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Paradox in Positive Organizational Change

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Positive organizational change is a paradox. On one hand, natural human inclinations toward the positive and heliotropic tendencies foster a proclivity toward positive change in human systems. On the other hand, human beings react more strongly to negative than to positive stimuli, so the presence of negative events overshadows positive events. Paradoxically, both tendencies—toward the positive and in response to the negative—are important enablers of positive change, but because the negative usually dominates, positive factors have to be given extra emphasis for positive change to occur. The concept of “positive” has created a great deal of controversy and confusion in organizational studies, spawning critics as well as promoters. The major connotations of this concept in organizational scholarship are clarified, and a way to reconcile the paradox of positive change is proposed. New investigations of positive organizational change are introduced that address various aspects of the positive change paradox.

Keywords: *positive change; paradox; heliotropism; positive organizational scholarship*

This special issue of *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science (JABS)*, focusing on positive organizational change, considers a particular kind of change that has grown out of the newly emerging field of positive organizational scholarship (POS). It refers to the investigation of positive dynamics, positive attributes, and positive outcomes in organizations. Unfortunately, such investigations have been severely underdeveloped in the organizational sciences because of their reliance on the term *positive*. This term has created controversy in organizational studies and has spawned

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skeptics as well as advocates. The term *positive* is accused of a potentially restrictive connotation and values bias (Fineman, 2006; George, 2004) and has been criticized as implying that most organizational science is negative, that an ethnocentric bias is being represented, or that a narrow moral agenda is being pursued. The term has been credited, on the other hand, with expanding and enriching the domain that explains performance in organizations and with opening up, rather than restricting, organizational science (Caza & Cameron, in press). These contradictions have arisen at least partly because of the definitional ambiguity surrounding this term.

In this article, I discuss the primary connotations of the term *positive* in POS and explain the paradoxical nature of positive organizational change. I point out why this is both a neglected and sorely needed area for future investigations by organizational researchers. Natural human inclinations toward the positive as well as learned human tendencies to react strongly to the negative create a positive change paradox—both conditions can be important enablers for positive change, but negative is emphasized far more than positive. This paradox provides an opportunity for investigators to expand the factors they examine in explaining and enabling positive change. After illustrating this paradoxical proposition, the article explains how the paradox can be reconciled in enabling positive organizational change and highlights several new studies that hopefully will stimulate future research in this area.

THE CONNOTATIONS OF *POSITIVE*

A review of dictionary definitions of *positive* reveals that the concept has such a wide range of connotations and so many applications as to defy the establishment of precise conceptual boundaries (e.g., *Webster's*, *Oxford*, *American Heritage*). On the other hand, some convergence has begun to occur as the term has been employed in POS and applied to positive organizational change. One approach to the concept of positive has been a focus on extraordinarily positive outcomes, or positively deviant performance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). This means that outcomes are investigated, which dramatically exceed common or expected performance. Investigations of spectacular results, surprising outcomes, and extraordinary achievements have been the focus of several investigations (e.g., Baker & Gunderson, 2005; K. S. Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Gittell, Cameron, Lim, & Rivas, 2006; Hess & Cameron, 2006), each treating *positive* as synonymous with *exceptional performance*. Reaching a level of positive deviance, in other words, extends beyond achieving effectiveness or ordinary success in that it represents “intentional behaviors that depart from the norm of a reference group in honorable ways” (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003, p. 209). Investigating the indicators of and explanatory processes accounting for such positively deviant performance is one area in which *positive* has taken on a consensual connotation.

A second area of convergence regarding the term *positive* has been toward an affirmative bias in change, or toward an emphasis on strengths, capabilities, and possibilities rather than problems, threats, and weakness. This focus emphasizes positive energy, positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, and positive meaning in organizations (K. S. Cameron, 2008) as well as the value embedded in

obstacles and challenges (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Losada & Heaphy, 2004). It includes appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), positive energy (Baker, Cross, & Parker, 2003), and strengths-based assessments (Clifton & Harter, 2003). It does not exclude consideration of negative events but, rather, incorporates them in accounting for positive outcomes and the best of the human condition (e.g., Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002; Weick, 2003).

