

# Part V

## Conclusion

Exploring Positive Identities and  
Organizations: Building a Theoretical  
and Research Foundation 2009. L.M.  
Roberts and J.E. Dutton (eds.) New York  
Psychology Press

# 22

---

## *Forging Ahead: Positive Identities and Organizations as a Research Frontier*

---

*Laura Morgan Roberts, Jane E. Dutton, and Jeffrey Bednar*

### CONTENTS

Motivating the Pursuit of New Research Questions.....	498
Positive Trajectories of Identity Development: Pathways	
Toward Becoming.....	499
Illuminating the Agency in Positive Identity Construction.....	500
Mapping the Interdependencies Between Positive Identities and	
Their Relational, Organizational, and Institutional Contexts .....	501
Finding the Positive in Unexpected Places .....	503
Identity Threat as a Catalyst for Growth.....	504
Positive Outcomes of Multiple Identities .....	504
Charting the Course: Highlighting the Significance of	
Positive Identities.....	505
The Functional Significance of Positive Identities.....	506
Positive Identity Processes in the Contemporary	
Work Environment.....	507
Paving the Way: Demonstrating Varied Approaches to	
Identity Research .....	509
Revisiting Frequently Trodden Conceptual Paths.....	509
Creating New Conceptual Paths.....	510
Empirical Investigations of Positive Identity .....	511
Mobilizing a Cross-Disciplinary, Multilevel Inquiry Into	
Positive Identity .....	512
Conclusion .....	513
References.....	515

We opened this volume with the question: When and how does applying a positive lens to the construct of identity generate new insights for organizational researchers? In responding to this question, the contributors to this volume have made substantial progress toward addressing the six goals that inspired this book. In addition, the contributors to this volume have started us on a journey into a new frontier of identity research by motivating the pursuit of new research questions, charting the course toward relevant identity research, and paving the way with new approaches to identity research. In this conclusion, we provide an initial roadmap of this new research frontier by highlighting new insights that can be gleaned from the chapters in this volume regarding the positivity of identity content, identity processes, and outcomes of identity for individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and communities. We also demonstrate how several themes that emerge across the levels of analysis build conceptual and empirical pathways toward a deeper and broader understanding of identity and organizational studies that we hope enriches both theory and practice. We close with an invitation for others to join us in exploring this exciting new frontier.

---

## **MOTIVATING THE PURSUIT OF NEW RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The chapters in this volume serve an “opening-up” function (adopted from Carlsen & Pitsis, Chapter 4), in that each chapter, both explicitly and implicitly, uncovers numerous questions that have been prompted by each contributor’s perspective on positive identity. The commentators—Ashforth (Chapter 8), Sanchez-Burks and Lee (Chapter 15), and Glynn and Walsh (Chapter 21)—open up even more questions to explore in this new research frontier across the levels of analysis. We highlight several new questions for identity research that cut across all three levels of analysis: (a) How does an identity become more positive; (b) What role does agency play in positive identity construction; (c) How are positive identities interdependent with their relational and institutional contexts; and (d) How can positive outcomes emerge from identity conflict, tension, and threat?

## Positive Trajectories of Identity Development: Pathways Toward Becoming

Ashforth (Chapter 8), in his commentary, observes that “individuals and groups are constantly in a state of becoming” (p. 174). Many of the chapters in this volume examine identity in process; there are various accounts of how identities are constructed or transformed into more positive identities. These dynamic, rather than static accounts of identity encourage scholars to locate their investigations of identity within a trajectory of identity development. They also provide new answers to a fundamental question of identity construction, namely, *how does an identity become more positive?*

Corley and Harrison’s Chapter 16 approaches this question by examining how ACS corporation (pseudonym used to maintain confidentiality) continually searches for authenticity by understanding “what it means to be who we are” and aligning its identity with its core values and strategic goals. Through a perpetual learning process, the organization sustains the clarity and relevance of its identity and evolves (i.e., changes in a positive, generative direction) to meet new demands from internal growth and external pressures. In their model, Corley and Harrison emphasize that generative change is not prompted by internal or external discrepancies between current and desired states or by external threats to core values or reputation. Instead, the quest for authenticity pushes organizational identities along a trajectory of becoming more positive.

