Occupational callings: A double-edged sword for burnout and stress

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Abstract

We evaluate the bivalent relationship between perceiving a calling and burnout syndrome and occupational stress. We suggest that although callings are negatively associated with burnout and stress, they produce a positive effect on both, having the perception of paradoxical tensions as a mediator. For this purpose, we conducted a quantitative survey of 539 individuals. The results showed a direct effect, according to which the more individuals perceive an occupational calling, the smaller the symptoms of burnout and stress. We also found an opposite indirect effect: the more individuals perceive a calling, the greater the symptoms of burnout and stress caused by increased paradoxical tensions that are experienced by individuals. Our findings show the importance of problematizing the idea of occupational callings as a necessarily positive antecedent for career development.
Keywords: vocational guidance; professional development; labour; occupational stress.

Resumo

Chamados ocupacionais: uma faca de dois gumes para o burnout e o estresse. Neste estudo, avalia-se a relação bivalente entre perceber um chamado com a síndrome de *burnout* e o estresse ocupacional. Sugere-se que apesar dos chamados estarem negativamente associados com o *burnout* e o estresse, eles podem gerar um aumento nessas variáveis, por meio da percepção de tensões paradoxais. Para isto, realizou-se uma pesquisa quantitativa com 539 indivíduos. Em consonância com a literatura, os resultados apontaram que, diretamente, quanto mais os indivíduos percebem um chamado a uma ocupação, menores são os sintomas de *burnout* e de estresse. Mostrou também que, indiretamente, quanto mais os indivíduos percebem um chamado, maiores serão os sintomas de *burnout* e de estresse, provocado pelo aumento de tensões paradoxais que vivenciadas pelos indivíduos.
Palavras-chave: orientação vocacional; desenvolvimento profissional; trabalho; stress ocupacional.

Resumen

Llamamientos ocupacionales: un cuchillo de doble filo para el burnout y el estrés. En este estudio, evaluaremos la relación bivalente entre percibir una llamada con síndrome de burnout y estrés laboral. Sugerimos que aunque los llamamientos se asocian negativamente con el agotamiento y el estrés, pueden generar un aumento en estas variables, a través de la percepción de tensiones paradójicas. Para esto, se llevó a cabo una investigación cuantitativa con 539 individuos. En línea con la literatura, los resultados mostraron que directamente, mientras más individuos perciben un llamamiento a una ocupación, menores son los síntomas de agotamiento y estrés. Evidenció también, indirectamente, que cuanto más un individuo percibe un llamamiento, mayores son los síntomas de *burnout* y estrés, causados por el aumento de las tensiones paradójicas vivenciadas por los individuos.
Palabras clave: orientación vocacional; desarrollo profesional; trabajo; estrés ocupacional.

For the past two decades, people have been wanting more than material benefits from their jobs; they long for it to have meaning (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019). Thus, understanding the calling is an important step in addressing the question of how individuals extract meaning from work and, more broadly, from life (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011).

Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) defined a calling as an occupation to which an individual is attracted to pursue, expects it to be intrinsically pleasing and meaningful, and which one sees it as a central part of one's identity. Duffy, Dik, and Steger (2011) found that adults who view their career as a calling have higher levels of well-being, pleasure and occupational commitment. However, in addition to the positive aspects of having a calling, studies have also begun to document the challenges that those who are called may face (Conway, Clinton, Sturges, & Budjanovcanin, 2015; Felix & Blulm, 2020; Hall & Chandler, 2005).

In this logic, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) argued that as the calling is usually rooted in strong ideological beliefs, individuals may experience confusion and a painful tension between deeply rooted values and repeated efforts to overcome challenges. Therefore, those who have a calling may have difficulty responding to it, causing the determinants of pleasure and meaning also lead individuals to unpleasant states of stress (Berg et al., 2010), as well as work detachment, burnout and apathy (Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). These findings reveal a double-edged sword between pleasure and pain that may underlie the experiences of having and living an occupational calling (Berg et al., 2010).

