Definition and Historical Background
A “calling” is traditionally defined as a meaningful beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant (Baumeister, 1991; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Originally defined quite broadly as a calling in life, the term “calling” is now most often applied to an individual’s work occupation.

The notion of a calling is deeply rooted in Christian tradition and theology. In this tradition, individuals are “called” by God to unique vocations that are to be carried out in service of God and community (Calvin, 1574; Hardy, 1990). Perhaps the best known treatment of callings in the Christian tradition arose with the writings of Protestant theologians John Calvin and Martin Luther. Luther and Calvin’s discussions of calling place value on dutifully serving God through whatever work or “station” one occupies in life. In this perspective, a calling is revealed to an individual from God, whether directly or through the individual’s particular talents or circumstances. As such, the pursuit of a calling is a religious rather than a self-focused endeavor. In the early 20th century, German sociologist Max Weber claimed that Calvin’s interpretation of callings planted the seed of modern capitalism by generating a “Protestant work ethic” that drove a movement of individual pursuit for success. Despite modern critiques of Weber’s interpretation of Calvin, his perspective on the development of Western society greatly influenced scholarship on the topic of callings.

Callings in the Modern Era
The concept of calling has continued to transform over time, largely losing its religious cast in the modern era. Most definitions of calling are now focused in general on the individual experience of work as deeply meaningful and engaging, intrinsically motivating, and having a positive impact on the wider world (Dobrow, 2006; Elangovan, Pinder, & McLean, 2006;
Thus, the concept of calling has taken on stronger individualistic tones, resembling the teachings of Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, who argued that an individual could achieve authentic fulfillment through the pursuit of personally meaningful and intrinsically motivating activities (Aristotle, 1912). These perspectives raise several interesting tensions with respect to the religious roots of the term. For one, the assumptions that underlie the source, purpose, and expression of a calling differ between the traditional religious sense and the modern individualistic notion of a calling. Much of the contemporary research surrounding the concept of calling builds on these underlying tensions.

The increasingly individualistic and work-related meanings of a calling may be due to the changing nature of work. Increasing emphasis is placed on the importance of work as a source of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose in life today, as individuals spend more time at work (Schor, 1992) and change jobs more often and readily than in the past (Sennett, 2005). Accordingly, a calling is typically understood in modern vernacular to be connected to the domain of work, rather than to other life domains such as leisure or family. While one may find deep fulfillment and connection to the wider world through many activities, those activities unrelated to work are perhaps better classified as passions (Wrzesniewski, Rozin, & Bennett, 2002). With the growing significance of work and its increasingly unpredictable nature, a focus on work as a calling offers a powerful way for individuals to make meaning of their work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Recent research on callings in the fields of psychology and organizational behavior has emphasized multiple facets of the concept. Some scholars define a calling as deeply fulfilling work that an individual believes makes the world a better place (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Others suggest that callings have a strong prosocial component combined with a strong sense of clarity of purpose (Elangovan, et al., 2006). Still others contend that callings are an ultimate form of career success which transcends a particular job (Dobrow, 2006; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Despite these differences, most modern conceptions of a calling share an assumption that the work itself is what determines the deep level of meaning taken from it. These approaches differentiate having a calling from having a job, where the primary focus of working is to make an income, and from having a career, where the primary focus is occupational advancement. In contrast to those with jobs or careers, those with a calling engage in work as an end in itself, rather than as a means to extrinsically motivated outcomes, such as economic success or career achievements (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). These views differ slightly from earlier treatments of calling, where meaning is simply found in the act of pursuing whatever type of work God has called one to do. In both traditional and modern understandings of calling, however, there is an explicit assumption that callings can be enacted in any type of work, and are not exclusively reserved for work defined by others as worthy.

**Major Dimensions of Callings**

From a definitional perspective, the meaning of a calling differs a great deal depending on whether one is taking a religious or a secular perspective. While callings have taken on a decidedly secular, individualistic cast over time, this transformation is a departure from the concept’s origin as a responsibility from and to God, with several accompanying differences in underlying assumptions about the source of the calling. In the religious treatment, a calling is an invitation from God or another spiritual force, awaiting to be discovered and pursued by the
individual. This stands in contrast to a secular sense of calling as something to be chosen or created in the work one does.

Secular views of calling also differ from spiritual views in their treatment of how the calling is enacted; either through who one is, or through what one does. According to spiritual and religious perspectives, a calling is an invitation that the person may choose to accept or not. Pursuing the calling is cast primarily as a moral responsibility or duty to serving a higher power or greater good. In secular treatments of calling, however, the pursuit of the calling is more oriented around self-exploration and fulfillment. The individual follows a freely chosen path, and the responsibility is therefore to the self rather than to a higher power or external force. Features of calling that are shared by both traditions include a sense that the work is positively impacting the world and is intrinsically motivating as an end in and of itself. Individuals pursuing their calling often feel a great sense of urgency for following the path to which they feel intended (Bunderson & Thompson, 2006).

Perhaps the two most salient dimensions of a calling in modern research revolve around the calling as a source of intrinsic enjoyment and as a means to serving a greater good. Most modern treatments of calling capture both of these elements of the experience of work as a calling. However, great promise lies in further understanding the connections between the experience of a calling that is pursued for individual enjoyment and fulfillment and a calling that is done in service of others. In a sense, each dimension harkens back to the distinctions made between religious and secular perspectives of a calling. Recent research has started to differentiate between the impact of each model of calling in individuals’ lives, showing that different views of calling make a difference for how individuals approach and experience their work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2006).

The Impact of Callings
A growing volume of research has investigated the impact of having a sense of calling toward one’s specific job or occupation. This research shows that feeling one’s work is a calling affects both individuals and their organizations. Individuals with a stronger sense of calling toward their work tend to have higher work and life satisfaction, find work more meaningful, put forth greater effort at work, feel their work makes the world a better place, and feel more motivated to remain in their specific jobs, even if they were no longer paid (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Feeling that one’s work is a calling has also been linked to stronger identification and engagement with work (Bunderson & Thompson, 2006; Dobrow, 2006). While most research to date has investigated attitudinal and self-reported behaviors, recent studies are beginning to measure behavioral outcomes such as reemployment, performance, and occupational exits. As well, recent studies are beginning to consider the potential drawbacks associated with seeing work as a calling (Bunderson & Thompson, 2006; Dobrow, 2006). This is a promising direction for generating knowledge about the difference a calling orientation makes.

Future Research Directions
The study of callings remains a young field of inquiry, and further research is needed to better understand the prevalence, importance, origins, and outcomes of callings. Specific areas for future inquiry abound. For example, researchers may investigate the similarities and differences between callings that are rooted in individual fulfillment with those rooted in service of a
common good. Scholars have also typically operationalized callings as a job- or occupation-level construct, but it is plausible that a calling may be enacted more broadly toward the domain of work in general. Differentiating between the experience of a particular job as a calling and the activity of work in general as a calling is likely to provide deeper insights into the structure of the meaning of work. In addition, innovation is needed in the measurement of callings. Most research in this area has assessed callings through survey items (Dobrow, 2006; Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). However, recent research has begun to explore the nuances of callings through qualitative interview methods (Bunderson & Thompson, 2006). Future research would benefit from mixed method study designs that further elaborate the ways scholars can assess the presence and power of callings in individuals’ lives. Finally, it would be valuable to examine the relational elements of callings in order to better understand how significant others or the community impact the experience of a calling. Given the expansive impact that callings may have on individuals, organizations, and society, the study of callings offers rich opportunities for scholarship in a variety of disciplines.

REFERENCES