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# The Social Life of Organizations

By

**Lloyd E. Sandelands**

Professor of Management and Organizations; Professor of Psychology

**Monica C. Worline**

Assistant Professor of Organizational Management  
Giozueta Business School, Emory University

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ABSTRACT

A new field of positive organizational studies (POS) aims to enlarge inquiry in organizations to address neglected aspects of social life such as resilience, spontaneity, flow, courage, thriving, and virtue. In this article, we take seriously the promise and the challenge of this expanded realm of research in organization studies. We find that this nascent research field has come up against a classic philosophical problem of knowing without saying. Addressing this problem is a crucial part of answering critiques about the field's viability and fulfilling its aims. We offer a solution focused on the field's unifying and motivating intuition about the social life of organizations. We present a perspective on the social life of organizations that incorporates a fundamental distinction between human nature and human being; a distinction without which it is difficult if not impossible to come to terms with the phenomena of POS. Using the art of photography for purposes of illustration, we describe the social life of organizations in terms of three defining tensions—love, play, and individuation—which comprise its forms and feelings. We conclude that POS can better realize its important and distinctive contribution to organization studies by re-examining its focus on the material causes and effects that evince human nature in organizations and by focusing instead on the forms and feelings of social life that evince human being in organizations.

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# The Social Life of Organizations<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd E. Sandelands

University of Michigan

Monica C. Worline

Emory University

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## Abstract

A new field of positive organizational studies (POS) aims to enlarge inquiry in organizations to address neglected aspects of social life such as resilience, spontaneity, flow, courage, thriving, and virtue. In this article, we take seriously the promise and the challenge of this expanded realm of research in organization studies. We find that this nascent research field has come up against a classic philosophical problem of knowing without saying. Addressing this problem is a crucial part of answering critiques about the field's viability and fulfilling its aims. We offer a solution focused on the field's unifying and motivating intuition about the social life of organizations. We present a perspective on the social life of organizations that incorporates a fundamental distinction between human nature and human being; a distinction without which it is difficult if not impossible to come to terms with the phenomena of POS. Using the art of photography for purposes of illustration, we describe the social life of organizations in terms of three defining tensions—love, play, and individuation—which comprise its forms and feelings. We conclude that POS can better realize its important and distinctive contribution to organization studies by re-examining its focus on the material causes and effects that evince human nature in organizations and by focusing instead on the forms and feelings of social life that evince human being in organizations.

### **The Social Life of Organizations**

Suddenly, it seems, there's a new positive idea of life in the human sciences; an idea of social life. Claiming that psychology has emphasized the abnormal and pathological in human experience to the detriment of our understanding of what makes a good life, a new "positive psychology" has expanded the realm of psychological research into areas such as flourishing and thriving (Keyes & Haidt, 2002), authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004), virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and the nature of the good life (Kerns & Kinnier, 2005). In a development parallel to the new "positive psychology" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), a new "positive organizational behavior" (Luthans, 2003; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Wright, 2003) or "positive organizational scholarship" (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Dutton & Glynn, 2007) has arisen in the field of organization studies. Making a similar claim that organization studies has underemphasized phenomena such as strengths, virtues, and the good, positive organizational behavior is "the study and application of positively oriented human resources and psychological capacities...." (Luthans, 2003, p. 179) as they are situated explicitly in organizational contexts. According to Dutton & Glynn (2007, p. 1), "Positive Organizational Scholarship is a broad framework that seeks to explain behaviors in and of organizations. It focuses explicitly on the positive states and processes that arise from, and result in, life-giving dynamics, optimal functioning, or enhanced capabilities or strengths."

Scholars have met this expanded focus for research with both excitement and trepidation. Wright (2003) proclaims the field "an idea whose time has truly come," and the *Harvard Business Review* has heralded the field as a "breakthrough idea."<sup>2</sup> But in a critique of this new focus, Fineman (2006) asks if the field is theoretically limited and culturally relative. Tavis (2005) wonders if the move toward the positive is more hopeful than substantial. And Cowen

and Kilmer (2002) ask how this new field differs from the humanistic turn taken in the field decades ago by the likes of Jahoda (1958), Maslow (1954), and Rogers (1969). For many scholars today, judgment about the promise of positive organization studies (POS) awaits answers to these mounting questions.

In this article, we take seriously the promise and the challenge of this expanded realm of research in organization studies. First, in keeping with the promise of POS, we suggest that this nascent research field has come up against a classic philosophical problem of knowing without saying. Addressing this problem is crucial to answering criticisms of the field's viability. We hope to meet this problem by revealing the central but unspoken intuition of *social life* that is embedded in much of the early work in POS. Second, responding to the challenges facing this new research focus, we propose a new perspective on social life that helps scholars articulate their intuitions. Drawing a distinction between *human nature* and *human being*, we show how this "social life perspective" incorporates the spiritual dimension of human being in ways that illuminate phenomena of interest in positive organization studies. Finally, we step back and take a broader view to suggest how positive organization studies addressed to the social life of human being can invigorate organization studies more generally.

