

Positive organizational scholarship: A critical theory perspective

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Abstract:

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) is considered an alternative approach to studying organizations; it is argued that POS plays a critical theory role in contemporary organizational scholarship. By using essays on critical theory in organizational science to consider POS research, and drawing from the principles of Gestalt psychology, it is argued that the important distinctions between POS and traditional organizational scholarship lie in POS's emphasis on positive processes, on value transparency, and on extending the range of what constitutes a positive organizational outcome. In doing so, it is concluded that the primary contribution of POS is that it offers an alternative to the deficit model that shapes the design and conduct of organizational research.

Keywords: positive organizational scholarship | critical theory | organizational theory

Article:

Psychologist Abraham Maslow has been apocryphally credited with an observation that summarizes our article. Maslow noted that “if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” The claim is that familiarity and practice influence our perceptions and that we tend to understand the world in ways that conform to means available to us. However, problems arise when those means do not suit the problem, like when a hammer-wielder is confronted by something other than a nail. We argue that the disciplinary tendency toward paradigmatic assumptions has affected organizational science in a manner similar to providing a toolbox with only a hammer in it and that positive organizational scholarship (POS) can serve as an additional tool.

In this article, we consider POS as offering an alternative approach to organizational science. Consistent with Maslow’s observation, our aim is to offer another tool. We neither reject prior research nor impugn its quality. Our argument here is only that it is partial, because of how organizations are typically conceptualized, and that POS offers a useful, complementary conceptualization. In brief, our claim is that organizational science is predominantly based on a deficit model of organizations in which problems are identified and corrected. Its emphasis has been on how negative or neutral phenomena affect a narrow set of desirable outcomes. Far less attention has focused on overtly positive processes and variables, and the potential range of

desirable outcomes has not been fully explored. We believe that the traditional approach and POS paint a more complete picture of organizational life when taken together.

Our argument is consistent with Luthans' (2002) persuasive plea for a positive, proactive approach emphasizing strengths in the study of organizational behavior. We agree with Luthans (2002) and argue that POS is an example of what he describes. In making this claim, we are conscious of concerns that have been raised about POS: that it may contribute to construct proliferation, offers little that is different or new, and is not always clear about what is positive (e.g., George, 2004). These are legitimate concerns and identify important areas that POS researchers must address. However, we believe that such concerns obscure the primary benefit offered by POS, which is to challenge the deficit-correcting perspective that dominates organizational science. In contrast, POS is premised on emphasizing the positive aspects of organizations and on broadening the conception of what represents a positive outcome. By shifting the emphasis of research from negative to positive, and doing so explicitly, POS plays a critical theoretical role in organizational science.

A recent discussion in positive psychology offers an analogy and clarifies the important difference between enhancing the positive and eliminating the negative. Because of its focus on eliminating illness, traditional clinical psychology has been criticized for operating from a "deficit model" (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, eliminating illness is not the same as creating health. Anyone who has been in better physical condition than they are in now, or one who has recovered from prolonged illness, knows that there is a qualitative difference between not being sick and feeling healthy. The difference between creating the positive and eliminating the negative is subtle but potentially powerful (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995).

We see a parallel between psychology's deficit model and an assumption that seems to underlie most organizational science, and there are good reasons for this. It is our belief that organizational scientists, like clinical psychologists, are actively trying to help. When doing so, the obvious course of action is to eliminate suffering. If an organization has pathological problems in its strategy or human resource practices, correcting those problems is vitally important for the organization's success, and it becomes the focus of attention. Unfortunately, correcting problems may not be enough. In the same way that health is more than a lack of illness, the best possible outcomes may not suddenly appear with the correction of organizational deficits. For this reason, we see POS's explicit focus on increasing the positive, rather than decreasing the negative, as an important complement to traditional organizational science.

This article begins by briefly outlining the issue of paradigms in organizational science and then introduces a critical theory perspective, sketching the history, purpose, and contribution of critical theory to the social sciences on a general level. We then highlight the consistencies between critical theory and POS and use a critical theory framework to argue that POS offers a new approach for studying organizational life. We draw on foundational works in psychology, as well as current examples of research in the field, to support our argument that the fundamental distinctions between POS and traditional organizational scholarship are the former's emphasis on positive processes, explicit admission of value positions, and validation of a broader range of

outcomes as relevant and important. Finally, in the last section, we consider how POS, as an alternative paradigm, can affect both the development of theory and practice.

