



# Refreshing the positive: bridging positive organizational communication and critical scholarship with Buddhist philosophies

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## Abstract

This article makes a case for the productive synergy between positive organizational communication scholarship (POCS) and critical scholarship, which have been often viewed as incompatible. The article opens with an overview of POCS and its key critiques from critical audiences, which allows us to unpack the metatheoretical assumptions driving each research tradition. Next, the article discusses the limits of relying only on a Eurocentric definition of the “positive.” Notably, this article delineates how Buddhist philosophies refresh our understanding of the “positive” and challenge existing ways of thinking and problem-solving in organizational communication. We apply the Buddhist-inspired people-conditions-framework to a case study on the 2022 University of California system strikes.

**Keywords:** positive organizational scholarship, critical scholarship, organizational communication, Buddhist philosophy.

Smart people often talk trash about happiness (...) The fashion is to bemoan happiness studies and positive psychology as being the work not of the Devil (the Devil is kind of cool), but of morons. (Bloom, 2010, January 29).

So begins an essay in the *New York Times* on the tendency to critique anything that smacks of the positive. Although many scholars have embraced the study of bright-sided phenomena in organizations (e.g., positive emotions, positive states, positive processes) as a useful direction in organization research (Cheney et al., 2008; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017; Tracy, 2008), positive organizational scholarship (POS) and positive organizational communication scholarship (POCS) continue to be met with resistance and critique. The assumption amongst many—including those in the communication discipline—is that in the quest of studying the positive aspects of organizational communication, critical understandings of power are necessarily overlooked and abandoned. Critics of POS claim that this area of inquiry is naïve and optimistic at best (Fineman, 2006a) or a veiled attempt to control employees and implicitly deny corruption at worst (Joseph, 2020).

Given these concerns, it is unsurprising that PO(C)S and critical scholarship are often positioned as incongruent or even antithetical. Critics of positive scholarship argue that an overemphasis on the positive threatens theoretical, methodological, and empirical rigor (Donaldson et al., 2015), spurring scholars who study flourishing into a “defensive posture” in their work (Luthans & Avolio, 2009, p. 302). Moreover, investigations of positive and negative phenomena are commonly characterized as “extreme ends of a continuum” (Luthans & Youssef, 2007, p. 340). We argue that this incongruent positioning is unnecessary and threatens to create silos

in organizational communication research. Siloed scholarship presents high costs to the communication discipline in a time where multivocality and collaboration are already constrained by #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravarty et al., 2018), gendered paradigm wars (Townsend & Stohl, 2002), and fragmentation between theoretical camps (Timcke, 2016). By acknowledging and challenging silos, we gain the opportunity to recognize and grapple with the organizational communication field as a contested site where knowledge production is “a value-laden, political process (...) with disciplinary issues of centrality and marginality, of voice and representation” (Mumby & Stohl, 2007, p. 269). Why are PO(C)S and critical scholarship rarely in conversation with one another as research traditions, despite sharing a fundamentally “humanizing and emancipating agenda” (Lavine et al., 2022, p. 5) to create equitable organizations where employees can flourish? We explore this question with a curious and conciliatory spirit, teasing out the extent to which PO(C)S’ and critical scholarship’s metatheoretical commitments are mismatched or congruous in principle and in practice.

Overall, we argue that PO(C)S and critical scholarship are largely synergistic rather than incompatible, and that this productive potential is more visible when both traditions revisit and resist EuroAmerican conceptualizations of the “positive” and its associated outcomes. This article begins with a brief overview of PO(C)S and its aims. Next, the article identifies three common critiques of PO(C)S, which we use to unpack metatheoretical assumptions and to discover common ground between PO(C)S and critical scholarship. Third, we discuss the Eurocentric definition of “positive” and consider its consequences, especially in widening the perceived gap between PO(C)S and critical scholarship. Fourth,

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we explore how Buddhist philosophies can refresh modern understandings of “positive” phenomena in a way that bridges the motives and strengths of PO(C)S and critical scholarship. Finally, we apply the Buddhist-inspired people-conditions-goals framework to a case study on the 2022 University of California system strikes.

### A brief overview of positive organizational (communication) scholarship

POS is the “study of that which is positive, flourishing, and lifegiving in organizations” (Cameron & Caza, 2004, p. 731). With strong roots in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002), POS is motivated to identify and unpack the “best of the human condition” (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 4). POS sensitizes scholars to the possible virtues of the workplace (Cameron et al., 2003) by foregrounding “what is going right” in organizations (Roberts, 2006). In pursuit of organizational virtues, POS scholars have largely gravitated to topics such as: happiness and well-being at work, positive leadership, positive workplace relationships, psychological capital, and organizational virtuousness (Warren et al., 2017). Among these topics, organizational virtuousness represents one of the most enduring interests of POS (Meyer, 2018). To qualify as virtuous, organizations should foster conditions that promote human flourishing (i.e., human impact), create products and processes that are good and worthy of cultivation (i.e., moral goodness), and move beyond self-interest to serve society (i.e., social betterment) (Cameron, 2003). Although the outcomes of organizational virtuousness are well-documented in POS, the means toward such ends are also important to examine, which is where POCS excels.