Thus, in this study we will evaluate the possible ambiguous effects of perceiving occupational callings, relating it to two specific dependent variables: burnout syndrome and employee occupational stress. We suggest that although occupational callings are negatively associated with burnout syndrome and work stress, they can generate an increase in these variables by increasing paradoxical tensions. This is because perceiving a calling often activates a paradox between living meaningful work and meeting practical needs (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), and it is possible that these tensions produce an increase in burnout syndrome and occupational stress. Thus, the aim of this study is to evaluate the bivalent association between perceiving a calling with burnout syndrome and occupational stress.

This study has theoretical and practical implications. In theoretical terms, it intends to add elements to the discussion about the bivalence of occupational callings for the quality of life of individuals, and it can reduce or increase burnout and stress. More specifically, we connect the theory of paradoxical tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018) with the theory of occupational callings, seeking evidence of the existence of a bivalent association between the phenomena. In a practical way, the study presents caveats regarding the performance of career development professionals, that seem to encourage the occupational callings in individuals without reservations, without taking into account the negative effects of their perception.

Theoretical framework

Occupational Callings: The Pot of Gold

The literature on measuring and evaluating perceptions of work as a calling is growing, mainly with vocational psychologists studying the role of calling among teenagers and organizational psychologists and business researchers studying the role of calling among employed adults (Duffy et al., 2011). This expansion stems from the importance of the theme for a holistic understanding of work in the context of life, especially with regard to personal growth, career development, job satisfaction and well-being (Nunes & Felix, 2019).

In this context, although the constructs perceiving and living a calling are related, they are distinct, and this distinction places a strong emphasis on the perception, because many people who perceive a calling may not experience it through work (Duffy, Douglass, Autin, England, & Dik, 2016). In this sense, Hirschi, Keller, and Spurk (2018) found that people who perceive a calling are more likely to live it by working in jobs that offer more work resources, such as decision autonomy, importance of the task and social support. For this reason, the calling is conceptualized as a personally meaningful and pro-social occupation that an individual is attracted to pursue and which, when lived, relates to increased career commitment and increased meaning and job satisfaction (Duffy, Allan, Autin, & Douglass, 2014).

In this sense, different researches were developed in order to highlight the positive results that accompany individuals who perceive their work as a calling. A study by Beadle (2013), for example, demonstrated that traditional circus directors were able

to maintain their business for long periods, even in a period of worsening for the industry, as they had a striking work orientation that gave them pleasure and fulfillment even in the face of the challenges. In this sense, a study by Rawat and Nadavulakere (2015) with teachers from the United States revealed that in the face of complex job demands, individuals who perceived a calling were more committed to their organizations, had less emotional exhaustion and exhibited higher levels of contextual performance, adopting a coping style, that allowed them to successfully solve challenges rather than adopt a style of avoidance.

Similarly, Neubert, and Halbesleben (2015) found that the perception of a calling was positively associated with satisfaction and commitment at work, even if the occupation was not satisfactory. Also, Haney-Loehlein, McKenna, Robie, Austin, and Ecker (2015) found that individuals were more likely to have positive feelings and greater satisfaction in their work environment, acting with less conflict and considering the welfare of others.

More recently, Duffy et al. (2016) found that the existence of a calling protected workers against the effects of exhaustion and exploitation, suggesting the insertion of the calling in the workspace as a way to increase the satisfaction at work. Corroborating this trend, a study by Bott et al. (2017), with doctors, noted that the perception of the profession as a calling provided greater motivation to overcome work tasks and use skills to help others, causing them to experience joy, satisfaction, gratitude, and reward even in the midst of the predominantly complex responsibilities and responsibilities of everyday life.

Burnout Syndrome and Occupational Stress

The results of the above studies suggested that perceiving a calling is associated with a sense of well-being in life and work, reducing physical and mental exhaustion and increasing enthusiasm, commitment, pleasure, fulfillment and satisfaction (Beadle, 2013; Bott et al., 2017; Wu, Hu, & Zheng, 2019. The above findings evidence that the perception of an occupational calling has the potential to reduce symptoms of burnout syndrome and occupational stress.

