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Calling and careers

Lysova, Evgenia I.; Dik, Bryan J.; Duffy, Ryan D.; Khapova, Svetlana N.; Arthur, Michael B.

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Editorial

Calling and careers: New insights and future directions

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ABSTRACT

With this article, we open a special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* on "Calling and Careers: New Insights and Future Directions." Calling has become an important emerging topic of study in vocational psychology and organizational behavior, as the exponentially increasing volume of published studies on the topic indicates. After summarizing the aims of the special issue, we introduce each of the nine studies of calling and careers selected for inclusion. These studies initiate fresh research directions in key domains of calling research, such as: a) the conceptualization of calling, b) the emergence and development of calling, c) positive and negative effects of calling, and d) further theoretical development related to the construct. Together with the authors of these studies, we hope this special issue succeeds in moving the scholarly conversation on calling and careers forward.

"Your profession is not what brings home your weekly paycheck, your profession is what you're put here on earth to do, with such passion and such intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling."

-Vincent van Gogh

1. Introduction

Calling has, without a doubt, become a hot topic in research on career development and workplace well-being. Within the broader scholarly conversation on meaningful work, calling has been studied as a factor associated with occupational choice (e.g., Kaminsky & Behrend, 2015), work engagement and career satisfaction (e.g., Xie, Xia, Xin, & Zhou, 2016), and burnout (e.g., Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Substantial progress has been made within the literature, in terms of the growing body of basic research (e.g., Thompson & Bunderson, 2019), new theoretical developments (e.g., Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England, & Velez, 2018; Hall & Chandler, 2005), and recommendations for how the construct might be applied in career counseling (e.g., Adams, 2012) and organizational settings (e.g., Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2010). Yet despite the popularity and practical relevance of the construct, the literature still lacks sufficient evidence to effectively address a number of germane questions. In charting out this special issue, our aim was to encourage submissions that address these questions.

Four areas of research struck us as particularly important. First, research is needed that offers new insights on the diverse (and debated) understandings of what calling means, and the implications of these differences for the growing body of calling research (Dik and Shimizu, in press). Addressing this question requires a better sense of whether calling is experienced differently by various occupational groups, for example, or by individuals from different socio-economic and contextual backgrounds. Do diverse conceptualizations of calling differ as a matter of kind, or degree? If the former is the case, "calling" may simply be a shared label that reflects distinct constructs, and different scales and even theories may be warranted based on the adherence of different populations to those different ways of defining and applying the construct. If the latter is true, definitional diversity may be less consequential in terms of how the construct functions for different people and groups. Second, research is needed that uncovers processes that underlie the emergence and development of calling. Much is known about the correlates and consequences of calling, but relatively little about its antecedents. In part, this requires consideration of the extent to which calling changes over time as well as more longitudinal work on the topic.

Third, research is required to investigate the conditions and mechanisms explaining why calling has positive and/or negative effects on diverse individual outcomes. Most of the research reveals positive associations between a sense of calling and beneficial

outcomes, but under some circumstances a sense of calling has been shown to create vulnerabilities—the so-called "dark side" of calling (e.g., Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016). This double-edged nature of calling has been long acknowledged (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), but little is known regarding the circumstances in which an ordinarily positive approach to work can become detrimental. Finally, given the growing but still-limited theoretical development with regard to why and how calling relates to various career- and work-related outcomes, the application of diverse theoretical perspectives is needed for a more comprehensive understanding of the role callings play in career development.

Inspired to address the above and related gaps in the calling literature and to help move the field forward, we present this special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior (JVB)* on callings and careers, beginning with the following summary of each of the articles, the common themes they reflect, and the future research directions toward which they point.

2. Contributions in this special issue

For this special issue, we wanted to invite contributions that would provide a better theoretical understanding of how callings develop and relate to diverse career- and person-related outcomes in different occupational contexts and for various social groups. Our call for papers encouraged scholars to contribute to the special issue by a) employing interdisciplinary ways of studying calling, b) exploring diverse occupational, cultural, and social contexts, and c) using novel or underutilized research methods. To spark scholarly interest in the special issue and to provide opportunities for potential contributors to further develop their ideas, we hosted the *1st International Conference on Calling* linked to the special issue in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in October 2017. As a result of our call for papers and the conference, 48 manuscripts were submitted for consideration to *JVB*. From this pool of manuscripts, those that fitted the objectives of our special issue and were of high quality ($N = 28$) were shepherded into the *JVB* peer review process. Our editorial team managed the peer review of 26 of these manuscripts. In this review process, there were papers that a) were not returned to us in a revised form, b) required extensive additional data collection, c) had a limited or unclear contribution to the calling literature, or d) were encouraged to be resubmitted to a regular *JVB* issue. Other papers that were not accepted had issues that both our editorial team and the reviewers felt were hard to be resolved in the next rounds of revisions. (Two other manuscripts, co-authored by members of the editorial team, were managed in the peer review separately, by established *JVB* action editors).

