

# Toward the Construct Definition of Positive Deviance

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*In this article, the authors develop a definition of positive deviance, a foundational construct in positive organizational scholarship. They offer a normative definition of positive deviance: intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways. The authors contrast this normative perspective on deviance with statistical, supraconformity, and reactive perspectives on deviance. They also develop research propositions that differentiate positive deviance from related prosocial types of behaviors, including organizational citizenship, whistle-blowing, corporate social responsibility, and creativity/innovation. Finally, the authors offer some initial ideas on how to operationalize positive deviance.*

**Keywords:** *positive deviance; norms; honorable; prosocial behavior*

The burgeoning positive organizational studies (POS) movement offers an important research contribution to understanding the excellence and flourishing that organizations enable but that scholars frequently overlook. Instead of focusing on the negative behaviors that some organizations create (e.g., errors, unethical actions, inefficiency, etc.) or even the normal modes of organizational behavior, POS addresses the virtuousness inherent in organizations (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Although the organizational studies literature has often neglected the positive behaviors within the work organization, perhaps nowhere has this neglect been more egregious than in the domain of deviance.

Traditionally, deviance refers to intentional behaviors that depart from organizational norms that threaten the well-being of an organization, its members, or both (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Included in these types of dysfunctional behaviors are stealing and incivility. Although the study of such negative behaviors is an important scholarly endeavor, research on deviance is an unnecessarily narrow area of study. To broaden the scholarship in deviance and make an important contribution to POS, this article expands the

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theoretical understanding of deviance to include positive behaviors. Our claim is not that the study of traditional deviance has failed to make important contributions to understanding workplace behaviors. Rather, our contention is that traditional deviance is incomplete and could benefit from an expanded definition that more accurately captures the wider range of behaviors present within work organizations.

By narrowly conceptualizing deviance as a negative set of behaviors, scholars unfortunately overlook how organizations and their members partake in positive behaviors. The development of a positive deviance construct will provide a conceptual framework for understanding these kinds of behaviors, which will facilitate future scholarship by providing a language for identifying and explaining positive, norm-departing behaviors. Positive deviance is foundational to the POS movement (Cameron et al., 2003), and positively deviant behavior has profound effects on the individuals and organizations who partake and benefit from such behaviors (Quinn, 1996; Quinn & Quinn, 2002). We highlight these effects in cases of positive deviance described throughout this article. Yet the positive deviance construct requires more thorough theoretical development to establish its legitimacy and to facilitate empirical research.

In this article, we first provide a rigorous theoretical definition of positive deviance, which captures the kinds of positive behaviors that organizational members partake in that depart from norms. Afterwards, we compare positive deviance to related constructs in organizational behavior with a series of researchable propositions. It is critical to demonstrate the *unique* contribution of positive deviance beyond related constructs because too often in the social sciences, researchers relabel existing constructs as new ones. Only through this construct discrimination will researchers be able to demonstrate what the unique contribution of positive deviance is—above and beyond related prosocial behavior constructs. Finally, we offer some initial recommendations on how to operationalize positive deviance in order to stimulate empirical research on the topic.

#### DEFINING POSITIVE DEVIANCE

As a starting point for defining positive deviance, it is useful to examine the deviance literature in sociology so that we can build on the core theoretical work from one of the most studied sociological topics. Since the early 1900s, the study of deviant behavior has taught us much about the social nature of all human beings—whether normal or at the margin of society (Goffman, 1961; Merton, 1938). Early deviance research focused on the morally objectionable, forbidden, and disvalued as well as other social phenomena that might be termed offensive (e.g., the Chicago School of Sociology and Whyte's [1943] Street Corner Society). The deviance literature then took on a functionalist approach (seeing the role of deviance as occupying a vital place in the maintenance of social order) and a social reactionist approach (focusing on the process

of becoming deviant).<sup>1</sup> More contemporary work on deviance has sought to learn from the boundaries of human behavior about social order, control, and change (Scull, 1988).

Although the study of deviance has changed since its inception, one common thread that unites most deviance scholarship is a focus on the negative: harmful behaviors, marginalized individuals, and so on. We wonder if the scholarly gains from research on deviance have been limited by its almost exclusive focus on negative behaviors. Sagarin (1975) compiled forty definitions of deviance, and only two were used in nonnegative ways. In the sociological literature, there have been only a few attempts at studying positive deviance (Ben-Yehuda, 1990; Dodge, 1985), and they have been met with strong opposition to the notion that positive deviance can exist as a concept (Goode, 1991; Sagarin, 1985).

