

# Overcoming the challenges of living an occupational calling: a study with veterinarians

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## Abstract

This study aims to understand how individuals experience the challenges of living their occupational calling. We performed qualitative research using the grounded theory approach through narrative interviews. We developed a substantive theory that argues that: a) workers, veterinarians in this study, can experience an occupational calling under different self-constructed meanings; b) these different self-constructed meanings lead workers to experience distinct short – and long-term emotions and challenges; c) workers apply a variety of strategies to overcome these challenges. Thus, this work contributes to the literature on callings by parting with the traditional view that having an occupational calling reflects a monolithic meaning itself. In contrast, the study suggests that different meanings related to a calling may produce different effects on the subjects' career path.

**Keywords:** Occupational calling. Grounded theory. Veterinarians. Career. Meaning of work.

## Superando os desafios de viver um chamado ocupacional: um estudo com veterinários

### Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é compreender como indivíduos vivenciam os desafios de viver seu chamado ocupacional. Foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa, com o método *grounded theory*, por meio de entrevistas narrativas. Assim, desenvolvemos uma teoria substantiva que sustenta que um chamado ocupacional pode ser vivenciado sobre diferentes significados construídos pelos trabalhadores – no caso particular, os veterinários pesquisados –, que essas diferentes construções de sentido levam os trabalhadores a vivenciar diferentes emoções e desafios de curto e longo prazo no trabalho, bem como que esses diferentes desafios são superados por distintas estratégias de superação. Assim, este trabalho contribui para a literatura no sentido de romper com a visão tradicional de que ter um chamado ocupacional enseja um significado monolítico em si. Ao contrário, o estudo sugere que diferentes significados relativos a um chamado podem produzir efeitos díspares na trajetória de carreira dos sujeitos.

**Palavras-chave:** Chamado ocupacional. *Grounded theory*. Veterinários. Carreira. Sentido do trabalho.

## Superar los retos de tener una vocación profesional: un estudio con veterinarios

### Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue comprender cómo los individuos experimentan los desafíos de tener una vocación profesional. Se realizó una investigación cualitativa, utilizando el enfoque de teoría fundamentada, a través de entrevistas narrativas. Así, desarrollamos una teoría sustantiva que sostiene que: a) una vocación profesional puede ser experimentada sobre diferentes significados construidos por los trabajadores (en el caso particular, los veterinarios investigados); b) estas diferentes construcciones de significado llevan a los trabajadores a experimentar diferentes emociones y desafíos a corto y largo plazo en el trabajo; c) estos diferentes desafíos se vencen mediante diferentes estrategias de superación. Así, este trabajo contribuye a la literatura sobre vocación al romper con la visión tradicional de que tener una vocación profesional da lugar a un significado monolítico en sí. Por el contrario, el estudio sugiere que diferentes significados relacionados con una vocación pueden producir diferentes efectos en la trayectoria profesional de los sujetos.

**Palabras clave:** Vocación profesional. Teoría fundamentada. Veterinarios. Carrera. Sentido del trabajo.

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## INTRODUCTION

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The modern work environment has increasingly been marked by people's search for meaningful careers beyond the mere quest for financial rewards (Allan, Duffy, & Collisson, 2018). Against this backdrop, there has been a growing interest in "occupational callings" (Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England, & Velez, 2018), defined as "an approach to work that reflects seeking a sense of overall purpose and meaning and is used to help others or contribute to the common good, motivated by an external or internal summons" (Duffy et al., 2018, p. 426). Despite the dominant emphasis on the positive aspects of seeing work as a calling, as a form of obtaining life satisfaction and career commitment (H. S. Lee, E. S. Lee, & Shin, 2020), many studies on the topic explore a different perspective. For example, Lysova, Jansen, Khapova, Plomp, and Tims (2018) and Silva, Felix, and Mainardes (2021) have explored the challenges individuals face while trying to live callings, considering that some people are unable to build a career with these characteristics.

However, studies discussing the challenges of occupational callings portray the individuals going through these challenges as persistent people who experience a sense of destiny (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Hall & Chandler, 2005). This may be considered an overly heroic and unrealistic view of these professionals (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Despite the contribution of the studies above, it is possible to identify some gaps in the literature. Although there is evidence that individuals respond differently to these challenges over time (Ng, Feldman, & Lam, 2010), it is necessary to understand how they work to overcome the adversities on their way to living an occupational calling.

