

WHEN THE STARS ALIGN: CAREER AND LIFE CONSEQUENCES OF CALLING

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue for the importance of disentangling the psychological experience of calling from its behavioral pursuit. We examine the strength of people's calling and their ultimate pursuit—or lack of pursuit—of that calling in their work. We conducted a 4-wave, 11-year prospective longitudinal field study of 508 people anchored in a common calling domain, music, to examine how calling and the pursuit of that calling interact to influence key career and life outcomes. We find differential effects based on whether people with varying calling strengths pursued the calling or not.

INTRODUCTION

The career advice to “do what you love” and “follow your calling” (e.g., Jobs, 2005; Tokumitsu, 2015) is given so often and without qualification that it seems taken for granted as a path to a happy, fulfilling life, even a financially lucrative one (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Yet, while callings are linked to many positive career and life outcomes (Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2013; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), other work highlights the potential for callings to also be detrimental (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018). Scholars have recently begun to recognize that people are often unable to achieve their desired careers (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2019) and must turn to alternate career paths (Obodaru, 2017). So, too, have they begun to caution about the “failed promises” of calling (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015) as well as the possibility that not everyone can find work in the occupation toward which they feel called. This is the case for some labor markets in which only a select few may earn coveted jobs (Frank & Cook, 2010) as well as for “unanswered callings” (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010). In fact, those with callings that are unanswered report worse career and life outcomes than those who report callings that are weak or altogether absent (Gazica & Spector, 2015). Thus, it appears time to critically examine the merit of unilaterally and uncritically advising people to find their callings.

Academic research on calling has exploded over the past two decades (Bloom, Colbert, & Nielsen, Forthcoming; Dik & Shimizu, 2018; Dobrow Riza, Weisman, Heller, & Tosti-Kharas, 2019; Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Interestingly, most of this research focuses only on calling as a *psychological experience*, such that scholars typically consider calling as something that people internally feel toward their work and can report on (see Thompson & Bunderson, 2019 for a review). Typically, the psychological experience of calling is treated both conceptually and methodologically as a proxy for the *behavioral pursuit* of calling, that is, actually working in one's calling. Yet, feeling a sense of calling and pursuing the calling behaviorally are not actually the same, similar to the dissociation between attitudes and behaviors more generally (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Thus, the calling literature lacks a nuanced understanding of the connection between the psychological experience of calling (“calling”) and its behavioral pursuit (“pursuit of calling”)—and, so, how they may interact to

impact career and life outcomes. Without this, we cannot begin to fully understand calling's role in the process by which people pursue their careers.

In this paper, we examine both the strength of people's calling and their ultimate behavioral pursuit, or lack of pursuit, of that calling at work. We consider how the interaction of these two important aspects of calling—psychological and behavioral—influences career and life outcomes. We specifically consider an objective career outcome, income, as well as a key life outcome, subjective well-being. To do so, we conducted a four-wave, 11-year longitudinal study of participants who entered our dataset because at one time they showed promise in, yet experienced different levels of calling toward, a focal occupation, music. This approach allows a comparison between those who pursued and did not pursue music professionally across a range of calling levels.

WHEN CALLING IS PURSUED (OR NOT)

We employ the following definition of calling: “a consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011: 1001). It is important to note here that almost all of the available information on calling is based on people's self-reported perceptions of their calling. We refer to these perceptions as the psychological experience of calling, since they typically do not assess whether people are pursuing these callings behaviorally. This approach means that what we know about calling is largely relatively static, anchored in a single job, employer, and occupation (for an exception, see Dobrow, 2013). This stands in marked contrast to the lived reality of people's careers, in which there is a dynamic interplay between individual intentions and elements like labor markets, recruiting practices and processes, and changes to the nature of work itself (Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2019). These elements serve as a sort of gatekeeper, enabling or preventing people from achieving their career goals.

In general, the advantages of calling do not appear to accrue to those searching for a calling. A recent meta-analysis found that many of the positive relationships for calling and various work attitudes have negative or null relationships to searching for a calling (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). In addition, scholars have made a distinction between “having a calling” (sometimes referred to as “perceiving a calling”) and “living a calling” (Duffy et al., 2013). This research seeks to recognize that, for a variety of reasons, people may know what their calling is but not feel that their current jobs are enabling them to live out their callings as desired (Duffy & Autin, 2013).

