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The Psychology of Positivity and Strengths-Based Approaches at Work

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Introduction

In this short introductory chapter, we aim to explore the nature of the psychology of positivity and how strengths-based approaches are used with individuals and organizations. We define positive psychology and describe strengths-based approaches and the relevance of both to work. Finally, we will briefly set out for the reader what follows in this edited handbook.

What Is Positive Psychology?

The science of positive psychology provides most of the empirical base for what is termed the "psychology of positivity" in the title of this handbook. Positive psychology has emerged as the scientific study of positive human functioning and flourishing intrapersonally (e.g., biologically, emotionally, cognitively), interpersonally (e.g., relationally), and collectively (e.g., institutionally, culturally, and globally) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

It may be considered to include three levels of research: the subjective level, the individual level, and the group level. Research at the *subjective level* includes valued subjective experiences and is broken down into past, present, and future constructs: the past involving well-being, contentment, and satisfaction; the present involving flow and happiness; and the future involving hope and optimism. The *individual level* involves research into individual traits that are positive, such as character strengths (including those that guide our interactions with others), talent, and the capacity for vocation. Finally, the *group level* involves research into "civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals towards better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). All three levels are relevant to the workplace, and we have attempted to represent each in the preparation

of this handbook: Part I maps well onto the subjective and individual levels and Part II maps onto the group level. In particular, the established area of research in positive organizational scholarship has much relevance for research within Part II (Cameron & Dutton, 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012).

What Are Strengths-Based Approaches?

Well-being may be viewed as a key outcome of positive psychology endeavors. The use of strengths, and particularly character strengths, may be viewed as a key process of positive psychology. The concept of character strengths is based in a tradition that emphasizes virtues as inducements to behave well, in contrast with traditions that focus on rules to be followed. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification of strengths comprising 6 universal virtues and 24 character strengths. The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths Survey (VIA) identifies character traits expressed across all areas of life: home, family, social life, and work. For this title, work is the key area of focus.

In addition to exploration of specific character strengths and strengths-use, which is covered directly in Chapter 3, this guidebook is strengths-based more broadly. That is, the approaches taken across the chapters seek to approach individuals and organizations from a strengths perspective – looking for what is working well, how individuals are leveraging strengths, seeking optimal performance – compared to traditional approaches which may be diagnostic, problem-solving, seeking root causes, and so on. A strength-based approach is often contrasted with a deficit-based approach. It is an approach where one aims to approach the positive, rather than escape or avoid the negative. It is an approach where the presence of positive attributes is what is sought, not only the absence of negative attributes. It is one in which we guard against the negativity bias, one in which revenue is considered important and not only cost reduction, one in which human and environmental contribution becomes paramount. This is similar to the approach within positive organizational scholarship, as described by Professor Kim Cameron in the Foreword. Both the psychology of positivity and the related area of strengths provide a fertile theoretical and growing empirical base to understand the behavior of individuals and groups in an organizational context. The specific research developments are now introduced.

Research Developments in the Psychology of Positivity and Strengths-Based Approaches at Work

Our hope is that this handbook will be a useful resource for postgraduate researchers, students, and academics, who are looking for a comprehensive and critical review of the literature as a platform for their own research. Also scholar-practitioners can refer to this handbook to understand the depth and scope of the literature to enhance evidence-based practices and generate practice-based research. Importantly and more broadly, our hope is that the knowledge base described in this title will contribute to making workplaces more positive and meaningful places to work and developing organizations as contexts that can better leverage the strengths of their employees.

This book is structured using three parts focused on individual approaches to positive psychology at work, organizational approaches to positive psychology at work, and business or sector-based applications of positive psychology. Together these sections progress the reader through an ecological journey from the individual, to the organization, and then consider whole sectors on an international scale.

Part I comprises 12 chapters that describe classical positive psychological constructs and evidence in the workplace.

In Chapter 2 Green, McQuaid, Purtell and Dulagil set the foundation for this guide by reviewing the theories and evidence surrounding the psychology of positivity at work, including Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). These authors assert that positive organizational scholars have become intrigued by the potential benefits that positive emotions (e.g., joy, gratitude, and hope) and "positivity" more broadly (encompassing emotions, thoughts, and behaviors), have to offer employees and organizations.

Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, and Lyubchik – Chapter 3 – explore the important area of psychological strengths at work. In addition to critically reviewing important literature, this chapter provides a useful comparison between well-known strengths frameworks of VIA, StrengthsFinder, and Realise2, and important exploration of the malleability of strengths (Linley, Nielsen, Wood, Gillett, and Biswas-Diener, 2010; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2009).

Chapter 4 takes the reader to the future-oriented construct of hope. Wandeler, Marques, and Lopez provide a description of hope theory that addresses fundamental motivational, cognitive, and emotional components of human thinking, feeling, and action, and thus is well suited to be applied to the context of work. They assert that usually hope is considered as a characteristic of an individual, but organizations can also be considered hopeful (Wandeler, Baeriswyl, & Shavelson, 2011).

