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Positive Organizational Scholarship

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Introduction

Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and Positive Psychology are focused on understanding the conditions and processes that explain flourishing (Gable and Haidt, 2005). What differentiates POS is an explicit interest in understanding and explaining flourishing in organizational contexts (including individuals, groups, units and whole organizations). Flourishing refers to being in an optimal range of human functioning (Keyes, 2002) and is indicated at the individual level by goodness, generativity, growth and resilience (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). At the collective level of groups and organizations, flourishing may be indicated by creativity, innovation, growth, resilience, thriving virtuousness or other markers that a collective is healthy and is performing in an “above normal” or positively deviant range. POS also focuses on the development of individual, group and collective strengths that represent forms of individual and collective excellence.

POS unites existing domains of organizational inquiry focused on flourishing. This includes work on flourishing indicators such as creativity, engagement, flow, growth, health and well-being, as well as contributors to flourishing that consider features of the organization, group and job contexts. POS opens up new topics of study, such as compassion, courage, energy and energy networks, forgiveness, resilience, thriving, and work callings—just to name a few. POS scholarship includes a growing body of theoretical work (for reviews, see Cameron & Caza, 2004; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) and an emerging set of empirical studies (for example, see two special issues (Cameron & Caza, 2004) and (Bakker & Schaufeli, forthcoming) and publications in mainstream organizational journals).

In this brief review of POS, we will trade depth for breadth to provide the reader with a basic understanding of POS as both a domain and lens.

Topic’s Intellectual and Social Context

Many intellectual disciplines have influenced the development of POS including appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) and community psychology (Jahoda, 1958). POS also reinvigorates ideas from humanistic psychology (Maslow,

1968) that were foundations for the field of organizational studies. However, the most widespread influence comes from positive psychology. Both POS and positive psychology urge scholars to focus not only on improvements from “negative” states (such as illness or corrosive relationships) to normal states (such as mental health and helpful relationships), but also from normal states to extraordinary ones (such as thriving and life-giving relationships). This shift in explanatory focus from negative→normal towards normal→positive reflects a common concern that current theories are limited by a focus on explaining how individuals, groups and organizations move from below normal to normal states, which may be very different from explaining how individuals, groups and organizations move from normal to above normal, or positively deviant states. From a POS perspective, negative states may be important for explaining flourishing or the cultivation of strengths. For example, work on resilience shows that negative setbacks are critical (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). But POS scholars emphasize the building of strengths in the recovery from setbacks. POS is not synonymous with only positive phenomena but rather treats them as figure, and not ground.

Several research streams with a more positive focus have developed within organizational studies. Positive Organizational Behavior (POB, e.g., Luthans, 2002; Wright, 2003) focuses on understanding how to develop a particular set of psychological states (confidence, hope, optimism and resiliency) in individuals. Models of healthy work and healthy work practices also inform the positive organizational psychology agenda (e.g., Turner, Barling & Zacharatos, 2002). A focus on positive organizational relationships at work (e.g., Dutton & Ragins, 2007) emphasizes the forms, functions, consequences and enablers of relationships between people at work that are mutually beneficial. Researchers have called for a more positive approach to leadership and group research (Wang & Thompson, 2006); and other organizational researchers have integrated business ethics and POS research, either through a strengths-building approach to understanding business ethics and corporate responsibility (Giacalone, Jurkiewicz & Dunn, 2005) or focusing on how ethics as a field provides important philosophical foundations for POS (Sonenshein, 2005). Finally, some have called to re-vision the work-family literature with a focus on explaining conditions where individuals are flourishing in both life domains as opposed to emphasizing trade-offs between the two (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

While positive psychology originally sought to understand “positive institutions,” POS provides the thought leadership in this domain. To date, POS scholars tend to focus on the situations and states of individuals and groups in work organizations. POS shares many assumptions and goals with positive psychology, but brings a unique focus on processes, states and behaviors in and between organizational contexts. This necessitates the use of multiple levels of analysis and a greater social processes focus.

Major Dimensions of the Topic

The domain of POS is appreciated from three vantage points: the dependent variables studied, the core mechanisms considered and the core enablers identified. Given the newness of POS, these descriptors mark the beginnings of this field of inquiry.

Dependent Variables

Because of its interest in explaining flourishing at all levels within and of organizations, the range of dependent variables of interest to POS is broad. At the

individual level, foci have included: well-being and health, growth, optimism, self-efficacy, happiness and satisfaction, thriving, resilience, integrity, and other markers of optimal human functioning and the building and exercising of individual strengths and virtues in organizations. At the dyadic level, POS focuses on high quality connections that may be manifest in a variety of relationships in organizations e.g., between subordinates and supervisors and among peers. At the group, team or unit level, POS invites inquiry into flourishing as indicated by collective levels of creativity, learning, flow, synergy and resilience. Finally at the organizational level, POS focuses on the development and display of virtues and strengths such as organizational courage, compassion, forgiveness wisdom, integrity, and virtuousness as well as explaining other forms of organizational flourishing such as collective resilience, collective optimism and collective hope.

Explanatory Mechanisms

Another way of viewing POS is to examine explanatory mechanisms, which emphasize positive dynamics within individuals, groups and organizations. Positive dynamics refer to processes that strengthen or improve the functioning of individuals, groups or organizations. A POS focus directs attention to generative (e.g., life-building, capability-enhancing, capacity-creating) dynamics in organizations. Consider three possible mechanisms.

