

Furthermore, our point is that nothing should be regarded as inherently positive or negative, but the romantic, middle-class, elitist view developed and legitimized as positive by Dutton et al. is one that effectively excludes many common experiences of work and identity formation. Perhaps the disciplinary traditions emphasized by us in this piece are seen by scholars such as Dutton et al. as the negative side of management scholarship—a plausible reason that the literature is absent from their paper. However, rather than opening “up new possibilities for seeing and appreciating the different pathways to positivity in work-related identity construction” (2010: 285), the act of eliminating these traditions seems to us to do the opposite—that is, close down potential new pathways for research, debate, and understanding.

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Using a Positive Lens to Complicate the Positive in Identity Research

We appreciate the opportunity to respond to Learmonth and Humphreys’ commentary on our article, “Pathways for Positive Identity Construction at Work: Four Types of Positive Identity and the Building of Social Resources” (2010). In this rejoinder we clarify our motivation for studying positive identity, make explicit our a priori assumptions, and engage our colleagues’ ideas about employee resistance to demonstrate how our typology of positive identities enriches understanding of identity-based mechanisms in organizational research. We hope this exchange will stimulate discussion and open new pathways for future research.

OUR MOTIVATION: COMPLICATING THE POSITIVE

The notion of constructing a “positive” identity is a foundational concept in the identity literature. Gecas asserts that “the motivation to maintain and enhance a positive conception of oneself has been thought to be pervasive” and almost “every self theory posits some variant of this motive” (1982: 20). For example, Snow and Anderson show that homeless individuals engage in the “avowal of more positive identities” (1987: 1363), Alvesson suggests that “knowledge-intensive workers have access to powerful symbolic resources in the construction of a positive work identity” (2004: 194), and Ashforth and Kreiner note that identity construction can “recast dirty work in more ennobling terms and

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bestow a positive identity on those who perform it" (1999: 427).

However, as we deconstructed these global references to "positive identity," we found a range of assumptions about what makes an identity positive. We created our typology to capture these varying assumptions and to open up new avenues for theorizing about how individuals, in any role or context, could construct more positive identities. Thus, our motivation for creating this typology was never to eliminate the negative; legitimize our supposed "romantic, middle-class, elitist view" (p. 427); or serve the interests of managers (as asserted by Learmonth and Humphreys). Indeed, such a motive would be, as they suggest, dangerous. But there is also danger in treating all references to positive identity in the literature as though they are the same. As a result, our motive was to enhance our understanding of the multiple ways the existing literature talks about identities that are positive.

Our A Priori Assumptions

In accord with Alvesson's (2010) review of the different images of identity in organizational research, we imagine our views on identity may be based on different epistemological and ontological assumptions than our commentators'. We believe it is important to clarify our subjective positions and assumptions regarding positive identity construction. Contrary to what Learmonth and Humphreys imply, we do not view organizations as "harmonious systems, with consensus as the norm . . . [and] uniformly 'positive' outcomes for everyone" (p. 426). We understand that organizations are replete with hardship, pain, and toxic behaviors. As a result of the negativity found in many organizations, it is not surprising that many employees experience work as "degrading and exploitive." Yet the identity literature challenges the dominance of structure over agency in self-definition. For example, despite attempts to document self-hatred among African Americans, empirical studies reveal that many African Americans take pride in their racial heritage and their role in emancipation and freedom and that this positive identity fosters resilience in the face of discrimination (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006).

Research also suggests that stigmatized workers in what sociologists call "dirty work

occupations" construct positive identities that foster occupational self-esteem and increase work role identification (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate 2007). And our own experiences researching individuals who are devalued, marginalized, or stigmatized have shown that these individuals find ways to construct identities that are psychologically and socially strengthening. Thus, as organizational psychologists, we do not discount or eliminate the negative circumstances that abound in many organizations, but we do assert that individuals have agency within organizational contexts to actively construct identities that are a source of strength and resilience (e.g., Snow & Anderson, 1987). As Frankl suggests, "Everything can be taken from . . . [an individual] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way" (2006: 66). We would also add "to construct one's self."

