Living a Calling During COVID-19: A Resource Gain Perspective

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Abstract
Massive disruptions to work and threats to employee well-being due to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic have highlighted the need to identify resources which enable employees to gain other valuable resources. Using a resource gain perspective, we examined the role of living a calling as a potentially robust resource, enabling employees to gain work readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic, and, in turn, resulting in a greater well-being in the form of lower job strain. Using a sample of clergy (N = 216) from various denominations, we provide initial evidence that living a calling may be associated with lower levels of job strain through increased COVID-19 work readiness. This study underscores the relevance of living a calling in a time of high potential or actual loss of resources.

Keywords
living a calling, COVID-19, work readiness, job strain, resource

The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused massive disruptions to work and has threatened the health and well-being of millions around the world (World Health Organization, 2020). In the United States, 81% of workers expect a negative effect on their work from COVID-19, and over half (52%) report that cutbacks at work are affecting their financial situation (Brenan, 2020). Moreover, 69% of U.S. workers claimed that this pandemic has been the most stressful time of their entire professional career, including major events like the September 11 terror attacks and the 2008 Great Recession (Ginger, 2020).

Given the detrimental effects of this pandemic, research is needed on the personal resources (e.g., personal characteristics; Hobfoll, 1989) which enable employees to adapt to their rapidly changing work circumstances in a time when many resources are being threatened or even lost. One such resource is an individual’s experience of living a calling (i.e., a sense of transcendent summons, meaning, and prosocial orientation in one’s work; Duffy & Dik, 2013). A recent

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population estimate found that 43% of U.S. adults endorsed the statement “I have a calling to a particular kind of work” as either mostly or totally true of them (White et al., 2021), underscoring the prevalence of calling. Living a calling may serve as a personal resource which enables individuals to gain other personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, competence, and motivation) that can be useful for dealing with intensifying job demands and adapting to changing work circumstances. Further, personal resources like self-efficacy to adapt, work competence, and work motivation may be considered indicators of employees’ COVID-19 work readiness (Cigularov, 2020) and may be related to improved well-being outcomes (e.g., lower job strain) during the pandemic.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the role of living a calling as a personal resource during the COVID-19 pandemic among clergy. Using a resource gain perspective (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018) rooted in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we propose that individuals who are living a calling in their jobs will experience higher COVID-19 work readiness, a personal resource which may in turn be related to enhanced well-being in the form of lower job strain.

Our study seeks to contribute to the occupational calling and well-being literatures in two ways. First, our study aims to provide a theoretical grounding for calling. Despite a growing body of research on work as a calling, the construct has often been criticized for its lack of theoretical grounding (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). A few recent studies have conceptualized calling (Nielsen et al., 2020; Praskova et al., 2015) and perceiving a calling (Dalla Rosa et al., 2020) as resources. However, these studies did not give a theoretical rationale for why calling or perceiving a calling should be considered resources. By conceptualizing living a calling as a personal resource on the basis of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018), we provide a framework on which future research can be built. Beyond being a useful personal resource in and of itself, living a calling may lead to the acquisition of other valuable resources. Such an understanding would help to address concerns about the relevance of calling for outcomes that are of interest to supervisors and practitioners (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019).

Second, our study has practical implications for individuals who perceive or may develop a calling. Previous research suggests that individuals who perceive a calling are likely to engage in job crafting techniques (i.e., taking active steps to alter their job) so that their job better aligns with their calling (Berg et al., 2010). Additionally, individuals may develop a calling after they have been working in an occupation for some time by experiencing fit with their work environment (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012). Hence, if living a calling is associated with the gain of other valuable resources, vocational psychologists and managers may be able to promote calling through interventions (e.g., job crafting). Moreover, our study has practical implications for our sampled population (i.e., clergy). Clergy job demands are highly interpersonal. For example, the majority of clergy have face-to-face discussions with others every day (ONET, 2017). These interactions have likely been interrupted as a result of the pandemic. Further, an April 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 91% of U.S. adults who attend religious services at least monthly reported that their congregation has closed religious services to the public (Gecewicz, 2020). Hence, clergy have faced unprecedented disruptions in their work due to the pandemic. Our study contributes to this population by identifying living a calling as a personal resource which may be associated with greater readiness to adapt to COVID-19 work changes.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018) is a useful framework for understanding the experiences of workers during the current global pandemic. The basic tenet of COR theory is that individuals strive to retain, protect, and build resources, and are
threatened by the potential or actual loss of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). From a COR perspective, resources are objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual, or are valuable because they allow the individual to gain other objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies.