The studies cited did not widely explore the different reactions individuals with the same occupational calling can adopt to live such a calling. Despite previous research citing the influence of personal values, emotions, and meanings of work on how individuals seek to overcome challenges (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), it is necessary to explore these aspects in the context of occupational callings – since these callings tend to amplify the influence of personal values, emotions, and meanings of work (Duffy & Dik, 2013). In addition, these studies present a monolithic view of callings by exploring only the individual's connection with a given occupation but not the functions that this connection aims to fulfill for the individual (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019; Obodaru, 2017).

Thus, this qualitative research with Brazilian veterinarians aimed to understand how individuals experience the challenges of living an occupational calling. The study was based on the grounded theory method and used in-depth narrative interviews and inductive analysis.

The study offers two main contributions to the literature on occupational callings. First, it adopts a multidimensional rather than a unidimensional view to support the notion of work as a calling, exploring the different dynamics individuals may experience in this process. Second, it seeks to overcome the dichotomized discussion about the positive and negative effects of living an occupational calling (Lysova et al., 2018), exploring the circumstances and reasons why both effects manifest.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### Work challenges: what do we know so far?

The literature has shown robust evidence that how individuals interpret challenges in their careers has consequences for their emotions and, in a second moment, for their work. Studies show that when professionals interpret challenges at work as pulling them away from their personal and work goals, they are likely to be emotionally affected with anger, fear, and anxiety (Dong, Seo, & Bartol, 2014; Felix & Blulm, 2020). Such negative emotions produce undesirable effects on work, such as moral disengagement, counterproductive behavior (Bauer & Spector, 2015), lack of punctuality, equipment sabotage, and abusive behavior toward other employees.

Some studies indicate that challenges can also affect the attitude of employees, decreasing productivity. For example, working in organizations seen as political arenas and with narcissistic (Lavoie-Tremblay, Fernet, Lavigne, & Austin, 2016) or toxic (Lam & Xu, 2019) leaders tends to reduce job satisfaction and increase the chances of turnover. These processes are considered sickening and can be perceived by a sensemaking process or by an event that leads the individual to perceive the unfavorable condition (T. W. Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

Although the literature emphasizes the negative consequences of challenges experienced in the work environment, not all people deal with professional challenges negatively. Many studies focus on coping strategies or how people respond to reduce or eliminate them. For example, studies on voice and silence at work have indicated that constructively expressing dissatisfaction or points of view related to challenges in the work environment tends to generate more positive consequences for the individual and their work than remaining silent (Felix, Mello, & von Borell, 2018). Research on characteristics of job crafting, identity negotiation, and career adaptability (Bardon, Brown, & Pez , 2017) point out that individuals use different mechanisms to overcome the challenges encountered in the workplace.

Unlike the crosscutting temporal perspectives on the phenomenon, two other research lines focus on discussing professional challenges from a long-term viewpoint. On the one hand, studies on burnout – a “psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 397) – reveal the adverse effects. They point out that individuals experience a gradual evolution from exhaustion to cynicism, the impoverishment of work relationships, and a drop in performance (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). On the other hand, research on thriving – as a constructive response to challenges that leads individuals to achieve a greater sense of vitality and learning (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) – explores positive long-term consequences of challenges at work.

In general, these studies show that the individuals’ interpretation of work challenges tends to lead them to respond differently, influencing the consequences for individuals and organizations. Also, individuals’ positive or negative reactions tend to be magnified into respectively positive and negative consequences. However, such research addresses broader professional challenges. In the following topic, we delve into the specifics of professional challenges one faces to live an occupational calling.

### How do individuals respond to challenges in the search for living occupational callings?

Occupational calling is a relatively new concept in the careers literature, with different approaches to studying the topic. The term has been examined under two dominant orientations, neoclassical and modern. Neoclassical studies see callings as an impulse toward a designation arising from a sense of destiny or a divine origin inviting the individual to work in a career that benefits others (Baumeister, 1991). Modern studies emphasize the individuals’ internal drive to find self-actualization and meaning in their work. According to this modern approach, chosen to guide this study, an occupational calling can be understood as “as a sense in which (a) one feels called by some external, beyond-the-self force, to a particular career in a manner that (b) is a source or expression of one’s broader sense of meaning and purpose in life, and that (c) views the needs or benefits of others as a motivating force” (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011, p. 211).

While the literature on occupational callings usually emphasizes the positive aspects of living occupational callings, there are relevant challenges worth exploring. Those who are living an occupational calling tend to have greater engagement, commitment (Duffy et al., 2011), and life satisfaction (Duffy, Allan, & Bott, 2012). However, not everything is positive. There is evidence that perceiving and living occupational callings is associated with unwanted effects such as workaholism, poorer sleep quality and morning vigor, employability (Lysova et al., 2018), and organizational exploitation (Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016). Thus, callings are seen as a double-edged sword in terms of their consequences (Felix & Papaleo, 2021; Lysova et al., 2018), and it is crucial to develop a deeper understanding of how individuals deal with the challenges of living a calling.

