

## **The Social Life of Organizations**

**Lloyd E. Sandelands**  
University of Michigan  
USA

**Monica C. Worline**  
University of California, Irvine  
USA

### **Abstract**

*A new field of positive organizational studies (POS) has been proposed to enlarge our understanding of organizations to include neglected aspects of social life such as resilience, spontaneity, flow, courage, thriving, and virtue. Despite its promise, this nascent research field has come up against a philosophical problem of knowing more than it can say about the social life of organizations. Drawing upon the art of photography, we describe the social life of organizations in terms of three essential tensions—of love, play, and individuation—that comprise its forms and feelings. We suggest that the field of POS can better realize its important contribution to organization studies by augmenting its focus on the natural causes and effects of social life in organizations with a focus on the spiritual forms and feelings of social life in organizations.*

### **Introduction**

There is a new and positive idea of life in the human sciences. Claiming that psychology has emphasized the abnormal and pathological in human life at the expense of what makes life good, a new “positive psychology” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) has brought research into new areas such as flourishing and thriving (Keyes & Haidt, 2002), authentic happiness (Seligman, 2004), virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and the nature of the good life (Kernes & Kinnier, 2005). In a parallel development, a new “positive organizational behavior” (Luthans, 2003; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Wright, 2003) or “positive organizational scholarship” (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Dutton & Glynn, 2007) has arisen upon claims that organization studies has underemphasized phenomena such as strengths, virtues, and the good. Positive organizational behavior is “the study and application of positively oriented human resources and psychological capacities....” (Luthans, 2003, p. 179) as they are situated explicitly in organizational contexts. And positive organizational scholarship is “a broad framework that seeks to explain behaviors in and of organizations” that “focuses explicitly on the positive states and processes that arise from, and result in, life-giving dynamics, optimal functioning, or enhanced capabilities or strengths” (Dutton & Glynn, 2007, p. 1).

This expanded focus for organizational research has been greeted both with excitement and trepidation. Wright (2003) proclaims the field “an idea whose time has truly come,” and the *Harvard Business Review* has heralded the field as a “breakthrough idea.”<sup>1</sup> But in a critique of this new focus, Fineman (2006) asks if the field is theoretically limited and culturally relative. Tavris (2005) wonders if the move toward the positive is more hopeful than substantial. And Cowen and Kilmer (2002) ask how this new field differs from the humanistic turn taken in the field decades ago by the likes of Jahoda (1958), Maslow (1954), and Rogers (1969). For many scholars today, judgment about the promise of positive organization studies (POS) awaits answers to these mounting questions.

In this article we take seriously the promise and the challenge of this new field in organization studies. We find that the key to both is a philosophical problem of knowing without saying. The promise of the field lies in its founding intuition of social life in organizations; the challenge of the field lies in its inability to define and describe this social life in a satisfactory way. In this article we seek to explore the promise and meet the challenge of the intuition of social life by offering a way of talking about it. Building upon the distinction between *human nature* and *human being*, we show how this “social life perspective” adds a spiritual dimension of human being to the material dimension of human nature already described by organizational science. At article’s end we step back and take a broader view to suggest how a positive organization studies addressed to social life can invigorate organization studies more generally.

## The Problem of Knowing without Saying

Positive organizational studies (POS) speaks with a new vocabulary, with talk of such things as *virtue, flow, character strengths, excellence, high-quality connections, thriving, resilience, and courage*. However, while such talk enlarges organization studies, it challenges the canons of natural social science focused on objects and events in relationships of cause and effect. For instance, while the idea of ‘courage’ has occupied philosophy for centuries it has resisted empirical definition and causal explanation—as underscored by Socrates’ famous line: “tell me, if you can, what is courage?” (see Schmid, 1992). This difficulty of capturing positive organizational phenomena in scientific terms is noted by Cameron and Caza (2004):

The lack of precise language to explain POS phenomena has led to an impoverished understanding of that which is good, elevating, and life-giving in organizations. Concepts have remained under-bounded and under-defined and, as a result, under-investigated. POS is hampered, in other words, by being in the early stages of developing a vernacular for the most ennobling and empowering aspects of organizational life. (p.5)

While Cameron and Caza presume the difficulty is developmental and can be remedied with time and attention, this is belied by the long history of our thinking about courage (e.g. Miller, 2000; Worline, 2004; Yearley, 1990). We propose instead that the difficulty lies in the assumptions of natural science itself, and thus can be remedied only by beginning with different assumptions.