Later conceptualizations of COR theory expanded to recognize the role of resource gains (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR theory suggests that individuals must invest resources in order to gain resources. Inherent to this principle is the idea that resources have the potential to create other resources. For example, perceived social support may create higher levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem in employees. Further, Hobfoll (2001) argued that all types of resources gain their motivating potential and become particularly useful when needed. Specifically, an important principle relevant to resource gains is the gain paradox principle, which states that resource gains become more valuable when resource loss circumstances are high (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Many employees have experienced the threat or actual loss of valuable resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Brenan, 2020). These present loss circumstances underscore the importance of understanding resources that are valuable and useful to individuals for generating other resources.

Living a Calling

Living a calling may be a useful resource in the context of resource loss. Duffy and Dik (2013) defined calling as “an approach to work that reflects the belief that one’s career is a central part of a broader sense of purpose and meaning in life and is used to help others or advance the greater good in some fashion” (p. 429). This definition reflects three different components of the calling construct: transcendent summons (i.e., the individual was called to their line of work by something outside of himself or herself), purposeful work (i.e., the work is meaningful to the individual), and prosocial orientation (i.e., the individual feels that their work contributes to the good of others and society.) Researchers have noted the theoretical and empirical distinctions between perceiving and living a calling. As stated in the recently proposed Work as a Calling Theory (Duffy et al., 2018), an individual who perceives a calling may not be currently living a calling. This proposition was based on prior research which showed that the two constructs, while related, are empirically distinct (e.g., Duffy et al., 2013). Further, the theory states that living a calling is a more proximal predictor of work and well-being outcomes than perceiving a calling (Duffy et al., 2018).

While some studies have noted that calling may lead to potentially detrimental outcomes, such as workaholism (Keller et al., 2016), a recent meta-analysis found that stronger callings were associated with lower job strain, in terms of negative physiological, psychological, and behavioral outcomes (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). Interestingly, Dobrow Riza et al. also found that stronger callings were associated with greater challenge stressors, which previous research suggests should lead to greater strain (e.g., Bliese et al., 2017). In light of these seemingly contradictory findings, Dobrow Riza et al. (2019) suggested that individuals with stronger callings may be better equipped to handle stressful work conditions. In light of the above theoretical rationale and meta-analytic evidence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Living a calling is negatively related to job strain.

Mediating Mechanism

Dobrow Riza et al. (2019) suggested that future research should investigate the mechanisms (i.e., mediators) involved in the relationship between calling and job strain. We propose that employee
readiness to work under COVID-19 conditions may help explain the relationship between living a calling and job strain. For the purposes of this study, we define COVID-19 employee work readiness as a multifaceted construct that includes employees’ self-efficacy to adapt, work competence, and work motivation under COVID-19 work conditions (Cigularov, 2020). This construct is conceptually similar to career adaptability, which refers to an individual’s resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks and difficulties in their occupational roles (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). However, our interest in the present study was on work readiness specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than the more general career adaptability construct. We describe the three facets of COVID-19 employee work readiness and their proposed relationships with living a calling below.

Self-efficacy to Adapt

Wood and Bandura (1989) defined self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands” (p. 408). Living a calling may be a robust resource associated with the resource gain of self-efficacy to adapt to COVID-19. The meaning and importance of an individual’s experiences through living a calling in their job may increase their self-efficacy, especially when resource loss circumstances are high (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The transcendent summons component of living a calling likely increases an individual’s self-efficacy because the individual perceives that a force outside of himself or herself has called them to their work. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that calling is related to career self-efficacy (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). Additionally, previous research has found that occupational self-efficacy mediates the relationship between calling and job performance (Park et al., 2016). Moreover, self-efficacy has previously been shown to mediate the relationship between other resources (e.g., self-leadership) and strain (e.g., Unsworth & Mason, 2012).