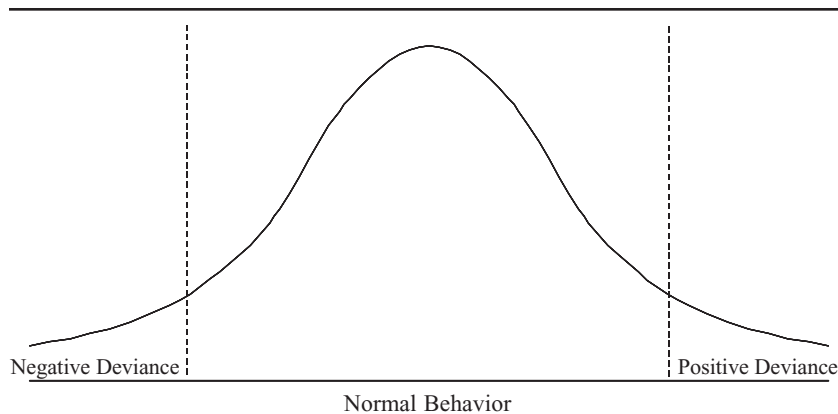
To understand possible constructions of positive deviance for organizations, it is useful to consult other attempts at constructing a definition of positive deviance. The sociological literature offers four major perspectives on deviance: statistical, supraconformity, reactive, and normative.

### The Statistical Approach

Perhaps the most common approach to deviance is referred to as *statistical deviance* (Clinard & Meier, 2001; Heckert, 1998). This term has gained significant attention because it coheres with our intuitions about deviant behaviors. Simply put, statistical deviance refers to behaviors that differ from average or normal experiences. Deviants in the statistical sense engage in behaviors that the majority in a group do not engage in (see Figure 1). For example, a deviant within a work organization may wear shorts to work, whereas other workers dress in suits. Quinn and Quinn (2002) have approached positive deviance in organizations from the statistical view. In their view, positive deviants are individuals found at the far right of a normal distribution of behaviors.

Quinn (1996) considers individuals as diverse as world class athletes and internally driven managers to be positive deviants. These select individuals stand out from their peers because their behaviors are to the far right in a normally distributed curve of a given behavior (see Figure 1). Because many kinds of behaviors are normally distributed, statistical deviance could potentially consider all sorts of behaviors as deviant, either negatively or positively. For example, Michael Jordan stood out from other basketball players during the peak of his career.

The statistical version of positive deviance is a useful formulation, but it also comes with limitations. By definition, anyone scoring in the minority within a behavioral curve is a deviant, either negative (to the left) or positive (to the right). It is unclear where, or if, we place limitations on statistical deviance. According to the statistical view, world class athletes are positive deviants. Chess masters are also positive deviants. But how about individuals who excel at spitting?



**Figure 1: A Statistical Approach to Deviance**

Spitters present an unusual case for statistical deviance. If we consider the distribution of spitters on a normal curve, at the far right we would find the most talented spitters—the positive deviants. But this is not the kind of positive deviants that are relevant to POS, or for that matter, sociology or positive psychology. Statistical deviance lacks criteria to distinguish between normally distributed behaviors that are relevant for organizations—and particularly for positive organizational scholarship. Therefore, we find the statistical approach to defining deviance inadequate for conceptualizing positive deviance.

### **The Supraconformity Approach**

Another definitional perspective contends that positive deviance is supraconformity or excessive conformity to norms (Ewald & Jiobu, 1985; Hughes & Coakley, 1991). This kind of behavior is conceptualized as pronormative, but becomes deviant because it extends beyond the bounds deemed appropriate by a referent group (Dodge, 1985). According to the supraconformity approach, too much of even a good thing such as bodybuilding or long-distance running (Ewald & Jiobu, 1985) becomes problematic, leading to dysfunction such as addiction. Put another way, supraconformity positive deviance collapses into traditional deviance, as overly eager participants are actually dysfunctional because their addictions dominate their life.

### **The Reactive Approach**

A third formulation of deviance focuses on the reactions of an audience to a behavior. Reactive deviance considers a behavior (traditionally) deviant if a negative condemnation by an audience occurs (Dodge, 1985; Heckert, 1989) such as publicly labeling a behavior as depraved or punishing an individual for engaging in a behavior. Absent any such negative reaction, no deviant behavior

has taken place. Some scholars have criticized the reactive form of deviance for not accounting for intuitive examples of deviance. Clinard and his colleagues (2001) criticize the reactive school for not considering a robber deviant if he burglarizes a house without detection. Because the robber was not caught, the community could not react to his behavior and subsequently label him a deviant. Not only does reactive deviance require the observation of the deviant act but the concomitant reaction must be negative (Norland, Hepburn, & Monette, 1977). Using this approach to deviance, excellent or virtuous acts are not deviant because deviance requires a negative reaction.<sup>2</sup> Because reactive deviance requires a negative reaction to a behavior, Goode (1991) argues that positive deviance (in the reactive sense) is a *reductio ab absurdum*. Consequently, we do not completely adopt the reactive perspective on deviance in this article because most reactive theories of deviance require both the observation of the deviant behavior and the subsequent reaction (e.g., labeling) to it as negative. However, we do include a reactive component to our understanding of positive deviance, which we will discuss below.

