

## **Callings**

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If a man loves the labour of his trade, apart from any question of success or fame, the gods have called him. - Robert Louis Stevenson

Few topics inspire as much idealism and positivity as the notion of work as a calling. Practitioners and popular authors strive to help seekers find (or create) their callings, academics and scholars aim to understand the nature of callings as well as their antecedents and effects, and countless individuals simply wonder about what their calling might be, how to find it, and if they have found it, how to successfully pursue it. Other orientations toward work certainly exist; work can be experienced as an alienating grind, an opportunity for challenge and growth, or any number of other framings. But callings have stolen center stage in our imaginations as offering some sort of special gateway to fulfillment and meaning in work. As a window onto the individual experience of work, callings are of central importance to POS, because they capture the most positive and generative manifestation of the connection between people and their work that scholars have studied. Yet callings are somewhat of a Rorschach test in organizational behavior and psychology – viewed from various angles, callings reveal different understandings, assumptions, and predictions regarding their nature and form. While the variety of viewpoints on callings may seem confusing, I attempt to trace these viewpoints to their roots in earlier research and writing in order to reconcile different approaches to the topic.

The goal of this chapter is to elucidate the construct of callings, defining their structure and content, their antecedents and outcomes, and the debates that continue over their very essence. It is at the intersections of these different findings and viewpoints on callings that the most fruitful ground for future empirical research exists. Treating the variety of perspectives on callings as a valuable set of research opportunities, rather than a liability, I highlight promising

areas for future inquiry with an eye toward bringing helpful resolution to some of the debates in this area while sparking new questions to help spur researchers to continue to deepen our understanding of the nature of callings.

### **What is a Calling?**

There is not, to date, a single universally accepted meaning of the term “callings”, as the term has been given a broad range of definitions in the organizational literature. Many of these definitions differ because they are derivative of those offered in the social sciences or in much earlier philosophical and religious works. It is a sign of the evolving and dynamic nature of research on and inquiry into callings that the definition of callings is the subject of ongoing debate.

Beginning with the social sciences, the sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), in the context of their influential discussion of individualism and commitment in different domains of life in the United States, argued that work can be subjectively experienced as a calling (see also Baumeister, 1991). In their view, those with callings work not primarily for financial gain or career advancement, but instead for the fulfillment that the work itself brings to the individual. In a sense, the work is an end in itself. This definition is emblematic of the largely secular and individually-based view of work as a calling that has dominated the organizational literature. Later, Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) drew on this definition to define callings as work that people feel is usually seen as socially valuable—an end in itself—involving activities that may, but need not be, pleasurable (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). More fully, a calling is traditionally defined as a meaningful beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, forthcoming).

A calling is assumed to be unique to the person, comprising activities people believe they must do to fulfill their unique purpose in life, and offering a path to connect with one's true self (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Levoy, 1997; Novak, 1996). A calling refers to the enactment of personally significant beliefs through work (Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010); an enactment that has been referred to as the highest form of subjective career success (Dobrow, 2006; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Those who view their work as a calling understand their work to be an end in itself, rather than a means to some other end (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

### **Callings as a Religious Entity**

The term "calling" clearly has religious roots. Specifically, callings are a product of Christian theology. Traditionally, callings were rooted in an understanding that people were "called" by God to do morally and socially significant work (Weber, 1956, 1963). Organizational scholars note that the Protestant Reformation saw a significant shift in the meaning of work, converting it from a pursuit that lacked intrinsic value to an activity that was glorified in its own right (Ciulla, 2000). This shift occurred as Martin Luther's theology promoted the concept of a calling, defined by him as a vocational direction from God about how best to serve God and the community (Weber, 1958). Later, John Calvin defined callings as a divine ordinance to which individuals have a duty and responsibility. As a result, any activity done to serve God was considered intrinsically valuable, and failure to fulfill one's calling was seen as immoral (Nord, Brief, Atieh, & Doherty, 1990). This perspective suggests that callings are revealed by God, either directly or through one's abilities, thus suggesting that callings are religious endeavors rather than expressions of the self. Later, Weber suggested that Calvin's interpretation of callings helped to enable the development of modern capitalism by producing a "Protestant work ethic" that greatly increased a societal emphasis on the individual pursuit of success. Though the

accuracy of Weber's interpretation of Calvin has been debated, the impact of his perspective on callings is hard to overstate.

