

Positive Organizational Scholarship and Business Ethics

Scott Sonenshein

University of Michigan Business School

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Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) pursues the scientific study of positive outcomes, attributes and processes within organizations. The field does not favor a single theory, but rather positions itself as an umbrella term that encapsulates how, when and why individuals achieve the good life in work contexts. Given that business ethics scholars study relationships between work contexts and the pursuit of the good life, there are obvious bridges linking business ethics and POS. By articulating these connections, I will start an important conversation between the two fields that will strengthen both of them.

In order to elucidate the connections between business ethics and POS, I first offer a definition of POS. Afterwards, I describe POS’s intellectual heritage in positive psychology. While positive psychology is certainly not the only intellectual discipline to have influenced POS, I specifically highlight positive psychology because of its direct role in helping establish POS. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of two important connections between POS and business ethics, suggesting how the two fields of inquiry can build off of each other’s strengths and accomplishments.

What is Positive Organizational Scholarship?

A useful approach for defining POS is to understand the meaning of “Positive,” “Organizational,” and “Scholarship” (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003b). By “Positive,” researchers refer to positive states and positive dynamics associated with those states. Most organizational scholarship focuses on negative states such as inefficient performance, production errors or unethical behaviors as well as negative dynamics that lead to those states (Cameron, 2003). POS does not deny the importance or legitimacy of researching these organizational phenomena. Rather, the field calls for the expansion of organizational research to include a more purposeful focus on positive phenomena. POS researchers focus on constructs such as resilience—making improvements even under adverse circumstance (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003); positive deviance—significant departures from norms in honorable ways (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003a, 2003b); and high-quality relationships—life-giving relationships that create meaning (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). These constructs focus on when, how or why individuals pursue and/or how organizations enable excellence, well being and virtue.

POS’s emphasis on “Organizational” refers to the importance of situating the study of positive phenomena within work contexts. For POS researchers, context plays a central role in enabling individuals to achieve the good life. Instead of serving as a medium to dehumanize individuals, POS claims that organizations actually have the potential to help their members fulfill the good life.

Finally, POS researchers stress the importance of “Scholarship.” Careful theoretical development and empirical research help separate POS research from the recommendations given by pop psychologists and the prescriptions of management gurus. No doubt, POS scholars openly embrace a set of value assumptions. These value assumptions play a prominent role in guiding the questions that researchers pose. For example, POS clearly favors questions that address how individuals achieve the good life, and how organizations enable individual, group and organizational level excellence. Moreover, POS starts from the universal premise that all individuals want to achieve the good life. However, unlike pop psychologists and management gurus, POS leaves describing and explaining the exact means and mechanisms for achieving the good life to empirical exploration. POS researchers emphasize the importance of using objective research methods, even if their research questions inevitably reflect normative biases. The prominence of the scientific method in POS reflects the field’s conscience desire to integrate the study of positive phenomena within mainstream organizational research by using longstanding empirical methodologies.

Intellectual Roots of Positive Organizational Scholarship

Many intellectual disciplines have influenced the development of POS such as appreciative inquiry in organizational development (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yaeger, 1999) and community psychology (Jahoda, 1958). However, for the sake of brevity, I will focus on the discipline with the most direct, and perhaps most widespread, influence on the development of POS: positive psychology. POS arose, in part, from the cross-pollination of psychology and organizational behavior departments (Bernstein, In Press).

Positive psychology (for an extensive overview of the field, see Snyder & Lopez, 2002) was formally introduced in 1998 by Martin Seligman during his tenure as president of the American Psychological Association (APA) (Seligman, 1999). Seligman observed that the overwhelming majority of psychology research focused on curing disease and dysfunction. Clinical diagnostic materials such as the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) embrace a “disease model of human nature” (Peterson & Seligman, 2003b: 15). Psychologists have concentrated on how to cure diseases—that is, how to take individuals from a negative state of dysfunction to a neutral state called normal. While curing disease is obviously a worthwhile endeavor, psychology has surprisingly paid little attention to how individuals can achieve a positive state of well-being, flourishing and excellence. Positive psychologists, in the words of Seligman (2002: xii), wonder more about “how to go from plus two to plus seven” and “not just how to go from minus five to minus three and feel a little less miserable.” The objective of both positive psychology and POS is not how to make improvements to take individuals or organizations from negative states to slightly less negative or neutral states. Rather, both intellectual viewpoints focus on the majority of the population—those already at a normal level of functioning—and seek to elevate these individuals into a state of enhanced well-being, excellence and virtue.

Far from calling for a ban on traditional psychology—referred to as “business-as-usual-science” (Peterson & Seligman, 2003b)—POS scholars and positive psychologists think that the study of both negative and positive states demand legitimate intellectual attention. That is, the goal is not to denigrate the tremendous progress made by organizational behavior and psychology over the past century. Instead, POS and positive psychology attempt to rectify the significant imbalance of negative to positive research projects scholars undertake by widening the research agendas in their respective fields. At the heart of this plea is a call for recognizing that studying the good life is as legitimate of a scientific endeavor as studying disease or organizational dysfunction.