Milton’s Chapter 13 also captures a dynamic process of development in work groups. She proposes a regenerating cycle of identity confirmation in teams. Identity confirmation is a subjective state that exists when an individual’s social environment is aligned with his or her identities. Identities are confirmed when they are validated and valued and can be confirmed in multiple ways (e.g., within interpersonal interaction, via meaningful work, via work group culture). According to her model, the confirmation of team members’ relational identities creates the social fabric necessary to build cooperative capacity in work groups. This cooperative capacity fuels cooperation that then strengthens existing positive relational identities, creates new positive relational identities, and increases confirmation of those identities within the group, ultimately moving the group toward optimal achievement. Ragins’ Chapter 11 about mentoring identity also emphasizes development along a positive trajectory. Her discussion of

the formation of a mentoring identity emphasizes how positive mentoring experiences and established expectations of the mentor role increase and motivate one's capacity to incorporate mentoring into the future possible self and continue involvement in current (and future) mentoring relationships.

Other chapters explain how disruptive or problematic identity dynamics motivate shifting toward the development of more positive identities. Maitlis' Chapter 3 discussion of individual growth from trauma is one such example. Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, and Settles (Chapter 7) describe how people can become more authentic by peeling away masks or challenging others' simplistic or stereotypic expectations for how they should behave. These views of identity in progress raise interesting questions about identity trajectory or development: what differentiates those identities (and their possessors) that are capable of shifting toward an upward path of growth and vitality from those that remain ensnared in a downward spiral of despair or detachment? What constitutes progress or positive identity change at different levels of analyses, and how would we study these patterns?

### **Illuminating the Agency in Positive Identity Construction**

Several chapters in this volume address the question, "*What role does agency play in positive identity construction?*" Agency is central to the accounts of positive identity construction in this volume, as individuals and collectives are seen as initiators and/or shapers of identity creation, identity work, or identity change. Ashforth (Chapter 8) comments on the prominence of agency in the volume, reminding readers that, "so important is agency or control that it is frequently regarded as a fundamental psychological need. As Gecas (1986, p. 140, his emphasis) wrote, 'the *experience* of agency... seems to lie at the very heart of the experience of self.'" For instance, Kreiner and Sheep (Chapter 2) emphasize the central role of proactivity in identity work as individuals choose to engage their world in a way that enhances their experience of competence, resilience, authenticity, holism, and transcendence. Rothbard and Ramarajan (Chapter 6) focus on the control that individuals and organizations have over the coactivation of work and nonwork identities as a key variable in fostering compatibility between multiple identities. Kopelman, Chen, and Shoshana (Chapter 12) posit that positive relational identities are a

product of concentrated attempts to regulate the experience and expression of counterproductive negative or positive emotions, emotional displays that produce a threatening interpersonal encounter. DeRue, Ashford, and Cotton (Chapter 10) explain how individuals attempt to claim a leadership identity by engaging in verbal or nonverbal acts that are intended to reflect the characteristics that are considered unique and essential to leaders (e.g., “taking the seat at the head of a meeting table or asserting one’s expertise in a particular domain” [p. 216]). Pratt and Kraatz (Chapter 17) also highlight agency in their description of the organizational self, suggesting that organizations modify and change their constraints, the institutions in which they are embedded, and ultimately the organizational self. In Carlsen and Pitsis’ Chapter 4 account of the interplay between hope and positive identity construction, agency is implied as individuals open up to the possibility of attaining, transforming, and becoming stronger or more capable in some way. In their account, the mobilizing force of hope gains momentum as it resonates with an entity’s present and future narrative of becoming. Viewing oneself as hopeful, and subjectively experiencing hope, promotes goal achievement, legacy building, and flourishing.

A focus on agency in identity construction opens a host of new questions for organizational scholars. For example, what are the different ways that individuals or collectives exercise agency in identity construction? What motivates the expression of agency in identity construction? Further, what are the important enablers and constraints within interpersonal relationships, groups, organizations, or within institutional fields that close down or open up opportunities for exercising agency in identity construction? This last question leads us directly to our next core theme.

### **Mapping the Interdependencies Between Positive Identities and Their Relational, Organizational, and Institutional Contexts**

Another line of questioning that this volume raises is: “*How are positive identities interdependent with their relational and institutional contexts?*” Contextual understanding is necessary to explain the form, functions, and relevance of positive identities. Positive identities are embedded in relational, organizational, and institutional contexts that play a critical role in determining their evolution. In some contexts, agency is met with validation, and positive identities are solidified and strengthened.