PARADIGMATIC ASSUMPTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONAL SCIENCE

Concerns about paradigms are familiar to organizational scientists and have been discussed in many forms (e.g., Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995; Pfeffer, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995; Young, 1988). However, Gioia and Pitre (1990) raised the issues most relevant to our concerns when they argued for a multiparadigm approach to theory building in organizational science. They defined paradigms in Kuhn's (1970) sense, that is, as a way of perceiving and as a set of assumptions that influence how one thinks and acts. The key point of their article for our purpose is that organizational science theory has been limited by its overly narrow paradigmatic approach. Unlike other calls for a better or different theory, Gioia and Pitre (1990) were not concerned with the quality of theory per se, as much as with the assumptions underlying its construction. They argued that organizational science has not done an adequate job in developing alternative approaches to theory building to account for the multifaceted nature of organizational life. In their words:

Traditional approaches to theory building in organizational study have tended to produce valuable, but nonetheless incomplete views of organizational knowledge, mainly because they have been predicated predominantly on the tenets on one major paradigm of one way of understanding organizational phenomenon. By now, however, the field recognizes that the use of any single research paradigm produces too narrow a view to reflect the multifaceted nature of organizational reality. Curiously, however, theory-building discussion seems to proceed as though the principles of theory building are somehow universal and transcendent across disparate paradigms of thought and research—they are not. Because different paradigms are grounded in fundamentally different assumptions, they produce markedly different ways of approaching the building of theory. (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p. 584)

Gioia and Pitre (1990) used Burrell and Morgan's (1979) typology of the four dominant social science paradigms (radical humanism, radical structuralism, interpretivism, and functionalism) to make a provocative plea for expanded theorizing and methodology in organizational science. Two polar dimensions define this typology: subjective versus objective, and status quo versus radical change. Gioia and Pitre (1990) argued that by the paradigm of functionalism organizational science is dominated by status quo-oriented and objectivist theories. They stressed that their aim was not to discredit or abolish functionalist theories but rather to create space for theories based on the other paradigms. The authors expressed concern that the field was too narrow in its focus because of the imposition of a single paradigm's assumptions on all research.

Although their article was published more than a decade before POS was formally launched, Gioia and Pitre's (1990) basic premise provides the groundwork for illuminating the importance of POS in the field of organizational science. We believe that POS responds to the spirit of their request for alternative paradigms to provide a more complete picture of organizational life. In fact, POS research has identified a third dominant assumption that limits organizational

scientists: In addition to being primarily status quo-oriented and objectivist in approach, organizational science is overwhelmingly focused on the negative aspects of organizational life. POS, with its explicit focus on the nourishing and enriching aspects of organizing, offers an alternative view. As Spreitzer (2003, p. 203) explains, “POS is a fresh lens for looking at human and organization possibility.”

We advance this argument here in three stages. First, we provide a brief overview of critical theory, highlighting the consistency of its aims with those of POS. Then, we explain how traditional approaches to organizational science and POS are fundamentally different, stressing the critical theoretical role that POS can play in organizational science. Finally, we provide examples of the differences between traditional organizational scholarship and POS.

CRITICAL THEORY AND POS

Critical theory is a theoretical perspective that falls under the general heading of “postmodern thought” (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Giddens, 1979; Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Karl Marx and Max Weber have been credited with launching critical theory in the social sciences, but the most substantial advancements in this area have been attributed to the Frankfurt school (Crotty, 1998; Jermier, 1998). Like all forms of postmodern thought, critical theory has its share of advocates and opponents in organizational science (e.g., Frost, 1980; Weiss, 2000). Although it seems that many of its ideas are appealing, the lack of coordination in grassroots critical theory movements has limited its influence on organizational science (Weiss, 2000).

Originally, critical theory was directed specifically at capitalist labor market practices. However, recent conceptualizations only abstractly resemble the radicalism of Marxist philosophy in that they share the same starting assumption that one can rationally critique various modes of science (e.g., Steffy & Grimes, 1986). The aim of recent forms of critical theory in the study of organizations has been to advocate the explicit analysis of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions underlying research (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Steffy & Grimes, 1986). Critical theorists believe that all theories are systems of knowledge that are embedded in and reflect particular worldviews, and therefore no single absolute system of inquiry exists (Crotty, 1998; Steffy & Grimes, 1986). Specifically, critical theory departs from approaches that are more traditional by advocating open discussion of the limitations of alternative modes of inquiry, an awareness of one’s own biases and values, and an explicit acknowledgment and analysis of the practical aims of research (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Steffy & Grimes, 1986).