What are these disorders? Burnout is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal fulfillment (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014). Emotional exhaustion corresponds to feelings of being emotionally exhausted from contact with others and is the central dimension of burnout. Depersonalization concerns a negative or excessively detached response to these people, who are the recipients of a service provision. Also, the reduction in personal fulfillment refers to a decline in feelings of competence and successful achievement in work tasks.

Schabram and Maitlis (2017) emphasize that burnout is widely understood as a cumulative condition, that is, a gradual progression of exhaustion with the demands of occupation, of cynicism about work and feelings of depersonalization towards people in the organization, which leads to low effectiveness and job performance. For Bakker et al. (2014), when burnout occurs, employee energy turns into exhaustion, involvement turns into cynicism, and effectiveness turns into ineffectiveness.

Stress is commonly perceived in terms of general physiological and psychological reactions that cause adverse mental or physical health conditions, when a person's adaptive capacities are overloaded. In this circumstance, work stress occurs when there are discrepancies between physiological demands within a workplace and employees' inability to manage or cope with them (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Tripathy (2018) pointed out that in these situations the body systems are continually aroused and elevated, causing individuals to suffer from energy and emotion fluctuations, affecting the balance and composure of personal and professional life, manifesting in symptoms such as anger, irritability, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, dizziness, shortness of breath, chest pain, among others.

Individuals who perceive a calling are more likely to look at their organization, not with cynicism or suspicion, but as an important means of perceiving their calling (Cardador & Caza, 2012). For the authors, these individuals should have more positive personal and professional relationships, demonstrating a more cooperative behavior, pro-social, supportive and mutually rewarding with co-workers. Behavior is important for well-being as it provides the resources and support you need to compensate for or recover from negative or difficult situations and events.

Bott et al. (2017) added that perceiving a calling can contribute to positive social interactions in the workplace, making individuals feel support and appreciation from colleagues in their efforts, arousing feelings of motivation, joy, gratitude and overcoming. In this scenario, for Duffy et al. (2016), perception of a calling does not increase the likelihood that the individual will

be vulnerable to burnout and reduced satisfaction, but can buffer these negative experiences, arousing feelings against exhaustion, lack of fulfillment and stress.

In all, in line with Creed, Rogers, Praskova, and Searle (2014), we suggest that perceived occupational calling reduces both burnout syndrome and occupational stress symptoms. Specifically, we assume from the literature review that:

Hypothesis 1: Occupational calling perception negatively influences burnout syndrome.

Hypothesis 2: The perception of occupational calling negatively influences occupational stress.

Occupational Calling: The Other Side of the Coin

However, pioneering research by Cardador and Caza (2012) already evidenced that the perception of a calling could have positive and negative effects in the personal and work relationships of individuals. For the authors, people who had a calling could be healthily or unhealthily impacted inside and outside the organization. Since then, debates over the potential dark side of a calling have gained even more emphasis, especially after the clear distinction in the literature between perceiving and living an occupational calling (Duffy et al., 2016).

Often the structures and practices of organizations are unable to respond to the callings of individuals (Berg et al., 2010). For the authors, misalignment between system support and individual expectations has potentially significant implications for employees overall, causing them to have unpleasant experiences of perceiving unanswered callings. Conway et al. (2015) went further and argued that people themselves may not feel competent to develop their calling. It lowers the positive effects of motivation, affecting the welfare of individuals negatively.

From this point of view, research was conducted to search for evidence of possible negative effects that may accompany a calling. A study conducted by Gazica and Spector (2015), for example, found that those without perception of a calling reported better life-related outcomes, compared to those who perceived a calling but did not live it. For the authors, having a calling is only a benefit if it is fulfilled, otherwise it may be a loss, increasing the physical and psychological tension of individuals. Also, Cardador and Caza (2012) had already found that negative and exhausted relationships, accompanied by a rigid working identity, which does not allow

personal and professional adaptation, can lead individuals on a difficult path in the search for the calling, with high sacrifice, personal tension and exhaustion, resulting in reduced subjective well-being.

Schabram and Maitlis (2017), argued most recently when conducting a study with animal shelter workers, that callings are permeated with passion and meaning, which causes people to have especially intense emotional reactions to the problems they encounter. As calling perception is often rooted in strong ideological beliefs, individuals may experience confusion and a painful tension between deeply rooted values and the realities of work.

