

Positive Organizational Psychology, Behavior, and Scholarship: A Review of the Emerging Literature and Evidence Base

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The positive psychology movement seems to have stimulated new research and applications well beyond the discipline of traditional psychology. Among various areas of inquiry, research and scholarship about good work and positive organizations has received considerable attention from both researchers and practitioners. The current review examined the scholarly literature published between 2001-2008 on good work and positive organizations to provide a detailed picture of the current state of the new field. This review sought to discover the overall growth rate, trends in the literature, and to identify where, by whom, and on which topics the literature has been published. The findings suggest there is a growing body of scholarly literature and an emerging empirical evidence base on topics related to good work and positive organizations. Strengths, limitations, and implications of building a practical knowledge base for making significant improvements in the quality of working life and organizational effectiveness are discussed.

Keywords: Positive organizational psychology, positive organizational behavior, positive organizational scholarship, positive psychology at work, industrial/organizational psychology, management, leadership, organizational development, literature review

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Introduction

Since its formal introduction at the American Psychological Association Convention in 1998, the positive psychology movement has blossomed, giving birth to a vibrant community of scholars and practitioners interested in improving various aspects of society (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, forthcoming). The widely cited new millennium issue of the *American Psychologist* on *Happiness, Excellence, and Optimal Functioning* by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has arguably helped fuel the passion for and emergence of a broad range of positive oriented activity across the social and human sciences (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Over this brief ten year period of positive psychology's earliest development, a wealth of new scholarly books, research studies, peer review journal publications, grant funds from major foundations and the National Institutes of Health, national and international conferences, and generous prizes for exemplary work have emerged (Donaldson, forthcoming). This expanding domain of scholarship and a growing evidence base have inspired Universities across the globe to develop and offer courses and graduate programs in positive psychology, and the first Ph.D. program was launched at Claremont Graduate University in 2007.

Positive Psychology seems to have become an umbrella term used to stimulate and organize research, application, and scholarship on strengths, virtues, excellence, thriving, flourishing, resilience, flow, and optimal functioning in general. This refreshing new orientation and focus on strengths, solutions, and what makes life worth living, provides an alternative to traditional research paradigms. That is, it offers a new dimension to the traditional social and human sciences, which have largely focused on diagnosing and

solving problems. The new positive orientation to research and application is often conceptualized as complementary to the more problem focused or deficit based paradigm, as opposed to a replacement. These different social science orientations are believed to be complimentary and essential for understanding the full range of human experience in contemporary times.

The new positive orientation to research, application, and scholarship inspired by the positive psychology movement escaped the disciplinary confinement of psychology, and has spread quickly across the disciplines and professions of education (Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, & Riley-Tillman, 2004; Gilman, Furlong, & Huebner, 2009; Liesveld & Miller, 2005), public health (Post, 2005; Quick & Quick, 2004; Taylor & Sherman, 2004), health care (Houston, 2006), social and human services (Radey & Figley, 2007; Ronel, 2006), economics (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Marks, Shah, & Westall, 2004), political science (Linley & Joseph, 2004), neuroscience (Burgdorf, 2001), leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), management (Ghoshal, 2005), and the organizational sciences (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton, 2003; Luthans 2002a, 2002b) among others. The purpose of this review is to isolate one of these new areas, good work and positive organizations, in order to understand the nature of the scholarly literature that has been published since the positive psychology movement began at the turn of the new millennium. It is important to point out that there is plenty of research and scholarship prior to 2000 that could now be classified as fitting within the definitions of positive organizational psychology, behavior, or scholarship. But, our focus in this paper will be placed on peer reviewed publications published between

2001-2008. We are specifically interested in research and scholarship about good work and positive organizations that is in some way linked to, or the result of, the new movement in positive psychology.

New positive research and scholarship applied to work settings in the last decade generally seems to fall under the headings of positive organizational psychology, positive organizational behavior, and positive organizational scholarship. These terms appear to be used interchangeably in the literature at times, and at other times to have distinct meanings. Below we will briefly describe and define these three interrelated concepts or frameworks for using a positive orientation to study the modern world of work and organizations.

Positive Organizational Psychology

Positive psychology refers to “the science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5).

Simply put, positive organizational psychology (POP) can be considered positive psychology focused on work and organizational issues. It is the study and application of positive psychology to improve the effectiveness and quality of life in organizations.

Naturally, POP topics overlap with those of positive psychology. According to Peterson (2006), positive psychology topics belong to three pillars. First pillar, *positive subjective experience*, includes happiness, well-being, flow, pleasure, hope, optimism, and positive emotions. Second pillar, *positive traits*, encompasses talents, interests, creativity, wisdom, values, character strengths, meaning, purpose, growth, and courage. Last pillar *positive institution* facilitates the first two pillars and promotes human flourishing.

