

Positive Deviance for a Sustainable World: Linking  
Sustainability and Positive Organizational Scholarship

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## **Abstract**

This chapter examines the linkages between the positive organizational scholarship (POS) and the sustainability research domains, examining ways in which each domain can enrich the other, their mutual research agendas, and practical contributions. POS can help sustainability make a shift from addressing “deficit gaps” to instead addressing “abundance gaps.” Sustainability can help expand the scope of the POS research domain from explaining how people and organizations can flourish, to also consider ways in which human and organizational flourishing is embedded within the flourishing of the natural environment. To do this, the chapter first outlines the issues and the domain of sustainability scholarship; then discusses the linkages in more detail, exploring the scholarly implications for each domain; and then concludes by suggesting potentially fruitful research questions posed by these sustainability/POS linkages, and discussing the implications of the linkages for business education.

Keywords: sustainability, sustainable development, natural environment, positive organizational scholarship, cultural creatives, LOHAS, hybrid organizations.

## **(H1) Introduction**

This chapter explores the fit between the research domains of sustainability and positive organizational scholarship (POS); both of which are grounded in the core concept of flourishing. POS is concerned with “conditions that foster flourishing at the individual, work group, and organizational levels” (Dutton & Glynn, 2008).

Sustainability holds “the possibility that human and other life will flourish on the planet forever” (Ehrenfeld, 2008: 6). As a vision, POS research seeks to explore organizational and institutional contexts that help to realize the fullest human potentialities.

Sustainability research explores economic development that will “meet the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). With these as foundational starting points, we explore two fundamental ways in which these domains are interconnected; each emerging from challenges within the respective traditions.

On the one hand, scholars and practitioners in the sustainability literature have long sought to explain and prescribe how individuals and organizations can live and organize *less unsustainably*. More recent scholars have begun to push the literature into focusing instead on living *more sustainably* (Ehrenfeld, 2008; Elkington, 1997). This distinction represents a shift from addressing “deficit gaps” to instead addressing “abundance gaps” (Cameron, 2007). However, this shift has not been adequately explained within the sustainability literature. POS can help sustainability scholars explain and make this transition by offering a conceptual basis by which to understand it. Further, contributions from POS can make sustainability issues more actionable and

sustainability more achievable by suggesting tangible skills and actions that individuals can use to transform their lives and organizations. For sustainability scholars, this means focusing beyond the managed destruction or regeneration of the natural world, to instead understand and work with nature's bias towards abundance without waste.

On the other hand, POS scholars focus on the study of especially positive (or “positively deviant”) contexts, systems, practices and outcomes that foster and enable individuals and collectives to flourish (Cameron, 2007; Dutton & Glynn, 2008; Dutton & Sonenshein, 2008). By introducing sustainability issues more directly into POS scholarship, researchers can expand the scope of the research domain from explaining how people and organizations can flourish, to also consider ways in which human and organizational flourishing is embedded within the flourishing of the natural environment.

By calling out these linkages, we hope that sustainability and POS scholars will see how their domains can enrich each other, their mutual research agendas, and practical contributions. We invite readers to examine these linkages, and to identify other ways in which the two domains are complementary. To more fully explore these possibilities, this chapter first outlines the issues and the domain of sustainability scholarship. We then discuss the linkages in more detail, discussing the scholarly implications for each domain. We conclude by suggesting potentially fruitful research questions posed by these sustainability—POS linkages, and discussing the implications of the linkages for business education.

## **(H1) Issues of Sustainability**

The past century has witnessed unprecedented economic growth and human prosperity. World population increased by a factor of four; the world economy increased by a factor of fourteen (Thomas, 2002); global per capita income tripled (World Business Council on Sustainable Development, 1997); and average life expectancy increased by almost two-thirds (World Resources Institute, 1994). In the US alone, life expectancy rose from 47.3 to 77.3 between the years 1900 and 2002 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

But, while these and other advances are notable, widening income disparities mean that not all people share in the material and economic progress of the past century. According to the United Nations, the richest 20% of the world's population consume 86% of all goods and services while the poorest 20% consume just 1.3%. In fact, the richest three people in the world have assets that exceed the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least developed countries. Of the 4.4 billion people in the developing world, almost 60% lack access to safe sewers, 33% do not have access to clean water, 25% lack adequate housing and 30% have no modern health services (Crossette, 1998).

