A Meta-analytic Study of Positive Organizational Scholarship and Organizational Performance

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Review Article	

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to review the development of the concept of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and its emergence in the studies of organizational effectiveness. It attempts to understand why studies of organizational effectiveness were hindered in its advancement and explore the future directions of POS development. This study first reviews the theoretical underpinning of POS. Then, it highlights empirical supports and methodological issues associated with the research. The software QSR NVivo 11 was used in content analysis of 46 selected articles. After that, it looks into new perspectives and recent development of POS. POS has stimulated research interest in the studies of organizational effectiveness. Traditional approaches of measuring organizational effectiveness focused on goal achievement, problem solving and efficiency. Positive deviances like excellence, benevolence and generosity seemed to be neglected. Construct of POS just fills the gap by drawing more attention towards positive deviances. POS is not necessarily a cure for a problematic organization, but instead it keeps organizations in good shape. This study draws attention for viewing organizational effectiveness with a more holistic approach. It stimulates thinking and arouses interest for further research to address the practicability of POS in real-life situations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Virtuousness has been an important aspect in the studies of organizational sciences. Various empirical studies have been conducted to understand the linkage between virtuous behavior and organizational performance. There are several reasons for the emergence of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). One general phenomenon is that negative events have bigger impact on people than do positive events [1]. Organizational science had concerned more on the negative aspects. Most studies had focused on negative phenomena which posed challenges and threatens about survival of organizations. In contrast, positive and uplifting phenomena are often neglected.

According to [2], "Positive" refers to the elevating processes and outcomes in organizations. "Organizational" refers to the interpersonal and structural dynamics activated in organizations. "Scholarship" refers to the scientific investigation of organizational settings. POS concerns about integration of both positive and negative conditions, though more emphasis is putting on uncovering affirmative aspects in organizations. It focuses on positive deviances that lead to extraordinary positive outcomes and processes. Contributions of positive organizational scholarship came in responding to the shortcomings in negligence of positive phenomena in organizational science. They address the problems of lacking valid and reliable measurements, association of positivity with uncritical science and the bias towards negative events.

The purpose of this paper aims to review the development of the concept of Positive Organizational Scholarship and its emergence in the studies of organizational effectiveness. The first section defines the aims and scope of this study. Then it reviews the theoretical underpinning of POS. The next section highlights empirical supports and methodological issues associated with the research. After that, a review will be provided on some new perspectives and latest development of POS. The last section will discuss how positive deviance and extraordinary performance stretch beyond the traditional levels of performance and generate extraordinary interests for future research.

2. AIMS AND SCOPE

This study aims to illustrate why studies of organizational effectiveness were hindered for further advancement and introduce new approaches which shift the focus towards Positive Organizational Scholarship. It is about stretching beyond the traditional concept of organizational effectiveness and driving towards positive deviance and extraordinary performance. It attempts to identify practical indicators, standards and measures for organizational effectiveness.

As Positive Organizational Scholarship was first introduced [3], it drew the attentions by its characteristics in appreciation, collaboration, and meaningfulness. Since then, it aroused discussion on practicability of using organizational effectiveness as a measure of organizational performance. Organizational effectiveness was once a hot topic in research of organizational performance. However, it was criticized for being too focused on quantifiable concepts such as share price, productivity, financial ratios, error rates and customer loyalty [4]. Without advancement in development of better measuring tools, studies of organizational effectiveness almost called to an end. Therefore a new approach, Positive Organizational Scholarship, was suggested as a new dimension for further study.

3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

[5] argued that organization can be effective or ineffective on a number of different facets which may be relatively independent of each other. Despite organizational effectiveness has no universal definition, [6] regarded organizational effectiveness as "human judgments about the desirability of the outcomes of organizational performance from the vantage point of the varied constituencies directly and indirectly affected by the organization" (p. 614). In addition, more pragmatic definitions for organizational effectiveness have been derived thereafter. For example, [7] defined organizational effectiveness as "the extent to which an organization, by the use of certain resources, fulfils its objectives without depleting its resources and without placing undue strain on its members and/or society" (p. 21). [8] further analysed the way

academics use to measure organizational effectiveness and organizational performance.

The earliest form of organizational effectiveness focused on maximization of certain attributes to achieve an ideal condition. [9] was a well-known example. It was then transformed to specialization of work, standardization of practices, and centralization of decision-making [10]. It was generally accepted efficiency as an appropriate measure of performance. Then the concepts which consider organizations as cooperative systems were further extended to the approaches of goal accomplishment [11], congruence [12], social equity [13], and interpretation systems [14]. During 1980s, researchers tended to use the multiple constituency models for measurement of organizational effectiveness [6,15,16].