A third area of convergence regarding the term *positive* relates to the concepts of virtuousness and eudemonism (K. S. Cameron & Caza, 2004; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003). POS is based on a eudemonic assumption—namely, that an inclination exists in all human systems toward goodness for its intrinsic value (Aristotle, n.d.; Dutton & Sonenshein, in press). Whereas debate has occurred regarding what constitutes goodness and whether universal human virtues can be identified, all societies and cultures possess catalogues of traits that they deem virtuous, or the highest aspirations of humankind (Comte-Sponville, 1996/2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Positive change examines the development of and effects associated with virtuousness and eudemonism (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006; K. S. Cameron, 2003; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007), which is similar to what Aristotle (n.d.) labeled *goods of first intent*—or “that which is good in itself and is to be chosen for its own sake” (p. 3). Studies of virtuousness and its impact of individual and organizational performance have begun to appear in the scholarly literature (e.g., Bright, 2006; K. S. Cameron & Caza, 2004; Marotto, Roos, & Victor, 2007), and some convergence in POS has occurred regarding positivity as indicated by virtuousness and eudemonism.

These areas of convergence regarding the term *positive*—extraordinary performance, an affirmative bias, and virtuousness and eudemonism—highlight one aspect of the paradoxical nature of positive change. That is, positivity possesses attributes consistent with heliotropism (Drexelius, 1627/1862). *Heliotropism* is defined as the tendency in all living systems toward positive energy and away from negative energy—or toward that which is life giving and away from that which is life depleting (e.g., D’Amato & Jagoda, 1962; Mrosovsky & Kingsmill, 1985; Smith & Baker, 1960). In nature, positive energy is most often experienced in the form of sunlight, but it may occur in other forms as well (e.g., interpersonal kindness; Dutton, 2003; Erhard-Seibold, 1937). A positive environment, according to this viewpoint, is the preferred condition because it provides positive energy, and positive energy is heliotropic. Following this logic, human systems, like biological systems in nature, possess inherent inclinations toward the positive and thus toward positive change (Aristotle, n.d.; Tutu, 1999). Reinforcing the positive would be the normal prescription for unleashing positive change.

NATURAL TENDENCIES TOWARD THE POSITIVE

Empirical evidence supporting this natural tendency toward the positive is abundant in the social sciences. For example, human beings are more accurate in learning and remembering positive terms than neutral or negative terms (Kunz, 1974; Matlin, 1970; Taylor, 1991). When presented lists of positive, neutral, and negative words,

for example, people are more accurate over time in recalling the positive (Akhtar, 1968; Rychlak, 1977; Thompson, 1930), and the longer the delay between learning and recalling, the more positive bias is displayed (Gilbert, 1938).

Edwards (1969) found that individuals are less likely to remember negative than positive descriptions of themselves. Positive words are also learned faster than negative words (Bunch & Wientge, 1933; Rychlak, 1966), and people judge positive phenomena more accurately than negative phenomena. Managers, for example, are much more accurate in rating subordinates' competencies and proficiencies when they perform correctly than when they perform incorrectly (Gordon, 1970).

As summarized by Matlin and Stang (1978):

People are more accurate in processing positive information, whether the task involves verbal discrimination, organizational behavior, or the judgment of emotion. They think about a greater number of positive things than negative things, and each positive thing is thought about for a longer period of time. (p. 138)

In free association tasks, people tend to respond with positive rather than negative words (Silverstein & Dienstbier, 1968; Wilson & Becknell, 1961), as when presented with neutral stimuli and asked to identify the first thing that comes to mind. Positive associations are more frequent than negative associations (Washburn, Harding, Simons, & Tomlinson, 1925), and positive responses occur more quickly and have larger quantity than the negative.

Positive items also take precedence when people make lists (Matlin, Stang, Gawron, Freedman, & Derby, 1978), so that people list those things they like before those things they do not like, most favorite things before least favorite things, and so on. This effect is observed when referring to objects, sentences, movies, evaluations of people, life events, and memories (Matlin et al., 1978). The positive is listed more frequently than and prior to the negative.