Although the literature does not explore how individuals experience and overcome such challenges, three studies point to what can be seen as ‘sensitizing’ paths.

## Sensitizing concepts: the sensemaking literature

Challenges to living occupational callings seem to be influenced by the people's interpretation of situations that occur in their careers. This aspect can be explored through sensemaking, which refers to the process by which people make sense of surprising events or themes by asking what is happening or what is the story behind the facts (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Individuals carry out this construction of meaning through cyclical processes of interpretation and action, which lead them to create credible and relatively sustainable subjective interpretations (Maitlis, 2009). As the challenges experienced when perceiving and living an occupational calling are built at the interface between personal values and the facts *per se* (Obodaru, 2017), we understand that the idea that sensemaking has an explanatory potential in how individuals deal with occupational callings is reasonable.

## Sensitizing concepts: the literature on emotions at work

As mentioned, the literature on emotions at work suggests that they tend to influence how people deal with challenges at work (Bauer & Spector, 2015; Dong et al., 2014). Thus, it is expected that these effects will be present, perhaps in an accentuated way, in challenges that occur in the context of callings, a high engagement approach, and work expectations (Duffy et al., 2018). Because the search for living the callings tends to arouse feelings of hope for life and work endowed with meaning (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019; Obodaru, 2017) at the same time as it may generate feelings of anger and anxiety when faced with challenges, it is possible to say that this duality (hope-anger/anxiety) is determinant to influence the process.

## Sensitizing concepts: the temporal perspective in the literature on challenges at work

The studies above that adopt a long-term temporal perspective on challenges at work through concepts such as burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005) are especially relevant in the case of occupational callings. It is reasonable to suggest that, in the context of an approach to work in which work is seen as highly meaningful and purposeful, as in the case of occupational callings (Duffy et al., 2018), the negative effects of burnout and the positive adaptation mechanisms expressed through thriving are magnified (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). In other words, professionals experience burnout when they consider their work endowed with meaning (Duffy et al., 2018).

On the one hand, frustration can be excruciating after investing a lot of time in a calling that does not return the expected personal results (Berg et al., 2010), without the individual realizing in time that they were allocating resources that would not generate a return. On the other hand, the intensity and persistence characteristic of seeking to live a calling can lead individuals to become more focused and resilient in facing challenges (Carver, 1998). Thus, a temporal perspective may be especially relevant as a sensitizing perspective for this research.

## METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand how individuals experience the challenges they face in the quest for living an occupational calling. A grounded theory (GT) was developed based on Charmaz's (2009) constructivist GT. GT is a qualitative research method that allows the development of a theory (Charmaz, 2009) based on the collected data and its suitability for situations in which there is no previous theory to study the topic, which is the case in this research.

The research subjects were veterinarians working in states of Northeast and Southeast Brazil who declared having a professional calling. The procedure by Berg et al. (2010) and Felix and Cavazotte (2019) – a quantitative procedure used in qualitative research to select participants – was adopted to identify whether the subjects had such a calling. The subjects invited to

participants responded to the four-item occupational calling perception scale by Dik, Eldridge, Steger, and Duffy (2012), with a 5-point Likert scale and response options ranging from 1 ("Not at all true of me") to 5 ("Totally true of me"). Questions included descriptive phrases such as "I have a calling to a particular kind of work" and "I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career." Participants who responded with options 4 ("Mostly true of me") or 5 ("Totally true of me") were invited for interviews.

Veterinarians were contacted from lists obtained from trade unions and through personal contacts. E-mails were sent to 12,892 professionals inviting them to respond to the perception scale. A total of 743 responded, and 208 were considered people who saw their career in veterinary medicine as an occupational calling. Of these, 62 declared not to be practicing the profession and were excluded. Finally, it was established that participants should accumulate a minimum of 10 years of working experience as a veterinarian to assess the challenges faced in the quest to live an occupational calling. After applying this criterion, 97 veterinarians formed the final sample.




Data was collected through an in-depth narrative interview using a semi-structured script with open-ended questions. This script was prepared based on the sensitizing concepts presented in the literature review and improved throughout the research development according to the principles of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2009). Demographic data such as age, length of time in the profession, gender, income, sub-area of activity, and involvement with volunteering were also collected.