These contingency models challenged that effectiveness was not a function of how organizations reflect qualities, but instead it was about how organizations match with environmental conditions. After that, emphasis was changed to multiple stakeholders in measuring organizational performance, and effectiveness was considered as a function of qualities such as learning, adaptability, strategic intent and responsiveness. However, it was also challenged if organizational effectiveness could be a practical measure. During the period, researchers almost ceased advancement in the topic of organizational effectiveness. Cameron's findings showed that none of the models could exist as a universalistic model. No conceptualization of an effective organization is comprehensive. Different models are used just in different circumstances.

In line with the works of earlier researchers like [17] who highlighted the importance of both human resources and employee-oriented processes in their studies, Cameron developed the new approach of POS and introduced a new perspective of looking at organizational effectiveness in 2003. With reference to sociological literatures, [18] provided suggestions for constructing definition of positive deviance with four approaches, namely statistical, supraconformity, reactive, and normative approaches. Most importantly, they conceptualized positive deviance from individual level up to organizational level. As [19] mentioned, POS was based on the Gestalt psychology, and what we see at first glance is only one way of seeing. Together with Maslow's observation

about the limitation of restricting to just a single tool, POS was developed as an alternative approach for looking into organizational effectiveness.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL SCHEMA

Throughout this literature review, software QSR NVivo 11 was used to facilitate content coding and data analysis. NVivo was used because it facilitated writing solid analytical observations and kept a clear trail of the data and the outcomes.

Firstly, relevant papers were identified and key themes were extracted from articles. Sources were selected from papers in the domain of Positive Organisational Scholarship. The selection criteria were articles concerning Positive Organisational Scholarship and particularly articles concerning organisational effectiveness and performance. The key phrases used were "Positive Organisational Scholarship", "Positive Organisational Behavior", "Organisational Effectiveness", and "Organisational Performance". Searching was initiated by looking for titles, abstract and keywords of these themes with Google Scholar. Only journal articles between 1970 and 2015 were included. With backward and forward searching, a pool of 56 papers was identified. Articles were reviewed against these inclusion criteria. The literature was screened in the process and end up with 46 articles in the themes concerned. Other than the four key phrases, eight more keywords were defined as nodes in coding. Coding of nodes helped in categorising the literatures for deeper analysis.

Table 1 summarises the number of sources and number of references for the identified nodes.

Table 2 lists the results of the word frequency query which identified 20 most frequently occurring words in the identified journal articles.

Firstly, "positive" is on top of the list which indicates that positive events or positive deviances are taking an important role in POS. Secondly, "performance" has almost doubled the counts of "effectiveness" which reflects that performance of organisation probably aroused more attention than "organisation effectiveness". Apart from that, keywords such as "psychology", "social", "people" and "human" also call for more attention to people's feeling in organisations.

Table 1. Number of sources and references in coded nodes

	Node names	No. of sources	No. of references
1	Positive psychological scholarship	9	10
2	Positive psychological behavior	5	5
3	Organisational effectiveness	12	108
4	Organisational performance	14	67
5	Positive organisational ethics	1	1
6	Virtourousness	5	16
7	Psychological capacity	2	2
8	Positive deviances	12	24
9	Negative deviances	2	2
10	Measurements	4	4
11	Human issues	18	46
12	Social context	8	8

Table 2. Number of word count and weighted percentage in text analysis

	Word	Count	Weighted percentage (%)
1	Positive	2543	1.06
2	Organizational	2141	0.89
3	Psychology	1030	0.43
4	Social	949	0.40
5	Organizations	938	0.39
6	Research	924	0.38
7	Performance	856	0.36
8	Management	741	0.31
9	Journal	724	0.30
10	Organization	688	0.29
11	Study	613	0.26
12	Psychological	612	0.25
13	University	578	0.24
14	Behavior	568	0.24
15	Negative	559	0.23
16	People	541	0.23
17	Model	524	0.22
18	Decision	465	0.19
19	Human	455	0.19
20	Effectiveness	452	0.19

Moreover, classification of literatures helped in separating theoretical and empirical studies for further analysis. Among the 46 selected articles, 26 are classified as theoretical studies while 20 are classified as empirical studies. The next section discusses findings in the review.

5. EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

5.1 Theoretical Evaluation

As [2] remarked, "POS consciously uses the word scholarship to identify its scientific and theoretical foundations" (p. 734). The concept of POS was based on the properties of amplifying qualities and buffering qualities.

