

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL: A PRELIMINARY EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTRUCT

Liam F. Page & Ross Donohue

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Abstract

Positive psychological capital (PPC) provides a framework that enables scholars to extend current research into positive organisational behaviour (POB). The construct, which comprises self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resiliency, was introduced by Luthans, Luthans, and Luthans (2004) as a measure comparable and complimentary to measures of human (or intellectual), social and traditional physical capital. This paper explores the rationale behind positive psychological capital, reviewing the model with a specific focus on the clarifying the distinctive value of component constructs, and further, on clarifying the criteria by which additional states might be assessed for inclusion in the theory; trust is briefly assessed under these criteria as a potential addition to the model. To conclude, an agenda for future research is outlined.

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INTRODUCTION

Positive psychological capital (PPC) provides a framework that enables scholars to extend current research into positive organisational behaviour (POB). The construct was introduced by Luthans, Luthans, and Luthans (2004) as a measure comparable and complimentary to measures of human (or intellectual), social and traditional physical capital. At present, whilst the rationale behind PPC appears sound, further exploration of the concept is required to ascertain its value as a tool for both broadening our understanding of behaviour in organisations and applying a positive schema to management practice. This paper explores the rationale behind positive psychological capital, reviewing the model with a specific focus on the clarifying the distinctive value of component constructs, and further, on clarifying the criteria by which additional states might be assessed for inclusion in the theory. To conclude, an agenda for future research is outlined.

The Origins of Positive Psychological Capital

Psychopathology Bias in Organisational Behaviour

Traditional approaches to the study of organisational behaviour demonstrate a bias towards psychopathology. This predisposition towards negative phenomena stems partly from the science's roots in psychology, where attention has traditionally been drawn to the treatment of dysfunction, and is compounded, according to Cameron (2004), by deficient measuring devices, a tendency to associate the positive framework with uncritical (perhaps fashionable) science, and the more obvious effect that negative variables have on organisations (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Cameron & Caza, 2004).

More recently, a trend towards a positive research framework has been identified, and is clearly linked to a similar trend in the broader field of psychology. Positive psychology, first described by Seligman (see his book *Authentic Happiness*, 2002, for more on the origins of the idea) and the subject of much recent work (Fredrickson, 1998; Luthans, 2002a; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Wright, 2003) moves away from a traditional focus on the analysis of illness, behavioural dysfunction, and psychopathology and instead looks to build strengths.

The Value of the Positive Psychology to Organisations

A number of notable researchers support the positive research trend, arguing that psychologists have little knowledge of the valued subjective experiences that contribute to desired outcomes and psychological health (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and that the long-established focus on the negative marginalises emotion and affective states, particularly those such as joy, hope, interest, and love (Fredrickson, 1998). Wright (2003) concurs, suggesting that the emphasis on negative aspects of human nature is one reason why much applied psychological research is seen to have little relevance to organisational scholarship.

It is in the work of Luthans (particularly Luthans, 2002a, 2002b) that the value of positive psychology to organisations and organisational scholarship is most evident. Building on the foundation laid by Seligman, Luthans contends the need for an examination of positive organisational behaviour (Luthans, 2002a, 2002b) that moves beyond the popular style of self-help publications for practicing managers towards research-backed, theoretically sound solutions to real-world problems. Thus, positive organisational behaviour (POB) is defined 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," (Luthans, 2002a, p. 59). The measurable and manageable nature of these capacities is most critical to developing relevant scholarship; by focussing on those factors that can be thus affected, POB presents a clear mandate for the development of tools that respond directly to the needs of practitioners.

Perhaps the principle contribution of the positive research framework and POB lies in the fact that the approach is, by its nature, generative. It eschews pursuit of the root of dysfunction, looks instead for the root of distinction, and seeks to build that distinctive strength as a sustainable asset. The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002) expresses this best, contending as it does that positive experiences broaden an individual's capacity for effective action and builds upon their personal resources. This suggests that, like all resources, positive psychological resources require investment and development to realise their full potential.

Conceiving Positive Psychological Capital

Extending further the POB framework for organisations, Luthans et al. (2004; Luthans & Youssef, 2004) present an argument for a combined construct, positive psychological capital (PPC), as a key contributor to the competitive advantage of organisations. The construct adds the value of positive psychological resources to our current best measure of organisational worth, comprised of the more established constructs of social capital (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Lin, 2001; Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001), human (or intellectual) capital (Dixon, 2000; Drucker, 1992; Stewart, 2001), and traditional physical and financial capital.

