

# Relationships Among Career Thoughts, Vocational Identity, and Calling: Implications for Practice

Jacob A. Galles and Janet G. Lenz

The concept of a calling in relation to career choice is a topic of interest in current literature. Exploring variables that may contribute to the presence of a calling is an important gap in the literature. This study examined career thoughts and vocational identity in relation to the presence of calling in a sample of 329 undergraduate university students enrolled in a career development course. The findings revealed significant relationships among all the variables of interest, as well as moderate predictive power, indicating that vocational identity and career thoughts may contribute to the formation of a calling to pursue a particular career. Limitations, implications for practice, and future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* calling, career thoughts, vocational identity, vocation, career development course

Career decision making has been a major area of research in the history of counseling and vocational psychology (e.g., Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Duffy & Dik, 2009; Earle & Bright, 2007; Holland & Holland, 1977; Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009). For college and university students, a significant developmental task is to decide on a course of study and a future career path (Gordon, 2007). Students are mindful of the realities of seeking employment and making “practical” choices in the current economy, whereas some books and career counselors emphasize seeking and finding one’s calling.

According to Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2005), learning more about the factors that negatively affect career decision making—as well as strategies to minimize them—is a focus of career counseling research and practice. Various theories have emerged to explain how individuals, including college students, make career choices. The majority of these theories have in common the notion that both internal and external factors play important roles in determining how individuals make career decisions. Although various factors that influence career decision making have been widely examined, there is still a need to understand more fully the relationships among constructs currently thought to influence vocational behavior. This study was designed to add to the previously

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unexamined concepts of calling, dysfunctional career thoughts, and vocational identity.

## Calling and Career Choice

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The construct of calling refers to the extent to which individuals feel summoned or called to enter a particular career or life role. Related concepts include the notion of a protean career (Hall, 2003), in which individuals pursue their path “with heart and with the intensity of a calling” (p. 9). Hall’s (2003) conceptualization of calling involves seeing one’s work as an invitation to which one must respond and involves discernment (deep reflection or prayer) to find the right career path. Treadgold’s (1999) transcendent vocation is another interpretation of calling, defined as engaging in meaningful work through inner guidance as an expression of one’s personality. Treadgold found that engaging in meaningful work as a calling was negatively related to stress and depression and positively related to clarity of self-concept.

Historically, the term *calling* contained a spiritual or religious undertone, as in being called by God to perform a certain task (Duffy & Blustein, 2005). The idea of answering God’s call has been an ongoing tradition in the Judeo-Christian religion. Previously, the concept of calling had received little attention in career counseling research, possibly because of its historical ties to religiousness. A broader definition was proposed by Dik and Duffy (2009), who described calling as “an external summons to approach a life role in a manner oriented toward deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness” (p. 427). Broadening the definition of calling allows individuals to endorse possessing a calling regardless of their religious or spiritual beliefs. This broader definition of calling led to studies that investigated how calling may be related to various career constructs (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010).

Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) found that the presence of a calling was positively correlated with career decidedness, indicating that those who have a calling are more likely to be decided on a particular career. Possessing a sense of a calling has also been found to be positively related to career decision self-efficacy and intrinsic work motivation (Steger et al., 2010), suggesting that those who have a calling are more confident in their ability to accomplish career-related goals and are more intrinsically motivated to do so. These findings provide support for the notion that possessing a sense of a calling influences one’s ability to make decisions and increases behavior oriented toward accomplishing career-related goals.

The concept of a calling has become increasingly salient in society, as evidenced by its emergence in popular culture and in the field of career development. Organizations are using the term to attract attention; for example, Monster.com uses the term in its slogan (“Find Jobs. Build a Better Career. Find Your Calling.”), and the military is now using the term in recruitment campaigns (Duffy, Dik, & Blustein, 2010). College career centers have embraced the concept of calling, which is reflected by the use of the term in their office titles (e.g., Center for Career and Calling). Duffy and Sedlacek (2007) surveyed more than 5,000 graduate students and found that more than 35% endorsed possessing a sense of

a calling. Previous research suggests that searching for and possessing a sense of calling has become relevant for young adults making career decisions and, in addition, is associated with various positive outcomes. Therefore, exploring variables (such as career thoughts and vocational identity) that may contribute to the formation of a calling is important in order to inform career counseling practice.