Descriptions of the social construction of identity make this evident, as individual, relational, and collective identities are cocreated through the dynamic processes of claiming, verifying, and validating.

LeBaron, Glenn, and Thompson's Chapter 9 makes strong claims regarding the essential role of the relational context in identity construction. They argue that positive relational identities are interactive accomplishments that only exist in the context of interactions when moment to moment communications (verbal and nonverbal) call forth positive constructions of the self and other. DeRue et al. (Chapter 10) suggest that a leader identity is developed by claiming and granting, whereby people employ behaviors to signal their possession of leadership qualities, which, when validated by others, results in the internalization of a leader identity into one's self concept. Roberts et al. (Chapter 7) also use the example of leader identity to illustrate how authentication (i.e., validation from others regarding one's own identity claims) enhances experienced authenticity and generates more positive feelings about oneself. Both Milton's Chapter 13 and MacPhail, Roloff, and Edmondson's Chapter 14 propose that identity validation (i.e., having one's identities recognized and affirmed) enhances members' willingness and ability to cooperate and collaborate within a team. These studies suggest that relational contexts, characterized by mutual verification *and* affirmation of identities, are important for positive identity construction.

Organizational identities are validated by members and stakeholders when their actions align with stakeholder expectations or preferences (see Brickson & Lemmon, Chapter 18) and community or societal needs (see Hamilton & Gioia, Chapter 19; Marquis & Davis, Chapter 20). Pratt and Kraatz (Chapter 17) suggest that organizations verify their identities by "making symbolic offerings to the society of which they are a part ... aimed at showing the organization's conformance with various *identity standards* that are derived from the macro level." Hamilton and Gioia give examples of "greenwashing" (i.e., potentially disingenuous or purely instrumental attempts to brand oneself with a "green" identity through products, practices, mission statements) in response to institutional pressures. For example, when Clorox attempted to brand itself with a green identity, these identity claims were met with skepticism by those who considered it to be an inauthentic advertising scheme. Colgate, on the other hand, has not experienced such skepticism toward its unpublicized ownership of Tom's of Maine toothpaste (p. 442). Hamilton and Gioia also note that although "greenwashing may be

intended to change an organization's image with customers and other stakeholders, ... organizational practices can have unintended consequences for the focal organization itself" (p. 443) by promoting positive identity change (i.e., becoming more green).

Glynn and Walsh (Chapter 21) remind readers that, for organizational scholars, the idea of contextual embeddedness is key (Dacin, Ventresca, & Beal, 1999; Granovetter, 1985). When applied to the construct of identity, researchers must take into account the varying levels of the situation that enable, mold, shape, and alter the processes, structures, and contents of identities. Brickson and Lemmon (Chapter 18) focus on how the relationships that organizations build with stakeholders, based on the organization's identity orientation (e.g., individualistic, relational, or collectivistic), provide a set of goals and actions that enable the organization to produce valued resources for itself and its stakeholders. Marquis and Davis (Chapter 20) explain how geographical communities shape firms through the provision of traditions and reference groups, while at the same time local firms' actions importantly contribute to a geographical community's identity. Glynn and Walsh (Chapter 21) also comment that "the notion of organization in society figured more prominently in these conceptualizations of positive organizational identity than in existing research on organizational identity" (p. 477).

A close consideration of context raises new questions about how positive identities form and function, and why they matter. Context offers a lens through which researchers can study the embeddedness of identity processes and dynamics with a multilevel analysis that takes into account geographic, institutional, organizational, and relational features.

### **Finding the Positive in Unexpected Places**

The invitation to apply a positive lens seemed to liberate our colleagues from certain assumptions about how identities are conceptualized and function. Many of the authors chose to reevaluate whether what has often been construed as "bad" might, under certain conditions, in fact be "good." Specifically, these chapters pose the question: "*How can positive outcomes emerge from identity conflict, tension, and threat?*" Two areas of identity research illuminate how a positive lens can recast identity dynamics that have often been considered problematic into possibilities for contribution, connection, and growth: identity threat and multiple identities.