We are pleased to present the final collection of nine articles included in the special issue. These articles showcase diverse methodological approaches (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual). They are authored by researchers working within different countries (e.g., Italy, Lebanon, Switzerland, the Netherlands, UK, and USA) and different research disciplines (e.g., management, vocational psychology, organizational behavior, business ethics, human resource management). The articles also explore calling among different occupational and social groups (e.g., (video)game company founders, students, priests, financiers, firefighters and police officers, and older workers). Below, we provide a brief overview of each of the nine articles.

Shimizu, Dik, and Conner (2019) aim to enrich our understanding of the latent structure of the calling construct, and the nature of the differences that exist between how people conceptualize calling. They do so by applying taxometric and cluster analyses using a sample of U.S. undergraduate students. The results of their taxometric analysis did not reveal discrete types or categories within the calling construct, but rather suggest that the diverse definitions of calling differ as a matter of degree, along continuous dimensions identified in previous research. The results of their cluster analysis revealed two groups of individuals with a calling. The first group contained people who place a high level of importance on work centrality and the work value of self-enhancement, emphasizing the value of advancing themselves through their careers. The second contained people who place a high level of importance on religion and self-transcendence values in their calling. The more these individuals endorsed religion, the stronger sense of calling they manifested. Thus, this article suggests that calling has a singular latent structure, which allows for different points of emphasis expressed by people who perceive a calling.

Michaelson and Tosti-Kharas (2019) use qualitative data drawn from the New York Times' "Portraits of Grief" – brief sketches about the work and lives of victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. that are based on the interviews with their close relatives and friends – to explore whether and how a self-oriented calling can be seen by others as having ethical value. Employing an ethical perspective, the authors show that the representation of work as a calling differs in frequency and in form. In particular, the findings reveal that the portraits of first responders (i.e., firefighters and police officers) were more likely to describe work as a calling compared to financiers. They also show that the narratives of other-oriented callings and of self-oriented callings were regarded by loved ones as having ethical value. Ethical theory helps highlight how the narratives of self-oriented callings are not seen by close others as being strictly ego-driven but rather as enabling individuals to reach for and realize their best selves (i.e., self-realization). In this way, this article emphasizes the usefulness of the third-person perspective in understanding the potential ethical value of self-oriented callings similar to other-oriented callings. It also points to the need to study calling across diverse and contrasting occupations to better understand self- and other-oriented callings.

Lysova and Khapova (2019) explore how individuals experience, enact, and sustain their calling in the context of less-established career structures and scarce resources. In so doing, they draw on qualitative data collected among founders of (video)game development companies in the Dutch video game industry. The findings reveal that in the context of poorly-established career structures, the interviewed founders experienced a creative calling that was focused broadly on a creative process, which satisfied their inner urge to create and to have a positive impact on gamers and the videogame industry as a whole, rather than on a specific occupation or profession. In such a context, the game company founders tried to enact their creative calling through engaging in emergent entrepreneurship and bonding with likeminded people. The game company founders tried to sustain their creative calling by anchoring its enactment in the video game industry to either an idealized work identity or a crafted work identity. The first approach was of a more short-term nature than the second one, limiting the possibilities for game company founders to be successful at making a living

while pursuing their creative calling in the long term. This article shows the importance of studying calling in less-established career contexts and professions. It also explains how one's work identity can shape how individuals try to sustain their calling enactment in challenging circumstances and the likelihood of succeeding in this endeavor.

Dalla Rosa, Vianello, and Anselmi (2019) test three competing hypotheses by means of a three-wave longitudinal study conducted with a sample of Italian students. The authors examine whether calling is an antecedent of career choices (*a priori* hypothesis), a consequence of purposeful involvement in a domain (*a posteriori* hypothesis), or both (*reciprocal* hypothesis). Using a newly-developed multidimensional measure of calling, the authors examine the relation of calling with engagement in learning, clarity of professional identity, and social support over time in the light of the three hypotheses. The results suggest that engagement in learning, clarity of professional identity, and social support predict calling over time, supporting the a posteriori hypothesis rather than the alternative a priori and reciprocal hypotheses. The results also show that the effect of social support on calling is smaller than the effect of engagement in learning and clarity of professional identity. This article provides important insights on the antecedents facilitating the development of a calling over time.