The final script that guided the interviews included items such as how the individual concluded that they had a calling, general goals, meanings, emotions, and challenges – and ways to overcome them in the context of work. In addition, we built an understanding of the specific context of each interviewee, through questions about their age, a specific area in which they work in veterinary medicine, hobbies, and parallel activities, for example.

Initially, 5 of the 97 veterinarians were interviewed. First-order codes directly associated with the data were constructed from these interviews, and new questions were added. Other interviewees were selected among the 92 remaining participants using demographic criteria that could lead to new categories. The interviews were carried out until the interviews no longer led to new categories (theoretical saturation), which occurred after 55 interviews.

Data analysis followed the iterative processes suggested by grounded theory. Initial coding was carried out to synthesize the meanings of the interviewees' speech in first-order codes – examples: "Feeling good about the calling" and "Feeling sad for not living the calling as desired". As the interviews and analysis unfolded, some first-order codes used to synthesize the meaning of excerpts from the interviews were grouped or reassigned into second-order, more abstract, and theoretically far-reaching codes. Some examples are "Generation of self-worth" and "Existential sadness" (Box 1). Finally, the last ones originated the aggregate dimensions that were characterized as the three central categories of the presented grounded theory ("calling to be," "calling to do," and "calling to contribute," see Box 1).

**Box 1**  
**A model on the challenges of living an occupational calling**

			
Goal associated with a calling	Calling to be	Calling to do	Callin to contribute
Meaning of the calling	Generation of self-worth/ personal distinctiveness	Pleasure to work	Sense of existential contribution
Commonly experienced challenging emotions	Annoyance at not standing out enough	Boredom/stress due to lack or excess of challenges	Existential sadness/ emptiness
Long-term negative consequences	Low self-esteem	Work overload	Fear of missing out/ counterfactual thinking
Coping strategies	Impression management and vicarious activation	Job crafting and leisure crafting	Social activism

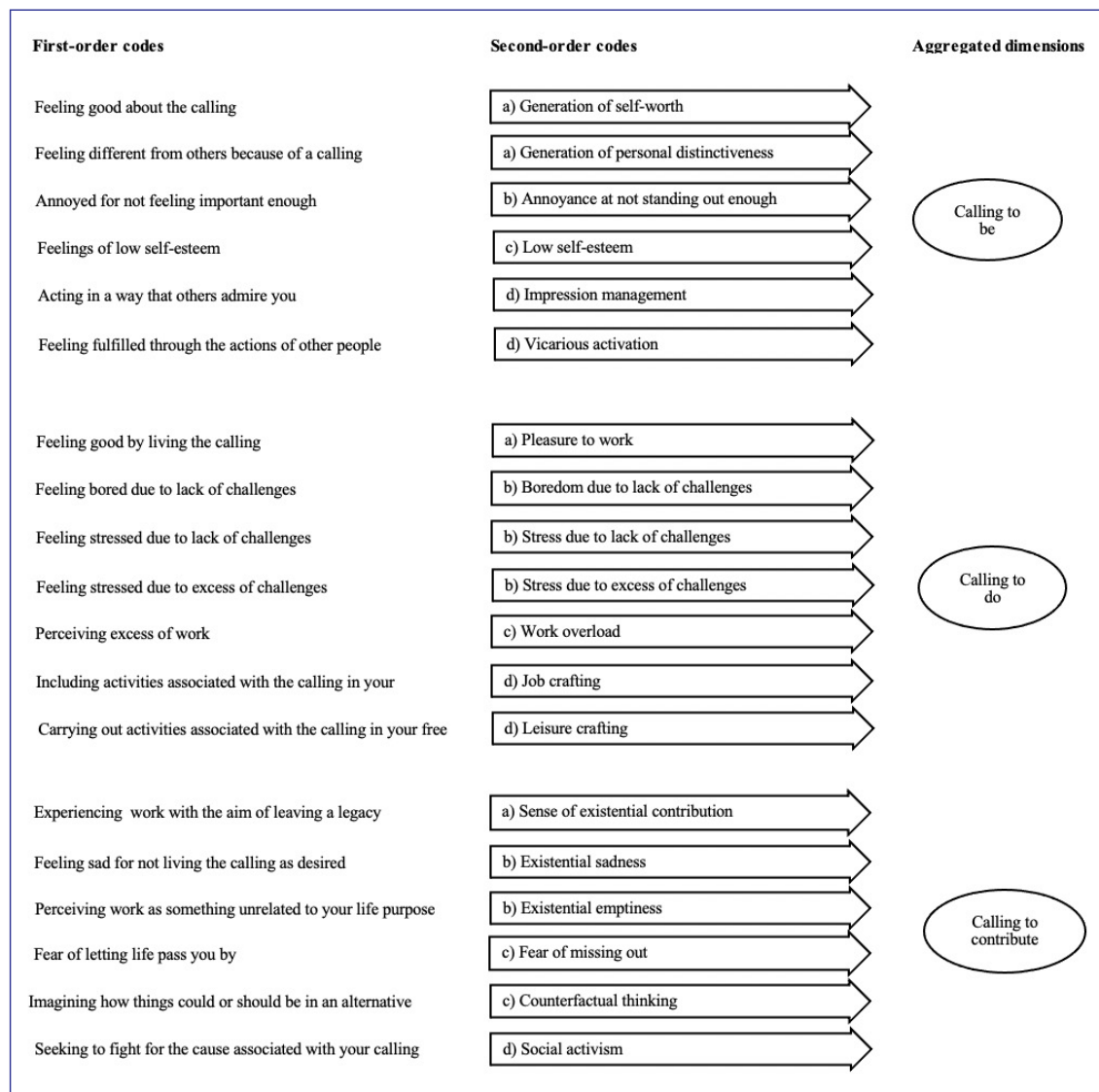
Source: Research data.