Communication scholars are well-poised to investigate how virtuous organizations are constituted through language and socially constructed meaning, which in turn builds positive structures and processes in organizations (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017). A communication-based perspective thoroughly unpacks positive phenomena by “describing how the inner world, outer world, social relations, and means of expression are reciprocally constituted with the interactional process as its own best explanation” (Deetz, 1994, p. 577). POCS attends to the communicative phenomena and practices of organizations that are exceptional (Cameron, 2003) and positively deviant (Cameron & Caza, 2004). Much of the early POCS manifested under the umbrella of appreciative inquiry, a social constructionist approach to organizational change focused on cultivating strengths (Bright, 2014) and being life-centric (Grieten et al., 2018). Communication scholars have highlighted how appreciation (Barge & Oliver, 2003) and reflexivity (Barge, 2004) positively shape managerial practices and create inclusive work environments.

Additionally, communication scholars have investigated a variety of transformative workplace virtues, including compassion (Leach et al., 2023; Miller, 2007; Way & Tracy, 2012), dignity (Lucas, 2011), moral learning (Bisel, 2017), empathy (De Waele et al., 2020), hope (Barge, 2003), and resilience (Buzzanell, 2010; French & Holden, 2012). Often, these virtues are explored in the context of organizational change or crisis, where positive communication emerges in response to and in spite of adversities. However, POCS has also explored how positive communication is achievable in a variety of contexts and

relationships. For example, Mirivel’s (2014) model of positive communication highlights behaviors that are key to improving communication in any relationship, and how these can be taken up by leaders (Mirivel & Lyon, 2023). Prior research has also identified general sources of positive emotional experiences at work, ranging from recognition and rewards to social support and positive workplace climates (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2011). Scholars have also called for more focus on positive deviance case studies to illustrate intentional, nonnormative, and honorable communication worthy of imitation in organizations (Bisel et al., 2020).

Whereas traditional POS has focused on the cultivation of positive qualities and emotions within the individual (Duening, 2016), POCS draws attention to: (a) how language and interaction create positive social structures and processes; and (b) how our interactions are influenced by and situated within broader systems that guide norms, beliefs, and meaning in organizations (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017). POCS complements theoretical approaches emphasizing the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), which reposition communication as the central force by which organizations are created and sustained (McPhee & Zaugg, 2009). POCS is necessarily concerned with the ontological role of communication in creating virtuous organizations, which speaks directly to CCO approaches that frame organization as process (i.e., organization as a state of becoming) (Putnam & Nicotera, 2010). POCS also offers a unique lens on understudied organizational phenomena in a discipline that is historically focused on problem-based research and “negative assumptions regarding organizational life” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017, p. 2). However, POS and POCS continue to be met with resistance and reservations due to their perceived incompatibilities with critical approaches.

### Key critiques of PO(C)S: a seeming mismatch with critical scholarship?

Critiques of PO(C)S largely focus on the erroneous assumptions that PO(C)S endorses a Pollyanna-like disregard for life difficulties and exploitation (Lazarus, 2003). In this section, we break down three central critiques of PO(C)S and interrogate the extent to which these critiques are truly incommensurate with critical scholarship.

#### Critique 1: PO(C)S enables exploitation

Perhaps the most problematic misunderstanding of PO(C)S is that it categorically camouflages injustice and enables worker exploitation in the workplace. Granted, in some organizations, a discourse of flourishing “encapsulates the worker in a positive bubble, deflecting managerial attention from impoverished conditions of work and important features of the workers’ biographies” (Fineman, 2008, p. 691). This type of positiveness certainly can be exploited by human resource managers who might, for instance, implement an employee empowerment program while ignoring the “social, economic and political conditions that contribute to and contain powerlessness in the workplace” (Fineman, 2006a, p. 277). Organizational leaders may also be strategic in their public displays of compassion, wielding positive messages to discipline and control their employees (Simpson et al., 2014). In sum, the language and purported values of PO(C)S could be dangerous weapons in the hands of manipulative managers

as they build oppressive and controlling structures in their organizations (Joseph, 2020).