At the same time, the past century has witnessed unprecedented human impacts on the natural environment. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Reid et al., 2005) commissioned by the United Nations (involving more than 1,360 experts worldwide) concluded that, of the 24 global ecosystem services analyzed, 60% were degraded or used unsustainably, and that humans have changed the Earth's ecosystems over the past 50 years quicker and more extensively than comparable historical periods. Humans have increased the species extinction rate by as much as 1,000 times over background rates

typical over the planet's history. In the last 100 years, 816 species have become extinct and 11,046 more are threatened with extinction (United Nations, 2001). Nearly 25% of the world's most important marine fish stocks are depleted, over-harvested, or just beginning to recover from over-harvesting. Another 44% are being fished at their biological limit and are, therefore, vulnerable to depletion (World Resources Institute, 2000).

In short, the exploitative relationship between the economy and the natural and social environments, which took shape in the industrial revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that continues to grow with globalization of industrial production in this century, cannot be sustained. We are today in the throes of a commons tragedy of global proportions, and this has caused a great deal of concern among many within society (Sandelands & Hoffman, 2008). This concern has given birth to the sustainable development movement.

## **(H2) The sustainable development movement and sustainability scholarship**

The "sustainable development" movement and inter-disciplinary domain of sustainability scholarship emerged in the mid-1980s. The United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) Brundtland Commission report - *Our Common Future* - promoted sustainable development by calling for economic growth to be pursued in a manner that assures the protection of both social and environmental systems. The report followed an environmental conservation movement that can be traced back to the late 1800s and led to the protection of large tracts of American land for national parks. The movement gained momentum throughout the 1900s with events such as the publication of Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring*, the

first Earth Day in 1970, and the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm (the first UN conference to attend to global environmental issues).

The Brundtland Commission report advanced the sustainability issue by highlighting ways in which economic development was causing environmental degradation and social inequities under the general concept of “sustainable development”. NGOs, policymakers, scholars and members of the general public have taken inspiration from the Brundtland report and advocated for organizations to address environmental and social issues in communities and the economy, while sustainability scholars investigated the interconnections between business strategy and issues such as ecosystem protection, species extinction, pollution, community development, and human health and well-being.

Sustainability scholarship is an inter-disciplinary domain that encompasses a holistic view of firms and their relationship with the natural environment and societies in which they operate, and includes topics such as corporate social responsibility and environmental management. Work has progressed over the past fifteen years to identify how organizations can reduce their impact on both society and the natural environment. For instance, pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development have been identified as strategic organizational capabilities (Hart, 1995), as have the ability to integrate matters concerning the natural environment into strategic planning processes (Judge & Douglas, 1998), process innovation (Christmann, 2000), stakeholder integration, higher-order learning and continuous innovation (Sharma & Vredenburg, 1998) to reduce environmental impact. In many cases, the strategic importance of these capabilities has been measured through correlations with company profitability or cost



advantages (Christmann, 2000; Judge & Douglas, 1998; Menguc & Ozanne, 2005; Russo & Fouts, 1997). One of the most widely used concepts for measuring sustainability action has been the notion of the triple bottom line (TBL) (Elkington, 1997), which advocates for companies to maximize three bottom lines: the three e's (equity, environment and economy) or the three p's (people, planet and profit).

But with its focus on operating *less unsustainably* rather than *more sustainably* (Elkington, 1997), or on addressing the “deficit gaps” can rather than identifying and addressing “abundance gaps” (Cameron, 2007), sustainability has drawn criticism both from the left and right, and both from advocates and opponents. The harshest criticisms come from those who believe that pursuing sustainability misappropriates the purpose of the corporation and is contrary to the true intentions of capitalism. For example, *The Economist* magazine published a cover story in January 2005 that derided sustainability and corporate social responsibility as misguided concepts driven by people with little knowledge or a downright fear of capitalism. Similarly, when the US Climate Action Partnership, a consortium of ten blue-chip corporations (including DuPont, Alcoa, BP America, GE, Lehman Brothers, PG&E and two environmental NGOs) called for federal standards on greenhouse gas emissions in early 2007, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial ridiculed them as the “10 jolly green giants” and challenged their motives as being economically opportunistic rather than environmentally altruistic (Strassel, 2007). In 2005 when GE announced plans to publish its first “Citizenship Report,” the *Wall Street Journal* wrote that environmentalists had made their “biggest catch yet” and pondered whether “capitalists are abandoning capitalism” (Murray, 2005: A2). Such critics believe that economic growth remains the primary goal of development planning, while

sustainability is a social and political constraint (Colby, 1991). Rather than harmonizing economic, environmental and social considerations into a synergistic whole, such critics believe the prevailing regimen remains one of making tradeoffs while holding to economic growth as the paramount objective.