Positive Organizational Behavior

Positive organizational behavior (POB) refers to “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans, 2002a, p.59). POB research topics are state-like and should be something one can measure, develop, and use to improve performance (Luthans, 2002b; Nelson & Cooper, 2007). Core concepts of POB include hope, optimism, resiliency, self-efficacy, and authentic leadership (Luthans, 2002b; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Positive Organizational Scholarship

Positive organizational scholarship (POS) is “concerned primarily with the study of especially positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members” (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 4). The basic idea of POS is that understanding the drivers of positive behavior in the workplace would enable organizations to rise to new levels of achievement (Roberts et al., 2005). POS seeks to study organizations characterized by “appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness where creating abundance and human well-being are key indicators of success” (Bernstein, 2003, p. 267). POS focuses on positive dynamics that bring positive effects like exceptional individual and organizational performance (Cameron & Caza, 2004; The Essence, n.d). Examples of research subjects within the POS include strength, resilience, vitality, trust, organizational virtuousness, positive deviance, extraordinariness, and meaning (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Spreitzer & Somenshein, 2003; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

The Study of Positive Organizational Psychology and Evidence

For simplicity, we are going to refer the scholarly literature on good work and positive organizations/institutions using the term positive organizational psychology. We will locate and examine the scholarly literature on good work and positive organizations/institutions published between 2001-2008. All work that falls under one or more of the overlapping definitions of positive organizational psychology, behavior, or scholarship will be included. There are a number of specific questions about this literature we will address in this review:

- How many articles have been published between 2001-2008?
- What percentage of the publications in this new area is based on empirical investigations?
- Have the number of journal publications in this area increased over the nine year period?
- What percentage of the studies is conducted by scholars based in the United States?
- Which other countries are represented by authors in this new area of scholarship?
- Which universities are most often affiliated with the publications in this area?
- Which journals are publishing studies in this field?
- What are the most popular topics addressed in this new body of scholarship?

Method

A vigorous search of the extant literature was conducted using the search terms of positive psychology, positive organizational psychology, positive organizational behavior, and positive organizational scholarship. Peer review journal publications between 2001 and

2008 were identified by searching the following databases: Academic search premier; Business source premier; ERIC; PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES. The search was limited to studies on adults (18+ years).

The initial search generated 1218 entries (after deleting duplicates). Among these, 151 entries (100 non-empirical, 51 empirical) were selected for analysis. Each of these articles met one or more of the following search criteria:

- (a) the article was linked to the POB literature;
- (b) the article was linked to the POS literature;
- (c) the article reported about a study that applied positive psychology topics in an organizational setting; and
- (d) the article reported about organizational studies which revisited established/pre-existing topics from positive psychology perspectives.

A total of 151 publications were analyzed to determine the amount and type of articles published, the authors' geographic location, and the nature of the journals publishing this type of work. Further, a content analysis was conducted to determine the most common positive organizational psychology topics addressed during 2001-2008. More specifically, a total of 33 topics were identified through a content analysis procedure. Each article was first coded with one main topic, based on the title, keyword(s), abstract, and the body contents. This initial analysis resulted in 51 topics within positive organizational psychology. These 51 topics were then re-categorized into 20 broader themes which were used to analyze the contents of the articles that met the inclusion criteria.

Results

Amount and Type of Publications

A total of 151 peer-reviewed articles that met our search criteria were published during 2001-2008 (Table 1). Of the 151 articles identified, a total of 34% were based on empirical studies while the other 66% were conceptual in nature. Figure 1 illustrates how the number and type of publications have changed over the period of interest. For example, there were only two publications identified in 2001, compared to 37 in 2008. During the period of 2002-2007 conceptual studies out-numbered empirical studies, with the largest gap of 19 conceptual vs. four empirical occurring in 2005. However, empirical studies (19) out-numbered conceptual publications (18) for the first time in 2008. While it is uncertain at this point if this pattern reflects a trend toward an emerging evidence based for positive organizational psychology, it does offer promise that more researchers are pursuing empirical evidence to confirm/disconfirm conceptual claims.

Insert Table 1 about here

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Authors' Geographic Location

Of the total of the 151 publications identified, 72% (109) of the authors were based in the United States. Of the 38% located outside the United States, the majority were found to be based in the United Kingdom (26%), Australia (14%), South Africa (12%), Netherlands (12%), and Spain (10%). Table 2 and Figure 2 provide a distribution of the publications by authors' geographic location.