In modern times, the use of callings in a religious sense has come to be defined as a beckoning from God to a vocation, the acceptance and execution of which is thought to carry out the will of God (Hardy, 1990; Weiss, Skelley, Haughey, & Hall, 2004). According to this perspective, work, if carried out for purposes other than service to God, is of little spiritual significance. However, *any* work can become holy if dedicated to God (Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010), as answered callings are understood to be a pathway through which individuals act as the hands of God on earth (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Even without explicit reference to God or spirituality, a sense of calling as the expression of one's duty or destiny on earth through work is evident in modern society (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

More recently, organizational scholars have again revisited the traditional religious roots of callings, reaching a better understanding of the impact of experiencing a calling in a neoclassical sense – reflecting the Protestant reformation concepts as calling as a duty to society rather than as a satisfying exercise in pleasure in one's work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). However, callings have largely lost this religious connotation and tend to be defined in the secular sense as consisting of enjoyable or pleasurable work that the individual believes is making the world a better place. Thus, the concept of a calling has taken on other forms in the modern era, and is one of several kinds of meanings that people attach to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2009). These meanings may also guide individuals in how they enact the tasks and relationships that comprise their jobs (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

A recent review of research on callings in organizational behavior suggests that the set of definitions of callings in use share three important elements (Elangovan et al., 2010): first, callings are action-oriented; second, callings suggest a sense of meaning and mission (Dik & Duffy, 2009); and third, callings are prosocial in their focus. As well, Dobrow (2006) has suggested a broader set of elements of a calling, moving beyond a sense of fulfillment in the work and contribution to the greater good to include a sense of urgency and self-esteem from the activity of work. In the next section, I consider the experience of work as a calling in relation to other meanings of work.

### **Calling as a Work Orientation**

The concept of work orientation builds on theoretical assertions from sociology and psychology that work is subjectively experienced by individuals in one of three distinct ways: as a job, in which the focus of the work is on income, a career, in which the focus is on advancement in one's line of work, or a calling (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah et al., 1985; Schwartz, 1986, 1994). These three categories represent three different work orientations, which guide individuals' basic goals for working, capture beliefs about the role of work in life and are reflected in work-related feelings and behaviors (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Work orientation provides a helpful framework with which to understand how individuals make meaning of their work and how they enact their jobs to reflect these meanings (Scott Morton & Podolny, 2002; Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Callings have come to be defined as work that is viewed as a duty and destiny (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), a source of fulfillment that is important to one's identity (Berg et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), a social contribution to others or the wider world

(Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Wrzesniewski, 2003), work that is an expression of one's purpose (Hall & Chandler, 2005), or as comprising one's passion, identity, urgency, engulfing consciousness, longevity, sense of meaning, and domain-specific self-esteem (Dobrow, 2006). Thus, it is likely no surprise that many of the most popular examples of callings draw from work in which passion and meaning are often assumed, such as the arts or helping professions (e.g., medicine, advocacy work), as individuals in these occupations are thought to be compelled to do expressive work or be of service to others. As research on callings has suggested, callings can be experienced in work that runs the gamut from lofty to lowly (e.g., Berg et al., 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

In this volume, Perttula and Cardon (2010) note that passion for work is a hallmark of meaningful work more generally, and consider the passion that individuals experience for their work in entrepreneurial ventures and in their jobs in general (see also Wrzesniewski, Rozin, & Bennett, 2002 for a discussion of passion and work). Thus, the connection between callings and passions are clear. Both involve a sense of meaningful connection to the work that is often the source of great pleasure. Callings and passions differ, however, in two important ways. First, callings typically involve a sense that the work contributes to the world in a meaningful way (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), while passions do not necessarily have a social component to them. Second, passions are marked by the experience of joy and subjective vitality (Perttula & Cardon, 2010), which may or may not also accompany the experience of work as a calling. In fact, Bunderson and Thompson (2009) suggest that some may experience a calling more through a lens of duty and destiny, without the deep pleasure that is often assumed to be a part of a calling.

