

The **Positive organizational behavior:** Incubator **an idea whose time has truly come**

THOMAS A. WRIGHT*

Managerial Sciences Department, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada, U.S.A.

It is as if [applied] psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half.

Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (1954: p. 354)

The concept of a ‘positive psychology’ is rapidly gaining momentum in both psychology (Seligman, 1999) and organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Highly reminiscent of the quote from Maslow (1954), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 5) more recently suggested that the purpose of positive psychology ‘is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from pre-occupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities.’ Relatedly, but adopting a more utilitarian, cost–benefit perspective emphasizing the goal of enhanced workplace performance, Luthans (2002a, 2002b) clearly noted the need for a more relevant, proactive approach to organizational research, which he termed positive organizational behavior (POB). More specifically, Luthans (2003, p. 179) defined POB 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.’

Demonstrating the dire need for a POB approach, Luthans (2002b), in a computer search of contemporary literature in psychology, found approximately 375 000 articles on ‘negatives’ (i.e., mental illness, depression, anxiety, fear and anger), but only about 1000 articles on various positive concepts and capabilities of people. This constitutes a negative/positive publication ratio of approximately 375 to 1! These alarming findings are even more perplexing when one considers that Maslow (1954) first introduced the term ‘positive psychology’ almost 50 years ago. In fact, in his seminal book titled *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow (1954) actually titled the last chapter ‘Toward a Positive Psychology.’ In this final chapter, as well as in the appendix, Maslow diligently laid out a research agenda proposing investigation of such ‘new’ and ‘central’ psychological concepts as growth, self-sacrifice, love, optimism, spontaneity, courage, acceptance, contentment, humility, kindness, and actualization of potential. One can readily observe that his agenda for research was highly similar to that more recently presented by Seligman and his colleagues (cf. Buss, 2000; Diener, 2000; Myers, 2000; Peterson, 2000; Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, & Steward, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Vaillant, 2000).

The purpose of this *Incubator* essay is fourfold. First, as the article title heralds, I want to echo the sentiment that POB (and positive psychology) is a topic whose time has truly come in applied research.

* Correspondence to: Thomas A. Wright, Managerial Sciences Department, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, NV 89557-0206, U.S.A. E-mail: taw@unr.nevada.edu

Second, as the Luthans' (2002b) computer search well demonstrated, there is clearly an (over)emphasis on the negative aspects of human nature in social science research. Expanding upon Luthans (2002b, 2003), I suggest this emphasis on the utilitarian-based, more negative aspects of human nature, to the neglect of the positive, as one primary reason why much applied research is seen to lack relevance. Third, I briefly introduce Fredrickson's (1998) broaden-and-build model of positive emotions as one example of the potential contribution of positively based approaches in better understanding organizational behaviors. Finally, using lessons (hopefully) learned from the humanistic psychology movement, I offer a cautionary word to organizational scholars interested in pursuing research in POB.

Of late, many leading organizational scholars have suggested that our discipline has become one lacking in relevance and meaning (especially see the collection of articles by former AMJ editors in the 40th anniversary issue—December 1997—of the *Academy of Management Journal*). Wright and Wright (2002, p. 173) suggested that one possible reason for this apparent lack of relevance (and concomitant (over)emphasis on the negative aspects of work and life) is the failure of much organizational research to be responsive to the needs of *all* potential research stakeholders. As the primary reason for this failure, Wright and Wright proposed that the prevailing values perspective in organizational research, emphasizing a utilitarian or cost–benefit approach, has strongly influenced the framing and interpretation of organizational research questions. Epitomizing this utilitarian approach is what the authors termed the committed-to-management (CMR) perspective.¹

The basic assumptions of the CMR approach are very familiar to students of organizations. In particular, the primary, if not sole, objective of applied research is to fulfill the goals as set forth by one stakeholder group, the management/ownership of the organization. Still ringing true today, Baritz's (1960) critique of organizational research for catering to the needs, wants, and goals of management/ownership provides ample testimony to both the long-standing nature and widespread use of the CMR approach. As a consequence, another stakeholder grouping, the actual employees themselves, are considered important only to the extent that they are instrumental in fulfilling the organization's goals. This is especially ironic given that employees typically constitute the actual subject base for much organizational research. Based on the rational or 'intendedly rational' theoretical framework (cf. Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Weber, 1947), the CMR approach is highly consistent with the utilitarian perspective taught in business schools (Wright & Wright, 2000, 2002). According to utilitarianism, actions and policies should be evaluated on the basis of the costs and benefits they impose on the organization (Boal & Peery, 1985; Velasquez, 2002). Consistent with the belief that the ends justify the means, a utilitarian approach emphasizes the anticipated consequences of a particular action, with the focus on organizational, not necessarily individual, efficiency. At the extreme, the utilitarian perspective is epitomized by the classical economic 'Chicago school' framework, which proposes that an organization's stockholders should be the prime, if not sole, beneficiaries of corporate actions (Boal & Peery, 1985; Friedman, 1970).