Work Competence

We conceptualize work competence as an individual’s belief that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully complete work tasks. While conceptually similar to self-efficacy, competence also reflects an individual’s evaluation that they possess the resources needed to work. Individuals who are living a calling likely possess these resources, as supported by meta-analytic evidence that calling has a positive relationship with job resources (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). Competence may be particularly important amid rapidly changing work conditions. Individuals who are living a calling likely have invested time and energy into ensuring that they are able to successfully manage job demands in the future. For example, Praskova et al. (2015) found that calling was related to career planning and perceived employability. COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that individuals who have a calling likely view living a calling as a resource to be protected by ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to manage job demands. In other words, living a calling should relate to greater work competence, which in turn should result in lower job strain.

Work Motivation

Living a calling may be associated with lower job strain through its positive effect on work motivation. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that calling is related to intrinsic motivation and, to a lesser extent, extrinsic motivation (Dobrow Riza et al., 2019). We position living a calling as an antecedent of work motivation. This notion is supported by job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001), which suggests that certain resources may
enhance motivation, and motivation should then be more proximally related to job strain. Applied to the present study, living a calling may indirectly reduce job strain by increasing work motivation. Specifically, the meaning and importance an individual experiences through living a calling in their job may increase their work motivation, especially when resource loss circumstances are high (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Work motivation should then be associated with lower levels of job strain (Crawford et al., 2010).

In sum, living a calling may function as a resource enabling individuals to better manage their job demands, as reflected in lower levels of job strain, by boosting individuals’ COVID-19 work readiness (i.e., resource gain; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Hypothesis 2: Living a calling is positively related to COVID-19 work readiness.

Hypothesis 3: COVID-19 work readiness mediates the negative relationship between living a calling and job strain.

**Method**

**Participants**

Similar to other studies on calling (Clinton et al., 2017; Sturges et al., 2019), we limited our sample to those employed full-time as clergy (i.e., pastors, ministers, and priests). Clergy work is often characterized by the presence of calling. Moreover, a calling is typically a precondition for entry into the ministry, and a calling must be confirmed by members of the clergy’s denominational body (e.g., a local church). For these reasons, clergy are an ideal sample for understanding the effects of living a calling.

A total of 308 participants responded to the survey. Any participants who responded that they were not employed as clergy full-time (n = 19) or did not pass data quality checks (n = 73) were excluded from analyses. Specifically, participants who (a) did not respond “Never” to the item “for quality data purposes, please select ‘Never’” (n = 31), (b) did not provide information about their tenure in ministry (n = 27), and/or (c) responded similarly to the positively- and negatively-worded items (e.g., responded “Strongly agree” to the positively-worded item and “Strongly agree” or “Agree” to the negatively-worded item) for at least two out of the three facets of COVID-19 work readiness (n = 15) were excluded. The final sample for analysis included 216 survey records. All reported statistics past this point are based on this final sample. Male respondents constituted 83.3% of the sample. Most respondents identified their race as White (96.3%). A majority of respondents reported their highest level of completed education to be a master’s degree (63.4%), followed by doctoral degree (25.9%) and bachelor’s degree (4.2%). In terms of denomination, most participants identified as United Methodist (52.3%), followed by Presbyterian (PCA; 30.6%) and Southern Baptist (13.9%). Participants reported their geographical location to be suburban (51.4%), rural (31.9%), or urban (16.7%). The vast majority of participants’ job titles included the term “pastor” (83.8%) or “minister” (10.6%). Respondents’ time in current position ranged from less than a year to 49 years (M = 7.9, SD = 7.8), and their total years working in ministry ranged from 1 to 52 years (M = 18.6, SD = 11.9). Participants’ congregation size ranged from 15 to 14,000 congregants (M = 570; SD = 1322; Median = 220).