### **The Problem of Knowing without Saying**

Positive organizational studies (POS) offers a new vocabulary to organization studies, with fresh talk of things such as *virtue, flow, character strengths, excellence, high-quality connections, thriving, resilience, and courage*. While such talk is exciting because it expands the domain of organization studies, it also seems also to defy the vocabulary of a natural social science focused on objects and events that can be observed and arrayed in relationships of cause and effect. For instance, courage is a concept that has occupied a centerpiece of philosophical

thought for centuries and still defies empirical definition, as underscored by Socrates' famous line: "tell me, if you can, what is courage?" (see Schmid, 1992). The difficulty in capturing such phenomena in social scientific terms is reflected in Cameron and Caza's (2004) more recent discussion as well:

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 under-bounded and under-defined and, as a result, under-investigated. 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. (p.5)

While Cameron and Caza presume that the problem is a developmental one that can presumably be remedied with time and work, that presumption is belied by the disappointing history of the concept of courage (e.g. Miller, 2000; Worline, 2004; Yearley, 1990). We suggest here that one aspect of this challenge is inherent in the assumptions of natural science itself, and can thus only be remedied by adopting the assumptions of an alternative understanding.

This problem of an impoverished understanding is to see particularly in POS's defining idea of the "positive." In 2007, Dutton & Glynn published a comprehensive review of the field in which the adjective "positive" or its variants appeared 212 times, but without a single explicit definition. Fineman (2006) calls the question when he asks what is meant by the term, noting that positive aspects of life in organizations cannot easily be distinguished from negative aspects, and noting that any narrow focus on positive aspects leads to an inaccurate reading of life in organizations. It is a fair criticism, for ambiguity about the positive has plagued the field from its beginnings, and the study of positive phenomena has also been intertwined with adversity. For instance, Cameron & Caza (2004) acknowledged that: "... the most dramatic examples of flourishing, vitality, and strength in organizations are usually found amidst challenge, setback,

and difficult demands” (p. 1). Evidently, like the concept of courage discussed above, in general the positive is easier to see than it is to say in the language of natural science.

The challenge for positive organization studies is to come to an understanding within which scholars can speak intelligibly about things such as courage, thriving, flourishing, flow, excellence, and virtue. We believe that an important beginning toward meeting this challenge is to recognize that these phenomena tap into a common intuition of spirit and life; an intuition that Dutton (2003) has called *social life*. The notion of social life lies just beneath the surface of much POS research and writing. At times the idea is nearly explicit, such as when Cameron and Caza (2004, p. 1) introduce POS as “the study of that which is *positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations*” (italics added), or when Dutton and Heaphy (2003, p. 264) write of the vital connections people make at work as “the *dynamic, living tissue* that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (italics added). At other times the idea is implicit, such as when Emmons (2003, p. 93) writes: “Gratitude is a virtue that characterizes people who are well fit to *living harmoniously* among others ...”, or when Fredrickson (2003, p. 163) describes “how individual organizational members’ experiences of positive emotions—like joy, interest, pride, contentment, gratitude, and love—can be transformational and fuel upward *spirals toward optimal individual and organizational functioning*” (italics added). We believe that moving this implicit and unarticulated intuition into awareness is one key to unlocking the “positive” in positive organization studies. By articulating an idea of social life, we show that many of the subjects of POS challenge assumptions of social science focused on *human nature* and reach instead to assumptions of spirituality focused on *human being*.

## A Metaphysical Challenge

Einstein, in conversation with Heisenberg, claimed that it was nonsensical to found scientific theory on observable facts alone when, “In reality the very opposite happens. It is theory which decides what we can observe” (quoted in Hebb, 1972). Science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin (1969), discussing the importance of her genre, suggested that “the truth is a matter of the imagination” Einstein’s insight—that what we know how to see will determine what we do see—goes hand-in-glove with LeGuin’s reference to the truth as a matter of the imagination—science and art together showing us that what we can imagine is as essential as what we can observe.

If one sees only what one is ready to see, and what is already important in imagination, then for scholars of POS to see something as intuitive as social life, we must have ways of imagining it in order to be ready to encounter it. In many instances, this encounter cannot take place within natural science because social life cannot be fit to its terms. Focused on the material and objective, the methods of natural science often abstract away the imagination and vision that are necessary for the encounter. We find that the phenomena of social life identified by POS—such things as excellence, virtue, flow, resilience, high-quality connections, and courage—are not simply *natural things* (that is, not simply elements of a material nexus of causes and effects), but are also *spiritual things* (that is, expressions of an integral vitality that supersedes and inspires natural things). Social life “breathes” in and through the material substrate described by natural science, but it is not that substrate. In other words, social life is not a matter of human *nature* only, but is an intimation of human *being* as well. Between these two realms is the difference between matter and spirit. To the poet Coleridge, matter is “that of which there is consciousness, but which is not itself conscious” (quoted in Barfield, 1977, p. 147). Spirit, to the

contrary, is not that which is perceived, but that which simply *is* (Barfield, 1977). Human being is the realm of spirit and life over and above the realm of matter and causal determinism (Sandelands, 2005; 2007).