Given this, we see strong similarities between the aims of critical theory and those of POS. The foundational statement for POS invites researchers to imagine another world in which almost all organizations are typified by appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness. Creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success. . . . Significant attention is given to what makes life worth living. Imagine that scholarly researchers emphasize theories of excellence, transcendence, positive deviance, extraordinary performance, and positive spirals of flourishing. (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003, p. 3)

Although POS has not been explicitly positioned as critiquing mainstream organizational science, it nonetheless disputes a fundamental aspect of the field's dominant paradigm. By rejecting the traditional deficit model approach, POS serves the critical function of challenging the status quo. By espousing "an affirmative bias focused on the elevating processes and dynamics in organizations" (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 731), POS seeks to offer a "new way of looking at old phenomena," thereby making "elements that were formerly invisible become visible" (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 10). In the same way that critical theorists have sought to represent the unrepresented and to challenge the "naturalness" of the status quo (e.g., Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Frost, 1980; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997), POS is trying to reorient the attention of organizational science by questioning the deficit model approach and instead emphasizing the positive processes and outcomes found in organizations. As such, it shares a counter-traditional stance with critical theory, as described in detail below.

COMPARING POS TO TRADITIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL SCIENCE

Traditional Framework

Traditional organizational science's deficit model approach is evident in many of the keystone textbooks on the topic. For instance, the fifth edition of Scott's (2003) book *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems* comprises four parts. The first, second, and third parts provide an overview of organizational studies by covering the dominant perspectives of organizational theory, including its historical roots and major propositions. In the fourth section, Scott (2003) covers two additional topics: "Organizational Pathologies" and "Organizational Effectiveness." In the pathologies chapter, he covers the various problems of organizations for both their participants and society, largely based on Weber's (1947) theories of bureaucracy. Then the final chapter on effectiveness is introduced with the following quote from Ashby (1968): "There is no such thing as a 'good organization' in any absolute sense. Always it is relative; and an organization that is good in one context or another may be bad under another" (quoted in Scott, 2003, p. 350). Admittedly, the intent of this quote is to stress the contingent value of organizational practices and forms; one of the key points in this chapter is that what is "best" depends on prevailing circumstances. Nonetheless, it is indicative that a chapter focused on the presumably positive state of effectiveness begins by stressing the impossibility of a universally good organization. Organizational effectiveness is treated as a matter of maximizing under constraint—of making the best of an imperfect situation. This demonstrates how traditional views on organizations are often tainted with pessimistic assumptions about the nature of organizational life.

Scott is not alone in this. In another textbook, the authors emphasize the importance of organizational theory topics with such questions as, "Have you ever had a job where people don't get along, nobody knows what to do, everyone is goofing off, and your boss is—well putting it politely, unpleasant?" (Greenberg & Baron, 2003, p. 6). Thus, when starting a new chapter, readers become immediately aware of the worst-case scenario concerning that particular concept. The effect is subtle, almost unnoticeable, but the framing in the textbook makes a disease model of organizations salient. It suggests that without constant intervention, organizations are likely to deteriorate.

Moreover, recent research supports this notion of a collectively shared schema regarding what organizational life entails. For example, in a longitudinal study of language in the *Wall Street Journal*, Walsh (1999) found that the use of words with a negative connotation, such as “competition” or “beat,” increased almost fourfold in a 17-year period. In contrast, use of positive words, such as “compassion” or “moral,” remained rare throughout the same period. Similarly, the most highly cited research articles in the leading organizational science journals also reveal negative assumptions about organizational life. We selected the two most highly ranked empirical research journals in the current ISI Web of Knowledge database: *Academy of Management Journal* and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. From each, we chose the most cited article of 1999, 1989, and 1979. Looking only at the title and first page of each article, to limit our judgment to the article’s immediate impression, we found five of the six articles focused on negative variables, processes, or outcomes. Although the research was clearly important, it seemed that the starting assumption for much of the research was that organizations are inherently negative entities. Most of these articles adopted a negative viewpoint and focused on fixing or coping with organizational problems (see Table 1).

