

This year's winner of the prestigious Joanne Martin Trailblazer Award is the Positive Organizational Scholarship group from the University of Michigan (Wayne Baker, Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, Robert Quinn, Gretchen Spreitzer, Lynn Wooten). The award was presented at the Academy of Management Conference in Montreal this August. This award is aimed at honoring scholars whose boundary-spanning work has challenged and extended the boundaries of OMT.

Jane Dutton, a member of the Positive Organizational Scholarship group at U-M, has kindly taken the time to answer a few questions about Positive Organizational Scholarship.

What are the origins of the Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS)? How did you get involved?

POS (Positive Organizational Scholarship) represents a convergence of many different streams of organizational research happening at the micro, meso and macro levels which point to unanswered questions about what processes, states, and conditions are important in explaining individual and collective flourishing. "Flourishing refers to being in an optimal range of human functioning (Keyes, 2002) and may be indicated at the individual level by goodness, generativity, growth, thriving and resilience (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). At the collective level of groups and organizations, flourishing may be indicated by creativity, innovation, growth, resilience, thriving, virtuousness or other markers that a collective is healthy and is performing in an "above normal" or positively deviant range. POS also focuses on the development/building of individual, group and collective strengths that represent forms of individual and collective excellence. POS works toward integrating existing domains of organizational inquiry focused on flourishing. This includes work on flourishing indicators such as creativity, engagement, flow, growth, health and well-being, as well as contributors to flourishing that consider features of the organization, group and job contexts.

POS opens up new topics of study, such as compassion, courage, energy and energy networks, forgiveness, resilience, thriving, and work callings—just to name a few" (Dutton & Sonenshein, 2009, p. 737). POS does not ignore negative, painful oppressive and damaging states and processes. Instead, many researchers working from a POS perspective assume that deepening and broadening the understanding of generative, life-giving processes in and of organizations expands possibilities for enabling or cultivating processes and structures that can transform or modify negative circumstances and states. It is obvious by the topics and perspectives explored in POS, that there are strong roots and ties to many current and past research streams within organizational studies.

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Written by

Saturday, 28 August 2010 16:29 - Last Updated Sunday, 05 September 2010 16:13

I became interested in POS when I was doing work with Peter Frost and colleagues (see compassionlab.com) on individual and organization compassion and there did not seem to be a home for topic in organizational studies. At the same time, my colleague, Kim Cameron was studying organizational forgiveness, which also did not easily fit into mainstream organizational research. Several of us decided to try to have a mini conference at Michigan to explore similar topics, and to bring together researchers in positive psychology to see what we could learn about their research and emerging community. We had planned the conference in Fall of 2001. When 9-11 happened, we were inspired to redirect the conference to ask what organizational studies could do to help organizations deal with the pain and challenges prompted by this event. We launched a website called [Leading in Trying Times](#) and learned very quickly by responses to the website that there seemed to be a need for creating and applying organization theory and practice to understanding how to cultivate hope, build collective capability, and enable flourishing in the context of deep challenge and human pain. The small conference was catalytic in prompting many different people working in different domains of organizational scholarship to apply a perspective that asked how we build conditions and processes that foster flourishing and capability-building at the individual, dyadic, group and collective levels. The conference generated the first edited book on positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). At that time, we also started a [Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship](#) at the University of Michigan which was closely linked to work being done on Appreciative Inquiry at Case Western University and to research on Positive Organizational Behavior at the University of Nebraska. Since that time [many different centers](#) of related inquiry have sprouted up in related disciplines.

It is important to note that I am excited about POS not only as a domain of scholarship in organizational studies (although I think it does light up important new approaches and new avenues for theorizing organizational and individual-level processes). I am equally excited about how applying a POS lens to our professional practices (e.g., how we run research labs, organize and conduct conferences, engage in research dialogues) in ways that foster human and collective flourishing. I am an example of someone who was successful on the outside but languishing on the inside, in part because the organizational and professional practices that I was engaged in as a part of this community were depleting as opposed to life-giving. I wrote about this in my OMT Distinguished Scholar talk called "Breathing life into organizational studies" (Dutton, 2003). I think there is so much that can be done to alter our organizing processes and practices which not only improve our capability for learning, but also foster integrity, compassion and other forms of human and collective capabilities that are essential to a vital and generative scholarly community. I wish that even if people in our field did not study POS-like topics as part of their research, that they would experiment with different designs and practices used in our scholarly endeavors (meetings, conferences, research collaborations, telephone calls) with an eye toward how can they cultivate conditions of flourishing as it is in these states that ideas, connections and people are most likely to learn and grow.

How do you integrate the POS approach in your teaching?

I integrate POS into everything I teach. In fact, through teaching the core Organizations-Management course and a Managing Professional Relationships class from a POS perspective, I have fundamentally changed my experience of teaching. I teach a lot of people who are working in organizations that are in decline or seriously languishing (remember Michigan). As a teacher I believe by teaching with a POS approach I am giving students really useful insights and tools that they can use tomorrow in these resource-constrained contexts. POS gives people a theory of practice about how to view and act in contexts in ways that cultivate resources and broaden repertoires for action that are based on knowledge about what fosters capability-building or what we have come to call generative dynamics (Dutton & Glynn, 2008). Another way that POS has changed my teaching is through my belief that most students have had limited experience in knowing or feeling what it's like to be in a well-functioning, healthy or positively deviant team, unit or organization. As a result, they have fairly impoverished schemata for sensing or knowing what one is like or what one might do to foster this form of individual or collective flourishing. As a result, in my course I use only "positively deviant" cases—where students are exposed to a wide variety of situations and contexts where the unit or individual is "positively deviant". My desire to do so is to have people wrestle with "why is this working so well?" and "what can be done to foster flourishing and institutionalize it?" While I think these examples do enrich and complicate schemata about individual and organizational functioning based on more exposure to patterns of situations in which there is flourishing, repeated exposure to these examples also fosters hope and inspiration, which is also important to the students I teach.