**Procedure**

All procedures for this study were approved for exempt status by our university’s Institutional Review Board. Data for this study were gathered from a targeted convenience sample between March and April 2020. Potential participants were identified and contacted through email lists from U.S. denominational administrative offices and religious institutions. Additionally, potential
participants were invited to participate through social networking platforms (e.g., Twitter). In these communications, participants were asked to send the survey to any other clergy they knew. Due to snowball sampling and nonactive email addresses, we were unable to compute a response rate for this study. A web-based, structured survey was administered to participants through the Qualtrics internet-survey system, which has been frequently used in previous applied psychology research (e.g., Terry & Cunningham, 2020).

**Measures**

Measures included in the surveys, and the individual items within each measure, appeared in random order to account for potential order biases. All measures along with instructions are included in Table 1. Participants were asked to respond to items in relation to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to selecting and adapting items for the COVID-19 work readiness and job strain measures, we considered recent (i.e., since the COVID-19 outbreak) social media (e.g., Twitter) posts, popular clergy blogs and websites (e.g., The Gospel Coalition), and church communications (e.g., church emails). We also informally interviewed clergy and subject matter experts ($N = 4$) to better understand the work experiences and potentially beneficial personal resources for clergy during the pandemic. Our review of information and interviews helped us to select and adapt items which would be relevant to clergy during the pandemic. For instance, due to the cancelation of many in-person activities (e.g., religious services; Gecewicz, 2020), participants were asked about how often they felt lonely or isolated in their work (Frenk et al., 2013). We modeled living a calling, COVID-19 work readiness, and job strain as latent constructs to account for random error variance and measure-specific variance components (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

**Living a Calling**

Living a calling was measured using three items ($\alpha = .87$) from the original six items in the Living a Calling Scale (Duffy et al., 2012). We were interested in individuals’ experience of living a calling in their present jobs. Thus, we only used the three items which explicitly include the word “job.” Participants rated items on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). An example item is “I am currently working in a job that closely aligns with my calling.”

**COVID-19 Work Readiness**

Work readiness under job conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic was measured using six items ($\alpha = .73$) adapted from previous studies with self-efficacy to adapt, work competence, and work motivation assessed with three item pairs each (Asher, 2017; Barrick et al., 2002; Brockner et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2001; Melnick & Meister, 2008; Ng & Lucianetti, 2016; Spreitzer, 1995). These items were chosen and adapted based on our review of COVID-19 information and interviews to be relevant to clergy during the pandemic. Additionally, the instructions for this measure were adapted so that participants were asked to respond based on their work changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants rated items on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). An example item is “I feel confident that I can successfully adapt to work changes.”

**Job Strain**

Job strain experienced over the past month was measured using four items ($\alpha = .83$). Two items were adapted from the Clergy Occupational Distress Index (CODI; Frenk et al., 2013), which has been used in previous research with clergy (e.g., Terry & Cunningham, 2020). The other two items
were adapted from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Similar to our COVID-19 work readiness measure, these items were selected and adapted to be relevant to the work-related experiences of clergy during the pandemic. In addition, the instructions for this measure were adapted so that participants were asked to respond based on their experiences over the past month. Participants rated items on a 4-point frequency scale ranging from never (1) to

| Construct                  | Instructions                                                                 | Items                                                                                   | Reference                                    | Facet (if applicable)   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Living a Calling           | Please rate your level of (dis) agreement with the following three items about your job as a clergy. There are no right or wrong answers. | I am currently working in a job that closely aligns with my calling.                     | Duffy et al. (2012)                          | N/A                     |
|                            |                                                                            | I am living out my calling right now in my job.                                          | Duffy et al. (2012)                          |                         |
|                            |                                                                            | I am working in the job to which I feel called.                                          | Duffy et al. (2012)                          |                         |
| COVID-19 Work Readiness    | We would like to know how you feel about the changes in your work due to COVID-19 pandemic. Please rate your level of (dis)agreement with the following items. There are no right or wrong answers. | I feel confident that I can successfully adapt to work changes.                         | Chen et al. (2001)                           | Self-efficacy to adapt  |
|                            |                                                                            | I am not sure I can adapt to work changes as quickly as expected. (reverse scored)      | Ng & Lucianetti (2016)                       |                         |
|                            |                                                                            | I feel well prepared/trained to complete my work effectively under current job conditions. | Melnick & Meister (2008)                     | Work competence         |
|                            |                                                                            | I lack some of the knowledge and skills needed to complete my work effectively under current job conditions. (reverse scored) | Spreitzer (1995)                             |                         |
|                            |                                                                            | It is difficult for me to stay motivated to work under current job conditions. (reverse scored) | Asher (2017)                                 | Work motivation         |
|                            |                                                                            | I am motivated to work hard under current job conditions.                                | Barrick et al. (2002); Brockner et al. (2001) |                         |
| Job Strain                 | Over the past month, how often have you...                                 | Felt lonely or isolated in your work?                                                   | Frenk et al. (2013)                          | N/A                     |
|                            |                                                                            | Experienced stress because of the challenges in your work?                              | Frenk et al. (2013)                          |                         |
|                            |                                                                            | Felt frustrated because of the changes in your work?                                     | Maslach & Jackson (1981)                     |                         |
|                            |                                                                            | Felt emotionally drained from your work?                                                 | Maslach & Jackson (1981)                     |                         |