We also disagree with our commentators' suggestion that positive identity construction necessarily benefits managers' attempts to control and exploit employees. In our article we propose that positive identity construction can directly benefit any individual (manager or employee) by fostering the cultivation of psychological, physiological, and social resources. However, we do not claim that positive identity construction, or the resources such construction fosters, will serve the interests of any particular party. Under some circumstances positive identity construction may promote the joint pursuit of managerial and employee interests (e.g., defining oneself as virtuous can promote adherence to ethical principles of fairness, or defining oneself as evolving can enrich openness to learning and growth). Thus, we maintain that the process of defining oneself positively (where positivity can arise from multiple forms of identity content, structure, or change) can be an important means of empowerment and liberation that can enable any individual to take action. And we assert that the process of defining oneself positively may be particularly relevant for individuals in oppressive systems to empower actions that resist managerial or organizational interests and foster structural change. To dismiss or deny individual agency in self-construction constrains our understanding of the experience of oppression and stigmatization to an "iron cage" of low

self-regard and renders these important acts of resistance invisible. As a result, we believe it is important to carefully weigh the political implications of encouraging or discouraging certain forms of self-construction in work organizations.

Positive Identity Construction and Workplace Resistance

We see great potential in the confluence of our work and the resistance literature. Our typology uncovers multiple pathways by which individuals can exercise discretion in constructing identities that enrich their own well-being and empower them to act. Learmonth and Humphreys' *a priori* assumptions about positive organizational scholarship lead them to conclude that we would view "resistance to managerial intervention . . . [as] a negative identity" (p. 425). On the contrary, we envision important relationships between positive identity construction and employee resistance. We apply our typology to the employee resistance literature in three ways: (1) showing how different types of identity threats can prompt different forms of resistance, (2) showing how positive identity construction can give strength to those who resist oppression and exploitation, and (3) showing how employee resistance can expand understanding of the pathways to positive identity construction.

Resistance as a response to different types of identity threats. The four perspectives in our typology help explain why different types of identity threats motivate different types of resistance. For example, Ashcraft (2005) suggests that professional pilots felt threatened by the adoption of crew resource management (CRM) and resisted through varying discursive tactics. Ashcraft notes many different types of identity threats and documents in great detail the pilots' responses. However, the positive identity typology helps explain why different types of threats may have produced different discursive responses. For example, the structural perspective helps us better understand why the pilots responded to a threat viewed as "gendered" by attempting to "masculinize their role." The virtue perspective helps us understand why the pilots responded to a threat to their identity of "captain as omnipotent and omniscient father" by reasserting themselves as "captains as benevolent fathers." And the developmental perspective helps us understand why the pilots re-

sponded to the different trajectory of the professional identity by asserting themselves as mentors to "the new generation of junior pilots." Thus, our typology helps us make sense of different types of identity threats and why they evoke different forms of resistance.

Acts of resistance and positive identity construction. Our typology can also facilitate more precise theorizing about how acts of resistance unlock different sources of positivity for identity construction. First, the virtue perspective suggests that acts of resistance can encourage individuals to define themselves in terms of virtues or character strengths. For example, acts of resistance may help individuals construct ethical narratives about themselves that serve as a "strategic resource for identity work" (Kornberger & Brown, 2007: 497). Second, the evaluative perspective suggests that resistance might increase public or private regard for a particular identity. For example, in Fine's (1996) account of the occupational rhetoric of cooks, he notes that acts of resistance (i.e., "accidentally" overcooking meals that the cooks would then consume or refusing to perform certain tasks) increase feelings of self-worth and value. Third, the developmental perspective suggests that acts of resistance may help change internal or external standards causing identity discrepancies, or they may change the trajectory of a particular identity toward the "ideal self." For example, resisting may change the "aspirational story" or the narrative someone tells of who he or she is earnestly trying to become (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Finally, the structural perspective suggests resistance might reduce structural tensions between multiple identities or facets of a particular identity. For example, Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) document how priests play poker as a way to resist tensions between work and nonwork life.