What direction do you see POS heading? What are some future avenues of research for POS?

There are so many possibilities of elaboration and enrichment of organizational theories and their reach to practice through a POS (and related) lenses. My colleagues, Kim Cameron and Gretchen Spreitzer, are co-editing a Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship (forthcoming from Oxford University Press next summer) that has close to 75 chapters covering a wide range of topics (traditional and non-traditional) that are being approached through a POS lens. All of the chapters are intended to review and build theory important to organizational studies that is enriched through application of a POS lens.

I think there are all kinds of potential to enrich more macro organizational theories from a POS

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perspective. For example, I see many new insights being developed by researchers uncovering how organizational processes, practices and structures create endogenous resourcing (unlocking or creating resources such as trust, legitimacy, hope, respect energy) that help to explain important outcomes such as resilience (Glynn & Wrobel, 2007), adaptation and change (Feldman, 2004) and compassion organizing (Dutton, Frost, Worline & Lilius, 2006). A POS lens expands the set of resources that we might consider as important in explaining collective capabilities and competencies—a perspective that is so important in organizational theory and strategy. At the same time, I think that a POS-focus lights up new ways of thinking about core processes such as identity construction in and of organizations. For example, Glynn and Walsh (2009) suggest that positive collective identities may “have greater carrying capacity for resources, meaning and generativity” (pg. 489) helping to explain their usefulness in predicting outcomes such as community vitality (e.g., Marquis & Davis, 2009) and stakeholder relationships (e.g., Brickson & Lemmon 2009).

However, the possibilities for using a POS lens to uncover new pathways for theorizing exists in all kinds of domains. For example, Karen Golden-Biddle and I are co-editing a book on *Using a Positive Lens to Explore Social Change* that tries to complicate the positive in theories of social change in the domains of poverty, sustainability, health and change agency. In a co-edited book with Arne Carlsen called *Research Alive: Exploring Generative Moments in Doing Qualitative Research* (forthcoming, Copenhagen Business School Press) we are trying to apply a POS lens to understanding the practice of doing qualitative research. Through 40 stories of generative moments told by novice and expert qualitative researchers, we think the stories unlock important insights about how to cultivate generative processes in doing this form of knowledge work. Thus, we think there are applications of a POS lens to all kinds of endeavours in organizational scholarship that we hope scholars, practitioners and student find enlivening and enriching in their understanding and practice.

Applications of any “positive lens” needs to be done with humility and caution as there are always unintended consequences and hidden assumptions that can blind researchers and theorists, and naively support theory and practices that can be damaging and harmful. Applications of “positive perspectives” in organization studies and beyond (e.g., psychology) have prompted important and useful critiques that complicate and enrich discussions about what claims about the positive in social life means and impacts (e.g., Fineman, 2006; Hackman, 2009). We hope such debates and critiques continue as they enable enriched conversations about the perils and possibilities afforded by this set of lenses (e.g., Roberts, 2006).

What does winning the prestigious OMT Martin Trailblazer Award mean to you and your colleagues?

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Joanne Martin is one of the most courageous and impactful scholars in our field. The OMT division is one of the most innovative and theoretically rigorous divisions we know. How could we be anything less than absolutely thrilled to receive this award? As our friend Jerry Davis would say, it rocks!

For those who want to learn more about POS and for those who want to get involved, where would you suggest be a good place to start (i.e. books, papers, conferences, University of Michigan Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship website, etc.)?

I would suggest going on the Center for [Positive Organizational Scholarship](#) website which has listings of all kinds of books, articles, review articles, linkages to related research websites, a listing of community of scholars (anyone who is doing work in the area and wishes to share what they are doing with others), conference websites from POS conferences, video links for POS-related talks given at the University of Michigan (called Positive Links). In addition the website had several course syllabi for management-organization studies courses taught from a POS perspective at Michigan and elsewhere. Several of the course syllabi have embedded in them full teaching notes with the powerpoint slides, lecture notes, videos etc, to ease people's ability to imagine how topics like organizational design, organizational culture, change, job design etc. might be taught from a POS perspective. We also have an annual POS gathering at the Academy of Management meetings (now will be held early Sunday mornings) where we welcome anyone who is interested in conversations related to POS. We welcome people to send write-ups about how their research relates to POS and we will post it on the Community of Scholars (send to

positiveorg@umich.edu

). Finally, we encourage the development of micro-communities who are interested in particular topics and we will distribute powerpoint slides, discussion from micro-community events and whatever might be useful to facilitate conversation and learning in the microcommunity. For example, there has been a group focused on the meaning of work that has been meeting for 7 years and

[posting slides from their micro-community on our website](#)

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