In terms of the behavioral pursuit of calling, far less is known. One study examined the link between early calling and later behavioral pursuit of the calling, finding that people with stronger callings were more likely to actually pursue their callings (Dobrow Riza & Heller, 2015). However, this study did not examine the interaction between the strength of the calling and its behavioral pursuit on career and life outcomes. We know that not everyone can pursue a calling, just as not everyone can pursue their intended careers in general (Obodaru, 2017; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2019). Qualitative research examining unanswered callings looked at those who were called to occupations other than their current job roles. These individuals reported unpleasant psychological states, such as long-term regret, stress, and frustration (Berg et al., 2010). Quantitative research found that those with unanswered callings reported lower work engagement, career commitment, and job satisfaction, along with greater anxiety, depression, physical symptoms, and withdrawal intentions than those who reported no or weak callings (Gazica & Spector, 2015).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Income is a primary indicator of objective career success (Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), yet research on calling has not directly theorized about the relationship between calling and income. Meta-analytic findings of the scant studies that include correlational data about the relationship between calling and income reveal a small positive but not significant relationship (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). It could be argued that those with strong callings will earn more because they are more committed to, passionate about, and engaged at work (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Duffy et al., 2013). Indeed, this was the case for people in a variety of occupations ranging from professionals to administrative support staff (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). However, the opposite argument could be made, given the potential of those with strong callings to sacrifice unpaid work time, as supported by a within-occupation study of zookeepers finding that those with the strongest callings earned less (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Assuming a slight positive main effect relationship between calling and income, we predict this relationship will be enhanced for those who pursue their callings via their work. We might even go so far as to say that the reason calling and income have shown such a weak relationship in previous research is that calling has been studied as only being psychological, and not behavioral. Those who are able to gain employment in their calling occupation will likely experience an income boost from the enhanced performance (Kim et al., 2018), effort (Praskova, Hood, & Creed, 2014), and extra-role behavior (Xie, Zhou, Huang, & Xia, 2017) that accompany experiencing a strong calling toward work. In sum, we expect that any income benefits of a psychological calling will be enhanced for those who are actually pursuing the calling via their work.

Hypothesis 1: There will be an interaction between calling and pursuit of calling via one's work on income such that the relationship between calling and income will be more positive for those who pursue versus do not pursue their calling.

Subjective well-being, also known as hedonic well-being, focuses on happiness, pleasure, and life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Calling is typically positively related to both subjective and psychological well-being (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019) and has long been related to both job and life satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). The rationale behind this relationship is that the fulfillment and satisfaction that can accompany a calling at work may have a positive spillover to life as a whole given the outsize influence work can have on life (i.e., the hours and mental investment often dedicated to work).

For those who are pursuing their callings, we expect this relationship to be even greater. Previous studies have shown that "having a calling," as in a psychological calling, related to life satisfaction through "living a calling," or the perception that one was enacting one's calling in one's current work (Duffy et al., 2013). Although this study did not look at the interaction between having and living a calling, only the mediation, it nevertheless implies that life satisfaction will be enhanced for those with strong callings who are also pursuing them at work. In addition, we note that "living a calling" is not a proxy for the behavioral pursuit of calling, as people may report that they are living a calling even though they are not actually objectively working in the calling domain (e.g., they may engage in job or leisure crafting to cope with unanswered callings (e.g., they may engage in job or leisure crafting to cope with unanswered callings; Berg et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By contrast, those who do not pursue their calling may feel less satisfied and happy in life because they are not achieving their desired careers. Overall, we expect that the typically-reported positive relationship between calling and subjective well-being will be enhanced for those who actually pursue their callings at work.

Hypothesis 2: There will be an interaction between calling and pursuit of calling via one's work on subjective well-being such that the relationship between calling and

subjective well-being will be more positive for those who pursue versus do not pursue their calling.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Participants were 508 students at two prestigious United States high school summer music programs. In the present analyses, 70.7% of participants were female and 84.5% were Caucasian. They had varied socioeconomic backgrounds, skewing toward the upper class end of the spectrum (6.4% low or lower middle class, 30.0% middle class, 63.7% upper middle or upper class), and were on average 17.6 years old at the beginning of the study.