On the opposite extreme, some advocates of sustainability argue that the TBL does not go far enough. They argue alongside opponents that sustainability is nothing but a label for actions or strategies that are actually driven by the standard social, economic and institutional mechanisms (e.g. Jacobs, 1993; Schnaiberg, 1980). Though beyond their opponents they further argue that simple metrics such as internal rate of return or net present value contribute significantly to present-day sustainability problems by obscuring broader responsibilities that cannot be easily measured, if at all. Thus it seems beyond optimistic to suppose that metrics for sustainability, such as the TBL, could resolve these problems; and if they could, it seems beyond hopeful to suppose they would be embraced when opposition to intertwining environmental, social and economic development remains (and many still assume they are mutually exclusive). In short, the sustainability movement could be seen as having become as intractable as the problems it aims to solve, because it has been defined and enacted using the same logics that created the problem in the first place - a focus on the deficit gaps – and attempts to explore abundance gaps and operate more sustainably remain outweighed by challenges and under-explored opportunities.

## **(H1) Positive Deviance in Practice**

We say “outweighed” and “under-explored”, because despite these challenges, a growing number of individuals and organizations have begun to alter their lifestyles and business models to enact their vision of sustainability towards “intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways” (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004: 828). They act as positive deviants seeking to change the organizations, industries and socio-economic systems of which they are a part. There are several proposed explanations as to why this shift is happening at this point in time (Hoffman, 2003). First, society has advanced in terms of leisure time such that people are searching for more meaning in the work realm of their lives (Neck & Milliman, 1994). Many people are reaching a stage in their development where they feel secure in their basic needs such that they are striving for the highest stage of human development, self-actualization (Maslow, 1954). These individuals derive a sense of self-actualization through their actions, and a sense of sacredness and purpose through their work that allows them to feel more genuine and authentic (Ray & Anderson, 2000). They tend not to spend their whole career within a single company. Instead, their career path represents a more personal journey of self-discovery (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). For this demographic, leading a sustainable lifestyle may be explained as a calling or vocation (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) on that journey. People now strive to develop and express their entire selves at work (Mitroff & Denton, 1999) and therefore bring their personal values into the workplace (Hoffman, 2003; McDonald, 1999).

Second, many in the current workforce are baby-boomers who grew up in the idealistic 1960s and 1970s and are trying to maintain their idealistic roots (Cash, Gray, &

Rood, 2000; Hall & Richter, 1990). These people may be among the many that search for ways to leave a legacy and the satisfaction of knowing their lives made the world a better place (Covey, 1995). Third, as educational experience, social values and religious doctrine increasingly support sustainability, it becomes more tightly tied to individual identity and becomes an important motivator of personal action (Wade-Benzoni et al., 2002).

By observing the actions of proactive individuals and organizations through a POS lens, we can begin to explain why and how sustainability can be achieved through discrete shifts in values, beliefs, skills, capabilities and strategies. In the next sections, we will discuss key examples of individual and organizational positive deviance within the sustainability domain, and explore how using a POS lens can help to explain them.

## **(H2) Positive sustainability deviance at the individual level**

To address sustainability issues and their frustration with policy solutions, many people are taking direct action that reflects their personal beliefs and values about their proper role within the natural environment and among fellow human beings. These positive deviants have been recognized as a growing demographic segment within America with labels such as Cultural Creatives (Ray & Anderson, 2000) or Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) Consumers (LOHAS, 2009; The Natural Marketing Institute, 2008); people who value design, health, environmental and social justice, and ecological sustainability in the products they purchase, the careers they pursue, and the lifestyles they lead.

Rather than acquiesce to societal values, these positive deviants act and seek meaning according to their beliefs, and growth in the segment suggests that in doing so they are affecting those same societal values. This segment values authenticity, nature, and community (Ray & Anderson, 2000). They actively pursue a life that they feel is environmentally and socially fulfilling by expressing themselves and making a practical difference (Neal, 2000). They are careful consumers who reject products that are imitations, of poor quality, disposable, or cliché in style, and they want to know where products originate, how they are manufactured, by whom, and what becomes of them in disposal (Ray & Anderson, 2000). In 2001, the LOHAS demographic was estimated at 50 million people, approximately 25% of American adults. By 2003 that figure had grown to 68 million Americans, or about 33% of the adult population (Cortese, 2003). In 2008, LOHAS Consumers represented an estimated \$209 billion U.S. industry for goods and services focused on health, green building, eco tourism, alternative energy and transport, and natural lifestyles (LOHAS, 2009).