People more frequently recall positive life experiences than neutral or negative ones, and they mentally rehearse positive items more than negative items (Meltzer, 1930; Stang, 1975). When asked to recall a summer vacation or past life experiences, for example, positive experiences are identified most frequently, and they increase in frequency over time (Koch, 1930; Stagner, 1931; Steckle, 1945; Thompson, 1930).

Positive memories tend to replace negative memories, and negative memories diminish or become neutralized over time (Hollingsworth, 1910; Holmes, 1970; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970). For example, when asked to read three statements from a magazine—positive, negative, and neutral statements—then report a day later on how much time they spent thinking about the statements (Stang, 1978), people reported thinking about positive statements 20% longer than negative statements and almost 50% longer than neutral statements. People mentally rehearse positive items more than negative items because, according to Matlin and Stang (1978), "Positive is registered in memory more accurately than negative, so it can be recalled easier and more accurately. Because positive information is stored more accessibly than negative information, it tumbles out more rapidly and accurately" (pp. 120, 138).

People tend to seek out positive stimuli and avoid negative stimuli (Day, 1966; Luborsky, Blinder, & Mackworth, 1963), as when given a choice about looking at smiling faces or frowning faces or pleasant scenes versus disturbing scenes. Moreover, when people see positive and neutral stimuli equally often, they report that the positive stimuli are more frequent than the negative (Matlin & Stang, 1975; Stang, 1974). Positive stimuli are also judged to be larger in size than negative or neutral stimuli when large size is valued (Stayton & Wiener, 1961). When smallness is valued, positive things are judged to be smaller.

In judgments of themselves and of others, people display a positive bias. For example, people judge from two thirds to three quarters of the events in their lives to be positive (Bradburn, 1969; Havighurst & Glasser, 1972; Meltzer & Ludwig, 1967, 1970), and most people judge themselves to be positive, optimistic, and happy most of the time (P. Cameron, 1972; Goldings, 1954; Johnson, 1937; Wessman & Ricks, 1966; Young, 1937). In one study in which people rated themselves each day for 65 consecutive days on a scale ranging from +5 (*I have never been happier*), 0 (*This is my normal degree of happiness*), to -5 (*I have never been more miserable*), people's average rating was +1.2, meaning that they rated themselves as happier than they normally are (Johnson, 1937).

People also tend to judge the future as significantly more positive than the past or present (Watts & Free, 1973). According to Hollingsworth (1910): "The canonization of saints, the apotheosis of strenuous historical characters, the obituaries of our friends, the reminiscences of childhood, all testify to this natural and universal habit of forgetting the bad and exalting the good" (p. 710).

A similar positive bias is found in language. Positive words have higher frequencies in all the languages studied—including English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Urdu (India and Pakistan), Russian, Italian, Dutch, Belgian Flemish, Iranian Farsi, Mexican Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, and Serbo-Croatian. The preponderance of positive words is present in all types of literature, in formal and informal usage, in written and spoken communication, and among both adults and children (Boucher & Osgood, 1969; Matlin & Stang, 1978).

It has also been shown that positive words typically entered English usage more than 150 years before their negative opposites, so that people were "better" before they were "worse" and "clean" before they were "dirty" (Boucher & Osgood, 1969; Mann, 1968; Matlin & Stang, 1978; Zajonc, 1968). Osgood and Richards (1973) concluded that:

It would appear that from time immemorial humans have been differentially reinforced for strength (rather than weakness), for activity (rather than passivity), . . . that humans have found believing more reinforcing than doubting, certainty more than uncertainty, plenty more than scarcity, asserting more than denying—and congruity . . . more than incongruity. (p. 410)

The inclination toward the positive, in other words, appears to characterize human beings in their thoughts, judgments, emotions, and language. A tendency toward the positive seems to be a natural human attribute, and empirical evidence suggests that positivity is the preferred and natural state of human beings, just as it is of biological systems.