5.2 Amplifying Qualities

As [20] denoted that virtuousness provides an amplifying effect towards positive emotions, social capital and prosocial behavior. Virtuous behavior inspires positive emotions, positive emotions in turn produce improved cognitive functioning and better interpersonal relationships, which reinforce virtuousness to enhance performance of individual. In addition, association with social capital enables better access to information and resources. Lastly, people observing and experiencing virtuousness induce prosocial behavior in offering help to others as well.

5.3 Buffering Qualities

[20] found that presence of virtuousness may serve as a buffer which protects, inoculates and creates resilience. Hence, association with virtuousness helps absorbing misfortune, recovering from trauma, and maintaining momentum in difficult circumstances. Besides, [21] regarded compassion as an important process that can occur in response to suffering. They raised awareness of positive potential inherent in organizations.

[19] treated POS as a critical theory and argued that POS offers a new approach for the study of organizational life. They supported that POS offered an alternative approach to organizational science. "Far less attention has focused on overtly positive processes and variables, and the potential range of desirable outcomes has not been fully explored" (p. 22). In addition, [19]

highlighted the consistencies between critical theory as proposed in [22] and POS. It was argued that organizational theory had been limited by its overly narrow paradigmatic approach. By rejecting the traditional deficit model approach, POS served its critical functions in the arena of organizational science. They restated that contribution of POS did not fall on creating a surprisingly new construct, but its challenges to predominantly negative assumption over organizational effectiveness. Adoption of POS perspective enhanced the awareness of the positive aspects of organizational life. It is not to replace traditional organizational science, but instead it helps with a balance and complete understanding of organizations.

5.4 Empirical Evaluation

The research of [23] and previous studies were based on effectiveness measured in colleges and universities. After that, [24] conducted research on organizational virtuousness with organizational performance and recovery from downsizing. On one hand, it was found that organizations scoring higher in virtuousness were more profitable. On the other hand, virtuousness also mitigated the negative effects of downsizing when compared to competitors, industry averages, goals, and past performance. It was reported that organizations scored higher in virtuousness had significantly higher objective and perceived performance.

One major part of the study was analysing an organization from different perspectives using five different models. The goal model aimed at accomplishing organizations' stated goals. The resource dependence model aimed at acquiring the resources needed. The internal congruence model focuses on consistency and efficiency of internal functions. The strategic constituency model aimed at satisfying dominant stakeholders. The human relations model emphasized employee engagement and collaboration. Findings concerned about the shift of focus away from organizational effectiveness was mainly based on the data regarding the numbers of journals and books published during the period. The major analysis involved integrating these five models to the Competing Values Framework.

Apart from the works of Cameron, there were other studies heading towards the virtues of positiveness. One of the studies, conducted by [25], was based on the extent how people feel when they interacted with each other. It was found that energy network was four times the predictor of performance as information and influence networks. Furthermore, high-performing firms had three times as many positive energizing networks as low-performing firms.

Another study was conducted by [20]. The study focused on virtuousness in organizations which uncovered the concepts of compassion, integrity, forgiveness, trust, and optimism at an organizational level. This empirical study was based on the measure of 24 universal human strengths and virtues. Eighteen out of 52 sampled organizations representing 16 different industries were participated. The response rate was 36%. The industrial coverage was fairly wide. However, as it was using a convenience sampling method, most of the organizations were located in the Midwestern United States. That could be a shortcoming in extending its generalizability to other geographical regions. Besides, all except two companies had just downsized. It might impose restriction of representativeness of samples to mainly downsizing companies. Four selected performance indicators including innovation, quality, customer retention and employee turnover were used. Through analysis with linear regression and hierarchical linear modelling, results showed that organizations scored higher virtuousness performed significantly better than other organizations in terms of profitability, quality and customer retention.

In fact, Cameron's studies also aroused the interest for further study. For example, [26] conducted a study by observing how top executive teams worked and interacted in their strategic planning session. Communication patterns in 60 top management teams were observed. It was found that those high performing firms actually distinguished themselves from others by positive communications, which include supportive, appreciative and encouraging statements. Besides, [27] used a case study approach to investigate humanistic work ideology of the midwives and explained how patient service capabilities were positively affected by positive organizational elements such as passion for work, egalitarian management style and resiliency during adversity. In addition, [28] analysed the performance of an organization in a project of cleaning up the nuclear arsenal in Colorado. It was found that the job was achieved in much under budget and completed much earlier. New variables which enabled such extraordinarily positive performance were then