Thus, our framework facilitates more nuanced theorizing about how acts of resistance might unlock sources of positivity for identity construction. This line of inquiry also raises important questions about how self-views interact with others' views in positive identity construction, since people who engage in acts of resistance may be viewed less favorably by others (e.g., managers, customers, coworkers) who are adversely affected. The typology also illuminates potential conflicts that can emerge when resistance increases the positivity of identity along

certain dimensions but decreases it along others (e.g., whistleblowing may increase virtuous identity content but decrease a person's sense of self-regard if others criticize that person's choice to speak out).

Expanding pathways to positive identity construction through incorporating resistance. A focus on employee resistance also elaborates understanding of the pathways to positive identity construction, beyond what we presented in our original article. The developmental and structural perspectives on positive identity may be enriched by incorporating an explicit consideration of resistance as a source of positivity. Within the developmental perspective, the adaptive approach emphasizes that positive identity construction involves experiencing "fit" with internal and external standards. The adaptive approach is often featured in studies of organizational socialization (which we cited in our original article); as such, it might be misconstrued as valuing only compliance with managerial expectations, cultural norms, and social structures. The resistance literature raises the important possibility that adaptation also involves learning to stand in opposition to external expectations, norms, or structures that undermine inclusion, justice, or equity. For example, Pratt observed that in order "to keep a positive sense of self, . . . [some Amway employees] often came to identify themselves in opposition to Amway" (2000: 479). And Prasad and Prasad (2000) suggested that labeling and interpreting certain acts as resistance helped people to affirm their own identities as autonomous individuals. Claims from both studies are consistent with progressive models of positive identity development, which emphasize the importance of questioning social mores and authority in order to discover one's own views (Erikson, 1980; Kegan, 1982).

The resistance literature can also enrich the structural perspective on positive identity construction by deepening understanding of how tension and harmony might coexist within identity structures. A prime example of this fruitful terrain can be found in Meyerson and Scully's (1995: 586) characterization of tempered radicals, in which they show how ongoing tension between personal and professional identities can be generative in organizations when "tapped as a source of strength and vitality" (see also Meyerson, 2001). Meyerson and Scully refer to

individuals [who] do not easily fit within the dominant cultures of their organizations or professions. However, despite their lack of fit, or perhaps because of it, they can behave as committed and productive members and act as vital sources of resistance, alternative ideas, and transformation within their organizations (1995: 586).

We encourage researchers to continue to consider the role of resistance in cultivating positive identities and the impact of positive identity construction on acts of resistance. Although Learmonth and Humphreys suggest that our work "neglects people, obscures certain phenomena, and therefore limits our understanding" (p. 426), we believe that the value of our typology lies, in part, in its relevance for the very people the commentators suggest we have excluded. We see exciting possibilities for examining relationships between more nuanced views of positive identity construction and the ability of individuals to resist oppression.

CONCLUSION

In closing, we view this commentary as part of the much larger debate about the value of a positive perspective in organizational studies (e.g., Fineman, 2006; Roberts, 2006). We do not see focusing on the positive and eliminating the negative as two sides of the same coin. We believe that exposing the assumptions underlying the different ways individuals in the literature conceptualize and study positive identity aids scholars in examining precisely the questions that our colleagues have articulated: *positive for whom and positive in what way?* We view this work on positive identity construction and capacity building as pivotal for enabling individual and collective action, particularly among people in less dominant, more constrained situations. In that spirit, we hope this continued conversation will not "close down potential new pathways for research, debate, and understanding" (p. 427) but will unleash generative new areas of impactful research.

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