EDITORIAL

Unpacking positive organizing: Organizations as sites of individual and group flourishing

You have before you a handpicked harvest of empirical articles that make us proud to serve as co-editors of this Special Issue on Positive Organizing. A relatively new approach to organizational science, positive organizing is inspired in part by positive psychology, with its emphasis on the underpinnings of individual flourishing (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), as well as by classic organizational theory (e.g., Weick, 1979), with its emphasis on the inherently social, contextually-embedded, and dynamic processes and structures associated with states and activities of and in organizations. In broad terms, positive organizing refers to the generative dynamics in and of organizations that enable individuals, groups, and organizations as a whole to flourish. Flourishing may manifest itself in a variety of ways, including becoming more virtuous, creative, resourceful, resilient, and highly effective.

Positive organizing is a term that helps to link two veins of positive organizational studies. Positive Organizational Scholarship looks at how organizations are macro contexts that shape positive states and positive outcomes for individuals, groups, and whole organizations (e.g., Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). It is also a perspective that focuses on the cultivation of individuals’ strengths in organizations and collective organizational strengths. Positive Organizational Behavior is a vein of work that focuses more narrowly on developing positive psychological states that enhance human performance (e.g., Luthans, 2002). However, both streams of research are devoted to opening up organizational studies to more deeply understand the processes, structures, and states associated with individual, group, and organizational flourishing.

Organizations are critical contexts for studying positive dynamics and states because individuals spend so much of their time as members of organizations (e.g., schools, work, and community organizations), and so much of the world’s activity is conducted by individuals working within organizational settings (e.g., not-for-profits, governmental, business, and political organizations). Understanding how organizations as contexts influence positive organizing and, in turn, individual and collective flourishing has much to contribute to organizational studies, the base disciplines of psychology and sociology, and to the world of policy and practice.

We see flourishing in and of organizations (which may be either transient or more long lasting) as emerging through the interplay of a set of positive cognitive, emotional, and relational mechanisms (Dutton & Glynn, 2007; Dutton & Sonenshein, 2007). Operating in conjunction, these mechanisms discover, unleash, or create new individual and collective resources, such as energy, respect, optimism, and insight, which in turn contribute to individual and collective flourishing. Within organizations, micro-changes in positive meanings, positive emotions, and positive relationships can ripple through an entire system to produce macro-effects at the collective level. Building on the influential theorizing of Weick (1979, 1993), Glynn and Dutton (2007) describe such ‘positive deviation-amplifying cycles’ as the fuel of positive organizing. Although similar processes within individuals have been termed ‘upward spirals’ (e.g., see Fredrickson, 2000; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), working within organizational contexts it becomes clear that positive spirals do not simply spring upward. They spring outward as well, infusing, connecting, and energizing whole networks, communities, and organizations.

We selected the four papers presented here to exemplify certain aspects of this new approach to organizational science and introduce it to readers within psychology who may be less familiar with this organizational side of positive psychology. Each paper, to one degree or another, contributes to understanding the facts of positive organizing. That is, each investigates either the causes or consequences of positive meanings (e.g., jobs designed to have a positive impact on beneficiaries in Grant’s study of prosocial job characteristics, positive self-identity in Carlsen’s study of positive dramas), positive emotions (e.g., self-worth in Ramarajan, Barsade, and Burack’s study of organizational respect), or positive relationships (e.g., contact with beneficiaries in Grant’s study of prosocial job characteristics, positive attitudes toward outgroup members in Brickson’s study of relational identity orientation) within or applied to organizational
work contexts. In doing so, each paper surfaces ideas that have been submerged and unarticulated within organizational research, allowing us to see and understand more clearly a part of the positive organizing process or the effects of positive organizing. We provide highlights below from the four articles to illustrate how each offers new pieces of the positive organizing puzzle.