EXPLANATIONS FOR POSITIVE TENDENCIES

Several explanations have been proposed for why individuals experience heliotropic tendencies and have inclinations toward positive change. For example, Erdelyi (1974) explained positive biases as a product of individuals' cognitive development. Human mental processes develop in such a way as to favor the positive over the negative. Because of the overwhelming amount of sensory information available to individuals, most information is disregarded. That which is retained, or selected, tends to be that which is life giving rather than life depleting. Perceptual defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, displacement) develop to counteract the effects of negative information, so inclinations toward positivity develop.

Selectivity of positive information is not limited to perception; it is not limited to language, or to memory. Instead, selectivity appears to be a condition that cuts across all processes. Selectivity of the positive is inherent in the way humans handle stimulus material . . . this generalization holds true whether the operations . . . include perception, or memory storage, or a judgment process. [A positive bias] does not focus on one segment in the information processing sequence; it operates at all segments. (Matlin & Stang, 1978, p. 195)

Similarly, Becker (1973) explained natural positive biases as resulting from the fear of death. That which is unpleasant is repressed because it reinforces a fear of dying, whereas that which is positive—or life giving—is reinforced, so people develop a bias toward it.

Learning theorists (e.g., Skinner, 1965) explain positive biases as being associated with reinforcement.

Every learning theorist's version of learning principles maintains that activities which are [positively] reinforcing are repeated while activities that are punishing or unpleasant are extinguished . . . selectivity occurs via stimulus selection, a process that assures that stimulus input will be predominantly pleasant. (Matlin & Stang, 1978, p. 21)

Brain scan research has also verified a bias toward the positive and explains positive tendencies organically. For example, in an attempt to explain why most people expect positive events to occur in the future even when there is no evidence to support such expectations—for example, people expect to live longer than the average, they underestimate the likelihood of getting a divorce, they overestimate their prospects for success on the job market, they expect to win more than lose in randomized tasks—Sharot, Riccardi, Raio, and Phelps (2007) found that the human brain has a tendency to produce optimistic and positive orientations in its natural state. The rostral anterior cingulate cortex is significantly related to positivity and optimism. “The brain generates a tendency to engage in the projection of positive future events . . . and is related to optimism” (p. 102).

Social process theorists explain positive biases on the basis of the functions they perform in perpetuating social organization (Merton, 1968). Simply stated, organizing depends on positive social processes that reinforce mutual benefit. The eudemonic tendency leads people toward helping behavior (Krebs, 1987), and when others observe this behavior, they feel compelled to join with and build on those

contributions (e.g., Sethi & Nicholson, 2001). Observing and experiencing positivity unlocks predispositions to act for the benefit of others, causing an upward spiral and increasing social connections in an organization (Feldman & Khademan, 2003).

A similar explanation comes from Gouldner (1960), who proposed that role modeling and social norm formation create a tendency toward the positive. Positive social processes are more likely to survive and flourish over the long run than negative social processes because they are functional for the group. Collectivities survive when they are reinforced by positive norms.

The point is, several explanations have been proffered for why human beings are positively inclined and heliotropic in their tendencies. Cognitively, emotionally, behaviorally, physiologically, and socially, human systems tend to prefer exposure to the positive, so they develop a natural tendency toward positive change.

THE PARADOXICAL EFFECTS OF THE NEGATIVE

On the other hand, a paradox exists in producing positive change, and it is illustrated by the effects of the negative in human systems. That is, positive change can also result from problems, difficulties, traumas, challenges, and losses. Some of the greatest triumphs, most noble virtues, and highest achievements have resulted from the presence of the negative. In fact, common human experience, as well as abundant scientific evidence, supports the idea that negativity has an important place in positive change. Negative news sells more than positive news, people pay more attention to negative feedback than positive feedback, and traumatic events have greater impact on individuals than positive events.