Sturges, Clinton, Conway, and Budjanovcanin (2019) explore the emergence of a calling, drawing on qualitative data collected from a sample of clergy in the Church of England. The findings reveal that for these participants, the emergence of a calling is not a discrete event but an unfolding process of sensemaking. In this process, the participants' identity as Christians and the socio-material context of the calling domain influence the cues that are extracted and how they are interpreted and acted upon, leading to the emergence of a calling. In particular, a dramatic experience, a powerful emotion, an unexpected prompting or persistent feeling served as an initial cue triggering the emergence of calling. Attending to these cues, the interviewed respondents tried to clarify their experiences (through self-exploration and self-awareness, and seeking confirmation and support of others) and acted on them. The findings also show that the context (i.e., high participation in the church activities) and the participants' faith and identity as active Christians played an important role in the process of calling emergence. Thus, making sense of one's calling represents an unfolding journey where one's existing identity gets challenged due to complex interactions and interrelationships between the context, cues and individuals' actions and interpretations. This article manifests the value of employing a sensemaking perspective for a better understanding the process through which callings emerge.

Afiouni and Karam (2019) draw on qualitative data collected from women in Lebanon to explore how these women perceive and affectively react to contextual hardships, and how these, in turn, have shaped the formation of their callings. This article shows how contextual hardships that women perceive in national business (political, educational and labor, cultural, and financial) subsystems can facilitate the development of their callings. By so doing, it provides novel insights into the role of contextual hardships that go beyond merely challenging or impeding one's calling pursuit. Employing a feminist lens, the authors demonstrate that because of the perceived hardships, women experience feelings of awareness, anger, anxiety, and isolation that trigger them to act and respond in proactive ways, leading to the development of their callings. This article shows that contextual hardships serve as external sources that drive the process of internal formation of a career calling, a process that happens through affective mechanisms.

In their conceptual article, Buis, Ferguson, and Briscoe (2019) argue that teams facilitate the development of individuals' callings. Drawing on social identity theory and optimal distinctiveness theory, the authors suggest that teams represent an important context in which individuals make sense of themselves and their callings. In this group context, they propose, individuals evaluate their experiences of calling through their satisfaction of the needs for distinctiveness and belongingness. The article presents a typology of six individual experiences of calling in teams according to the two dimensions: a) an individual's calling dimension (i.e., individuals searching for calling and those that have acknowledged the presence of a calling) and b) the balance between the need for distinctiveness and the need for belongingness (i.e., too much assimilation, too much distinctiveness, and optimal distinctiveness). This is the first article that explicitly addresses the under-explored connection between calling and teams, opening valuable directions for future empirical research.

Hirschi, Keller, and Spurk (2019) examine whether the presence of a calling affects the work-nonwork interface (i.e., work-nonwork enrichment and conflict) and which mechanisms explain these relations. Drawing on a two-wave data collection conducted among older workers in Germany, the authors show that a calling can enhance as well as deplete personal resources at work, which explains why it has both positive and negative effects on the work-nonwork interface over a period of one year. In particular, an increase in the presence of a calling positively relates to an increase in a positive affect at work, which, in turn, relates positively to work-nonwork enrichment and negatively to work-nonwork conflict. Furthermore, an increase in the presence of a calling positively relates to an increase in workaholism, which, in turn, positively relates to both work-nonwork conflict and work-nonwork enrichment. Not only does this article explain why calling can have both positive and negative effects, but also it emphasizes the importance of studying calling in relation to work-nonwork interface outcomes that have not been addressed so far by the calling research.

Webster and Edwards (2019) examine whether holding a calling for a second job affects individuals work experiences in the primary job. Drawing on two samples of respondents who had two jobs (i.e., dual jobholders), this article tests the possibility that viewing one's second job as a calling predicts both positive and negative effects on individuals' work engagement in the primary job. The results show that viewing the second job as a calling exacerbates the negative relation between second job-to-primary job resource drain and primary job work engagement. This means that a dual jobholder is likely to exert considerable energy and effort on the second job viewed as a calling, depleting resources required for work engagement on the primary job. In this way, this article suggests that having a calling can potentially have a negative effect in the context of alternative work arrangements such as dual jobholding.

3. Common themes and future research directions

The nine articles included in this special issue make important contributions to the calling literature and open unique opportunities for future research. Below, we discuss four themes that are addressed in the articles, and reflect on directions for future research.

