



Callings and organizational behavior

A.R. Elangovan^{a,*}, Craig C. Pinder^a, Murdith McLean^b

^a Faculty of Business, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 2Y2

^b Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 2Y2

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ABSTRACT

Current literature on careers, social identity and meaning in work tends to understate the multiplicity, historical significance, and nuances of the concept of calling(s). In this article, we trace the evolution of the concept from its religious roots into secular realms and develop a typology of interpretations using occupation and religious orientation as core dimensions. We offer a definition of calling that emphasizes action, a convergence of selves, and a pro-social intention. Next, we identify a number of key conditions necessary for discovering a calling, explore the relevance of callings to a range of organizational behavior phenomena, and offer suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

The ancient concept of callings has been resurrected in recent organizational behavior literature and continues to garner growing attention from researchers and practitioners. Traditionally seen as “a meaningful beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant” (Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009, p. 115), researchers and theorists have rekindled efforts to understand the key features and qualities of a calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Novak, 1996; Weiss, Skelley, Haughey, & Hall, 2004), the circumstances under which a person may discover a calling (Levoy, 1997), the experiencing of a calling (Dobrow, 2004), the notion of a “callings orientation” (e.g., Bellah, Sullivan, Tipton, Madsen, & Swindler, 1996; Wrzesniewski, 2003), the importance of having a calling relative to a career (Dobrow, 2004; Hall & Chandler, 2005), and the relationship between a calling and career development (e.g., Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). Other, related concepts have also received increasing attention, such as finding personal meaning and purpose in work and life (Grant, 2007; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Ray, 2005; Steger & Frazier, 2005; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Practitioners such as career counselors have invoked the idea of callings to help their audience critically assess their own jobs and careers and guide them towards better and more satisfying career choices (e.g., Hall & Chandler, 2005; Webber, 1998). There is something about the concept of calling that has heretofore been mystical and amorphous. Our purpose in this article is to bring attention to this idea in a disciplined way that, we hope, will stimulate more scholarly inquiry.

The renewed interest in callings is both important and interesting. The idea of a calling is so central to one’s identity and connection with his or her work (see Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hall & Chandler, 2005) that it could cast a deeper and different light on a range of work-related behaviors. For example, emerging research on callings has collectively highlighted that the motivation, satisfaction, career self-assessment and development of people with a sense of calling tends to be different from those who view their daily work merely as a job (Davidson & Caddell, 1994; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Wrzesniewski, McCauley,

* Corresponding author. Address: University of Victoria, Faculty of Business, PO Box 1700 STN CSC, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 2Y2. Fax: +1 250 721 6067. E-mail addresses: arelango@uvic.ca (A.R. Elangovan), cpinder@uvic.ca (C.C. Pinder), mmclean@uvic.ca (M. McLean).

Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). A sense of calling was correlated with lower levels of stress and depression (Treadgold, 1999) and is claimed to foster the acquisition of meta-competencies (e.g., adaptability) which ultimately improve individual and organizational performance (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Also, a sense of personal mission, purpose-in-living and an element of service towards others characterizes people who are pursuing their calling (Dobrow, 2004), which has implications for citizenship behaviors in organizations. But most extant models and theories of work behavior are limited in accommodating or explaining many elements of work-related behaviors and attitudes (cf. Pinder, 2008). We believe that a deeper inquiry into callings and related dynamics could significantly enhance our understanding of work motivation, career choices, job satisfaction, employee stress, commitment, citizenship behaviors and other organizational phenomena.

Accordingly, we have four major objectives in this article. First, we propose a definition of the concept of callings. Second, we explore the evolution of the concept over time, variously taking on religious or secular meanings, resulting in a typology of interpretations. Third, we address the conditions necessary for discovering a calling. We conclude by highlighting areas of research in organizational science in which the concept of callings may shed new light and advance both theory and practice.

2. A definition of calling(s)

While the term callings has been used in different ways over time, three fundamental features have stayed constant across these interpretations. First, all interpretations suggest an orientation toward action. Second, they feature a sense of clarity of purpose and personal mission. Third, all imply pro-social intentions as perceived by the individual with the calling. We highlight each of these as we propose our definition of callings.

2.1. Action orientation

First, callings always suggest a call to action; the emphasis is on *doing* rather than simply *being*. Specifically, a *calling refers to a course of action*. For example, Raatikainen (1997) viewed a calling as a “service task” – an activity to be done. Whether one is called to a specific way of life by divine design or by a sense of self-awareness and an inner compass, the implicit focus is on what one *does* (Grant, 2007). Thus while beliefs, attitudes and values are essential and ever-present, the concept of callings, *per se*, focuses on the actions they motivate.

2.2. Sense of clarity of purpose and personal mission

Second, callings suggest a certain sense of clarity of purpose, direction, meaning and personal mission (Dik & Duffy, 2009) such that the one who is called identifies fully with the course of action. Several researchers have noted how the notions of self-concept, purpose, action, identity and callings are intricately intertwined. For example, Norton (1976) suggested that those who have found their calling derive their sense of identity from what they do; *viz*, you are what you do. Likewise, Dobrow (2004) stressed the coming-together of the identities of the person and his/her work as a facet of the experience of having a calling. Bolman and Deal (2001) voiced a similar sentiment in their observation that authenticity is achieved only when life and livelihood meld into one. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) have also noted that an integration of various aspects of oneself, including identities, and its connection to one’s work is a key aspect of fostering meaningfulness.

Aristotle’s ideas regarding living one’s self-truth or personal truth is consistent with the notion of callings marking one’s true identity (Norton, 1976). Similarly, much of Levoy’s (1997) analysis seeks to link the possession of a calling to following an “authentic life” as does Norton’s (1976) emphasis on “being where one must be, and doing what one must do” (p. 198). These ideas stress a certain clarity of purpose, meaning, and direction inherent in the notion of a calling that is more than a just a mere sense that one needs to find or do something – the latter reflects more the *search for a calling* rather than *having a calling per se*. As Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) noted, the presence of a calling was strongly associated with self-clarity.

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) offers a theoretical underpinning for conceptualizing this facet of callings. The premise of this theory is that the behaviors and actions of individuals can be explained by recognizing their urge to reduce the discrepancies among their multiple selves – what they would like to do (*ideal self*), what they think they should do (*ought self*), and what they currently do (*actual self*). Discrepancies among these multiple selves cause dissonance, which in turn serves as the motivation to engage in certain dissonance-reducing behaviors. For our purposes, being engaged in one’s calling can be seen as the convergence of the actual, ideal, and ought selves. In other words, in following his or her calling, the individual would be able to state: *viz*, “I *am* what I *want* to be and *should* be.” Such a convergence of selves would promote the clarity, direction and sense of meaningfulness that is considered central to feeling called (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

2.3. Pro-social intention(s)

The third salient characteristic of our conceptualization of callings is pro-social intention – a desire to make the world a better place. In other words, not only is there a sense of personal purpose in a calling, but that purpose is, to varying degrees, other-focused (Bellah et al., 1996; Dik & Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). There is considerable convergence of views on this aspect of callings. For example, Buechner (1973, p. 95) described a calling as “the place where your deep gladness . . . and the world’s hunger meet.” Similarly, Raatikainen (1997) associated callings with serving others altruistically. More re-

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