A comprehensive review of psychological research by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) summarized this conclusion in the article's title: "Bad Is Stronger Than Good." Human beings, they pointed out, react more strongly to negative phenomena than to positive phenomena. This finding is also consistent with evolutionary theory (Darwin, 2003), which presumes that living systems respond strongly and quickly to stimuli that threaten their existence or that signal maladaptation. Baumeister et al. concluded:

Events that are negatively valenced (e.g., losing money, being abandoned by friends, and receiving criticism) will have a greater impact on the individual than positively valenced events of the same type (e.g., winning money, gaining friends, and receiving praise). This is not to say that bad will always triumph over good, spelling doom and misery to the human race. Rather, good may prevail over bad by superior force of numbers: Many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one. When equal measures of good and bad are present, however, the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh those of the good ones. (p. 323)

Support for this conclusion is plentiful and demonstrates the paradox in positive change—namely, both positive inclinations and negative sensitivities exist simultaneously in human beings and are potential enablers of positive change. However, reacting to negative events—a proclivity toward survival—usually overpowers heliotropic and eudemonic tendencies. The primary response to the negative in the

absence of the positive tends to be threat, rigidity, and protection rather than positive change (Starbuck & Hedberg, 1977; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981).

For example, negative feedback has more emotional impact on people than positive feedback (Coleman, Jussim, & Abraham, 1987), and the effects of negative information and negative events take longer to wear off than the effects of positive information or pleasant events (Brickman, Coates, & Jason-Bulman, 1978).

The negative tends to disrupt normal functioning longer than does the positive. A single traumatic experience (e.g., abuse, violence) can overcome the effects of many positive events for example, but a single positive event does not usually overcome the effects of a single traumatic negative event (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). That is, a single traumatic event usually has longer lasting effects on behavior than a single positive event. Negative events have stronger effects, according to Berlyne (1971), because they are relatively rare and therefore tend to be more salient. In terms of memory, a positive event is remembered more accurately and longer, but a negative event has more effect on immediate memory and salience in the short run (Bless, Hamilton, & Mackie, 1992; Dreben, Fiske, & Hastie, 1979).

Similarly, negative events have a greater effect on people's subsequent moods and adjustment than positive events (Nezlek & Gable, 1999), and negative or upsetting social interactions weigh more heavily on people (they produce more depression and bad moods) than positive or helpful interactions (Manne, Taylor, Dougherty, & Kemeny, 1997; Rook, 1984). Vinokur and van Ryn (1993) found, for example, that conflict takes a greater toll on people's mental health than positive social relations helped bolster mental health.

People tend to spend more thought time on threatening personal relationships than supportive ones and on personal goals that were blocked than those that were not blocked (Klinger, Barta, & Maxeiner, 1980). When negative things happen (e.g., people lose a wager, endure abuse, or become a victim of a crime), they spend more time trying to explain the outcome or to make sense of it than when a positive outcome occurs (Gilovich, 1983; Pratto & John, 1991).

Hamilton and Huffman (1971) found that undesirable human traits receive more weight in impression formation than desirable traits. For example, when people acquire a negative trait, fewer instances are required to confirm it in the minds of observers than when people acquire a positive trait (Rothbart & Park, 1986). Bad reputations are easy to acquire but difficult to lose, whereas good reputations are difficult to acquire but easy to lose.

Bolster and Springbett (1961) found, for example, that in initial hiring decisions, 3.8 unfavorable bits of information were required to shift a decision to rejection, whereas 8.8 favorable pieces of information were necessary to shift an initial negative decision toward acceptance. Skowronski and Carlston (1989) proposed that to be categorized as good, one has to be good all of the time, but to be categorized as bad, one only has to engage in a few bad acts. An impression of moral goodness is easily negated by an immoral act, but an impression of immorality is not easily overcome by engaging immoral acts. Baumeister et al. (2001) concluded:

Most findings indicate that people react more strongly to bad than good events. The evidence covers everything from minor everyday events and brief experimental exposure to aversive odors to major life events and traumas. Bad events produce more emotion, have bigger effects on adjustment measures, and have longer lasting impacts. . . . There are several reasons to think that it may be highly adaptive for human beings to respond more strongly to bad than good. In the final analysis, then, the greater power of bad may itself be a good thing. (pp. 328, 362)

EXPLAINING NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE INCLINATIONS

When most people were very small, they learned that ignoring negative feedback could be dangerous or produce unpleasant consequences. Ignoring positive feedback, however, usually produces little or no lasting effect. Over time, therefore, individuals tend to suppress their natural heliotropic tendencies and react more immediately and more strongly toward the negative.

