The Importance of Calling in Career Counseling: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Research on calling as related to career has gained momentum as of late. The literature has shown that calling is salient to both college and adult populations. Calling has also been linked to career-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, and to well-being measures like life satisfaction. Though limited, the vocational research on calling indicates that career counselors should evaluate whether calling is relevant to their clients and examine how calling may influence their career development. Further research is needed to assess calling within diverse populations and to examine its links to work-life outcomes.
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Describing one’s occupation as a calling is a relatively new concept. Calling in the traditional sense has long been associated with a religious calling from God. A modernization of the term, however, has led to a more secular conceptualization of calling. Within the last five years, the construct of calling has become more prevalent in the field of vocational psychology. The career literature has found calling to be salient to a variety of populations (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Duffy et al., 2012; Hirschi & Herrman, 2012; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), though it may be particularly relevant to college students (Domene, 2012; Duffy, Allan, & Dik, 2011; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Hirschi & Herrman, 2012; Hunter, Dik, & Banning, 2010; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that calling is associated with work and life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), though these links are complex (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Domene, 2012; Duffy, et al., 2011; Hirschi & Herrman, 2012). Therefore, calling is important to address in career counseling for both its relevance to clients and its potential influence on their career development and career outcomes.

Steger, Pickering, Shin, and Dik (2010) wished to assess the degree to which career calling can exist beyond the religious framework in which it originated. Steger et al. utilized two strategies to approach this question. First, they addressed two potential intermediary means (intrinsic religiousness and meaning in life) that might account for the healthier psychological adjustment and positive work attitudes that people with a calling exhibit. Second, they examined whether religious and nonreligious students who express having a career calling experience equally positive psychological and work attitudes. Their sample consisted of 295 introductory psychology students at a large university. Meaning in life, positive work attitudes, and
psychological adjustment were equally related to calling for both highly religious individuals and for those who were less religious. These results indicate that calling could be conceptualized in a way that is relevant for both religious and nonreligious people. As such, it may prove useful for counselors to address calling early in the counseling process in order to determine what the construct means to each client. With this understanding, counselors can tailor future discussions in religious or secular terminology, depending on the client’s preference.

Hunter, Dik, and Banning (2010) argued that the construct of calling may be particularly relevant to college students because they are in the process of establishing identity and making important career decisions. In a qualitative study, Hunter et al. compared definitions of calling from the research literature to college students’ conceptualization of calling. Participants were 435 undergraduate college students (340 from a large Western research university and 85 from two Midwestern Christian liberal arts colleges). For 68% of the sample, calling was a relevant consideration in their career decision-making process. Interestingly, calling was relevant to 94% of students at the Christian colleges and 61% of the students at the research university indicating that religious students may find calling to be more salient in their lives. Students who reported that calling was relevant to them answered three open-ended questions related to calling. From their responses, Hunter et al. identified three themes: participants viewed calling as something originating from guiding forces (e.g., God or fate), as an optimal fit between person and career, and as having altruistic features. These findings illustrate an overlap between calling as defined by the research literature and calling as perceived by college students. Still, the varying themes found within student definitions of calling provides further evidence that counselors should learn what calling means to each client with which they work.
Duffy and Sedlacek (2010) also evaluated the salience and relevance of calling to college students. They distributed the Brief Calling Survey to 5,523 incoming freshman college students over a 2-year period at a large, mid-Atlantic university. They found that 72% of students either identified as having or searching for a career calling. Analyses indicated that students seeking doctoral, medical, law, or other higher-level degrees were more likely to feel they had a career calling while those seeking lower level degrees (e.g., bachelor’s, master’s) were more likely to be in search of a career calling. The authors postulated that careers requiring post-master’s degrees might be more widely associated with career calling. Thus, addressing calling with college students who aspire to pursue higher-level degrees may be especially pertinent. Moreover, the presence of or search for a calling occurred in similar proportions across the sample’s racial and gender groups, so the construct can be discussed with a diverse range of clients.

Calling may also be relevant to adult populations. Duffy et al. (2012) explored the meaning of and the process of discovering a calling with a group of counseling psychologists who viewed their work as a calling. Eight counseling psychologists, half of which worked in academic faculty positions and the other half worked primarily in practice settings, were interviewed. Results indicated that most participants believed they were meant to do the work in which they were involved and, furthermore, that this was their purpose in life. Participants articulated initially struggling to find their calling and viewed calling as something that evolves over time. Participants noted that the passion they felt about their work sometimes led to negative consequences, such as stress about workload and not feeling financially rewarded. However, overall, participants reported that the positive impact of having a calling far outweighed the negative. This study implies that counselors should help clients in search of a
calling become aware of the sometimes non-linear path by which one discovers a calling and the potential barriers one must overcome along the way.