The evidence of the broad types of work that can be experienced as a calling is consistent with research that suggests that *any* kind of work can be a calling. Work orientations are essentially frames of meaning applied to the work one does; thus, it is possible for different people to do the same work and view it quite differently, based on which orientation each has toward the work. For example, a bank president can view the work as a way to enjoy a large income (job orientation), as a way to move into leadership positions in national banking organizations that set banking policy (career orientation), or as a way to carry out the enjoyable, fulfilling work of contributing to the financial security and well-being of a lifetime of clients (calling orientation). Likewise, a laborer can view the work as a way to cover the mortgage (job orientation), an opportunity to become crew foreperson and someday, a supervisor (career orientation), or as a way to build the infrastructure of a city, thus ensuring the safety and futures of millions of people who will live and work there (calling orientation). Regardless of the kind of work, those with calling orientations are more likely to experience their work as deeply meaningful.

### **Callings as a Secular Entity**

Though religious connotations of callings survive, the concept of a calling has taken on stronger secular tones over time. This shift is reminiscent of much older conceptions of the meaning of work which, reaching back to the Greek philosophers, including Aristotle, held that authentic fulfillment would be found through personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating pursuits (Aristotle, 1912). Indeed, much as the Greek philosophers put the individual at the center of meaningful work, modern conceptions of callings emphasize the individual as the primary entity that defines and is served by callings as well.

There seems to be little disagreement in the emerging organizational literature on callings that the sense of calling is defined by the individual doing the work. Thus, a humanitarian aid worker who primarily views the work as a way to advance into a job at the United Nations, for example, does not have a calling, while a groundskeeper at a professional baseball stadium who sees the work as deeply enjoyable and essential to the pursuit of the country's favorite pastime could have a calling. Both religious and secular traditions emphasize that callings include a sense that the work has a positive impact on the world and is intrinsically motivating as an end in itself. Individuals pursuing their calling often feel a great sense of urgency for following the path to which they feel intended (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Callings both in the modern secular sense and the religious sense have enjoyed a surge of interest in research and the popular press. This is likely due to the pressures that stem from the increasing tendency for people to define themselves, and be defined by others, through their work (Casey, 1995). The sense that work ought to represent a meaningful, important contribution is evident in the burgeoning career counseling and coaching industry, to which individuals flock in the hopes of identifying or creating a calling, or turning their current job into a calling. This interest in work as a calling is likely to continue as long as work is emphasized as a source of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose in life, and as individuals work more hours than ever (Schor, 1992) and change jobs more often than in the past (Sennett, 2005), potentially creating a need to understand one's own path through the lens of the work in addition to the lens of the organization (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

While religious callings involve a beckoning from outside of the self that is heeded (or not), secular callings differ in that the pursuit of the calling tends to be oriented within the self (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, forthcoming). In research on secular callings, self-fulfillment is

the primary focus. Individuals are depicted as following paths chosen by the self, rather than by God or some other higher power (Berg et al., 2010; Rosso et al., forthcoming).

While the self is most salient in secular callings, scholars still define callings both as a source of intrinsic fulfillment and as a way of making a contribution to the wider world.

However, the connection between internally-directed fulfillment and work done in service of others is still unclear in the literature on callings. Future work that delineates the nature and forms of calling (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) would mark an important research contribution. In the next section, I consider related concepts that are different from, but likely related to, the experience of work as a calling.

### **What Callings Are Not**

There are several constructs from the organizational psychology and organizational behavior literatures that are likely related to callings. While these relationships are instructive for understanding markers of callings among existing constructs, these constructs do not, in part or whole, capture what a calling is. Rather, they reflect elements of work attitudes and experience that individuals with callings might be expected to endorse. In most cases, the difference between each of these constructs and a calling is the fact that each of the former is a reflection of how deeply one is engaged in or committed to work, rather than the nature of or reasons for these attachments – which a calling more clearly captures.

Work centrality, defined as how work compares with other life spheres in its importance, and work commitment, defined as the importance of work to people's sense of self (Dubin, 1956; MOW, 1987; Loscocco, 1989), are likely related to callings. Individuals who view their work as a calling would, by definition, have high work centrality and high work commitment. However, one could have a high level of work centrality and commitment for reasons other than having a

calling; for example, a mid-level manager with a strong career orientation (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) who is primarily focused in advancement in her work life would likely report high work centrality and commitment, but toward quite different ends than a manager who views the work as a calling.

Similarly, work and job involvement (Kanungo, 1982; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965), defined as one's attachment to work and beliefs about the importance of work in life, respectively, are also likely to be related to callings. However, like work centrality and work commitment, they are unlikely to differentiate between those with callings and those who are deeply involved in their work and jobs for other reasons. In a basic sense, a broad swath of constructs that represent a unidimensional focus on the strength of attachment to a job or to work more generally cannot capture the *nature* of that attachment. Callings are a special case of a unique kind of relationship with and experience of work, with implications for the strength of one's attachment to work. However, callings are not solely defined by the strength of attachment.