This predominance of the negative over the positive can be explained by theories of intensity, novelty, adaptation, and singularity. As mentioned earlier, both inclinations toward the positive and toward the negative are evolutionarily adaptive, but they work in different ways. Negative events represent threats to survival and species perpetuation, so living systems are keenly affected by them. Negativity is more likely to be experienced intensely (Matlin & Stang, 1978), so reactions are usually immediate and strong. In contrast, because positive events are more common and tend to be more generalized in human experience, they are usually less intense. Temporarily ignoring the positive may produce regret but no life-altering effects. As a result, the negative predominates over the positive when both stimuli are present because the negative tends to be more concentrated. Gottman (1994) claimed, in fact, that negative events are five times more powerful than positive events for human beings.

Similarly, because most events in life are positive, any negative occurrence represents an aberration or a novel condition (Holmes, 1970). Kellermann (1984) hypothesized that bad is stronger than good because it is usually extreme, unexpected, or unusual and therefore captures awareness. Just as movement in a still room attracts attention, so negative (novel) events capture more attention than positive (normal) patterns (Thorngate, 1976; Turner & Barlow, 1951). That which is unusual has more impact than that which is expected, explaining why one bad act has more impact in impression formation than one good act (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989).

Furthermore, negative events often indicate maladaptation and a need to change. Negative information usually serves as a corrective influence or as a motivation to adapt to new circumstances (Taylor, 1991), whereas continuous positive information is not likely to motivate change or adaptation. Personal and organizational change are more frequently stimulated by information about maladaptation—crises, achievement gaps, threatening challenges—than by evidence of positivity (Lewin, 1935; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007).

Finally, it is usually the case that one single negative thing can cause a system to fail, but one single positive thing cannot guarantee success. For example, one part in an engine, one person on a team, or one organ in the body can cause the entire system to stop working, but a single good part or person cannot cause an entire

system to thrive. Many things must work in harmony for success to occur in most living systems, but failure can be singular.

RECONCILING THE PARADOX IN POSITIVE CHANGE

One important point to keep in mind in reconciling this paradox—namely, that tendencies toward both the positive and the negative are important stimuli for positive change, but the negative tends to dominate—is to recognize that an overemphasis on either the positive or the negative is dysfunctional. Over time, a constant focus on the negative leads to paranoia, defensiveness, and degeneration (Becker, 1973). In fact, psychological defense mechanisms (e.g., repression, regression, transference) exist to protect against an overabundance of the negative (Freud, 1946). Similarly, the effect of constant positivity is also dysfunctional, as illustrated by an unrealistic Pollyannaish perspective or a complete absence of corrective feedback. For example, people who have a genetic insensitivity to pain (i.e., no negative physiological feedback) do not long survive because they are not able to adapt to their changing environments.

In other words, both positive and negative elements may be functional for the perpetuation of positive change (Bagozzi, 2003). But when both are present, the survival benefits of attending to the negative tend to create stronger defensive reactions than inclinations toward the positive (Alderfer, 1986; Maslow, 1968), so the positive requires more emphasis for positive change to be stimulated.

This dynamic also helps explain why a bias exists in social sciences toward studying the negative much more than the positive (Czapinski, 1985; Seligman, 1999). A larger effect (R^2) can usually be detected by accounting for negative phenomena compared to positive phenomena—that is, the bad has stronger effects than the good (Baumeister et al., 2001)—so it is understandable that researchers focus on the strongest factors accounting for the most variance. Negative effects usually dominate heliotropic inclinations, they account for a larger amount of variance in behavior change, and they capture more attention in scholarly analyses. Consequently, a tendency toward investigating the negative dominates the organizational change literature.