## Negative Thinking in Career Decision Making

Within the framework of cognitive therapy, negative thoughts are believed to have a damaging effect on people's feelings and motivation to behave in an effective way (Beck, 1976), which causes difficulty in processing and effectively using information to solve problems. Cognitive information processing (CIP) theory (Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004) describes how thinking affects career problem solving and decision making. From a CIP perspective, making effective career decisions requires processing and using information about oneself (e.g., values, interests, skills) and about available options. However, as Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, and Peterson (2009) noted, "having information about oneself and one's options [is] important, but not sufficient in career problem solving" (p. 67). Another key aspect is how individuals think about career problem solving and decision making, which is referred to as "metacognitive skills" (p. 67).

Cognitions have been recognized as an important factor in the career decision-making process, and dysfunctional career thoughts have been shown to lead to significant difficulty in career problem solving and decision making (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1998). Career thoughts include the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that relate to one's effectiveness in career problem solving and decision making. Various studies have found significant relationships between dysfunctional thoughts and decision-making style and cognitive thought patterns (Paivandy, Bullock, Reardon, & Kelly, 2008), depression (Saunders, Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 2000), vocational identity (Strohm, 2008; Yanchak, Lease, & Strauser, 2005), and self-efficacy and satisfaction with occupational choice (Wright, 2001).

In CIP theory, persons with high levels of negative thinking would likely lack the readiness to effectively engage in career problem solving (Sampson, Peterson, Reardon, & Lenz, 2000) and would require more intensive levels of assistance. What is not clear from previous research is how exploring the notion of finding one's calling, as a dimension of career choice, might be related to negative career thoughts and vocational identity level. By better understanding any potential relationship between these variables, counselors could better serve clients facing dilemmas regarding career choices.

## Vocational Identity

Career indecision has been hypothesized to be the result of difficulties in forming personal identity and vocational identity (Holland & Holland, 1977). Vocational identity refers to the possession of a clear and stable picture of one's goals, interests, personality, and talents (Holland,

1997). The possession of a clear vocational identity has been shown to contribute to one's confidence in making career decisions, and the failure to form a clear and stable vocational identity often results in career indecision (Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980). Super, Savickas, and Super (1996) suggested that the establishment of a vocational identity serves as the basis for making occupational choices that are a good fit and that individuals who possess concrete goals, clear interests, stable personality traits, and knowledge about their talents are more likely to be successful in making career decisions than are those with low vocational identity levels. Previous research (e.g., Yanchak et al., 2005) suggests that individuals with higher vocational identity levels are less likely to have negative career thoughts regarding their career decisions.

Presence of calling, dysfunctional career thoughts, and vocational identity have been well established as salient constructs in vocational research and practice. The present study sought to explore the relationships among these three constructs for the first time, using university students enrolled in an undergraduate career course. It was hypothesized that students who endorsed fewer items pertaining to dysfunctional career thoughts and who had higher levels of vocational identity would be more likely to endorse experiencing the presence of a calling to pursue a particular career.

## Method

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### Participants

This study was approved by the university's institutional review board, which allowed us to solicit participants from selected undergraduate course sections. Participants consisted of 329 undergraduate university students recruited from a large public southeastern university's undergraduate career development course during two sequential spring semesters. Students who volunteered to participate received 5 points of extra credit. Participants included 164 men (49.8%) and 164 women (49.8%), with one individual not indicating gender. The sample's ethnic composition was 67% European American ( $n = 219$ ), 20% African American ( $n = 67$ ), 9% Hispanic ( $n = 29$ ), and 4% other ( $n = 14$ ). With respect to class level, 10% of the participants were freshmen, 23% sophomores, 15% juniors, and 50% seniors. (The remaining 2% were unknown because the participants left the item blank or marked more than one class standing.) Participants' age ranged from 18 to 58 years, with the mean age being 20.9 years.