3.1. Conceptualization of calling

The presence of diverse definitions of calling in the literature continues to be an important issue that requires attention. The special issue builds on recent work by Dik and Shimizu (in press) and Thompson and Bunderson (2019), adding fresh insights into the complexity of how the calling construct is conceptualized, and by whom. The papers in our special issue emphasize the importance of being flexible in how we define calling. They point to a need to acknowledge there is not necessarily two discrete types of calling, such as Modern (i.e., a secularized, internally-driven concept emphasizing self-actualization, fulfillment, and passion) or Neoclassical (i.e., a prosocially motivated approach to work originating from sources beyond the self). Rather a diversity of definitions of calling exist that can bridge these two poles of the continuum. In the way individuals perceive their calling, they may emphasize certain aspects more strongly than others (e.g., self-enhancement versus religiousness and self-transcendence values). Callings can be understood as having a self-oriented as well as other-oriented nature, and both self- and other-oriented callings can have ethical value in the eyes of others. What is more, an (occupational) context appears to shape how individuals perceive their calling. For example, the presence of established career structures within a particular context likely shapes whether calling is viewed narrowly, as tied to a specific occupation (highly-established career structures), or broadly, as focused on meaningful activities or processes (less-established career structures) that transcend job titles.

Drawing on these novel insights, we encourage scholars to further explore the complexities involved in how people frame or interpret their callings, because this likely influences the diverse outcomes of calling. In particular, while calling research has emerged within different countries, very little research has investigated cross-cultural comparisons of calling conceptualizations. This research direction should include exploring ways that different cultural contexts shape people's experiences of calling. Doing so would enable a more contextualized understanding of calling.

Furthermore, additional research should study the implications of individuals focusing their calling on self-oriented rather than other-oriented values. For example, do individuals with a self-oriented focus to their calling adapt more readily to challenges associated with pursuing their calling compared to those with a stronger other-oriented focus, or is the reverse true? Which approach to understanding one's calling is most likely to introduce vulnerabilities prompting them to live out their callings in an unhealthy manner? What is more, scholars should further explore how particular (occupational) contexts shape how people perceive and live out their callings. This is especially relevant given the changing nature of work and employment (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017) that has given rise to new occupations (e.g., digital nomads, vloggers) and ways of working (e.g., platform-enabled work). Qualitative research will be of particular value initially, as it can uncover the relevance of the calling concept for individuals in these emergent occupations and ways of working as well as explore the ability of these new working arrangements to challenge or advance existing ways of understanding and expressing a calling.

3.2. Emergence and development of calling

With the majority of research on calling focused on studying diverse work-, career-, and well-being correlates and consequences (i.e., outcomes) of calling, relatively little research has investigated the development of calling (Dobrow, 2013; Duffy & Dik, 2013). This special issue contributes to this limited research by examining factors and processes that explain how callings emerge and develop. It shows that both person-related factors (e.g., clarity of professional identity, engagement in learning activities) and contextual factors (e.g., supportive social environment, social-material context, teams, contextual hardships) facilitate the emergence and development of calling. Among these factors, the role of teams and contextual hardships are particularly unique and underexplored factors that influence the development of calling. The focus on teams emphasizes the role of others in shaping the development of one's calling within the work domain, which reaches beyond the study of others in the nonwork domain (e.g., parents; Bott et al., 2017). The focus on contextual hardships as a factor contributing to the development of calling is also unique, given that most research has so far examined how contextual hardships constrain the ability of individuals to pursue their calling (Duffy, Autin, England, Douglass, & Gensmer, 2018). The special issue also highlights sensemaking as an important underlying process influencing the development of a calling. Clearly, the process through which callings emerge is dynamic and complex, characterized by an interplay of the context in which one is immersed and one's evolving identity.

The papers in this special issue provide valuable insights about the factors and processes explaining how calling emerges and develops. However, these insights are somewhat limited given their conceptual nature or the specificity of the sample under investigation (i.e., priests, students, women in a fragile geopolitical context). Thus, more research is needed that will replicate, extend, or challenge these novel insights. Since most papers in our special issue that study the development of calling are explorative in nature, future research should test hypotheses using quantitative longitudinal designs. What is more, given a growing interdependence between employees and an increase in teamwork (Beus, Jarrett, Taylor, & Wiese, 2014), we encourage scholars to investigate the role of teams as an important context in which individuals engage in self-reflection and evaluation of their experiences, processes that may contribute to the development of a calling. Qualitative research focused on uncovering how teams shape the development of calling would be of particular value.