Looking more broadly, the scientific difficulty posed by POS appears in its defining idea of the “positive.” In 2007, Dutton & Glynn published a comprehensive review of the field in which the adjective “positive” or its variants appeared 212 times, but without a single explicit definition. Fineman (2006) calls the question when he asks what is meant by the term, noting that positive aspects of life in organizations cannot easily be distinguished from negative aspects, and noting that any narrow focus on positive aspects leads to an inaccurate reading of life in organizations. It is a fair criticism, for ambiguity about the positive has plagued the field from its beginnings and positive phenomena often have been intertwined with adversity. For instance, Cameron & Caza (2004) acknowledged that: “... the most dramatic examples of flourishing, vitality, and strength in organizations are usually found amidst challenge, setback, and difficult demands” (p. 1). Evidently, like the concept of courage discussed above, the positive is easier to see than it is to say in the language of natural science.

The challenge for positive organization studies is to come to an understanding within which scholars can converse about such things as courage, thriving, flourishing, excellence, flow, and virtue. We believe that an important beginning toward meeting this challenge is to recognize that these phenomena tap into a common intuition of spirit and life; an intuition that Dutton (2003) has called *social life*. The notion of social life lies just beneath the surface of much POS research and writing. At times the idea is nearly explicit, such as when Cameron and Caza (2004, p. 1) introduce POS as “the study of that which is *positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations*” (italics added), or when Dutton and Heaphy (2003, p. 264) write of the vital connections people make at work as “the *dynamic, living tissue* that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction” (italics added). At other times the idea is implicit, such as when Emmons (2003, p. 93) writes: “Gratitude is a virtue that characterizes people who are well fit to *living harmoniously* among others ...”, or when Fredrickson (2003, p. 163) describes “how individual organizational members’ experiences of positive emotions—like joy, interest, pride, contentment, gratitude, and love—can be transformational and fuel upward *spirals toward optimal individual and organizational functioning*” (italics added). We believe that moving this implicit and unarticulated intuition into awareness is the key to unlocking the “positive” in positive organization studies.

## A Metaphysical Challenge

Einstein, in conversation with Heisenberg, claimed that it was nonsensical to found scientific theory on observable facts alone when, “In reality the very opposite happens. It is theory which decides what we can observe” (quoted in Hebb, 1972). Science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin (1969), discussing the importance of her genre, suggested that “the truth is a matter of the imagination.” Einstein’s insight—that what we know how to see will determine what we do see—goes hand-in-glove with LeGuin’s reference to the truth as a matter of the imagination—science and art together show us that what we can imagine is as essential as what we can observe. If we see only what we are ready to see, then to see something as intuitive as social life our imagination must be ready for the encounter.

We believe this encounter cannot take place within the imagination of natural science because social life cannot be fit to its terms. Concerned with the concrete and objective, natural science cannot comprehend a social life which is neither. The phenomena identified by POS—such things as excellence, virtue, flow, resilience, high-quality connections, and courage—are not simply *natural things*, but are also *spiritual things*. Social life “breathes” in and through the material substrate described by natural science, but it is not that substrate. In more philosophical terms, social life is not a matter of human *nature* only, but is a spirit of human *being* as well. To the romantic poet Coleridge, matter is “that of which there is consciousness, but which is not itself conscious” (quoted in Barfield, 1977, p. 147). And to the psychologist Barfield, spirit is not that which is perceived, but that which simply *is*. Human being is the spirit and life over and above the matter and causal determinism of human nature (Sandelands, 2005; 2007).

Thus, to grasp the intuition of social life requires a different way of seeing—a way of seeing not limited to the naturalism of social science, a way of seeing open to the life and spirit of human being. We believe that, perhaps without recognizing it, the field of POS calls us to think about organizations differently—not only in terms of material things and events in causal relation or even in terms of the meanings of such things (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006; Tsoukas, 2003), but also in terms of spirit, life, and the transcendent. Although these last ideas are familiar in the fields of theology and religion, as well as in the humanities (e.g. Zald, 1993), they have only recently become a focus in studies of management and organization (e.g. Conger, 1994; Dent & Higgins, 2005; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Weick & Putnam, 2006).<sup>2</sup> In answer to this call, we try below to describe the social life of organizations in terms open to the spiritual and transcendent, in terms focused on human being rather than human nature, in terms that POS knows but has been unable to say.

