POSITIVE MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION: INTERACTIONAL PRACTICES THAT PROMOTE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract: The movement toward studying positive processes and outcomes has gained prominence across multiple disciplines and domains, including psychology, management, and communication. One area of particular interest concerns positive interpersonal interactions. A language and social interaction approach examines real-life moments in which participants create the positive through their joint actions. A case study shows how formulating what another speaker has said creates a moment of transcending differences. Such research provides a way to understand how positive outcomes emerge from specific interactional practices. It invites attention to linguistic and cultural generalizability of our understandings of the positive. Finally, it offers insight for managers seeking to create workplace relationships that supportive individual and organizational flourishing.

Key words: positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, positive communication, interpersonal communication, language and social interaction, formulations, listening

Introduction

Scholars and practitioners across a number of academic disciplines and fields of inquiry have turned attention to the positive. Rather than beginning with troubles, problems or pathology, focus is placed on identifying and nurturing practices that work well. This movement arose first in Positive Psychology (Positivepsychology.com), led by Martin Seligman, Christopher Peterson, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Sonja Lyubomirsky, and others. Positive psychologists seek endurable insights into variables and processes that contribute to human happiness, well-being, and flourishing. Although this work has conceptual roots in humanistic psychology (Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, etc.), its practitioners have at times sought to distance themselves from humanistic psychological claims that are perceived to lack sufficient scientific support (Hefferon, Bonniwell, 2011, p. 10). Research and practice have contributed to ongoing revision and evolution of key concepts. Second wave positive psychology (Gil, 2021; Wissing, 2022) reframes simpler conceptions to acknowledge that positive and negative forces operate in a necessary yin-yang relationship. Processes that promote well-being in one context might prove more negative in another. Relationships can be both valuable and harmful, meeting some needs while failing to meet or interfering with others. Pathology and flourishing need to be considered as complementary, not competing or mutually exclusive, areas of emphasis. Third wave positive psychology embraces models of greater complexity, moving beyond emphasis on the individual, encouraging more meaningful interdisciplinarity, interest in cultural variation and complexity, and meta-theoretical and methodological diversity (Wissing, 2022). One manifestation of more collective conceptions of happiness is the World Happiness Report (2023) which compares people by nation across composite indices of health, safety, freedom, well-being, etc. As the positive movement spreads to more disciplines, the first handbook of positive education has been published (Kern, Wehmeyer, 2021).

Reflecting parallel interests, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS; Cameron, Spreitzer, 2012) concerns how individuals, workplace relationships, and organizations thrive and flourish. The Center for Positive Organizations at the University of Michigan frames POS as promoting "A world where both organizations and their people are energized and enthusiastic, finding purpose, productivity, and passion at work" (Center for Positive Organizations, 2023). Contemporary research topics include ethics and virtues, culture, compassion (e.g., Dutton, Workman, Hardin, 2014), meaning and purpose, identities

(e.g., Dutton, Roberts, 2009), relationships (e.g., Hinz, Stephens, van Oosten, 2023), and leadership (e.g., Biganeh, Young, 2021; Seppälä, Cameron, 2022).

In the communication studies discipline, Positive Communication has been the focus of multiple anthologies (e.g., Socha, Pitts, 2012; Pitts, Socha, 2013; Muñiz-Velázquez, Pulido, 2019), a textbook (Mirivel, 2014), and several communication conferences. It is the central theme of a forthcoming special issue of the *International Journal of Business Communication*. A newly formed Positive Communication Network recently hosted its inaugural conference (Positive Communication Conference 2023).

Locating the positive in interaction

There is considerable variety in how scholars conceptualize and operationalize positive communication. Socha and Beck (2015, p. 179) define positive communication to include message processes that "facilitate and promote individual, relational, and organizational health and wellness." Their approach emphasizes communication that contributes to meeting human needs. Browning, Morris and Kee (2012) provide a model of positive organizational communication anchored in two key "standards" that, they argue, help organizations flourish. The first, integrative communication, is characterized by inclusiveness, respect, and support. Practices that support it include dialogue, information sharing, and pursuit of public goods. The second standard, constructive interaction, is characterized by a future orientation, a solution focus, and collaborative interaction. Practices that support it include conversation, therapeutic interaction, innovative conference models, and overarching narrative vision. Browning and colleagues pay particular attention to how information and communication technologies can contribute to positive communication processes.