3.3. Explanations of positive and negative effects of calling

A growing body of research suggests that a calling can have positive and/or negative influences on diverse work- and career-related outcomes (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, & Tims, 2018). Papers in this special issue provide insights into the factors and conditions that can explain these diverse effects. For instance, they suggest that these diverse effects could be explained by a) the presence of a calling in a primary versus a secondary job in case of dual job-holders, b) the ability of a calling to increase as well as to deplete one's personal resources, and c) the ability of individuals to craft an idealized work identity associated with one's calling. The identified factors and conditions shaping how calling relates to diverse outcomes are mainly person-focused, suggesting that how a person approaches the pursuit of a calling has implications for its outcomes. Individual career agency manifested in contemporary career studies is powerful (Khapova & Arthur, 2011), but raises a question about the potential role of contextual factors in shaping whether calling positively and/or negatively influences diverse outcomes (Cohen & Duberley, 2015). For example, it would be interesting to study whether rules or norms of behaving within certain occupational groups shape how individuals in these groups pursue their calling (e.g., in a healthy or unhealthy way). For example, the paper by Lysova and Khapova (2019) notes that being a part of a video game community may pressure individuals to pursue their idealistic creative calling despite all odds, resulting in their inability to sustain this calling for the long term. Future research should also examine how support provided to individuals with a calling in work and nonwork domains shapes the ability of individuals to cope with the challenges associated with the pursuing a calling.

Papers in this special issue also propose that studying how callings intersect within different life domains can provide novel perspectives on the factors and conditions that can explain the diverse outcomes of calling. Indeed, studying calling in the context of holding different jobs and in relation to nonwork domains appears to be of particular value. With regard to the former, we encourage scholars to examine the influence of calling on different work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., well-being, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior). With regard to the latter, it would be interesting to study the factors that can buffer the negative effects of calling on one's work-nonwork interface (e.g., nonwork support, identification with a nonwork role).

3.4. Theoretical perspectives for studying calling

The absence of a solid theoretical models explaining the emergence of callings and the mechanisms through which they influence key outcomes has been long a point of critique, arguably leading to a lack of coherence in the literature. Even with a recently-developed formal theory (i.e., Work as a Calling Theory; Duffy, Dik, et al., 2018), there are many possibilities for scholars to enrich our understanding of calling and its outcomes by employing different theoretical perspectives. Indeed, papers in our special issue clearly demonstrate the applicability of different theoretical and discipline-diverse perspectives to open new insights on calling. For example, the authors in the articles showed that a) work-nonwork theories (i.e, work-home resource model, work-family enrichment model, spillover theory, and inter-role conflict theory); b) conservation of resources theory; c) identity theory, and d) optimal distinctiveness theory may be of value for future research on calling. They also provided support for the relevance of ethical, feminist and sensemaking perspectives. We applaud this theoretical diversity. Indeed, a theoretically-diverse and interdisciplinary conversation was one of our objectives in initiating this special issue. However, we recognize that most of the work on calling still very much rests on insights from vocational psychology and organizational behavior and management, expect for limited calling research in communication studies (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Scholars in the social sciences might draw from social-psychological and sociological perspectives to shed new light on calling.

4. Conclusion

This special issue as a whole, and each of the papers within it, make important empirical and conceptual contributions to the calling literature. Together, they provide fresh insights and address important under-explored questions in calling research within the following four themes: a) conceptualization of calling, b) emergence and development of calling, c) factors and conditions explaining positive and negative effects of calling, and d) theoretical perspectives for studying calling. Our sincere hope is that this special issue stimulates future research on calling and further establishes its relevance for understanding diverse career- and work-related outcomes.

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Evgenia I. Lysova[a],[*], Bryan J. Dik[b], Ryan D. Duffy[c], Svetlana N. Khapova[a], Michael B. Arthur[d]

[a] *School of Business and Economics, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*
[b] *Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, 209 Behavioral Sciences Building, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA*
[c] *Department of Psychology, University of Florida, PO Box 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA*
[d] *Department of Strategy and International Business, Suffolk University, 370M, Sargent Hall, Boston, MA 02108-2770, USA*
E-mail addresses: e.lysova@vu.nl (E.I. Lysova), Bryan.Dik@ColoState.edu (B.J. Dik), rduf@ufl.edu (R.D. Duffy),
s.n.khapova@vu.nl (S.N. Khapova), marthur@suffolk.edu (M.B. Arthur).

[*] Corresponding author.