Not content to project their values and beliefs only in the safety of their homes, these individuals often take them into the workplace. Many choose to pursue careers in companies with values that match their own. Or, if the values of the organization clash with their own, they seek to change the organization's culture in ways that fit their personal beliefs rather than succumb to organizational pressures (Hall & Richter, 1990).

For example, Interface Inc. CEO Ray Anderson describes having a personal epiphany after reading *The Ecology of Commerce* by Paul Hawken (1993), which changed how he thought about the legacy of his company, its products and manufacturing processes. With an increasing awareness of the environmental destructiveness of the

carpets and fabrics it manufactured, Anderson came to believe the company could no longer pursue profits in the way it had. He changed the materials and processes it used to manufacture carpet to be less environmentally impactful and to recycle all materials, and introduced a service business model to the carpet industry, by leasing rather than selling carpet to consumers (therefore retaining responsibility for refurbishing worn carpet) without forgoing profitability (Anderson, 2007; Fishman, 1998).

Sustainability scholars and practitioners have celebrated Anderson's work and the change he continues to orchestrate in and through Interface, Inc., and have held him out as an example of what is possible. However, the field has done less to explain the shift he initiated. Through a POS lens, several explanations become available. First, the combination of reducing environmental impact *and* developing new markets in sustainable goods can be explained as organizing in a way that not only addresses deficit gaps, but also address abundance gaps (Cameron, 2007). Second, we can investigate the change that Anderson implemented in Interface as a result of switching to positive meaning-making (Dutton & Sonenshein, 2008). Anderson realized that Interface's ways of operating were not sustainable, but rather than only seeing this as a threat (and considering ways to reduce environmental impact to avoid consequences), he also saw opportunities. Anderson identified how a service business model could work in a manufacturing industry and ways of operating that were both significantly more sustainable and full of profit potential and market leadership.

Third, there are significant leadership components to Anderson's actions. By combining sustainability and profitability through innovative business models, Anderson's style embodies positive leadership through its demonstration of virtuousness,

focus on creating positive outcomes from negative situations, and driving an organization to exceptional achievement (Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Cameron, 2008; Flynn, 2008). Interface embodies Flynn's (2008: 359) argument that "[t]he coalescence of virtue and profit is possible only when daring, creative and insightful business leadership is practiced in society."

But, not all change emerges from positive deviants at the top of the corporate hierarchy like Anderson. Often, sustainability-driven individuals are rank and file members that find themselves in the middle, mediating between conflicting value sets – their personal beliefs and those of the organizations in which they work. To resolve this tension, they seek to "fit" within both cultures. Known to both sustainability and POS scholars, these "tempered radicals" succeed by the rules, protocols and reward systems of the organization, but act in ways that concur with their personal beliefs (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). They continue to look like what the organization determines to be valid and appropriate, but are ambivalent to these norms. Through discrete visible positively-biased actions that reflect individualized motivations, their program of positive deviance becomes infectious and helps to sculpt new beliefs and behaviors in the workplace that align with their own.

One example of a tempered radical identified by Meyerson (2001) was Peter Grant, an African-American who had worked his way up to an executive level banking position. Grant had a long-term aim of hiring highly qualified minorities and helping them to be successful in the bank. He did this at every opportunity, "chipping away at the organization's demographic base" one person at a time over a 30-year career (Meyerson, 2001: 95).

Tempered radicalism is a powerful concept for exploring challenges that individuals face as they reconcile the competing demands and expectations of different value systems (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). For instance, they may be perceived (or perceive themselves) as hypocritical (Goffman, 1969), and feel isolated from both value systems. They must also withstand pressures for co-optation to forfeit one side or the other. These perceptions and pressures may lead to emotional burdens of guilt or self-doubt about their effectiveness and importance (Kolb & Williams, 1993). Tempered radicals overcome these challenges by programmatically “chipping away” at them with initiatives that act as “small wins” on a path towards lasting organizational change (Meyerson, 2007). These individuals bring energy, creativity and vitality to the organization and spiritual satisfaction for themselves. By thinking differently than the organizational norm, these positive deviants can also be critics of the status quo, and identify opportunities for change that may be overlooked by others.