Finally, callings are not simply intrinsic motivation toward one's work. While those who view work as a calling are likely to be highly motivated by the content of the activity itself (Wrzesniewski, Tosti, & Landman, 2010), it is the direction toward which this motivation is oriented that defines a calling. One can be motivated to engage in an activity for its own sake because it is engaging or fun, but the personal fulfillment and social contribution inherent in callings denote a more complex relationship to the activity of work. An employee in the emergency lending arm of an institution who enjoys fielding calls from clients because it is interesting and absorbing is intrinsically motivated; an employee who enjoys fielding calls from clients because it is engaging and means that those clients can make the financial arrangements

necessary to live their lives, thus impacting society in positive and potentially profound ways, may have a calling.

In the next section, I consider the antecedents of a calling orientation. Regardless of whether callings issue forth from a religious entity or well up from within, considering the sources from which they may emerge can shed helpful light on the nature of callings more generally. As well, the sources of callings raise important questions about whether callings are answered, found, or made.

### **The Path to Callings: Antecedents and Sources**

A review of the literature quickly reveals an interesting distinction between two basic but competing assumptions that are made about the very nature of a calling. An interesting tension exists regarding whether callings are found, or discovered, and whether they are created, or made. Callings that are religious in origin are positioned as calls to be answered that issue forth from a sacred source or an entity beyond the self (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Rosso et al., forthcoming). Callings that are secular in focus have also been treated as pre-existing entities to be discovered by or about the individual (Chandler & Hall, 2005; Elangovan et al., 2010) rather than as understandings of the meaning of work to be created or enacted by the individual (Wrzesniewski, 2003; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, consider the difference between someone who becomes a claims administrator because he believes God has called him to do so, someone who takes the same job because a series of occupational and career tests point him to that work as his calling, and someone who takes the job because it is the best opportunity available but soon changes elements of the job to align the work with a passion for helping others in need (Berg et al., 2010). In a basic sense, all three are pursuing callings, but whether that calling was issued, discovered, or created in the work differs.

The differences between these assumptions on the sources of callings matter, and the practical implications are clear. In the first case, one should engage in introspection and reflection so as to better “hear” the call that is issuing forth from some sacred source. In the second case, one should look deeply within the self and search high and low for feedback and data that will point one in the correct direction toward work that will be experienced as deeply meaningful. In the third case, neither of these requirements applies; instead, one is challenged to craft the elements of a job – ostensibly any job – to align it with one’s sense of a calling.

Of course, callings may evolve over the course of one’s working life. Dobrow (2010a) suggests in her research on young musicians that a sense of calling changes over time, becoming reinforced or undermined as a result of one’s behavioral investments in and social support of the calling. As well, Wrzesniewski (2002; 2003) suggests that a sense of calling can grow or diminish in one’s work as a result of contextual factors ranging from features of the work context to shocks in the external environment. Whether callings are found or made, and whether they evolve over time as circumstances change, are important questions requiring further study (Rosso et al., forthcoming).

Thus, the origins of callings are represented differently depending upon researchers’ understanding of what a calling is. In a sense, the debate over the sources and nature of callings has limited exploration of the role of other forces in shaping the experience of a calling. This oversight is important, for it concerns our ability to comprehend the origins of callings and the relationships people will have with their work throughout the course of their lives.

Understanding how it is that one develops an understanding of what it means to work and how one’s work relates to the rest of life is a rather lofty goal, and several models can be used to elaborate a set of arguments about the development of work orientation. For example, object

relations theory (Masling & Bornstein, 1994) and theories of social representations of reality (Mannetti & Tanucci, 1993) both offer explanations of how people are likely to develop a particular kind of relationship to or representation of their work.

Other possible paths of development are suggested by Bandura's social learning theory (1977). Social learning theory, unlike object relations theory, offers a clear argument for the paths of transmission that work values are likely to take. In contrast, object relations theory focuses on the complex personal configurations of one's inner and outer worlds, without making a statement about how these configurations are created (Bocknek & Perna, 1994).