PPC is comprised of positive psychological capacities that, as POB dictates, are measurable, open to development, and manageable (Luthans et al., 2004); specifically, Luthans et al. refer to the positive psychological resources confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. Each of these positive states has been explored to some extent within the organisational literature (see for example Gabris, Maclin, & Ihrke, 1998; Hamel & Valikangas, 2003; Peterson & Luthans, 2003; Schepman & Richmond, 2003) and have relevance to organisational scholarship and practice in their own right. However, as soft, intangible variables in an organisational landscape focused on the bottom line, these constructs rarely appear in the executive's line of sight, and only slightly more often in that of management scholars. As such, the subtleties of distinction between the states are less than apparent; each is reviewed and compared briefly below.

Objective 1: To review the four dimensions of positive psychological capital with the aim of clarifying the unique contribution each makes within the integrated construct.

Luthans and Youssef (2004) depict the dimensions of PPC (see Figure 1, below), summarising the manner in which each component affective state is defined within the integrated construct. Further, they highlight that each of these states is unique within a given organisation (implying inimitability and, potentially, sustainable competitive advantage), measurable, developable, and impactful on performance (thus implying a clear significance to management practitioners). These characteristics provide the principle criteria by which the four dimensions, confidence, hope, optimism, and resiliency, have been selected; details of that process of assessment for inclusion in the integrated construct, however, are not provided. Luthans et al. (2004) suggest that other dimensions will be added to PPC in the future; a clearer approach to this problem would strengthen the value of the theory as a tool for research and as a practical measurement of organisational worth.

Objective 2: To further explicate the criteria by which positive affective states might be assessed for inclusion in the integrated construct.

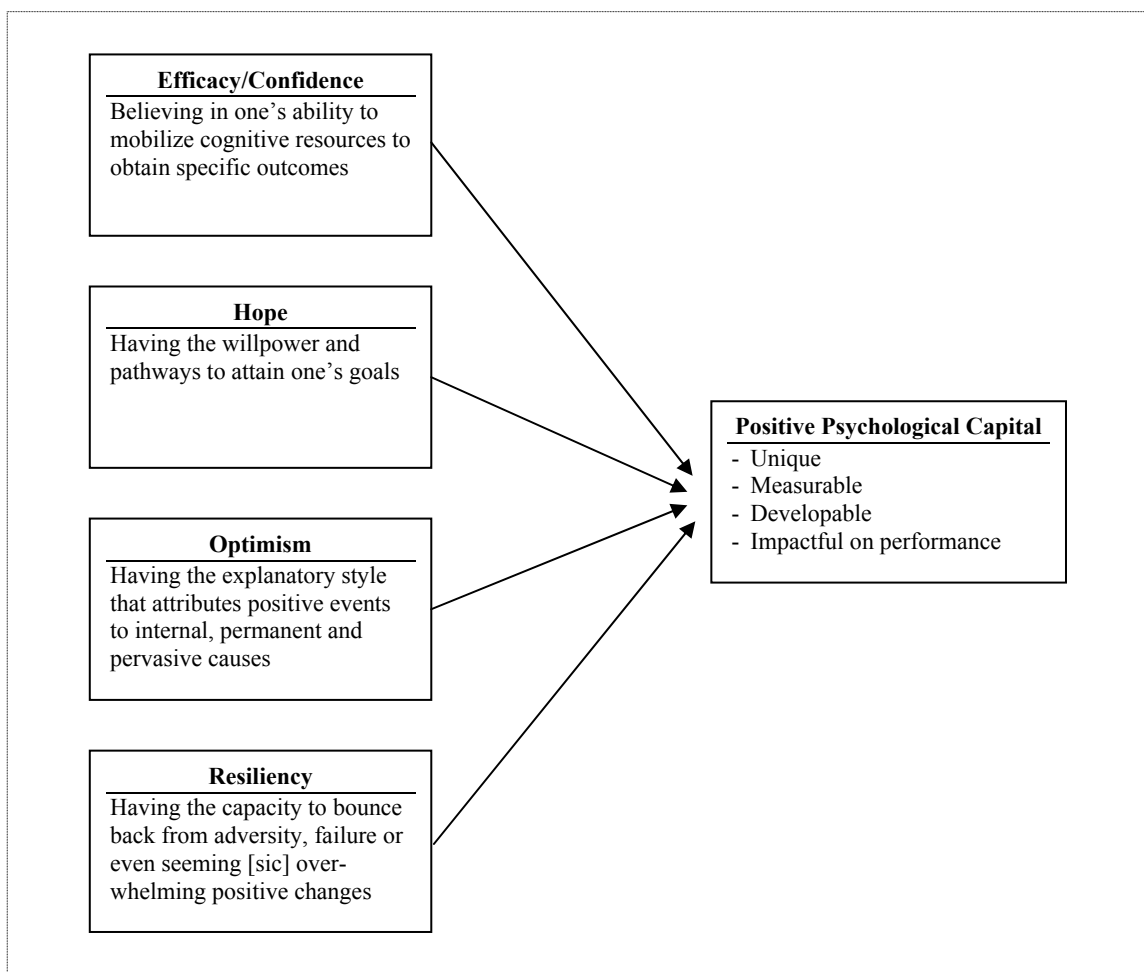
The Positive Psychological Capital Construct