This utilitarian perspective has long been very influential in determining the research focus for a wide range of topics in organizational research. The first systematic applications of applied psychology to business problems involved how to generate increased sales dollars through 'better' advertising (see Baritz, 1960, for a highly enlightening discussion of this and other related topics). Walter Dill Scott, a well-known applied psychologist at Northwestern University at the turn of the twentieth

¹While beyond the scope of this *Incubator*, Wright and Wright (2002) provided an overview of two widespread and popular utilitarian-based approaches to conducting organizational research, which they termed the committed-to-management research (CMR) and committed-to-science research (CSR) perspectives. In addition, to address potential limitations of these approaches, and which complements the positive psychology movement, the authors proposed a third values perspective, the committed-to-participant research (CPR) perspective. Simply stated, a CPR approach considers issues surrounding the individual well-being and betterment of *all* research stakeholders, irrespective of their perceived instrumentality to future organizationally based outcomes, as appropriate and worthwhile topics in organizational research.

century, gained added prominence to his reputation through the publication of his influential *Psychology of Advertising* in 1908. No less an authority than Hugo Munsterberg (1913) took the time to assure his students that knowledge of psychology would greatly increase their commercial proficiency and subsequent success.

Later, in a series of classic articles published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Lucas and Benson (1929a, 1929b, 1930a, 1930b) captured the essence of the utilitarian perspective. Laced also with a strong measure of Social Darwinism, the authors succinctly concluded (1929b) that ‘it is obvious that the [business] methods which survive and are retained must be those which are most profitable’ (p. 346). Additionally, and highly germane to my *Incubator* essay discussion, Lucas and Benson’s research on various practical applications of applied psychology techniques well chronicles the early reliance on negative, as opposed to positive, aspects of human motivation, an emphasis continuing to the present as Luthans’ (2002b) computer search clearly demonstrates. An added bonus is that these classic studies also make fascinating reading for organizational scholars interested in our discipline’s early roots. In particular, I suggest the following study by Lucas and Benson (1930b) as especially illuminating regarding the ‘birth’ of applied psychology’s early emphasis on the negative dimensions of human nature.

The research involved an ad test campaign for a proprietary medicine. Five advertisements were created and circulated in 15 eastern American cities of roughly equal size. The advertising appeals ranged from a highly positive one promoting the attainment of good health and its preservation (in other words, emphasizing a POB approach), to a strongly negative one warning against the dire and costly consequences of ill health. The results speak volumes: positive appeals to good health met with so little success (sales actually went down 10%) that they were, for the most part, discarded. Alternatively, negative appeals met with tremendous success, with sales increasing 171%. Over the years, these and many other similar results, covering a wide gamut of organizational topics, were not lost on an attentive business audience.

I propose the focus on a utilitarian, cost–benefit approach provides the basis for better understanding *why* the negative has been so emphasized in advertising research over the years. According to utilitarianism, actions should always be selected on a net benefit-maximizing basis. Utilitarianism also focuses on the anticipated consequences of the particular action, with special emphasis on efficiency (Wright & Wright, 2000). Advertisers have long recognized the utility, especially when measured in the short run, of framing negative, emotional appeals designed to narrow an individual’s perceptual field (cf. Fredrickson, 2001). The net result of this perceptual narrowing is to steer potential buyers away from, or even totally avoid, situations/products reframed to be (re)interpreted as annoying, distressing or dissatisfying (Lucas & Benson, 1929a, 1929b). I propose that research on positive-based strengths and capabilities suggests this short-run focus on the negative may, in fact, have been less than an optimal strategy (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). For example, recent research has shown that inducing positive emotional states in people facilitates flexible, effective problem solving, decision making and evaluation of events (e.g., Erez & Isen, 2002; Isen, 2003). Unfortunately, Maslow (1954) was unsuccessful in bucking the more traditional utilitarian approach and, as a result, organizational research continues to focus on the negative.