In order to tap into an intuition of social life that incorporates but expands beyond our typical assumptions about human nature, the new field of positive organization studies calls for a new way of seeing in organizations—a way of seeing that is not beholden to what we already know how to see. For purposes of this essay, we move toward art as a means of seeing that helps us imagine social life and that reaches more deeply into our intuitions than most modes of natural social science. Thus, we find that POS makes not only a claim for new concepts of social life, but also broaches a more profound claim for a new metaphysical approach to organization studies.

Without recognizing this about itself, POS asks us to think about organizations differently from the typical terms of social science, as instances of things and events arrayed in causal orderings, or even from the terms of interpretivist social science, as thoughts, interpretations, and meanings rendered in interaction (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Tsoukas, 2003). Instead, in reaching to social life, POS reaches to terms beyond social science, to ideas of spirit and life. Although such ideas are well-known in theology and religion, and have been part of the humanities as well (e.g. Zald, 1993), they have only recently begun to appear in studies of management and organization (e.g. Conger, 1994; Dent & Higgins, 2005; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Weick & Putnam, 2006). In a notable exception, one of the founders of psychology, William James, could see long ago in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1908) that most people understand their lives as being somehow both part of and beyond nature; or in our terms here, people often hold folk theories that show their lives in terms of human being.

By its cardinal idea of social life, positive organizational studies challenges our thinking about organizations. Where social science begins with ideas of material persons, places, and things, or with interpretations of such things (see Tsoukas, 2003), POS begins differently, with an intuition of life and spirit. These different beginnings lead in different directions and to different endings. In what follows we outline some of those different directions by proposing a metaphysic of social life focused on human being rather than human nature; a metaphysic of spirit and life that we imagine positive organization studies knows but cannot say.

### A Social Life Perspective

We begin to describe social life, not in the usual way with a definition, but with a view and discussion of three photographic images that can lead to a definition. We take this unusual step because we want to begin by coming to social life with as much openness to metaphysical possibility and imagination as we can manage. We call upon artistic images of social life, recognizing that these offer prospects of seeing beyond the focus of scientific language. Where scientific language delineates the constituent ‘things’ of social life, art presents social life in the round, in all its human dimensions (Langer, 1953). Looking at the whole of social life revealed by art, it is possible to see in terms other than the scientific ones of objective cause and effect (Barry & Rerup, 2006; Bruner, 1986; 1992; Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1999; 2000), and instead see in the terms of spirit and life intimated by positive organization studies.

Thus we ask the reader to consider with us the trio of photographs below. We offer these photos neither as empirical evidence nor as rational argument, but rather to make room for an alternative idea of social life as human being. Although any number of other photographs might have served this purpose, we focus on these three in specific because they hold important aspects of social life still for us to see and discuss. Photography is an exacting art of opportunity—an art

of being in the right place at the right time. Not without cause we say that a picture is worth a thousand words.

[Insert Figures 1 – 3 about here]

### **Moments of Social Life**

These are images of human being. In the images we find in common three aspects of social life that comprise its ontology. These aspects are *love*, *play*, and *individuation* and they are nested, like Russian dolls; each contains its successor. We call these aspects *moments of social life*. By the word ‘moment’ we intend both an interval of time (social life unfolds through time) and an aspect of energy and movement (social life is a dynamic). In particular, as we describe below, we intend a condition of polarity, of tension between countervailing tendencies.

We suggest further that the three moments of social life are known as *feelings*, which are the way the moments of social life are manifest in the body. When these feelings are sufficiently strong they rise to the level of conscious awareness (see Sandelands, 1998b). The epistemology of social life is its feeling. Thus knowledge of social life is not exclusively rational—it is not simply an empirical induction or a logical deduction. Rather, knowledge of social life is an immediate intuition of being, a kind of ‘abduction’ (Pierce, 1955) that is different from the means of knowing that are more familiar to social scientists (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2007). This kind of direct and unmediated knowledge has been pointed to by many scholars before—where Pierce (1955) called it ‘abduction,’ Aquinas called it ‘knowledge through inclination,’ and Maritain called it ‘connatural knowledge.’ As described by Maritain (2001), this is “a kind of knowledge that is not clear like that obtained through concepts and conceptual judgments. It is obscure, unsystematic, vital knowledge, by means of instinct or sympathy, and in which the intellect, in order to make its judgments, consults the inner leanings of the subject”

(pp. 34-35). In more familiar terms, knowledge of social life is that written on the heart. Because of the initially fuzzy nature of such knowledge, it is perhaps not surprising that social scientists avoid concepts best known in this way (Deutsch, 1961). Rather than skip over these elements of human being, however, we propose that scholars can turn to the epistemological value of art (we turn to photography in this case) to represent the feelings and forms of social life in works that we can talk about together.