The nature of the affective states that comprise PPC is such that the distinction between each is not always clear; hope, for example, might easily be confused with optimism. Exploring the definitions employed within the model, and explicating the specific value each adds to the aggregate, is critical; "the development of clear definitions for concepts is important to improving organizational research and theory building", (Osigweh, 1989, p. 580). Here, the definitions adopted by the theory are reviewed with the intention of highlighting the differences between each state (that is, the unique contribution that each makes to the integrated construct).

Confidence

Confidence (self-efficacy) is defined in the PPC model as “believing in one’s ability to mobilize cognitive resources to obtain specific outcomes”, (Luthans & Youssef, 2004, p. 152). Thus, it draws on earlier work (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998) and especially that of Bandura who defined perceived self-efficacy as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments”, (1997, p. 3). Such beliefs are said to be “the most important determinants of the behaviours people choose to engage in and how much they persevere in their efforts in the face of obstacles and challenges”, (Maddux, 2002, p. 277). We infer, in simple terms, that the benefit confidence offers an individual is not any particularly advantageous cognitive process or other tool, but a certain openness to challenge, and a willingness to expend effort in the pursuit of a successful result (perhaps because he or she expects a positive return on that investment). As dictated by the POB framework, the concept is measurable (see Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), developable (Bandura, 1997), and has a clear impact on performance.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Positive Psychological Capital (Luthans & Youssef, 2004, p. 152)



Hope

The PPC model describes hope as “having the willpower and pathways to attain one’s goals”, (Luthans & Youssef, 2004, p. 152). This definition is derived from Snyder et al. (1991), who determined hope to be a motivational state whereby two elements, agency (or goal-directed determination) and pathways (or planning to achieve those goals), interact. In other words, it is both the presence of (and desire to attain) goals or objectives (which implies an effect on or relationship to motivation), and the ability to conceive a strategy for attaining those goals or objectives. As such, this definition adopts a cognitively-biased approach to hope, but without

discounting the role of emotions. Planning or strategising to achieve goals, for example, is a cognitive process; goals and the desire to attain those goals might be described as a mix of both affective and cognitive processes. In each case, it is clear that hope, conceived as defined here, is quantifiable (see, for example Lopez, Snyder, & Teramoto Pedrotti, 2003), has a clear impact on performance (see Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002 for discussion of hope's effect on a range of outcome variables), and can be developed. This last is discussed in more detail by Luthans et al. (2004), but could be as simple as setting clear and defined organisational goals and developing multiple strategies (pathways) for pursuing those objectives.

Optimism

The model considers optimism an “explanatory style that attributes positive events to internal, permanent and pervasive causes, and negative events to external, temporary, and situation-specific ones”, (Luthans & Youssef, 2004, p. 153). It draws on the definition employed by Seligman (2002), who described two dimensions of optimism in terms of the degree of permanence one perceives in a variable (optimists will see a negative event as temporary, and a positive event as permanent), and pervasiveness (optimists will see a negative cause, for example, as specific to an event and not to all events, and will see a positive cause in the reverse fashion). Thus, optimistic individuals are buffered from unfavourable events, discounting the potential for feelings of guilt, depression, and the like, but are more likely to accept the positive return from favourable events. Optimism appears also to be future-focussed, whereby the optimist is more likely to anticipate that future events will be positive in nature, regardless of present circumstances. Together, the elements of optimism combine to impact upon performance; Martin-Krumm, Sarrzon, Peterson and Famose (2003) report, for example, that participants with an optimistic explanatory style improved in performance on a test after a failure feedback, while those with a pessimistic style did not. Evidence suggests that optimism defined as above can be developed within individuals (Seligman, 1990).