identified. In another profound example, [29] studied the performance of airlines after the September 11 attacks. Southwest and Alaska put employee's concern first and absorbed losses to preserve jobs while other airlines used layoffs to preserve the company. It was found that stock price recovery correlated significantly with the number of employees laid off and the extent of human concern in their recovery strategy. Results showed that profitability was strongly correlated across the industry with Southwest remaining profitable while others sustaining loss. Another example concerned about the influences of social contexts. [30] had conducted a study on vitality, positive momentum, and learning. It was found that organizations stretching beyond mere effectiveness could be out of especially positive dynamics related to organizational processes and outcomes. Under conditions of thriving, employees reported feeling more vitality and experiencing more positive emotions in comparing to conditions that organizations just ran smoothly or effectively. It helped understand how social contexts interact to promote positive functioning at work.

Later, [19] used a critical theory framework in supporting that POS offers a new approach for studying organizational effectiveness. Firstly, they distinguished POS from traditional research in organizational science with explicit aim in light of positive aspects. Secondly, they demonstrated support of the relevant phenomena with a series of empirical studies [31-36]. Then, they provided a hermeneutical evaluation with empirical results. Lastly, beneficial changes and contributions of POS to theory and practice were provided. [19] also suggested POS researchers to adhere to the critical theory by giving practical examples explicitly.

Despite the sound progress made, not all researchers came to a unified conclusion. One major consideration leading to a different point of view from POS was that bad occurrences have greater impact to the emotions and impressions of people [37,38]. [19] identified a number of studies from the category of traditional organizational science which adopted a different viewpoint focusing on fixing organizational problems (e.g. [39-42]), and they were found to be more practical ones.

6. WEAKNESSES AND GAPS IN THEORY

Strictly speaking, POS is not a theory. A theory should constitute some features that help in understanding, explaining and making predictions for a class of phenomena. Instead, it is considered as a new approach. This approach introduces a new perspective in viewing organizational effectiveness. It suggests a new dimension of indicators to be considered in assessment of organizational effectiveness.

Since [24] discussed the organizational virtuousness and performance with three case studies, so far major empirical findings were based on the use of the Competing Values Framework. It demands further support for regarding it as a comprehensive and effective framework for the analysis. Instead of identifying some indicators as proxy for effectiveness, the study provided some guidelines in selection of criteria for studying organizational effectiveness only. As previous studies fell mainly on measuring effectiveness in colleges and universities, it is suggested that studies in wider range of organizations to be conducted. There were not much empirical studies done in the area yet.

Another weakness comes from the association of positivity with uncritical science. As [2] commented that "the lack of precise language to explain POS phenomena has led to an impoverished understanding of that which is good, elevating, and life giving in organizations" (p. 735). In addition, there were difficulties in measuring organizational effectiveness as well. There could be multiple factors, other than those related to POS, contributing to a particular state of organizational effectiveness. Therefore, it is important that samples collected should cover a wide range of industries and include companies going through different stages in their life cycle. Moreover, it is worth noting that organizations having different culture and operating under different economic conditions may respond differently towards the concept of POS.

7. NEW PERSPECTIVES AND RECENT DEVELOPMENT

[43] regarded positive organization behavior as "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" (p. 59). After striving for a decade, many studies attempted to seize for new directions so as to keep moving forward. [44] and [45] are just examples of studies steering the direction from cost-view to employee-centred view. From which, [44]

suggested consideration of various issues for employee betterment, while [45] used the integral health management (IHM) approach to set out the importance of physical and mental health of employees apart from direct economic benefits.

In latest development, the focus shifted towards the management of human capital. As [46] denoted that studies of positive organizational behavior typically focused on employee well-being or performance improvement. The study further pointed out that there was a need for more focused theory building. In particular, it required effective applications of positive traits, states, and behaviors of employees. [47] might probably be one of the solutions. The study developed a model which highlighted the characteristics of positive organizational behavior that positive behavior affects similarity relationship and in turn forms a "positive group effect spiral".

Lately, some studies diverted to the area of positive organization ethics (POE). For example, [48] regarded POE as pursuing positive subjective experiences, positive attributes of individuals and groups, and positive practices that contribute to ethical and virtuous behavior in organizations. However, they considered it as a separate field from positive organizational scholarship. It will advance as a new domain that investigates how individuals sustain their desire to achieve ethical performance in workplace.