### Measures

*Brief Calling Scale (BCS; Dik, Sargent, & Steger, 2008; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007).* The presence of calling was measured using the Presence of Calling subscale from the BCS, which is a four-item scale containing statements related to the search for and presence of a calling that participants endorse as being *not at all true*, *somewhat true*, *mostly true*, or *absolutely true*. An example item is "I have a calling to a particular kind of work." The presence of calling and search for calling scores have been shown to be internally consistent (.81 and .75, respectively; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007) and are psychometrically supported (Duffy, Dik, & Blustein, 2010).

*Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996a, 1998)*. Dysfunctional career thoughts were measured using the CTI. The CTI contains 48 statements related to negative career thoughts to which participants respond *strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree* on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The measure includes three construct scales: Decision-Making Confusion (e.g., "I'm so confused, I'll never be able to choose a field of study or occupation"), Commitment Anxiety (e.g., "I worry a great deal about choosing the right field of study or occupation"), and External Conflict (e.g., "Whenever I've become interested in something, important people in my life disapprove"), as well as a total score. Reliability measures have determined that the alpha level for the total CTI scale for the college student sample is .97. The individual construct scale scores range from .74 to .94. The CTI's content, construct, and convergent validity have been well established (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996b).

*My Vocational Situation (MVS; Holland et al., 1980)*. Vocational identity was measured using the MVS Vocational Identity subscale, which consists of 18 items and assesses individuals' perceptions about their goals, interests, personality, and talents. The Vocational Identity subscale is in a true-false format, and all false responses are added to derive a total score. An example item is "I am uncertain about the occupations I could perform well." Reliability measures indicate an alpha level of .96 for the Vocational Identity subscale, and the construct validity has been well established (Holland, 1997).

### Procedure

All consenting participants completed a data sheet, with demographic items; the BCS Presence of Calling subscale; the CTI; and the MVS Vocational Identity subscale. On the 1st day of class, folders were distributed to students and lead instructors for each course section read a script explaining the research and the informed consent process, prior to having participants complete the research forms and assessments. Assessments were arranged in alternating order to control for ordering effects.

### Data Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to investigate the relationships among presence of calling, vocational identity, and dysfunctional career thoughts. The means, standard deviations, and a correlation matrix depicting relationships among measures of calling, dysfunctional career thinking, and vocational identity can be found in Table 1. To test the hypothesis that dysfunctional career thoughts and vocational identity would be predictive of the presence of calling, we used a simultaneous multiple regression procedure to analyze the data, the results of which can be found in Table 2.

## Results

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Significant relationships were found among all variables of interest ( $p < .01$ ; see Table 1). The CTI construct scales (i.e., Decision-Making Confusion, Commitment Anxiety, and External Conflict) were significantly inversely correlated with presence of calling ( $r = -.41, -.34, \text{ and } -.15$ ,

TABLE 1

## Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CTI total	—					
2. DMC	.89*	—				
3. CA	.88*	.69*	—			
4. EC	.67*	.46*	.53*	—		
5. Calling	-.35*	-.41*	-.34*	-.15*	—	
6. VI	-.70*	-.64*	-.67*	-.42*	.38*	—
<i>M</i>	50.66	11.25	13.95	4.74	5.57	9.50
<i>SD</i>	21.96	7.68	5.79	3.12	2.31	4.54

Note. CTI total = Career Thoughts Inventory total score; DMC = Decision-Making Confusion scale; CA = Commitment Anxiety scale; EC = External Conflict scale; Calling = presence of calling; VI = vocational identity.

\* $p < .01$ .

respectively) and vocational identity ( $r = -.64, -.67$ , and  $-.42$ , respectively). For example, participants who scored higher on calling and vocational identity scored lower on the CTI construct scales. See Table 1 for the means and standard deviations. Standard regression analysis was used to test if dysfunctional career thoughts and vocational identity significantly predicted participants' endorsement of a presence of calling (see Table 2). The results indicated that the two predictors explained 16% of the variance in calling. Dysfunctional career thoughts significantly predicted calling ( $\beta = -.16, p = .028$ ), as did vocational identity ( $\beta = .27, p = .0001$ ).