Table 1. Most Cited Articles in Top Management Research Journals

Year	Article	Organizational Emphasis
1999	Kirkman, B. L., & Rosen, B. (1999). Beyond self-management: Antecedents and consequences of team empowerment. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 42(1), 58-74.	Positive: This article is concerned with explaining and furthering a positive state in organizations
	Hansen, M. T. (1999). The search-transfer problem: The role of weak ties in sharing knowledge across organization subunits. <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 46, 233-254.	Negative: The primary research question is how to overcome the “problem” of search-transfer
1989	Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 32, 543-576.	Negative: The article opens with the story of Gavilan Computers’ bankruptcy, and states that this is “not unusual” when firms are forced to cope with fast-paced environments
	O’Reilly, C. A., Caldwell, D. F., & Barnett, W. P. (1989). Work group demography, social integration, and turnover. <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 34(1), 21-37.	Negative: The primary dependent variable (turnover) is a negative outcome. It is about the loss of members from lack of social integration
1979	Robey, D. (1979). User attitudes and management information system use. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 22, 527-538.	Negative: This research is premised on the observations that (a) “MIS can and does fail” and (b) the research investigates the “problems of system” (p. 527)
	Karasek, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental strain: Implications for job redesign. <i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 24, 285-308.	Negative: The article is concerned with developing and testing a “stress-management model of job strain” (p. 285)

Taken together, these examples—Scott’s (2003) book, the Greenberg and Baron (2003) text, the Walsh (1999) study, and our sample of the most highly cited articles in the top research journals—demonstrate the deficit approach taken by traditional organizational science. Admittedly, understanding and correcting poor outcomes in organizations is important, but the overwhelming focus on these issues may deflect attention from more positive outcomes. Moreover, because scientific research is conducted as a progressive undertaking, once a negative bias is introduced into the field of organizational science and becomes integrated into key theoretical models, it is likely to become self-reinforcing. The approach taken by researchers and

the assumptions they begin with (e.g., that organizations are problem prone and need to be fixed and that negative outcomes and processes characterize organizations) constrain the questions they ask and the methods they use; thus, because of its paradigms, organizational science is limited in what it sees and explains (e.g., Gioia & Pitre, 1990). For example, if a researcher believes that all individuals in organizations are primarily self-interested and individualistic, they will be constrained in the ways they go about investigating how these individuals could be motivated to perform, as well as the conclusions they draw from their investigation. By focusing explicitly on the positive side of organizations, POS offers a way to balance traditional organizational research. In doing so, POS validates more kinds of organizational processes and outcomes as relevant and important, such as compassion and resilience.

Gestalt psychology's figure-ground principle offers a vivid means of demonstrating how assumptions influence perception and serves as a useful analogy for the potential effect of organizational science's paradigmatic assumptions. The "figure-ground" principle was developed to describe a basic tendency of visual perception (Kohler, 1959; Rubin, 1915/1958). In any visual arrangement, the observer will always perceive part of it as the "object" (i.e., figure) and everything else as the background (i.e., ground). What is considered as the figure and what as the ground has important consequences for what is seen. For example, consider two versions of Rubin's vase. In Figure 1, the vase is clearly the figure, and the rest of the picture is simply a black background. However, in Figure 2—which is essentially the same picture—the vase is the background and becomes no more than the white space between two human profiles. A careful comparison of the two pictures reveals that the faces and the vase are actually present in both, but the likelihood of perceiving them is different in each picture.



Figure 1. Rubin's Vase I



Figure 2. Rubin's Vase II

Considered more abstractly, the figure-ground principle can be used to understand our perceptions of any life experience. For example, visualize a snapshot of organizational life—such as a moment in the life of a company in the middle of downsizing—freeze it, and analyze it as a still picture. From extensive research, we know that this moment of organizational life is likely to be dominated by feelings of injustice, psychological distress, and decreased performance (e.g., Brockner et al., 1986; Cameron, Kim, & Whetten, 1987). Such things are so apparent to a student of organizations, perhaps out of familiarity with the literature, or perhaps because these concepts help to distinguish this particular moment from other moments in organizational life that it may seem as though there is nothing else. However, as Gestalt psychologists have demonstrated, what we see at first glance is only one way of seeing. If we take the same moment of downsizing and focus a bit harder, other important aspects may be perceived. For example, maybe you will see a moment of compassion in a group of coworkers

who gather to help a laid off colleague (e.g., Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Kanov et al., 2004), or perhaps you will notice how high levels of organizational virtuousness help minimize the hardships of downsizing (e.g., Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004).