Resiliency

Resilience in the PPC model is defined as “having the capacity to bounce back from adversity, failure or even positive but seemingly overwhelming changes such as increased responsibility”, (Luthans & Youssef, 2004, p. 154). Of all the component affect states that comprise PPC, resilience has been given the least attention in organisational literature. Earlier work however, particularly in the area of child psychology, suggests that resilience is a phenomenon resulting from normal human adaptational responses and is “characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development”, (Masten, 2001, p. 228); Masten goes on to conclude that building resilience should therefore necessitate the development of the adaptive systems (including cognitive and learning processes). Luthans et al. (2004) draw also on Coutu (2002), adding to the adaptive process both a lucid perception of reality, allowing for effective and rational responses to given circumstances, and the inclination to seek or make meaning from events, allowing them to “build bridges from present-day hardships to a fuller, better constructed future”, (Coutu, 2002, p. 50). Thus, resilience can be seen to have a clear impact on performance, can be measured (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003), and might be developed at the individual level (Luthans & Youssef, 2004 provides further detail).

Defining Distinctions of the PPC Components

Reviewing the disparate constructs, it becomes clear that a large degree of overlap exists even within the limits of the definitions selected (the overlap and, indeed, confusion is far greater when taking into consideration the larger field of literature from which each definition is taken). Table 1, below, summarises the primary value contributed to PPC by each component affective state.

Table 1: Component contributions to PPC

Affective State	Directionality	Contribution
Confidence	Present-to-future focussed	Provides for openness to challenges and a willingness to expend effort on the pursuit of a goal (perhaps because of the expected return on that investment)
Hope	Future focussed	Provides goals and desire to attain those goals (implying a link to motivation), as well as planning or strategic response to enable the attainment of those goals
Optimism	Future focussed	Provides buffers between negative impact of unfavourable events and (a persistently positive) expectation for the future, and enhances or capitalises on the positive impact of favourable events
Resilience	Past-to-present focussed	Provides for recovery from previous or present unfavourable events or stressors and maintains (or exceeds) the status quo

As can be seen, there is a subtle distinction between some of the states; each, however, adds some unique value to the measure. There is, for example, a similarity between confidence and hope. Both relate in some way to internal resources by which an individual may attain a given goal. The difference is twofold: hope is explicitly focussed on the future (goals and plans for the short to long-term), whereas confidence relates to both present and future challenges. Secondly, hope is internally driven (whereby goals and desire to achieve them imply some internal source of motivation), whereas confidence speaks only to preparedness to take on a given challenge (be it internally or externally driven).

Similarly, the concepts addressed by self-efficacy (confidence) and optimism appear close. In self-efficacy, “the self as a causal agent is paramount”, (Carver & Scheier, 2003, p. 76); a favourable outcome might thus be judged to be dependant on the internal resources of the individual in question. One who is optimistic, however, might also be ‘confident’ of a positive outcome, but the source of said belief need not necessarily be internal. Further, while self-confidence depicts a willingness to act as challenges arise, optimism speaks clearly to the future (even when used in reference to a current event, the optimistic response is often in line with, “it will be better *next* time”).

In discussing resilience, especially with regard to seeking or making meaning for events, clear ties to both hope and optimism emerge. However, here the focus is quite clearly on the present and on adapting to (coping with) events in a way that enables the individual and builds strength.

Given these distinctions, it becomes easier to see the advantage that a measure of positive psychological capital offers (alongside measures of traditional, human, and social capital) in developing a more thorough estimate of the value of an organisation.

Extending Positive Psychological Capital

The existing model for PPC is preliminary; Luthans et al. (2004) contend that other dimensions will be added as research in positive psychology and POB progresses. Unfortunately, details of the process by which the component constructs that currently comprise the theory were selected are limited. Luthans et al. (2004) go as far as to reference the agenda underlying POB, citing the need for theories that provide measurable and developable variables that can be managed for effective work performance (that have an impact on performance, and thus an unambiguous significance to management practitioners). These factors imply that at a minimum, beyond the requisite positive nature of any component, an included theory must be state-based (as opposed to trait based), and

thus open to intervention. Luthans and Yoessef (2004) extend this further, suggesting that to be considered a component of PPC, affective states must be inimitable (and thus offer a potential competitive advantage), as well as being positive, measurable, developable, and impactful.

Here we propose another criteria, necessary to reinforce the rigour of the theory, and driven in part by the earlier discussion above: component affective states must make a distinctive contribution to the overall integrated construct. In other words, they must be significantly different from (although may interact or overlap with) other included constructs (and thus, provide for divergent validity). In order to illustrate this further, Table 2 outlines the criteria by which a variable might be assessed for inclusion in the model. For this purpose, the construct 'trust' will be assessed, albeit in a necessarily limited fashion.