Connections between Business Ethics and Positive Organizational Scholarship

Since its inception in 2001, POS has made remarkable progress. For example, POS has published the first scholastic reader on positive organizing (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003a) and the first special issue of a journal dedicated to POS research (Cameron & Caza, 2003). Moreover, over 50 scholars now openly align themselves with POS, and scores of others conduct research consistent with POS’s main tenants (University of Michigan Business School, 2003). Yet, in order for POS to expand from a developing field into a fully established intellectual paradigm, researchers need to make progress on two important fronts, both of which require tighter integration with business ethics scholarship. First, POS researchers need to invest in additional theoretical development about the good life. Second, POS researchers need to recognize and build off of prior work in business ethics that pose similar questions. By making progress on both of these fronts, POS can craft a deeper contribution to the organizational studies literature. POS can use its empirical tools to garner a better understanding of how to reach the good life, an important question for business ethics scholars as well.

Further Theoretical Development of the Good Life

One of the most important contributions that business ethics can make to POS is to help with defining what constitutes the good life. POS scholars and positive psychologists both claim to help individuals reach the good life, but are remarkably vague about what exactly constitutes the good life. For some researchers, the good life focuses on subjective well-being (SWB) (Diener, 2000), and for others, the good life emphasizes virtues (Cameron, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2003a). But while POS scholars often refer to the good life in general, and SWB and virtues in particular, POS scholars, trained as social scientists, are not well suited for expanding these concepts or articulating their philosophical bases. When, how and why individuals achieve the good life may require empirical investigation. But what constitutes the good life inevitably necessitates philosophical discussion, something with which business ethics scholars can aptly help. Take for example Robert Solomon’s work on virtues, which emphasizes the importance of character in business (Solomon, 1992). Solomon grounds his theory using an Aristotelian approach that recasts the way we conceptualize organizations in a manner consistent

with POS. In Solomon's words (Solomon, 1992: 19), his work is a "battle in a war against those myths and metaphors and other forms of conceptual isolationism that lead us to think about business as a game—or worse, as a jungle or a war for survival." Solomon's work not only describes the way we live, but it also describes the way we *ought* to live. It provides a set of aspirational ideals for which we ought to strive. Questions about *ought*—and discussions about how we *ought* to live—are not understandable merely through empirical descriptions but rather require philosophical articulation as well.

While business ethicists can provide POS researchers with the content of the good life, I think that POS can offer business ethics a set of important empirical findings that help scholars understand more about how to achieve—and the social and psychological consequences of achieving—the good life. The description and explanation of organizational processes and psychological enablers that help individuals reach the good life can disseminate important information to scholars and practitioners interested in bringing the good life to organizational contexts.

Overlap of Intellectual Interests

At their very cores, business ethics and POS share important value assumptions often overlooked by other management disciplines. Both disciplines seek to influence mainstream management and organizational research to adopt positive and affirmative assumptions about human behavior, including that individuals have moral agency and can exist as moral creatures. The two disciplines can affirm the similarities of their intellectual interests and build off of each other's strengths in order to influence the larger management literature. For example, one of the more recent influential developments in business ethics addresses the importance of conceptualizing organizations as being capable of fostering the good life (e.g., Hartman, 1996). Business organizations are not only the type of ethically impoverished institutions described most prominently by Robert Jackall (1988). As early as 1994, R. Edward Freeman (1994) called for an end to the separation between "business" and "ethics," suggesting that theoretical work often treats business and ethics as conceptually distinct. Too much attention, Freeman argued (1995), is placed on describing business organizations as radically self-interested or exploitative. The separation of business and ethics is manifested in many well-engrained dichotomies such as the purpose of the firm, the moral norms used to describe business and the conceptualization of human behaviors within organizations (Wicks, 1996). This "negative" view of business leads to a focus on compliance ethics, as opposed to more aspirational understandings of business ethics (Paine, 1994). While business ethicists have lamented the implicit theoretical separation of business and ethics, they have offered little empirical support that business and ethics can converge in the empirical world. Positive organizational scholars can help document how individuals achieve the good life within work contexts—and how work contexts are at least equally capable of fostering the good life as they are at taking it away. POS's concentration on empirical testing can demonstrate that Freeman's intuition about the separation of business and ethics is correct: namely, that despite the preponderance of

research that separates business from ethics, there are many positive, and integrative, stories we can tell about business and ethics.

Conclusion

POS and business ethics ultimately center their energies on improving the human condition. Whereas business ethics instructs us about our endpoint—legitimate views of the good life—POS helps us reach that endpoint by describing and explaining the underlying processes and dynamics that lead to the good life. An understanding of both destination and journey can help individuals achieve the excellence and well-being valued by both positive organizational scholars and business ethicists. The common world descriptions implicit in most management theories consider organizations ethically impoverished institutions that deny individuals their moral agency and strip away their humanity. Greed, radical self-interest, corruption and the exclusive pursuit of shareholder returns overshadow the compassion, loyalty, relationships and extraordinary performance within organizations. While both views may exist in the empirical world, we unfortunately know very little about the latter view. POS's call for expanding research agendas to encompass understanding the good life should receive a warm welcome from business ethicists who think that the good life serves as the very foundation on which we build and understand business organizations.

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Brief Biography:

Scott Sonenshein is a doctoral student in organizational behavior at the University of Michigan Business School.