Note. N/A = not applicable.
very often (4). An example item is “Over the past month, how often have you felt lonely or isolated in your work?”

**Control Variables**

We examined demographic variables (i.e., gender, race, completed education, denomination, geographical location, and total years in ministry) for possible relationships with job strain, as previous research suggests these variables may be related to health and well-being outcomes for clergy (e.g., Wells, 2013). None of the examined relationships were significant, except for total years in ministry ($r = -0.32, p < .01$). For this reason, we controlled for total years in ministry in our structural equation model.

**Results**

Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and internal consistency reliabilities are shown in Table 2. Using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) and following the two-stage procedure by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we first estimated a measurement model that included the three latent constructs, that is, living a calling, COVID-19 work readiness, and job strain. We modeled living a calling and job strain with their three and four items as item-level indicators, respectively. COVID-19 work readiness was modeled with three 2-item parcel indicators, representing the three work readiness facets of self-efficacy to adapt, work competence, and work motivation. This facet-representative parceling approach is recommended where items share secondary facet-relevant content (Little et al., 2013).

Model fit was evaluated using one incremental and two absolute goodness-of-fit indices, which are most widely used and recommended in the literature: comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Steiger, 1990; Steiger & Lind, 1980), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; Hu & Bentler, 1999). Simulation work by Hu and Bentler (1998, 1999) and others (e.g., Yu, 2002) suggests cutoff values for good model fit of $≥ 0.95$ for CFI, $≤ 0.06 / 0.08$ for RMSEA, and $≤ 0.08$ for SRMR.

The three-factor measurement model showed good fit to the data, $\chi^2(32) = 67.12, p < .001$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, 90% confidence interval (CI; [.05, .10]), and SRMR = 0.06. All factor loadings were large ($\lambda > 0.40$) and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$; Hair et al., 2018), with standardized loadings ranging from 0.49 to 0.87. To test the structural model, we used the Mplus Model Indirect function (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017; Muthén et al., 2017), as recommended by Valente et al. (2020), which allowed us to (a) model our constructs as latent variables using maximum likelihood estimation and (b) obtain a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect using 10,000 bootstrap samples (Cheung, 2007; MacKinnon et al., 2012; Muthén,

### Table 2. Means, SDs, and Correlations Among Studied Variables.

| Variable                           | M      | SD     | Possible Range | Actual Range | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     |
|------------------------------------|--------|--------|----------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. Total years in ministry         | 18.59  | 11.87  | N/A            | 51.00        | _     | _     | _     | _     |
| 2. Living a calling                | 4.45   | .73    | 4.00           | 4.00         | .05   | (.87) |       |       |
| 3. COVID-19 work readiness         | 3.58   | .66    | 4.00           | 3.50         | .07   | .22** | (.73) |       |
| 4. Job strain                      | 2.47   | .73    | 3.00           | 3.00         | .32** | -.15* | -.43**| (.83) |

Note. $N = 216$. N/A = not applicable. Cronbach’s alphas are presented in parentheses along the diagonal.

*p < .05.

**p < .01.
We included total years working in ministry as a covariate in the structural model, given its significant correlation with job strain ($r = .32$, $p < .001$).