## Discussion

The current study provides support for the idea that students who have higher vocational identity levels and lower levels of negative thinking are more likely to report that they have a presence of a calling. On the basis of the literature reviewed, it was expected that those with a more clear and stable picture of their vocational identity, and those with fewer dysfunctional thoughts related to their career decision, would be more likely to endorse the experience of a calling to pursue a particular career. In CIP theory terms, these findings suggest that readiness variables such as vocational identity and dysfunctional thinking should be explored prior to engaging students in discussions related to their life calling.

TABLE 2

## Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Presence of Calling

Variable	Presence of Calling				
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
CTI total score	-.02	.01	-.16	-2.21	.028
Vocational identity	.14	.04	.27	3.85	.0001
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.16		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			.16		
<i>F</i>			30.02		

Note. CTI = Career Thoughts Inventory total.

## Implications for Practice

Today, people are living in a quickly evolving global economy, and college students are pressured to make academic and career decisions in the face of challenging job market conditions. At the same time, there are also messages in the popular media that individuals should find their “true calling.” Career counseling practitioners may find it helpful to consider a variety of constructs related to career problem solving and decision making to serve young adults and other clients in the career development process. Although a presence of calling has been shown to lead to positive career-related outcomes, it may be difficult to engage clients in a discussion about their calling if they describe themselves in ways indicative of a low vocational identity level (e.g., “I am not sure of myself in many areas of life”). Similarly, CIP theory would suggest that clients who are lower in readiness and who possess higher levels of negative thinking may find it difficult to engage the concept of pursuing a particular calling. Prior to integrating strategies for helping students further explore their calling, practitioners may find it important to address barriers to career problem solving and decision making, such as low vocational identity and high negative thinking. Cognitive reframing interventions (Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996c) may help reduce the anxiety and confusion associated with negative thinking, thus freeing individuals to focus on their future career goals. By attending to these factors, clients may more readily engage the topic of finding their calling, which, in turn, may contribute to more effective career problem solving and decision making.

Practitioners can facilitate discussions with clients about how career thoughts and vocational identity influence clients’ ability to make career decisions and solve career problems. Additionally, practitioners can qualitatively assess whether clients possess or are searching for a calling to pursue a particular career through strategic open-ended questions such as “How important is it for you to gain a sense of purpose through your career?” or “What kind of work would you find meaningful?” (Duffy et al., 2010).

## Limitations

There are some limitations to the current study, and the results should therefore be considered with caution. Predicting calling using both dysfunctional career thoughts and vocational identity simultaneously does not account for the unique predictive ability of each of the variables separately. Multicollinearity between dysfunctional career thoughts and vocational identity is evident based on the high correlation between the two variables ( $-.70$ ), although they are believed to be unique constructs. One potential threat to the external validity is that all participants were recruited from career development course sections at a single institution, which may not accurately depict the general population of undergraduate university students. Additionally, because all the variables were self-report, relationships were likely elevated because of method variance.

The instrument used to assess presence of calling has been shown to be reliable and valid in previous research, but consists of only four items (only two were used for the purposes of this study), which may not adequately measure what it means to have a calling. Using a measure that considers the source of one’s calling would be desirable, given that

individuals may have differing notions of what it means to be called to a particular career (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2010).

### Implications for Research

Future research could explore additional applications of calling, vocational identity, and dysfunctional career thinking to determine their efficacy in improving career counseling outcomes. To what extent are these three constructs related to outcome measures such as satisfaction with choice, decidedness level, and related concepts? Because the predictors used in this study (career thoughts and vocational identity) accounted for 16% of the variance in calling, 84% of the variance remains unexplained. Therefore, examining other possible predictors (e.g., volition of choice, mindfulness) related to possessing a presence of a calling may provide support for considering these concepts together when exploring with clients salient factors related to career choice. Assessing whether the presence of calling is related to personality type or interests using Holland's (1997) RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional) theory might also yield informative and useful results. Are individuals with certain types of personalities or interest areas more likely to engage in discussions around their search for a calling? Additional experimental research investigating the outcomes of infusing calling into career interventions, as well as qualitative research studying how the calling construct plays into short-term and long-term career development, will provide insight into how to incorporate calling into career counseling practice.

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