### **A Social Life Perspective**

We begin to describe social life, not in the usual way with a definition, but with a view and discussion of three photographic images that can lead to a definition. We take this unusual step because we want to come to social life with as much openness and imagination as possible. We call upon artistic images of social life because these offer prospects of seeing beyond the sightlines of scientific language. Where scientific language delineates the constituent ‘things’ of social life, art presents social life in the round, in all its human dimensions (Langer, 1953). As Scruton (1998) points out: “Art ennobles the human spirit, and presents us with a justifying vision of ourselves, as something higher than nature and apart from it” (p. 42). Looking at the whole of social life revealed by art, it is possible to see in terms other than the scientific ones of objective cause and effect (Barry & Rerup, 2006; Bruner, 1986; 1992; Gagliardi, 1996; Strati, 1999; 2000), and instead see in the terms of spirit and life hinted by positive organization studies.

Thus we ask the reader to consider with us the trio of photographs below. We offer these photos neither as empirical evidence nor as rational argument, but as prompts to a different kind of look at social life as human being. Although any number of other photographs might have served this purpose, we focus on these three because they hold important aspects of social life still for us to see and discuss. Photography is an exacting art of opportunity—an art of being in the right place at the right time. Truly a picture is worth a thousand words.

**Insert Figures 1 about here**

**Insert Figures 2 about here**

**Insert Figures 3 about here**

### **Moments of Social Life**

These are images of human being. In them we find in common three aspects of social life: *love*, *play*, and *individuation*, which are nested, like Russian dolls in which each contains its successor. We call these aspects *moments of social life*. By the word ‘moment’ we intend both an interval of time (social life unfolds through time) and an aspect of energy and movement (social life is a dynamic). In particular, as we describe below, we intend a condition of polarity, of tension between countervailing tendencies. We suggest further that the three moments of social life are known as *feelings*, which are the way the moments of social life are manifest in the body. When these feelings are sufficiently strong they rise to the level of conscious awareness (see Sandelands, 1998b). Thus knowledge of social life is not rational—it is not an empirical induction or a logical deduction, but is an intuition of being that comes instead by ‘abduction’ (Pierce, 1955; Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2007).

This kind of direct and unmediated knowledge has been pointed to by scholars before—Pierce (1955) called it ‘abduction,’ Aquinas called it ‘knowledge through inclination,’ and Maritain called it ‘connatural knowledge.’ As described by Maritain (2001), this is “a kind of knowledge that is not clear like that obtained through concepts and conceptual judgments. It is obscure, unsystematic, vital knowledge, by means of instinct or sympathy, and in which the intellect, in order to make its judgments, consults the inner leanings of the subject” (pp. 34-35). Because of the initially fuzzy nature of such knowledge, it is perhaps not surprising that social scientists avoid concepts known in this way (Deutsch, 1961). However, rather than skip over these essentials of human being because they are hard to pin down, we propose that scholars instead turn to art, such as photography, which can represent these essentials in concrete works visible and discussable to all. And we suggest, finally, that the three moments of social life are *spiritual*, which is to say that they are phenomena not only of human nature but also of human being which subsumes it.<sup>3</sup> In making this claim we recognize something that is true of every way of seeing or metaphysic; namely, that just as each is an ontology (i.e., an idea about existence) and an epistemology (i.e., an idea about knowing), each is also a spirituality (i.e., an idea about immanence). Whereas natural science denies immanence, a social life perspective affirms it.

*Love: The primary tension between unity and division*

The first and main thing to feel in these images is *love*, which is manifest in the tensions between unity and division in social life. Building upon Sandelands (2003), we define love abstractly as the tension between the division and unity of human being. Love is at once movement toward unity across differences (e.g., as persons or groups overcome differences that separate them) and movement toward differentiation within unity (e.g., as persons or groups claim individual identities). Love is to see, for instance, in the struggles of its young (no matter how old they may be) to establish that oneness that does not deny but rather nourishes their personality. Thus love brings form to social life through its dividing aspect of difference and its uniting aspect of similarity.