In another study involving adult participants; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997) posited that people see their work in one of three ways: as a job, a career, or a calling. In their study, calling was defined from a secular perspective. Wrzesniewski et al. described having a calling as viewing one’s work as an integral and fulfilling part of one’s life. Participants consisted of 196 working adults. Each of which completed a survey and were grouped into three categories (job, career, or calling) depending upon their responses. Approximately one third of the participants tended to view their career as a calling. Additionally, participants in the calling group were better paid and educated and had significantly higher life and job satisfaction than those in the job or career group. These findings suggest that calling is related to career outcomes.

Duffy, Allan, and Dik (2011) expanded on the literature that identified links between calling and work satisfaction (e.g., Wrzesniewski, 1997) by exploring the relation between presence of calling and academic satisfaction. They hypothesized that students with greater levels of calling would report higher levels of academic satisfaction. After collecting data from 312 undergraduate students via an online survey, Duffy et al. used a multiple mediation model to analyze the relationship between calling and academic satisfaction. They found that career decision self-efficacy and work hope both served as significant partial mediators. Although the causal direction of relations cannot be determined, the study highlights calling’s influence on career-related constructs, such as career decision self-efficacy. Once again, calling appears to be particularly relevant to college students who are in the midst of making important academic and career choices.
Domene (2012) also considered self-efficacy as a potential mediator. He examined calling as a predictor of career outcome expectations for college students. The 855 undergraduate students from Atlantic Canadian universities who participated in the study completed an online survey. Hierarchical multiple regression and mediate analysis identified self-efficacy as the mediator by which calling indirectly influenced career outcome expectations. The presence of or search for a calling accounted for only a small (2.5%) part of the variance in career outcome expectations. Nevertheless, counselors must acknowledge that a sense of calling represents a real influence on college students’ career expectations for future success.

Duffy, Dik, and Steger (2011) studied the link between calling and career outcomes among an adult population. They distributed an online questionnaire to 370 employees of a research university. Calling was shown to moderately correlate with job satisfaction, but this relationship was fully mediated by career commitment. Duffy et al. identified career commitment, then, as a critical link between calling and work-related well-being. Along with this, the authors wish to identify a “dark side” of calling. They warn, if one’s job does not fit with one’s calling, it may lead to lower levels of workplace well-being. This conclusion is echoed in Cardador and Caza’s (2012) article, which takes an identity perspective. The authors assert that calling may lead to unhealthy work outcomes when individuals’ work identities are inflexible. Together, these studies recognize calling as having a notable impact on work outcomes and satisfaction.

Hirschi and Herrman (2012) explored the mechanism for the link between presence of a calling in one’s career and life satisfaction. The participants, 269 German college students, filled out an online questionnaire. The effects of core self-evaluations (CSEs) were controlled for in an attempt to assess the degree to which basic personality traits may contribute to the effects of
calling on work and life outcomes. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis and a mediation model found CSEs to be significantly related to the presence of a calling, vocational identity achievement, and life satisfaction. The presence of a calling predicted greater vocational identity achievement, but was not directly related to life satisfaction as it has been shown to be with U.S. samples (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). This article, along with others, suggests that the relationship calling has between life satisfaction and career outcomes is complicated and most likely acts through mediators.

While further research is needed to understand the mechanisms by which calling operates on career outcomes and life satisfaction, it is clear that career counselors should address the topic of calling early on in the counseling process in order to assess its importance to the client. For example, a counselor may be better able to tailor a counseling session to the client’s needs depending on whether a client is in search of a calling or reports already having a calling. The research literature suggests that people who find calling to be relevant to them may view work as a source of meaning or purpose for their lives. Consequently, the job and life satisfaction of these individuals may be influenced by the degree to which their job aligns with their calling.

Due to the relatively limited literature on calling, further research will be necessary to ascertain a clearer understanding of the impact of calling on career development and outcomes. For instance, since much of the current research involves college students, studies involving more diverse populations along racial, cultural, and religious lines are needed. In addition, extending the qualitative research done with counseling psychologists (Duffy et al., 2012) to employees in non-helping professions could be gathered for a more complete picture of experiencing a calling in one’s line of work. Career counselors would benefit from knowledge of how calling can contribute to positive and healthy career outcomes.
References