And we suggest, finally, that the three moments of social life are *spiritual*, which is to say that they are phenomena not only of nature but also of being, which subsumes nature.<sup>3</sup> These are moments of *human being*. In making this claim we recognize something that is true of every metaphysic; namely, that just as every metaphysic implicates an ontology and an epistemology, every metaphysic implicates a spirituality. Whereas the metaphysic of natural science excludes the spiritual from human nature, we look to a metaphysic of social life includes the spiritual in human being.

*Love: The primary tension between unity and division*

The first and main thing to feel in these images is *love*, which is manifest in the tensions between unity and division in social life. Building upon Sandelands (2003), we define love abstractly as the dynamic tension between the division and unity of human being. Love is simultaneous movement toward unity across differences (e.g., as persons or groups seek to overcome the differences that separate them) and movement toward differentiation within unity (e.g., as persons or groups seek to maintain their identities in their bond). This is to see, for instance, in the struggles of the young at love (no matter how old they may be) to establish that magical oneness that does not deny but rather nourishes their own individual being. Thus love

brings form to social life through its dividing aspect of difference and conflict and its uniting aspect of similarity and cooperation.

That love, the dynamic tension between unity and division, is the first moment of social life is at once an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that love is the foundation of human being, where the human person and human society subsist in communion. Through this tension we see that the person is an indivisible unit of being (literally, an 'individual'), at the same time that society is a unity of human being across persons. The epistemological claim is that this dynamic tension between unity and division is known through distinctive feelings of love, which are experiences of its moment in the body. And the spiritual claim is that love is transcendent. At the same time that it is natural and realized in the body, love also reaches beyond the natural world (it is more than physics, chemistry, biology, and even psychology). To say this is to affirm what all of the world's great religions take for granted; namely, that love embodies spirit.

Turning to the photographs in Figures 1 – 3, we gain additional insight into the defining tension between unity and division as a moment of social life. For instance, love is exuberant in the Eisenstaedt photo of the drum major with children. Here a tension of unity and division appears in the delightful question of the march itself. Will the march come off? Will the line hold? Will this rag-tag group remained united or will it divide into a chaos of the wayward? In this image the feeling of love is palpable. It is the excited feeling of taking part in a surprising new life and of coming together across the differences of individual persons to find a unity of action and purpose.

A somewhat different image of the tension between division and unity in social life appears in the photo of the candidate Whitlam and his followers. There is love in the electricity

between the individual candidate and the mass of followers. Will the candidate be swallowed up into the group, or will he remain apart, his identity intact? There is love as well in the parallel tension among members; they throng to pack closely together around the leader and experience their more usual resistance and even fear to be touched (Canetti, 1963). The image also captures distinctive feelings of love—of longing for the leader and of longing for the group, of wanting to be included despite one’s separate individual existence.

Finally, although one does not usually think of the executive suite as a lovers’ lane, there is tension between unity and division in Weiner’s photograph of the Packard Motors executives. Here is love here in the division and unity of organizational hierarchy. As Goffman (1967) notes in his analysis of social life, the interaction rituals of organizations both inform and are informed by hierarchy. For each person there is a position and role—of leader, lieutenant, underling—and to each person there is commensurate expectation—to lead, to follow, to defer, to perform. Weiner’s photo captures the tension in one of the central questions of hierarchy: Will the boss (seated at the center) be pleased? Will he be supported by his lieutenants? This moment of social life becomes known through the feelings of the continuing affirmation of structure, of parts in relation to the whole.

*Play: The elaborating tension between fantasy and reality*

The second thing to feel in these images is a tension between what is real and what isn’t, a tension we define as *play*. Building upon Sandelands (2003), we define the moment of play as the dynamic tension between fantasy and reality in human being. This tension appears in simultaneous movements between reality and fantasy, such as that captured in Eisenstaedt’s photo of the drum major and children. At the same time that players know their play is “only a game” (a fantasy in reality), they take their play seriously and they truly want to pull it off (a

reality in the fantasy). Play brings form to social life through its creative edge, which brings to human being fantastic new things and ideas. To speak of the creativity of social life, therefore, is to speak of play.

That play is a second moment of social life is at once an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that play is the creative origin of social life. This is to say, with anthropological linguist Huizinga (1950), that the human world is created through play; that its social structures, institutions, and culture arise in the form of play. The epistemological claim is that the feeling of play is the experience of its moment in the body, an experience that again may or may not rise to the level of conscious awareness (in a feeling of fun perhaps, or one of contest or undergoing). And, again, the spiritual claim is that play is transcendent. Human being is distinguished by its creative imagination; a faculty that surpasses nature and so is able to conceive of it (Anscombe, 2005).

In Eisenstaedt's photo of the drum major with children, play's moment of tension is vivid. For the kids, the fantastic world of the drum major (a world of garish costume and theatrical movements) is set against their mundane reality of a late summer afternoon in the neighborhood. For the drum major, the exacting demands of martial exercise are set against an occasion of make believe. In the photograph, too, the feelings are vivid. For the children and drum major alike the photo conveys a giddiness in the whimsical scheme, set against the serious aim of sticking to one's role.

