

# **Called to precarious work The case of German health care workers in times of a global pandemic**

Wolfgang Bichler-Riedl - University of Kassel

Stefan Gold - University of Kassel

Research has yielded ambivalent outcomes regarding vocational calling (Duffy et al., 2018). A central discussion revolves around the “dark side of calling” (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009), when calling makes employees more seducible to being exploited, e.g., working long hours at the expense of health, family life, and general well-being (Anastasiadis and Zeyen, 2021). So far, this debate has looked at vocational calling as a concept, which is generally applicable to all kinds of prosocial occupations. In this paper, we assume that vocational calling and its effects differ substantially between standard and precarious work (Campbell and Price, 2016) in times of individual and/or collective hardship or crises. We ask as research question: How can a vocational calling be characterized in times of severe hardship and how does it interact with important occupational outcomes such as turnover intention and quality of care? We have applied a qualitative exploratory research design based on qualitative interviews with German health care workers during the SARS-CoV-2-pandemic collected since February 2021. Preliminary results of our deductive-inductive analysis following Gioia and qualitative pattern-matching techniques as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) indicate that calling itself keeps workers “stuck” in non-satisfying working conditions. This results in workers escalating their commitment towards their work, while the quality of care suffers. Workers appear being unable to improve their working situation by themselves; for instance, many did not participate in a strike due to concerns of “abandoning” their patients, even though all admitted that the current conditions prevent the care they would like to give. We thus argue that actual working behavior in times of hardship strongly contradicts the original content of living out a calling and ultimately call for the responsibility of employers (or external stakeholders) to act for their called employees. Our research contributes to the body of knowledge on precarious work, vocational calling and provides first evidence for mechanisms of escalating commitment towards an occupation. It aims for a more nuanced perspective on vocational calling today that considers more explicitly working conditions and individual as well as collective hardships. We conclude by formulating implications for business practice and policymakers.