The Cultural Creatives, LOHAS Consumers, positive leaders and tempered radicals use their positive deviance to pursue sustainability in their personal lives, organizations, and society. These change agents remind us (in the spirit of Gandhi) that individuals can be the change they want to see in the world. Drawing upon concepts and models from POS, sustainability scholars can gain greater insights into the ways that individuals play these key roles in the pursuit of sustainability. The next section will consider ways in which positive deviance manifests at the organization level of analysis.



## **(H2) Positive sustainability deviance at the organizational level**

Moving beyond the level of the individual, we can also observe organizations that are playing instrumental roles in changing industrial norms by addressing social and environmental issues, and competing on the basis of sustainability to yield positive social, environmental, political and economic benefits. The most evocative examples of positive organizational deviance can be found among companies with business models that blur the boundary between the for-profit and non-profit worlds. These companies have been described as the Fourth Sector, Blended Value, For-Benefit, Values Driven or Mission Driven, B-Corporations, or what we will use in this chapter, “Hybrid” organizations (Alter, 2004; Boyd, Henning, Reyna, Wang, & Welch, 2009). These new organizational forms adopt social missions like a non-profit but generate income to accomplish that mission like a for-profit entity. They operate on the notion that traditional non-profit operating models are no longer adequate to address the environmental and social problems of our day (Alexander, 2000; Draper, 2005) and that a new emphasis on social enterprise models provides promise for achieving sustainability goals. Their business models do not seek to comply with prevailing environmental regulation or community expectations, or address the ills of the past. Rather, they seek to build profitable organizations and markets in the service of addressing their causes while creating broad scale institutional change.

One such example is Guayakí, a for-profit company that sells organic, fair trade, rainforest-grown Yerba maté (a type of tisane, or herbal tea) to deliver products that are beneficial to well being and health, using business models that drive and facilitate reforestation and provide employees with living wages that benefit farmers and

indigenous communities (Boyd et al., 2009). Guayakí pays its farmers above market wages and devotes significant time and resources to training them in sustainable farming techniques. There are easier and cheaper ways to obtain their raw materials and resources, and CEO Chris Mann acknowledges that his company could expand faster if they were willing to compromise their mission and source the ingredients in ways that do not promote the protection of Atlantic rainforest. But the social mission of the company holds equal prominence with the profit mandate. For instance, Mann noted that the company had struggled with the decision to bring on partner financing, because venture capitalists want high percentages of control, which would make it difficult to maintain Guayakí's mission (Boyd et al., 2009).

Hybrid organizations, like Guayakí, are becoming a force for social change by resetting the norms of business practice; one of their stated goals. Their mission is about driving change in the norms, values, and beliefs of organizational and market systems. Sustainability scholars have studied their business models, strategies, structures, missions, market tactics and measures of success. However, by examining hybrid organizations through a POS lens, we can begin to explore the ways in which they pursue profit to support sustainability-oriented missions as that of positive deviance.

Another example of positive sustainable deviance is Green Mountain Coffee Roasters (GMCR). GMCR competes on the basis of its ethical and environmental principles, and has been rated by *Forbes* magazine as the leading ethical company in the US, while growing to \$180M in sales revenue (Neville, 2008). GMCR takes the view that “knowledgeable and dedicated farmers and distributors are just as important to GMCR as employees within the corporate headquarters,” and that they all contribute to an

exceptional coffee experience for consumers (Neville, 2008: 565). Employees retell stories of how they travel to where the coffee is grown to help them appreciate the natural environment, and of how an executive personally extended a \$3000 interest-free loan to a new employee whose partner was diagnosed with cancer. Such stories reflect a culture embedded in values of compassion, integrity, optimism, and corporate success. They represent a shift to an “abundance approach” to management (Cameron & Lavine, 2006) and demonstrating that that organizational virtuousness can be correlated with high performance (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004).

Neville (2008: 569) termed the philosophy of GMCR as “conscience capitalism,” which recognizes the interconnectedness between people, organizations and society, sees wealth as stretching far beyond financial status, and operates on organizational time horizons that span multiple generations. A key mechanism underpinning GMCR’s ability to flourish was its use of appreciative inquiry methods. In this case, the use of Whitney and Cooperrider’s (2000) “4-D Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny” process helped to facilitate strategy development within the company and enabled it to affirm an image infused with positive meaning. This, in turn, yielded action that had positive implications for how stakeholders interrelated and related to the natural environment.