Insert Table 2 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

To gain a sense of which universities in the United States have been most active in supporting positive organizational psychology over the past decade, the top five Universities were identified. Table 3 reveals that the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (19 publications), University of Nebraska-Lincoln (15 publications), Case Western Reserve University (four publications), Central Washington University (four publications), and Harvard University (four publications) were the universities most often affiliated with publications in this area.

Insert Table 3 about here

Journals Publishing Positive Organizational Psychology

Another question we set out to address is which journals have published articles in positive organizational psychology. For example, we wondered whether these publications mainly appeared in a limited number of specialty journals, or if they were accepted more broadly across the organizational sciences literature. Table 4 shows that 23 different journals published two or more articles related to positive organizational psychology during 2001-2008. This only represents 71% of the total number of articles published, another 44 journals have published one article and a total of 67 different journals have published work in this area. The top 5 journals publishing in this area were *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (11 publications), *Academy of Management Review* (nine publications), *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (eight publications), *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management* (eight publications) and the *OD Practitioner* (eight publications).

The *Journal of Positive Psychology* and *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* tied for the sixth spot with seven publications each.

Insert Table 4 about here

Most Popular Topics in Positive Organizational Psychology

Content analysis was conducted to determine which topics were most often addressed in the articles published between 2001-2008. Four topics seemed to emerge as the most popular: Positive psychology at work (17 publications), introduction and overview of positive organizational scholarship (13 publications), positive organizational development and change (12 publications), and positive leadership (11 publications). Table 5 displays the top 20 topics; all of these topics were addressed in at least three different publications during the period of analysis.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

The results of this review confirm there is a growing body of literature on topics related to positive organizational psychology, behavior, and scholarship that has been published in a wide range of mainstream and specialty peer review journals. More than 150 articles have appeared since positive psychology began to build momentum at the turn of the century, and the increasing number of empirical investigations suggests that a stronger evidence base to confirm or disconfirm theoretical and conceptual claims in this area is likely to develop in the coming years. While the majority of articles have been published by

scholars with U.S. affiliations (72%), we found evidence that there is growing scholarly interest and activity in Europe and other regions of the world.

Scholars from two universities in the United States, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and University of Nebraska-Lincoln, were found to have been the most active in publishing about positive organizational psychology over the past decade. Scholars from Harvard University, Case Western Reserve University, and Central Washington University were also found to be major contributors to this emerging literature and evidence base. Overall, 78 different journals have served as outlets for work in this area, with the most popular outlets being the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *OD Practitioner*, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, and the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Content analysis of the 151 articles published across these 78 journals identified 20 distinct topics that were addressed in at least three articles. The most popular topics to date in this emerging literature were positive psychology at work, introduction and overview of positive organizational scholarship, positive organizational development and change, and positive leadership.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first review we know of that documents and analyzes the peer review literature on good work and positive organizations/institutions since the positive psychology movement began around the turn of the millennium. Using powerful contemporary search engines and a systematic procedure, we are confident that the studies reported offer a reasonable sample of the peer review work that has been published in this area during

2001-2008. The analyses reported should help researchers take stock of the evidence base for claims about positive organizational psychology, the range of topics that are being pursued, where this work is located, and to identify needs and opportunities for future research.

It is important to point out that the keywords used in this review might have not captured all positive organizational psychology studies and articles, since the search results only included literature that specifically included the keywords in their title, abstract, keyword (provided by the authors), or the main text. It is likely that some of the studies that would meet the definitions of positive organizational psychology, behavior, and/or scholarship did not include those search terms. Moreover, there was some variability in terms of how closely the studies included in the analyses were linked to positive organizational psychology, as several studies mentioned positive psychology, positive organizational psychology, positive organizational behaviour, and/or positive organizational scholarship in their discussion section but not as their main interest or focal point. Nevertheless, this review provides a very lucid snapshot of the kinds of conceptual and empirical work in positive organizational psychology that has gone on since the positive psychology movement began.

We do not mean to imply that we have data to support that the positive psychology movement caused the scholarship reported in this review. While it was certainly published after the positive psychology movement began, other factors occurring in these disciplines could be at least partially responsible for this new robust area of research activity. Furthermore, our review is limited to peer review journal articles. There is another

emerging literature consisting of scholarly books, book chapters, popular press books, and popular press articles that was beyond the scope of this review, but future reviews might consider analyzing this domain of activity.