The analysis process was interspersed with further interviews to collect data that could be useful to refine the preliminary findings. As explained, the first data collection effort consisted of interviewing five participants. The following five rounds of data collection collected 7, 13, 10, 9, and 11 interviews, respectively. Respondents had an average age of 42 years, with more or less 16 years of professional experience. They were mostly men (52%) and had an average income of around BRL 7,000. The professionals interviewed work in the clinical and surgical areas (74%), animal reproduction (12%), pathology (6%), inspection of products of animal origin (4%), and public health (4%).

## RESULTS

This section presents the grounded theory proposed. As mentioned above, the analysis process led to the creation of several first-order codes, selected according to their relevance and re-elaborated in the form of second-order codes. The second-order codes were more abstract and had greater theoretical scope. They were grouped into aggregate dimensions that characterize the central categories of the study, referring to three ways of experiencing the calling: becoming a professional with a “calling to be” a veterinarian (identity), with a “calling to do” (activities), and a “calling to contribute” (delivery). These three categories are not exclusive. To some degree, individuals had more than 1 of these motivations for living their calling. Thus, the classification adopted did not intend to categorize individuals but to describe central explanatory categories. Figure 1 shows the construction map of the categories derived from this grounded theory.

**Figure 1**  
**Map of the construction of codes and aggregated dimensions**



Source: Research data.

These categories were organized to understand how individuals experience the challenges in the quest to live an occupational calling. Box 1 presents the structure around which the categories were structured. The second-order codes grouped under the same letter (a, b, c, and d) were placed under similar criteria (a – meanings of the calling; b – commonly experienced challenging emotions; c – long-term negative consequences; d – coping strategies), which were further explored in the theory presentation.

The theory is presented in the subsequent topics, which also introduce examples of evidence supporting the categories.



## The meaning of the calling

The meaning was the first criterion to explain the difference between the three ways of experiencing the calling. When we identified individuals with a “calling to be” a veterinarian, the associated meaning was almost always that of something we coded as “generation of self-worth” – the creation of an identity that enabled individuals to see themselves in a positive light. In this case, people understood that being a veterinarian meant being seen as someone who performs admirable work and also adheres to the symbolic constitution – for example, through the typical clothing of a professional in the area. The following evidence illustrates a construction of the meaning of the calling based on this understanding.

For me, being a veterinarian has always been something that helped me fulfill a desire I had to be there, in a lab coat, to be seen as someone who helps animals. I always felt good about being seen by others this way [...]. For others and for myself (I7, woman; area: clinical and surgical).

In other cases, the “calling to be” a veterinarian was expressed in something coded as “personal distinctiveness.” This concept refers to the intention of working in this profession to become someone different from other people, which is also a relevant identity component.

For individuals classified as experiencing a “calling to do,” it was possible to observe sensemaking regarding the calling in the activities performed by the veterinarian rather than in the occupational identity. In these cases, individuals reported that at some point, they perceived a calling to perform tasks – for example, surgical and clinical procedures that led to the animal being cured of a disease, large-scale animal husbandry with lower costs and better health, or supervision of establishments to promote public health. We used the code “pleasure to work” to synthesize narratives such as that of the interviewee below, who claimed, “my calling is to get my hands dirty.”