Tensions denote competing elements such as contradictory demands, objectives, interests and perspectives (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Organizations host a wide variety of these tensions, and propose that the scarcity of resources, both internal (psychological support, intelligence, self-esteem, skills and motivation) as external (time and financial), increases the likelihood of employees experiencing paradoxical tensions in the workplace. These results suggest that perceiving a calling may be related to negative outcomes for some individuals, with increased physical and psychological tension. Thus, we assume from the literature review that:

Hypothesis 3: The perception of occupational calling positively influences the experience of paradoxical tensions.

The Role of Paradoxical Tensions: A Double-edged Sword

Paradoxical tensions arise as contemporary organizations become increasingly accelerated, global, and complex, incorporating distinct institutional logics or multiple organizational identities, to meet interested parties with competing and equally valid demands (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Global competition requires, for example, that organizations innovate, improve financial and social performance and meet global and local needs (Felix, 2020; Lewis & Smith, 2014). This environment of persistent conflicting interests and perspectives is flooding organizations with paradoxical tensions, intensifying the stress of limited time, human and financial resources and causing ever-increasing and ever-increasing competitive demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018).

Smith and Lewis (2011) defined the paradox as contradictory but interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time. Johnson (2014)

illustrated the phenomenon as two poles surrounded by an energy system in the form of an infinite loop. For the author, when energy surrounds each pole, it holds them together, reflecting the reality that they form a set and need each other over time, always being connected, and when energy crosses between the poles, it separates them, reflecting the reality that they never collapse, being always differentiated, thus generating the experience of a tension.

Tension is insoluble and inevitable, will always exist and we must learn to deal with it, and we went wrong trying to choose one of the poles as a solution to a problem because they are inseparable (Johnson, 2014). Lewis and Smith (2014) reinforce this view by stating that the central premise is not problem solving through adjustment but coexistence, accepting tension as the ubiquitous, inherent and persistent force in organizations that challenges and stimulates long-term success. Schad et al. (2016) understood that while individuals may experience tensions between opposing elements, there is interdependence between them, suggesting that the paradox need not be resolved but embraced and transcended.

Lewis and Smith (2014) saw these tensions as a double-edged sword, potentially triggering a strategic response amid anxiety, fear and discomfort, stimulating creativity, but also triggering a defensive response amid preferred priorities, skills and routines, increasing stress and counter defenses. Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) stress that tensions can fuel virtuous cycles that unleash creativity and enable long-term resilience and sustainability, but they can also stimulate vicious cycles that threaten our sense of certainty and order, challenge our egos and provoke defensive responses that paralyze action or promote intractable conflicts.

In this sense, Schad et al. (2016) argued that paradoxical tensions can trigger a myriad of potentially constructive or destructive responses. On the negative side, paradoxes promote anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity, leaving individuals feeling threatened and defensive. In a study on burnout and workplace engagement, Bakker et al. (2014) found that role conflict, working hours and ambiguity of tasks were important predictors of burnout, especially the components exhaustion and cynicism. These results suggested that experiencing stress may be related to negative results for some individuals, with increased exhaustion, depersonalization, stress and less personal fulfillment. Thus, we assume from the literature review that:

Hypothesis 4: The experience of stress positively influences (a) burnout syndrome and (b) occupational stress.

Theoretical Model

Recent studies of occupational calling theory have evaluated both the positive outcomes that accompany individuals who perceive a calling, as reducing symptoms of burnout and stress syndrome (Beadle, 2013; Bott et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2016; Haney-Loehlein et al., 2015; Neubert & Halbesleben, 2015; Rawat & Nadavulakere, 2015). They also examined the possible negative outcomes, such as the increased experience of paradoxical tensions (Cardador & Caza, 2012; Conway et al., 2015; Duffy et al., 2016; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017).

In turn, concomitantly, paradoxical stress current theorists have evaluated their positive effects, as well as the negatives that affect employees in organizations, such as increased exhaustion, stress, depersonalization, and less personal fulfillment (Bakker et al., 2014; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Schad et al., 2016).