Conclusions

There are many signs now that the positive psychology movement -- the science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions -- is continuing to build momentum (Donaldson, forthcoming). This review documents that peer reviewed articles related to the application of positive psychology to understanding good work and positive organizations is limited, but growing. While it is encouraging that we found a total of 151 published peer review articles on positive organizational psychology between 2001-2008, this is still a very limited evidence base to support claims about the promise of the new field of positive organizational psychology. For example, the initial publications in this area tended to be conceptual with only 3-4 empirical works per year before 2006. But, the number of empirical studies has increased sharply in the last couple of years, surpassing the number of conceptual articles for the first time in 2008 (19 empirical, 18 conceptual). It will be interesting to observe in the next few years if this trend continues.

While the majority of the literature we identified was published by scholars with U.S. affiliations, we found evidence that researchers in other parts of the world are interested and beginning to publish at higher rates on topics in positive organizational psychology. The range and quality of the journals publishing articles was surprising and impressive. Many articles in this area are being published by top tier journals, which bodes well for the future of the discipline and practice. The list of topics in these articles,

including positive organizational development and positive leadership among 20 others, seem to have the potential to invigorate research and applications in the traditional fields of industrial/organizational psychology and organizational behavior. It is our hope that the systematic documentation and analysis of the initial literature in the new area of positive organization psychology inspires more high quality empirical research and scholarship published in top tier journals. These efforts are needed to work out the limits and boundary conditions of this new area of inquiry, and to build a practical knowledge base for making significant improvements in the quality of working life and organizational effectiveness.

Appendix. Literature included in the current analysis

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Table 1. Conceptual and empirical peer-reviewed journal article publications by year

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | Total |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| Conceptual | 1 | 4 | 6 | 18 | 19 | 18 | 16 | 18 | 100 |
| Empirical | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 10 | 19 | 51 |
| Total | 2 | 6 | 9 | 21 | 23 | 26 | 26 | 37 | 151 |

Table 2. Peer-reviewed journal articles publications by authors' geographic location

| Country | Total |
|--------------|-------|
| US | 109 |
| Non-US | 42 |
| UK | 11 |
| Australia | 6 |
| South Africa | 5 |
| Netherlands | 5 |
| Spain | 4 |
| Canada | 3 |
| New Zealand | 2 |
| Norway | 2 |
| Finland | 2 |
| China | 1 |
| Germany | 1 |
| India | 1 |
| Switzerland | 1 |
| Total | 151 |

Note: Non-US publication refers to the publications by *all* authors located in countries outside US

Table 3. Peer-reviewed journal article publications: Top five US institutions

| University | Total |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. University of Michigan-Ann Arbor | 19 |
| 2. University of Nebraska-Lincoln | 15 |
| 3. Case Western Reserve University | 4 |
| 4. Central Washington University | 4 |
| 5. Harvard University | 4 |
| Total | 46 |

Note: Total number of US institutions included in the analysis = 72; Total number of publications = 151

Table 4. Peer-reviewed journal article publications by journal

| Journal | Total |
|---|-------|
| 1. Journal of Organizational Behavior | 11 |
| 2. Academy of Management Review | 9 |
| 3. Academy of Management Learning & Education | 8 |
| 4. Journal of Organizational Behavior Management | 8 |
| 5. OD Practitioner | 8 |
| 6. Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences | 7 |
| 7. Journal of Positive Psychology | 7 |
| 8. Organizational Dynamics | 6 |
| 9. American Behavioral Scientist | 6 |
| 10. Journal of Management Inquiry | 4 |
| 11. Leadership Quarterly | 3 |
| 12. International Coaching Psychology Review | 3 |
| 13. International Journal of Stress Management | 3 |
| 14. Journal of Business Ethics | 3 |
| 15. Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology | 3 |
| 16. T+D | 3 |
| 17. Academy of Management Executive | 2 |
| 18. Administrative Science Quarterly | 2 |

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|--|-----|
| 19. Journal of Management | 2 |
| 20. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology | 2 |
| 21. Personnel Psychology | 2 |
| 22. South African Journal of Business Management | 2 |
| 23. Group & Organization Management | 2 |
| <hr/> | |
| Total | 107 |