Given that critical scholars view organizations as fundamental sites of power and control (Mumby, 2013), concerns about worker exploitation are rightfully warranted and to be expected. Critical scholarship is “aimed at understanding, explaining and transforming dehumanizing and oppressive realities” (Splichal & Mance, 2018, p. 400), which is why many critical scholars explore how dominant ideologies control and constrain employees (Ferguson & Dougherty, 2022; Long & Buzzanell, 2022; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). The discourse of flourishing in PO(C)S may seem at odds with such goals, but understandings of power, control, and exploitation are just as crucial in investigations of positive phenomena such as empowerment and resistance. Indeed, PO(C)S can meaningfully engage with calls from critical scholars to explore what counts as resistance (Mumby et al., 2017) and how individual and collective forms of resistance are linked (Pal & Dutta, 2008).

In particular, the pursuit of employee empowerment in PO(C)S meaningfully intersects with research on labor organizing among the critical community. For example, critical scholars have examined the unique challenges faced by union workers, who often characterize their pursuit for worker rights as intense battles and combat (Cloud, 2005; Real & Putnam, 2005). Such conditions beg for investigations of the practical tools toward positive transformation and empowerment, such as rhetorical strategies for proposing solutions to resist grievances (Salamon, 2023). Just as critical researchers dig deep and move beyond surface explanations to investigate how inequities such as worker exploitation are born and sustained (Tracy, 2020), PO(C)S researchers move beyond surface explanations to investigate the mechanisms toward radical change to combat the very kind of exploitation that attempts to use the guise of positivity.

### Critique 2: PO(C)S is naïve and moralistic

PO(C)S is guided by the belief that “the desire to improve the human condition is universal and that the capacity to do so is latent in most systems” (Cameron et al., 2003, p. 10). The driving motivation of PO(C)S has been criticized for being overly and even glaringly optimistic in this regard (Fineman, 2006a). Indeed, PO(C)S has been packaged as an appealing match for “researchers who have a more optimistic personal standpoint” (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017, p. 2). PO(C)S inherently carries a moral agenda in the pursuit of the “good” and “lifegiving” (Fineman, 2006a). Given the roots of the field, it is not surprising that PO(C)S often celebrates positive phenomena and emotions as defined by a North American cultural script: individualism, optimism, self-confidence, self-promotion, and being noticed (Fineman, 2006a). In response to critiques, PO(C)S has attenuated its overtly positive position in several ways, such as by emphasizing the contextual nature of positivity (Dutton et al., 2001, 2002) and by demonstrating that negative emotions can regulate positive emotions (Bagozzi, 2003). Nonetheless, PO(C)S is occasionally framed as a necessarily niche, naïve, and moralistic area of organizational communication scholarship.

At first glance, the claims that PO(C)S is both naïve and moralistic seem to be one in the same; that is, the apparent logic goes that PO(C)S is naïve *because* it is moralistic. For those hailing from managerial perspectives and post-positivism, PO(C)S certainly does have the potential to threaten objective inquiry

(Fineman, 2006a). However, many interpretive and critical scholars do not aim toward objective inquiry (or view it as a myth). Indeed, critical scholars’ ontological and epistemological commitments, depending on their discursive positioning between modernism and postmodernism (Mumby, 1997), are often interested in discursively constructed and multifaceted understandings of reality (Tracy, 2020).

Moreover, it can be argued that both PO(C)S and critical scholarship are equally moralistic and value-laden, with strong images of what is beneficial and harmful to people. After all, critical research is fundamentally motivated by goals of societal betterment and transformation, prompting questions of “what is” and “what could and should be” (Tracy, 2020). Critical research is “overtly motivated by [its] values—rightly and unapologetically so” (Bisel et al., 2020, p. 285), especially in the pursuit of a humanitarian vision, emancipation, and reformation. In short, both PO(C)S and critical scholarship possess strong axiological commitments to the creation of and transformation toward a greater good.

PO(C)S and critical scholarship are thus more alike than different in their confident embrace of value-driven research. Where, then, do perceptions of naïveté stem? We argue that the common ground between PO(C)S and critical research is often overshadowed by the ontological differences felt between those who see reality through a discourse of suspicion (i.e., critical scholars) (Mumby, 2013) and those who see reality through a discourse of flourishing (i.e., positive scholars). Despite sharing an overarching goal in their scholarship, the immediate values that drive PO(C)S (e.g., virtuousness, well-being, hope) may seem incompatible to critical scholars who view reality as constructed through power relations. In either case, a focus on values only become problematic if scholars refuse to practice self-reflexivity, acknowledge their privileged views, and examine the ways in which they are accountable to others and the self (Jones, 2010). PO(C)S and critical scholarship emphasize different means to a common end, but this is not to say that these means are fundamentally incompatible.