### The Normative Approach

Having surveyed three other possible definitions of positive deviance, we now turn to the normative approach, which we find more relevant to POS than any of the other definitions discussed above. The normative view defines deviance as a departure from norms (Dodge, 1985). Often we are not cognizant of a norm until it is violated and there is a response to it. That is, we infer a norm exists from the presence of a reaction to a perceived violation of a norm (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996).

The normative approach to deviance is common within the organizational studies literature where deviance is defined as intentional behavior that significantly departs from norms (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). But most of the work in organizational studies on normative deviance has focused on negative behaviors such as stealing and lying. However, there are a few examples of nonnegative normative deviance. For example, Warren (2003) has conceptualized what a "constructive" view of deviance might entail, and Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) have offered an initial definition of normative positive deviance.

Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) define the normative approach as follows: *intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways*. The normative formulation of positive deviance focuses on the nature of a behavior (whether it departs from norms). More concretely, positively deviant behaviors depart from expectations (Goode, 1991). Although this definition is rooted in the normative school, it also contains a component of reactive deviance.

However, the definition we adopt for this article by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) differs from the reactive school on three accounts. First, the behavior does not have to be labeled as deviant per se. Rather, it is important that the

behavior would have been labeled deviant, if it were observed. The problem with the reactive school is that if a behavior is not observed, it could not be deviant. For example, if an employee anonymously donates a week of her vacation time to help support a co-worker so that no one notices, according to the reactive approach, her behavior would be deviant because we were not aware of the behavior. What is important from our formulation of positive deviance is that the behavior would have been labeled positively deviant had the referent group been aware of it. Second, the reactive approach remains silent on what causes particular behaviors to be labeled as deviant (Clinard & Meier, 2001). However, to apply a label to deviant behaviors, the audience usually relies on an evaluative criterion such as norms. This evaluative criterion is precisely what the normative view offers. Third, instead of conceptualizing the labeling of deviant behaviors as negative, we substitute the criterion honorable. We find the normative approach to deviance, with the honorable labeling component, most complete because it clearly limits the relevant kinds of behaviors regarding what one ought to do (in contrast to the statistical view), avoids the reactive problem of nonobservable behaviors, and does not collapse into negative deviance like the supraconformity approach.

The normative formulation of positive deviance has several important implications. First, *positive deviance* is an evaluative term. It recognizes conduct that ought or ought not to occur (Clinard & Meier, 2001). Therefore, the normative approach would condemn spitters because such behavior falls short of normative expectations. However, the normative approach for deviance would not classify athletic super-stars as deviants because such behaviors concern performance as opposed to a normative expectation. Second, the definition specifies positive deviance in relationship to regular or typical behaviors (Clinard & Meier, 2001). That is, there is a specific group (the referent group) whose normative expectations determine typical behaviors. Finally, if others become aware of the positively deviant behavior, they would extol or commend the behavior.

It is also important to point out that the definition of positive deviance focuses on behaviors with honorable *intentions*, independent of *outcomes*. Positive intentions do not always lead to positive outcomes. We consider intentions the important criterion for positive deviance, and not outcomes. There is a long intellectual tradition of understanding noteworthy behaviors independent of outcomes (e.g., Kant, 1993).

Moreover, the addition of outcomes to our definition of positive deviance raises an important question: What is the time frame for determining a positive outcome? Consider the case of Malden Mills, a textile company that kept employees on the payroll and rebuilt its plant after a devastating fire. The expected behavior was to take the insurance settlement and relocate offshore where labor costs were substantially cheaper. However, as a result of costs associated with rebuilding its plants and paying salaries (without producing a product), the company is currently under bankruptcy protection, and it is not clear if

and when they will successfully emerge. Immediately after announcing its plans, employees gained the positive outcome of keeping their jobs. However, several years later, they may lose their jobs due to bankruptcy. Should we no longer consider the Malden Mills case to be an example of positive deviance because the organization's honorable behaviors may eventually result in a negative outcome?

We consider the normative approach to deviance to focus on intentions. Unlike the statistical approach, which considers many kinds of behavior as potentially deviant (e.g., athletic performance), the normative view exclusively focuses on the collective expectations of a specific group: what we will call a referent. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) further suggest that there are several relevant referent groups for positive deviance: unit/organizational, industry, practice, and general principles of business norms. *Unit or organizational norms* are the shared understandings of work values and behaviors among individuals within a unit or organization (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). For example, the norms of a business unit might include treating employees in a collegial and supportive manner whereas the norms of an organization may be more competitive and aggressive in the treatment of employees. *Industry norms* regulate behaviors across vertical lines. For example, an industry norm for the pharmaceutical industry is to develop drugs for paying markets. *Practice norms* focus on norms that span across functional lines. For example, highly professionalized fields such as medicine, law and accounting have strong practice norms (e.g., the Hippocratic Oath for physicians). *General principles of business norms* also can act as a referent to deviant behavior. A general principle of business is to avoid making lay off announcements right before the Christmas holidays. Although it is not illegal to announce a round of layoffs on Christmas Eve, it clearly would be deviant behavior for an organization to do so. Given that different referents may have different norms, it is possible for one referent to view a particular set of behaviors as deviant, whereas another could see those same behaviors quite differently.