First, the dynamics of positive emotions are keys to understanding human flourishing in and of organizations (Fredrickson, 2003). Positive emotions refer to shorter-term states of felt activation of individuals or collectives that are associated with “a pleasantly subjective feel” (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 300). Positive emotions of individuals and of collectives broaden “momentary thought action repertoires” and the experience “builds enduring personal resources” (Fredrickson, 2003, p. 166). Studies directly and indirectly support this idea when accounting for the effects of positive emotions on creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller & Staw, 2005), patterns of group interacting in problem solving tasks (Rhee, 2006) and levels of cooperation in negotiation (Carnevale & Isen, 1986).

Second, the dynamics of positive meanings help to explain how individuals, groups and whole organizations construct and institutionalize meanings that facilitate individual and collective functioning. For example, studies of how individuals craft positive work identities through seeing their work as a calling (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), through changing the relationships that people have with others on their jobs (Blatt & Camden, 2007), or through emphasizing positive distinctiveness of one’s social group memberships (Roberts, 2005) illustrate how cultivating positive meaning about the self in organizations can direct people toward more optimal states of functioning. However, positive meaning can also be a collectively shared construction among unit members that fosters flourishing. For example, in a study of compassion organizing, shared positive meaning around the collective valuing of the whole person and the valuing of expressing one’s humanity were shown to help explain the activation and mobilization of compassion (Dutton, Worline, Frost & Lilius, 2006). More generally, shared positive collective meaning can alter the connection between people, provoke positive emotions, and foster interactions that elevate functioning and capability.

A third mechanism that is studied in POS involves positive relationships between people that are marked by mutuality, positive regard, trust and vitality. While called by

different names (e.g., positive ties, positive social capital, or high quality connections), a focus on these types of relationships and their functions (e.g., task accomplishment, career development, sensemaking, provision of meaning and personal support, Kahn, 2007) has unearthed possibilities for explaining different forms of flourishing in and of organizations. For example, studies in nursing units find that units marked by higher levels of respectful interaction between members (a form of high quality connecting) are more attentive to errors, which, is associated with fewer accidents and a better safety record (Vogus, 2004).

Core Enablers

A final mapping of the POS domains extends the interest from a focus on process to a focus on contextual enablers of different forms of flourishing in and of organizations. Included in this approach are research on how organizational cultures, structures, practices, systems and leadership create conditions in which individuals, teams or units flourish, and consideration of how features of organizations, unit or team contexts create dynamics that contribute to individual and collective flourishing.

Methodological and Conceptual Challenges

While POS research has progressed, pressing methodological and conceptual concerns remain. Methodologically, POS researchers have often “sampled on the dependent variable”, studying instances where people, units or organizations are flourishing, which may obscure the more intricate dynamics of the full spectrum of variation needed to explain these outcomes (Vedder, 1992). On the other hand, the types of enablers and mechanisms that underlie states and behavior associated with flourishing may differ from those that focus on negative and normal behavior.

A second methodological challenge involves developing valid measures of the new variables being considered—e.g., energy, vitality, high quality relationships, thriving and to establish their convergent and discriminant validity. Finally, future work will need to include experimental and field study designs that allow for inferences about underlying causal dynamics and processes, while at the same time, remaining open to the insight and descriptive richness afforded through more qualitative and narrative approaches.

Several conceptual challenges invite consideration. First, POS scholars must account for the role of the “negative” in explaining positive outcomes and positive dynamics within and of organizations. As recent reviews of POS suggest (Fineman, 2006; George, 2004), negative phenomena—such as negative emotions—are often adaptive in human functioning. Yet, as suggested above, POS scholars are attentive to “the negative”; they examine what may be positive about seemingly neutral or negative states (Roberts, 2006).

Second, POS researchers need to clarify the referent groups for determining positive (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004), to address the question, “positive to whom?” For example, research in organizational-citizenship behaviors identifies a set of prosocial behaviors individuals engage in, but some of these prosocial behaviors may compromise organizational functioning (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Is something that helps individuals but harms organizations considered positive? Or consider traditional positive phenomenon such as empowerment. Would POS scholars consider such concepts positive if they are used to exploit individuals, a point critical theorists have considered (Fineman, 2006; cf. Caza & Caza, forthcoming)?

A third challenge is to more comprehensively determine the range of positive and negative enablers that explain human flourishing in and of organizations, and to carefully identify at what level of analysis these enablers and processes are operating. This means carefully attending to what is uniquely organizational about the underlying causes and processes (Cameron, Dutton, Quinn & Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Fourth, while some indicators of flourishing and some individual and organizational strengths have been studied, much remains unexplored. For example, Peterson and Seligman (2004) have developed a classification of 6 core virtues thought to capture positive human strengths highlighted across a broad range of philosophical and religious traditions. While organizational scholars have considered some of these virtues and strengths (e.g., justice and wisdom) they have paid less attention to emotional strengths such as courage, interpersonal strengths such as humanity and temperance or transcendence-related strengths. Organizational researchers have opportunities to contribute to understanding how organizational contexts develop and sustain these kinds of positive strengths as well as how these strengths are manifest at collective levels.

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