***Identity Threat as a Catalyst for Growth***

Identity threat is typically cast as a negative challenge to the significance, status, or distinctiveness of an identity. Yet, several chapters in this volume recast identity threat as a catalyst for growth or generative change. Several authors explain how entities (e.g., individuals, groups, organizations) can become stronger, more capable, and more connected to others when they respond to identity-threatening experiences constructively. For example, Maitlis' Chapter 3 on growth shows how people challenge their former assumptions about their own professional goals and relationships after experiencing a career-altering injury. This process of reflection infuses one's professional and personal identities with new meaning and broadens one's aspirations beyond the career he or she previously pursued (e.g., teaching, conducting, writing music instead of performing, playing a different instrument for pleasure). According to Maitlis, this experience of trauma also fosters growth and positive identity development as people come to see themselves as more capable of thriving in the midst of traumatic experiences. Kreiner and Sheep (Chapter 2) describe identity work tactics such as identity jujitsu (i.e., using the very power of the threat to catalyze increased self-awareness and positive identity change), which enable people to transform identity threats into opportunities. As a consequence of reframing identity threats and improving relationships with people who pose identity threats, people experience identity growth and develop identities that are more resilient. A third example of growth resulting from identity threat can be found in Kopelman et al.'s Chapter 12. They propose that as individuals respond to threatening interpersonal encounters in resilient ways, they can conarrate a positive relational identity that is viewed as constructive and able to overcome relational challenges and threats.

These chapters point to new directions for research that specify the conditions under which threatened identities can promote growth. They also raise important questions regarding the types and degrees of identity threat that can build personal and collective capacity compared with those that diminish performance and well-being.

***Positive Outcomes of Multiple Identities***

In their commentary, Sanchez-Burks and Lee (Chapter 15) challenge the assumption that multiple identities create tension, distraction, and dissonance. Instead, they review research on how multiple identities lead to

positive psychological and performance outcomes when they are framed as compatible. Following this same line of reasoning, Rothbard and Ramarajan (Chapter 6) propose that cognitive reframing and routine coactivation of work and nonwork identities (i.e., making one's work and nonwork identities salient at the same time) facilitate an individual's ability to experience both identities as compatible and to engage both identities at work in ways that enhance creativity and reduce intrapsychic conflict. Caza and Wilson's (Chapter 5) data on certified nurse midwives support these claims. They reveal how complex (i.e., multifaceted, compatible) role and social identities provide cognitive, social, and behavioral resources that enhance professionals' ability to respond to patient crises with resilience. They present additional data that link identity complexity to positive discretionary behaviors (organizational citizenship behavior) among professionals. At the macro level, Pratt and Kraatz (Chapter 17) embrace the metaphor of the organizational self as an agent of discovery, prioritization, and rationalization of differences among multiple (and perhaps) competing identities to explain how unity or wholeness exists alongside pluralism in organizational identities. Each of these chapters points to the value of embracing multiple facets of identification to harness cognitive, social, and instrumental resources that enhance individual and institutional performance and well-being.

Questions such as these can inspire new lines of research on identity and organizations. In this way, the chapters in this book take important steps toward meeting one of our stated goals:

- *Developing diverse perspectives on how individuals, dyads, and collectives can construct, sustain, and change positive identities*

---

## CHARTING THE COURSE: HIGHLIGHTING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POSITIVE IDENTITIES

The importance of positive identities in the current world of work calls for relevant research. Chapters in this volume take up the issue of why identity matters. They do so by moving beyond a descriptive account of who I am, toward an account of “what it *means* to be who I am” (adopted from Corley & Harrison, Chapter 16) and why it matters that I am who I am. We highlight two ways that the chapters in this volume explain why positive

identities are important for individuals, groups, organizations, and societies. First, many chapters detail how identities positively impact entities and their constituents. Second, several chapters discuss the processes by which identities grant meaning, order, and adaptability in a complex, interconnected, changing world of work. Both of these lenses help to reveal even more of the interplay between positive identities and the social context.

