# ANSWERED AND UNANSWERED STUDENTS' OCCUPATIONAL CALLING DURING STUDYING: IMPORTANT FOR THEIR WELL-BEING AND WHY?

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## Abstract

People who consider their work as a calling find it fulfilling, intrinsically rewarding, meaningful, and socially useful. Perceiving and living work as a calling is related to various positive work outcomes, both for the employee and the organization. Unfortunately, not all employees can live their calling at work due to various organizational or other contextual reasons. Unanswered calling leads to lower levels of well-being and job satisfaction. Although the construct of calling was mainly researched within the work settings, the perception of work as a life calling already exists among students during their studies. Research shows that calling is a salient construct for a substantial proportion of college students and is also related to higher levels of well-being. However, studies of unanswered calling in students are scarce. This study adds to the literature by exploring the role of both answered and unanswered calling in students. The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between students calling orientation, satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and well-being. A mediation model was proposed with basic psychological needs mediating the relationship between students answered and unanswered callings and academic satisfaction, students' burnout, and flourishing. Since calling is often associated with the teaching profession, our sample included 198 students (96.5% female), from the first to the fifth year of study at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, Croatia. Self-report measures of unanswered and answered calling during studying (*Unanswered Calling Scale, Answered Calling Scale*), basic psychological needs (*Student Psychological Needs Scale*), academic satisfaction (*Academic Satisfaction Scale*), flourishing (*Flourishing Scale*) and students' burnout (*School Burnout Inventory*) were used. The findings of mediation analysis revealed that answered calling was positively related to satisfaction of basic psychological needs which in turn increased students flourishing and academic satisfaction, and decreased academic stress. Contrary to that, unanswered calling was negatively related to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs consequently to lower flourishing and academic satisfaction, and higher academic burnout. These results show that feeling that one's calling is answered while studying is important for both students' well-being and ill-being. The results also point to the importance of interventions aimed at helping students view their future jobs as a calling. Also, university teachers should be encouraged to cultivate factors that can help students to have their future work calling answered during their studies.

*Keywords: Answered calling, ill-being, students' basic psychological needs, unanswered calling, well-being.*

## 1. Introduction

Employees can have different attitudes toward their work, known as work orientations. To this day, three different work orientations have been identified. Job orientation refers to understanding work mainly as a source of income, career orientation emphasizes achievement and advancement while calling orientation includes viewing work as fulfilling, purposeful, and socially useful (Wrzesniewski, 2003). Research has shown that perceiving work as a calling is related to various positive outcomes, both personal and professional, including higher life and job satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2009), higher organizational commitment, and fewer intentions to withdraw (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

Perceiving a calling is not the same as living a calling. Some people perceive that they have found and live their calling (answered calling), while others feel that their calling has not been fulfilled (unanswered calling) (Berg et al., 2010). Unanswered calling can be caused by various situational factors such as lack of work choice or organizational support (Duffy et al., 2018). Although both perceiving a calling and living a calling result in positive work and life outcomes, living a calling or answered calling has stronger links to these outcomes than just perceiving it. Also, employees with unanswered calling report

poorer physical and psychological health compared to those with answered calling or no calling at all (Gazica & Spector, 2015).

The perception of work as a life calling can emerge not only among employees but also among students during their studies. The most of today's college students receive the message that finding their calling is essential (Fisher, 2014). In one study 44% of undergraduate students reported having a calling to a particular kind of work (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). In another study, more than two-thirds of a sample of college students expressed that the construct of work calling was relevant to how they thought about their future careers (Hunter et al., 2010).

Similarly, as with employees, perceiving a calling within the student population is related to various positive academic and personal outcomes. Within the academic domain perceiving a calling result in higher academic satisfaction (Dufy et al., 2011), mainly because it increases career decision self-efficacy and work hope. Also, it is related to higher academic engagement and lower absenteeism (Ensher & Ehrhardt, 2020). In the personal domain perceiving a calling is positively related to life satisfaction and life meaning (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010; Steger et al., 2010).

Although the consequences of having occupational calling during the studies have been researched to a certain extent, the research on actually living a calling is lacking. Perceiving occupational calling while studying does not mean that circumstances at college always allow students to actually live it. Some of them find and live their occupational calling while studying (answered calling), while others perceive to have a calling but are unable to live it (unanswered calling). Research in work settings has shown positive outcomes of answered calling and negative of unanswered ones, but it is not clear whether the same relationship is true for the student population.