As this experiment demonstrates, the negative aspects of downsizing (e.g., injustice, anxiety, and hostility) typically fill the foreground, whereas evidence of compassion and resilience become indistinct parts of the background. Simply put, the negative is the “figure” that stands out prominently against the positive “ground” in the organization. Although critical theorists would argue that this tendency is a general function of the self-perpetuating nature of dominant paradigms, organizational science’s tendency to focus on the negative may also have a psychological explanation. In an extensive literature review, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) demonstrated that negative events are more prominent in our memory, have a stronger effect on emotion and cognition, and explain more variance in human behavior than do positive events. In their discussion, these authors provide a convincing argument as to why humans may be evolutionarily predisposed to experience bad as stronger than good: It is unfortunate to ignore a positive event, but it can be literally life threatening to ignore a negative one. This line of reasoning suggests that the negative bias in organizational studies may reflect a survival tendency, making us more likely to notice, remember, and puzzle over the negative aspects of organizational life. As a result, the focus of our research is likely to be disproportionately negative as well (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) so that over time the field becomes overfocused on issues such as incivility, injustice, downsizing, and the like.

However, the survival value of attending to negative events does not extend to theory and research. Even if one assumes that on a day-to-day basis it is wisest to attend to threats, this logic does not imply that no attention should be devoted to understanding the positive aspects in organizational life. If organizational science’s purpose is to fully understand life in organizations, it must take account of both the positive and the negative. In recognition of this, POS research has begun to show the importance of positive dynamics in organizations. POS serves as the paradigmatic challenge that may allow organizational researchers to see in new ways. We develop this claim in detail below.

POS Framework

In defense of traditional organizational science, we admit that we have characterized a diverse and varied discipline in rather monolithic terms. There has, of course, been published research examining positive aspects of organizations, including such topics as organizational citizenship behaviors (for a review see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) and corporate social responsibility (e.g., McGuire, Sundgren, & Schneeweis, 1988; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). However, in comparison to the literature as a whole, such positively oriented research is relatively rare and is scattered throughout the literature, as suggested by the sample of research articles above. Consistent with our findings, Heath and Sitkin’s (2001) recent review of research topics in key organizational journals indicated that issues of stress, strain, perceived injustice, and politics are among the most prominent. To date, organizational science has been most concerned with the negative aspects of organizations.

One of the stated aims of POS is to counteract this by serving as an impetus for uniting and advancing what is currently fragmented literature on positive organizational phenomenon (Cameron et al., 2003). This intention comes across clearly in a recently published interview discussing POS with three of its key authors, Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, and Robert Quinn. In this interview, Jane Dutton explains her view of POS:

As a label that unites many different efforts. We imagine Positive Organizational Scholarship as a stew of really wonderful work that's been ongoing but has never been defined . . . existing pockets of research that were humming along and being published in respectable places but never saw themselves as being synergistic or complementary to each other in helping to paint a portrait or brew a stew. That, in fact, taken together collectively coupled help us envision possibilities of how to move organizations from ordinary to extraordinary or how to move people in organizations from ordinary to extraordinary.
(Bernstein, 2003, p. 7)

This emphasis in POS accords with critical theory. One of the distinctive traits of critical theorists is their relentless search for the suppressed and the ignored—the things that have been swept aside by the dominant view of social life (e.g., Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Frost, 1980; Jermier, 1998). As Roseneau (1992) explained, postmodern approaches, such as critical theory, “focus on what is nonobvious, left out, and generally forgotten in a text and examines what is unsaid, overlooked, understated, and never overtly recognized” (quoted in Kilduff & Mehra, 1997, pp. 459-460).

However, it is important to point out that the concerns of critical theory and of POS are a special sort of nonobvious phenomena. All scientific investigation should be based on a certain amount of self-criticism. Formulating hypotheses and subjecting them to empirical tests is at the heart of mainstream organizational science (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Presumably, all organizational scientists are looking for surprising, counterintuitive, or “interesting” findings (Davis, 1971), but this is not the nonobviousness of critical theory and POS. The focus that distinguishes critical theory perspectives is concern for aspects of the phenomena that are systematically denied by the normal practice of the discipline. POS is different not for pointing out surprising differences or proposing new constructs but for challenging the deficit model that shapes the design and conduct of organizational research. Such approaches all but exclude the possibility of positive outcomes, and it seems to us that POS's reaction against this is one of its most important contributions. By questioning the dominant approach and focusing on the positive aspects of organizational life that are traditionally understated, POS plays a critical theory role in organizational science.

