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Positive Organizational Ethics: Cultivating and Sustaining Moral Performance

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Abstract We present this special issue on positive organizational ethics (POE) to highlight those pursuing positive subjective experiences, positive attributes of individuals and groups, and positive practices that contribute to ethical and virtuous behavior in organizations. Although prior research has offered some insight in this area, there is still much to be learned about how to cultivate and sustain ethical strength in different types of organizations and how goodness can emerge from and in spite of human failings. After describing the positive movement, we position POE as a discrete area of inquiry within the broader positive behavioral sciences, at the intersection of positive behavioral studies and business ethics. After defining our terms and purpose for creating the POE domain, we introduce the articles in this special issue. The introduction concludes with suggested topics for future research.

Good executives focus on opportunities rather than problems. Problems have to be taken care of, of course; they must not be swept under the rug. But problem solving, however necessary, does not produce results. It prevents damage. Exploiting opportunities produces results. (Drucker 2004, p. 62)

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Introduction

Scholars have begun to make progress into explorations of the positive side of organizational life, but we believe there is untapped potential in terms of what can be gleaned from the existing foundational studies, applying knowledge about what creates, supports, and sustains ethical strength in business enterprise. This special issue began with our asking: *How might a positive lens advance our understanding of ethical cognition, affect, and behavior in the workplace?* In posing this question, we recognized that although we need continued research to explicate what leads employees to make poor ethical choices, we must also explore what encourages and sustains positive ethical decision-making and action at the personal, group, and organizational levels of analysis. Managers need a wide variety of resources to understand and foster ethical performance in varied contexts. By unpacking ethical failure, which has been the focus of the majority of scholarship within the field of organizational behavior to date, and examining the building blocks of ethical strength, scholars can help people to engage in more productive and meaningful lives in the workplace.

Throughout the past decade we have seen a burgeoning exploration of the many positive aspects of organizational behavior (cf. Cameron et al. 2011; Caza and Caza 2008; Donaldson and Ko 2010; Miller et al. 2012; Pittinsky and Shih 2004; Searle and Barbuto 2011; Sekerka et al. 2009; Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003). Scholars across various organizational disciplines have begun to pose questions aimed explicitly at describing, explaining, and predicting what forms of thinking, feeling, and behavior are associated with the best of humankind. Studies in the general area of positive psychology (PP) as well as in the domains of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) and Positive

Organizational Behavior (POB) have put the spotlight on the best aspects of our organizational systems at both the individual and collective levels. Work in these areas has sought to leverage and enhance effectiveness in a way that goes beyond promoting basic organizational survival, seeking instead to uncover what contributes to personal and collective thriving in the workplace (i.e., Cameron et al. 2003).

Even with years of appreciative insight now mounting across various social science fields, positive assumptions inherent in organizational inquiry often give way to traditional problem-focused analyses, interventions, and techniques. Such deficit-based approaches to research and practice direct our collective learning toward how to diagnose organizational ills and how to fix identified issues rather than how to cultivate organizational flourishing (i.e., Bakker and Schaufeli 2008; Seligman 2011). Furthermore, such problem-centric foci tend only to move individuals and organizations from a state of malady and weakness to a condition of normalcy, rather than to cultivate strengths (Cooperrider and Godwin 2012; Cooperrider and Sekerka 2006). Although today's management theories are informed by a wide variety of disciplines, as Ghoshal powerfully argued, "they have increasingly converged on a pessimistic view of human nature" (2005, p. 82). This negative myopia in our theoretical foundations as a field led him to decree that "Bad Management Theories are Destroying Good Management Practice" (2005).

Why has a focus on problems become the dominant lens through which scholars explore organizational life? Perhaps it is because negative issues tend to command our attention (Baumeister et al. 2001). As a result, if we want to move beyond this inherent negativity bias in our scholarship, it is essential that we pay deliberate and explicit attention to strengths, the elements and facets of organizational behavior that support and cultivate the best of our capabilities. Purposeful targeted inquiry into the conditions of thriving in organizational life is especially vital because of the challenges that continue to beset the global business environment. These issues consistently draw us back into myopic investigations that focus primarily on the "dark side" of management (Neider and Schriesheim 2010).