### **The Functional Significance of Positive Identities**

There are several explanations of how and why identities generate favorable outcomes for individuals, collectives, and their constituents. In these accounts, identities are central engines in dynamic cognitive and social processes that expand possibilities for how entities engage with and contribute to their social world. Glynn and Walsh (Chapter 21) note the normative stance that underlies several of the chapters in this volume with respect to the importance of identity in generating positive outcomes for others (e.g., benefiting society in a meaningful or valuable way). Hamilton and Gioia (Chapter 19) put forth a call for organizations to harness identities that promote sustainability by balancing environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic capability. Brickson and Lemmon (Chapter 18) claim that positive organizational identities provide the basis for actions that “generate a net positive level of socially valuable resources to the earth and its living inhabitants” (p. 404) by building stakeholder resources and enhancing stakeholders’ self-schemas. In Marquis and Davis’ Chapter 20, they offer a compelling account of how corporations shape community identities and reputations sustaining local foundations and nonprofits and by mobilizing citizen involvement in the community. They discuss how such actions ultimately contribute to a community’s well-being.

This volume also reveals how, within work groups, identities serve to enhance connections, contributions, and group outcomes. For example, MacPhail et al. (Chapter 14) discuss how individual identities (e.g., expert identity), when validated and affirmed, can motivate actions that contribute to a positive team identity and group performance outcomes (e.g., knowledge sharing, creativity, group learning). Ragins’ Chapter 11 on mentoring identity proposes that relational identities also produce important outcomes, such as the formation and maintenance of high-quality connections at work. She claims that as mentoring becomes internalized into the mentor’s self-structure, the quality of mentoring relationships and

the motivation to pursue future mentoring relationships increase. These are just a few of the many positive outcomes that are associated with identity content and processes in this volume.

### **Positive Identity Processes in the Contemporary Work Environment**

Ashforth (Chapter 8) points out in his commentary:

a positive identity is not only instrumental to organizational effectiveness—in these chapters, through organizational citizenship behaviors, creative problem solving, and organizational change, to name a few—but also is desirable as an end in itself ... for the edification of self and others that they provide. (p. 173)

The edifying and organizing properties of identities are especially important in our fast-paced global society where organizational boundaries are becoming increasingly permeable. As we mentioned in the introduction, this focused inquiry into positive identity reveals various ways organizations and their members can construct and maintain identities that are appropriately meaningful, legitimate, and stable yet also dynamic, flexible, and adaptable. Here we offer a few examples of ways that identity construction contributes to favorable outcomes in the contemporary organizational environment.

One of the principal functions of identity is to provide order and meaning to social life. Several chapters illuminate how and why positive identities are especially important for helping entities make sense of and derive meaning from their existence, actions, and aspirations. For instance, we glean from Carlsen and Pitsis' Chapter 4 illustrations of personal and organizational change that hope serves to anchor and validate the persistent drive to progress beyond apparent constraints in pursuit of a higher potential. In accordance with LeBaron et al. (Chapter 9), positive identities are also the conduit through which connections are forged and sustained during boundary moments in social life. The mutual accomplishment of positive identities involves bridging past, present, and future relational selves and cohering one's file self (objectified self as represented in written record) with one's embodied self. Kopelman et al. (Chapter 12) draw on a narrative framework of relational identity to explain the "means by

which people make themselves intelligible within the social world.” In their account, people develop a story of their relationship with another person that is constantly refined to incorporate emerging interactions. The construction of an organizational self is also a means for providing order and cohesion among an organization’s multiple identities. In a complex institutional environment, Pratt and Kraatz (Chapter 17) advocate for the conceptualization of organizations using a multiple identity conceptualization of the self (MICS) to embrace the paradoxical coexistence of an organization’s unifying and fragmenting properties.

This volume also provides new ways to think about facilitating the benefits of diversity in a global marketplace. Several authors, in their discussions of positive identity, call attention to the individual, relational, and organizational dynamics that promote inclusion and allow entities to engage their varied backgrounds and orientations in a positive way. MacPhail et al. (Chapter 14) emphasize that reciprocal expertise affirmation is a key mechanism for enabling workgroups to overcome the faultlines that often emerge when members do not recognize or appreciate each others’ respective expertise. Ragins (Chapter 11) invites scholars to consider how gender influences the internalization and enactment of mentoring identity to enhance the quality of same and cross-gender mentoring relationships. Roberts et al. (Chapter 7) explain how underrepresented minorities and women can become more authentic by peeling away masks of identity suppression and countering stereotypical expectations. They also note that a diverse workplace climate creates a context that welcomes authenticity from diverse employees. Sanchez-Burks and Lee review several studies that show how work groups that fully engage their diversity (i.e., maintain salience and foster compatibility among multiple identities that exist within the group) increase knowledge sharing and knowledge synthesis. Brickson and Lemmon (Chapter 18) invite scholars to consider the diversity in organizational identity orientations to appreciate various resource-generating relationships between organizations and stakeholders.