We employed structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation to test the proposed model of indirect effects, using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). Similar to the measurement model, the fit of the structural model was found to be good, $\chi^2(32) = 74.54$, $p = .001$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [.04, .08], and SRMR = .06 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Standardized parameter estimates of this model are displayed in Figure 1. Results indicated that the direct effect of living a calling on job strain was not significant ($\beta = .023$, $p = .751$, bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CI [-.11, .17]). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Hypothesis 2 was supported as the effect of living a calling on COVID-19 work readiness was significant and positive ($\beta = .260$, $p = .001$, bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CI [.10, .41]). The test of the indirect effect of living a calling on job strain via COVID-19 work readiness was significant and negative ($\beta = -.136$, $p = .006$, bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CI [-.24, -.05]), supporting Hypothesis 3. Specifically, COVID-19 work readiness significantly and fully mediated the relationship between living a calling and job strain.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that living a calling may function as a personal resource during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic among clergy. Specifically, our study shows that individuals who are living a calling in their jobs may experience higher COVID-19 work readiness. The findings also suggest that living a calling may be related to enhanced well-being in the form of lower job strain through COVID-19 work readiness. These results underscore the potential of living a calling to function as a personal resource which may enable individuals to gain other resources that can be useful for dealing with intensifying job demands and adapting to changing work circumstances.

**Practical Implications**

Our study responds to Thompson and Bunderson’s (2019) concern that research has not yet supported the relevance of calling for outcomes that are of interest to supervisors and practitioners.
Indeed, our findings indicate that clergy who are living a calling may be more self-efficacious to adapt to rapidly changing work circumstances, may perceive greater competence to complete their job tasks, and may be more motivated to work. While these facets of work readiness may be important for day-to-day tasks, they may be particularly important for times of organizational disruption. One reason that living a calling may empower individuals to work during times of disruption is because they perceive that a force outside of themselves has called them to their work (i.e., transcendent summons; Duffy & Dik, 2013). This external force may provide individuals with the reassurance they need that they can be successful in their work. Additionally, vocational psychologists and managers may be able to help individuals experience greater congruence between their job and calling through interventions (e.g., job crafting; Berg et al., 2010). Such interventions may enable individuals to better live out their calling and potentially gain other valuable resources. These interventions may even lead to the emergence of a calling for some individuals through experiencing fit with their work environment (Hagmaier & Abele, 2012).

According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, resources gain their motivating potential and become particularly useful when needed (Hobfoll, 2001). One of a clergy member’s main job tasks is to care for the spiritual needs of their congregation. Clergy likely know congregational members who have encountered hardships (e.g., lost their jobs, quit their jobs to care for children or elderly family members, and experienced the death of a family member) as a result of COVID-19. In the wake of these hardships, congregational members are often looking for their clergy to provide spiritual support and care. Hence, clergy may perceive their work to be even more meaningful and greatly contributing to the needs of those around them during the pandemic (i.e., purposeful work and prosocial orientation, respectively; Duffy & Dik, 2013). This notion may also be true for individuals working in other occupations. For example, health care workers may perceive their work to be more purposeful and important during the pandemic as they care for patients who have contracted COVID-19 (Hennekam et al., 2020).

Our study also responds to Dobrow Riza et al.’s (2019) call for research to investigate the mediators involved in the relationship between calling and job strain. Specifically, our results are consistent with the proposition that COVID-19 work readiness fully mediates the relationship between living a calling and job strain. In other words, clergy who perceive that they are living a calling in their jobs may experience greater work readiness, and as a result, they may experience less emotional exhaustion and distress at work. This notion is particularly important for clergy as they frequently experience stressful situations (e.g., excessive demands from congregational members; Frenk et al., 2013), and these stressful situations may have detrimental effects on their mental health (Ellison et al., 2010). A clergy member’s perception that they are living a calling may help them to feel prepared to handle these stressful situations and thus experience less job strain. Individuals working in similar occupations (e.g., mental health professionals) who frequently experience stressful situations may similarly benefit from the experience of living a calling.

