

**A SIREN SONG?
A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF THE FACILITATING ROLE OF CALLING AND
ABILITY IN THE PURSUIT OF A CHALLENGING CAREER**

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ABSTRACT

In an 11-year, five-wave longitudinal study of 450 amateur high-school musicians progressing from adolescence to adulthood, we found that regardless of their actual musical ability, people with stronger early callings were likely to perceive their abilities more favorably, which led them to pursue music professionally.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

During challenging economic times such as today, people face deeply conflicting options regarding what they should prioritize in their future careers. One approach to career pursuit encourages people to prioritize doing what they love and to pursue their passions, as exemplified by Steve Jobs' statement that "the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle" (Jobs, 2005). A second approach encourages prioritizing achieving outcomes such as salary and job security, as exemplified by the advice in a *U.S. News & World Report* article: "'Do what you love,' for most people, isn't a reliable way to find the right career – and can lead to anxiety, job-hopping and dissatisfaction... So a better goal... is probably to do something that you're good at, that brings you a reasonable amount of satisfaction, and that earns you a living" (Green, 2013). Ideally, people can follow both approaches – pursuing a career that simultaneously permits them to do something they love *and* earn a strong salary and have high job security. However, given economic realities, people commonly face trade-off decisions as they make initial career decisions that pit these two sides of careers against one another. This poses a difficult dilemma for individuals, as people typically care about both. Indeed, even as relative preferences among intrinsic and extrinsic career values vary across generations, most people nonetheless want both types of values to some degree in their careers (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). In this study, we focus on understanding what impacts career-pursuit decisions when prospects of pursuing both sides of careers seem to clash.

Careers are comprised of these two sides – the "objective" and "subjective" (Hall, 2002). The objective side of a career includes external or structural characteristics, such as pay, occupational status, or one's sequence of jobs, whereas the subjective side of a career consists of internal characteristics (e.g., meanings or interpretations people apply to their careers), such as job and career satisfaction, identity, or purpose (Barley, 1989; Heslin, 2005; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). Dating back to the 1930s, when the Chicago School of Sociology first

articulated the distinctions between the objective and subjective sides of the career, (e.g., Hughes, 1937), career theory has long advocated considering both subjective and objective aspects to fully understand people's careers (Hall, 2002). In spite of this longstanding broad view of careers, the vast majority of careers research in the second half of the 20th century focused only on objective career characteristics (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Consistent with decades of organizational psychology research highlighting the importance of various subjective characteristics in work, including intrinsic motivation (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994), task significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), job and work involvement (Kanungo, 1982), and professional identity (Ibarra, 1999), within the last decade, careers scholars have again begun advocating paying attention to *both* objective and subjective career characteristics (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Heslin, 2005; Ng et al., 2005). Nonetheless, as a result of an early research emphasis on objective aspects of careers and relative neglect of the subjective aspects of careers, little is known about how people make career-pursuit decisions when these aspects are misaligned. When career contexts do not allow for the “ideal” of maximizing positive outcomes for both sides of the career, a significant dilemma emerges for people considering embarking on this career path: should they pursue a career in which they are likely to experience a high amount of positive subjective career characteristics but a low amount of objective career characteristics (or vice versa)?

In this study, we examine how people make career-pursuit decisions in contexts in which the objective and subjective aspects of the career might clash, specifically, the career path to become a professional musician. We posit that a key factor in resolving this dilemma is the sense of *calling*, defined as the “consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain” (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011, p. 1003). We hypothesize that those who experience strong callings toward a domain as adolescents will prioritize their emphasis on the subjective aspects of their career over the objective aspects of their career by pursuing a professional career in this domain as adults. We also investigate *how* calling triggers this career pursuit. We propose a causal sequence in which calling leads to these career behaviors via two types of ability in the calling domain – ability as seen from (a) the perspective of the individual (“perceived ability”) and (b) the perspective of expert judges (“actual ability”) – as they occur during early adulthood (see Figure 1). That is, calling may either distort people's perceptions of their abilities and, consequently, their beliefs about their chances of success in the domain or it may enhance people's effort and practice leading to improvement in the domain (as rated by experts in the field). We also test for the reverse-causal sequence, namely that people's abilities in a domain as adolescents influence their calling as young adults, which ultimately drives career pursuit as adults. We test our hypotheses in an 11-year, five-wave longitudinal study of a sample of 450 amateur high-school musicians progressing from adolescence to adulthood. In the full-length paper, we present theoretical arguments for the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The degree of calling toward a domain experienced early in life will positively predict career pursuit in this domain many years later—*above and beyond* the effects of other early predictors (perceived ability, actual ability, and external pressure to pursue this career).

Hypothesis 2: The degree of calling toward a domain experienced early in life will be positively associated with perceived ability several years later—*above and beyond* the effects of other early predictors (perceived ability, actual ability, and external pressure to

pursue this career).

Hypothesis 3: The degree of calling toward a domain experienced early in life will be positively associated with actual ability several years later—*above and beyond* the effects of other early predictors (perceived ability, actual ability, and external pressure to pursue this career).