In the photograph of the candidate Whitlam, the tension between fantasy and reality appears as the group rallies behind its winning candidate. The group is becoming a fantastic new being in the world—a new force to be taken seriously in a political contest that is itself a game. Political victory is a moment of turning in which an imagined standing and power becomes a real

standing and power. Politics, like baseball, is an endless game played in ever-renewed earnestness.

In Weiner's photograph of the Packard Motors executives, play unfolds in the interaction ritual of a business presentation. Seeming to capture a moment suspended in time, the photo captures Goffman's (1967) description of such rituals as dramas played in earnest. The players well know that their standing in the organization is a stock in fantasy that rises and falls with news good and bad. All hinges on what the boss (seated at the center) thinks and says, a tension between fantasy and reality that engenders powerful feelings of apprehension—feelings of concern that may turn into exhilaration if the presentation goes well, or into despondency if the performance goes poorly. What is perhaps most interesting about these feelings, both actual and potential, is that they take place behind masks of agreeable indifference. This business setting discourages expressions of feeling as signs of lost composure. Of course, we all know that, away from work, the feelings of this play will come alive in great tales of intrigue and passion. The magic in this photograph is that it conveys the tension of the moment in spite of pretenses to the contrary. It is a tension to see in aspects of countenance executives cannot think to control—their intent gaze, postures, and places taken in relation to one another.

*Individuation: The culminating tension between person and group*

The last thing to feel in these images is the tension between one and all, a tension we refer to as *individuation*. Building upon Sandelands (2003), we define the moment of individuation as the tension between the person and group in human being. In each of these images, one sees a central moment of social life: at the same time that the person stands apart from the group in his or her individuality, the person finds the ways and means of individuality by being a member of the group. Building from the central insight offered in Markus and

Kitayama's (1991) well-known study of person in culture, we see that persons only know how to define and create individual selves within the outlines provided by the group. Thus individuation is the farthest reach of social life, the moment at which the life of the group is realized in the life of persons.<sup>4</sup> To speak of the end or goal of social life, therefore, is to speak of individuation.

Once again, the claim that individuation is the third moment of social life is at once an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that individuation is the moment at which appears both the individual person and the group to which he or she belongs. Interestingly, in this final moment of social life we come to the starting point of social science that takes the "entities" of individual and group as its concrete "first facts."<sup>5</sup> Thus we come to the crucial realization that the natural ontology of social science is a rendering upon the spiritual ontology of the social life perspective.<sup>6</sup> The epistemological claim is that the feeling of individuation is the experience of its moment in the body, such as a feeling of mutuality, or loneliness, or perhaps simply a feeling of "being in it with others." And, again, the spiritual claim is that individuation is transcendent. This is to affirm a central precept of many of the world's great religions that the individual person is an image of the divine.

The photograph by Eisenstadt reveals the tension between person and group that appears in the children's delight as they question whether or not they can take on and live up to the role of member of the marching band. And, in a different way, the drum major delights in the question of whether he, as the leader and the group's most individuated member, can pull the group into line and, thereby, bring the band into being. They begin as separate persons with an idea of the band and its structure. Can they bring the group into their personal lives? This moment of individuation comes with exuberant feelings of coming together into something new and being swept into something that has a life of its own.

The photograph of the candidate Whitlam presents the tension between person and group in a more grown up way, as a moment of truth to see in Whitlam's eyes. He is the one chosen by the group to be its leader and custodian, and yet he looks distant and abstracted, as if questioning what he has gotten into. Leadership is a daunting task, rarely done well. It is a test of character, rarely passed without hardship and qualification. Amidst the enthusiasm and joy in the image, there is a hint of apprehension in Whitlam's wary eyes that seems to foreshadow the burden of being the one to lead.

Finally, Weiner's photograph of the Packard Motors executives bears the tension between individual and group in full flower. In taking a formal role or office, the person steps aside from himself and takes a place in relation to the whole. Along with their roles come duties of office to be dispatched dispassionately and impersonally, and yet each of these men, in different ways, is concerned to reconcile his personal beliefs, wants, and actions with the requirements of the group. In Weiner's photograph is the classic tension between one's role or office and one's personal integrity. Individuation comes in the ceaseless tension between being company men on the one hand, and being their own men on the other hand. This image also brings to light moral feelings, or at least the possibilities of such feelings, as in one executive, standing to the side, who looks as if he may be weighing an unwelcome objection to a developing consensus while another, sitting next to the boss, is perhaps resigning himself to follow the bosses' lead. The presenter, too, is perhaps hoping to advance his pet project and thereby himself in the company. Such are the complexities of feeling in this rich form of social life, all unfolding behind masks of impassiveness.

## Social Life Defined

We can now define social life by taking its three moments together. *Social life is the form taken by human being in three fundamental and interrelated moments of tension: love* (division and unity), *play* (fantasy and reality), *and individuation* (person and group). Thus social life is a form in much the same way that a waterfall is a form—it is an appearance of movement or of forces in action. Substance is involved to be sure—just as there can be no waterfall apart from water, there can be no social life apart from people and what they do. But as the social life perspective makes clear, the substance (persons, things, and interactions) is the medium through which the form appears. To adopt a different metaphor, the material facts of human nature that social science describes are the soil within which the social life of human being emerges and develops.