Lakshmi Ramarajan, Sigal Barsade, and Orah Burack (2007) examine how employees’ perceptions of the degree to which they and other employees are treated with dignity and respect influence employee emotional exhaustion, a key aspect of job burnout. They test these ideas using a longitudinal field study of Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) working in long-term care facilities. A subset of units within the organization underwent a change in organizational practices intended to convey more respect for CNAs. Ramarajan and colleagues surveyed the CNAs prior to the change and again 16 months later. Across a number of analyses, they found, first, that CNAs’ perceptions of organizational respect predicted decreases in emotional exhaustion over time and, second, that organizational change efforts both increased perceptions of organizational respect and decreased emotional exhaustion. Building on this evidence, future studies might unpack the psychological mechanisms through which organizational practices allow employees at all levels to maintain positive self-regard and make positive contributions, two critical components of individual flourishing.

Adam Grant (2008) is especially interested in how organizations can design jobs that allow employees to make positive contributions to the lives of others, and also to connect with those who benefit from their work. To this end, he has developed a self-report survey that assesses six dimensions of prosocial job characteristics, suitable either for reporting on beneficiaries in general or the specific beneficiaries of a given occupation (e.g., ‘guests’ for lifeguards, ‘citizens’ for police officers). In his Study 1, Grant uses confirmatory factor analyses to demonstrate the psychometric properties of his new scale. In his Study 2, he uses structural modeling to test the hypothesis that prosocial job characteristics predict a variety of other-focused psychological states, including employees’ perceived impact on beneficiaries, their affective commitment to beneficiaries, as well as their motivation to do good. Finally, in his Study 3, he uses multitrait-multimethod matrices to provide more rigorous evidence for the validity of this new conceptualization of job design. In developing and validating this new measure, Grant paves the way for future investigators to discover how organizations might better design jobs to unleash or create employees’ motivations to do good, which can both energize the process of work and contribute to individual and group flourishing.

Shelley Brickson (2008) is interested in testing the underlying mechanisms for how attitudes towards others can be enhanced within organizations that have a diverse workforce. In an experimental study she compares a relational identity orientation vs. a recategorization (i.e., collectivist identity manipulation) influences attitudes toward outgroup members when individuals have either direct or indirect contact with outgroup members. Her results suggest that attitudes towards outgroup members are most positive with relational identity orientations and direct contact with an outgroup member and least positive with a collectivist identity orientation and no direct contact. Her study invites further inquiry into how the mechanisms underlying relational identity orientations could be understood as means for generating more positive interrelating toward diverse others in work organizations. Such positive relations are a core feature of individual and group flourishing.

Arne Carlsen (2008) invites us to consider how work contexts contribute to identity formation processes and, in particular, how they facilitate the construction of positive dramas that enable peak performance, influence organizational change, and increase the attractiveness of employing organizations. Using detailed narrative analyses from four different work organizations, Carlsen illustrates five types of positive dramas. His analyses suggest how work practices contribute to identity production through the way individuals author life stories from work activities. A focus on positive dramas illuminates the forward-looking, projective aspects of identity construction in work organizations, where individuals enact self-adventures that are favorable, meaningful, or engaging in some way. His article enriches how organizational researchers understand the construction of positive identities at work. For positive psychologists, Carlsen’s paper invites considerations of how organizational practices enable and constrain the production of identity narratives, with a particular focus on the generative possibilities that spring from positive dramas.

The four papers in this volume contribute to the fertile terrain for studying the mechanisms and outcomes associated with positive organizing. As others in the field of organizational studies have noted, there is strong need and opportunity to understand the conditions that cultivate individual and collective flourishing both inside and among organizations (e.g., Roberts, 2006); Wright, 2003. As these studies suggest, a focus on positive organizing illuminates how contexts (such as jobs, units, work groups, professions, organizations) affect and are affected by positive relationships, positive emotions, and positive meanings. Although not covered within
these papers, there are also opportunities to focus on the psychological and social processes that explain collective flourishing and collective strengths. For example, studies of the conditions that foster collective wisdom or mindfulness (e.g., Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999), collective compassion (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilis, 2006), and collective resilience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) illustrate some of the avenues opened by this vein of positive organizational scholarship. Our hope is that this special issue will inspire psychologists to explore and contribute to this generative and growing interdisciplinary field of organizational scholarship.

References


Barbara L. Fredrickson & Jane E. Dutton