The development of a calling may begin long before one enters the workforce. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) maintains that learning takes place via the imitation of observed behavior, which would predict that parental influences and early models of what it means to work would act together to shape a sense of work as a calling. Powerful influences, such as parental socialization with reference to the world of work, can shape one's expectations and understanding of what the experience of work will be like in later life (Mannetti & Tanucci, 1993). Indeed, Baker and Dekas (2009) find evidence that individuals primarily "inherit" their orientations toward their work from their parents. Specifically, callings seem to be influenced by the interaction of both parents' own calling orientations toward work. In a most obvious example of social learning about work, most children see their parents go to and return from work every day over the course of many years. What their parents do, say, and teach (or, conversely, do not do, say, or teach) to their children about their work communicates a powerful message about what work is and what it is not. Children observe these behaviors of parents and other role models (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Higgins, Fazio, Rohan, Zanna, & Gergen, 1998), and learn how people are rewarded or not rewarded for the general orientation they bring to their work.

Just as orientations toward work may be forming as the life course unfolds, so do individual identities. As Roberts and Creary (2010) suggest in their chapter on identity in this volume, individuals are motivated to construct and validate positive identities in their own eyes and the eyes of others. Identity theorists suggest that the pathway to a positive identity is guided by the sense that one's group memberships create endowments of favorable comparisons with others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Another pathway suggested by identity theory hinges on one's prototypicality as a member of the group – to the extent that one represents the group prototype, one is evaluated positively by others (Turner, 1987). The implications for work as a calling are interesting when viewed through this lens. Having a calling orientation may endow people with a sense that they represent the best of their category – the zookeepers with callings studied by Bunderson and Thompson (2009) come to mind as reaping strong benefits from their sense of themselves (and, likely, others' sense of them) as exemplars of their occupational group.

In addition, social class extends its influence into important areas including educational opportunity, social networks, and opportunity structures more generally. It is widely assumed in theories of social and educational reproduction that parents use their socioeconomic and cultural standing to confer upon their children the necessary educational and cultural experiences to secure their places in occupational and class levels close to their own. It is therefore not surprising that most children follow their parents into the same levels and types of work to which they were exposed as children (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Willis, 1981). Social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) is built around this set of assertions, and predicts rather successfully the occupational levels reached by children based on their fathers' occupational position (Robinson & Garnier, 1985). The cycle in which this process occurs begins in childhood, but continues throughout the lives of children as they age and enter the workforce.

After one's sense of work has started to form in childhood, adolescents and young adults experience their first few jobs and may find a sense of calling to be reinforced, invalidated, or simply made more ambiguous by this set of experiences (see Roberson, 1990 for a discussion of how stable individual differences in work meanings develop through early socialization and work experiences). For example, a new entrant into the workforce may believe that work is meant to be a meaningful and fulfilling experience, only to find that the work is tedious and void of meaning. In contrast, another new entrant might expect that work is meant to yield a paycheck and nothing more, but find that the work is interesting, enjoyable, contributes to the common good and is deeply meaningful. Whether one learns that expecting nothing of work but a paycheck is an undesirable approach to work, or that attempting to scale the hierarchical set of positions in an occupation is exciting and personally meaningful, one's expectations are challenged by the experiences encountered in the workplace, which act to further develop one's sense of work as a calling. Eventually, based on what one has learned about work through learning from role models and from actual work experience, a work orientation develops, and becomes a guiding principle for making sense of how work fits in relation to the rest of life.

Dobrow (2010a) also challenges the assumption that callings are discovered rather than developed. In a longitudinal study of young musicians, she explores the antecedents of callings, suggesting that one's early experiences shape the degree to which one views music as a calling over time. Berg and colleagues (2010) note in their study of unanswered callings that individuals may have multiple callings for different occupations and activities, thus suggesting that the roots of a calling may be more complex than a single detected signal or discovery of a particular path. Their study reveals the strategies used by individuals in pursuit of unanswered callings to craft their work and leisure activities in order to realize their callings (Berg et al., 2010), thus

reinforcing the importance of understanding how different understandings of the meaning of work are shaped over the life course.

Whether callings issue forth from spiritual sources, the self, one's upbringing and circumstances, or some combination of these, one point of agreement in the literature on callings is that they have largely positive effects in work and life. However, researchers have recently begun to theorize about the potential drawbacks of callings as well. In the next section, I consider the evidence that callings influence positive and negative outcomes for individuals and organizations.