A better understanding of how positive identities form and function can broaden the ways that identity is used as a vehicle for generating beneficial or desirable outcomes within and for organizations and communities. Together, these chapters point scholars toward relevant research on the functions and formation of identity, which aligns with another goal for the book:

- *To provide individuals and collectives with ideas, concepts, and resources that will aid them as they strive to construct and to engage positive identities*

---

## PAVING THE WAY: DEMONSTRATING VARIED APPROACHES TO IDENTITY RESEARCH

A third way that we see this volume advancing research is by offering varied theoretical and empirical approaches that pave the way for others to join in this focused inquiry on positive identity.

### Revisiting Frequently Trodden Conceptual Paths

Some of the preceding chapters reexamined familiar identity topics through a positive lens, deepening our understanding of generative mechanisms and valued outcomes associated with identity processes. In addition to identity change, multiple identities, and diversity, which we have discussed in previous sections of the Conclusion, here we mention just two of many other possible examples where traditional identity topics have been expanded through consideration of positive identity: identity categorization and identity work.

Identity categorization has been a core idea in identity research for both macro and micro scholars. Researchers have focused on both the causes and consequences of categorization into social groups. Consideration of positive identity content, processes, and outcomes focuses attention on certain types of identity categories that have inherent value in certain social contexts and to an expanded repertoire of outcomes associated with categorization into particular social groups. For example, DeRue et al. (Chapter 10) draw attention to the category of leader, Ragins (Chapter 11) the category of mentor, and MacPhail et al. (Chapter 14) the category of expert as being categories that are charged with a particular positive valence. Other chapters broaden consideration of the consequences from certain forms of identity categorization, drawing attention to the generative consequences from an individual's or collective's defining themselves in terms of specific traits, such as authentic (e.g., Roberts et al., Chapter 7), sustainability focused (e.g., Hamilton & Gioia, Chapter 19), or charitable (Marquis & Davis, Chapter 20).

Identity work directs attention to the efforts and practices deployed to create, sustain, or change a particular identity. Much of the research on identity work has focused on individual and collective efforts expended in the wake of identity threats. This volume offers a view of identity work that is inspired by an entity's desire to grow and evolve rather than a need to maintain social status or self-worth in the face of threat. Corley and Harrison (Chapter 16) describe a form of organizational identity work that guides organizational change absent identity threats or discrepancies. Kreiner and Sheep's (Chapter 2) five positive identity work tactics differ from many other studies of identity work that emphasize coping with stigma or identity threat. LeBaron et al. (Chapter 9) capture yet another form of identity work by coding verbal and nonverbal enactments (e.g., statements in context, tone, enthusiasm, silence) that mutually constitute positive relational identities. They emphasize the importance of knowing and relating (i.e., indicating a knowledge of and appreciation for the other) in identity work.

These descriptions of identity work differ from the threat-induced accounts of coping via cognitive reframing or behavioral expressions that have been featured in traditional studies of identity work. In reviewing one definition of identity work as "being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165), we believe this volume offers several new descriptions of forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening identities.

### **Creating New Conceptual Paths**

Other chapters used the positive lens to expand the scope of future identity research and build new bridges between positive dynamics and identity theories. Authenticity receives a great deal of attention in this volume as it relates to positive identity. Corley and Harrison, Hamilton and Gioia, Kopelman et al., Milton, and Roberts et al. (Chapters 16, 19, 12, 13, and 7) all point to authenticity as a core element of a positive identity for individuals, dyads, and collectives. All three commentaries highlight authenticity as a theme in their reviews, which suggests that this remains a central issue for identity research. A review of these chapters and commentaries also suggests that the bridge between authenticity and positivity is paved with contingencies. Several contributors question whether authenticity

is inherently positive from an identity perspective. Ashforth (Chapter 8) cautions against idealizing the authentic self and presuming that when one behaves authentically, idealized traits and virtues are displayed rather than character flaws. Sanchez-Burks and Lee (Chapter 15) invite scholars to consider that inauthenticity might also generate desirable identity outcomes by ensuring smoother social interactions.