Like the swinging of a pendulum, our collective scholarship has moved toward finding an equilibrium. Despite our natural inclination to attend to what is wrong, management literature has increasingly incorporated uplifting topics, such as organizational resiliency (e.g., Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003), upward spirals of positive emotions (e.g., Fredrickson 2009), compassion as a generative force (e.g., Dutton and Workman 2012), high-quality connections in the workplace (e.g., Stephens et al. 2013), virtuousness in support of organizational performance (e.g., Cameron 2003), and a general science of happiness and well-being in

everyday life (e.g., Diener 2000; Seligman 2002). These inquiries into the positive aspects of organizational behavior have perhaps been, in part, a response to the deficit-based approaches dominating the social sciences (Ghoshal 2005).

We see vast opportunity to build upon this momentum with additional positive research that targets the intersection of Positive Behavioral Studies and Business Ethics. To ensure that scholars weave their explorations of ethical disorder and dysfunction together with ethical achievement, aspiration, and excellence in performance (e.g., Linley et al. 2006), we argue for an integrated framework among the positive research domains, one that specifically advances business ethics. Such a focus must offer practical application to current workplace settings, where real ethical issues demand daily attention. The study of ethics in organizational settings requires a unique and sustained exploration of the positive to complement the more ingrained examination of ethical problems, issues, and challenges that dominates the field.

We, therefore, direct this special issue on Positive Organizational Ethics (POE) to those pursuing positive subjective experiences, positive attributes of individuals and groups, and positive practices that contribute to ethical and virtuous behavior in organizations. We embrace the notion that negative situations, contexts, and experiences can ultimately fuel positive outcomes and produce fresh theoretical knowledge. Although some work has already been done in the area of POE (e.g., Caza et al. 2004; Giacalone et al. 2005; Sekerka and Godwin 2010; Stansbury and Sonenshein 2010; Verbos et al. 2007; Whitaker and Godwin 2013), we have not yet fully explained how to cultivate and sustain ethical strength in different types of organizations, nor how ethical strength can emerge from and in spite of human failings. For this issue, we welcomed scholars' contributions to help clarify how people, and the organizations in which they work, build ethical strength and moral performance—in good times and in bad.

To set the stage for the nascent field of POE, we first provide a more detailed description of the positive movement, with a brief review of the rise of PP and its influence on research in POS and POB. We conceptualize POE as a discrete area of inquiry within the broader positive behavioral science movement, positioned at the intersection between the domain of Positive Behavioral Studies and the field of Business Ethics (see Fig. 1). This introduction to the special issue also defines the terms and purpose of this new realm of scholarly work. Then, we offer a brief overview of the articles selected, giving readers a snapshot of what these works reveal about the emerging field of POE. We conclude with suggested topics for future research.