These examples, and the use of the POS lens to understand them, is a counterpoint to the predominant sustainability research that investigates ways in which individuals and organizations address their negative deviance – focusing on how they become less unsustainable. They represent a redirection towards understanding how and why companies become more sustainable and positively deviate. This is a shift that is vastly open to future research (Neville, 2008). The holistic and interconnected thinking found at

hybrid organizations like GMCR and Guayakí leads to a critical linkage between sustainability and POS perspectives; the relationship between human/organizational flourishing and natural environmental flourishing.

### **(H1) Environmental and Human/Organizational Flourishing**

POS scholars recognize that human flourishing is contextually embedded (Dutton & Glynn, 2008), while sustainability scholars recognize that the ability for people and organizations to flourish is embedded within a stable and balanced natural and social environment (Stead & Stead, 2009). As Harper (2001: 37) explains:

“...humans and human systems are unarguably embedded in the broader webs of life in the biosphere. We are one species among many, both in terms of our biological makeup and our ultimate dependence for food and energy provided by the earth.”

At the most rudimentary level, the natural environment provides people and organizations with raw materials, water, air, energy, and the bare physical context in which life and business is conducted (Haigh & Griffiths, 2009; Starik, 1995; Stead & Stead, 2004). Services provided by the natural environment, such as air and water purification provided by forests, waste assimilation, and air and water currents provided by oceans and wind, makes many of these resources renewable (therefore making our relationship with them more sustainable).

But, at a deeper level, the connection between the natural environment and flourishing extends and enhances POS principles and demonstrates the embeddedness of human flourishing in the natural environment. If humans can learn to work with natural

systems rather than exploit them, both humans and nature will flourish. The difficulty is in avoiding the temptation to think of ways to “fix” nature (beyond restoring ecosystems that have been severely affected by humans), since nature is not broken. If sustainability is to be achieved, the need is for humans to understand, work and flourish within the bounds, dynamics and constraints presented by biophysical systems. Below we offer two examples to explain this connection.

## **(H2) Individual flourishing and the natural environment**

Richard Louv (2005) studied the reasons and implications for people (children specifically) losing their connection to the natural environment through modern Western lifestyles. Similar to what Wilson describes as “biophilia,” the “the innate tendency [in human beings] to focus on life and lifelike processes” (Wilson, 1984), Louv argued that the loss of connection to the natural environment could be a factor in the rise in emotional, mental and physical maladies, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, childhood heart and circulatory problems, and diminished use of the senses. Louv (2005) cited a host of reasons for children spending less time in nature, including stranger danger fears, liability concerns, a reduced appreciation by parents of unstructured playtime, computer games, increased homework, and the simple fact of there being less nature available. He argued that all these factors have contributed to the growing divide between children and nature, or “nature-deficit disorder,” and advocated for the restorative power of nature and the importance that time spent in nature has for the emotional and mental development of children. As an example of nature’s positive influences, Louv highlighted that children who attend schools with natural settings “are

more physically active, more aware of nutrition, more civil to one another, and more creative” (Louv, 2005: 220).

Teachers of these students also benefit, expressing “renewed enthusiasm for teaching” and a realization of their passion for teaching when doing so outdoors and at schools with more green space (Louv, 2005: 220). Thus, natural settings appear to have strong implications for the ability for these teachers to thrive at work. Extending Spreitzer, et al.’s (2005) work on the social aspects of the work unit and resources produced in doing work, there appears an opportunity to explore how nature (or natural settings) is an equally important element of the work context. Human thriving at work can be seen as both socially and environmentally embedded by complementing POS and sustainability perspectives. For example, exposure to natural settings could moderate the ability of work contexts to facilitate the agentic work behaviors which Spreitzer, et al. (2005) argue contribute to thriving.

The processual aspects of Louv’s (2005) work are also worth highlighting, as the natural settings appear to enhance key processes which the POS literature advocates as being central to flourishing: positive meaning-making, positive emoting, and positive interrelating (Dutton & Glynn, 2008; Dutton & Sonenshein, 2008). Specifically, this work shows positive meaning-making and positive emoting among teachers through statements about “renewed enthusiasm” and “passion” for their chosen profession, and positive interrelating among students as they treat each other with more civility if they have experienced schools with green spaces.

## **(H2) Organizational flourishing and the natural environment**

Organizations also have a very close relationship with the natural environment; though it is often overlooked outside the sustainability literature. For instance, it has been shown that the reintroduction of previously lost species (e.g. Salmon into Lake Erie and the River Thames (Harper, 2001)) can play a significant role in rejuvenating heavily degraded ecosystems. The rejuvenation improves the health of surrounding communities and industry by improving the ability to utilize resources from the ecosystem (in the Salmon example, these resources may be fresher water, salmon, predators of salmon, etc.). Sustainability is not about helping to “save the planet,” since Earth has survived significant previous stresses to its systems (e.g. the comet or meteor credited with dinosaur extinction). Rather, sustainability is about reestablishing and sustaining a “human-friendly habitat” on the planet (Stead & Stead, 2009: 3).