Resilience is explicitly mentioned in Caza and Wilson's Chapter 5 discussion of how identity complexity generates resources that professionals draw on to respond to workplace challenges in a resilient manner. Resilience is also a theme in Maitlis' Chapter 3 study of musicians who transcend the pain and disappointment of career-altering injury by constructing a resilient self-narrative. Kopelman et al. (Chapter 12) propose that a resilient response to a counterproductive emotional display promotes the formation of a positive relational narrative identity. Kreiner and Sheep (Chapter 2) include resilience as one of five characteristics that are core to the development of a positive individual identity.

Carlsen and Pitsis (Chapter 4) join hope with positive identity and, in so doing, reveal how hope serves as a future-oriented quality of experiencing that motivates people to narrate themselves in terms of goal pursuit, expanding possibilities, and escaping or transforming hardship. The formation of hoped-for possible selves (i.e., visions of whom one wishes to become) is also linked to identity growth (Kreiner & Sheep, Chapter 2), motivation to build high-quality work relationships (Ragins, Chapter 11), and generative change (Corley & Harrison, Chapter 16). However, Ashforth (Chapter 8) reminds us to take note of how false hopes might encourage engagement in futile action and forestall more efficacious action.

The theoretical grounding of these chapters makes headway on another goal:

- *To facilitate the integration of a positive identity perspective into new and established areas of organizational behavior and organizational theory*

### **Empirical Investigations of Positive Identity**

It is interesting to note the predominance of conceptual frameworks, case studies, and qualitative analyses, as well as the relative absence of survey and laboratory studies in this volume. Contributors have forged into

this territory of positive identity with rich, descriptive accounts of identity content, processes, and outcomes. This is likely an artifact of the novelty of a focused inquiry on positive identity. Although identity has been a central topic in organizational studies and related disciplines for decades, the application of a positive lens to identity requires that scholars revisit core assumptions and build new theories about the form and function of positive identities. As such, it is appropriate that this early-stage research is pursued through inductive, theory-building studies of positive identity rather than deductive, theory-testing studies.

Contributors do point to the need for additional empirical studies to test the claims that have been raised in their chapters. These chapters also encourage the study of organizational contexts that enable the formation and functioning of positive identities. For example, Carlsen and Pitsis (Chapter 4) invite scholars to consider how human resource practices and job practices cultivate and sustain positive identity construction via the generation of hope. Hamilton and Gioia (Chapter 19) raise the issue of how organizational size and public versus private ownership influence the adoption of sustainability into an organizational identity. Caza and Wilson (Chapter 5) note that certain organizational contexts embrace identity complexity (e.g., welcoming the varied professional approaches of certified nurse midwives), which better enables professionals to draw on their multiple identities as a resource.

### **Mobilizing a Cross-Disciplinary, Multilevel Inquiry Into Positive Identity**

These chapters are also imbued with an energizing, mobilizing quality that is fostered by multilevel, multidisciplinary dialogue. Our book-building conference, which took place on a wintry (January) weekend in Ann Arbor, literally brought together scholars from around the world, at different stages of their careers, with different theoretical takes on identity, to engage one another in this conversation about naming the positive in, of, and from identity. Together, we probed into each other's research questions and considered the theoretical implications of our claims for individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, and communities.

As a result, this process for collectively pursuing the study of positive identity yielded a wide range of theoretical approaches to identity, including identity as narrative (e.g., Maitlis, Chapter 3; Carlsen & Pitsis,

Chapter 4; Kopelman et al., Chapter 12), identity as object or schema (e.g., Ragins, Chapter 11; Roberts et al., Chapter 7; DeRue et al., Chapter 10; Brickson & Lemmon, Chapter 18), and identity as subject (e.g., LeBaron et al., Chapter 9; Carlsen & Pitsis, Chapter 4; Corley & Harrison, Chapter 16; Pratt & Kraatz, Chapter 17). Some chapters span levels of analysis, such as Marquis and Davis' Chapter 20 discussion of the interplay between organizational and community identities, Carlsen and Pitsis' Chapter 4 attention to how hope mobilizes identity construction for individuals and collectives, and MacPhail et al.'s Chapter 14 propositions that reciprocal affirmation of individual expert identities strengthens the team identity. Interesting questions emerge from this multilevel volume regarding the extent to which "positive qualities and processes are isomorphic across levels of self and across levels of analysis?", as Glynn and Walsh (Chapter 21) stated.