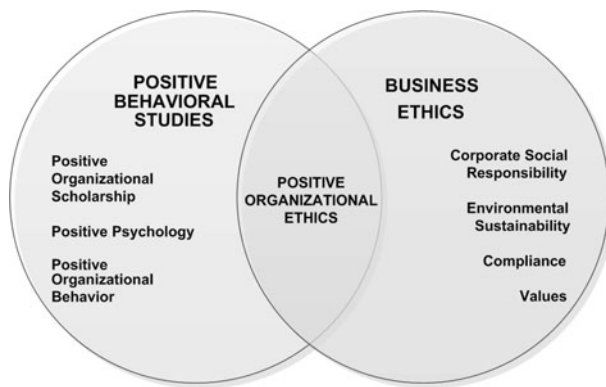


Fig. 1 Positioning POE between literature domains

A Brief History of the Positive Movement

Historically, the field of psychology, an important foundational discipline for organizational studies, has focused almost solely on trying to define, understand, and solve human dysfunction. Indeed, a look at the latest version of the American Psychiatric Association's classic *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013) suggests that much time and effort have gone into diagnosing what is wrong with people's emotional health. Researchers brought this same "diagnose-and-fix" mentality into organizations, working to root out dysfunction in employees, teams, and systems. Undoubtedly, the use of this clinical problem-solving model has led scholars to important discoveries—findings that have helped to address the symptoms at multiple levels of analysis. On the other hand, use of this deficit-based framework has distracted us from considering what contributes to effective existence and what underwrites long-term well-being. As Seligman, a founding father of PP, once stated, "[T]his progress has come at a high cost...Relieving the states that make life miserable, it seems, has made building the states that make life worth living less of a priority....If you are [seeking the latter], you have probably found the field of psychology to be a puzzling disappointment" (2002, p. ix).

In his highly influential presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman officially declared the need to launch the field of PP. He called for a rejuvenation of the Association's mission, describing the field of psychology as being "literally half-baked. We had baked the part about mental illness; we had baked the part about repair of damage. But...that's only half of it. The other side's unbaked, the side of strength, the side of what we're good at" (1999, p. 559). He reflected on his own scholarship, which had focused on mental illness and human failing. He recognized, after spending decades on the concept of *learned helplessness*, that he had been blind to the notion of *learned optimism*. He came to see how he

could expand his understanding of humanity by shifting his attention to human strengths—the power to move beyond adversity and to thrive despite difficult circumstances. Until this call to action, the positive focus in psychology had largely been understudied or simply overlooked. Defined as the study of "positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promised to improve the quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, p. 5), PP helped to usher in a new era of scholarship in the social sciences.

This new wave of PP research at the turn of the millennium inspired more scholars of management and organizational behavior to explore the positive side of organizational life. Subsequently, two new general areas of inquiry emerged. One of the domains, POB, was presented 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" (Luthans 2002, p. 59). Work in this area tends to focus on individual positive psychological conditions and human resource strengths related to employee well-being or performance improvement. As described by Bakker and Schaufeli (2008), POB targets cognitive and affective capacities that contribute to creativity and wisdom, and explores how favorable qualities such as self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency enable individuals to cope with organizational demands and foster exceptional performance. Work in POB also examines peak performance in organizations, particularly the conditions under which employees thrive. This area of inquiry closely dovetails with those working and engaged in the second domain, a broad movement within the Academy of Management (AOM) referred to as POS.

POS provides a conceptual framework for organizing and integrating research on creating and sustaining positive organizations (Cameron et al. 2003). Here, the focus is on the study of that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. The term "organizational" within POS refers to the interpersonal and structural dynamics activated in and through organizations, specifically taking into account the context in which positive phenomena occur (Cameron and Caza 2004). The overarching aim is to identify, examine, and better understand "positive outcomes, processes, and attributes of organizations and their members" (Cameron et al. 2003, p. 4). The purpose of research in POS is to understand the drivers of positive behavior in the workplace, what enables organizations to rise to new levels of achievement (Roberts et al. 2005). Scholars working within this domain tend to study organizations characterized by appreciation, collaboration, virtuousness, vitality, and meaningfulness; abundance and

well-being are indicators of success (Bernstein 2003). Subject areas within POS include constructs such as strength, resilience, vitality, trust, organizational virtuousness, positive deviance, extraordinariness, and meaning (e.g., Cameron 2003; Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003, 2004; Sutcliffe and Vogus 2003).

In presenting this special issue, we do not attempt to make distinctions between the emerging bodies of positive literature (for more details see Donaldson and Ko 2010). We do, however, see that POS and POB are currently the most prominent areas of positive inquiry that concentrate on the workplace and on accomplishment of work-related outcomes. Whereas POB tends to focus more on the individual and POS more on the organization, studies in each domain have offered insights stemming from, and applied to, both micro and macro perspectives. That said, POB tends to be more concerned with individual psychological states and human strengths that influence employee performance (Luthans 2002), whereas POS targets the positive aspects of the organizational context that influence thriving (Cameron 2007). Taken together, PP, POB, and POS have given scholars a robust set of tools to move away from negativity as a starting point for scientific inquiry. No longer tethered to the predominant model of problem deconstruction and resolution, many social scientists have embraced the importance of understanding wellness, happiness, and flourishing in organizational settings.

So influential are these growing bodies of work that research on the positive elements of individual and collective organizational realities (i.e., strength-based inquiry) is no longer at the fringe of the AOM. It has become an element of our mainstream scholarly dialogue. For example, the first POS-themed sessions debuted at the Academy's annual conference in 2002. By 2011, there were nearly 40 positive-themed sessions at the meeting.¹ Perhaps the most telling evidence of the impact of positive scholarship came a year earlier, when the theme of the Annual AOM Meeting in Montréal, Canada was "Dare to Care." Just as Seligman had challenged the American Psychological Association members a decade earlier, leaders of the Academy used their platform to challenge scholars "to consider whether our research and the knowledge we produce contribute to the well-being of the larger society in which we live and work." Furthermore, they asked researchers and practitioners alike to "focus on enabling others to create, produce, and deliver goods and services that enhance the well-being of, and generate value for, all the stakeholders involved."²

Coming full circle, positive psychologists have also begun to recognize that a growing body of empirical evidence, based on topics within their own movement, relates to the creation of positive organizations. In the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, Donaldson and Ko (2010) outline how research in POS and POB provides a practical knowledge base for making significant improvements in the quality of work life and organizational effectiveness. Nonetheless, as Mills et al. (2013) underscore, there is much more work to be done. The time has come to apply positive topics and concepts directly to the study and advancement of business ethics.

Positive Organizational Ethics

Over the years, scholars have attempted to determine what distinguishes an ethical organization from an unethical one. As Verbos et al. (2007) point out, we have learned a great deal about unethical behavior, corporate misconduct, and the processes that lead to such negative phenomena (Bolino et al. 2013; Jones and Ryan 1997; Sims 1992, 1994; Sims and Brinkmann 2003; Treviño and Youngblood 1990; Weaver et al. 1999). Although the reduction or elimination of unethical practices is important, it is not sufficient for creating and sustaining an ethical organizational identity. Verbos et al. (2007) propose we look more specifically at what establishes a positive ethical organization. Their work suggests that positive ethics in the workplace calls for a *living code*, which is the cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestation of the organization's ethical identity, where the "right thing to do is the only thing to do" (2007, p. 17). We applaud their contribution and seek to take it forward with this special issue by outlining a specific field dedicated to encouraging research in the area of POE.

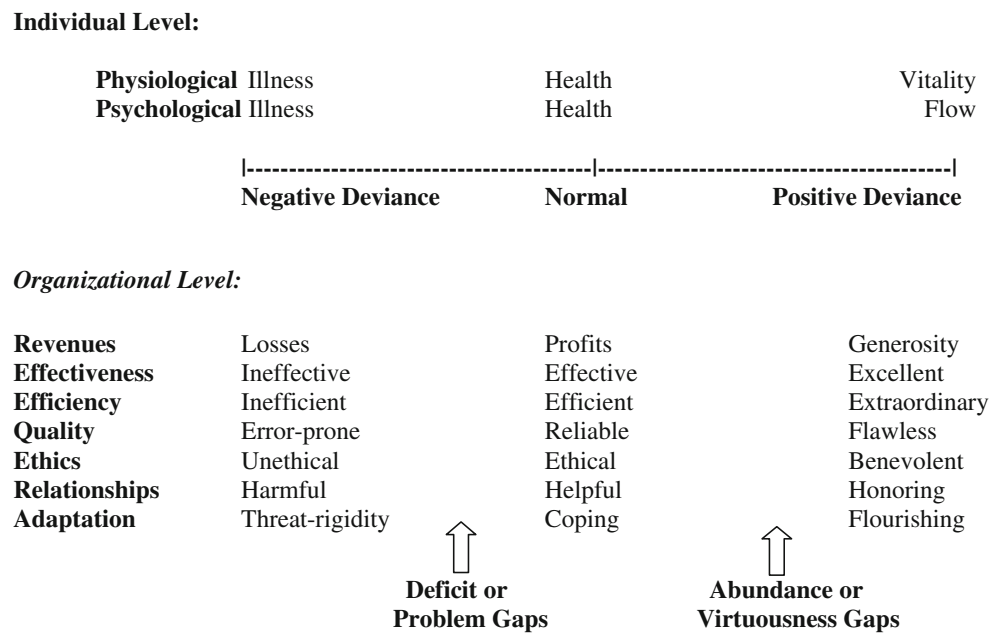
Although the articles in this special issue help to define the genre in their own right, explaining what we mean by POE is a critical point of departure. Definitional insight comes from the words themselves: "positive," "organizational," and "ethics." First, the word "positive," according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, indicates the inclusion and/or the presence of something, rather than its negation, withholding, or the absence.³ As it relates to ethics in organizational settings, the term connotes the creation and support of ethical thinking and behavior rather than the deterrence or removal of unethical action. Positive means that a quality exists, and POE focuses on creation and sustainability of goodness (rather than on what is lacking). To go beyond a break-even, baseline, or compliance-driven protocol for ethics, POE invites scholars to conceptualize models for ethical health, goodness, and well-being. As a field of

¹ See <http://www.centerforpos.org/the-field/about-the-field-of-pos-pos-at-the-academy-of-management>.

² See <http://meeting.aomonline.org/2010>.

³ See <http://www.oed.com/>.

Fig. 2 Continuum illustrating positive deviance. See Cameron (2007)



study, POE casts the light of inquiry on the advancement of progressive development and actualization of ethical strength, fortitude, and excellence in organizational settings. To “organize” is to coordinate components into a system that will carry out vital functions in order to accomplish agreed upon goals.⁴ With respect to POS, this refers to the interpersonal and structural dynamics activated in and through organizations. Combining “positive organizational” with the word “ethics” highlights a focus on the principles, virtues, duties, rights, and responsibilities of organizations and their stakeholders. Ethics also refers to the rules of conduct recognized in human life, which explicate standards for right and wrong behavior in association with others. POE is aspirational; work in this domain aims to create a better future by promoting the potential for ethical behavior as a pathway to increase flourishing, good works, well-being, and health.

Scholarship in POE is designed to provide insight with regard to right action as a sustainable form of business enterprise. Integrating the meanings of the three terms, we define POE as the *study of people, practices, and contexts that cultivate and sustain individual and collective ethical strength to achieve successful and durable moral performance in organizations*. Since the person, situation, and context are all relevant factors in creating a positive ethical organization (Treviño 1986), we situate POE at the intersection of the existing realms of Positive Behavioral Studies and Business Ethics. POE occupies the center position of the Venn diagram in Fig. 1. Within the Positive Behavioral Studies circle are the major

movements of POS, PP, and POB. Within the Business Ethics circle are Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental Sustainability, Compliance, and Values; these are key topics rather than an exhaustive list. For example, in the Positive Behavioral Studies arena (left circle), scholars might examine how to cultivate organizational environments that foster employee well-being. Scholars in the Business Ethics arena (right circle) might examine compliance with ethical standards. In the POE intersection, scholars might explore how values-based management approaches help to cultivate ethical behavior that goes above and beyond compliance and creates organizational well-being.

To nurture this sector of positive inquiry, we look to existing frameworks for insight. Cameron (2003) provides a theoretical platform based on positive deviance in the organizational sphere. Here, the individual or organization leverages virtue and character strengths to deviate from the negative and to advance the positive or best of humanity (see Fig. 2). This continuum sets forth a relationship between organizational virtuousness and performance. As Cooperrider and Godwin (2012) note, “combined with positive psychology’s inauguration of a science of human strengths, POS’s razor sharp clarifying framework truly set the stage for a fundamental shift in our understanding of the human condition and its prospects” (p. 742). Albeit not a single theory or method, this framework incorporates states and processes arising from and resulting in life-giving forces, optimal functioning, and enhanced capabilities and strengths (Dutton and Glynn 2007) and focuses on what primes or develops resiliency, restoration, and extraordinary performance (Cameron and Spreitzer 2010).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Fig. 3 Compliance as the moral minimum. See Sekerka (2010)

Targeting strength-based organizational ethics directly (see Fig. 3), Sekerka (2010) outlines how people and organizations must go beyond ethical compliance, seeing moral strength as a worthwhile and achievable performance goal. A deliberate emphasis on empowering, promoting, and nurturing ethical strength is necessary in order to ensure that organizations not only prevent unethical action, but also promote virtuous behavior. Compliance with regulations alone is a moral minimum; it does not yield ethical excellence. Sekerka's (2010) framework underscores that POE strives to aim higher, not only prohibiting wrongdoing, but also developing the desire to do right. Organizational systems, processes, and leadership must support the notion that the right thing to do is the only thing to do (Verbos et al. 2007). Management needs to embrace the responsibility of promoting the ongoing moral development and ethical strength of employees by establishing an organizational culture and climate that advances the open discussion of ethical matters and ethical discovery.

It delights us that research on organizational ethics increasingly encourages leaders, managers, and employees to build an ethical climate and culture (cf. Arnaud and Schminke 2012; Huhtala et al. 2013; Kaptein 2011; Schwartz 2013; Treviño et al. 1998). Yet, the value placed on understanding and fostering ethical strength in business performance remains woefully inadequate. It is, therefore, essential for organizations to enable employees to exercise and develop their character and acumen for moral decision-making and action. Ongoing research must guide organizational practice to support responsibility at every level. Hence, we direct the attention of scholars and practitioners to the area of POE. The call for papers to explore this intersection of Positive Behavioral Studies and Business Ethics scholarship asked: *How are scholars studying and advancing positive organizational ethics in business enterprise? How have scholars worked to cultivate, encourage, and grow the study of organizational ethics, helping it move beyond compliance?*

Learning from the Contributors

The articles this special issue presents bring forward a blend of fresh insights, which we summarize below. This overview is followed by the identification of key takeaways and questions that emerged from this collaborative endeavor.

In "Reconsidering virtue: Differences of perspective in virtue ethics and the positive social sciences," David Bright, Bradley Winn, and Jason Kanov provide a much-needed integration of two key perspectives on virtues: the classical philosophical approach that sees virtue as character and the more contemporary positive social science approach based on behavior. Bright, Win, and Kanov argue that the optimal expression of a virtue is an ideal point that depends on context, advocate the incorporation of character and context in empirical studies of virtue, and urge more explicit examination of virtue at the organizational level. Their work to combine these two perspectives helps to enrich future research on POE.

Some of the articles in this special issue cover specific virtues. For example, empathy is explored in "Wage cuts and managers' empathy: How a positive emotion can contribute to positive organizational ethics in difficult times." The authors, Jörg Dietz and Emmanuelle Patricia Kleinlogel, define empathy as an emotional response to another's perceived need. Dietz and Kleinlogel created a lab experiment based on the classic in-basket exercise technique and collected data from German social psychology students to test their hypotheses about the relationship between trait-based empathy and compliance with the requests of an organizational superior. The authors found that more empathic individuals were more likely to comply with a superior's request to *cut* employees' wages, but that empathy was not related to compliance with a request to *freeze* wages. They conclude that positive emotions in the workplace can contribute to ethical organizational behavior that considers people as well as profits.

