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**Positive Organizational Scholarship**  
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**Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)** focuses on the generative dynamics in organizations that lead to human strength and virtue, resilience and healing, vitality and thriving, capability-building, and cultivating extraordinary individuals, groups and organizations. POS is premised on the belief that enabling human excellence in organizations unlocks latent potential and reveals hidden possibilities in people and systems that can benefit both human and organizational welfare. POS does not adopt one particular theory or framework, but, instead, draws from the full spectrum of organizational theories.

The term POS describes what this perspective is about: *positive*, because it emphasizes elevating, affirmative, and generative states and dynamics; *organizational*, because it highlights how these generative dynamics unfold within and across organizations; and *scholarship*, because it emphasizes theoretically-informed accounts, backed by data and analysis, that suggest implications for organizational functioning, practice and teaching. When applied to career development, POS uncovers new ways of thinking about antecedents and outcomes of career development and suggests new research questions about the career development process.

ORIGINS OF POS

Although the POS perspective is relatively new, its core ideas were seeded by the ideas of earlier scholars. POS origins developed in parallel though a few years behind the Positive Psychology movement, initiated in 1998, by Martin Seligman and colleagues. Positive Psychology aims to shift the focus in psychology from dysfunctional mental illness to mental health, calling for an increased focus on the building of human strength (as opposed to shoring up human weakness), a focus on creating good lives for healthy people (as opposed to healing people who are psychologically distressed), and building the best in people (as opposed to repairing the worst). POS is a cousin to the Positive Psychology movement -- POS broadens the focus by examining these thriving and generative dynamics within organizations, and by emphasizing the role of embedded contexts (extra-organizational, organizational and intra-organizational) in explaining generative dynamics and positive states of individuals, groups and organizations,

Positive Organizational Scholarship also provides a theoretical grounding for an organizational development and change paradigm called Appreciative Inquiry, introduced by David Cooperrider in 1986, which has become a widely adopted change practice used in organizations globally. The core premise of Appreciative Inquiry is that change involves search and discovery processes that value, prize and honor the life or what is called the “positive core” in an organization.

POS is an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing not only from psychology and organizational theory, but also from sociology,, anthropology and social work. Different aspects of POS focus at different levels of analysis and on different aspects of positive dynamics. For instance, one subset of POS, called Positive Organizational Behavior, focuses on positive individual-level states and their development. More macro-level POS

perspectives view positive dynamics through the lens of institutional theories, network models, and resource-based views of the firm; here, the focus is on the creation, diffusion, and legitimation of POS practices in business units and organizations as well as the development of generative capacities such as resilience and capability building . For instance, network researchers have demonstrated how positive energy networks in organizations explain individual and project performance over and above information networks. Institutional perspectives highlight the changing context of positive organizational practices or activities and the struggle of reproducing such practices within and across organizations as well as the generation of alternate forms. Finally, other scholars focusing on intangible organizational assets draw attention to how a positive organizational identity may build social and reputation capital for the firm and its members.

#### CORE ASSUMPTIONS OF POS

Several key assumptions underlie the POS perspective. First, an assumption in POS is that the same factors that bring about a problem state (organizational stress, for example) are not necessarily the same factors that cause an extraordinary or positively deviant state (organizational thriving, for example). Just getting rid of the conditions that cause stress will not be sufficient for creating thriving at work. Thus, to theorize what promotes and enables positive deviance (above normal, extraordinary states that are good, honorable or virtuous) may require new or slightly altered theoretical lenses and explanations than what currently exists in organizational studies.

Second, a POS perspective draws attention to a broader repertoire of human and collective states that organizations impact, but which organizational scholars study only

sporadically. In effect, POS enlarges the domain of dependent variables. The POS focus on the positive and affirmative means asking questions about what individual and organizational conditions (and their interactions) account for valued human conditions such as resilience, vitality, thriving, fulfillment, transcendence, courage, flourishing, integrity, wisdom, as well as other individual and collective virtues and strengths. POS re-emphasizes the importance of outcomes such as well-being, citizenship, and health, not only as means to the desired end of strong economic performance, but also as ends worthy of explanation on their own.

Third, a POS perspective assumes that organizational scholars benefit from considering how, why and when various positive states shape individual, group and collective behavior. For example, there is a growing body of research on three possible engines of life-giving dynamics in organizations: positive emotion, positive meaning and positive connections. While these topics have each been considered in isolation within various research domains in organizational studies, a POS lens encourages consideration of how they interrelate as core engines of generative and life-giving dynamics in individuals, groups and organizations,

Fourth, POS assumes that is important to focus on positive states and positive dynamics as a corrective to the hard-wired human tendency to attend to the negative more than the positive. Psychologists have conducted exhaustive literature reviews of psychological research and concluded that, when it comes to perceptions, the bad trumps the good. For example, we are more deeply affected by losing \$50 than by gaining \$50. The effects of negative events take longer to dissipate than the effects of positive events. However, work by Fredrickson and Losada suggests a way to counterbalance this basic

human tendency. They found that a 3:1 mathematical ratio of positive to negative behaviors, communications, or emotions activates the broadening and building dynamics that enhance the capacities of individuals, dyads, and teams to act. Thus, given the human tendency to weight the negative more heavily, a POS perspective offers a counter-weight, alerting our attention to the importance of amplifying the positive.