#### BRINGING POSITIVE DEVIANCE TO LIFE: AN EXAMPLE

Consider the following example of positive deviance. In 1978, Merck & Co., one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, inadvertently discovered a potential cure for river blindness, a disease that inflicts tremendous pain, disfigurement, and blindness on its victims. The medication was first discovered as a veterinarian antibiotic, but it quickly created a major dilemma for Merck when its scientists realized the medication could be adapted to become a cure for river blindness. Because river blindness was indigenous to the developing world, Merck knew that it would never recover its research or distribution expenses for the drug. In addition, the company risked bad publicity for any unexpected side effects of the drug that in turn could damage the drugs reputation as a veterinary antibiotic (Business Enterprise Trust, 1991). Departing from norms in the

pharmaceutical industry, Merck decided to manufacture and distribute the drug for free to the developing world, costing the company millions of dollars. Consequently, Merck helped eradicate river blindness, at its own expense.

So why is Merck's extraordinary action an appropriate example of positive deviance? It is entirely possible that Merck acted out of self-interest, and that the organization's production and distribution of the drug reflected a self-interested perspective. However, we think that there is substantial evidence in several published cases (Bollier, 1996; Dutton & Pratt, 1997) to suggest that Merck's behavior is a prime example of positive deviance. We articulate this evidence in the points below.

First, few of the potential customers of the drug could afford it. The governments controlling most areas that needed the medication had other more immediate problems, such as famines, civil strife, and other significant health crises. Moreover, these governments could not afford to even cover the costs of the drug. Consequently, the Mectizan project had no foreseeable profits but an estimated \$250 million price tag (Bollier, 1996).

Second, besides the cost of developing, manufacturing, and distributing the drug, the company risked destroying its corporate reputation. What if the drug backfired and caused unanticipated adverse effects on public health? Merck's reputation for producing quality products could be destroyed. Third, absent pharmacies, doctors, roads, communications, and other infrastructure, Merck faced a huge distribution problem. Solving these logistical problems cost Merck a significant amount of money and involved risk.

Fourth, no one could predict the strategic implications of Merck's decision. The firm's motivations might have included some form of self-interest, but to argue that its actions were largely self-interested is a stretch. The company incurred huge financial risks, including comprising its long-term reputation as a manufacturer of safe and effective pharmaceuticals. One might propose that Merck's decisions were guided by a long-term profitability strategy, tied to publicity or some other benefit. But this kind of post-hoc analysis is tautological. Skeptics might assume that Merck's actions were guided by self-interest, because why else would it donate the drug? But we can also interpret Merck's behaviors as a function of the organization's mission to promote public health. The fact that Merck's decision was a long-term strategic success does not necessarily imply that its motivation was based exclusively on self-interest. Etzioni (1988, p. 26) argues that

once one breaks out of the straightjacket of the one-utility paradigm, once one allows for other factors to explain behavior, one sees that normal people do some things because they judge them to be their duty, to be right, whether or not they enjoy these acts.

We side with Etzioni's observation in introducing the Merck example, especially given the great cost and risk the organization endured to distribute the drug.

### POSITIVE DEVIANCE AND RELATED EXTRA-ROLE CONSTRUCTS

Part of the process of construct definition is convergent and discriminant validity. To establish legitimacy for a construct of positive deviance, it is critical to ascertain how it is similar to but also distinct from related constructs. Therefore, in this section of the article, we compare positive deviance to several constructs that have some conceptual overlap with positive deviance. More specifically, we consider the key distinctions between positive deviance and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), whistle-blowing, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and creativity/innovation in order to develop research propositions about the construct discrimination of positive deviance from related constructs.

### Organizational Citizenship Behaviors

Similar to positive deviance, OCBs are discretionary behaviors that go above and beyond an employee's role responsibilities. Typically, definitions of OCBs include five dimensions: altruism (helping others with a heavy workload), conscientiousness (not taking extra breaks), sportsmanship (not complaining), courtesy (treating others with respect), and civic virtue (keeping up with changes in the organization) (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Although each of these dimensions may result in the labeling of behavior as honorable, OCBs and positive deviance have important differences. First, whereas OCBs reflect "behaviors that could not be enforced by the organization in terms of formal role expectations or *job requirements*" (LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002, p. 53) (for example, helping a coworker even when not required), positive deviance involves a departure from *the norms of a referent group* (for example, Merck decides to develop and distribute the cure for river blindness, despite norms counter to this decision in the industry). Of course, sometimes the norms of a referent group may overlap with job requirements (e.g., an unstated norm about how long each employee works), but this need not be the case.