### Critique 3: PO(C)S is logically fallacious

A third common critique of PO(C)S is that it brackets the positive from the negative and is, therefore, logically fallacious because the positive cannot be understood without experiencing the negative. Fineman (2005) sums this up by stating that “our disappointments, vulnerabilities and miseries impart meaning and contextualization to our joys and happiness; or, more mundanely, to our ordinary unhappiness” (p. 13). An emotion can potentially be felt and appraised positively, negatively, or a mix of both (Fineman, 2008). For example, the sadness one feels when being laid off could be appraised as loyalty (positive), shame (negative) and/or nostalgia (mixed). Splitting the positive and the negative is at odds with the interdependence and mutual connected reality of emotions and experiences in organizational life. Moreover, bracketing positive and negative experiences may create a “separation thesis” such that positive and negative practices always lead to positive and negative outcomes, respectively (Fineman, 2006a).

The critique that PO(C)S is logically fallacious presumes that the study of the positive is to forgo the study of the negative, either intentionally or implicitly. For some, PO(C)S may seem like its own island of research, separated from broader intellectual conversations and priorities within our discipline.

However, we argue that PO(C)S contributes to complex understandings of organizational life. As previously mentioned, organizational communication research has historically favored problem-focused research (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2017), a pattern that matches the tendency to focus on deficits in organization science (Caza & Caza, 2008). PO(C)S is, in many ways, “a paradigmatic challenge” that asks organizational scholars to identify and stretch their longstanding ways of thinking and problem-solving (Caza & Caza, 2008, p. 27). Positive phenomena typically function as the academic backdrop of negative phenomena, but PO(C)S foregrounds virtuous qualities, relationships, and outcomes instead.

To shift which object (i.e., positive phenomena or negative phenomena) is in the foreground and background is not to erase the other, but to create a more complex and multifaceted understanding of organizational life (Caza & Caza, 2008). However, the history of PO(C)S’ emergence in the field and its introduction as a contrast to problem-focused research may be linked to the longstanding assumption that PO(C)S is solely invested in ebullience and joy. When we rely on distinctions and contrasts to define any given concept, we may slip into binary thinking (Berlin, 1990). The tendency toward binary thinking is certainly not unique to the communication discipline, and scholars have traced this penchant back to Eurocentric thought traditions (Chen, 2009; Müller, 2019). Still, binary thinking tempts scholars to “blindly embrace [one end] (...) or fully reject it on the other end” (Chen, 2009, p. 402), which may prove to be the “tumor of intellectual inquiry” over time (p. 407).

Although pushing away from binary thinking as a theorizing heuristic is challenging, thinking in terms of gradations and continuums is increasingly valued in the communication field, as evidenced by the poststructuralist, queer, and critical scholarship that actively theorize against essentialist and binary constructs. Likewise, organizational communication scholars have challenged binary thinking through a focus on dialectics (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024; Mumby, 2005), dualities (Zanin & Piercy, 2019), discursive struggles (Real & Putnam, 2005), and organizational paradoxes (Martin, 2004). Organizational life can rarely, if ever, be reduced to black-and-white conditions that influence human interaction. Well-being and the “good” do not immediately follow when organizations remove the “bad,” nor does creating “good” in an organization erase the “bad” (Seligman, 2019). PO(C)S pushes scholars to consider not only how to avoid dysfunction in organizations, but also how to pursue the type of exemplary communication necessary for organizational transformation (Bisel et al., 2020). Like critical scholarship, PO(C)S cannot ignore the negative because positive and negative processes, emotions, and phenomena are often intertwined.

In sum, a close examination of the main critiques of PO(C)S indicate that both PO(C)S and critical scholarship share strong axiological commitments toward societal transformation. Moreover, PO(C)S is more flexible in its research aims than initial impressions and binary logics suggest, creating space to understand and address both the “positive” and the “negative” through a discourse of flourishing. In the following section, we argue that bridges between PO(C)S and critical scholarship may manifest more easily if we are willing to challenge and refresh what it means to be “positive.”

## The sticking point: a narrow definition of the “positive”

Overcoming gaps and finding greater meaning through an examination of seeming opposites is not new to our field. So why is it that PO(C)S and critical research too often operate in silos? We argue that the true sticking point here is not a mismatch between the fundamental values or approaches within PO(C)S and critical scholarship. Instead, we assert that existing definitions of the “positive” inevitably invoke binary logics due to a long history with a narrow conceptualization of “positive” borne from Enlightenment philosophies.

Although the meaning of “positive” is often subjective, it is important to recognize that “positive” experiences are defined and informed by our cultural and institutional memberships (Nilsson, 2015). The study of positivity and well-being has been contoured by many historical and societal currents, including Greek philosophy, Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment (Lomas, 2022). Notably, scientific and secular investigations of positivity were a hallmark of the Enlightenment period in the 1700–1800s. Enlightenment philosophies centered on a narrative of progress, which ignited advancements in science, technology, and economics in the pursuit of perfecting society and finding happiness on earth (Lomas, 2022).