That love is the first moment of social life is at once an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that love is the foundation of human being, where person and society subsist in one another. In this tension the person is an indivisible being (literally, ‘individual’) and the society is a whole being across persons. The epistemological claim is that the tension between unity and division is known by distinctive feelings, that we call “love,” when its intensity rises to the level of conscious awareness. And the spiritual claim is that love is transcendent. At the same time that it is natural and realized in the body, love is supernatural and reaches beyond the body (it is more than physics, chemistry, biology, and even psychology can say). To say this is to affirm what all of the world’s great religions take for granted; namely, that love embodies spirit. Turning to the photographs in Figures 1 – 3, we gain insight into the moment of love. In the Eisenstaedt photo of the drum major with children love’s tension between unity and division appears in the delightful question of the march itself. Will the march come off? Will the line hold? Will this rag-tag group remain united or will it divide into a chaos of the wayward? In this image the feeling of love is that of taking part in a surprising new life; of coming together across the differences of individual persons to find a unity of action and purpose.

A somewhat different image of tension between division and unity in social life appears in the photo of the candidate Whitlam and his followers. There is love in the electricity between the individual candidate and the mass of followers. Will the candidate be swallowed up into the group, or will he remain apart, his identity intact? There is love as well in the parallel tension among members; they throng to pack closely together around their leader in spite of their natural resistance and even fear to be touched (Canetti, 1963). The image also captures distinctive feelings of love—of longing for the leader and of longing for the group, of wanting to be included despite one’s separate individual existence.

Finally, although one does not usually think of the executive suite as a lovers’ lane, there is tension between unity and division in Weiner’s photograph of the Packard Motors executives. Here is love in the division and unity of organizational hierarchy. As Goffman (1967) has noted, the interaction rituals of organizations inform and are informed by hierarchy. For each person there is a position and role—of leader, lieutenant, or underling—and to each person there is an expectation—to lead, to follow, to perform. Weiner’s photo captures the tension in one of the central questions of hierarchy: Will the boss (seated at the center) be pleased? Will he be supported by his lieutenants? Love’s moment is known through feelings of the continuing affirmation of structure, of parts in relation to the whole.

*Play: The elaborating tension between fantasy and reality*

The second thing to feel in these images is a tension between what is real and what is not, a tension we define as *play*. Building upon Sandelands (2003), we define the moment of play as the dynamic tension between the fantasy and reality of human relationships. At the same time that players know that their play is “only a game” (a fantasy in reality), they take their play seriously and they truly want to pull it off (a reality in the fantasy). Through play they give form to social life by juxtaposing newly imagined relations with established relations.

That play is a second moment of social life is again an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that play is the creative origin of social life. This is to say, with anthropological linguist Huizinga (1950), that human being is played; that its social structures, institutions, and cultures arise in the form of play. The epistemological claim is that the feeling of play is the experience of its tension in the body, an experience that again may or may not rise to the level of conscious awareness (in a feeling of fun perhaps, or one of contest or undergoing). And, again, the spiritual claim is that play is transcendent. Our human being is distinguished by its creative imagination which reaches beyond nature, not only to regard nature as “nature,” but to create new “worlds” of meaning (Anscombe, 2005).

In Eisenstaedt’s photo of the drum major with children, play’s tension is vivid. For the kids, the fantastic world of the drum major (a world of garish costume and theatrical movements) is set against the mundane reality of a late summer afternoon in the neighborhood. For the drum major, the exacting demands of martial exercise are set against an occasion of make believe. In the photograph, too, the feelings are vivid. For the children and drum major alike the photo conveys the giddiness of whimsy set against the seriousness of march.

In the photograph of the candidate Whitlam, the tension between fantasy and reality appears as the group rallies behind its winning candidate. The group is becoming a fantastic new being in the world—a new force to be taken seriously in a political contest that is itself a game. Political victory is a moment of turning in which an imagined standing and power becomes a real standing and power. Politics, like baseball, is a repeated game played in repeated earnest.

In Weiner’s photograph of the Packard Motors executives, play unfolds in the interaction ritual of a business presentation. Capturing a moment suspended in time, the photo confirms Goffman’s (1967) description of such rituals as dramas played in earnest. The players know that their standing in the organization is a stock in fantasy that rises and falls with news good and bad. All hinges on what the boss (seated at the center) thinks, a tension between imagined and real that could turn into exhilaration if the presentation goes well or into despondency if not. What is perhaps most interesting about this play is that it takes place behind masks of agreeable indifference. The business setting discourages expressions of feeling as signs of lost composure. But away from work, in confidence with family and friends, the feelings of this play will come alive in great tales of intrigue and passion. The magic in this photograph is that it conveys the tension of the moment in spite of pretenses to the contrary. It is a tension to see in aspects of countenance executives cannot think to control—their intent gaze, postures, and places taken in relation to one another.