Even more important however is that over time, organizations also tend to emphasize negative phenomena for the same reasons—survival and adaptation are associated with addressing obstacles, dangers, or threats. If greater organizational effects can be created by addressing the negative, it is logical that organizational policies, practices, and processes will, over time, also tend toward focusing on and organizing around negative factors more than positive factors.

Evidence of this tendency is confirmed by Margolis and Walsh's (2003) findings that negative phenomena dominate positive phenomena in the business press and organizational studies literature by a factor of 4. An examination of articles published in *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* also produces the same result. Investigations of negatively motivated change clearly predominate over investigations of positive change. Classifying the approximately 500 articles published in *JABS* between 1990 and 2007 according to their focus on negative change, positive change, or a neutral topic, for example, revealed that approximately 40% of the

articles addressed negatively motivated change whereas only 4% addressed positive change. (The remainder addressed neutral topics such as biographies, methodologies, the field of organizational development, or special topics such as IT, architecture, or global culture.)

Therefore, an important challenge in organizational scholarship is to pay more attention to the processes and practices that can unleash heliotropic tendencies and produce positive change in human systems. Empirical evidence is clear that when positive factors are given greater emphases than negative factors, human beings tend toward positive change. Spectacular success has been documented when the positive dominates the negative (K. S. Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; K. S. Cameron & Lavine, 2006; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, in press).

For example, research on Fredrickson's (1998, 2001, 2003) broaden-and-build theory confirms that when positive emotions dominate negative emotions, mental capacity, personal resilience, intellectual complexity, knowledge, the capacity to explore, and physiological functioning are all enhanced. Other research has found that dominant positivity also enhances creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005), interpersonal trust in relationships (Anderson & Thompson, 2004; Rhee, Dutton, & Bagozzi, 2006), productivity (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), and greater mindfulness (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Individuals and organizations that demonstrate positive energy are by far the most successful (Baker et al., 2003), and the attribute of positive psychological capital—consisting of hope, optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy—predicts individual health, motivation, commitment, and absenteeism at work better than does job satisfaction (F. Luthans & Youssef, 2007; K. W. Luthans & Jensen, 2005). A focus on and affirmation of positive personal values attenuates psychological stress, cortisol levels, cardiovascular illness, depression, and defensiveness and enhances performance (Creswell et al., 2005).

Investigations of caregivers for Alzheimer's patients found that persons in positive, supportive relationships had heart rate patterns associated with lower chronological age compared to caregivers with negative relationships (Uchino, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Cacioppo, 1992). Those with positive relationships were not as old physiologically as those without. A study of 10,000 Israeli men (Medalie & Goldbourt, 1976) found that among those experiencing high levels of stress, individuals who had a positive relationship with a spouse had half the rate of angina pectoris (chest pain), and after a heart attack, the presence of positive relationships doubled the chances of survival 6 months later (Berkman, Leo-Summers, & Horowitz, 2002). Individuals in positive relationships had greater resistance to upper respiratory infections and less incidence of prostate cancer than normal individuals (Cohen, Doyle, Skoner, Rabin, & Gwaltney, 1997). Dutton and Ragins (2006) documented a wide variety of similar effects of positive relationships on human health and performance (also see Ryff & Singer, 2001).

In organizations, a variety of empirical studies (Bright et al., 2006; K. S. Cameron, 2003; K. S. Cameron et al., 2004) found that the presence of virtuousness significantly predicted high levels of profitability, productivity, quality, innovation, customer loyalty, and employee retention. In one investigation in the financial services industry, 45% of the variance in six measures of financial performance was accounted

for by the implementation of positive practices (K. S. Cameron & Mora, 2008). In addition, financial return in the airline industry after the September 11 tragedy was found to be significantly related ($r = .80$) to the virtuousness of downsizing strategies (Gittell et al., 2006).