Steger – Chapter 5 – proposes that meaningful work holds the promise of being the 'next big thing' among organizations seeking a lever for improving organizational performance (Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013). Steger explores how meaningful work represents an opportunity to go beyond the standard maximization of effort and outcome to the improved well-being of the wider range of people associated with organizations. He suggests that not only is there meaning at work, but explores the idea of work itself as meaning (Steger & Dik, 2010). This chapter relates to the Good Work chapter – Chapter 14 – described below.

In Chapter 6, Niemiec and Spence introduce the archetypal workplace construct of motivation. Based particularly in self-determination theory (SDT), this chapter explores optimal motivation at work. The authors explain that optimal motivation – marked by volition and self-regulation – is likely to be facilitated by contextual support for satisfaction of basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). In addition to theoretical description, the chapter provides a critical review of recent empirical literature (Güntert, 2015).

In Chapters 7 and 8 the focus moves to issues of attention and absorption at work. In Chapter 7 Cziksentmihalyi, Khosla, and Nakamura describe flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and its relevance to the workplace and work itself. Based on a review of 10 years of literature, the chapter summarizes facilitators, inhibitors, and outcomes of flow.

In Chapter 8 Spence elucidates the recently popular area of mindfulness at work. Spence helps the reader wrestle with that considerable confusion that has arisen due to poorly defined approaches to mindfulness, which vary in its presentation as a state, trait, attentional process, mode of being, or committed lifestyle choice (Cavanagh & Spence, 2013). Notwithstanding these challenges, Spence reports how the positive impact of mindfulness on working adults is now being confirmed by meta-analytic studies, such as Sharma and Rush (2014) and Virgili (2015).

In Chapters 9 and 10 the notion of having something in reserve to deal with work challenges is addressed by exploring resilience and mental fitness respectively. Denovan, Crust, and Clough explore resilience at work in Chapter 9. These authors necessarily take the time

to define the contested term resilience comparing it to other concepts including hardiness and mental toughness (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012). The authors conclude by arguing for the need for future research with tighter ways of defining and measuring resilience.

Chapter 10 introduces the concept of mental fitness and its application at work. Robinson and Oades (Robinson, Oades, & Caputi, 2014) assert that mental fitness, based on an analogy to physical fitness, can make intentional efforts toward managing one's psychological well-being more accessible and more likely. They use strength, endurance, and flexibility as factors to achieve this. The chapter critiques related literature and provides workplace examples to elaborate this new empirical construct.

The final trio of chapters in this section involve relational concepts, positive relationships, and issues of humility and compassion at work. In Chapter 11 Roffey provides a critical overview of the broad and important issue of positive relationships at work. Quoting Reis and Gable's (2003) assertion that relationships may be the most important source of life satisfaction and well-being, Roffey covers how the changing nature of organizations has impacted upon relationships with work and relationships at work.

Davis, Hook, DeBlaere, and Placares – Chapter 12 – examine the interesting phenomenon of humility at work. They posit that we seem to struggle with narcissistic tendencies more so than in years past (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Given this observation the chapter explores how humility may impact upon one's work life, and they note that since 2010 the scientific study of humility has grown considerably.

Chapter 13 examines compassion at work. Anstiss uses Jazaieri et al. (2013) to define compassion as 'a complex multidimensional construct that is comprised of four key components: (1) an awareness of suffering (cognitive component), (2) sympathetic concern related to being emotionally moved by suffering (affective component), (3) a wish to see the relief of that suffering (intentional component), and (4) a responsiveness or readiness to help relieve that suffering (motivational component)'. Anstiss argues that this research area now needs to progress from descriptive studies, theory building, and the development of plausible models to more rigorous and systematic model testing, single and multicomponent interventional studies, and research into casual pathways and mechanisms.

Part II comprises nine chapters that describe organizational approaches that involve positive psychology and well-being.

Wong, Itzvan, and Lomas commence the section – Chapter 14 – with exploration of the concept of good work based on a meaning-centered approach (Wong, 2006). These authors provide a critical review of previous approaches from positive psychology toward organizations. They argue that there is a somewhat unrecognized link between work and meaning in life.

In Chapter 15 Oades and Dulagil outline a three-level conceptualization of individual, group, and organizational well-being. They argue against the "individualist fallacy" in organizational research, which sometimes inadvertently reduces analysis to the level of the individual. They propose that systems thinking will be fruitful for future organizational research in workplace and organizational well-being (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

Cantore – Chapter 16 – examines the important area of organizational change. The author explores the role of pessimism and optimism in how people conceptualize organizations and change with them. He draws on concepts such as positive deviance from positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Dutton, 2003) to outline the emergence of positive organizational development.

In Chapter 17 MacKie asserts that positive leadership development offers access to a range of new theoretical and evidence-based approaches that have the potential to refine and enhance how leaders and leadership are developed in organizations drawing on the works of writers such as Luthans and Avolio (2003).