Today, the definition of “positive” continues to be imbued with strong EuroAmerican cultural overtones (Fineman, 2008), inviting repeated critiques for portraying a limited perspective of what qualifies as positive (c.f. Fineman, 2005, 2006a, 2006b). Fineman (2006a) observes that much of what positive means in PO(C)S relates to values such as individualism, optimism, self-confidence, and self-promotion—expressions deemed as positive in EuroAmerican cultural scripts. Given the globalization of organizations and an increasing cultural diversity within organizations, a mono-cultural and absolutist definition of the positive is ethnocentric and insufficient. The danger of imposing a normative and absolutist understanding of what it means to be “positive” is that it might undercut critical thought and preempt a “nuanced, dynamic portrait of the kind of ‘goods’ that define and circumscribe enacted ethics in organizations” (Fineman, 2006b, p. 281).

Two reasonable resolutions to this issue are: (1) to just drop examination of flourishing, virtue, and well-being; and (2) to attenuate what we mean by positive organizational phenomenon. Either of these resolutions do not properly address the critique, however. A change in the labels used to study organizational communication is not a real solution; scholars would continue to perceive incongruencies between PO(C)S and critical scholarship regardless of whether we continue to use the words “positive” and “negative” to describe organizational phenomenon. Further, regardless of how we attenuate the definition of the positive, flourishing will continue to be mono-culturally defined unless we look outside of EuroAmerican and Enlightenment philosophical traditions for inspiration. We thus propose that instead of *backing away* from the critique that positive is culturally defined, we instead pivot 180-degrees to move *towards* the critique by expanding the scope of which positive is culturally defined.

First, we embrace the critique that “positive” is culturally defined by looking to the Asian cultural tradition of Buddhism to understand how a non-Enlightenment spiritual

philosophy might define and study the positive. Likewise, we embrace the critique that the definition of positive is intertwined with a Eurocentric moral agenda by investigating how the positive is defined in the Asian spiritual philosophy of Buddhism. In short, instead of pivoting away from the growing gap between PO(C)S and critical scholarship, this article looks to the Asian spiritual philosophy of Buddhism to refresh our understanding of the positive. The objective of introducing a Buddhist-inspired framework for studying PO(C)S is to expand the ways that “positive” may be culturally defined. In doing so, we do not imply that Buddhism is the “opposite” of Eurocentrism or that Buddhism is the only way to expand one’s definition of the positive. Instead, we do so as homage to a long-established practice where EuroAmerican trained scholars in disciplines outside of communication studies have been working with Buddhist scholar-clergy to refresh the study of positive phenomenon within their respective fields.

In the next section, we provide a brief description of these conversations between EuroAmerican academia and Buddhist scholar-clergy. This is then followed by a brief explanation of how Buddhist principles may be applied to the study of organizational communication phenomena to refresh current theorizing of the positive in PO(C)S in ways that align with commitments to critical scholarship. In short, the next section will cumulate to the proposal of a Buddhist-inspired framework that has resonances with both current PO(C)S and critical scholarship as a third way out of the tensions between critical vs. positive that does not break the hull but provides a new perspective for complementary fusion.

## Refreshing the positive through Asian spiritual philosophy

Scholarly debates between the EuroAmerican scientific community, Buddhist clergy, and scholars well-versed in Buddhist philosophy and theology, have been held almost every year since 1987. These scholarly debates are known as the Mind & Life Dialogues (2018 and before) and the Mind & Life Conversations (starting 2019). Academic disciplines that have participated in the Mind & Life Dialogues and Conversations include neuroscience, psychology, physics, economics, and social work. Subjects that have been debated upon include climate change, compassion, resilience, human flourishing, power and social change, ethics, addiction, ecology, cosmology, neuroplasticity, destructive emotions, and death. The Mind & Life Dialogues and Conversations are conducted under the auspices of the Mind & Life Institute, a nonprofit organization based in the United States.

The Mind & Life Institute began in 1987 as a conversation between Buddhist monk and philosopher the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, scientist and philosopher the late Dr Francisco Varela, and lawyer and entrepreneur Adam Engle. The objective of the institute is to “bring science and contemplative wisdom together to better understand the mind and create positive change in the world” (The Mind and Life Institute, n.d.). Buddhist clergy participating in the Mind & Life Dialogues and Conversations have advanced degrees in scholastic traditions that run parallel to, but are different from, EuroAmerican academic disciplines. For example, within the Tibetan Buddhist clergy, the Nyingma school offers the *khenpo* doctoral degree whilst the Gelukpa school offers the *geshe* doctoral degree. There are many different philosophical

schools of Buddhism, each with its own scholastic tradition. The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, is arguably the most well-known *geshe* scholar in the world. In the following paragraphs, we examine published dialogues from the Mind & Life Dialogues and Conversations to ask: how do we refresh our definition of “the positive” through the lens of an Asian spiritual philosophy?