### **Outcomes of Callings**

To date, much of the empirical research on callings has been correlational in design. Several positive outcomes have been associated with having a calling, including higher levels of work, life, and health satisfaction (Dobrow, 2006; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) and lower absenteeism from work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) - effects that remain even when controlling for one's income, education, and type of occupation. Callings are also associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2010) and the derivation of more satisfaction from the work domain than other major life domains (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Individuals with callings tend to put more time in at work, whether or not this time is compensated, which is perhaps not surprising in light of the finding that those with callings are more likely to report intentions to keep working even if they did not need the money (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Individuals with callings report higher levels of passion for and enjoyment of their work (Novak, 2006; Vallerand, Blanchard, Mageau, Koestner, Ratelle, Léonard, Gagné, & Marsolais, 2003), have stronger identification and engagement with their work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2006), and perform at higher levels than their

peers (Hall & Chandler, 2005). As Bunderson and Thompson (2009) note, those with callings are less likely to suffer from stress, depression, and conflict between the work and non-work spheres of their lives (Treadgold, 1999; Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005).

While most of the research findings on the outcomes associated with callings are quite positive, more recent studies are beginning to consider the potential drawbacks associated with seeing work as a calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2006). This research marks an important development, as it deepens scholars' understanding of the nature and impact of callings and challenges an implicit assumption that callings are universally positive experiences. For example, while Bunderson and Thompson (2009) found that a sense of calling among the zookeepers they studied was associated with a sense of transcendent meaning, identity, and significance, the basis of a sense of calling in their sample was rooted in a feeling of duty and destiny to do zookeeping work. This sense of duty and destiny may explain the sometimes profound experience of sacrifice and vigilance that the zookeepers also reported; an experience the authors described as a double-edged sword to reflect the simultaneously positive and difficult experience of having a neoclassical calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). While Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) defined callings as an experience of the work as an end in itself in which the activities of the job may or may not be pleasurable, most subsequent research on callings has primarily highlighted the enjoyment of work as the marker of a calling. Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) study marks an important step forward in building a more complete and nuanced understanding of the nature of callings in modern work.

Recent research also suggests that callings may limit individuals' ability to correctly calibrate their abilities in the domain of their calling. Dobrow (2010b) finds that among young musicians, a sense of calling is associated with overestimation of one's own musical ability

relative to ability as rated by outside experts. This discrepancy may be costly, as a sense of calling is also associated with intentions to pursue and actual pursuit of a professional music career. Given the sense of passion experienced by those with callings, it is perhaps not surprising that they are more likely to pursue the calling in their occupational path (Berg et al., 2010). But Dobrow (2010b) suggests that a sense of calling may be setting individuals up for a fall if they do not have the requisite talent to succeed. It is possible, however, that those with callings may, even in spite of less objective ability, work harder to develop their abilities and ultimately be more likely to succeed. Resolving this question represents a fascinating opportunity to better understand the link between callings and activities in the work domain, and would be relevant to the growing literature about whether people have the ability to build on their talents through their efforts to develop them (e.g., Dweck, 1986).

Finally, emerging theoretical work has taken on the question of whether callings have the potential to be unhealthy for individuals and organizations if they are taken to an extreme that makes them unsustainable (Caza & Cardador, 2009). Clearly, callings have all the markings of an orientation toward work that could lead to exhaustion and burnout if approached as an all-consuming activity in life (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). While most research on callings suggests positive outcomes, the field may be suffering from a sampling issue, in which individuals who experience their work as a calling and are still working in their occupations, and thus available for research, are the individuals researchers have studied. Future research should assess the extent to which individuals may have experienced their work as a calling in the past and should also include individuals who have exited a calling due to their inability to sustain it. These exits may be due to lack of ability (Dobrow, 2010b), an unhealthy experience of the calling (Caza & Cardador, 2009), or other dynamics. Only through studying those who have

experienced the drawbacks of callings can researchers gain a deeper understanding of the full scope of the construct.

### **The Future of Callings Research: Unresolved Questions and Promising Threads**

As noted above, areas of great promise abound in the future of callings research. Callings represent an ancient notion, but research on callings is still relatively young. The multiple emerging threads of inquiry are a testament to this, as are the conflicting assumptions and approaches taken to understanding what a calling is and why it matters. While callings have captured the imagination of organizational researchers, the current body of work is still developing and in need of deeper study. Below, I outline several threads for future research that could help to increase our understanding of the experience of work as a calling.