Like every genus of life, social life grows and develops through time and in fulfillment of its being. As described, social life takes root in love, shoots forth through play, and blossoms as individuation. This growth is a progression of increasingly complex forms which are linked by their ultimate end or *telos*, the human person in the group. In this regard it is interesting to note how this progression of human being, which is a progression of spirit as well as of substance, appears in some of the most basic and not explicitly “spiritual” ideas of social science. At a primitive level, in Canetti’s (1962) concept of the ‘open crowd’, the moment of love appears in the fleeting life of a crowd in which people put aside their differences to unite as one being. At a higher level, in Huizinga’s (1950) concept of ‘cooperative agonism’, the moment of play appears in the creative dynamic of contest that defines the unique culture of every group. And at an even higher level, in Weber’s (1946) concept of ‘bureaucracy’, the moment of individuation appears as people see themselves and others as taking parts or offices in abstract formal organizations.

Across these levels and kinds of human society we see the growth and development of human being and spirit in social life.

As described above, the moments of social life are known as feelings when their respective polarities or tensions register in the body. In the social life perspective, the body is the register and sounding board of social life (Sandelands, 1998a, 1998b). In feeling, the realm of spirit or human being meets the realm of matter or human nature as the dynamics of social life are induced sympathetically in dynamics of the body. In feeling, spirit and matter are united as one. Interestingly, the idea that feelings are important markers of social life is beginning to take hold in natural science as evidence collects for relationships between social life and the body. Neurobiologists, for example, now write about limbic regulation in infants that relies on their relationship with a caregiver. Mother and child divide the unity of human being, or in the terms of neuroscience: “the mammalian nervous system depends for its neurophysiologic stability on a system of interactive coordination” (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 200, p. 84).

While the integral vitality of social life may come as a surprise to a natural social science accustomed to analyzing the social world according to its material parts, the social life perspective makes this its starting point for social theory. This is why we have appealed to art as a crucial and perhaps indispensable vehicle for the study of social life. Art is the mode of abstraction by which the feelings and forms of social life are represented in objects or events, such as in a photograph, painting, dance, sculpture, song, poem, or ritual (Langer, 1953). Art succeeds as an idea or symbol of social life because it is the image of human being par excellence (Sandelands, 1998b). What Langer (1953) and others call ‘significant form’ in art is its dynamism—be this of lines and color in painting, of sound and rhythm in music, of mass and space in sculpture and architecture, and of sound, meter, and meaning in poetry. The

fundamental elements of art are “tensions” that engender structure by acting upon one another.<sup>7</sup> A great deal of art, perhaps most art, objectifies the feelings and forms of social life. Social life is what we sing, dance, paint, sculpt, enact in ritual, and tell stories about (e.g. Boje, 1991; Phillips, 2005). On an intellectual plane, the forms of social life are understood by seeing them represented, literally “re-presented,” in works of art. And on an emotional plane, the feelings of social life are understood as they are remembered, literally “re-membered,” by the feelings of art.

Because art objectifies the feelings and forms of social life, it produces representations that form the basis for dialogue, study, and debate. We have appealed to the art of photography in this article for this reason—that its images objectify social life, holding it still for study. That different scholars may find different dynamics of division and unity, fantasy and reality, or person and group represented in the photographs is important, for it opens the possibility of a dialogue through which scholars can deepen their understanding of these fundamental moments of social life.

### **Knowing and Saying: Positive Organizational Studies Revisited**

We believe that this article makes explicit what has been implicit in positive organization studies for some time. By its focus on positive phenomena that betoken social life, POS declares an interest in human being. Perhaps what has kept this interest implicit is the want of a metaphysical perspective in which to know and talk about this human being. We have offered the *social life perspective* as an answer to this want. In the section that follows we attempt to demonstrate the subtle but important differences that such a perspective reveals and the new possibilities that open for researchers who adopt the fundamental premises the social life perspective offers. To do this we consider two recent descriptions of positive organization:

“collective flow” (Quinn, 2005) and “compassion organizing” (Dutton, Worline, Frost & Lilius, 2006).

Building on Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Quinn (2005) defines the psychological state of “flow” as a high-performance experience marked by “temporal merging of one’s situation awareness with the automatic application of activity-relevant knowledge and skills” (p.10).