Second, although OCBs, by definition, are intended to improve organizational functioning (Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995), positive deviance may or may not improve organizational functioning (in the Merck case, developing and distributing the cure for river blindness cost them millions of dollars).<sup>3</sup> And third, although OCBs are minor in magnitude, mundane, and common (Van Dyne and LePine [1998, p. 110] describe them as "small acts of consideration"), positive deviance represents a more substantial departure from norms. For example, industry watchers were amazed when Merck made the decision to develop and distribute the cure for river blindness because it was so unexpected and major in scope. In the statistical sense, OCBs fall closer to the mean in the bell curve in Figure 1. In the normative sense, OCBs may surpass, but not exceptionally exceed, normative expectations. A good way of understanding the difference between OCBs and positively deviant acts is to consider

the potential costs of the two behaviors. Because OCBs are minor in magnitude and are extensions of prescribed role responsibilities, there is little or no cost to the organization. In contrast, because positively deviant behaviors include substantial departures from norms, they can result in substantial costs to the organization.

Providing additional support for the discrimination of OCBs from deviance (though in this case negative and not positive deviance), research by Lee and Allen (2002) found that OCBs and negative deviance were only moderate negatively correlated ( $r = -.40$ ). If OCBs were the same as positive deviance, we would expect this correlation to be much higher. These arguments suggest the following:

Research Proposition 1: Positive deviance will be positively related to but empirically distinct from OCBs.<sup>4</sup>

*Whistle-blowing.* Whistle-blowing is the disclosure of information, usually of legally or ethically suspect behavior (Near & Miceli, 1985) either inside or outside of the organization (Dworkin & Baucus, 1998). Often whistle-blowing results from an ethical dilemma, in which an organizational member faces the conflict of publicly disclosing proprietary information in order to prevent social harm (Jubb, 1999). Consider the whistle-blower who decides to depart from the organizational norm to secretly evade taxes by disclosing to the IRS her organization's improprieties. In this example, the case of whistle-blowing is a very specific form of positive deviance focused on departures from organizational norms that are ethically questionable. The whistle-blower refuses to follow an illicit organizational norm—she will not conform to the tax evasion policies of the organization. At the same time, the whistle-blower also departs from an organizational norm of silence by discussing with third parties the alleged illegal activity of her organization.

But not all cases of whistle-blowing are examples of positive deviance. This is only the case when the whistle-blower departs from the normative expectations of a referent ground (e.g., she does not conform to the illegal tax evasion). Moreover, the whistle-blower's behavior must be voluntary and intentional. In addition, the kind of behaviors that the whistle-blower engaged in must relate to what one ought to do. In the above example, the whistle-blower decided if she ought to depart from organizational norms and *not* evade taxes. The whistle-blower also decided that she ought to breach fidelity with her organization and expose the illegal activity. The final criterion to consider is whether the whistle-blower's behaviors would be labeled as honorable. Although in some cases, the whistle-blower's activity may be honorable (i.e., exposing an illegal behavior), in other cases the whistle-blower may be choosing to act for less than honorable reasons. For example, the whistle-blower might want vengeance against a boss who mistreated employees. Or the whistle-blower might be seeking a large

financial gain from exposing a fraud. Thus, although some instances of whistle-blowing fit the definition of positive deviance, others clearly are different.

Research Proposition 2: Positive deviance will be positively related to but empirically distinct from whistle-blowing.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

CSR activities are business practices that benefit society and potentially the organization. (For alternative definitions and a review of the literature, see Moir, 2001). Some of the CSR activities that organizations frequently undertake include human rights programs, environmentally sustainable manufacturing, charitable donations, and economic development. By looking at the ways that CSR is typically measured, we can see some important differences between CSR and positive deviance.

*Fortune Magazine's* annual survey of America's Most Admired Companies includes a single indicator called "responsibility to community and environment." The magazine compiles the index by surveying financial analysts and senior executives. This is the initial measure that most researchers used to measure corporate social responsibility. However, many researchers pointed out that such a survey introduced a halo effect, in which companies that performed well financially would also perform well socially. Moreover, some have questioned the "objectivity" of using reputation ratings from senior management (Wood, 1995). Others have tried to improve the dataset by factoring out the halo effect (Brown & Perry, 1995a, 1995b) but such moves have not been without controversy (Logsdon & Wartick, 1995; Sodeman, 1995).

In the early 1990s, another dataset was introduced into business and society research that is now seen as the best measure of corporate social responsibility. The "KLD Index" involves ratings by an independent organization, versus reputational indicators from executives to measure social performance. Some of the indicators for the index include community relationships and employee relationships (see Graves and Waddock [1994] for discussion).

In looking at these different measures of CSR, we can clearly see important differences between positive deviance and CSR. First, positive deviance is not a reputational measure such as the *Fortune* index, nor does it necessarily focus on community or employee relationships such as the KLD. In addition, CSR programs may or may not be highly aligned with organization or industry practices (e.g., in the cement industry, all of the dominant players are active supporters of corporate social responsibility so it does not involve a substantial departure of organizational or business norms). In contrast, positive deviance requires a departure from an organizational or business norm. We would also not consider a new environmental initiative at an environmentally friendly company such as Tom's of Maine to be positive deviance in reference to the organization. The organization already stands for environmentally friendly processes. However,

compared to other organizations in its peer group (e.g., business norms), we would consider Tom's of Maine to be positively deviant. A final difference is that CSR is conceptualized as an organization level phenomenon, whereas positive deviance can exist at either an individual or organization level of analysis. Thus, these arguments suggest the following:

Research Proposition 3: Positive deviance will be positively related to but empirically distinct from CSR.

### **Creativity/Innovation**

Creativity can be defined as something that is novel and useful (Amabile, 1988). Scholars theorize creativity from a variety of different perspectives, including as an attribute (Oldham & Cummings, 1996), an activity or process (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999), or as an outcome (Ford, 1996). Innovation, in turn, is the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization (Amabile, 1988).

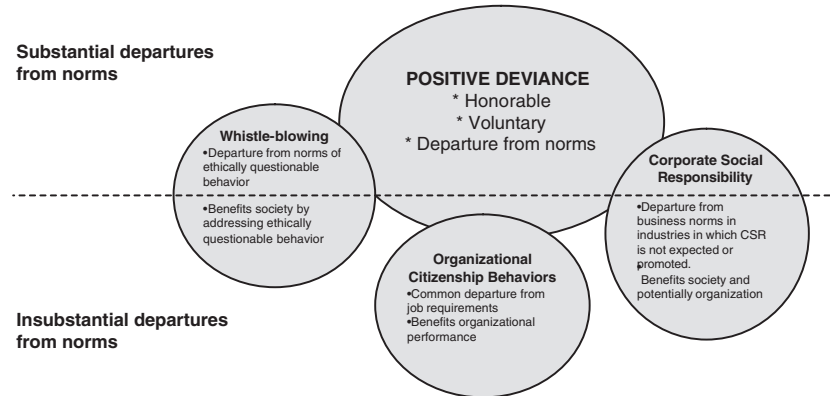
Most examples of creativity/innovation do not meet the conditions of positive deviance. For example, a hacker can be creative in designing a new virus to invade computers around the globe. The hacker is clearly creative and even innovative, but certainly not acting honorably.

In addition, creativity and innovation do necessarily need to result from a departure of norms. For example, in most creative industries such as advertising or entertainment, the norm is to be creative and innovative.

Research Proposition 4: Positive deviance will be positively related to but empirically distinct from creativity and innovation.

Figure 2 summarizes the key areas of commonality and difference between positive deviance, OCBs, whistle-blowing, and CSR. We do not include creativity/innovation in the figure because it does not necessarily involve honorable behaviors. The figure is divided into two halves—with more significant departures from norms on the top half and less substantial departures from norms on the bottom half. The largest circle represents the core of positive deviance as demonstrated in terms of behaviors that are honorable, voluntary, and that depart from norms. These are the three definitional criteria for positive deviance. Examples of positive deviance such as the case of Merck are located in the top half of the figure where there are substantial departures from norms.

The circle that represents whistle-blowing on the left side of the diagram suggests that some forms of whistle-blowing are examples of positive deviance, whereas others are not. For example, some whistle-blowers may expose an ethically questionable behavior, but may have blown the whistle to get revenge against their former companies. We claim that most would not label this behavior as honorable, and therefore would not consider it positive deviance. On the



**Figure 2: A Typology of Positive Deviance**

other hand, some whistle-blowers have good intentions in that they simply want to prevent an ethical wrong-doing to protect the public's interests.

Turning to CSR, some examples of CSR overlap with positive deviance whereas others are clearly different. For example, some organizations start CSR programs to improve their brand awareness. It is questionable as to whether this behavior would be honorable because the CSR benefit is exclusively a means to promote financial performance. On the other hand, some organizations engage in CSR because they think they have a duty to provide support to the local communities that sustain their businesses (e.g., communities provide a labor force, education system, etc.). In this case, the example of CSR would be consistent with positive deviance.

In addition to whether the CSR program would be labeled as honorable, it is also necessary to consider the referent groups norms. In industries in which the norm is *not* to engage in CSR, those companies that have CSR programs for honorable reasons are behaving positively deviantly. On the other hand, if the norm is to engage in CSR, the behavior is not necessarily positive deviance.

Another important distinction within positive deviance is the magnitude of the departure from norms. For example, some CSR programs may be limited programs that do not require a substantial departure from a norm. For example, suppose that an organization allows its employees to donate one hour of paid time to a charity, where the industry average is 45 minutes. In this case, the example of CSR is smaller in magnitude than would be the case of positive deviance.

Notice that although organizational citizenship behaviors may sometimes involve honorable and voluntary behaviors that depart from norms (e.g., such as unstated work regulations), by definition, OCBs involve minor departures from norms. Therefore, the OCB circle never crosses above the dotted line and

therefore has few overlaps with positive deviance. Similarly, some CSR programs or whistle-blowing behaviors involve substantial departures from norms, whereas others do not. Therefore, the dotted line intersects both the whistle-blowing and CSR circles.

### OPERATIONALIZING POSITIVE DEVIANCE

Now that we have a clearer definition of positive deviance and how it differs from related constructs including OCBs, whistle-blowing, and CSR, we now turn toward some initial ideas about operationalizing positive deviance. More specifically, in this section of the article, we are interested in how to measure the construct of positive deviance so that empirical research can be conducted. The operationalization of positive deviance will provide a way of measuring the positive, norm-departing behaviors that traditional conceptualizations of deviance overlook. For example, measuring positive deviance will be critical to conduct the kind of empirical research to test the propositions suggested by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) on the individual/psychological facilitators of positive deviance. For example, they suggest courage and an "other-focus" as potential predictors of positive deviance. In addition to helping understand the facilitators of positive deviance, the proposed measurement of positive deviance will also play an important role in examining possible outcomes or results of positively deviant behavior in organizations and communities. For example, one research question could address whether positive deviance is contagious, that is, when others observe positively deviant behaviors, do those others also tend to act in positively deviant ways. For the purposes of this article, we will not be presenting any data, but will focus on the kinds of measures that capture the substance of positive deviance. To facilitate the discussion, we use the Merck case above as an example throughout this section.

For a measure to be valid, it must have a strong theoretical basis. Our measure will be based on the definition of positive deviance we have adopted for this article, which has a strong theoretical underpinning: *intentional behaviors that significantly depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways*. Notice that in using this definition, we will want to measure a specific set of behaviors that are part of the episode of positive deviance (i.e., an event or series of events). Also notice that this definition also has several parts to it, each of which is necessary for articulating the notion of positively deviant behavior. Any measure of positive deviance must incorporate all of these parts.

Before having a respondent rate a possible episode of positive deviance along a set of items, we would want to ask them to identify a particular episode to assess.

Think of a specific episode or series of behaviors you would like to assess in terms of positive deviance. Using the following questions, assess the episode/behaviors

in terms of the extent to which you agree or disagree that each one describes your episode.

With this introduction, the assessment would then move to a specific set of survey questions.

#### **POSSIBLE ITEMS TO MEASURE POSITIVE DEVIANCE**

##### **Intention**

The first part of the definition suggests that positive deviance is intentional. Positive deviance is voluntary, purposeful, and discretionary, rather than forced or coerced. Items that capture this part of the definition of positive deviance might include:

- ☐ The behaviors described in the episode were intentional, rather than happening by chance.
- ☐ What occurred happened by accident.
- ☐ The person in the episode acted voluntarily rather than being coerced by others.
- ☐ The actions of the person were discretionary.

##### **Departure From Norms**

The second part of the definition suggests that positive deviance involves a departure from the norms of a referent group and is therefore often unexpected. Items to capture this part of the definition might include:

- ☐ The behaviors in the episode significantly departed from unit/organizational, industry, practice, or general principle of business norms.
- ☐ The person or organization acted in a way that was not expected.
- ☐ The actions did not represent "business as usual."

##### **Of an Honorable Nature**

The third part of the definition suggests that episodes of positive deviance are honorable. They have a virtuous character to them. Items that might be used to capture this part of the definition include the following:

- ☐ The behaviors in the episode were honorable.
- ☐ The actions of the person could be characterized as virtuous.
- ☐ The episode could be described as ennobling.
- ☐ The actions are praiseworthy in nature.

Although we have discussed the 11 items in order of the different components of the definition, proper use would dictate putting the items into random order rather than ordering them by category.

#### WHO ARE APPROPRIATE RATERS OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE?

Earlier in the article, we discussed how instances of positive deviance can depart from norms at the level of the unit/organization, practice, industry, or even general principles of business. To understand whether a departure from norms has occurred, it is important for a respondent from the appropriate referent group to rate the behavior. For example, if the case of positive deviance involves an individual departing from unit or organizational norms, the rater should be an individual from the unit or organization who understands the norms. However, if the case of positive deviance involves an organization departing from industry norms, it would be important for the rater to be from another organization in the same industry who understands the norms of that industry.

#### RESPONSE SCALE

Most behavioral measures of organization behavior constructs (including the measurement of OCBs) use a Likert-type response format. A 7-point Likert-type format is fairly standard and provides a sufficient number of choice points for the rater. The anchors for this scale would be (1) *very strongly disagree* and (7) *very strongly agree* with the middle point on the scale being neutral (4).

- |                           |            |                        |
|---------------------------|------------|------------------------|
| 1. Very Strongly Disagree |            | 5. Agree               |
| 2. Strongly Disagree      | 4. Neutral | 6. Strongly Agree      |
| 3. Disagree               |            | 7. Very Strongly Agree |

To understand how this operationalization of positive deviance might work in practice, consider another case of positive deviance. Rachel Hubka, owner of Rachel's Bus Company in Chicago, rose from the ranks as a bus dispatcher of the Stewart Bus Company to owning her own company (Bollier, 1996). When Hubka scouted areas for her new bus company, she wanted to target one of Chicago's most depressed neighborhoods. She picked North Lawndale, an area that had an employment rate of only 37% and where almost half of the residents lived below the poverty line, because she thought that the residents deserved an opportunity. After recruiting a set of drivers, Rachel's Bus Company formed innovative educational programs to teach its employees about business. Because Hubka has instilled fundamental ideas about business and entrepreneurship in her employees, some of her employees have become entrepreneurs themselves, frequently gaining Rachel's as their first customer. A bonus program allowed drivers to earn extra money for charter referrals. All drivers dressed in a shirt and tie and carried business cards to promote the business.

Hubka helps her employees reach their full potential. She not only provides them with a paycheck, but also an opportunity: Her company serves as an incubator for new companies founded by individuals who could not even get a job at first. From her selection of the impoverished North Lawndale community to her

support of employee efforts to create their own businesses, Hubka deviates from expectations about the role of an employer of a bus company. For example, she turned down several potential expanded revenue streams for her business so that former employees could capitalize on them to start their own businesses.

To assess the extent to which this example encapsulates positive deviance, we would target raters who work in the bus industry, but not at Rachel's Bus Company, to assess the example according to the scale items above: intentions, departure from norms, and of an honorable nature. We think that most respondents would likely rate this example quite high on all of the items, so it would receive a high score on positive deviance.

## CONCLUSION

This article advances current thinking about notions of positive deviance, beyond prior work by Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) and Warren (2003). First, we draw our definition of positive deviance from a synthesis of the different approaches to deviance in the field of sociology. This allows us to utilize the most appropriate parts of different approaches in conceptualizing positive deviance. Second, we explicitly differentiate positive deviance from related constructs in organizational behavior through a series of four research propositions to demonstrate positive deviance's unique value as a construct. Third, we conceptualize positive deviance as not only an individual level construct (as is the case with Warren's [2003] work) but as something that can also occur at the organizational level of analysis. The Merck and Malden Mills cases are examples of organizational positive deviance. This expansion of the level of analysis is important because it helps address issues pertinent to positive *organizational* scholarship, not just positive *individual* scholarship as prior work has focused on. Finally, we have started to operationalize positive deviance to encourage empirical research to be conducted. Prior scholarship within this domain has focused exclusively on theoretical development without movement to empirical work. Empirical research is critical for testing positive deviance posited here and in Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003).

In this concluding section of the article, we also offer some suggestions for an empirical research agenda on positive deviance. First, researchers need to empirically validate the measure of positive deviance outlined in the previous section. As part of this validation, the propositions differentiating positive deviance from related constructs should be empirically examined. These validation steps are critical for legitimating the study of positive deviance. Afterwards, the larger nomological network of positive deviance can be further developed and tested. In this vein, for example, Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) offered five key psychological conditions, which facilitate the likelihood of positive deviance: meaning, self-determination, other focus, self-efficacy, and courage.

Further theoretical work is necessary to flesh out the organizational and contextual enablers for positive deviance.

The nomological network also includes the outcomes of positive deviance. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2003) suggest some possible outcomes of positive deviance including subjective well-being, long-term effectiveness, and the evolution of organizational and common business norms. Future empirical research should examine these outcomes as well as the idea that positive deviance may be contagious—that those who witness positive deviance may be stimulated to behave in positively deviant ways as well. Through the study of this nomological network, we will be able to clearly demonstrate why positive deviance matters for organizations and their members.

This article has demonstrated why positive deviance is an important construct for POS. Positive deviance focuses on those extreme cases of excellence when organizations and their members break free from the constraints of norms to conduct honorable behaviors. By understanding better these remarkable individual and organizational level behaviors, scholars will learn how and why such behaviors occur. By answering the how and why questions for positively deviant behaviors, POS can take an important step toward understanding and promoting additional positive behaviors in the work organization.

## NOTES

1. For a good review, see Scull (1988).
2. Although our argument for positive deviance takes a normative approach, it is worth mentioning that in some empirical studies, the reactivist view of positive deviance holds (Jones, 1998). Jones had her college class perform random acts of kindness for strangers. In some examples, the students were met with the negative labels usually reserved for “negative” deviants such as criminals. For example, a student tried to buy a stranger’s bagel for him, and was met with the response: What’s wrong with you? Don’t you think I can afford my own food?
3. However, we recognize that one can argue that Merck gained long-term benefits from the donation through increased positive publicity.
4. This research proposition focuses on the discriminant validity of positive deviance from each of these related constructs. We would expect to see a moderate correlation between the constructs to indicate that the constructs share conceptual space with positive deviance but that they are also distinct.

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