## Interdependent conditions

In the 1990 Mind & Life Dialogue, Daniel Goleman asked the Dalai Lama why cruelty and repression continued to exist in Buddhist-practicing societies (including Tibet) despite years of widespread teaching on the importance of cultivating virtuous mental states such as compassion. To this question, the Dalai Lama explained the Buddhist concept of interdependent conditions: “You can’t say compassion is the only foundation; that if you have that, everything will be perfect and if you do not have that, nothing will be perfect. Compassion can be a motive for ethical actions, but that doesn’t mean compassion alone is sufficient” (Dalai Lama, 1997, p. 29). In the 1995 Mind & Life Dialogue, the Dalai Lama explains interdependent conditions in this way:

Any event or thing must have a continuum, a preceding moment, as its cause (...) if you observe a phenomenon changing, it points to the fact that it is subject to causes and conditions and therefore cannot arise spontaneously without a cause. So anything that is a product, which clearly shows that it has been caused by certain conditions, must have an earlier continuum. The cause must be concordant with the effect, unlike circumstantial conditions which could be varied. (Davidson & Harrington, 2002, p. 97)

In short, the concept of interdependent conditions suggests that striving for positive phenomenon as an end-goal is not the right pathway for creating positive organizational communication. One should ask not how to “be (more) positive” but instead, what are the conditions that have resulted in the situation to be the way that it is now, how are these conditions interdependent, and what needs to change to arrive at the goal(s) that we desire?

## Whose definition of positive? Whose goals?

The above being said, even if the conditions for the positive were to be in place, it still begs the question: to what ends are we striving for when we cultivate the best in people, communities, and in organizations? Who gets to define what is good and positive? For whom are these goals positive? There is a common misconception that Buddhist philosophy does not think about phenomena in positive or negative terms. There is also a common misconception that Buddhist philosophy encourages one to avoid strong positive and negative emotions. Both are not true, as articulated in 2000 Mind & Life Dialogue. Biochemist Dr Matthieu Ricard, who is also an ordained Buddhist monk at the Shechen Monastery in Kathmandu, explains how Buddhism approaches the positive-negative binary:

There is no such thing as good or bad in an absolute sense. There is only good and bad—the harm in terms of happiness or suffering—that our thoughts do unto ourselves or

to others (...) when we say an emotion is negative, it's not so much that we are repudiating something, but that it's negative in the sense of less happiness, less well-being, less lucidity and freedom, more distortion. (Goleman, 2004, p. 76)

Instead of negating binaries that arise in the mind, Buddhist spiritual philosophy encourages one to recognize one's binary frameworks (good vs. bad, positive vs. negative) as thoughts that have arisen when a phenomenon is present; Buddhist meditation is not about pushing these thoughts away but to be aware of and present with the texture of one's thoughts. Cultivation of such recognition and awareness is considered beneficial to those who are on the Buddhist path towards achieving more happiness (and less suffering) for self and for others. In short, the definition of positive in the Buddhist spiritual philosophy is a definition of "better" in terms of achieving the objective of not harming self and others.

Rather than believing that one should just trust the process and strive for virtuous states as a good person, Buddhist spiritual philosophy advocates that one should investigate the conditions that afford the manifestation of virtuous states such as compassion and loving-kindness. Further, rather than cultivating belief in virtuous states as an absolutist end goal, Buddhist spiritual philosophy advocates that one should ask: to what end-goals are we pursuing, which virtuous states are appropriate pathways to these goals, and in which texts or from whom are these goals and definitions derived (c.f. Davidson & Harrington, 2002, p. 40)? It may thus be seen that Buddhist spiritual philosophy emphasizes empirical observation and validation<sup>1</sup>, rather than a pollyannaish celebration of and belief in the positive.

In short, Buddhist spiritual philosophy investigates ways to cultivate the positive by providing clear explanations about: (1) *people*: whose definition of the positive are we using and whose happiness are we concerned about in the pursuit of the positive?; (2) *goals*: to what ends are we striving for, in cultivating the positive?; and (3) *conditions*: what are the interdependent conditions that have given rise to the current situation and which of these conditions needs to be (and can be) changed to arrive at the goal(s) that we desire? In the case study that follows, we demonstrate how this people-conditions-goals framework can be used to refresh current theorizing of "the positive" in PO(C)S in ways that demonstrate one's commitments to critical scholarship.