To exemplify this key point, we turn to companies that seek not only to understand their relationship with the natural environment, but also to actively use an understanding of natural dynamics to enhance their business models. For example, PAX Scientific is an engineering research and development company that uses “biomimicry” (Benyus, 2002) to design improved air and fluid-handling equipment (Boyd et al., 2009). Biomimicry is the practice of learning from and imitating nature’s designs and/or processes in man-made systems. Well-known products which are the result of biomimicry include hypodermic needles and Velcro<sup>®</sup> (Environment, 2002; Post, 2007). The founder of PAX Scientific calls nature the “supreme designer” (Boyd et al., 2009: 129), and the company leveraged the design and efficient function of nature’s vortexes and spirals (e.g. hurricanes) to develop technologies, such as water mixers, air fans,

propellers, and turbines, which they patent and license. In addition to using nature's design principles, these products also have positive environmental and health outcomes. For instance, one potable water mixer designed by PAX Scientific provided higher quality water that averted bacterial growth; enhancing health not only through bacteria control, but also by enabling an 85% reduction in the use of chemical disinfectant.

Just as Louv (2005) argued that nature nurtures creativity among children, PAX Scientific demonstrates that nature also provides design templates for creativity and innovation (Boyd et al., 2009) for organizations; topics of great interest within the POS literature (Dutton & Glynn, 2008). Such considerations potentially extend the study of to the role of the natural environment in innovation. For instance, in their study of the relationship between trust, connectivity and thriving, and employees' innovative behaviors at work, Carmeli and Spreitzer (2009) found that connectivity mediated the relationship between trust and thriving, and thriving mediated the relationship between connectivity and innovative behaviors. Louv's (2005) observations and PAX Scientific's (Boyd et al., 2009) practices prompt us to ask questions about the role that human connectivity with the natural environment might play in innovation. More broadly, the PAX Scientific case study and Louv's (2005) work lead us to consider the possibility that connectivity encompasses connectivity not only being between humans (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Losada & Heaphy, 2004), but also between humans and the natural environment.

Human flourishing is embedded in the natural environment. People and organizations draw value from and generate new ideas through connections with the natural environment, as well as better connections with each other. The two comprise a



complete system managing the complexity, diversity and irreducibility of sustainability issues and the relationship of organizations to them (Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney, & Yeager, 2000; Shrivastava & Cooperrider, 1999). This encompassing system generates an ecological perspective in which “all the pieces of the puzzle come together in one place and everyone can gain an appreciation for the whole” and “environmental and social performance [becomes] an opportunity for innovation, profit, and growth.” (Laszlo & Cooperrider, 2008: 18).

These examples show ways in which the sustainability domain can provide ground for POS scholars to not only explain human and organizational flourishing in a social sense, but to extend this expertise to exploring ways in which human and organizational flourishing is embedded within the condition of the natural world. In this sense, we see that POS capabilities such as generativity, resilience, thriving, and endogenous resourcing may enable a fuller appreciation how humanity and our economic activity relates to the natural environment, and we see potential value in both fostering them on a practical level within organizations and communities, and studying them to track their sustainability.

### **(H1) Future Directions**

The objective of this chapter is to invite POS and sustainability scholars to further examine the linkages between their domains, and to identify and pursue ways in which the two may complement and improve each other. These linkages highlight ways in which complementing or merging POS and sustainability research domains can help

scholars to revisit existing research questions in their own domain, and to generate new questions.

## **(H2) Revisiting existing research questions and developing new ones**

This chapter motivates us to revisit existing research questions and develop new questions in three ways. First, it prompts us to consider ways in which a POS perspective can help to shift sustainability from a focus on people and organizations being less unsustainable, to becoming more sustainable, from explaining “deficit gaps” to instead addressing “abundance gaps” (Cameron, 2007). Questions in this track include: What is the form of the shift from addressing less unsustainable ways of organizing to more sustainable ways? What contexts, processes and mechanisms can explain the dynamics that lead to this shift? What are the antecedents and implications of this shift for organizations? What measures track the move? What can firms that were established under the traditional (rational) premises of organizing learn from organizations (such as hybrids) that were established under sustainability premises? What are the tactics and strategies that can be used by positive deviants to facilitate this shift? What are the underlying cognitive and cultural beliefs that may impede this shift in consciousness and how can they be overcome?