We draw on four waves of longitudinal survey data over 11 years (total number of surveys = 1,257). The first two waves, “Time 1” ($n = 407$) and “Time 2” ($n = 331$), were completed as written surveys at the beginning and end of the summer programs in 2001, respectively. After seven years (2008), we invited all participants who had completed at least one of the previous surveys and had provided usable contact information ($n = 410$) to participate in the online survey (“Time 3,” $n = 254$; response rate = 62 percent). After another four years (2012), we again invited all participants who had completed at least one of the previous surveys and had provided usable contact information ($n = 409$) to participate in the online survey (“Time 4,” $n = 265$; response rate = 65 percent).

Measures

Calling. We used Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas’s (2011) 12-item calling scale to measure participants’ calling toward music, measured at Time 3. This measure represents participants’ calling at the point in time just after most had finished college and were in the earliest years of their careers, which is the conceptually relevant timepoint in which to study calling in relation to subsequent behavioral pursuit of calling as well as career and life outcomes. Participants rated items such as: “I am passionate about playing my instrument/singing,” “My existence would be much less meaningful without my involvement in music,” and “Music is always in my mind in some way” on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged the items to create the scale ($\alpha = .89$).

Pursuit of Calling. In the Time 4 survey, we asked participants about their professional involvement in music: “Are you or do you intend to be a professional musician (i.e., someone who earns money as a musician)?” Participants selected one option from: “Yes, I am a professional musician;” “Yes, I intend to be a professional musician;” “I was a professional musician in the past, but no longer am;” “Maybe I will be a professional musician;” or “No, I am not a professional musician and do not intend to be one.” To create a purely behavioral measure of calling pursuit in the professional music context, as opposed to intentions or desires, we coded the options as 1 = “Yes, I am a professional musician” (41.0 percent) and 0 = all other options (59.0 percent).

Income. In the Time 4 survey, we asked participants to report their individual annual income (in U.S. dollars) from the previous year, not including spousal income or interest from jointly-owned assets. Participants used a response scale with 12 categories, converted to a numerical variable by using the midpoint of each interval (e.g., the categorical response \$10,001 to \$20,000 converted to \$15,000).

Subjective Well-being. In the Time 4 survey, we measured participants' cognitive and affective evaluations of their life overall with a 6-item scale, including items such as: "In most ways my life is close to ideal," "The conditions of my life are excellent," and "I am satisfied with my life" (Pavot & Diener, 1993; adapted by Pichanick, 2003) on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We averaged the scale items ($\alpha = .90$).

Control Variables. We controlled for several socio-demographic and music background variables that could affect participants' career and life outcomes (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz Jr., 1995; Ng et al., 2005; Saks & Shore, 2005), including gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*); family socioeconomic status in all analyses; type of musical involvement (1 = *instrumentalist*, 0 = *non-instrumentalist*, such as singers and composers); and actual ability in music. We controlled for actual ability because it could affect participants' calling toward music, their capacity to pursue a calling toward music professionally, as well as their subsequent outcomes, especially in music careers. Our measure of actual ability was the rating of each participant's overall music ability as judged by experts evaluating their live or recorded audition for entry into the summer music program. Because the two programs used different audition rating scales, we standardized these ratings by z-scoring within each site and also controlled for which of the two summer programs participants attended (1 = *Site 1*; 0 = *Site 2*). This approach created an index of how much each participant's rating was above or below the site's average.

RESULTS

Our sample was characterized by relatively high overall levels of calling ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.16$), with 44 percent pursuing vs. 66 percent not pursuing music professionally. Looking descriptively at participants' text responses to "what they were currently doing" in life (i.e., work, school, etc. at Time 4), those pursuing their calling listed such roles as "teaching, gigging, catering. A NYC freelance pianist," "orchestral violinist," "I'm a teaching assistant as part of my D.M.A. [Doctor of Musical Arts degree] at [X] University. I'm also working freelance as a composer, music director, vocalist, and vocal instructor," often indicating a mix of music-related activities. Those not pursuing their calling listed diverse roles such as "barista at Starbucks," "I am care taker to my two children," and "Working on PhD in philosophy." We examined this latter set of occupations for common themes, but found none.