For me, being a veterinarian is, without a doubt, about the fact that I like to be with the animal in front of me, to work with that being and see it healthy. I always enjoyed dissecting dead animals in childhood, understanding bodies; I loved biology classes. So, I feel my calling is to get my hands dirty (I23, woman; area: cynical and surgical).

Finally, we classify some respondents as having a “calling to contribute.” They attributed to the profession of veterinarians the objective and the meaning of transforming the reality concerning the animals. For respondents classified in this category, the meaning of the calling was coded as a “sense of existential contribution,” meaning they felt a calling to change the existing scenario that was so significant it gave meaning to their lives. In the following report, the interviewee says that being a veterinarian represents contributing to leaving a “legacy” in the form of a more attentive world in the care of animals.

I was born to be a veterinarian, to make the world a little more aware that we are not superior to them, that we are equal; We need similar care [...]. At the end of my life, I want to be sure that I leave my legacy (I48, male; area: clinical and surgical).

## Commonly experienced challenging emotions

The second category of analysis emerged in the development of this grounded theory was that of commonly experienced challenging emotions. Among veterinarians in the category “calling to be” the most recurrent emotion was coded as “annoyance at not standing out enough”. The central goal of professionals with this form of calling involves the construction of an identity that provides self-esteem in the face of challenges to achieve this objective. The most reported emotion was annoyance from disappointment when perceiving that such construction did not occur as expected. The following excerpt illustrates this understanding.

The difficult thing for me is that time passed and I realized that, yes, I am a veterinarian. I have nothing to complain about, but I thought it would be more. I thought I would be a different person who stands out. And I ended up having to do anything professionally to survive, to do things that made me ordinary; nothing overwhelming, but different from what I imagined (I30, woman; area: animal reproduction).



Veterinarians who perceived a “calling to do” showed a central objective of performing work activities with pleasure. Two codes synthesized the emotions they experienced in the face of occupational challenges: boredom due to lack of challenges and stress due to excessive challenges. In the first case, some veterinarians experience a “calling to do” but do not find a scenario in which they can use their skills fully in their current occupation. The second case refers to those who work in a scenario with a certain lack of structure, making the challenges beyond their execution possibilities. Next, two excerpts are presented to illustrate the two emotions portrayed (boredom and stress).

I idealized a lot; I thought I would do it and it would happen, but 99% of my time is doing the same things, what makes money. The activities that give me the most pleasure are not so profitable for my business, it gives the [clinic's] owner a lot of headaches. So, I feel bored because everything is easy and not challenging (I31, male; area: clinic).

I feel stressed when I see the difficulties of my work. I like the challenge, having to study about diseases, about health issues, laws; I get excited, I always think I should dedicate more time to work because it's this kind of passionate thing. But when I see it, I can't take a vacation, a rest; I know it interferes with my marriage. My husband complains a lot, and rightly so, isn't it? (I3, woman; area: public health).

On the other hand, those who see veterinary medicine as a “calling to contribute” showed to have the goal of transforming the reality regarding animal care. As time passed, however, some noticed that this goal was not being fulfilled. Therefore, the most recurrent emotions were coded as “existential sadness/emptiness.” When realizing that, despite their performance and dedication over the years, the industry that involves the exploitation, consumption, and sale of animals remains and expands, many reported not living their life mission. Therefore, the most reported emotion was sadness, associated with a feeling that their existence as a whole represented a void, as shown in the following report.

It makes me sad, because, as much as I dedicate myself, people's conscience takes time to change. Takes time. I have this thing about wanting to change the world, and being a veterinarian was that. When it sinks in, it gives me a feeling of swimming and dying on the edge of the beach. So much effort for nothing. The pet industry, the food industry... It cannibalizes. I end up having to take care of pets with which I don't even agree with the sale. Then I feel a great emptiness, a feeling of not living my mission (I26, woman; area: clinic).

## Long-term negative consequences

What are the long-term consequences of experiencing the emotions described earlier in each of the meanings assigned to callings? During the interviews, attention was directed to this question, and distinct patterns of responses were also identified. For those in the category “calling to be,” the annoyance at not standing out enough produced the perception of what we codified as “low self-esteem.” The non-fulfillment of the veterinarians' ideal of identity produced an initial irritation and, later, a negative view of themselves. The following is an example of a veterinarian who claimed not to admire herself as a professional and perceived a problem in how she viewed herself.

Not being the vet I wish I had become, I often feel like a decimal point, a person not worthy of admiration. I don't admire myself as a professional. As a person, yes. But, professionally, my self-esteem goes downhill (I29, woman; area: clinical and surgical).