Note: Journals with less than two publications are excluded from here; Total number of journals included in

the analysis = 73; Total number of publications = 151

Table 5. Peer-reviewed journal article publications by research topic

| Topic | Total |
|--|-------|
| 1. Positive psychology at work (i.e., Application of positive psychology in the workplace or in the organizational literature) | 17 |
| 2. Introduction and overview of POS and its topics | 13 |
| 3. Positive OD&C (i.e., Application of positive psychology in OD&C or revisiting traditional OD&C concepts from the positive psychology perspective) | 12 |
| 4. Positive leadership (i.e., Proposition of new theory of positive leadership; e.g., authentic leadership) | 11 |
| 5. Job satisfaction/Happiness at work | 8 |
| 6. Introduction and overview of POB and its topics | 8 |
| 7. Critique (i.e., Critiques on or concerns regarding applying positive psychology in the organization) | 6 |
| 8. Ethics/Virtuousness | 6 |
| 9. Psychological capital (i.e., hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience) | 5 |
| 10. Work engagement | 5 |
| 11. Flow at work | 5 |
| 12. Stress/coping with stress | 5 |
| 13. Positive emotion | 5 |
| 14. Appreciative Inquiry | 4 |
| 15. Hope at work | 4 |

| Topic | Total |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| 16. Strengths/Extraordinariness | 4 |
| 17. Work-life balance | 4 |
| 18. Well-being at work | 4 |
| 19. Compassion | 3 |
| 20. Identity | 3 |
| Total | 132 |

Note: Topics with less than three publications are excluded from here. Total number of POP research topics included in the analysis = 33; Total number of publications = 151; POS = Positive Organizational Scholarship; OD&C = Organizational Development and Change; POB = Positive Organizational Behavior

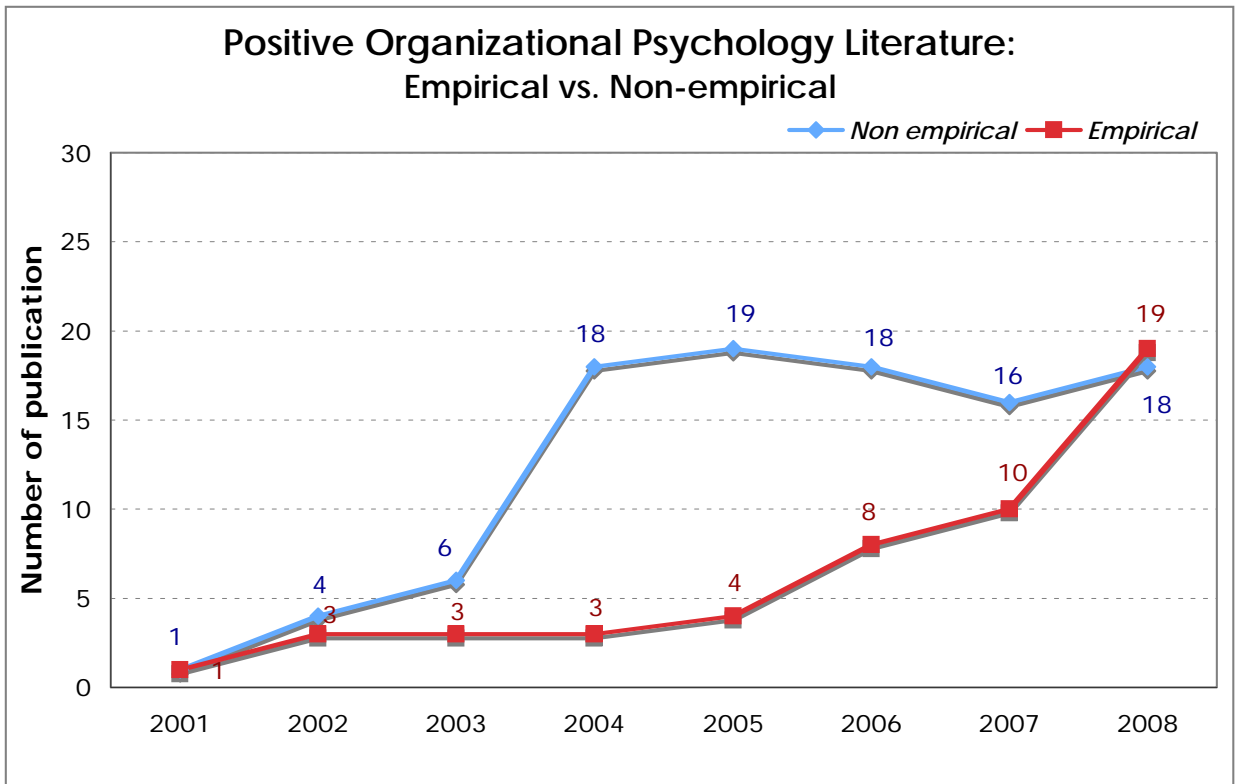


Figure 1. Positive organizational psychology literature from 2001 to 2008



Figure 2. Positive organizational psychology literature authors' geographic location