REFRAMING ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE: WHAT POS OFFERS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

We have argued that the importance of POS is not its subject matter per se, because researchers have always sought to understand excellence in organizations. Rather, the contribution lies in POS's challenge to predominantly negative assumptions about organizational life. As Kim Cameron explained, “At its roots, POS represents a particular way of thinking, a value

orientation, and a posture toward organizational research” (Bernstein, 2003, p. 3). Put another way, positive organizational scholars look at the same pictures of organizational life but do so with a different paradigmatic lens. It, therefore, follows that POS can result in markedly different approaches and conclusions in theory building.

To help demonstrate these differences, we use Steffy and Grimes’ (1986) framework for critical theory in the study of organizations. In their effort to lay the foundation for institutionalizing critical theory in organizational science, these authors specify four essential steps. First, they argue that adopting a critical theory perspective requires the researcher to explicate and consider the effect of his or her intent in conducting the research. Second, like any other theory, critical theory must include an empirical analysis of the relevant phenomena. Third, it is necessary to engage in hermeneutical evaluation of those empirical results, which involves at least one of three types of follow-ups: (a) assessing the actors’ interpretations of the researcher’s findings, (b) situating the findings in their historical–contextual setting, or (c) a self-reflective analysis of the research product and process. Steffy and Grimes’ (1986) fourth requirement for critical theory is a commitment to organizational change; the consequence of theory, and its ability to effect beneficial change, is an important aspect of a critical theory approach. Below, we consider how POS satisfies all four criteria.

Explicating Intent

Consistent with the first part of Steffy and Grimes’ (1986) framework, POS researchers have been clear in explaining that the intent of their research is to identify the positive dynamics that foster vitality and prosperity in both individuals and systems (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003). Moreover, the majority of research self-identified as POS is carried out in the spirit of explicating this intention. The consistent and explicit reference to the “positive bias” of POS accords with the critical theorists’ notion of a “third level construct” (Steffy & Grimes, 1986, p. 328). Critical theory stresses that researchers cannot be purely objective and value-free but instead have values and beliefs that influence their research. By explicitly stating the aims of their research and recognizing their lack of value objectivity, POS researchers distinguish themselves from traditional research in organizational science. The traditional research model is just as intentional and value-based as POS but does not typically admit it (see also McCloskey, 1985).

Empirical Analysis

Inherent in the second part of Steffy and Grimes’ (1986) framework is the fact that modern critical theory emphasizes a positivist and empirical approach to investigating research questions. Although critical theories are likely to lead to different kinds of research questions (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997), the methodological rigor with which these questions are investigated is as important to critical theory as it is to traditional theory. POS seems to be particularly concerned with this issue. All formal statements of POS emphasize that “S” stands for scholarship and that rigorous empirical testing is a cornerstone of POS (Bernstein, 2003; Cameron & Caza, 2004; Cameron et al., 2003). In this regard, POS is consistent with the standards of traditional research, as demonstrated by the accumulating body of empirical POS research (e.g., Andersson, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2007; Avey, Patera, & West, 2007; Bright,

Cameron, & Caza, 2006; Britt, Dickinson, Moore, Castro, & Adler, 2007; Cross, Baker, & Parker, 2003; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Losada & Heaphy, 2004; O'Donohoe & Turley, 2006; Pittinsky & Shih, 2004; Vogus & Wellbourne, 2003; Wooten & Crane, 2004). By empirical research, we mean that these studies have collected and analyzed data (be it qualitative or quantitative data) in a systematic manner.

Hermeneutical Evaluation

Steffy and Grimes (1986) believe that a hermeneutical evaluation of research is a necessary component of a critical theory approach to organizational science. They explain that “hermeneutics emphasizes the historical dimension of research. This method assumes that social processes and events are revealed only in light of the complex interaction between the researcher and the research domain” (p. 324). Again, much of the POS research is consistent with this part of the framework. For example, in Vogus and Wellbourne’s (2003) study of mindfulness in software firms, they grounded their empirical analysis in a historical and contextual understanding of what entails mindfulness in that particular type of organization. Additionally, some POS researchers have explicitly engaged in a self-reflection process, thereby acknowledging, coming to terms with, and being inspired by their roles and the biases in their own research (e.g., Dutton, 2003). The fourth part of Steffy and Grimes’ (1986) framework, a commitment to change, is also important for POS, and we discuss it extensively below with regard to POS’s contributions to theory and practice.