We have pushed one another to own and articulate our assumptions, sharpen our insights, and bolster our claims—generating a renewed energy for identity scholarship. The process of creating this volume, as well as the chapters that were produced, help to address two of our goals:

- *To establish positive identity as a multidisciplinary, multilevel field of inquiry, and to facilitate and encourage cross-fertilization and interdisciplinary linkages*
- *To offer a foundation for building a community of scholars in all stages of their careers and from various disciplines to pursue research that identifies antecedents, outcomes, processes, and mechanisms associated with positive identities*

---

## CONCLUSION

As we continue to explore this new frontier of identity research, we are excited by the possibilities that lie ahead. The chapters herein point to various ways in which scholars can help to accomplish our sixth and final goal for this book:

- *To bring positive identity to the forefront of organizational research by establishing, deepening, and broadening the link between the positive organizational scholarship perspective and identity research*

Positive organizational scholarship endeavors to understand the generative dynamics and processes that underlie individual, group, and organizational flourishing (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Glynn, 2008; Roberts, 2006). A focus on identity processes helps to shed light on how different forms of positive meaning applied to different levels of entities (individuals, relationships, groups, organizations, and communities) deepens understanding of the conditions and processes that cultivate individual or collective flourishing. By examining what is positive about identity, this volume adopts an appreciative stance toward the content, processes, and outcomes of identities. Just as we conclude from a POS perspective on relationships (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), we are reminded that remedying the negative (e.g., negative identity content, processes, or outcomes) is not the same as cultivating the positive. By focusing on the different meanings of positive identities at different levels of analysis, the authors in this volume have helped us to see new possibilities for understanding the generative possibilities of identity as a topic in organizational studies.

As we forge ahead into this terrain of research on positive identity, we recognize those scholars who heed us to keep sight of the interplay between the positive and negative (and all of their variations) in understanding and researching identity content, processes, and outcomes. We hope that as researchers carefully examine the generative insights from serious consideration of positive identity (in all of its various forms), they develop and test theories that also attend to the potential pitfalls and limits derived from an explicit focus on the positive (e.g., Fineman, 2006; Hackman, *in press*). Our commentators remind us of the value in understanding the interplay between positive and negative dynamics as they relate to identity, such as the sustainability of positive outcomes of identities for individuals and collectives, and the contingent nature of many of the relationships proposed in this volume.

We conclude this volume inspired by newly sparked conversations about identity; we enthusiastically direct our attention toward understanding new mechanisms and new consequences that are revealed at the intersection of identity and positive organizational scholarship. The conceptual frameworks and empirical findings presented in the chapters illuminate the impact of positive identity across levels of analysis. In turn, we hope that forging ahead into this domain will catalyze research that increases the capacity for organizational studies to foster hope, growth, resilience, connections, and contributions for individuals, dyads, and collectives.

---

## REFERENCES

- Cameron, K. S., Dutton, J. E., & Quinn, R. E. (2003). *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Dacin, T., Ventresca, M. J., & Beal, B. (1999). The embeddedness of organizations: Dialogue & directions. *Journal of Management*, 25, 317–356.
- Dutton, J., & Ragins, B. (Eds.). (2007). *Exploring positive relationships at work: Building a theoretical and research foundation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dutton, J. E., & Glynn, M. (2008). Positive organizational scholarship. In C. Cooper & J. Barling, (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational behavior* (pp. 693–712). London: Sage Publications.
- Fineman, S. (2006). On being positive: Concerns and counterpoints. *Academy of Management Review*, 31, 270–291.
- Gecas, V. (1986). The motivational significance of self-concept for socialization theory. *Advances in Group Processes*, 3, 131–156.
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91, 481–510.
- Hackman, J. R. (in press). The perils of positivity: “Counterpoint” of point-counterpoint section. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.
- Roberts, L. M. (2006). Shifting the lens on organizational life: The added value of positive scholarship. *Academy of Management Review*, 31, 241–260.
- Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle. *Human Relations*, 56, 1163–1193.