

Contributions to the Discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship

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Abstract

Positive organizational scholarship is the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. *Positive* refers to the elevating dynamics and outcomes in organizations. *Organizational* refers to the processes and dynamics associated in and through organizations, specifically taking into account the context in which positive phenomena occur. *Scholarship* refers to the scientific, theoretically-based, 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.

Contributions to the Discipline of Positive Organizational Scholarship

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Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is a new movement in organizational studies that focuses on the dynamics leading to the development of human strength, producing resilience and restoration, fostering vitality, and cultivating extraordinary individual and organizational performance. POS investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in especially affirmative 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 merely a fashionable form of advocacy for the power of positive thinking. Whereas an unequivocal bias exists toward positive phenomena, POS does not ignore the presence of negative, challenging, or contrary phenomena. The most dramatic examples of flourishing, vitality, and strength are usually found amidst active encounters with challenges, setbacks, and demands, and they are less often a product of blissful or tranquil circumstances (Ryff & Singer, 2003). POS, therefore, is concerned with the integration and interaction of positive and negative conditions, not merely with the absence of the negative. The ways in which difficulties and

challenges are interpreted, managed, and transformed in ways that reveal the positive is 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.

Everyday human and organizational behavior usually fails to reach its optimal potential. Most of the time people and institutions fall short of achieving the best they can be or the fulfillment of their highest capabilities. The focus of POS is toward positive deviance, therefore, in that it investigates extraordinary positive outcomes and the processes that produce them. POS also includes, however, the study of phenomena that are quite common in organizational settings, and it casts a long shadow over a variety of organizational phenomena ranging from organizational design and structures (e.g., Gittell, 2003; Worline & Quinn, 2003) to compassionate responding (e.g., Dutton, et al., 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 to the domain of traditional organizational studies is expanded and enriched. For instance, organizational and work design (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), organizational forms (Worline & Quinn, 2003), organizational errors and tragedies (Weick, 2003), social networks (Baker, Cross, and Wooten, 2003), and community building (Feldman & Khademian, 2003) are examples of topics where insights have been uncovered and relevant phenomena elaborated as a result of incorporating a POS perspective in recent scholarly work.

In addition, scholarly work in related disciplines 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, 2003), ethics (e.g., Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb 2002), creativity (Amabile, et al., 1996), and other fields all are examples of social science research streams that share overlapping interests in positive phenomena. Hence, POS is not a new invention, and it recognizes that positive phenomena have been studied even in the domain of organization and management science for decades—e.g., management skills, organizational effectiveness, teamwork, motivation (Whetten & Cameron, 2002). Yet, studies of affirmative, uplifting, and elevating processes and outcomes have not been the norm. They have been overwhelmed in the scholarly literature by non-positive topics. For example, Walsh's survey (1999) found that positive terms have seldom appeared in the business press in the last 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. One objective of POS is to redress this bias so that positive phenomena receive their fair share of rigorous and systematic investigation. Up to now, the conscious examination of positive phenomena is vastly underrepresented in organizational science.

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Reasons for this neglect of positive phenomena are multiple and include (1) the lack of valid and reliable measurement devices, (2) the association of positivity with uncritical science, and (3) the

fact that negative events have greater impact on people than do positive events (Baumeister, et al., 2001).

First, most positively-focused instrumentation to date has been developed at the psychological level—e.g., surveys have been designed to assess concepts such as forgiveness, optimism, virtues, and gratitude (McCullough, et al., 1998; Seligman, 2002; Peterson, & Seligman, 2003; Emmons, 2003)—but little exists by way of organizational measurement devices. Few attempts have been made to gather quantitative measures of positive phenomena (exceptions include Baker & Cross' [2003] study of positive energy networks, Clifton and Harter's [2003] study of strengths in organizations, and Rhee, et al.'s (2003) study of virtuous organizational responses to the 11 September 2001 tragedy). Most scholarly work to date in POS has been conceptual and definitional rather than empirical, or, in rare cases, qualitative analyses 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 empirical studies of positive organizational phenomena—the relationship between emotional space or connectivity and performance, organizational virtuousness and performance, and commitment and employee mobility.