Therefore, the proposed model connects these two lines of research, occupational callings and paradoxical tensions, quantitatively exploring the bivalent nature of perceiving a calling to symptoms of burnout syndrome and occupational stress, taking the experiences of paradoxical tensions as an independent mediating variable.

Methods

This study aims to evaluate the bivalent association between perceiving a calling with burnout syndrome and occupational stress symptoms, having the experiences of paradoxical tensions as a mediating variable. For this purpose, we performed a descriptive quantitative cross-sectional research with primary data.

For data collection, we prepared a questionnaire containing 41 questions, extracted from constructs validated by the Brazilian literature (for example Faro, 2015; Lima, Gomes, & Barbosa, 2020; Luft, Sanches, Mazo, & Andrade, 2007; Schuster & Dias, 2018). All constructs are rooted in a positivist/functionalist epistemological approach. We measured the perception of occupational callings using 4 items on a scale developed by Dik, Eldridge, Steger, and Duffy (2012), the burnout syndrome was measured using 16 statements from a scale developed by Demerouti, Mostert, and Bakker (2010), work stress was assessed using 14 items on a

scale designed by Cohen et al. (1983) and the experience of paradoxical tensions was measured by a scale by Miron-Spektor et al. (2018), containing 7 items. The original English sentences of the constructs were translated into Portuguese and submitted to the analysis of experts who validated the translation.

All questions used 5-point Likert scales, with response categories ranging from 1 (Not true for me) a 5 (Totally true for me) for the perception of occupational calling; from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (I totally agree) for burnout syndrome and experience of paradoxical tensions and; 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often) for work stress. Finally, 10 questions were devoted to collecting demographic information on gender, age, marital status, education, family income, working hours, length of professional experience, position and type and size of organization, to characterize respondents and identify possible demographic bias.

To evaluate the data collection instrument, we pretested the questionnaire with 8 people, to check for possible misunderstandings. After the pretest, only spelling corrections indicated by the respondents were performed. Therefore, we considered the questionnaire as validated and able to be applied. Following, a link from the Google Docs online platform was used to spread the form in e-mails, social networking and instant messaging app. All research procedures were in line with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of FBS. An informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

We applied the questionnaire in January and February 2019, reaching 539 answers. From the collected data, it was possible to identify that the public of this research was formed, mostly by women (54.2%), with an average age of 37 years and married or marital status (57.3%), having an MBA / Specialization (35.4%) or a Master's degree (33.6%) as the last academic formation. In addition, the sample reported having a family income above 8 minimum wages – BRL 7,984.00 (40.3%), have a 40-hour work week (82.6%), with more than five years of work experience (74.6%), acting in operational (39.3%) or tactical (28.4%) function of large public bodies (93.1%) (53.2%), i.e., with more than 499 employees. The following sectors were represented in the study: construction (18.3%), technology (14.2%), entertainment (13%), healthcare (10.2%), consumer products (8.7%), advertising (6.2%), transportation (6.2%), manufacturing (5.9%), banking (5.7%), mining (4.5%), hospitality (4.1%) and education (3%). The

companies in which the participants work are diverse: 47.2% of them have more than 1000 employees, 42.3% have between 100 and 999 employees and 10.5% have 99 or less employees.

For data analysis, the proposed structural model was validated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis, verifying the matrix of factor loadings, i.e., evaluation of the statistical significance of factor loadings and convergence of variables for their own construct; convergent validity, which evaluates the consistency and convergence of the constructs, performed by studying the average variance extracted and composite reliability; and discriminant validity, which analyzes the unique characteristic of each construct and differences in relation to the other, comparing the square roots of the average variance extracted for each construct with the correlations between them.

Then, we evaluated the model fit indices to determine the adequacy of the proposed structural model. And, finally, we performed the hypothesis test of this study, using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), with estimation by the Partial Least Squares technique (PLS), which allows identifying factors (linear combinations) of the independent variables X that best model the dependent variables Y.

The validation starting point of the proposed measurement model corresponded to the verification of the presence of convergent validity of the statements of each construct, to check whether the indicators shared a high proportion of common variance, to confirm whether each scale correlated with other known measurements of the concept (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2009).