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between degree of calling toward a domain experienced early in life and career pursuit in this domain many years later will be mediated by perceived ability —*above and beyond* the effects of other early (perceived ability, actual ability, and external pressure to pursue this career) and contemporaneous (actual ability) predictors.

Hypothesis 5: The relationship between degree of calling toward a domain experienced early in life and career pursuit in this domain many years later will be mediated by actual ability —*above and beyond* the effects of other early (perceived ability, actual ability, and external pressure to pursue this career) and contemporaneous (perceived ability) predictors.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Participants were 450 students at two premier U.S. high-school summer music programs. These two programs were selective on a national level and offered young musicians four to nine weeks of complete music immersion, which provided a preview of life as a full-time musician (Wanous, 1992), considerable musical training, and the opportunity for social comparison of their musical abilities to peers (Larrick, Burson, & Soll, 2007).

We administered surveys in five waves over the course of 11 years (total number of surveys = 1,607). The first two waves in the study, “Time 1” ($n = 426$) and “Time 2” ($n = 342$), were written surveys completed at the beginning and end of the summer music programs in 2001, respectively. After three and a half years (2004–2005), we contacted individuals who had completed at least one of the surveys and had provided contact information ($n = 450$) to participate online in the next survey (“Time 3,” $n = 306$; response rate = 68%). After another three and a half years (2008), we once again invited all participants who had completed at least one of the previous three surveys and had provided contact information ($n = 410$) to participate in the online survey (“Time 4,” $n = 262$; response rate = 64%). After another four years (2012), we again invited all participants who had completed at least one of the previous surveys and had provided contact information ($n = 409$) to participate in the online survey (“Time 5,” $n = 271$; response rate = 66%). The surveys included measures of calling, perceived ability, actual ability (awards), career-related behaviors relevant to their particular age, and general background. The summer programs provided archival data about participants’ actual ability (audition ratings).

During Times 1 and 2, participants were *amateur* high-school musicians on the cusp of making their first significant steps toward or away from pursuing music professionally, particularly deciding whether to major in music in college. By Time 3, participants were typically in college. By Time 4, most participants had graduated from college and were in

graduate school or working. By Time 5, participants were predominantly working. Our attrition analyses indicate that attrition in this sample is not systematic with regard to our focal variables.

Measures

Calling. To measure calling toward the domain of music, we used Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas' (2011) 12-item scale. We collected this measure three times over 3 ½ years (Times 1, 2 and 3). 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 (possible range of 1 = *weak calling* to 7 = *strong calling*; $\alpha = .88, .89$, and $.90$ at Times 1 through 3, respectively).

Career Pursuit. We examined two temporally separate objective indicators of professional pursuit in the calling domain: college degree earned and professional involvement. First, participants earned their college degrees primarily between 2005 and 2008. On the Times 4 and 5 surveys (in 2008 and 2012, respectively), participants provided the name of the college or university from which they earned a degree, their primary affiliation at their college or university, such as a music school within a university, and their major. We categorized each college degree earned from most to least music-focused as follows: 5 = *stand-alone music conservatories*; 4 = *conservatory or music school within a university*; 3 = *music department within a college or university*; 2 = *music and other*; 1 = *all others*.

Second, we measured the degree to which participants work in the calling domain, music, professionally with a 4-item scale on the Time 5 survey. We focused on the income earned from and time spent on the two dominant aspects of professional music activity, (1) performing and/or composing and (2) teaching (SNAAP, 2011; Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Participants used the following response scale for each question: 0 = *I did not work as a musician/music teacher in 2011*, 10 = *Less than 20%*, 30 = *21% to 40%*, 50 = *41% to 60%*, 70 = *61% to 80%*, and 90 = *81% to 100%*. We computed the average of the four items to generate the scale score ($M = 25.86$, $SD = 23.77$, range 0-85; $\alpha = .76$). Thirty percent of the sample did not earn any money or spend any time on professional music activities.

Perceived Ability. We measured participants' assessment of their own abilities in music with a two-item scale that captured their general sense of their musical talent on the Times 1, 2, and 3 surveys. On the Times 1 and 2 surveys, we asked participants to answer, using a 5-point scale (1 = *much less than others*, 5 = *much more than others*), "Compared to others in your musical specialty (such as players of your same instrument/same voice part) at this festival, how talented are you?" On the Time 3 survey, the instruction wording changed from present to past tense. Participants also rated the item "I believe I have the talent to become a professional musician, regardless of whether I want this career or not" on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Following appropriate statistical procures, we computed a scale from these two items (Spearman-Brown = $.69$ for Times 1 & 2; $.75$ at Time 3).

Actual Ability. We assessed actual ability using *expert judges'* ratings of participants' musical talent relative to their peers from the two settings that are most critical for determining performance and career outcomes in a musical context: awards in competitions and auditions. First, winning awards serves as a strong indicator of current actual ability in a domain, because ability is typically a key determinant of success in competitions (Chapman & McCauley, 1993; Shepard, 2010), and as a predictor of future success. We asked participants, "Have you won any

awards in your primary musical specialty? (check all that apply),” on the Times 1, 2, and 3 surveys. We used geographic level as a proxy for the award’s degree of competitiveness and asked participants to select all awards they had won from a list ranging from most geographically narrow (i.e., least competitive) to most geographically expansive (i.e., most competitive). We utilized each participant’s highest-level of geographic award won (“actual ability (awards)”) (0 = none through 5 = *international award or competition*).

