

# Beliefs about work, & beliefs about groupwork: Exploring the relationship

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## **Abstract**

Smrt & Karau's (2011) finding that the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) influences individual behaviour towards groups, emphasized that individuals who have a stronger PWE are less likely to socially loaf. This note aims to contribute to this research by exploring the influence which a key component of the PWE, the vocation, has on individual beliefs about groupwork. An online questionnaire based on Wrzesniewski et al.'s (1997) research on personal relationships to work and Karau & Elsaid's (2009) research on beliefs about groupwork was deployed amongst a cohort of business undergraduates at an Irish university. It was hypothesized that students who sought a 'vocational' relationship to their work would harbour more positive dispositions to groupwork than students who sought 'jobs' or 'careers'. The results refuted this hypothesis. Possible explanations for this are considered, limitations of the study are discussed and avenues for future research are signposted.

**Keywords:** Vocation, Beliefs, Groupwork, Work Ethic.

Smrt & Karau (2011) have drawn attention to how the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) influences the behaviour of individuals towards groups they are members of. Specifically, they reported that individuals who demonstrated a personality type strongly influenced by the PWE were less likely to socially loaf (Latane, Williams, & Harris, 1979) in groups. Smrt & Karau's research was the first to study this relationship as the majority of existing research on social loafing tends to emphasise situational and environmental influences rather than personality (Karau & Williams, 2001), and found that the presence of the PWE was negatively associated with social loafing in groups. Smrt & Karau's (2011) finding signposted additional research avenues which 'could address potential antecedence or moderators of PWE and social loafing, such as educational background, family upbringing, or beliefs about the value of specific tasks or work environments' (p. 6). This brief research report aims to contribute to the latter avenue of potential research identified by Smrt & Karau by reporting on the relationship between student beliefs about work and the value of groupwork in order to ascertain if there is a relationship between the two areas. It does this by exploring how identification and engagement with a key component of Weber's (1930/1992) description of the PWE, the vocation, influences individual beliefs about the value of working in groups.

## Relevant Prior Research

### Protestant Work Ethic and Vocational Beliefs

Smrt & Karau (2011) adopt Beit-Hallahmi's (1979) definition of PWE as 'an orientation toward work which emphasizes dedication to hard work, deferment of immediate rewards, conservation of resources, the saving of surplus wealth, and the avoidance of idleness and waste in any form' (p. 263). Weber differentiated Luther's version of the calling from non-protestant understandings of vocation as something that had to be lived out through participation in worldly affairs. The PWE requires individuals to find and live their calling: 'This it was which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance... The only way of living acceptably to God was not surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling' (Weber, 1930/1992 p. 40).

Furnham (1990) provides a detailed account of how thinking about one's work as a vocation has impacted individuals, organisations and societies, and the consideration of one's occupation as vocation continues to be a fertile field of research interest. Thinking about one's work as 'vocation' (as opposed to a 'job', a 'profession' or a 'career') is a significant nuance which impacts on a wide range of areas such as career choice (Dik, Eldridge, & Duffy, 2009; Savickas **et al.**, 2009), motivation (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Huppertz, 2010), occupational decision-making (Laker & Laker, 2007), ethical and spiritual development (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; MacIntyre, 1979; Thompson & Miller-Perrin, 2008), job satisfaction (Rafferty & Griffin, 2009), commitment to a profession (Hartnett & Kline, 2005), enhanced feelings of empowerment (Grier-Reed & Skaar, 2010) and meaningfulness (Dik & Duffy, 2009), as well as mental health (Treadgold, 1999; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) and general well-being (Schulenberg, Vondracek, & Crouter, 1984).

Research on how thinking about one's future or present occupation influences attitudes to groupwork is less prevalent in the research literature, but some of the key contributions to work and group psychology are unpacked in the section below.

### **Beliefs about Work & Groupwork**

Karau & Elsaid's (2009) research on beliefs about groupwork summarized existing research which illustrated that such beliefs had a strong influence on how groupwork is understood and valued by individuals and organizations. Their development of the 'Beliefs About Groups' (BAG) scale demonstrated the existence of a broad range of beliefs about groupwork which individuals may possess. Karau & Elsaid also signposted opportunities for further research which could 'proceed to examine the origins and consequences of these beliefs' (p. 11). Beliefs about the value of groupwork have been found to be highly influential in determining the behaviour of individuals when working in group scenarios (Steven J. Karau & Williams, 1993). A heretofore unexplored research area has been the relationship between an individual's attitude to working in groups with their beliefs about the type of personal engagement they wish to have with the work they do in the future. Nederveen Pieterse **et al.** (2011) have demonstrated that diversity amongst group members in relation to their individual goals can have a significant negative impact on the performance of groups.

When these research findings are considered together, it is suggested that individual beliefs about work in general correlate with beliefs about working in groups. This brief report aims to test this suggestion in relation to the extent which a group of business students' beliefs about work correlated with their beliefs about the value of groupwork. If students desire to

find work that is their calling and which provides meaning to their lives in general, rather than working solely for economic gain, it was hypothesized that their attitude to groupwork would be more positive than those who did not share this occupational orientation.