Contribution to Theory

By explicating its aims and biases, by being rigorous in its methods, and by recognizing alternative interpretations and multiple meanings, POS serves a critical theory function to make important contributions to organizational science. It highlights the importance of the positive aspects of organizational life. In doing so, POS offsets the inherently greater power of information about negative processes and outcomes. By reversing the traditional figure-ground relationship between the negative and the positive, POS offers the opportunity for a more complete understanding of organized behavior. In the same way that it is easier to see the faces in Rubin’s vase after they have been pointed out, POS’s highlighting of the positive fosters the possibility of being able to see both the positive and the negative, thereby being able to view the whole. Challenging the traditional deficit model approach, POS promotes a dynamic picture of the whole organizational life, filled with the richness and tension of both positive and negative aspects.

In some cases, POS researchers’ denial of traditional assumptions is very explicit. For example, in their work on resilience, Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) argued that

Studies of organizing in the face of adversity have been focused on the negative. This tendency to focus on failures, decline, and maladaptive pathological cycles is revealed in images such as threat rigidity, downward spirals, vicious cycles, and tipping points that dominate the organizational literature. (p. 94)

These authors sought to counterbalance what they saw as a trend emphasizing the negative aspects of organizing. In contrast to the pessimistic tone of previous research about organizations' potential to withstand adversity (e.g., Roberts, 1990), Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) focused their analysis on understanding the positive aspects of resilience, aspects that had been overlooked or minimized by prior research.

Such efforts, focused on bringing the positive into as clear a focus as the negative, create the possibility for organizational theory to encompass all the dynamic processes that constitute an organized system. Although adopting a dynamic, process-oriented conceptualization of organizations is an old idea (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1978; Weick, 1979), it is rarely incorporated in the more recent theories of organizational behavior (e.g., Heath & Sitkin, 2001; Porter, 1996). However, by creating a situation in which they must account for both the positive and the negative, POS explanations are forced to consider dynamic interactions, feedback loops, and positive spirals. By stressing that there can be both exceptionally good and exceptionally bad outcomes and processes, POS reduces the implied determinism of organizational life, requiring explanations to be more dynamic.

Feldman and Khademian's (2003) examination of "empowerment and cascading vitality" expressed the potential dynamism of POS. They explain that "our model contributes to positive organizational scholarship by showing the dynamic potential in the relationship between the individual, organization, and community, and the role that organizational empowerment can have in creating and feeding these relationships" (Feldman & Khademian, 2003, p. 358). Drawing on research by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), which shows how three elements of organizational structure (job redesign, employee involvement, and nurturing callings) can enable meaningful work, Feldman and Khademian (2003) argued that employee involvement can lead to increased meaningfulness through its effect on job redesign, which, in turn, enables employees to pursue their job as a calling (see Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). In other words, they demonstrated how elements at the individual level (employee involvement) could influence aspects of the organizational level (job redesign), which in turn will create positive individual-level outcomes (increased meaningfulness).

This sort of dynamic and cross-level theorizing appears to be typical of POS. For example, the work on virtues in organizations stresses the feedback linkages between individuals' actions and organizational policies (Cameron et al., 2004; Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004). Likewise, POS treatments of emotion stress the "broadening and building" action of positive moods in which positive affect potentiates broadened cognition and durable resources, which in turn increase the future likelihood of success and further positive affect (Fredrickson, 2001, 2003). By treating organizations as a mix of positive and negative aspects, in contrast to the traditional approach, POS helps to balance the field and creates the possibility of dynamic, holistic theories of organizing.

To summarize, POS's contribution to organizational theory is apparent in the new generation of research that has been produced through critically challenging traditional approaches to organizational research. By bringing the positive organizational processes and outcomes to center stage, POS paints a new picture of organizational life. POS also broadens the scope of organizational science by validating more kinds of organizational processes and outcomes as

relevant and important to study. We recognize that each POS study has its own idiosyncrasies, and each must be treated as an individual scholarly effort. We further realize that POS is not an entirely homogeneous field. Within its ranks are objectivists and subjectivists, those favoring holistic accounts and those favoring methodological individualism, as well as many others. Nonetheless, as we have pointed out in this article, there is an important insight to be gained from considering the commonalities that characterize POS and distinguish it from traditional organizational research. To demonstrate this, we have detailed how POS challenges the negative mainstream assumptions about organizational life and how POS, unlike traditional organizational science, meets the demands of critical theory by explicating its aims and biases, conducting rigorous research, and subjecting that research to hermeneutical evaluation. We have argued that a movement that focuses on the positive side of organizations can help balance the traditional view of organizations, which will lead to more holistic and dynamic conceptualizations of organizations.