According to Quinn, flow becomes a state of positive organization when socially realized as an experience called *collective flow*:

For flow to be social, it must require people’s awareness of the situation to be similar or at least complementary, and for the automatic application of their knowledge and skills in that situation to be interrelated; it requires us to conceive of the social as interrelated action. If people experience flow in interrelated action—i.e., mutual adjustment—then their individual experience of flow is contingent on the other parties to the interaction experiencing flow as well, and this would make the flow a collective experience. (p. 38)

Quinn illustrates this idea of collective flow with the example of conversation, which he describes as a fundamental constituent of organization:

If flow is the experience of merging situation awareness with activity-relevant knowledge and skills, then in a conversation where the quality of each contribution is dependent on previous and subsequent contributions collective flow would mean that people experience themselves moving toward shared or complementary goals, adjusting in real time to each other’s expectations, needs, contributions, learning how others work and how to interact effectively along the way. Presumably, this would require people to have or develop shared or complementary goals that people care about achieving enough to prioritize above their personal agendas and the sensitivity and vigilance to keep up with the unique unfolding circumstances of the conversation. (p. 38)

Quinn begins in the metaphysics of human nature with the ontology of separate material individuals who operate relatively independently and who carry personal agendas that must be overcome in order for collective flow to be realized. But within this way of thinking the collective flow concept is difficult to apply because we find ourselves ever asking the question of how similar and/or how complementary people must be for their activity and experience to qualify as collective flow. By defining collective flow as an aggregate condition of separate entities, Quinn relegates the concept to an intellectual construct, rather than giving it status as an integral condition of social life.

From the social life perspective, which begins in the metaphysics of human being with the ontology of love, play, and individuation, collective flow is a form of social life—a unique combination of the defining tensions of division and unity, fantasy and reality, and person and group. Collective flow becomes not an abstract idea of people in aggregate, but a real form of social life. The conversation is an expression of tension among persons who, in spite of (or perhaps because of) their differences, are committed to talking together and participating in the life unfolding through the conversation. Collective flow can be understood as a distinct expression of social life that has a particular form—specific dynamics of division in unity, fantasy in reality, and person in group—that registers as specific feelings in the bodies of the participants. Within this way of thinking, collective flow is a form of social life that is known as it takes shape in feeling and that can be talked about and described as it is made object through conversation, metaphor, story and other forms of “folk” art.

Adopting the social life perspective in regard to collective flow also shows its relation to formal organizing in a different light. From this perspective, the flow of the conversation could be described as an instance of formal organization when its dynamisms culminate in a *moment of*

*individuation* in which persons form an idea of the conversation as a whole (creating the group in the individual) and identify themselves as taking a part in this whole (creating the individual in the group). In this view, individuated persons are simultaneously lives unto themselves and members of a living group, which allows for an integration of person and organization in a way that the aggregation of entities within collective flow cannot accomplish.

In a different example of a recent work published in the vein of positive organizational studies, Dutton et al. (2006) report on a case study of compassion organizing. The authors define the psychological state of compassion as “an expression of an innate human instinct to respond to the suffering of others,” which is manifest as a three-part experience of “noticing, feeling, and responding to another’s suffering” (p. 4). According to Dutton and colleagues, individual compassion becomes *compassion organizing* when “a collective response to a particular incident of human suffering ... entails the coordination of individual compassion in a particular organizational context” (p. 5). Based on a close study of how one organization responded to the misfortunes of three of its members, the authors describe the process of compassion organizing in terms of five mechanisms that ‘activate’ and ‘mobilize’ individual compassion: 1) contextual enabling of attention; 2) contextual enabling of emotion; 3) contextual enabling of legitimacy and trust; 4) agents improvising structures; and 5) symbolic enrichment.

Because Dutton and colleagues begin, as does Quinn, with an ontology of separate material individuals, compassion organizing poses the same puzzle as collective flow; namely, why and how should an individual feeling be organized? In the social life perspective, which begins in the metaphysic of human being with an ontology of love, play, and individuation, compassion organizing arises as an adaptation of the living group to a breach in its unity. Rather than being an individual inclination to respond to a separate others, compassion organizing

unfolds as people take their places in an ongoing social life defined by dynamic tensions of unity and division, fantasy and reality, and person and group. In this view, compassion is a feeling of human being. That allows us to see compassion organizing not as a conglomeration of individual reactions that are for some reason activated and coordinated mobilized, but rather as a form of social life felt in a moment of love when a rupture (a new division in unity) evokes a healing response (a new unity in division). In Dutton and colleagues' account of compassion organizing we see not only a moment of love, but also a moment of play as people create a new reality for those harmed, and a moment of individuation as people take stock of persons in the group to establish new formal structures and processes for its good.

We believe the Dutton et al. theory of compassion organizing is enriched by adopting the social life perspective. We see differently why feelings of compassion arise in response to traumatic events in groups, and this new light shows compassion organizing to be an expression of social life. Because it is rooted in a metaphysic of human being, the social life perspective suggests different possibilities for the means by which compassion becomes activated and mobilized in organizations, and helps us understand why people are swept up in the compassion organizing process.

### **Revisiting the Meaning of the Positive**

By identifying the feelings and forms of social life, the social life perspective clarifies what is “positive” about the phenomena of positive organizational studies. As we've seen, social life is essentially a dynamism of love (of unity and division) that is created in play (of fantasy and reality) that culminates in individuation (of person and group). Where there are these things, there is human being—an integral vitality of the human spirit. The positive phenomena of POS—such things as virtue, excellence, collective flow, compassion organizing, resilience, and

courage—are “positive” as they conduce to human being in these moments of social life. The positive meaning of POS phenomena is the social life they create and sustain.