## 2. Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between answered/unanswered students' occupational calling and well-being, and the role of satisfaction of basic psychological needs in this relationship. The following hypotheses and research questions were posed:

**H1:** Answered calling is positively related to academic satisfaction and flourishing, and negatively to academic burnout.
**H2:** Unanswered calling is negatively related to academic satisfaction and flourishing, and positively to academic burnout.
**H3:** Satisfaction of basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness mediates the relationship between answered/unanswered calling and academic satisfaction, flourishing, and academic burnout.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Participants and procedure
A convenience sample consisted of 198 students (96.5% female) from the integrated undergraduate and graduate program at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, Croatia. The students participated voluntarily and anonymously.

### 3.2. Instruments
*Answered Occupational Calling Scale* (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011) was adjusted and used to assess how strongly students perceive their studies as more purposeful, meaningful, and aligned with their passion for becoming teachers. The scale consists of twelve items (e.g., *I feel destined to study at this faculty*) which participants rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A higher total score, representing the average of all item ratings, indicates greater sense of answered calling.

*Unanswered Occupational Calling Scale* (Gazica, 2014) was adjusted and used to assess the extent to which participants perceive an occupational calling that they are not currently pursuing. The scale consists of six items (e.g., *I feel drawn to study for another profession because I expect that such study would fulfill me personally*) which participants rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A higher total score, representing the average of all item ratings, indicates a stronger perception of an unanswered calling.

*Student Psychological Needs Scale* (Goldman et al., 2017) was used to measure students' satisfaction of psychological needs. The scale consists of 24 items measuring four factors: competence (8 items, *I am competent at this faculty*), autonomy (8 items, e.g., *At this faculty, I have the freedom to learn in my own way*), relatedness with colleagues (4 items, e.g., *I am close to several of my colleagues*),

relatedness with professors (4 items, *I cannot relate to my professors*, reversed).  All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). The total score was calculated as an average rating of subscales and total scale, whereby a higher result indicates higher satisfaction of academic needs.

      *Academic Satisfaction Scale* (Schmitt et al., 2008) was used to measure students' academic satisfaction. The scale consists of six items (e.g., *All in all, I am satisfied with the education I can get at this university*) which participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true). A higher total score, representing the average of all item ratings, indicates higher academic satisfaction.

      *Flourishing Scale* (Diener et al., 2010) was used to measure self-perceived social-psychological prosperity, (e.g., *I am a good person and live a good life*). All 8 items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*). A higher total score, representing the average of all item ratings, indicates higher flourishing.

      *School Burnout Inventory* (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009) was adjusted and used to measure academic related burnout. The scale consists of nine items measuring exhaustion at schoolwork, cynicism toward the meaning of school and sense of inadequacy at school (e.g., *I feel overwhelmed by my academic work*). All items were rated on a 6-point Likert- scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). A higher total score, representing the average of all item ratings, indicates higher academic burnout.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

      The descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all measured variables are presented in Table 1. All correlations were in the predicted directions.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlations among the study variables and Cronbach's alpha.*

| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. answered calling | - | -.57** | .46** | .63** | .32** | .39** | .64** | .64** | .34** | -.51** |
| 2. unanswered call. | | - | -.46** | -.44** | -.21** | -.33** | -.52** | -.49** | -.34** | .52** |
| 3. autonomy | | | - | .49** | .27** | .48** | .84** | .61** | .32 | -.60** |
| 4. competence | | | | - | 28** | .40** | .80** | .52** | .55** | -.68** |
| 5. relatedness (c) | | | | | - | .15* | .50** | .21** | .28** | -.14* |
| 6. relatedness (p) | | | | | | - | .68** | .43** | .25** | -.51** |
| 7. needs (tot) | | | | | | | - | .65** | .50** | -.71** |
| 8. aca. satisfaction | | | | | | | | - | .37** | -.56** |
| 9. flourishing | | | | | | | | | - | -.51** |
| 10. aca. burnout | | | | | | | | | | - |
| Theoretical range | 1-6 | 1-6 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-7 | 1-6 |
| Cronbach's alpha | .92 | .95 | .95 | .85 | .92 | .83 | .92 | .89 | .89 | .90 |
| M | 4.00 | 2.31 | 4.83 | 5.40 | 6.07 | 4.36 | 5.16 | 5.20 | 5.71 | 3.45 |
| SD | 0.96 | 1.36 | 1.24 | 0.95 | 1.08 | 1.22 | 0.82 | 1-10 | 0.76 | 1.36 |

Note. $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; relatedness (c) = need for relatedness with colleagues; relatedness (t) = relatedness with professors; needs (tot) = total score for satisfied psychological needs; aca. = academic.

### 4.2. Mediation model

      The hypothesized mediation models were tested by the bootstrapping method using PROCESS macro for SPSS. The number of samples in the bootstrapping method was 5000 and the confidence interval was 95%.