**Theoretical Implications**

The calling construct has recently been criticized for its lack of theoretical grounding (Thompson & Bunderson, 2019). Our study contributes to the occupational health and well-being literature by theoretically situating living a calling as a resource. Specifically, our study suggests that living a calling may function as a personal resource useful for gaining other resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). While our research suggests that living a calling is associated with greater COVID-19 work readiness, future research should consider other personal resources (e.g., optimism), as well as organizational resources (e.g., supervisor support), which may be associated with living a calling.
Our research also indicates that the recently proposed Work as a Calling Theory (Duffy et al., 2018) may be refined by considering resource-based theories. In particular, this theory suggests that living a calling is a direct antecedent of burnout. However, job demands-resources (JD-R) theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001) proposes that resources are direct antecedents of motivation and buffer the effects of job demands on strain. Hence, if living a calling functions as a resource, it should directly impact motivation, while also having indirect effects on more distal positive outcomes (e.g., job performance) and negative outcomes (e.g., burnout). This suggestion is supported by our finding that COVID-19 work readiness mediates the relationship between living a calling and job strain. Future research may benefit current theory regarding calling by examining other potential mediators in the relationship between living a calling and more distal outcomes. For example, JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001) suggests that work engagement, commitment, and flourishing may mediate the relationship between living a calling and job performance.

Limitations

The implications of our findings are limited by its cross-sectional research design. We used a cross-sectional design for two main reasons, following recommendations from Spector (2019). First, we aimed to conduct an exploratory study. To our knowledge, our study is the first to examine potential indirect effects in the relationship between living a calling and job strain. Cross-sectional designs allow researchers to investigate potentially meaningful patterns without the cost and difficulty of conducting a longitudinal study (Spector, 2019). Second, the timeframe for the potential effect of living a calling on job strain is unclear. Using a longitudinal design for an exploratory study could potentially lead to erroneous conclusions about whether variables are related and the potential strength of these relationships. Hence, we chose the cross-sectional design to provide an initial inquiry into COVID-19 work readiness as a mediator in the relationship between living a calling and job strain. Nonetheless, we recognize that indirect effects should ideally be demonstrated across time. Future research should consider the potential role of living a calling as a resource using longitudinal research designs (Brusso et al., 2014) by measuring living a calling at multiple time points to discern the optimal timeframe during which this potential resource may engender other resources and affect more distal outcomes.

Additionally, the generalizability of our study results is limited by our sample (i.e., full-time clergy). Though previous research on calling has similarly limited their samples to clergy (e.g., Sturges et al., 2019), future research should consider living a calling as a potential resource among individuals in other occupations (e.g., mental health professionals). Additionally, while our study examined living a calling during the COVID-19 pandemic, future research should consider how living a calling may function as a resource during other times of disruption. Some examples might include business owners having to comply with new federal regulations, or employees experiencing higher workloads due to coworkers being laid off or furloughed.

Finally, we recognize that the use of shortened and adapted measures is a potential limitation of our study, and that these measures may have affected our results. The use of such measures is not uncommon in organizational research (Heggestad et al., 2019), and we used it for two reasons. First, we wanted to encourage participation by minimizing the amount of time needed to complete the survey. For example, our survey included a three-item version of the Living a Calling Scale (Duffy et al., 2012). Internal consistency reliability for this three-item scale in the present study ($\alpha = .87$) was similar to the reliability for the six items in the scale’s original study ($\alpha = .85$; Duffy et al., 2012). Further, the correlation between living a calling and job strain in the present study ($r = -.15$) is comparable to the correlation between living a calling and strain at work from a recent study ($r = -.21$; Ehrhardt & Ensher, 2020). Previous studies have similarly used brief measures for
living a calling, including a one-item measure (Ehrhardt & Ensher, 2020). However, the full six-item version of the scale might have provided greater variability in our results.

Second, items were adapted and combined from existing validated measures to better fit the novel context for this study (i.e., COVID-19). Similar practices for item adaptation and development have been used in previous research, including studies involving self-efficacy (e.g., Ng & Lucianetti, 2016). Moreover, these measures achieved acceptable reliability and related to other measures in expected ways. Nonetheless, future research should consider testing these hypothesized relationships using more well-established measures.

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