Mirivel's model of positive communication (Mirivel, 2021) identifies six communicative actions or processes, each of which can (under the right conditions) contribute to specific positive relationship outcomes. Greeting creates human contact, asking discovers the unknown, complimenting affects people's sense of self, disclosing deepens relationships, encouraging gives support, and listening contributes to transcending difference. Mirivel's model reflects a dual conception of communication. At a more meso or macro level, the attention to processes and relational outcomes reflects primary grounding in interpersonal communication (Knapp, Daly, 2011). At a more micro level, the attention to actual interactions and the turn by turn, joint creation of meaning, reflects primary grounding in language and social interaction (LSI; Fitch, Sanders, 2005). In an LSI conception, communicative meanings are rooted in actions, themselves rooted in sequences, which both shape and are shaped by interaction types, such as meetings, service encounters, and negotiations. As people jointly create actions, sequences, and interactions, they also jointly constitute their identities and relationships.

For example, a key practice in active listening, formulating (sometimes called paraphrasing; Glenn, 2022) contributes to particularly rich and often positive moments of joint meaning-making. Formulating occurs when one speaker puts into different words what another speaker has said or implied, thereby claiming and demonstrating understanding. Formulating gives the prior speaker an opportunity to confirm or amend the displayed understanding. In some instances, formulating works affiliatively; in some instances, it encourages more talk on topic, providing additional opportunities for understanding. In these ways – listening, understanding, supporting, and encouraging – formulations may contribute to positive communication processes and outcomes.

Case Study: A formulation at a delicate moment

One brief sample analysis will illustrate how a formulation contributes to a moment of positive connection, within a delicate and unresolved disagreement. It will also illustrate an LSI analytic approach to studying positive interaction. This instance is drawn from an acclaimed podcast series,

"Conversations with People Who Hate Me" (Marron, 2023). In the recorded interactions, host Dylan Marron converses with people who have written negative things about him online or moderates discussions between people who have sent or received hostile messages. Prior to this episode, a person named Emma had accused a man of sexual assault, in a case that gained extensive public attention in the USA. Another person named Ben had messaged Emma directly, writing "you are a liar." Both agreed to come on the show to talk. Dylan skillfully guides them through a conversation devoted to mutual understanding, while minimizing criticism, defensiveness, or negative judgment.

In a critical, delicate moment, Ben explains why he doubts Emma's claim that sexual assault took place. In explaining his position, Ben offers a version of the golden rule: he seeks to give someone else accused of a crime the same benefit of the doubt that he would want applied to himself. He orients to how an accusation of sexual assault can "ruin" the accused person's reputation. Emma does not answer. After a brief pause and a prompt from Ben, Dylan formulates an unstated premise that was implied in what Ben just said (turn marked with → arrow):

Excerpt from the podcast, "Conversations with people who hate me", Episode 17, "You are a liar", 44:25. Participants: Ben, Emma, Dylan.

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    Ben:     It's not that I don't believe you. And it's-
             it's- just- (0.7) it's- (1.2) °hhh° (0.7) It's
             not that I don't believe you, (0.5) It's just
             so hard to prove just definitively (0.6) and
             that's sort of what I need (.) before I ruin a
             per- person's reputation.
             Cause that's how I'd wanna be treated.
             (0.3)
    Ben:     You know?
→   Dyl:     S:o it's interesting (.) because a lot of- a
             lo:t of (0.2) and again (0.2) Benjamin jump
             in (.) if I misspeak, ·hh but it seems like a
             lot of what you're saying (0.4) is hinging on
             (0.8) the fact that you do not want to
             unfairly vilify (0.3) and villainize (0.5)
             someone (0.6) who is wrongfully accused of
             something. That's fair to say right?
    Ben:     That's- that's very fair to say. ↑An- an- not-
             an' not only that like I hope that you guys
             don't either.
             You know? Hu huh ·hh
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Dylan's starts his turn with an impartial assessment: "it's interesting." He begins the formulation, then suspends it momentarily to invite Ben to correct him. Continuing, Dylan puts into words an understanding of the intentions and values conveyed in Ben's preceding turn. Terms like "unfairly vilify," "villainize," and "wrongfully accused" suggest harmful and unjust actions. With them and the formulation as a whole, Dylan has given voice to Ben's position. By doing so in a way that makes it seem reasonable and justifiable, he affiliates with Ben. However – and crucially – Dylan does not express agreement with Ben's position. He then asks Ben for confirmation. Ben confirms strongly, repeating Dylan's phrase, "fair to say" with the upgraded "very". Ben continues, expressing the "hope" that Dylan and Emma would share the same value.

