

Essay on two qualitative papers: exploring the dark side of callings

My thesis focuses on the notion of meaningful work, particularly how individuals derive meaning for their work, how organization's enable or constrain the pursuit of valued causes through work, and how the institutional norms on the one hand and emotions on the other hand shape the work orientations of employees. The empirical qualitative papers by Schabram and Maitlis (2017) and Berg, Grant and Johnson (2010) examined for the purposes of this essay explore parallel questions, their key contributions being to the literature of work as a calling and meaning of work. This literature is tightly connected to my own core theoretical construct and the literature I intend to contribute to, the ideological psychological contract. While the ideological predispositions towards work and the ideological psychological contract have not yet been extensively investigated in the OB literature, the literatures on callings and meaningfulness of work are thematically highly related, focusing on understanding how and why individuals are willing to fulfill core personal values in their work, and what implications this orientation bears. The selected papers both grasp the emotional aspects related to working for a valued cause.

Furthermore, these papers appealed to me because they seek to reveal some of the darker aspects of a calling in contrast to the positive characteristics that dominate the work as a calling literature. While the paper by Berg, Grant and Johnson (2010) examines how individuals cope with unfulfilled or missed callings, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) in turn shed light on the challenges people face when succeeding to pursue a calling, investigating how individuals negotiate these challenges. In addition to callings and meaning of work literatures, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) contribute to the literature on employee responses to workplace challenges, whereas Berg and colleagues contribute to the study of job crafting. The papers examined present a nuanced understanding of their respective empirical contexts. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) explore the differences in how individuals respond to challenges they face when work is a calling, depicting different calling paths based on distinct concepts of self and recognizing the existence of three different ontologies of calling; calling as an identity, calling as a contribution and calling as a practice. The paper by Berg and colleagues on the other hand depicts five different techniques individuals engage in for unanswered callings either in work or leisure domains; task emphasizing, job expanding, role reframing, vicarious experiencing or hobby participating.

There are key ontological and epistemological differences between the two papers that are reflected in the methods, data analysis, and in how the findings are presented. While Berg and colleagues (2010) embrace classic Organizational Behavior style in their theorizing, justifying their arguments based on theories in psychology and social psychology, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) take a more sociologically oriented approach in their study with their additional focus on sensemaking and in conceptually framing the paper on literature of how employees response to workplace challenges in general and the emotions that the challenges may cause. Interestingly, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) do not cover sensemaking as a conceptual frontend even though the paper is framed with a sensemaking angle. I wonder if this is due to the sensemaking being perceived more as perspective and a lens rather than a theory per se. However, reading the article I would have appreciated if the authors had linked sensemaking to the callings in the theoretical background, and described their take on sensemaking, particularly the kind of sensemaking (e.g. collective or individual) they engage with. It is noteworthy that while both papers contribute to

the understanding of emotions in the study of dark side of callings, they engage in it in distinct ways in presenting the findings and in the discussion: Berg and colleagues form an OB angle depicting micro-level understanding of emotions, and Schabram and Maitlis (2017) approach emotions as a more sociological construct, as a means for sensemaking.

The data in both papers is largely interview-based and the justification offered for the sample in both papers is by Eisenhardt (1989), following the logic of extreme sampling and the notion of examining an occupation in which the process under study is transparently observable. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) examine animal shelter workers and Berg and colleagues (2017) mainly educators, both representing occupations in which employees have been shown to hold calling-related orientations for work. Schabram and Maitlis (2017) also explicitly state that the choice of investigating animal shelters is due to a personal background of one of the authors in that field, showing transparency in terms of personal motivations for the empirical context. The interview protocols in the papers are quite different and again highlight the ontological and epistemological differences between the papers; while Berg and colleagues (2017) have a more structured interview protocol and even mention using Likert-type scales in the interview questions, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) interviews are in a narrative style. The Berg and colleagues (2010) paper therefore includes the interview protocol and interview questions as an appendix, but for Schabram and Maitlis (2017) this isn't relevant because of the narrative style in interviews.

Schabram and Maitlis (2017) narratively interviewed 50 employees in animal shelters, while Berg and colleagues (2010), after discarding a part of the interviews conducted, used the data from 31 interviews. Berg and colleagues (2010) interviewed educators, and employees in non-profit and in manufacturing contexts. The two latter sample groups also answered a survey 6 weeks after the interview – again, this paper taking on an OB approach with the use of quantitative data. The diversity in terms of including three different occupational groups in the sample is explained by the desire to contrast and compare the findings from different occupational contexts, an approach that is more typical with OB. The selection of the manufacturing company is not explained, leaving questions on why it was chosen as the context for the study. My key challenge in analyzing the works was with this aspect of the Berg and colleagues (2010) paper; I was left wondering why they engaged with three very different samples (educators, non-profit workers and manufacturing employees), and if other contextual factors in these very different occupational realms might have explained some of the variations in the findings, rather than the calling orientations. I would have probably been more convinced of findings that would stem from one selected and well-argued sample that represents a single occupation.

The distinct ontological and epistemological orientations of the paper are also evident in how the findings are presented: Berg and colleagues (2010) formulate their results in a proposition style, more typical to quantitative oriented studies and OB studies in general. In contrast, the Schabram and Maitlis (2017) paper is more data-driven and inductive in style. The data structure is very clearly presented in the Schabram and Maitlis (2017) paper, building a possibly more convincing case on the data analysis than Berg and colleagues (2010) who in turn included a graph that depicts the different job and leisure crafting techniques for coping with unanswered callings, and exemplar quotes that accompany the categories.

What struck me as interesting was how Schabram and Maitlis (2017) illustrate different calling paths based on key moderators among the sample, such as length of tenure within the animal shelter or in the occupation. This was something that I would assume to find in a more micro-level OB paper that typically describe individual differences rather than commonalities. In fact, the authors explicitly state in the introduction that they “received feedback in the review process that prompted us to revise our research question to explore the possible variation between individuals rather than looking for commonalities” that was the initial idea of the authors. It might be likely that some of their reviewers were OB scholars, as the paper contributes to the literature on callings, even though the paper represents organization theory more than OB per se with the narrative approach and sensemaking frame. Might an OB reviewer pushed them to differentiate the paths of calling types based on individual differences within the sample, against their own preference?

My personal key learning from the papers was that a similar phenomenon and even parallel research questions can be examined from highly distinct points of view. What is important is that the ontological and epistemological orientations are aligned, and that there is consistency in the selection of literature of contribution, theory, method, data and the style of presenting findings. The possible frames are plentiful and it is a matter of the discussion one wishes to take part in. Finally, the explicitness in reporting how data is analysed is important for the credibility of argumentation that stems from qualitative data.

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