This consequence differed from that found for individuals in the category “calling to do” As explained, the interviewed veterinarians who felt a calling to perform the occupation's daily tasks were often bored by the lack of challenges or stressed from the excess of them. In the long term, the recurrent search for opportunities to carry out activities related to their profession produced “work overload.” It was common to find testimonies that suggested that these professionals experienced some guilt when they felt inclined to refuse to do a job due to tiredness. Some reported that this work overload was present not only in doing the job for which they were paid but also in their leisure time. The following excerpt illustrates this code.

In the long run, my inability to say no, the guilt I feel when I don't let go again... It's all screwing me up. I can't breathe because of overwork [...]. When it's not at the clinic, it's in my spare time, a neighbor's dog... I can't say no (I18, woman; area: clinic and surgery).

A distinct pattern was also identified in the long-term consequences for those who felt a "calling to contribute." The existential sadness/emptiness felt in the face of challenges related to changing how people deal with animals produces long-term effects coded in two ways: "fear of missing out" and "counterfactual thinking." Several interviewees reported feeling that "life is flying by," or mentioned, "I am not living what I should live." Counterfactual thinking, on the other hand, refers to spending time imagining how things could or should be in an alternative reality to the one experienced. Because they could not produce the desired contribution, interviewees reported that they reflected on the possibilities that could be explored in the past, in an alternative present, or in the future. The excerpt below presents both codes – fear of missing out and counterfactual thinking.

I live with the feeling that life is flying by and I'm not making a difference. I'm terrified of watching life go by, running through my hands. It hurts to think that I won't change anything in this world we live in, in the way animals are seen, how they are treated. I mean, mistreated, right? (I10, male; area: clinical and surgical).

## Coping strategies

The fourth and final category of analysis that made it possible to differentiate the experiences the interviewees had in overcoming the challenges of their occupational callings was that of coping strategies. Among those interviewed who see their calling as a "calling to be," low self-esteem is fought through a process of social impression management. By not becoming the professional they wanted to be, several participants reported that they sought to overcome this frustration by influencing how other people saw them. This process was reported to be experienced in personal interactions and social networks. The expression "personal marketing" was used by a large number of respondents, with the meaning of "a product that does not reflect the packaging well" (Interview 42). Thus, despite not becoming the veterinarians they would like to be and feeling their self-esteem affected, the understanding that it was necessary not to let this impression find an echo in the interpretation of other signifiers was recurrent. This can be seen in the following excerpt.

I'm still not the vet I'd like to be, but I don't think I need anyone to know. If I say I didn't win, then I really didn't. So, I use social media a lot to show that I'm good, that I have potential, to do personal marketing. If it's not true, at least you have to act like it is, for others to see it that way. It is the first step to change (I42, male; area: clinical and surgical).

Individuals used a second strategy in this group, coded as "vicarious activation" – the process of experiencing a renounced identity through other people. The most recurrent case was self-realization as a veterinarian through children, grandchildren, or nieces/nephews who decided to pursue the profession.

In turn, those who had a "calling to do," with the workload they faced due to the difficulty of denying activities they felt motivated to do, adopted two central coping strategies: job crafting and leisure crafting. While the first refers to seeking to increase pleasure at work by inserting more pleasurable activities into their work routine, the second involves performing work activities considered pleasurable during free time, regardless of whether the activity is a relevant source of income. Some veterinarians reported working in certain branches of veterinary medicine but felt a calling to work in other segments of the profession. Thus, they seek to adapt their routine using the two tactics above to alleviate the emotional burden of the volume of work they perform. The following excerpt illustrates these strategies.

My branch of veterinary medicine is inspection. I end up not getting involved with what really motivated me back then, which was the clinic, the very process of caring, operating, diagnosing. So today, sometimes I run projects here at work where I and other veterinarians with the same frustration help animals of other employees [...]. I also support friends who need it informally (I46, male; area: inspection of products of animal origin).

Finally, interviewees who felt a “calling to contribute” sought to overcome the “fear of missing out” and “counterfactual thinking” via social activism. When they were not successful in changing how people deal with animals through their work as veterinarians, several interviewees indicated to have found a space to freely express their concerns by engaging in causes such as animal adoption, environmentalism, veganism, and vegetarianism and feminism, not having to worry about jeopardizing financial subsistence. The narrative in the excerpt below illustrates that some interviewees avoid mixing activism with their paid work to avoid financial loss. For example, the interviewee below reported being against the sale of animals, but she cares for several animals in this condition at her clinic.