Losada and Heaphy (2004) found that superior performance among top management teams was characterized by a preponderance of positive versus negative communication. The most profitable, productive, and effective teams had a ratio of 5 positive statements for each negative statement during their work interactions, whereas the lowest performing teams had a ratio of 3 negative for every positive statement. This same 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative was discovered by Gottman (1994) in his predictive studies of successful marriages and divorces. The best predictor of the sustainability and quality of the marital relationship was found to be a preponderance of positive versus negative communication events. A similar finding was identified by Fredrickson and Losada (2005) concerning the relationship between experienced emotions and performance. Evidence from several psychological studies found that a ratio of approximately 3 positive emotions to every negative emotion is associated with flourishing, mental health, and superior individual performance.

The point is, abundant empirical evidence suggests that a preponderance of the positive over the negative helps enable positive organizational change. When positive conditions exist—such as positive climate, positive relationships, positive communication, positive meaning, and positive energy (K. S. Cameron, 2008)—heliotropic tendencies are able to mitigate negative tendencies and produce positive change. Whereas negative conditions can stimulate positive change, in the absence of the positive they tend toward rigidity and recalcitrance. Organizational researchers in the future, therefore, should give much more emphasis than they have in the past to positive factors in investigating and enabling change.

NEW STUDIES OF POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

This special issue introduces several studies that highlight various aspects of the paradox of positive change—a focus on the trade-offs and tensions related to negative and positive factors. For example, Jody Gittell (“Relationships and Resilience: Care Provider Responses to Pressures From Managed Care”) reports an empirical investigation of environmental threat in nine hospitals. Responses to these negative pressures produce positive change—extraordinary resilience—primarily when certain positive relational work practices are emphasized. Positive relationships enable organizational resilience in the face of negative events.

James Avey, Tara Wernsing, and Fred Luthans (“Can Positive Employees Help Positive Organizational Change? Impact of Psychological Capital and Emotions on Relevant Attitudes and Behaviors”) studied employees in a broad sample of organizations. They found that positive factors—employees’ positive psychological capital and positive emotions—are key to countering the dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors that often accompany organizational change. Specifically, the positive psychological and social resources of employees overcame the negative reactions (i.e., cynicism and deviance) associated with organizational change.

Mary Ann Glynn and Tim Dowd (“Charisma [Un]Bound: Emotive Leadership in *Martha Stewart Living* Magazine, 1990-2004”) examined the changes emerging in a leader’s displays of positive emotion and optimism in the presence of negative personal and organizational events. Institutional theory and positive organizational scholarship propose conflicting outcomes from such negative events, and in this study of *Martha Stewart Living*, those two competing theoretical viewpoints are reconciled. Positive organizational scholarship and institutional theory both have a predictive role in accounting for positive change.

Joel Brockner and Erika James (“Toward an Understanding of When Executives See Crisis as Opportunity”) examined what happens when executives encounter threats in the form of crises. Whereas most theories predict negative and rigid reactions to crises, they highlight the factors that lead executives toward positive reactions and approach the crises as opportunities. Specific leadership behaviors they can demonstrate lead to positive organizational change.

Flannery Stevens, Victoria Plaut, and Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks (“Unlocking the Benefits of Diversity: All-Inclusive Multiculturalism and Positive Organizational Change”) discuss the tensions embedded in the two main approaches to diversity in organizations—colorblindness and multiculturalism. One approach tends to disenfranchise members of minority groups and the other tends to disenfranchise members of nonminority groups. Both produce negative effects in organizations. These authors propose an approach to diversity that resolves the negative tensions and facilitates positive organizational change, inclusive of both groups.

Ned Powley and Sandy Piderit (“Tending Wounds: Elements of the Organizational Healing Process”) use a medical metaphor to highlight the processes by which organizations heal in the short run. They identify three stages of physiological healing that have parallels in organizational healing after traumatic events. Examining a case of a major organizational tragedy highlights the positive change that can occur by consciously applying healing processes.

In each of these studies, authors provide insight into the tensions and trade-offs that accompany the paradox of positive change, and they propose ways in which such seeming contradictions can be facilitated. Because the positive is yet ill understood and underdeveloped in organizational sciences, such investigations of positive change will hopefully stimulate more interest in organizational scholars’ research agendas.

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