Further, if the positive meaning of POS phenomena resides in their capacity to show us social life and the means by which social life grows, develops, and is sustained, then we have a new answer to the question about why many phenomena of POS are apparent in the breach. Under conditions of duress and uncertainty, human being must assert itself against death in moments of social life. This point is apparent in Worline’s (2004) analysis of courage as a form of social life that becomes apparent when an individual, acting on his/her own internalized life of the group, stands up to meet a threat to the collective. This conception of the positive answers Fineman’s (2006) criticisms related to the meaning and nature of the positive. The social life perspective shows more clearly how the positive is an expression of social life that may take many distinctive forms, but which is distinguished from and relates to the negative, or the dearth and death of human being. In this view, the positive is not culturally relative, but is a universal that we may come to understand through careful study of why and how distinctive forms of social life unfold in different human societies. At its heart, the social life perspective makes the universal claim that the moments of social life (of love, play, and individuation) both underlay and “in-form” the myriad forms and feelings of human being.

### **New Ways and Means**

By its new and different way of thinking about organizations, the social life perspective augurs a new and different way of studying organizations. By its turn to the metaphysic of human being focused on the integral vitality of the human spirit in moments of love, play, and individuation, this perspective opens upon a more expansive understanding of human organizations. As we have argued and shown by example, the social life perspective calls upon

understanding based not only upon empirical observations of objects and events in material or interpretative relation, but instead upon means of study that capture the feelings of social life in “moments” love, play, and individuation. Such attentiveness to feeling opens a door to methods of inquiry concerned with human being, such as story, literature, painting, theatre, cinema, music, photography, and dance. Many of these methods have been associated with the arts and humanities, yet have been left out, or kept out, of the social sciences (Zald, 1993). In this appeal to art we join a growing rank of others who have studied human organization using the arts of jazz (e.g., Bougon, Weick, & Binkhorst, 1977; Eisenberg, 1990), aesthetics and photography (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990; Strati, 2000; Taylor & Hansen, 2005), chant, folkdance, and architecture (e.g., Barry & Rerup, 2006; Guillen, 1997; Linstead, 2002; Sandelands, 1998b; Yanow, 1998), theatre (e.g., Meisiek & Barry, 2007), story (e.g., Boje, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; O’Connor, 1995; Phillips, 2006; Worline, 2004), and choral singing (e.g., Stephens, 2007). We see no reason for parochialism in the matter of understanding human organizations, which are expressions of a human being that encompasses the spiritual as well as the material. Thus we call organizational scholars to the testimonies of feeling, inviting them to see, with Pascal, that the human heart has reasons that are essential to our understanding

The social life perspective challenges the study of organizations because it is to grasp neither by methods of natural science focused on cause and effect, nor again by methods of interpretative science focused on meanings given to persons, places, and things. As we have seen, this perspective reaches to the transcendent. It is about human being over and above human nature; about spiritual form over and above material substance; and about growth toward the divine over and above an indifferent social physics. It is a mystery of love (of division and unity), elaborated by play (of fantasy and reality), that comes to fruition in individuation (as

person and group). To “see” into social life thus is to see with “eyes of faith,” with eyes open to the metaphysic of spirit that recognizes human being.

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*Plate 5: Drum major leads children in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1950.*

*Alfred Eisenstaedt/LIFE Magazine ©TIME Inc..*

Figure 1: Drum Major and Children – Eisenstaedt



Figure 2: Candidate Whitlam – photographer unknown

Figure 8.3



Photographer: Dan Weiner  
Source: Ewing, W.A. (1989) *America worked*. New York: Abrams.

Figure 3: Packard Motors Executives – Weiner

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> *Harvard Business Review*, February, 2004, pp. 13-37.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper we speak of spirit and of spirituality in the most general terms we can manage; to mean that which is transcendent, that which is “above and beyond the material universe” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). A more precise spirituality rooted in a more precise theology is possible and desirable, but articulation of such must be the subject for another paper.

<sup>4</sup> This may also be the moment that sets the life of humanity apart from all other animals (Trefil, 1997). Humans alone organizes formally into groups in which each member understands his/her place in the life of the whole.

<sup>5</sup> This is a point of significant comparison between the scientific metaphysic of human nature and the spiritual metaphysic of human being. As shown by Sandelands (2007) the two metaphysics engender different ideas of person and society, in which the former appear as corruptions of the latter. These differences are such, he goes on to explain, that the understanding of humanity is incoherent and inconsistent in the one while it is coherent and consistent in the other.

<sup>6</sup> This is an idea with which one could run a long way. Among its implications is that described by Barfield (1988) that the material realm is ever an appearance of the spiritual realm. A more immediate implication is that by its spiritual metaphysic the social life perspective provides what social science has always lacked and can never manage; namely, an understanding of how the individual person and the group are related (see, Sandelands, 2003; 2007).

<sup>7</sup> “Pure form,” writes Langer (1967) “does not exist as material, but as polarity, as lines of force, as tensions, perhaps as longing ...” (p. 163).