There, at the clinic, you can't do charity work otherwise everyone thinks that we have to work for free. Pretty complicated, that. So, you can't mix things up; I end up being more capitalist even in my work. But there's that void, right? What do I do with what I fell in love with? Back in my parents' city, I lead an NGO with my children. There, I bring out this more activist side, as a caregiver, I do more intense work on animal care, veganism (I14, woman; area: clinical and surgical).

## DISCUSSION

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The results presented show that depending on how a person perceives the calling as a veterinarian (“calling to be,” “calling to do,” or “calling to contribute”), the goals associated with the calling, the emotions experienced, the long-term effects, and coping strategies tend to be different. Thus, this study supports the idea that the notion of seeking to understand only whether or not a person has a calling is limiting. Perceiving a calling is not a monolithic and one-dimensional phenomenon, as suggested in the literature (Nunes & Felix, 2019); it has relevant nuances for a better understanding of this phenomenon, which is of fundamental importance for a complete theoretical development on the subject. Next, we present four central aspects that this study adds to the literature on occupational callings.

Firstly, the results allow us to broaden the discussion on the meanings of a calling. Several studies have been carried out for a deeper understanding of the meanings that a person can attribute to work activity (Allan et al., 2018), and one of them is work as a calling (Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Bott, 2013). However, interpreting work as a calling is a phenomenon with nuances that need further exploration. Suppose the meaning of work activities arouses certain emotions, short and long-term challenges, and demanding coping actions (Duffy et al., 2011). In that case, it is necessary to understand whether the act of interpreting work as a calling would be something unidimensional, which would lead to similar consequences, without subdivisions between types or ways of careers in a calling. The results show the opposite: the calling itself can have several meanings, which trigger different emotions, challenges, and coping strategies. Thus, this study contributes to the current state of the literature by positioning the meaning of callings as a multidimensional phenomenon, in which there are several ways to construct meaning about them, unlike what has been found so far (Duffy et al., 2018).

Second, the study expands the connection between the occupational calling literature and emotions. Traditionally, literature on emotions at work suggests that they influence how people deal with work challenges (Dong et al., 2014). When this topic is explored in the context of occupational callings, emotions associated with vitality and happiness on the positive side (Duffy et al., 2018) and stress due to the accumulation of activities on the negative side are almost always highlighted given the degree of emotional connection (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). This article offers evidence that professionals who have a calling to the same profession have different emotions in the face of challenges, which is explained by the different meanings they give to work. Thus, space is opened to discuss a wider range of emotions in the context of the occupational calling literature.

Finally, the research findings allow for a deeper understanding of the challenges experienced by workers who see their work as a calling. This study expands the discussion from the traditional literature on the subject, where concepts such as burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Spreitzer et al., 2005) and thriving are identified as long-term challenges for work as a calling. For example, although it is traditionally suggested that an occupational calling tends to exert a positive influence on a person's self-esteem (Duffy et al., 2018), this research shows that in cases where the individual experiences a "calling to be" a veterinarian, the effect may be opposite. On the other hand, the effect of work overload, often generalized as a possible shadow effect of having a calling (Duffy et al., 2013, Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), seems to be more recurrent among those who experience a "calling to do." In addition, counterfactual thinking and fear of missing out (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019) can often be experienced by those who have a "calling to contribute."

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

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This study presented some limitations to be addressed in future research. First, similarly to Schabram and Maitlis (2017), three meanings were found for the calling in veterinary medicine, which was the only occupation studied. Future studies could focus on other careers to understand what other meanings can be attributed to callings. Secondly, the qualitative delimitation of the study did not allow statistically testing of the categories of meanings of the callings as antecedents of emotions, challenges, and coping strategies. Thus, a future quantitative study is recommended to create a scale of meanings of occupational callings. Third, the three categories were presented theoretically as independent, but the meanings of the callings found in the research are not mutually exclusive. In other words, a person can have more than one interpretation of their calling – for example, having a calling "to be" and also "to do." Thus, subsequent studies may seek to understand the combined effect of different strategies on emotions, short and long-term challenges, and coping strategies adopted.

The substantive theory presented also has practical implications. The study allows professionals with an occupational calling to understand why they experience certain emotions and challenges. In addition, it enables a deeper understanding of the coping strategies to be adopted depending on the meanings attributed to the calling. For career counselors, the study provides an analytical tool that transcends unique stereotypes about how the career of a professional who feels they have a calling to an occupation develops. The categories "calling to be," "calling to do," and "calling to contribute" can be used to enable a clearer understanding of how professionals construct meanings.

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