Rothmann – Chapter 18 – addresses the growing interest in employee engagement from Kahn's (1990) notion of personal engagement of individuals in their work, represented by the person's investment of cognitive, physical, and emotional energy into their role performances. Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, V., and Bakker (2002) claim that although engagement is negatively related to burnout, it is an independent and distinct concept characterized by three dimensions, namely vigor, dedication, and absorption at work. Rothmann critiques the current approaches to employee engagement calling for a new unifying model to support future empirical research.

In Chapter 19 Slemp summarizes and critiques the literature on job crafting – defined as "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Slemp concludes that job crafting gives people a way to inject new organization into their work experiences, allowing them to steer their work tasks, relationships, and cognitions in a direction that is consistent with their intrinsic motives and preferences. He argues that this ultimately creates a different, more intrinsically driven experience of the job. Yoo and Lee – Chapter 20 – examine the interesting area of how people make career transitions at mid-stages of their career. These authors report that, for many, mid-career has been considered a plateaued period marked by the experience of mastery and maintenance (Slay, Taylor, & Williamson, 2004). To understand the nature of mid-career transition, Yoo and Lee review the evolution of the notion of mid-career, discussing the impact of environmental and individual factors on mid-career changes. They assert that future researchers need to move beyond the traditional approach to take into consideration the impacts of culture, gender, and types of work on the mid-career transition, as well as emerging new career patterns.

In Chapter 21 Cleveland, Fisher, and Walters explore the impact of the increasing length of our work life due to increased life expectancies (Phillips & Siu, 2012). These authors discuss positive aspects of aging in relation to work – particularly the benefits of aging, the positive contribution of older workers in the workplace, and implications of positive aging for human resource management in organizations.

Chapter 22 concludes this section, with Jarden and Jarden providing a critical analysis of existing well-being measures in the workplace. The chapter summarizes the benefits of well-being at work and the case for well-being assessments and the use of positive psychological assessment. Suggestions are provided as to what to assess in organizations, and how this should be assessed. The authors propose a new framework for conceptually evaluating organizational well-being research.

Part III, comprising five chapters, considers different sectors of business, and how specific typologies of job impact on work life. This section deliberately adopts an international focus.

In Chapter 23 Wiesmann investigates the well-being of health professionals – those professionals who have direct contact with patients. The World Health Organization defines the health workforce, as "all people engaged in actions whose primary intent is to enhance health" (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 1). Wiesmann provides a critical review of attempts to improve well-being in this context and asserts that, to date, positive psychology has given no theoretical input into "positive leadership" or "human resource management" in health institutions. Given the importance and size of this workforce worldwide, this represents a great opportunity.

Branand and Nakamura – Chapter 24 – move the context from health to education by examining the well-being of teachers and professors. These authors explore the concept of generativity as it relates to educators and serious challenges to persistence and well-being – burnout (Vailliant & Milofsky, 1980). A critical literature review of teacher and faculty well-being at work examines the impact of work on both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of well-being.

In Chapter 25 Singh and Junnarkar explore the well-being of information technology professionals (Diedericks & Rothmann, 2014). They open the chapter with an important fact: globally approximately a billion people work in information technology, however the sector still faces a shortfall of employees (Young, Marriott, & Huntley, 2008). Given the scope of this workforce, the promotion of workers' well-being in this sector will have broad importance.

Delle Fave and Zager Kocjan – Chapter 26 – examine the arts and crafts sector, summarizing studies focused on the challenges and benefits of creativity (Bille, Bryld Fjællegaard, Frey, & Steiner, 2013). As research into the well-being of people working in these domains has been largely neglected, the authors summarize the sparse studies investigating well-being among people who work as artists or skilled craftsmen, both in Western societies and in other countries and cultures. Importantly, these authors assert that findings derived from studies conducted on artists and craftsmen may provide useful suggestions for designing interventions aimed at increasing job satisfaction and work-related well-being among other professional categories more exposed to the risk of disengagement, repetitiveness, and lack of meaningful challenges.

In Chapter 27 Soosai-Nathan and Delle Fave examine the well-being of workers worldwide so essential to us all – farmers and personnel enrolled in the agricultural sector. Similar to information technology employees, it is estimated that approximately one billion people are officially employed in agriculture. Agriculture of course involves dealing with the unpredictability of climate, which has direct impact on work outcomes (Kennedy, Maple, McKay, & Brumby, 2014). While there is a limited number of studies on the well-being of workers in agriculture, there is evidence for the importance of positive relationships, mastery, self-efficacy, and connection with nature.

Conclusion

In this title we have taken a strongly academic approach to workplace applications of positive psychology including strengths and positivity. This is in contrast to popular texts such as Lyubomirsky (2008), which offers material for practitioners. The aim is to offer an up-to-date edited title, with leading international scholars providing comprehensive and importantly critical reviews of wide areas of literature related to the psychology of positivity and strengths in the workplace.

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