First and foremost, more rigorous empirical research on callings is sorely needed. The concept of callings entered the organizational literature from theoretical work in the social sciences (e.g., Bellah et al., 1985) and has been the subject of many empirical investigations, as noted here. However, there remains a relative dearth of studies that are empirical and longitudinal in nature to allow for a deeper understanding of the nature of callings. Qualitative studies have shed helpful light on the nature of callings in different occupations. Combined with careful measurement of the antecedents and effects of callings, this type of inquiry can help build a strong body of research in this area of inquiry. Regardless of the nature of the questions outlined below, careful empirical study marks our best opportunity as a field to move this area of research forward in a meaningful way.

Second, as might be expected in a relatively young area of research, there is work to be done on the measurement of callings. While various measurement instruments have been developed (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2006; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), each

emphasizes different aspects of having a calling. The focus of recent research on defining, measuring, and validating the calling construct (Berg et al., 2010; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow, 2004) and analyzing how callings are experienced (Berg, et al., 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2006) is likely to usher in a period in which additional perspectives and elements of callings are advanced before the construct is reduced to its core. This period represents an opportunity to carefully examine whether we are fully capturing what a calling is in our measurement of it. Specifically, the field needs to eventually converge on an understanding of whether callings are a loose amalgamation of different experiences of work, or whether they have particular hallmarks that define them – for example, a sense of the work as being a critically important end in itself for the individual, as well as a belief that the work contributes to the greater good in a meaningful way. Likewise, measurement advances that help differentiate a sense of callings in general from the extent to which individuals experience a calling in their current job would be helpful. To date, both treatments of callings have coexisted but clearly mean different things (Rosso et al., forthcoming).

Third, research in organizational behavior continually emphasizes the impact of changing structures of careers and work in organizations on any number of variables of interest. In this sense, callings are no different, and represent an opportunity to explore whether those with callings enjoy an additional advantage over others beyond those reported in this chapter. Specifically, it is possible that those who experience their work as a calling may be more protected from negative effects of the episodic and uncertain nature of career progression in organizations. Because those with callings primarily define their attachment to the work domain through the work itself, rather than through membership in the organization or the status of their occupation, they may find that over the various employment shifts that are likely in a career they

are relatively protected from the stresses that others experience during such transitions. To the extent that one is able to engage in work that represents one's calling, changes in the kind of position one holds, and the organization in which one holds that position, are less important than they would be for those who are more likely to define themselves by these bases. Understanding callings in the broader context of organizational life also yields opportunities to study what happens to callings in lean economic times. In economic environments that give rise to layoffs, it is possible that those with callings are both less likely to lose their jobs (if the positive performance effects of having a calling are an indication) and more likely to experience unemployment as a particularly hard time if they do lose their jobs.

Fourth, while this chapter has highlighted the role of callings in work, it would be unfortunate if research on callings advanced without an accompanying focus on other meanings of work. Research on the positive side of work and organizational life is incomplete without an anchoring in the full sweep of experience of these domains. While callings represent one kind of relationship people can have with their work, just as worthy of study are relationships to work as a job, a career, or other kinds of experiences. Callings help us to understand the nature of deep fulfillment and service to others in work. But many, even most, people who work do not have the luxury of finding, pursuing, enacting, or creating their callings (Berg et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Yet, each has a relationship to work that has meaning and is deserving of understanding. Indeed, any efforts to create conditions in which individuals are more likely to experience their work as a calling probably depend on understanding the kind of orientation toward work they currently have.

Fifth, recent research on moral psychology (e.g., Haidt, 2007) presents an interesting opportunity to understand the possible moral underpinnings of callings. Bunderson and

Thompson (2009) suggest that callings may be experienced as a kind of moral imperative, in which individuals have a strong sense of duty together with expectations that others should uphold the standards implied by a calling orientation. Haidt's emerging work on moral foundations of human cognition suggests that concerns regarding purity and sanctity underlie motivation to live life in a noble and elevated way (Haidt & Joseph, 2007). Future research should consider whether callings that represent either deep expressions of the self or the enactment of a life of service to others or to God may tap a fundamental moral foundation upon which people build their understanding of their actions.

To summarize, callings represent a unique and potentially multifaceted relationship between individuals and their work. While promising progress is being made in understanding the antecedents of callings and especially the outcomes of callings, basic questions remain regarding their structure and function in social life. Their power in shaping the human experience of work has been established. What remains is the drive for explaining why, and how, callings exert the influence they do over our experience of work.

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