Second, we used a measure critical for distinguishing musicians from one another: audition ratings (“actual ability (audition ratings)”). Prior to the summer music programs, all applicants completed a live or taped audition. For both sites, expert judges – typically faculty from the music programs – aimed to ascertain admissibility to the summer program based on overall musical ability. Each of the summer programs used its own audition rating scale. We standardized across the two sites by z-scoring the ratings within each site, thereby creating an index of the extent to which each participant’s rating was above or below the site’s average. This audition rating measure temporally preceded all other study measures.

Control Variables

We controlled for several socio-demographic and human capital characteristics (Ng et al., 2005) that could have affected participants’ experience of a calling, their perceived and actual ability, and ultimately career pursuit: participants’ music program site, gender, ethnicity, age (in years at Time 1), family socioeconomic status, years of musical experience at Times 1 and/or 2 and type of musical involvement (i.e., being an instrumentalist vs. non-instrumentalist). We also controlled for the early external pressure participants perceived from two potentially significant sources of subjective norms (e.g., social influence and career advice) in their lives: their parents and their primary music teacher.

RESULTS

Hypotheses Testing

Supporting Hypothesis 1, the hierarchical ordinal logit regression analyses indicate a positive association between early calling and college degree earned several years later, controlling for early perceived ability, early actual ability (awards and audition ratings), early external pressure, and other individual characteristics ($\beta = .70, p < .001$). Lending further support to Hypothesis 1, the hierarchical regression analyses indicate a positive association between early calling and the second career pursuit indicator (professional involvement) 10 years later, controlling for early perceived ability, early actual ability (awards and audition ratings), early external pressure, and other individual characteristics (standardized $\beta = .21, p < .05$).

In support of Hypothesis 2, early calling was positively associated with perceived ability three and a half years later, controlling for early perceived ability, early actual ability (awards and audition ratings), early external pressure, and other individual characteristics (standardized $\beta = .19, p < .05$).

Our results did not support Hypothesis 3, that early calling would be positively associated with actual ability (awards) several years later, controlling for early perceived ability, early actual ability (awards and audition ratings), early external pressure, and other individual characteristics (standardized $\beta = -.01, ns$).

We tested our mediation hypotheses (H4 and H5) using two approaches: the traditional four-step approach (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007) and indirect effects analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Both approaches converge to support our hypothesis that perceived ability mediates the relationship between early calling and music-career pursuit. Actual ability (awards) does not mediate this relationship.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In an 11-year, five-wave longitudinal study spanning a critical time period for career decision making in young musicians' lives, we addressed the question of how people make career-pursuit decisions in a context that provides positive opportunities for developing the subjective side of one's career, but poses serious challenges on the objective side. We argued and found that a sense of calling during adolescence is a key factor in resolving this dilemma, such that it tilts the balance toward the subjective characteristics of one's career. Specifically, we found that individuals with stronger callings toward music during adolescence were more likely to later earn a college music degree and be professionally involved in music as adults even after controlling for early actual and perceived ability levels, and pressure from parents and teachers.

We further demonstrated that perceived, but not actual, ability during young adulthood mediated the relationship between calling during adolescence and career pursuit during adulthood. That is, regardless of their actual musical ability, people with stronger early callings were likely to perceive their abilities more favorably several years later and, consequently, were more likely to pursue music professionally. These findings offer contributions to theory and research on calling and career decision making.

This study demonstrates that early callings can help resolve career decision-making dilemmas in contexts in which early considerations about the subjective and objective sides of the career clash. Early callings enhance perceived ability and thereby enable challenging career pursuit later in life, regardless of people's actual musical ability. Our results echo a *New York Times* article, which, in reference to classical musicians, suggested that "maybe going to a conservatory is like being a compulsive gambler: It is one big bet, but the drive to study music is so blinding, and doing anything else so inconceivable, that young players are oblivious to the risk. Sometimes it is hard to determine whether they are driven by single-mindedness or they live in self-denial" (Wakin, 2004). Thus, if a calling, like the song of the Sirens, can be so alluring yet also set up potentially challenging career pursuit, should individuals avoid calling's Siren song entirely or learn to navigate the rough career waters that swirl around it? Our findings reveal an optimistic picture in which those with strong callings are more likely to take the risk, to persist, and ultimately to graduate and get jobs in the calling domain, thereby potentially satisfying their objective and subjective career needs. Future research should continue to examine potential trade-offs people make between the subjective and objective sides of their careers when making decisions to pursue or not pursue callings, particularly in highly challenging domains. This research should include a broader range of affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes, thereby further painting the intricate picture of the calling-career pursuit connection in both its bright and dark colors.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS