A selective review of developments in positive studies of work and organizations

By: Arran Caza

Abstract:

At the end of the 20th century, psychologists reacted to what they perceived as a negative bias in their field by launching the positive psychology movement. This movement had influential effects on organization studies; much scholarly attention was devoted to studying positive organizational phenomena. The article provides a brief, selective introduction to some of the developments resulting from the early-21st century focus on positive work and organization (PWO) studies. Findings of PWO are described in six different domains: psychological capital, organizational virtue, positive relationships, leadership, positive states and outcomes, and positive practice. The article also describes some outstanding challenges and promising directions for future development, including the nature of positivity, construct clarity, and the risks of co-optation.

Keywords: leadership | positive organizational behavior | positive organizational scholarship | positive states | practice | psychological capital | relationships | virtue

Article:

***Note: Full text of article below

A Selective Review of Developments in Positive Studies of Work and Organizations

Arran Caza

Summary

At the end of the 20th century, psychologists reacted to what they perceived as a negative bias in their field by launching the positive psychology movement. This movement had influential effects on organization studies; much scholarly attention was devoted to studying positive organizational phenomena. The article provides a brief, selective introduction to some of the developments resulting from the early-21st-century focus on positive work and organization (PWO) studies. Findings of PWO are described in six different domains: psychological capital, organizational virtue, positive relationships, leadership, positive states and outcomes, and positive practice. The article also describes some outstanding challenges and promising directions for future development, including the nature of positivity, construct clarity, and the risks of co-optation.

Keywords

leadership, positive organizational behavior, positive organizational scholarship, positive states, practice, psychological capital, relationships, virtue

Overview

In the 1990s, Martin Seligman helped establish positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It was described as a counterbalance to a perceived negative bias in psychology, which typically studied and treated illness, concentrating on how to move people from deficit states to normal functioning. In contrast, positive psychology promoted the development of strengths and practices that contribute to thriving and fulfillment (Donaldson et al., 2020). Positive psychology fostered a similar trend in management and organization studies, where scholars highlighted what they perceived as a problem-focused bias (Caza & Caza, 2008; Walsh, 2000). Scholars have argued that the "tyranny of negativity" (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013, p. 198) created the need to add a positive perspective in studying work and organizations (Roberts, 2006). As a result, several positivity-focused research programs were launched, such as Positive Organizational Behavior (POB; Luthans, 2002) and Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS; Cameron et al., 2003). In addition to these programs, increased attention was devoted to existing topics that had a positive orientation, such that organizational research was described as taking a "positive turn" at the start of the 21st century (Fineman, 2006, p. 270).

This article provides a brief introduction to some of the themes and questions raised in the first 20 years of explicitly positive-oriented organizational studies. In doing so, several simplifications are introduced.

First, no distinction is made between the numerous branches of positive organizational studies (e.g., POB vs. POS), since they are highly compatible (Luthans & Avolio, 2009) and often not easily distinguished (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Instead, the umbrella label of positive work and organization (PWO) studies (Warren et al., 2017) is used to encompass these domains. Second, for brevity, this article only considers what might be called "explicit" PWO developments. Before any formal declaration of PWO, there were many studies of seemingly positive organizational behaviors and outcomes, including appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987), empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996), corporate social responsibility (Cochran & Wood, 1984), and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1998). These studies, and others like them, are beyond the scope of this article. Third, to maintain some distinction between PWO and positive psychology, this article does not address many relevant studies, despite their clear implications for organizational behavior, if those studies were not specifically focused on organizational domains (e.g., flow states, character strengths, core self-evaluations). There are already fine reviews of positive psychology available (e.g., Donaldson et al., 2020).

What then are PWO studies? This article follows the lead of Cameron and Spreitzer (2012), who suggest that PWO studies are defined by two qualities: their focus on processes and states that occur in association with organizations and their fit with one of four broad themes: a new way of looking at phenomena previously viewed as negative or harmful, directing attention to exceptionally positive outcomes, an affirmative bias directed toward fostering resourcefulness, or examining virtuousness and "the best of the human condition" (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012, p. 3). Adopting this perspective, the article highlights some key lines of PWO research in six broad domains. It also notes important criticisms and unanswered questions that remain in PWO studies.

Selected Domains of Positive Studies in Work and Organizations

Positive work and organization (PWO) findings and theory are discussed below in six domains: psychological capital; organizational virtue; positive relationships; leadership; outcomes; and practice.

Psychological Capital

Many positive individual qualities and virtues have been studied in organizations (e.g., Alzola, 2008; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). However, most such studies are best thought of as applications of positive psychology rather than uniquely PWO studies, and so are not addressed here. One important exception is psychological capital (PsyCap). PsyCap is an individual construct developed entirely in the PWO tradition, and explicitly focused on organizational contexts (Avey et al., 2011). Indeed, PsyCap may be the most focused and consistently developed area of study within PWO, with dozens of empirical studies conducted (see Kong et al., 2018). It is defined as a bundle of cognitive resources comprising efficacy (the confidence to undertake challenging tasks), optimism (the tendency to make positive attributions and expect success), hope (the ability to pursue goals and adjust as required to reach them), and resilience (the ability to persevere and recover from adversity; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). PsyCap is a synergistic, composite characteristic, such that the four components are collectively more strongly associated with outcomes than the sum of the individual constituent parts (Luthans et al., 2007). In addition, PsyCap is described as "state-like" in that it can be intentionally developed but is not as variable as true state qualities like moods (Lupsa et al., 2020). Higher levels of PsyCap have been associated with many desirable outcomes, including organizational climate, justice, leadership, job satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Kong et al., 2018).

Organizational Virtue

Extending psychological studies of individual virtue, the study of organizational virtue posits that characteristics traditionally considered virtuous in individuals (e.g., courage, forgiveness, integrity) can also be features of collectives (Cameron et al., 2004). Through attribution and institutionalization, the cultures, systems, and practices of organizations may take on virtuous qualities and facilitate virtuous action by members (Caza, 2015). Because organizations do not literally act for themselves, the expression of their virtue can take one of two forms: "virtue enabled by organizations" involves organizational practice fostering virtue among members, and "virtue in organizations" involves virtuous action taken by members as agents of the organization (Cameron et al., 2004, p. 768). Thus, an organization whose structure makes individual members more likely to notice the suffering of others, and more likely and able to act in response to that suffering is a more compassionate organization (Dutton et al., 2006). Organizational virtues have been studied in terms of specific qualities (e.g., forgiveness; Bright & Exline, 2012), and as composites of multiple virtues in the form of overall virtuousness (e.g., Rego et al., 2010). In both forms, organizational virtues have been linked to a variety of desirable outcomes, including resilience, improved performance, and reduced employee turnover (Cameron, 2020). These effects are explained through organizational virtue's ability to buffer members (protect against harmful forces) and amplify their work (facilitate effective action; Bright et al., 2006). One should note that most organizational virtue researchers stress that these processes and desirable effects are of secondary importance, emphasizing that virtue is its own reward and deserving of cultivation even if it does not lead to beneficial outcomes (e.g., Cameron et al., 2004; Dutton et al., 2006; Meyer, 2018; see also Roberts, 2020).

Positive Relationships

Most studies of interactions at work tend to focus on exchange, assuming that interactants are motivated primarily by duty or desire for personal benefit (Spreitzer et al., 2019). In contrast, PWO research suggests viewing relationships as ends in themselves, particularly as sources of positive identity and thriving (both concepts are discussed in the "States and Outcomes" section). Moreover, since interactions are an inherent part of organizing, relationships will inevitably develop among members, making it valuable to understand what distinguishes beneficial ones. Studying relationships for their own sake has led PWO studies to highlight previously neglected elements, such as a connection's tensility (ability to withstand strain) and its emotional carrying capacity (quantity and constructiveness of emotional expression that the link between two people sustains; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). These relationship qualities have been shown to foster safety, growth, and resilience (Stephens et al., 2013).

Indeed, consideration of emotion in interactions is an area where PWO studies have fostered many new developments, highlighting how emotional energy created between individuals is a key element of all communications (Quinn & Dutton, 2005). This emotional energy has been shown to be an important predictor of outcomes between individuals, in groups, and within organizations (Baker, 2019). For example, at the organizational level, emotional cultures characterized by companionate love (affection, compassion, caring, and tenderness) are associated with better outcomes for employees and clients (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). Extending beyond traditional organizations, PWO scholars have also explored positive relational dynamics among distributed work teams (Lee et al., 2020), sense of community in coworking spaces (Garrett et al., 2017), and members of temporary teams (Livne-Tarandach & Jazaieri,

2020), as well as positive identity among gig workers (Petriglieri et al., 2019) and inmates (Rogers et al., 2017).

Leadership

Leadership, broadly defined, may have received the greatest amount of PWO research attention (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Sometimes this work involves extending positive constructs to leadership contexts, such as the role of forgiveness in leadership (Cameron & Caza, 2002) or how leaders foster vigor among followers (Carmeli et al., 2009), but most often it consists of the study of one of the many positive leadership styles that have been proposed. These styles include authentic leadership (self-awareness, balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, and relational transparency; Gardner et al., 2011), ethical leadership (demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate behavior; Bedi et al., 2016), spiritual leadership (creating a vision and culture supporting a sense of calling; Fry, 2003), leadership humility (self-transcendence reflected in self-knowledge, teachability, and appreciation of others' strengths; Wang et al., 2018), and many others (Mumford & Fried, 2014). These positive forms of leadership are typically presented as reactions to the failure of leadership implied by well-known corporate scandals (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, Lehman Brothers). Each style of positive leadership has been associated with a range of important outcomes, and has also influenced research in cognate disciplines. For example, authentic leadership has shaped research in fields such as sports (McDowell et al., 2018), healthcare (Baek et al., 2019), and education (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020).

States and Outcomes

In an apparent effort to address the PWO claim that prior research has had a bias toward negative phenomena (Cameron et al., 2003), many new outcomes have been proposed and examined. As noted previously, high-quality relationships and organizational virtuousness have been advanced as intrinsically valuable phenomena that should be better understood for their own sake. Attention has also been devoted to examining a variety of positive states and outcomes, both to highlight their relevance and to explain their origins. These efforts sometimes involved extending established concepts to a collective level of analysis. For example, the psychological construct of individual resilience has been extrapolated to the team and organizational levels, highlighting how groups differ in their ability to regain previous levels of function following stress, and may even have the potential to benefit and grow from the experience (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). More frequently, though, PWO research has promulgated new constructs such as thriving (a subjective experience of vitality and forward momentum at work; Spreitzer et al., 2005) or positive work-identity (one's enriching self-definition based on professions, roles, memberships, or other work-related characteristics; Dutton et al., 2020).

Application and Practice

Consistent with the explicit PWO agenda of improving the human condition, considerable effort has been devoted to practical applications and organizational interventions. For example, a collected book of case studies (Hess & Cameron, 2006) highlights the success of positive practices in various organizations as role models for others on how to foster change (see also Cameron & Lavine, 2006). There is also a range of tools and activities designed to foster positive outcomes for individuals and groups, such as the Reflected Best-Self Exercise (Quinn et al., 2003), the Reciprocity Ring (Baker, 2007), and the Relational Coordination Collaborative (Hoffer Gittell, n.d.). To promote such exercises and to foster a community of practitioners, the University of Michigan's Center for Positive

Organizationshttp://www.positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/ provides links to resources and syllabi, in addition to hosting talks and networking events.

In terms of the effectiveness of these efforts, a meta-analysis of PWO interventions at work found that positive activities do matter. Based on 52 effects, positive interventions were associated with increases in desirable outcomes, such as subjective feelings of well-being, and with decreases in undesirable outcomes, such as job stress (Donaldson et al., 2019). Interestingly, in that meta-analysis the effect sizes associated with reducing undesirable outcomes tended to be larger than those for increasing desirable ones. That is, it appears that PWO interventions do more to eliminate negative states than they do to enhance positive ones. This difference seems somewhat ironic, given that a foundational assumption of PWO studies is the qualitative difference between moving from deficit to normality versus moving from normal to flourishing. It is an issue that bears further investigation.

Concerns and Future Directions

Given the depth of enthusiasm and breadth of attention that positive work and organization (PWO) studies have attracted (e.g., Glover, 2020; Business Roundtablehttps://www.businessroundtable.org/; SET Managementhttps://www.setmanage.org/), it is perhaps not surprising that a range of critiques and challenges have also arisen. Moreover, since PWO studies are explicitly attempting to introduce something new to research on management and organizations, it is inevitable that the work will take time to develop and require adjustments as it does so. This section considers three areas in which serious questions have been raised about PWO studies, and in which future development may be particularly useful.

Nature of Positive

The defining element of PWO—positivity—is not easily, or consistently, defined. The current lack, and potential impossibility (e.g., Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), of a unifying definition of the positive aspect of PWO creates many challenges and much potential for misunderstanding. "Positive" behaviors may lead to negative results in organizations, and vice versa (Lee et al., 2003). For example, the presumably positive emotion of pride can produce both desirable (positive?) and undesirable (negative?) outcomes among employees (Verbeke et al., 2004). Likewise, shame, which is likely a negative state since those experiencing it report emotional pain, has been shown to foster relationships and virtue (Bagozzi, 2003), both of which have been identified as PWO outcomes. Of course, PWO scholars recognize such complexities, noting that positive outcomes may arise from both positive and negative phenomena (Kanov, 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2019). But admission of equivocality and equifinality does not eliminate the uncertainty. Unlike psychology, where established professional guidelines specify what constitutes normal, exceptional, and deficit states (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), there is no consensual definition in organization studies. To the extent that it is unclear or debatable what constitutes "positive" in organizations, then it is unclear what constitutes PWO.

There is a risk that labelling something positive will signify nothing more than approval by the person applying the label. If positivity is entirely context dependent, it seems to undermine the PWO goal of developing general theories of positive phenomena (Cameron et al., 2003). Unfortunately, the contingent nature of what constitutes positive is especially complex when focusing on organizations because they are inherently interdependent. There may be consensus that the welfare of one individual does not outweigh the welfare of their community (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), but less

extreme cases of interdependence are not so clear. For example, is a group of workers who derive satisfaction and positive identity from resisting a management structure that they perceive as misguided (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2011) positive or negative?

Although PWO studies describe themselves as countering the tyranny of negativity (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013), they risk introducing a tyranny of their own. The foundational (Cameron et al., 2003) and continuing (Spreitzer et al., 2019) claim that there are inherent, universal human virtues and tendencies seems to conflict with the ideas of socialization and cultural contingency (Fineman, 2006). As well, an explicit focus on the positive may direct attention away from negative realities. Scholars of PWO have explicitly stated that denial of negative experiences is not a part of their goals (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003; Spreitzer et al., 2019), but it may nonetheless be a consequence of their actions. For example, there has been growing resistance to the popularization of resilience in American public education, because emphasizing student hardiness seems to blame students for not thriving amidst stress, deflecting attention and resources away from genuine environmental disadvantages that many poor-performing students face (Ris, 2016). Similarly, PWO's explicit focus on "human goodness" (Cameron et al., 2003) risks de-emphasizing non-human costs, such as ecological damage and habitat loss (Dyck & Caza, 2020). A clear and encompassing definition of "positive" seems to be a matter of challenge and potential development for PWO studies.

Another important aspect of any definition of positivity involves the issue of excess. Doubts have been raised whether more good things are always better. In particular, observers have challenged the PWO focus on positive phenomena by raising the question of whether there might sometimes be too much of a good thing. Grant and Schwartz (2011) suggest that the ideal state is an intermediate one between the vices of deficiency and excess; for example, too little courage is cowardice, too much is recklessness, and neither is desirable. The PWO scholars studying virtues have responded by suggesting that virtues cannot be excessive; for example, recklessness is not excess courage, but a misunderstanding of the true nature of courage (Cameron & Winn, 2012). As this disagreement highlights, the questions of how to define and measure organizational virtue are yet to be resolved (Meyer, 2018). It may be that these uncertainties arise from the more general PWO problem of distinguishing positive from negative.

Construct Clarity and Proliferation

Debate about progress in social science research is so longstanding and widespread that it is itself a platitude, and the source of numerous clichés. For example, the idea of old wine in new bottles points to the recurrent concern that "new" ideas are merely disingenuous or naïve restatements of old ones (e.g., Friedman, 1991). The same doubts have been raised about the novelty of positive studies in general (Kristjansson, 2012), and PWO research in particular (George, 2004). Such concerns may be particularly acute in the case of PWO, since positive organizational researchers tend to stress that there is a fundamental, qualitative difference between positive and negative, such that they are wholly different phenomena, not just opposite ends of one continuum (Cameron, 2020; Spreitzer et al., 2005). In the same way that positive and negative emotions are distinct experiences (Kercher, 1992), positive organizational phenomena are asserted to be independent and unique, rather than merely the absence of corresponding negative phenomena. Taking this distinction as dogma may have caused PWO researchers to devote less attention than they otherwise might have to investigating the relationships among potentially convergent constructs.

Indeed, relatively little effort has been focused on distinguishing positive constructs from negative ones. Moreover, what evidence does exist tends to raise doubts about the qualitative distinction between positive and negative organizational phenomena. For example, meta-analysis suggests that burnout (a state of low energy and withdrawal resulting from job strain) and job engagement (a state of high energy and dedication regarding one's work) are not two distinct constructs, but rather are negative and positive opposites of a single attitude toward one's work (Cole et al., 2012). Since burnout and job engagement both predate the PWO movement, they fall outside the scope of this article; however, they seem to reflect negative and positive states in organizational life, so the fact of their interdependence suggests that positive may sometimes be no more than the lack of negative. Consistent with this reasoning, a meta-analysis of PWO interventions found that positive practices had their strongest effects on reducing negative outcomes, rather than fostering positive ones (Donaldson et al., 2019). At present, the relationship between positive and negative remains uncertain, as do the relationships among new positive constructs developed in reaction to existing negative ones.

In addition, there are outstanding questions about construct proliferation even within PWO studies. Positive leadership provides an illustrative example. There appears to be significant conceptual overlap among the positive leadership constructs, raising doubts about their distinctiveness and utility (Anderson & Sun, 2015). For example, almost all of the positive leadership styles include a significant moral component (Mumford & Fried, 2014). One empirical examination of this overlap (Hoch et al., 2018) suggests that there is little to distinguish positive leadership styles from each other. The ethical concerns that motivated positive leadership researchers are admirable, but one wonders if their enthusiasm influenced their scientific choices and clarity.

The risks of enthusiasm are likely not limited to leadership studies. The inherent appeal of being more positive, and the crusading zeal that it sometimes produces (Fineman, 2006), might be clouding some scholars' judgment. For example, in the initial years of PWO, the notion of the "positivity ratio" attracted great attention. It was claimed that there is a specific ratio (2.9013 positive to 1 negative) between positive and negative emotions that is required for one to flourish. However, the associated research has since been discredited and retracted (Brown et al., 2013). In fact, there have been a number of retractions of PWO research reports (e.g., Atwater et al., 2014), leading observers to wonder if PWO practice may reflect passion and hope more than evidence-based management (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Baker, 2019).

Co-Optation or Misuse

Although the authors of positive studies often describe their work as different from "traditional" research because of their focus on thriving and other exceptional outcomes, the distinction is often not clear. For example, the foundational studies of organizational virtue linked them to increased organizational performance, and explicitly admitted that without that performance link, organizational virtue might not attract much attention (Cameron et al., 2004). Likewise, a primary rationale given for psychological capital's (PsyCap) value was its ability to provide a performance advantage in a world of "cutthroat competition" (Luthans & Youssef, 2007, p. 322). Indeed, an early review of the literature pointed out that studies of PWO constructs were frequently justified in terms of their performance benefits (Caza & Carroll, 2012). One might argue, as some PWO scholars have (e.g., Cameron, 2003), that it was required to initially ground positive studies in traditional "non-positive" organizational science in order to gain credibility and resources. Once a beachhead was established and the movement

gathered momentum, it could shift focus and concentrate on its original mission of fostering flourishing instead of financial profit.

However, it is not clear that such a shift has occurred. In 2019, Spreitzer and colleagues summarized PWO by stating that

"Organizations are flourishing when individuals and teams (1) are experiencing positive emotions, (2) are fully engaged in their jobs, (3) have high quality connections with coworkers, bosses, and customers, (4) believe their work is meaningful and with purpose, and (5) when they achieve goals and exceed expectations." (p. 4)

The fifth outcome is entirely consistent with traditional organizational research and the prioritization of financial profit. The other four risk co-optation, in the sense that those outcomes could be used to pacify employees and thus prevent any challenge or meaningful change in how organizations are run (Dyck & Caza, 2020). Moreover, recent work drawing on PWO theory appears to be continuing to support traditional organizational goals, for example fostering organizational compassion to reduce turnover (Simpson et al., 2020), structuring tasks to promote prosocial action with the intent of improving service quality (Kang et al., 2020), and using job crafting to increase job performance (Dan et al., 2020).

Of course, studies such as these do not necessarily mean that PWO theory and practices are being used to manipulate workers in service of organizational gain. But that outcome is a potential risk. Areas of research outside the scope of PWO as reviewed here demonstrate the real dangers of co-optation. Consider the case of corporate social responsibility (CSR). As noted by Margolis and Walsh (2003), through 30 years of extensive research and growing practical interest, the focus stayed on the link between CSR and financial performance; beyond the potential profit gain, little attention was paid to how or why organizations might make a positive difference in the world. It seems worth asking whether PWO faces a similar risk.

Conclusion

Organizational studies experienced a positive turn at the start of the century. A great deal of attention and effort was devoted to countering the seemingly negative focus of prior research. Introducing a positive perspective led to many developments, including new constructs and a richer understanding of familiar ones. Much has been gained from the introduction of positive work and organization (PWO) studies, but much also remains to be done, particularly in terms of clarifying the nature of positivity and its relationship to existing research and theory.

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Arran Caza