In this moment, Dylan has shown active listening skills to transcend difference (Mirivel, 2014). Even though surrounding talk makes clear that he does not agree with Ben's hostile message to Emma or Ben's continued unwillingness to grant Emma credibility, he still works to present Ben's position as understandable, reasonable, and morally just. His communication exemplifies constructive interaction, highlighting collaboration (Browning, Morris, Kee, 2012). Ben's confirming response shows appreciation that he has been heard and understood. Their differences have not dissolved, but they have co-created positive identities (LeBaron, Glenn, and Thompson, 2009) and a moment of dialogue.

Summary

The turn toward the positive evident in psychology, management and organizational studies, and communication studies complements but does not replace attention to problems, conflict, pathology, and the like. Rather, it begins with different questions, concerning the nature of, and how to nurture, individual and collective well-being. Scholars and practitioners across these fields have focused on relationships as central to enriching human capacities for flourishing and resiliency. Interaction is a primary, perhaps the primary, context in which relationships are created and maintained.

Among positive interactional practices, formulating (paraphrasing) makes key contributions to active listening. While each turn at talk demonstrates an understanding of what is going on and what has gone before, formulating what a prior speaker has said highlights joint meaning making and focuses attention on aligned understandings between participants. More than merely backward-looking, formulating also involves transforming the meaning of what has been said, subtly or radically.

What is positive – or not – is jointly constituted in interaction. Although individual actions shape interaction, activities and meanings emerge that are more than the sum of individual actions. A recipient may reject or challenge even the best-constructed, best-timed formulation; it may be heard and responded to as inauthentic or manipulative. The local, sequential context shapes meaning. A formulation offered early in an interaction may be treated differently than one that follows repeated attempts to bridge differences. Power dynamics inevitably shape (and are shaped by) interpersonal relationships. Context shapes participants' sense of "what we are doing" and influences how they talk. The instance examined here takes place in a discussion ultimately made into a podcast; participants may have oriented to the possibility of future overhearers. For these and related reasons, LSI research that seeks to explicate participants' perspectives, examines naturalistic data, and examines the fine-grained details of interaction has much to teach us about positive communication.

Such work invites further questions and avenues for research. While single case studies can yield rich insights, analyzing collections of cases provides a better grasp of typical patterns and unusual cases. Data drawn from diverse sources will strengthen confidence that phenomena identified will generalize. To what extent are formulations, and the sequences in which they arise, common across talk in different languages? To what extent might they reflect particular cultural practices or interpretive norms? How might participants' identities shape and be shaped by such talk? How do we trace the mutually-constituting nature of relationships creating talk and talk creating relationships (Arundale, 2020)? If positive communication is linked to meeting needs, to what extent do we understand basic human needs as universal, even if understood in linguistically, culturally varied ways?
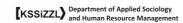
For managers, these issues invite close attention to their interpersonal communication. The humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1995) hypothesized that individual communication characterized by authenticity, acceptance, and empathy would help create positive relationships (workplace and family as well as therapeutic) that contribute to positive individual growth and development. Managers' interactional practices can transform workplace relationships to promote learning, mutuality, and positive regard. As Kegan and Lahey's (2001) book title proposes, changing the way we talk can change the way we work.

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