Table 2: Criteria for inclusion in the PPC model using trust as an example

Criteria	Description	Assessment
Positive focus?	Must be positive in nature (derived from the positive psychology literature); where disparate definitions exist, the appropriate definition should be explicated	Trust is under-represented in the positive psychology literature to date, but has clear ties to positive-themed organisational research; trust plays a role in transformational leadership, and as a positive psychological process within healthy work systems (Turner, Barling, & Zacharatos, 2002). Importantly, trust has been tied to hope and is considered a part of the theoretical model of that construct (Shorey, Snyder, Rand, Hockemeyer, & Feldman, 2002). Trust has been defined in a range of disparate ways; for the purposes of PPC, it can be conceived of as a combination of affective and cognitive processes (Morrow, Hansen, & Pearson, 2004) that involve both a willingness to be vulnerable and confident expectations, (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Thus, trust is here defined as being open to the risk of the influence or action of others with an expectation of desirable outcomes.
State-based?	Must be state- and not trait-based	Trust is generally accepted to be fluid, not fixed. It is tied to expectation, perception (both learned responses), and affective response (Williams, 2001).
Measurable?	Must be validly measurable	A number of approaches to the measurement of trust exist (as evidenced in Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Morrow et al., 2004).
Developable?	Must be open to development	The nature of trust as defined here is such that it is open to intervention (for example, in team building exercises, through the use of appropriate leadership behaviours, and the like).
Impactful?	Must have a clear and significant impact on performance	The impact of trust on a range of performance-related factors has been documented, including cooperation in organisations and teams (Erdem & Ozen, 2003; Morrow et al., 2004) and organisational learning (Scott, 2000).
Inimitable?	Must be unique and inimitable, and provide a potential source of competitive advantage	Given the interpersonal nature of the construct, trust is seen to be highly inimitable. A high-trust environment might offer a significant competitive advantage to an organisation.
Distinctive?	Must add value to the measure of PPC beyond the principle component constructs	At this necessarily limited level of analysis, trust as defined here moves beyond the measure provided by the four principle components of PPC; as distinct from self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, trust deals with cognitive and affective-state based responses to interaction with others (relationships). Whilst trust appears to be more fragile in nature than the other concepts, it could conceivably be nurtured and developed over time within an organisation and add significantly to that firm's performance.

Thus, the criteria set out above provide a straightforward but necessary tool for exploring the considerable range of potential component states for inclusion in the PPC model. Further refinement of the tool will be necessary, and the subjective nature of the qualitative analysis required will lead to some variability in the PPC model employed by scholars and practitioners, but a process of definition 'by negotiation' (Osigweh, 1989) will establish consensus and only serve to strengthen the theory overall. Whilst assessed here for illustrative purposes only, trust appears to fall within the criteria specified for inclusion in the PPC model; the concept is worth of further in-depth consideration.

CONCLUSION

Positive psychological capital is a model characterised by dimensions that assist in measuring the human contribution to organisations in subtly distinct ways. Self-efficacy (or confidence), hope, optimism and resilience are interrelated constructs that are well served by a process of integration under PPC. The model, also, is such that it lends itself to further development and to the addition of other relevant constructs as they become apparent. Given the criteria listed above, additional refinements of the model should add to its utility for both scholarship and practice; the continued refinement of the concepts within the model will add value to the process of organisational theory building (Osigweh, 1989).

For managers, PPC potentially presents a means of demonstrating the impact on organisational objectives of investing in positive psychological resources. For POB researchers, the PPC concept represents a critical milestone in the effort to introduce the principles of positive psychology to the organisational domain. The concept, however, is in its early stages; the premise requires rigorous exploration. Three needs in particular arise: one of measurement, one of refinement, and another of validity. Firstly, the model, as an integrated construct, draws together measures from a range of disparate areas; as a practical tool, a single instrument to measure PPC would be invaluable. Work is underway to pursue this goal, but the combined literature is extensive and the process iterative, and thus some way from completion. Secondly, PPC remains in its conceptual infancy; further consideration from scholars across a range of fields will add to our understanding of the interactions of the concepts involved; other concepts, like trust as briefly reviewed above, should be explored to ascertain their value to the model. Finally, empirical exploration of the impact that PPC has within organisations and on a range of desired outcome variables is needed to provide further evidence of the significance of the theory to organisational behaviour and modern management practice.

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