The second track in which existing research questions are revisited involves an expansion of the POS perspective beyond a focus on human flourishing to include an appreciation for its embeddedness within the natural environment. This linkage raises questions such as: What underpins individual and organizational learning about and from nature’s systems, communities, designs and dynamics? What can organizations borrow

from nature's ecosystems and communities? How do natural contexts and dynamics explain human flourishing? How does an integration of human flourishing within the natural environment change basic conceptions of what it means to be human?

Third, this chapter raises new research questions and opens a new stream of research that challenge POS and sustainability scholars to identify new variables, explanatory mechanisms, processes, and measures. In this area, key new questions are: Does working towards environmental sustainability simultaneously enhance human flourishing? What aspects of social and environmental sustainability sustain positive deviance? Does concern for the natural environment alter conceptions or tactics of positive deviance? How do we measure human flourishing in conjunction with natural environment flourishing?

Before closing, we consider one final issue in our examination of the POS-sustainability linkage. Since academic scholars live not only in the world of research, but also in the world of business education, the linkages between these domains offer critical opportunities for addressing pressing issues in management education.

## **(H2) Future directions in business education**

Today, confidence in the business world is very low and resentment is directed towards MBA education for lacking attention to development among students of critical thinking and moral reasoning skills, for having a fragmented approach to management, and for training the graduates that played central roles in scandals such as Enron, Worldcom and the financial crisis (Podolny, 2009). Calling attention to these issues means asking questions about what and who managers are and what is the purpose of

leadership (Khurana, 2007). Today within the modern business school, there is little sustained attention to critical sustainability issues like poverty, climate change, species extinction, social unrest, equity and fairness in a rapidly globalized world. These social and environmental ills present challenges to the dominant organizing models of business education (such as agency theory and investor capitalism) that POS and sustainability can begin to address.

While scholars can begin to push this shift in emphases, change may also be promoted from within. The demographics of new MBA applicants are increasingly drawn from those of the Cultural Creatives, Tempered Radicals and LOHAS Consumers demographic noted earlier. Students are driving business school administrators to address environmental and social awareness in the curriculum, operations and development. The rise of alternative business school and university rankings such as The Aspen Institute's *Beyond Grey Pinstripes* and the Sierra Club's *Cool Schools* list, and the introduction of sustainability into AACSB requirements are testament to this.

Linked, sustainability and POS scholars can help to address the growing issues facing business schools today by bringing a more holistic and humanistic approach to business education. POS and sustainability curricula and research have the scope to help students and managers understand the complexity of businesses and issues facing them without becoming overwhelmed by them, to learn of ways to develop and meet short and long term business goals that extend beyond earning money, and to learn ways that organizations can be naturally generative, competitive and innovative. A broader educational approach that addresses sustainability and guided by POS works towards developing managers that have the ability to question dominant mindsets, and play the

role of social or institutional entrepreneur to develop innovative solutions to intractable global issues (in which firms have historically only played a negative role).

## **(H1) Conclusion**

Perspectives from the POS research domain provide sustainability scholars with an avenue to investigate the role that individuals and organizations play in shifting society towards becoming *more sustainable* rather than *less unsustainable*.

Correspondingly, perspectives from the sustainability research domain push POS scholars beyond an appreciation of human flourishing, to recognizing its embeddedness within the natural world. In this sense, POS traits such as generativity, resilience, and endogenous resourcing can enable a fuller appreciation of how humanity relates to the natural environment, and may be viewed as measures of our ability to pursue and achieve sustainability.

The empirical platform explored by sustainability scholars – the natural environment - is the essence of generativity and abundance without waste. This platform also provides POS scholars with great destructive and regenerative polar contexts and a full range of states from birth/generation through to growth, maturity, decay, and rebirth/regeneration to study topics such as resilience, vitality, endogenous resourcing, meaningfulness and flourishing. Sustainability challenges us to develop a vision, mission, purpose, calling or vocation through work that will sustain a positively deviant balance between social, environmental and competitive realms. POS challenges us to ensure we, our colleagues, and our organizations develop or retain high levels of compassion, virtue, resourcefulness and care, with the understanding that the vision is not achievable or

sustainable without them. Together, the two domains can enrich each other, their mutual research agendas, and practical contributions towards achieving a sustainable world.

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