As Ace Simpson, Stewart Clegg, and Tyrone Pitsis note, compassion is different from empathy in that it includes a

behavioral component. That is, an individual who conveys compassion not only feels concern for someone else, but also acts on that concern. Most of us associate an individual's having concern for another's welfare and responding with support as morally good. However, in "The dynamics of compassion: A framework for compassionate decision making," Simpson, Clegg, and Pitsis highlight that compassion is not universally appropriate. The authors present a model, based on their qualitative analysis of empirical data of readers' online comments about two newsworthy events, one in Australia and one in the UK, suggesting that whether we view giving and receiving of compassion as legitimate depends on social norms in interpersonal and organizational relationships. Thus, whereas Bright et al. assert that the proper expression of a virtue depends on context, Simpson et al. argue further that the context affects whether or not at least one virtue—compassion—should even be a response.

Michelle Harbour and Veronika Kisfalvi's "In the eye of the beholder: An exploration of managerial courage" explores courage as a phenomenological construct dependent on the perceptions of actors and informed observers. Previous research on courage in the workplace has focused on the challenges of employees and managers as they strive to do what is right in opposition to pressures from superiors to behave unethically. In contrast, Harbour and Kisfalvi examine top Canadian financial-service executives, whose strategic decisions involve their subordinating personal interests for the benefit of their organization during a merger. From their interviews with these executives and others in their firm close to the merger, the authors offer a model for understanding whether an act is deemed courageous. They identify two types of managerial courage and report that for these executives, courage involves the ability to overcome their negative emotions.

Three of the papers in this special issue focus on macro-level aspects of POE. "Supererogation: Beyond positive deviance and corporate social responsibility" by Daina Dzintra Mazutis concerns supererogatory acts, those behaviors on the part of an organization that go beyond moral duties and obligations to stakeholders. Mazutis contends that supererogation is distinguishable from both positive deviance and CSR, which do not differentiate between actions based on duty and those based on norms. This distinction is useful because stakeholders increasingly expect companies to engage in behavior that falls under the rubric of CSR, and criticize them when they do not. Mazutis builds upon Heyd's (1982) definition of acts of supererogation as "those which are: (1) neither obligatory nor forbidden, (2) whose omissions are not wrong, and do not deserve sanction or criticism, (3) are morally good, both by virtue of their (intended) consequences and by virtue of their intrinsic value and (4) are done voluntarily

for the sake of someone else's good, and are thus meritorious)" (p. 115). She hastens to point out that an advantage of the supererogatory classification, which focuses on an act of supererogation, rather than on a particular actor within an organization or on the organization itself, helps to clarify how an individual or corporation can behave in an especially virtuous manner at one time, but commit a blameworthy deed at another.

Subrata Chakrabarty and Andrea Erin Bass's "Bringing the light of ethics to overcome darkness: Positive organizational ethics to better serve women microfinance borrowers in negative contexts" underscores that although microfinance institutions (MFIs) confer benefits, gender inequality in developing countries can put women borrowers at risk for exploitation by loan agents. Not only do the unethical actions of loan agents hurt borrowers, but they can also blemish an MFI's reputation. The scholars hypothesized that MFIs that serve a high proportion of women would be more likely to have a formal code that explicitly articulates values and expected behaviors, which will alleviate the problems confronting women borrowers. They further predicted that MFIs operating in regions in which the poverty level is higher and women face more disempowerment would be particularly likely to have a code. Their analysis of 275 MFIs from various regions of the world supports their hypotheses, suggesting that MFIs need to take explicit steps to pursue ethical strength in the face of negative contexts.

Zahir Dossa and Katrin Kaeufer define a positive ethical network (PEN) as "a purpose-driven network of positive ethical actors aligned under a shared set of values and goals." According to the framework they offer in "Understanding sustainable innovation through positive ethical networks," a crisis can serve as the catalyst for actors to work together to effect positive change, mobilizing them to create sustainable financial innovation. Dossa and Kaeufer conducted semi-structured interviews with employees, managers, and external stakeholders of a trailblazer in sustainable banking. Additionally, they collected participant observations and ran focus group discussions. Their findings confirm their framework: collaboration among prosocial actors within a PEN, in response to a crisis, results in a sustainable financial innovation. The authors emphasize that the PEN provides a supportive context that both gives birth to an idea and nurtures it to implementation.