Specifically, the first three articles report empirical investigations linking positive phenomena to positive outcomes. The paper by Losada and Heaphy, for example, uses a non-linear dynamics model to investigate the effectiveness of top management teams. Communication patterns and the types of statements exchanged in 60 top management teams were observed and coded in day-long strategic planning sessions. The ratio of positive to negative communications—which is

mathematically equivalent to the amount of “connectivity” and “positive emotional space” in the teams—was found to be a significant differentiator among high, medium, and low performing teams. Positive teams perform significantly better. Cameron, Bright, and Caza’s study operationalized the concept of virtuousness in organizations, uncovering the concepts of compassion, integrity, forgiveness, trust, and optimism. 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. Common indicators of employee commitment include intent to leave or longevity on the job. However, the commitment levels of employees and their loyalty to the employing organization were found to be independent of their intent to leave the firm or their tenure in the organization. The authors argue for “a new positive perspective on organizational commitment and worker mobility.”

A fourth article by Wooten and Crane uses a qualitative case study methodology to explain how one particular unit within a hospital maintained its own culture and dynamic capability. The study investigates the nurse-midwife unit and explains how its strategic capabilities are positively affected by dynamics incorporated into socialization processes, job definitions, feminist values, and clan control systems. A framework for explaining the development, execution, and preservation of a humanistic work ideology is provided, and the relationship between these factors and human resource management and patient service capabilities is explained.

A second reason for the neglect of positive phenomena in organizational studies is that POS topics have sometimes been associated with non-scholarly 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 personal gain (Cialdini, et al., 1987). Virtuousness has been rejected as saccharine, anti-intellectual, or morally dogmatic (Sandage & Hill, 2001). However, POS consciously uses the word *scholarship* to identify its scientific, scholarly, 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 reconceptualize more traditional phenomena (such as networks, routines, and relationships). It endeavors to document and measure unusually positive human experiences in organizations, sometimes requiring the application of new methods and analytical techniques (such as non-linear dynamics). It endeavors, in other words, to contribute to the verifiable body of knowledge about positive human conditions in organizations, thus providing a foundation upon which additional scholarship can be built.

The under-development of precise language to explain POS phenomena, however, has led to an impoverished understanding of what is good, elevating, and life-giving in organizations.

Concepts have remained under-bounded and under-defined and, hence, under-investigated. POS

is hampered, in other words, by being in the early stages of the development of a vernacular that describes the most ennobling and empowering aspects of organizational life. In response, several of the papers in this special issue take aim at defining precisely, and grounding theoretically, a particular positive construct.

For example, two articles are expressly intended to define and clarify key concepts in the domain of POS. 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 explained. Key organizational mechanisms—legitimation, propagation, and coordination—are explained which make compassion an enduring characteristic of an organization. Spreitzer and Sonenshein introduce 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 compare it to other more commonly discussed concepts in organizational studies such as citizenship, whistle-blowing, 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 are 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. It is reasonable, then that most research has focused on negative phenomena—both in the psychological and organizational sciences. Negative phenomena seem to account for more variance and are associated with more dire consequences

than positive phenomena, so they have been the object of more investigations. On the other hand, as pointed out in several articles in this special issue, the study of positive phenomena is able to clarify dynamics otherwise unobserved and unexplained and in ways that are not possible when non-positive perspectives are adopted.

For example, 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 outperform less virtuous organizations because of 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 as differentiated from citizenship, whistle-blowing, corporate social responsibility, and creativity. The presence of honorable intentions is a key contribution of their explanation. Wooten and Crane explain how developing, executing, and preserving a humanistic work ideology can create extraordinary performance in human resource management and patient services. In each case, the phenomenon under investigation provides explanations for outcomes that have, heretofore, been ignored by traditional organizational scholars. The comparison and explanation of successful performance

compared to less successful performance is not unusual, but the factors that explain how these dynamics occur certainly expand and enrich the array relevant phenomena.

Conclusion

POS has not invented 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 helps serve as a catalyst, an organizing mechanism, and a sense-making device to classify and clarify 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 barriers exist to the rigorous examination of positive phenomena—e.g., few assessment devices, nonscientific labeling, and the dominance of negative effects over positive effects in individuals—it takes a focused emphasis 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 desire to experience that which is good (Park & Peterson, 2003). This universal aspiration for the positive creates an important motivation for a discipline of positive organizational scholarship.

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