### A case study: people-conditions-goals in the 2022 University of California strike

To illustrate how Buddhist philosophies can help us refresh and complicate our understanding of "positive," we apply the people-conditions-goal framework to a case study on the events related to the 2022 University of California (UC) system strike. We begin with a brief overview of the key events, facts, and figures of the strike. Next, we imagine how the foci of this case study would differ from traditional PO(C)S and critical perspectives. Finally, we utilize the people-conditions-goal framework to demonstrate how new questions and observations can be generated in a way that does not reduce processes or outcomes to "positive" or "negative."

### Overview of the 2022 UC strike

In November 2022, workers from across the University of California system rallied together and participated in a walk-out to demand better living wages and benefits. This strike represents the largest academic strike in U.S. history, lasting 40 days and involving the participation of 48,000 unionized workers (many of whom were graduate students, teaching assistants, and workers in part-time positions). Originally, the union demanded part-time workers' salaries to be raised to at least \$54,000 a year to account for high-living costs in California. Negotiation talks between the union and university officials took place over several weeks, which were mediated by third-party Sacramento Mayor Darrell Steinberg (Hubler, 2022).

Throughout this period, academic workers continued to protest at various offices of university administrators. In early December 2022, 17 workers were cited, and 10 workers were arrested for trespassing at a sit-in protest (Sainato, 2022). Negotiations concluded and new labor contracts were approved in late December 2022. Notable deliverables included: salary raises (e.g., from \$22,000 to \$35,500 for graduate student researchers and about \$23,000 to \$34,000 for teaching assistants), improved healthcare and childcare, fee remissions, transportation benefits, and paid leave in special circumstances (UC Office of the President, 2022). Affected workers included teaching assistants, associate instructors, teaching fellows, and hourly workers.

### An examination of the case through PO(C)S and critical lenses

After learning the key facts about the UC strike as a starting point for scholarly investigation, positive scholars and critical scholars would likely be attracted to different aspects of this case. In other words, the norms and values of PO(C)S and critical scholarship sensitize scholars to ask different empirical questions within the same case study. Given that PO(C)S is largely interested in the factors that "inspire employees to be engaged, give their best, go the extra mile, and persist in the face of difficulties" (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008, p. 147), positive scholars might be especially interested in the "how" behind the organizing of a large-scale, successful strike. Positive processes and practices such as empowerment, social support, resilience, leadership, and dignity would likely be appropriate foci for such a study. The ability to organize and maintain positive progress despite the challenges in this situation (e.g., fear of arrest, fear of job loss) invokes a perception of the exceptional, which may merit an evaluation of positive deviance (Bisel et al., 2020). Positive scholars could ask questions such as "What communication is worthy of emulating in this scenario?", "How are involved parties moving beyond their self-interest for the greater good?", and "What are the communicative factors that foster flourishing here?". To do so, a PO(C)S approach to this case study might find the positively deviant aspect that is most worth celebrating (as influenced by Eurocentric values), work backwards to understand how that "positive" outcome or process was achieved, and articulate ways to transfer that knowledge to other contexts.

Whereas a PO(C)S approach may be focused on a systematic investigation and celebration of the "positive" outcomes in this case study, a critical approach would likely begin with questions related to historical relations of power, control, and oppression. Critical scholars would not only be

interested in communicative processes like organizing resistance and advocacy, but would also interrogate the broader, systemic factors that contributed to the issue in the first place (Iannacone, 2023; Südkamp & Dempsey, 2021). Such questions might include “How are ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism (re)produced in communication, and how do these result in the exploitation of part-time workers?”, “What are the structures that constrain and enable the communication of workplace justice in university systems?”, and “How are the interests of certain groups silenced and marginalized in times of organizational change?” Critical scholars may be especially interested in evaluating the negotiation process in this case study for hidden injustices, unfair procedures, self-subordination, or unintended consequences.

If someone assumed a Eurocentric, absolutist definition of “positive” outcomes in PO(C)S, the line of inquiry generated in their approach may feel narrow and naïve to critical scholars, perhaps lacking in a contextual understanding of deeper issues at play. Similarly, positive scholars might find critical approaches to be overly focused on the explication and removal of deficits rather than the scaffolding of positive practices necessary for organizational transformation. Such perspectives are likely to sustain silos in the communication discipline rather than bridge the gap between positive and critical perspectives. To create space for collaborative thinking and problem-solving, this case study could be approached with a people-conditions-goals framework instead.

### People-conditions-goals in the 2022 UC strike

The people-conditions-goals framework provides a set of nuanced questions for investigating organizational phenomena. The first prong of this framework demands a focus on people with two interrelated questions: (1) whose definition of the positive are we using; and (2) whose happiness are we concerned about in the pursuit of the positive. Rather than defining what the positive is a priori (likely by using EuroAmerican scripts), we are focused here on examining “people” in terms of whose definition of the positive we are using (e.g., the union, researcher-self, scholarly community and their published writings, etc.) and stating whose happiness are we now concerned about (e.g., employees, management, community members, etc). This process of relating to “people” is contextual and may require mitigating harmful practices and/or cultivating virtuous states within an organization.