Counter to expectations, calling and income were significantly and *negatively* related ($b = -5,344.18$, $p < .01$) and calling and subjective well-being were not significantly related ($b = -.11$, $p = .26$), though the main effect of calling became marginally significant and/or significant and *negative* once behavioral pursuit entered the model. These unexpected results suggest that focusing solely on the main effect relationships between calling and important career and life outcomes may provide an incomplete picture.

In support of Hypothesis 1, the hierarchical regression analyses indicated a significant and positive interaction between calling and pursuit of calling via one's work on income, above and beyond other individual characteristics and the main effects of calling and pursuit of calling ($b = 13,945.58$, $p < .01$). To interpret this interaction, we tested the simple slopes of the lines for participants pursuing versus not pursuing their calling to see if they were significantly different than zero. We found that the slope of the line for participants currently pursuing their calling was not significantly different from 0 (slope = 6,358.79, $p = .13$; 95% CI: -1,822.76, 14,540.34), indicating that for those participants pursuing their callings, the strength of their calling had no bearing on income, although the direction was leaning positive (i.e., stronger calling associated with higher income). In contrast, the slope of the line for participants not currently pursuing their calling was negative and significantly different from 0 (slope = 7,586.79, $p < .01$; 95% CI: -12,239.75, -2,933.83), indicating that for those participants not pursuing their callings, a stronger

calling was associated with *lower* income. Thus, as hypothesized, the relationship between calling and income was more positive for those who pursue vs. do not pursue their callings.

In support of Hypothesis 2, we found a significant and positive interaction between calling and pursuit of calling via one's work on subjective well-being, above and beyond other individual characteristics and the main effects of calling and pursuit of calling ($b = .71, p < .01$). The simple-slopes results indicate the line for participants currently pursuing their calling was only marginally significantly different from 0 (slope = .36, $p = .08$; 95% CI: -.04, .75), indicating that for those participants pursuing their calling, the strength of their calling did not have a significant effect on subjective well-being, although the direction was leaning positive (i.e., stronger calling associated with greater subjective well-being). In contrast, the line for not pursuing one's calling was negative and significantly different from 0 (slope = -.35, $p = .002$; 95% CI: -.58, -.13), indicating that for those participants not pursuing their calling, stronger calling was associated with *lower* subjective well-being. As hypothesized, the relationship between calling and subjective well-being was more positive for those who pursue vs. do not pursue their callings.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study we explored the interaction of calling and pursuit of calling on important career and life outcomes. To do so, we employed a longitudinal design of people moving through formative career stages through to the working world. What we found challenges the notion of how calling is typically studied and measured—that is, as a psychological cognition, assessed at a single point in time. Had we used this approach, we would have found misleading results for our main dependent variables: a negative relationship between calling and income and a non-significant relationship between calling and both occupational regret and subjective well-being. However, using more rigorous and comprehensive data that take into account both calling as a psychological cognition and its behavioral pursuit over the span of many years told a different story.

This study makes its primary theoretical contribution by illuminating the fact that focusing on calling's impact on outcomes is simply not enough. We add a novel behavioral perspective, which showed differential effects compared to studying the purely psychological perspective of calling alone. While we know this distinction exists more generally with regard to other types of attitudes and corresponding behaviors, for instance around social responsibility and sustainability (Guagnano, Stern, & Dietz, 1995; Holland, Verplanken, & Van Knippenberg, 2002), it has not been examined—or indeed even acknowledged conceptually—with regard to calling. Second, we focused on the whole spectrum of callings, from weak to strong, to gain a more complete picture of how different calling strengths play out over time. This approach stands in contrast to prior studies that generally consider callings with an implicit assumption that they are strong, but without specifying this explicitly (Berg et al., 2010; Duffy et al., 2013). Third, our study employed a long-term longitudinal design that allowed us to untangle the effects of calling itself from its behavioral pursuit, whereby we measured the strength of individuals' calling and their subsequent pursuit, or lack thereof, of their calling at work. Our results therefore mirror the way actual careers play out over time. This design is rare for calling research (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019), which is particularly unfortunate given the importance of longitudinal methods for understanding careers (Dobrow Riza & Weisman, Forthcoming). Finally, the study has clear practical implications for career development—for employees and managers—in terms of heeding the advice to “follow your calling.” Our findings suggest that this is not always the best option.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS