

Introduction

Contributions to the Discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship

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Positive organizational scholarship is the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. Positive refers to the elevating processes and outcomes in organizations. Organizational refers to the interpersonal and structural dynamics activated in and through organizations, specifically taking into account the context in which positive phenomena occur. Scholarship refers to the scientific, theoretically derived, and rigorous investigation of that which is positive in organizational settings. This article introduces this new field of study and identifies some of its key contributions.

Keywords: *positive; organizational; scholarship; flourishing*

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is a new movement in organizational science that focuses on the dynamics leading to exceptional individual and organizational performance such as developing human strength, producing resilience and restoration, and fostering vitality. POS investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in especially favorable ways. *Positive* refers to an affirmative bias focused on the elevating processes and dynamics in organizations. *Organizational* refers to the processes and conditions that occur in and through organizations, especially taking into account the context in which positive phenomena occur. *Scholarship* refers to the scientific, theoretically based, and rigorous investigation of positive phenomena.

POS is not fashionable advocacy for the power of positive thinking. Although it does espouse an unequivocal bias concerning positive phenomena, POS does not ignore the presence of negative, challenging, or contrary aspects of organizations. In fact, the most dramatic examples of flourishing, vitality, and strength in organizations are usually found amidst challenge, setback, and difficult demands. They are rarely a product of blissful or tranquil organizational

circumstances (Ryff & Singer, 2003). POS, therefore, is concerned with understanding the integration of positive and negative conditions, not merely with an absence of the negative. The ways in which difficulties and challenges are interpreted, managed, and transformed in order to reveal the positive is in the domain of POS. It advocates the investigation of both types of phenomena in relation to one another, but with a special emphasis on uncovering and interpreting what is affirmative in organizations.

Everyday human and organizational behavior usually fails to reach its full potential. People and institutions typically fall short of achieving the best they can be or of fulfilling their highest capabilities. The focus of POS is on positive deviance, therefore, in that it investigates extraordinary positive outcomes and the processes that produce them (Quinn & Quinn, 2002). Positive deviance tends toward the highest potential of organizations and their members. POS also recognizes, however, that conditions of relative normality (e.g., an absence of mistakes and crises) may be exceptional in conditions where deterioration or weakness is expected. When organizations should fail but do not, when they should not recover but do, and when they should become rigid but remain flexible and agile, the mere presence of resilience (i.e., the maintenance of the status quo) is also extraordinarily positive (Weick, 2003). Avoiding tragedy or failure, or coping admirably with setbacks or misfortune, also are included in the domain of POS.

In other words, POS includes the study of phenomena that are quite common in organizational settings. It incorporates a variety of traditional organizational phenomena ranging from organizational design and structures (e.g., Gittell, 2003; Worline & Quinn, 2003) to compassionate responding (e.g., Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002), and from leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) to large-scale organizational change (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). By adopting a POS perspective, the purview of topics that are central in traditional organizational studies is expanded and enriched. For example, the use of a POS orientation has recently provided new insights in areas such as organizational and work design (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), organizational forms (Worline & Quinn, 2003), organizational errors and tragedies (Weick, 2003), social networks (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003), and community building (Feldman & Khademian, 2003). Similarly, POS intersects with work in other areas such as positive psychology (e.g., Snyder & Lopez, 2002), appreciative inquiry (e.g., Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000), prosocial behavior (e.g., Batson, 1994), citizenship behavior (e.g., Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002), community psychology (e.g., Cowen & Kilmer, 2002), corporate social responsibility (e.g., Margolis & Walsh, 2001), ethics (e.g., Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb 2002), and creativity (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996).

POS, therefore, is both inclusive and expansive. It is not a new invention so much as an alteration in focus. It recognizes that positive phenomena have been studied for decades, but also that studies of affirmative, uplifting, and elevating processes and outcomes have not been the norm. In fact, they have been

overwhelmed in the scholarly literature by nonpositive topics. For instance, Walsh's survey (1999) found that positive terms have seldom appeared in the business press in the past 17 years, whereas negatively biased words have increased four-fold in the same period. Mayne (1999) found that studies of the relationship between negative phenomena and health outnumbered, by 11 to 1, studies of the relationship between positive phenomena and health. Czapinski's (1985) coding of psychology articles found a 2:1 ratio of negative issues to positive or neutral issues. To date, in other words, the conscious examination of positive phenomena is vastly underrepresented in organizational science. A primary objective of POS is to redress this bias so that positive phenomena receive their fair share of rigorous and systematic investigation.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

Several reasons exist for the relative neglect of positive phenomena in organizational science. Among these are (a) the lack of valid and reliable measurement devices, (b) the association of positivity with uncritical science, and (c) the fact that negative events have greater impact on people than do positive events (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenaur, & Vohs, 2001).

Concerning instrumentation and measurement, most positively focused work up to now has been at the psychological level. For example, surveys have been designed to assess concepts such as forgiveness, optimism, virtues, and gratitude (Emmons, 2003; McCullough, et al., 1998; Peterson, & Seligman, 2003; Seligman, 2002), but little exists by way of organizational measurement devices. Few attempts have been made to gather quantitative measures of positive organizational phenomena (exceptions include Baker et al.'s [2003] study of positive energy networks, Clifton and Harter's [2003] study of strengths in organizations, and Rhee, Dulton, and Bagozzi's (2003) study of virtuous organizational responses). Most scholarly work in POS has been conceptual and definitional rather than empirical, except for occasional qualitative analysis of single organizations (e.g., Dutton et al., 2002; Worline et al., 2003). Little quantitative work has been published (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). This special issue helps address this dearth in the literature by including three quantitative studies of positive organizational phenomena and one qualitative study.

The first three articles report empirical investigations linking positive phenomena to organizational outcomes. The article by Losada and Heaphy used a nonlinear dynamics model to investigate team effectiveness. Communication patterns in 60 top management teams were observed and coded in day-long strategic planning sessions. The ratio of positive to negative communications—which was found to be mathematically equivalent to the amount of “connectivity” and “positive emotional space” in the teams—was a significant differentiator among high, medium, and low performing teams. Positive teams

performed significantly better. Cameron, Bright, and Caza's study operationalized virtuousness in organizations, uncovering the concepts of compassion, integrity, forgiveness, trust, and optimism at an organizational level. They surveyed organizations across a number of industry types, finding that organizations scoring higher on virtuousness performed significantly better than other organizations on desirable performance outcomes such as profitability, quality, and customer retention. Pittinsky and Shih's study of knowledge workers in two high-technology firms found that traditional measures of commitment and loyalty are inadequate. Traditional indicators of employee commitment include intent to leave the organization and longevity on the job. However, employees' commitment level and organizational loyalty were found to be independent of their intent to leave and their tenure in the firm. The authors argue for "a new positive perspective on organizational commitment and worker mobility" (pp. 000 QQ 260210-1).

The article by Wooten and Crane uses a qualitative methodology to expand the notion of competitive dynamic capabilities to include the effects of positive organizational phenomena. This interview and participant observation study investigates a midwifery unit within a large hospital and explains how the unit's strategic capabilities are positively affected by positive dynamics incorporated into socialization processes, job definitions, feminist values, and clan control systems. A framework for explaining the development, execution, and preservation of the humanistic work ideology is provided, and the relationship between these factors and human resource management and patient service capabilities is explicated.

A second reason for the neglect of positive phenomena in organizational studies is that POS topics have sometimes been associated with nonscholarly prescriptions or uncritical ecumenicalism. They have been accused of being akin to disguised Sunday school prescriptions or grandparents' advice (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Hope and optimism, for example, have been interpreted as wishful thinking or naiveté (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994). Altruism and prosocial behavior have been dismissed as disguised and sophisticated motives for selfish acts (Cialdini et al., 1987). Virtuousness has been rejected as saccharine, anti-intellectual, or morally dogmatic (Sandage & Hill, 2001).

In contrast, POS consciously uses the word *scholarship* to identify its scientific and theoretical foundations. It endeavors to explain why positive dynamics work in organizations in addition to describing the fact that they do. It endeavors to enlarge the conceptual domain of organizational theory to include examinations of neglected phenomena (such as compassion, virtuousness, and positive deviance), as well as to reframe traditional phenomena (such as networks, routines, and relationships). POS is committed to documenting, measuring, and explaining unusually positive human experiences in organizations, and in doing so, contributing to the verifiable body of knowledge about positive conditions in organizations. It endeavors to provide a foundation upon which additional scholarship can be built.

Providing this foundation requires a clear explication of terms and concepts. The lack of precise language to explain POS phenomena has led to an impoverished understanding of that which is good, elevating, and life giving in organizations. Concepts have remained underbounded and underdefined and, as a result, underinvestigated. POS is hampered, in other words, by being in the early stages of developing a vernacular for the most ennobling and empowering aspects of organizational life. In response, articles in this special issue begin to precisely define, and theoretically ground, particular positive constructs.

For example, Kanov and colleagues discuss the concept of organizational compassion as distinguished from individual compassion. They explain the dynamics of collective noticing, collective feeling, and collective responding as key attributes of collective compassion. A variety of sources of organizational pain are identified, and the ways in which healing and restoration can occur through organizational compassion are described. Key organizational mechanisms—legitimation, propagation, and coordination—are explained regarding their role in making compassion an enduring characteristic of an organization. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) delineate the notion of positive deviance, defined as intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways. They tackle directly the central idea of “positive” in the label *positive organizational scholarship*, and they contrast it with other more commonly discussed concepts in organizational studies such as citizenship, whistleblowing, corporate social responsibility, and creativity. A normative definition of positive deviance (as opposed to a statistical, supraconformity, or reactive definitions) is shown to be most apropos for POS studies, and it is highlighted as a key outcome variable for this field of study.

Other articles in this issue also address definitional and conceptual issues associated with the phenomena they are investigating. Strict definitions are offered, for example, of several POS concepts, including organizational connectivity, organizational virtuousness, organizational commitment, and humanistic work ideology, each of which represents a unique contribution to the organizational studies literature.

A third reason for the dearth of POS work is illustrated by Baumeister et al.'s (2001) review of the psychological literature, ranging from neurological processes to interpersonal dynamics. They concluded that

events that are negatively valenced (e.g., losing money, being abandoned by friends, and receiving criticism) will have greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type (e.g., winning money, gaining friends, and receiving praise). This is not to say that bad will always triumph over good, spelling doom and misery for the human race. Rather, good may prevail over bad by superior force of numbers: Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one. When equal measures of good and bad are present, however, the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh the good ones. (p. 323)

This focus on negative phenomena is understandable from an evolutionary point of view in that the neglect of problems and challenges might threaten the very survival of individuals and organizations. The neglect of positive and uplifting phenomena, on the other hand, might result only in regret or disappointment. Consequently, it is not surprising that most research has focused on negative phenomena—both in the psychological and organizational sciences. Negative phenomena seem to account for more variance, and they are associated with more dire consequences, than positive phenomena, so they have been the object of more investigations. It takes an intentional concentration on positive phenomena to avoid being inundated by negative phenomena. Nonetheless, as pointed out in several articles in this special issue, the study of positive phenomena clarifies dynamics that remain unobserved or inexplicable when nonpositive perspectives are adopted.

Losada and Heaphy explain how high performing top management teams outperform less effective top management teams because of their ratio of positivity to negativity in verbal and nonverbal exchanges. Cameron, Bright, and Caza explain why virtuous organizations surpass less virtuous organizations through the amplifying and buffering functions of organizational virtuousness. Pittinsky and Shih explain how highly mobile workers maintain loyalty and commitment to their employing organizations, and how the benefits of commitment (e.g., increased citizenship and productivity and decreased alienation and absenteeism) can be maintained in turbulent employment conditions. Kanov et al., point out how compassion can be engendered, and how it can foster healing, restoration, and vitality within organizations and their employees through values, practices, and routines. Spreitzer and Sonenshein demonstrate why positive deviance is a core outcome variable, distinct from citizenship, whistleblowing, corporate social responsibility, and creativity; the presence of honorable intentions is a key contribution of their explanation. Wooten and Crane explain the formation and maintenance of an unusually positive work unit culture amidst pressures to abandon compassionate and humanistic work ideologies. In each case, the phenomenon under investigation provides explanations for outcomes that have, heretofore, been ignored by traditional organizational scholars. Comparing high and low performance is familiar, but the explanations for these differences are new and serve to expand and enrich the array of phenomena available to organizational scholars.

CONCLUSION

POS has not created a new field of study so much as provided focus for the rare and disparate scholarly work that has examined positive phenomena in a variety of contexts and related disciplines. Thus, introducing POS provides as a catalyst, an organizing mechanism, and a sense-making device for classifying and understanding important positive phenomena in organizational settings.

The articles on positive organizational scholarship in this issue represent an invitation to scholars and researchers to investigate, in rigorous, systematic, and enlivening ways, the phenomena that are associated with positive, flourishing, and life-giving dynamics in and through organizations. Because of the barriers to the rigorous examination of positive phenomena (e.g., few assessment devices, nonscientific labeling, and the dominance of negative effects over positive effects), it takes a concerted effort to identify and systematically investigate positive phenomena. Single negative events can undo the effects of multiple positive events, so they are apt to get more attention. On the other hand, individuals and organizations are inherently attracted to that which is inspiring, positive, and uplifting, and all human systems incline toward that which is good (Cameron & Caza, 2002; Park & Peterson, 2003). This universal aspiration for the positive creates an important motivation for the discipline of positive organizational scholarship.

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