That is, adopting what Keyes and Haidt (2003) refer to as a ‘repair shop’ perspective, and extending the advertising example, applied research has tended to focus unduly on identification of the pecuniary costs to the organization of distressed, dissatisfied, and unhappy employees. Furthermore, the cause of this employee dissatisfaction and unhappiness is typically seen from this ‘repair shop’ perspective as being deeply embedded in the emotional maladjustment of the employee, as opposed to aspects of the job itself. As a result, the ‘cure’ for this malady usually involves some type of prevention-based employee therapy (Baritz, 1960; Hoppock, 1935). Wright and Cropanzano (2000), among others, have referred to this approach as the disease model, for obvious reasons. As one promising alternative to this

utilitarian-based or disease model, I next briefly describe the potential relevance of one promising POB-based approach to organizational research: Fredrickson's (1998) 'broaden-and-build' theory of positive emotions.

Fredrickson's theory states that a number of positive emotions, including joy, interest, contentment, and possibly happiness, all share the ability to 'broaden' an individual's momentary thought-action repertoires through expanding the available array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2001). In addition, these positive emotions assist in 'building' the individual's enduring personal resources, ranging from physical, psychological, intellectual, and social in nature. This capacity to experience the positive is proposed to be central to one's ability to flourish, mentally prosper, and psychologically grow (Fredrickson, 2001). This sense of flourishing has also been proposed as being instrumental in assisting contented, happy or psychologically well people to become more proactive (cf. Argyle, 1987) and less prone to stress symptoms (Myers & Diener, 1995). For instance, Fredrickson (2001, p. 220) proposes that contented individuals can broaden their array of thought-action repertoires by creating the desire 'to savor current life circumstances and integrate these circumstances into new views of self and the world.' A continued focus on these positive feelings expands and builds on these urges, creating a potentially moderating 'upward spiral' effect, which can further enhance individual character development (Hobfoll, 1998; Wright & Wright, 2002). Considered together, one's capacity to experience positive feelings can be considered a fundamental human strength (Fredrickson, 2001).

Consistent with Luthans' (2002b, p. 703) call for enhanced theory development in identifying the nature and scope of moderating variables in POB research, the broaden-and-build model suggests the potentially adaptive and interactive nature of positive emotions. Past organizational research has long recognized the possibility of a moderating effect of positive emotion on the job satisfaction-job performance relation (e.g., Fisher & Hanna, 1931; Locke, 1976). However, the theoretical basis for such a disposition-based interaction remains tentative and unclear (cf. Judge, 1993; Staw & Ross, 1985). Based on the broaden-and-build dimension of Fredrickson's (2001) theory, one can propose that the adaptive or moderating nature of such positive emotions as happiness and joy is potentially more robust for those more happy or joyous than for those less happy or joyous (cf. Fredrickson, 2001, p. 218). As a result, through the impetus provided by happiness or joy, individuals are more easily able to transform themselves and become more creative, resilient, socially connected, and physically and mentally healthy. In addition, these effects would appear to persist over time due, in part, to the differential manner in which positively toned and negatively toned people recall events. This broaden-and-build example highlights that the movement toward POB is a potentially important step in helping to reintroduce and reconnect relevance back into the mainstream of organizational research.

Almost 50 years ago, Maslow (1954, p. 377) noted that the 'behavior of the healthy person is less determined by anxiety, fear, insecurity, guilt, shame, and more by truth, logic, justice, reality, fairness, fitness, beauty, rightness, etc.' Maslow and others went on to create humanistic psychology, clearly the intellectual forerunner of positive psychology and POB. Unfortunately, over time, for a number of reasons, such as the fact that the humanistic movement was taken over by a psychotherapeutic counter-culture with less scientific agendas (cf. Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Taylor, 2001), the mission of creating a more positive psychology was never accomplished by the humanists.

Not unlike the humanistic psychology movement roughly 35 years ago, POB faces a number of challenges to its success as the twenty-first century continues to unfold. First and foremost involves the need for POB to firmly establish a well-articulated mission perspective—one which offers a more balanced view of human nature than that offered by the traditional utilitarian approach. While the utilitarian perspective has definitely provided a significant value-added for those interested in the 'bottom line' for business success, it has been much less articulate in proposing an agenda to proactively assist employees in their pursuit of healthier and more meaningful lives. It has been suggested that the

purpose of much organizational research has [d]evolved to one too frequently concerned with developing various social charms, such as civility and collegiality, to name just two, designed to better help facilitate or augment the human interaction process (Covey, 1999; Wright & Wright, 2001, 2002).

More than just considering employees as a means to the desired end of higher organizational productivity, to make a truly valuable contribution to the field the mission of POB must also include the pursuit of employee happiness, health, and betterment issues as viable goals or ends in themselves. Highly consistent with Aristotle's centuries old quest of *eudaimonia*, to provide a value-added contribution to organizational research, POB must consider issues of employee betterment as intrinsic goods for which all should work and strive. Pursuit of the good or worthwhile life deserves no less.

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