### **The Current Research**

Weber described the calling as ‘an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity, no matter in what it consists’ (1930/1992 p. 19). This implies that if an individual seeks out work which is a vocation, rather than another form of occupational relationship, that their attitude to groupwork will be stronger than in more self-oriented forms of work-relationship, such as jobs or careers. Moreover, Weber emphasized how the PWE diverts individuals away from work that serves the self, towards work that benefits and serves others and ‘makes labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him’ (p. 64).

This is not to say that vocations are explicitly aligned to religiosity. Many of the recent contributions to the research literature on vocational ideation point out that such inclinations can stem from religious or secular motives (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Thinking of one’s work as calling or vocation from a secular perspective, carries with it the same inclination to do work that benefits others through a service-based collectivist perspective as callings which stem from a religious perspective. Calling and vocation have been differentiated from other relationships which an individual might have with their work identity by Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz (1997). Individuals who do not have callings, but instead seek to do work solely for economic reward demonstrate that they have a ‘job’-based orientation to the work that they do, or aspire to do. Individuals who seek more than economic gain by advancing through organizational or

occupational structures and achieving recognition and esteem are judged to have 'career'-based orientations. Because 'jobs' and 'careers' are based on individuals achieving rewards for themselves, and not serving other people, it was hypothesized that the beliefs about the value of group work of individuals demonstrating 'job' or 'career' orientations would be more negative than those who are more vocationally oriented.

## **Methods**

A questionnaire based on Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz's (1997) research on people's relationship to their work and Karau & Elsaid's (2009) research on beliefs about groupwork was deployed amongst a group of 266 final year undergraduate students taking a business module at an Irish university. The intention of using elements of both these instruments was to identify students who ideated seeking work as vocations, career or jobs and to determine if there were significant aggregate differences in each of these group's beliefs about groupwork. 249 respondents completed the questionnaire and consented to their data being used for this research. Of the respondents, 59% were female with a mean age of 21.7 years (range 18-58). The vast majority of the respondents were Irish nationals (over 93%). The second largest grouping was students from other EU states (4.8%) with the remaining respondents identifying as North American, Eastern European, Asian or African. 74.7% of respondents indicated that they had no, or less than one year of, full-time work experience prior to taking the survey; 18.1% had between 1 and 5 years work experience; 2.8% had over 6 but less than 10 years experience; 2.8% had between 11 and 20 years work experience, and; 1.6% of respondents reporting having over 20 years work experience.

As with Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), respondents were presented with three short paragraphs describing job, career and calling and asked about the extent to which they identified with

each on a scale ranging from ‘very much like me’, ‘somewhat like me’, ‘a little like me’, or ‘not at all like me’. Following the approach used by the above researchers to categorize their results, respondents who did not rate all sections or who rated two more of the paragraphs as being equally like them ( $n = 45$ ) were not included in the analysis of correlations, but were included in the general report in this section. For the purpose of this research, only respondents who clearly identified themselves as having a strong level of identification through stating that each category was ‘very much like me’ or ‘somewhat like me’ with each of the job, career, calling categories were included in the following analysis ( $n = 205$ ). Unlike (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), responses were not evenly distributed across each category and possible reasons for this are explored in the discussion section. 76.6% of respondents fell clearly into the category of career; 17.1% identified as having vocations, and; 6.3% indicated that they had a ‘job’-related orientation to their work. Descriptive information relative to each of these fields is reported in Table 1.

Table 1

*Descriptive characteristics of Respondents Viewing Work as Job, Career, or Calling*

		<b>Job (<math>n = 13</math>)</b>	<b>Career (<math>n = 157</math>)</b>	<b>Calling (<math>n = 35</math>)</b>
Gender	Male	46.2%	59.2%	65.7%
	Female	53.8%	40.8%	34.3%
Nationality	Irish	92.3%	94.3%	88.6%
	Non-Irish	7.7%	5.7%	11.4%
Age	Average	21.5	21.3	22.5
	Range	19-33	18-58	18-54
Amount of full-	None or less	61.5%	75.8%	77.1%



time work experience	than one year			
	1 – 5 years	30.8%	17.8%	17.1%
	6 – 10 years	7.7%	1.9%	0%
	11 – 20 years	0%	3.8%	0%
	Over 20 years	0%	6%	5.7%

The questionnaire also asked respondents to identify their level of agreement with 5 statements about their experiences, and beliefs, regarding groupwork in relation to their occupational and academic preferences on a scale which ranged as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree, to; 5 = Agree. As the survey was designed with the intention of relating beliefs about work to beliefs about groupwork, Karau & Elsaid's (2009) BAG instrument was not applied in its entirety, but the statements in the questionnaire related to their four main factors: 'group preferences' (the preference for working in a group rather than working alone); 'effort beliefs' (the extent to which one believes that other members of the group can be relied on to work on group tasks); 'negative performance beliefs' (the belief that the outcome of group performance are generally low in quality), and: 'positive performance beliefs' (the belief that individual work is not as effective as group work). The five statements which respondents were asked to indicate levels of agreement with were as follows:

1. My experiences working on group projects in the past have been positive
2. I learn better when I study on my own
3. I work better when I am part of a team
4. I want to work in a field where I will work closely with others
5. I believe I achieve more when I am not reliant on other people.