      Mediation analyses examined the proposed role of satisfied psychological needs at the faculty in the relation between answered/unanswered calling and well-being/ill-being. Answered calling positively predicted students' satisfaction of psychological needs ($b = .55$, $SE = .05$, $95\%$ $CI$ [.46, .64]), and students' satisfaction of psychological needs positively predicted academic satisfaction ($b = .55$, $SE = .09$, $95\%$ $CI$ [.38, .72]) and flourishing ($b = .44$, $SE = .08$, $95\%$ $CI$ [.29, .56]), while negatively predicting academic burnout ($b = -1.07$, $SE = .11$, $95\%$ $CI$ [-1.28, -.86]). Unanswered calling negatively predicted students' satisfaction of psychological needs ($b = -.32$, $SE = .04$, $95\%$ $CI$ [-.39, -.24]), which in turn positively predicted academic satisfaction ($b = .73$, $SE = .08$, $95\%$ $CI$ [.57, .89]) and flourishing ($b = .40$, $SE = .07$, $95\%$ $CI$ [.27, .53]), while negatively predicting academic ($b = -1.00$, $SE = .09$, $95\%$ $CI$ [-1.19, -.82]).

      Results of total (c), direct (c') and indirect effects (a*b) presented in Tables 2, 3, 4 indicate that the mediation effects were significant. The satisfaction of psychological needs at the faculty mediated the

relationship between un/answered calling and academic satisfaction, flourishing and academic burnout. For un/answered calling and flourishing, as well as answered calling and academic burnout, these mediation effects were complete.

*Table 2. Mediation role of basic psychological needs in the relationship between unanswered/answered calling and academic satisfaction.*

|  | Effect | SE | LLCI | ULCI | $R^2$ | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Answered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | .72 | .06 | .60 | .85 | .42 | 71.29** |
| Direct effect | .42 | .07 | .28 | .57 | .52 | 70.22 |
| Indirect effect | .30 | .06 | .20 | .41 |  |  |
| *Unanswered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | -.39 | .05 | -.49 | -.29 | .25 | 32.41** |
| Direct effect | -.16 | .05 | -.25 | -.06 | .47 | 56.80** |
| Indirect effect | -.23 | .04 | -.31 | -.16 |  |  |

*Table 3. Mediation role of basic psychological needs in the relationship between unanswered/answered calling and flourishing.*

|  | Effect | SE | LLCI | ULCI | $R^2$ | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Answered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | .27 | .05 | .16 | .37 | .12 | 12.68** |
| Direct effect | .02 | .06 | -.10 | .15 | .25 | 21.45** |
| Indirect effect | .24 | .04 | .17 | .33 |  |  |
| *Unanswered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | -.20 | .04 | -.27 | -.12 | .12 | 13.56** |
| Direct effect | -.07 | .04 | -.15 | .01 | .26 | 22.65** |
| Indirect effect | -.13 | .03 | -.18 | -.08 |  |  |

*Table 4. Mediation role of basic psychological needs in the relationship between unanswered/answered calling and academic burnout.*

|  | Effect | SE | LLCI | ULCI | $R^2$ | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Answered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | -.72 | .09 | -.89 | -.55 | .27 | 36.66** |
| Direct effect | -.13 | .09 | -.31 | .05 | .52 | 69.71** |
| Indirect effect | -.59 | .08 | -.74 | -.44 |  |  |
| *Unanswered calling* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total effect | .51 | .06 | .39 | .63 | .27 | 36.58** |
| Direct effect | .20 | .06 | .08 | .31 | .54 | 76.26** |
| Indirect effect | .32 | .05 | .23 | .41 |  |  |

## 5. Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the relationship between students' calling orientation, satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and well-being. Mediation models were proposed, with basic psychological needs serving as a mediator between students answered and unanswered calling, academic satisfaction, burnout, and flourishing. The mediation analysis results supported the hypotheses, showing that answered calling was positively associated with satisfaction of basic psychological needs, which in turn led to increased flourishing and academic satisfaction, while reducing academic burnout. In contrast, unanswered calling was negatively associated with satisfaction of basic psychological needs, resulting in lower flourishing and academic satisfaction, and higher academic burnout. These results are consistent with previous studies on students, which have shown the impact of perceiving a calling on academic satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2011) and life satisfaction (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). Since employees who endorsed an unanswered occupational calling tended to experience lower job and life satisfaction and higher psychological distress (Gazica & Spector, 2015), a recent study has shown that satisfying basic psychological needs can help prevent academic burnout (Siregar et al., 2023).

## 6. Conclusion

This study extends the literature on the role of both answered and unanswered calling in students. The findings emphasize the importance of feeling that one's calling is answered during studies, as it affects both student well-being and ill-being. They also underscore the value of career counseling services that help students identify and align with their sense of vocational calling. At universities, interventions aimed at fulfilling students' psychological needs could be effective in reducing burnout, while fostering a culture that helps students connect their studies to a broader sense of purpose could enhance their psychological well-being.

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