Contribution to Practice

The final part of Steffy and Grimes' (1986) framework for critical theory in organizational science is an explicit consideration of practical utility. One of the most notable distinctions between critical and traditional theories is the former's emphasis on creating change (Frost, 1980; Habermas, 1973; Steffy & Grimes, 1986). Citing Thomas and Tymon (1982) and Shrivastava and Mitroff (1984), Steffy and Grimes (1986) argue that the biggest problem with traditional organizational science is that it does not lend itself to practical change. They argue that traditional theory affects practice mainly through its mediating effect on manager's decisions (p. 326). Although this is an extreme opinion, and does not do justice to the work in traditional organizational science that undoubtedly affects practice, it seems fair to say that the link between traditional research and practice is often largely implicit. Action-oriented research has largely remained in the periphery of organizational science. A number of scholars have recognized the gap between research and practice in organizational sciences and have urged practitioners and researchers to take steps toward increasing the level and quality of their communication to bridge this gap (Hambrick, 1994; Starkey & Madan, 2001).

In contrast, critical theory explicitly pursues research agendas to inform practice and create change (e.g., Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Frost, 1980; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Steffy & Grimes, 1986). POS researchers adhere to this aspect of the critical theory framework in publicly stating their commitment to developing a theory that applies to real-world settings (Cameron et al., 2003). Moreover, POS has produced theory and empirical evidence that serves as a guide for enabling organizations and their members, thereby giving concrete evidence of the importance of practice in POS theories (e.g., Clifton & Harter, 2003; Dutton, Heaphy, Spreitzer, Roberts, & Quinn, 2005; Vogus & Wellbourne, 2003). To take one example, POS research not only led to a theoretical explanation of the nature of an individual's "reflected best self" but also informed on the creation of assessment tools for utilizing theory in both applied organizational and educational settings (Roberts, Spreitzer, et al., 2005). Other important organizational interventions, such as appreciative inquiry and the reciprocity ring, are likewise consistent with a POS perspective on organizations (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987).

An important source of the actionable nature of POS research is derived from its emphasis on positive processes and states in organizations. Although we do not deny the importance of removing problems and barriers, it is important to note that their elimination does not necessitate replacement by a corresponding positive aspect. As a simple demonstration, imagine what would happen if one were instructed not to think of a white bear. Typically, the immediate response is to picture a white bear. This is negative advice, focused on what not to do and falls prey to humans' difficulty in recognizing indirect proofs and substantiation by negation. In contrast, telling someone to think of a brown bear provides a positive direction, indicating what action would be useful (i.e., focusing on the "to do" rather than the "do not do"). Because of its emphasis on positive processes and variables, POS research is inherently focused on practical recommendations.

RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we have treated POS as critical theory, arguing that POS offers a new approach for studying organizational life. Drawing from the principles of Gestalt psychology and critical theory, we have demonstrated that the important distinction between POS and traditional organizational scholarship is POS's emphasis on positive processes, on value transparency, and on extending the range of what constitutes a positive organizational outcome. Furthermore, we have demonstrated how this change in emphasis influences both the development of theory and its subsequent translation into practice. Taken together, these observations indicate that although organizational scholars have always studied exemplary structures and outcomes, the creation of a coherent POS orientation nonetheless offers a new perspective on organizational life.

We began this article with Maslow's observation about the limits of having only one tool to work with. This observation was echoed in Gioia and Pitre's (1990) assertion that the field of organizational science needs to adopt a multiparadigmatic approach to capture the dynamic complexity of organizational reality. We argued that POS offers one such alternative, based on its critical theory-like approach to the study of organizations. Adopting a POS perspective can make researchers more aware of the positive aspects of organizational life, aspects that were traditionally minimized in organizational theories. Moreover, the potency of POS research for the development of theory and the advancement of practice exemplifies the benefit of adopting multiple paradigms (i.e., having more than one tool). We see the aim of POS not as replacing traditional organizational science but as helping to balance and complete our understanding of organizations.

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