Mean scores relative to each field are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

*Overall Mean Answer Scores for Questions about Groupwork (n = 249)*

	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean Agreement</b>
1	My experiences working on group projects in the past have been positive	3.29
2	I learn better when I study on my own	3.86
3	I work better when I am part of a team	3.11
4	I want to work in a field where I will work closely with others	3.51
5	I believe I achieve more when I am not reliant on other people	3.72

Although these result fall generally in the mid-range, it is interesting to note a general tendency, particularly in the stronger average levels of agreement demonstrated in the answers to question 2 and 5, towards a belief that groupwork results in lower levels of individual performance in relation to learning and individual achievement.

## **Results**

Having populated the occupational orientation categories, it was then possible to compare the means obtained for each of these in relation to five questions about groupwork and these results are reported for each category in Table 3.

Table 3

*Mean Answer Scores for Questions about Groupwork for Respondents Who Viewed Work as Job, Career, or Calling*

	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Job (Mean Agreement)</b>	<b>Career (Mean Agreement)</b>	<b>Calling (Mean Agreement)</b>
1	My experiences working on group projects in the past have been positive	3.5	3.2	3.4
2	I learn better when I study on my own	3.5	3.9	3.8
3	I work better when I am part of a team	3.3	3.05	3.17
4	I want to work in a field where I will work closely with others	3.8	3.42	3.7
5	I believe I achieve more when I am not reliant on other people	3.2	3.8	3.7

These results clearly refute that hypothesis that having a vocational relationship to one's occupational identity is underscored by a positive attitude to groupwork. Across all five of the questions agreement was highest amongst the respondents in the 'job' category in relation to group preferences and effort beliefs (question 3), negative performance beliefs (questions 2

and 5) and positive performance beliefs (questions 1 and 4). It is perhaps not surprising that agreement with all of the above was lower for respondents in career category, which expressly advocates a relationship to one's work which is based primarily on personal advancement and self-esteem. It is interesting, however, that although respondents in the vocation category had similar agreement rates in relation to negative performance beliefs, that their scores were closer to the job category in relation to positive performance beliefs. The most striking outcome of this analysis, however, is that respondents in the job category had, in their mean answer scores to each question, demonstrated a slightly more positive attitude to groupwork than those in the career and vocation category. Some possible explanation for this is offered in the discussion section.

### **Discussion.**

This is a brief research report and is important to highlight its many limitations. Firstly, it was undertaken amongst a group of final year undergraduate students at an Irish university, and the vast majority of the respondents were Irish nationals. It would be interesting to see if these results were replicated in a similar study undertaken at another national locale, with greater levels of respondent diversity. The locale of this research is not only important for cultural reasons; during the time-period when this research was undertaken the Irish economy was under severe pressure which had resulted in an extremely tight labour market which many of the respondents would soon enter. This may have skewed many of the answers to self-preservation, rather than self-actualization, and respondents may have identified themselves as desiring careers out of necessity, rather than orientation.

Secondly, significant concern has been recently been raised about the dominant mode of career counselling which is given to students at pre-university levels (Savickas et al., 2009), which in the Irish context has been accused of leading to high levels of student attrition and

disengagement from learning (Donnelly, 2011). Because the 'career-paradigm' model of occupational counselling has been dominant for so long, it can often be difficult for students to differentiate between careers and callings. For students who are introduced to occupational counselling through a career lens, it might be the case that the stress on individual attainment has led to a de-prioritization of the value of groupwork, despite the ongoing organizational need for effective team-workers. It is interesting to note that younger respondents, with less exposure to full-time work tended to state a career-centred relationship to work, rather than that of vocation. As vocations are socially, rather than individually-oriented, a question remains as to whether respondents who stressed a vocational preference have a genuine engagement with the concept of service to others or if they seek a vocation solely for the personal value that it would create for them. Qualitative research with groups of students on how they define and understand that concept of vocation might generate some working theories in this regard.

In order to get a deeper picture of how occupational preferences influence beliefs about groupwork, the application of the entire BAG instrument (Karau and Elsaid, 2009) with a larger group of respondents at various stages of university studies could also provide additional data that might better explain why each occupational preference tends to display different attitudes to groupwork.

The benefits for having a vocational orientation have been widely stated in the research literature, but usually in terms of advantages they provide to the individual. However, organizations require people with positive dispositions to groupwork: 'Because collective work settings are so pervasive and indispensable, it is important to determine which factors motivate and demotivate individuals within these collective contexts' (Karau & Williams, 1993 p. 681). If the findings of this brief research report are found to be more generalizable, could it be that 'job'-oriented individuals offer a greater practical utility to contemporary

team-based workplaces than those who seek out individual career paths or endeavour to discover their vocation? The findings of this research demonstrate that people who think about their work as 'jobs', rather than 'careers' or 'vocations', tend to hold more positive beliefs about the value of groupworking; further research is required to demonstrate if this finding is more widely applicable, but also *why* this might be the case.

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