It started, therefore, with the calculation of the factor loadings referring to the research assertions. After successive measurements we found that the variables: OC3 (Perception of Occupational Calling); BS1, BS3, BS4, BS7, BS8, BS10, BS11, BS13, BS15 and BS16 (Burnout Syndrome); WS5, WS6, WS9, WS10, WS12 and WS13 (Work Stress) and ET1 (Experiences of Tension) had factor loadings lower than 0.50, below what was recommended by Hair et al. (2009) and were thus excluded from the confirmatory factor analysis.

In addition, despite burnout scales (Demerouti et al., 2010) and stress (Cohen, et al., 1983) have presented in their studies, respectively, a reliability factor of 0.79 and 0.86, the results of our analysis showed that several indicators of these two constructs had a low factor loadings, and it was necessary to exclude them.

However, 6 burnout indicators and 8 stress indicators still remained, enough to test the two constructs. After correction, the fit of the measurement model was good, with significant factor matrix loadings reaching values above 0.50, as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Factor Loadings

Latent Variables	Factor Loadings
OC1	0.861
OC2	0.942
OC4	0.916
BS2	0.692
BS5	0.598
BS6	0.756
BS9	0.712
BS12	0.753
BS14	0.730
WS1	0.717
WS2	0.785
WS3	0.825
WS4	0.757
WS7	0,645
WS8	0.641
WS11	0.776
WS14	0.719
ET2	0.678
ET3	0.762
ET4	0.784
ET5	0.771
ET6	0.771
ET7	0.699

Source: Research data.

To complete the verification of the convergent validity of the indicators of each construct, we evaluated the Average Variance Extracted indices (AVE), of Composite Reliability scores (CR), from Cronbach's Alpha and Spearman's Correlation (rho_A). The results of the Average Variance Extracted showed values equal to or greater than 0.5, meeting the criteria proposed by Hair et al., (2009), thus suggesting an appropriate convergence. The composite Reliability, in turn, exceeded the lower limit of 0.70 as recommended by Hair et al., (2009), confirming the existence of internal consistency of the variables and the acceptability of the constructs.

Another reliability measure that assesses the consistency of the scale, Cronbach's alpha, also showed results above the 0.7 threshold, making the constructs statistically accepted. Finally, the Spearman's correlation (rho_A) presented values close to 1, confirming the relationship between the variables. These results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. AVE, CR, Cronbach and Spearman Indexes

Latent Constructs	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)	Cronbach's Alpha	Spearman correlation (rho_A)
Occupational Calling (OC)	0.823	0.933	0.895	0.959
Burnout syndrome (BS)	0.502	0.858	0.801	0.807
Work Stress (WS)	0.541	0.851	0.746	0.883
Experiences of Tension (ET)	0.556	0.882	0.843	0.858

Source: Research data.

Then, we examined the presence of discriminant validity of the model constructs, to ensure that each scale used is truly different from the others, highlighting its peculiarity in capturing phenomena that other measures cannot (Hair et. al., 2009). Table 3 shows that the discriminant validity of the model is sustained, because the values of the average variances extracted for each construct are larger than the values of the shared variances between them.

Table 3. *Discriminant Validity*

Latent Constructs	Occupational Calling (OC)	Burnout syndrome (BS)	Work Stress (WS)	Experiences of Tension (ET)
Occupational Calling (OC)	0.907			
Burnout syndrome (BS)	-0.193	0.709		
Work Stress (WS)	-0.094	0.604	0.736	
Experiences of Tension (ET)	-0.018	0.417	0.428	0.745

Source: Research data.

Results

After confirmation of the structural model through convergent and discriminant validity, we perform the hypothesis test to show which constructs

interrelate and how this interrelation happens (Hair et al., 2009), from the magnitude and significance of the estimated path coefficients, as shown in Figure 1.

Starting the data analysis, in the present study it was found that the perception of occupational calling is negatively associated with both burnout syndrome (path coefficient: -0.193; $p < 0.05$), as for the stress at work (path coefficient: -0.187; $p < 0.05$), supporting respectively the predicted hypotheses H1 and H2.