Recent research also called for more attention on creating positive environment in workplace, and thus positive energy in organizations [49]. Other research like [50] emerged into a new perspective over collective gratitude. Indeed, gratitude is one of the positive emotions under the umbrella of diverse set of theories [20]. The proposed framework illustrated how collective gratitude associated with the consequences of high quality connection, contextual performance, and team learning. As [50] highlighted that while positive organizational behavior focused on micro view of the behavior of organizations and individuals, positive organizational scholarship focused on macro view of positive behavior of organizations and their members. Although this was not an empirical research, it drew attention for further study in the direction of positive emotions and positive organizational outcomes.

Apart from the main stream in the emergence of positive organizational scholarship, recent development also contributes to other disciplines. The development of POS has fallen into a new arena which distinguishes itself from POB. While POB concentrate on positive behavior characteristics of individuals, POS focuses on more consistent and stable environmental factors.

In recently research, [51] presented a critical comparison between the research streams of POB and POS. Firstly, the study pointed out that personality characteristics and environmental features were intertwined in a way which produced positive behavior in organizations. Organizational characteristic might influence positive individual states. Secondly, individual traits of positivity could be changed. With the considerations that meaning assured long-range positivity in organizations [52] and meaning came from enriched tasks and membership characteristics [53], organizations need to create environments desired in establishing meaningfulness for employees at work.

[54] had studied the relationship between psychological well-being and performance at work, which pointed out that psychological capital might be a positive resource used to enhance employee psychological well-being. Apart from this study, recent research of [55] argued that confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience were measurable items and they could be improved for better work performance. Regarding these items as positive psychological capacity, the study assessed the relationship between psychological capital items and academic achievement. Although only confidence and hope were found significant, the study signified the trend that more empirical studies are necessary for the emergence of POS.

Particularly, during economic downturn or in situations that becomes less favourable to the organizations, it becomes even more challenging for organizations to sustain organizational positivity. Originating from positive psychology, psychological capital promotes positive aspects that enhance performance. As many differences in behaviors of employees can be explained by their control points [56,57] examined the relationships between control point and four psychological context in Chinese culture, namely calm, hope, optimism, and confidence. Results showed that control points had positive impact on the four aspects of psychological capital.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Advocates of traditional approaches of organizational effectiveness tend to rely on

economic and quantifiable measures. POS uncovers new variables as predictors of performance. Studies related to virtuousness have also emerged towards positive psychology [58] and stakeholder theory. POS has not created a new discipline for research. Instead, it aroused interests for researchers in taking a wider scope and considering positive aspects and humanistic constituents as the impacts to organizational effectiveness. It invited more vigorous and systematic ways of looking into organizational effectiveness from an alternative perspective. It provides new insights in organizational design and organizational culture. It interacts with positive psychology and corporate social responsibility to unveil the capabilities of positive thinking.

POS has indeed stimulated research interest in the studies of organizational effectiveness. It is evidenced from the series of research came thereafter. For example, [18] made contribution to POS through constructing positive deviance with different approaches. Lately, [59] also highlighted the importance of psychological contract management, which was one of the important factors that ensure organizational effectiveness and successful change management. Furthermore, [60] extended the work of Cameron towards the direction of workplace empowerment. It fills the gap by providing empirical studies linking structural empowerment to psychological empowerment. Among various approaches like the Goal Attainment Model, Systems Model, Strategic Constituencies Model and Competing Values Model, [60] used the Competing Values Model for assessing the effectiveness of organizations in the banking sector. [61] narrowed down the criteria of assessment into four major areas, namely rational goal, internal process, open systems and human relations. In one latest study, [62] also made similar investigation on the impact of employee motivation on organizational effectiveness. In addition, [63] provided a review of intervention studies in the field of POS. The analysis concluded that positive psychology interactions tended to enhance employee well-being and performance, and diminish stress and burnout.

Traditional approaches of measuring organizational effectiveness focus on goal achievement, problem solving and efficiency. Many of those indicators such as error-rate and competitor forces tend to be negative deviance. Positive deviances such as excellent, benevolent, honouring and generosity seem to be neglected.

Construct of POS fills the gap by drawing more attention towards positive deviances such as virtuousness, flourishing and abundance. By reviewing previous studies in positiveness and organizational effectiveness, this paper intends to present an essay of research paper in light of the practicability of Positive Organizational Scholarship as a whole.

POS is not necessarily a solution or cure for a problematic organization. However, it keeps an organization in good shape just analogous to fitness of human body. It introduced a new set of indicators that were frequently overlooked. So far the studies have aroused interest and drawn attention for viewing organizational effectiveness again with a more holistic approach. There are still questions about whether POS is applicable to organizations of different culture, operating at different economic states and under different external environments. It stimulates thinking and arouses interest for further research with more empirical studies. Further research is anticipated to address the practicability of POS in real-life situations.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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