Essentially, we need to ask *whose* interests and happiness we are invested in, because that knowledge may color the meaning and application of “positive.” For example, many scholars may be drawn to focus on the unionized workers in this case study. It would not be unusual to view the unionized workers as the narrative underdog in this case study. However, the unionized workers are not the only people affected by the events of the UC strike: UC students, administrators, and local law enforcement are also relevant parties with their own interests and needs. One might even consider how the events at UC inspired other university unions to seek change too (Kumar, 2023). What is “positive,” fruitful, or less harmful for one party may not be the case for another party. Buddhist philosophies encourage us to consider both the self and others in any given situation, which necessitates a loose grip on the meanings we attach to the positive.

Next, the people-conditions-goals framework directs our attention to the interdependent conditions that have constituted a situation. Buddhist philosophies position events on a

continuum, allowing us to discuss the multiple causes that feed into the development of a specific situation (Davidson & Harrington, 2002). Importantly, this step requires a consideration of the complex and overlapping conditions that give rise to any given issue. For example, it would be an oversimplification to state that the main cause of the 2022 UC Strike was a refusal to raise workers’ wages, just as it would be an oversimplification to claim that a successful negotiation is due entirely to the efforts of one mediator. To craft a more holistic understanding of the event, we must ask questions such as: How and why were part-time workers’ salaries kept at low rates up to this point? What was the tipping point that motivated individual and collective action? How did other factors like media coverage and public support influence how the strike unfolded? In answering these questions, we may find that some conditions feel “local” to the strike (e.g., charismatic leadership in the union) and other conditions that are borne from societal norms or ideologies (e.g., capitalism, bureaucracy). As such, it benefits us to consider the actionable, short-term and long-term goals necessary for imitating, improving upon, or radically changing existing conditions.

The final step of the people-conditions-goals framework is focused on articulating clear goals in our scholarship and praxis. Importantly, Buddhist philosophies caution us that virtuous communication (e.g., compassion, kindness) alone is rarely the end-goal that we seek. As discussed previously, the existence of the “positive” does not preclude the “negative” and vice versa. Scholars can examine both the goals of communities we study and our own goals in conducting research. Consider the case study: what was the end-goal of the UC strike? Is financial well-being the ultimate end-goal, or is there another end-goal we can visualize where financial well-being becomes a condition toward that end? Perhaps the end-goal is underscoring and protecting part-time workers’ value in the academic system. Or perhaps the end-goal is a radical reimagining of structures in higher education. We can only evaluate our progress toward an end-goal when that end-goal is clearly articulated. Additionally, depending on the end-goal(s) motivating our scholarship and action, the way we design research projects and interventions can completely change.

Future research might explore how the people-conditions-goals framework applies in longitudinal studies (e.g., organized resistance efforts, organizations recovering from crisis, community responses to disasters) where people, conditions, and goals are especially likely to change over time. Future research could also explore the utility of the people-conditions-goals framework in the context of strategic interventions in the workplace, given that desirable outcomes in organizations are normally defined by capitalist logics and other dominant ideologies. The people-conditions-goals framework prompts researchers to interrogate the motives and pathways toward change while remaining sensitive to the many people affecting and affected by any given issue.

### Conclusion

In this article, we have: (a) examined PO(C)S and its key critiques; (b) unpacked the metatheoretical assumptions that exacerbate the perceived gap between PO(C)S and critical scholarship; (c) highlighted the consequences of leaning on a narrow definition of the “positive”; and (d) offered a way to refresh the “positive” with Buddhist philosophies and the people-conditions-goals framework. In summary, we

reemphasize that PO(C)S and critical scholarship share a good deal of common ground, but a Eurocentric definition of the “positive” has exacerbated the perception that these two areas are incompatible. To complicate and refresh the meaning of “positive” phenomena in organizations, we recommend that communication scholars adopt the people-conditions-goals framework. In doing so, scholars not only gain distance from the historical connotations associated with certain PO(C)S language; they also create a space to engage in intellectual and creative play where positive and critical values coexist.

*Conflicts of interest:* None declared.

## Data availability

No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

## Notes

- 1 Each tradition of Buddhist philosophy expresses this adage in different ways. For example, Zen Buddhism epitomizes the adage with the koan: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama expresses the same point differently in his speech at the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience on November 12, 2005 in Washington DC: “In the Buddhist investigation of reality, at least in principle, *empirical evidence* should triumph over scriptural authority, no matter how deeply venerated a scripture may be. Even in the case of knowledge derived through reason or inference, its *validity* must derive ultimately from some observed facts of experience.” (emphasis added) source <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/buddhism/science-at-the-crossroads>

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