Hypothesis H3, which analyzed the positive association of occupational calling perception with the experience of paradoxical tensions, was also supported (path coefficient: 0.275; $p < 0.05$), that is, for this sample, the higher the perception of calling, the greater the experience of paradoxical career tensions.

In turn, hypothesis H4 which analyzed the positive influence of the experience of paradoxical tensions on burnout syndrome (path coefficient: 0.415; $p < 0.05$) and occupational stress (path coefficient: 0.431; $p < 0.05$) was also supported. Thus, it can be stated that, for this sample, the greater the experience of paradoxical tensions, the greater the manifestation of burnout syndrome and occupational stress among employees.
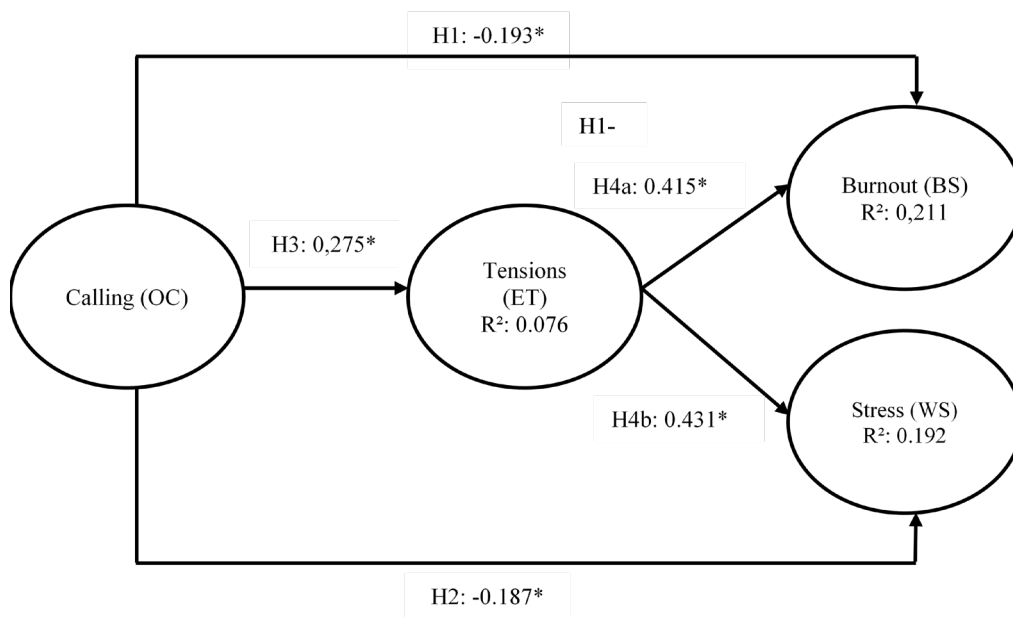

Figure 1. Estimated Model of Structural Equations.

Note. *p < 0.05

Source: Research data

Discussion

The main objective of this study was to explore the bivalent association between perceiving a calling with symptoms of burnout syndrome and occupational stress. Regarding our formal hypotheses, the first two supported the claim that perceiving an occupational calling is related to both a minor symptom of burnout syndrome (H1) as occupational stress (H2). This is consistent with previous research that found positive results that followed individuals who perceived their work as a calling, such as increased sense of pleasure and personal fulfillment (Beadle, 2013), greater commitment to organization and less emotional exhaustion (Neubert & Halbesleben, 2015; Rawat & Nadavulakere, 2015), greater positive feeling and satisfaction in their work environment (Duffy et al., 2016; Haney-Loehlein et al., 2015) and greater motivation, gratitude and reward (Bott et al., 2017). The preponderance of evidence, coupled with the findings of our study, suggests that viewing career as a calling tends to bring benefits to individuals' lives, especially with regard to emotional well-being, personal fulfillment and satisfaction in the workplace (Creed et al., 2014).