## DOMAINS OF POS INQUIRY

Currently, there are several identifiable domains of inquiry that are taking shape under the broad umbrella of Positive Organizational Scholarship. One domain involves virtuous processes, strengths, and positive organizing; it includes work on individual and organizational virtues, integrity, compassion, resilience, wisdom, human strengths, and positive identity. A second domain involves the study of upward spirals and patterns of positive change; it includes work on appreciative inquiry, positive deviance, positive emotions, knowledge creation, and positive leader development. A third domain focuses on positive meanings and positive connections; it includes work on the dynamics of vitality and energy in organizations, relationships, cooperation, and creativity. Another domain focuses more on the institutional and structural aspects of POS; it includes work on developing and reproducing organizational designs that enable positive dynamics and outcomes. All these domains of POS inquiry are a blend of new and old theoretical perspectives that find a fuller integration under the POS umbrella.

## POS INVITES EXPLORING NEW FRONTIERS FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Positive Organizational Scholarship opens up possibilities for career research by posing innovative questions that redirect and motivate studies; these are complementary

to existing thinking about careers but do stretch the reach of both POS and careers research into several new directions. First, POS invites career researchers to consider the antecedents and dynamics of positively deviant career-relevant outcomes. For example, we might ask: Under what conditions do individuals' careers flourish, or enable people to live within an optimal range of human functioning? For example, some researchers have asked what enables people to view their jobs and careers as callings? Alternatively, what are the contexts that enable people to have moments or episodes of career thriving, where thriving is defined as the experience of increased vitality and learning? Or, as other researchers have asked, when and how do work and family roles enrich rather than deplete the individuals and their organizations?

Second, POS may help careers researchers to see a complementary perspective to traditional research questions in careers research. Traditional research on career problems (whether early career setbacks, midcareer plateauing, or retirement adjustments) has focused on understanding how people cope and rebound to where they were before the setback, or adjust to the new work situation. A POS lens shifts the focus slightly, redirecting attention to looking at how people can be resilient and grow in response to career setbacks, discovering perhaps new or unexplored career possibilities. For example, a large body of research on organizational downsizing documents how difficult it is for victims (or those laid off) to find new jobs at their previous level/compensation. However, rather than simply restoring people to their pre-downsizing levels, POS opens up the possibility that there may be many positively deviant workers who are energized by the opportunity to break out of old patterns and do

something really different and meaningful. A POS lens would suggest more work on these positive rebounds and creative career redirections.

A third way in which a POS perspective might help reframe careers research is that POS invites consideration of different mechanisms to explain career-relevant processes and outcomes. For example, POS researchers might inquire as to when and how positive emotions, positive connections, and positive meaning, both in isolation and in interaction, contribute to desirable career relevant outcomes. For example, how do organizations enrich and enable positive meanings about different roles and different careers, and what effect do these positive career-relevant meanings have for the individuals and for the organization? How do occupational, professional, and organizational contexts contribute to inspiration, hope and a sense of possibility for different career development end states and career development pathways? How do different organizational features (e.g., culture, design, strategy, leaders) amplify and/or buffer the psychological conditions that propel individuals to deeply satisfying, authentic and capability-building careers?

A fourth way that POS might offer new insights in career research is in the reframing of mentoring. Traditional research on mentoring has focuses on how mentors contribute to the mentee's capabilities, job performance, and career trajectory. The focus is on how mentors help proteges. POS might suggest some a reframing of mentoring research to focus more attention on the effects of mentoring on the mentor. For example, recent research has suggested that the givers of social support actually receive more benefits than the receivers. Other research confirms the health-promoting, stress-

relieving benefits of coaching for mentors. Thus, a POS lens would suggest focusing on the effects of mentoring on the mentor rather than on just the mentee.

Finally, a POS perspective introduces new topics for consideration that do not fit neatly into current career development topic categories. For example, it encourages consideration of how career behaviors and pathways cultivate different human strengths and virtues. It invites consideration of how organizations cultivate positive identities and shape conditions in which individuals can grow toward a “best self.” It considers how individuals can grow and develop not only in response to threats, challenges and hardships but also to positive jolts that highlight the best in people and systems. It asks how career patterns contribute to the creation and sustenance of organization-level virtues or strengths such as wisdom, integrity, compassion or justice. Overall, a POS perspective on career development and management invites an enriched and integrated approach to understanding ways in which career options can ultimately better both people and organizations.

## CONCLUSION

The POS approach is an emergent and growing perspective on individuals, groups and organizations that can shift our view of career development in organizations. POS offers a fresh view of individuals and organizations as sites or moments of vitality, flourishing and life-giving dynamics. Through the POS lens, then, the career choices of individuals and the recruitment efforts of organizations are re-directed towards building human capital that enables those conditions and encourages the best of the human condition. A POS perspective focuses on how organizations can be sites of human and collective strength and capability-building and thus, in interviews and in career planning,



the focus is on building the “best” self (instead of countering the worst) and developing capabilities, rather than simply compensating for shortcomings.

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The POS website is also a helpful source for more information on POS:  
[www.bus.umich.edu/positive](http://www.bus.umich.edu/positive)