Opportunities for Discovery

This special issue identifies POE as a discrete area of inquiry within the broader Positive Behavioral Studies movement. The articles herein help advance our understanding of the positive side of ethical life in organizations

and enterprise. One could argue that POE is simply a facet of study within the existing domains of PP, POS, and POB. However, insofar as self-serving motives, competition, power, and money are still the marrow of many firms (Giacalone and Promislo 2013), it is necessary to declare POE a separate field in order to ensure a continued focus on ethical strength in organizational contexts.

The articles in this issue help illuminate this new domain of POE, making scholarly ideas more visible, identifying connections to other fields, and priming additional research and discovery. These articles do not cover all possible POE concepts, but they do suggest some core POE themes, including the following:

- Virtue can be viewed as both an organizational perspective as well as an element of character;
- Positive and negative emotions experienced during ethical dilemmas can serve as levers for collective and individual ethical strength;
- Discrete character strengths of moral courage, empathy, and compassion are salient in the pursuit of moral fortitude in ethically challenging circumstances, but may be construed and valued in varying ways; and
- An awareness of the complexity of identities (e.g., personal and organizational) is an important element in generating variations in commitment to character (virtue ethics), duty (deontology), and consequences (consequentialism) and depends upon the context and researchers' unit of analysis (e.g., micro, meso, and macro).

Taking the contributions as a collective statement about the future of POE, the opportunities for additional discovery are substantial. It is our fervent hope that future research will advance this domain by addressing questions such as:

- How do individuals sustain their desire to achieve ethical performance and virtuous consideration of others when they work in organizations that promote and reward selfish, self-serving behaviors?
- How can business schools serve as a training ground of POE behaviors for our future business leaders by cultivating fair play, honest engagement, and ethical strength through informal and formal curricular/reinforcing experiences?
- What skillsets and mental models support coping and resiliency for those facing the repercussions of whistleblowing, speaking truth against corrupt power, and otherwise engaging in morally courageous actions?
- How might positive ethical reinforcement via financial mechanisms encourage a long-term commitment to ethical performance across the global business community?
- What are the form and function of POE within firms that possess an unfavorable ethical identity vis-à-vis their industry (tobacco, fossil fuels, etc.)?

- How do POE scholars and practitioners help transform the gestalt of corporations from being narcissistic (Downs 1997) and psychopathic (Bakan 2004) toward becoming entities with an ethical conscious?
- What can the arts teach us about creating ethical organizations? How can we develop morally courageous business leaders who have the courage of great artists to “see reality as it actually is and not as others would have us see it; the courage to envision previously unimagined and unimaginable possibilities; and the courage to inspire others to bring possibility back to reality” (Adler 2006, p. 494)?
- What would an integrated POE theoretical framework, one that reflects and balances an organization's capacity to build ethical strength from both virtue and vice, look like?

We Conclude with Gratitude

The special editors gratefully acknowledge a number of people who helped make this issue a reality. We offer our appreciation to Thomas Maak, Special Issues Editor of the *Journal of Business Ethics*, for supporting our idea for a special issue on POE; and Sivakani Jayaprakash and Radha Shankar of Springer, for their patient assistance. Thanks also go to our reviewers, whose sustained commitment and dedication served to develop the contributions and thereby improve the issue overall; and to our authors, who diligently revised and polished their work, helping us to introduce the domain of POE. Finally, we were gratified by the response to our *Call for Papers*. A great deal of exciting research is emerging; regretfully, we could not accept more of the submissions. We look forward to seeing others' explorations of these topics as we collectively advance POE scholarship.

The notion of sustained positive ethical performance in and by organizations awaits further scholarly pursuit. We hope the insights our contributors offer and the questions their work raises inspire others to pursue inquiry within POE. There are ample opportunities to unpack the foundations of human strength and build and maintain the virtuous organization. Understanding what fuels our desire, ability, and willingness to engage in moral decision-making and action with resiliency and fortitude during challenging circumstances can help us continue to cultivate the best of humanity within our organizations.

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