Considering the possible negative effects that may accompany a calling, we test their relationship to an increase in the experience of paradoxical tensions (H3), which proved significant and highlighted evidence of the potential dark side of a perceived calling. This finding is consistent with previous research linking the calling to unfavorable outcomes for some individuals, as the increase of physical and psychological tension (Gazica & Spector, 2015; Hall & Chandler, 2005), greater personal tension and burnout, with a reduction in subjective well-being (Cardador & Caza, 2012) and a sense of confusion and tension between the values and the realities of work (Berg et al., 2010; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Steger et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2019). This result reinforces the bivalent nature of the phenomenon and contributes a poorly addressed literature, paradoxical tensions, which can be triggered by misalignment between living meaningful work and meeting everyday practical needs, in the face of resource scarcity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), becoming a counterintuitive challenge that not everyone can be prepared to face.

In turn, strong links were also found that supported the correlation between the experience of paradoxical tensions and the increase in burnout symptoms (H4a) and occupational stress (H4b). As discussed earlier, the literature supports this finding, suggesting that the experience of stress may be related to negative outcomes for some individuals, as increased exhaustion and cynicism (Bakker et al., 2014), anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity (Schad et al., 2016), as well as stress and counter defenses (Lewis & Smith, 2014). This finding supports our assumption that after including a link between calling perception and stress and burnout syndrome, perceiving a calling no longer has only a significant direct and negative relationship to these phenomena, but also has a significant indirect and positive influence on them. This indirect relationship between burnout and stress, mediated by paradoxical tension, are new discoveries that fit the current understanding of the calling, that only when experienced is it related to increased career commitment, meaning and job satisfaction (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007).

Final considerations

This study aimed to analyze the bivalent association between perceiving a calling with the symptoms of burnout syndrome and occupational stress. The results indicated that, directly, the more individuals perceive callings to an occupation, the lower the symptoms of exhaustion, depersonalization and dissatisfaction, characteristics of burnout syndrome, as well as lower symptoms of occupational stress. In addition, the findings also indicated that indirectly, the more the individual perceives a calling, the greater the symptoms of burnout syndrome and occupational stress, caused by the increase in paradoxical tensions that is activated in individuals who perceive a calling. Such result can be considered counterintuitive and corroborates the authors' understanding as Berg et al. (2010) who saw the experience of having an occupational calling as a double-edged sword between pleasure and pain.

This result can also be interpreted under the light of the Brazilian context. Most of the literature on callings were developed in the context of developed countries, where individual and contextual resources for career development are more available than in emerging economies, such as Brazil (Felix & Cavazotte, 2019). The bivalent relationship between perceiving a calling, burnout and stress, due to the meditation effect through the experience of tensions, can be interpreted as a result of the scarcity of resources that individuals have for developing their careers in Brazil (Felix & Blulm, 2020; Nunes & Felix, 2019).

Based on these results, the present study allowed us to make theoretical contributions to the literature of calling, adding evidence to the discussion of the phenomenon's bivalence for individuals' quality of life, as a positive and negative influencer of burnout and stress, connecting to paradoxical stress theory as a mediating variable.

In terms of managerial implications, the results show that negative effects are also present for those who perceive the callings, with a similar magnitude of positive path, so depending on the profile and context people can feel better without this perception. Thus, our results may inspire professionals to enhance career and personal satisfaction and well-being, also taking care to alleviate possible experiences of tensions inherent in the organizational life, developing the ability to deal with such tensions in a balanced and satisfactory way. The results also allow a reflection on the work of career development professionals, such as coaches, for example, whether or not to encourage calling in individuals, as the effects are equivalent to one another.

The present study has limitations that can be explored in future studies. First, this study is cross-sectional, excluding claims of causality. It would be

interesting to evaluate how this relationship would occur through a longitudinal cross-sectional survey. Second, we collected online data, which may cause selection bias due to who participated in the study. Third, the research did not focus on the geographical situation of the researched universe, since in our country there are regions with different socioeconomic characteristics, it would be appropriate to replicate the study in different regions. Fourth, each measuring instrument carries limitations on the social and temporal context in which it was developed. As the calling is a process in continuous evolution, it is appropriate to readjust the scale by Dik et al. (2012), to include the new discoveries of the phenomenon and reach different groups.

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