#### *Individuation: The culminating tension between person and group*

The last thing to feel in these images is the tension between one and all, a tension we refer to as *individuation*. Again, building upon Sandelands (2003), we define the moment of individuation as the tension between the person and the group. Each image presents individual persons involved in the ways and means of the group. Persons come to be in the group which comes to be in its persons. Individuation is the culmination of social life, the moment at which social life appears both in the group and in its persons.<sup>4</sup>

Once again, the claim that individuation is the third moment of social life is an ontological, an epistemological, and a spiritual claim. The ontological claim is that individuation is the moment at which appear both the individual person and the group.<sup>5</sup> The epistemological claim is that the feeling of individuation is the experience of its tension in the body, such as in a feeling of mutuality, or loneliness, or perhaps simply “being in it with others.” And, again, the spiritual claim is that individuation is transcendent. This is to affirm a central precept of many of the world’s religions that the individual person in communion with others (the person who loves neighbor as self) is an image of the divine. In the photograph by Eisenstaedt the tension between person and group is to see in the children’s delight in the question of whether or not they can take on and live up to the role of member of the marching band. And, likewise it is to see in the drum major’s delight in the question of whether or not he, as the leader and the group’s most individuated member, can pull the group into line and, thereby, bring the band into being.

All begin as separate persons with an idea of the band and its structure. Can they together bring the group into being, into a life that is its own? The photograph of the candidate Whitlam presents the tension between person and group in a more grown up way, in the look in Whitlam's eyes. He is the one chosen by the group to be its leader and custodian, and yet he looks distant and abstracted, as if questioning what he has gotten into. Leadership is a daunting task; its test of character rarely passed without hardship and qualification. Amidst the enthusiasm and joy in the image Whitlam's wary eyes seem to foreshadow the burden of being the one to lead.

Finally, Weiner's photograph of the Packard Motors executives bears the tension between individual and group in full flower. In taking a formal role or office, the person steps aside from himself and takes a place in relation to the whole. Along with their roles come duties of office to be dispatched dispassionately and impersonally, and yet each of these men, in different ways, is concerned to reconcile his personal beliefs, wants, and actions with the requirements of the group. There is the ceaseless tension between being company men on the one hand and being their own men on the other hand. This image also brings to light possible moral feelings, as one executive standing to the side looks as though weighing an unwelcome objection, while another sitting next to the boss is perhaps resigned to follow the bosses' lead. Such are the complexities of feeling in this rich form of social life, all unfolding behind masks of impassiveness.

### **Social Life Defined**

We can now define the social life of organizations by taking its three moments together. *Social life is the form given by three interrelated moments of human being: love* (tension between division and unity), *play* (tension between fantasy and reality), *and individuation* (tension between person and group). This idea of form stands apart from substance. Social life is a form much as a waterfall is a form—it is the shape taken by substance in action. Just as there can be no waterfall apart from water, there can be no social life apart from people and what they do. The substance of persons, things, and interactions is the medium in which social life appears. This social life becomes known as its polarities or tensions appear in the body as feelings. The body is the register of social life (Sandelands, 1998a, 1998b), the site at which human nature and human being come together as feeling.

Like every genus of life, social life grows and develops through time and in fulfillment of its being. As described, social life takes root in love, shoots forth through play, and blossoms as individuation. This growth is a progression of increasingly complex forms which are linked by their ultimate end or *telos*, the human person in the group. In this regard it is interesting to note how this progression of human being, which is a progression of spirit as well as of substance, appears in some of the most basic and not explicitly "spiritual" ideas of social science. At a primitive level, in Canetti's (1962) concept of the 'open crowd', the moment of love appears in the temporary life of a crowd in which people put aside their differences to unite as one being. At a higher level, in Huizinga's (1950) concept of 'cooperative agonism', the moment of play appears in the creative dynamic of contest that defines the culture of every group. And at an even higher level, in Weber's (1946) concept of 'bureaucracy', the moment of individuation appears as people see themselves and others as taking parts or offices in abstract formal organizations. Across these levels and kinds of human society there is growth and development of human being and spirit in social life.

Where the vitality of social life is alien to a natural social science focused on the material, the social life perspective takes this vitality as the starting point for social theory. This is why we turned to art as a crucial and perhaps indispensable instrument for the study of social life. Art is the mode of abstraction by which the feelings and forms of social life are represented in objects or events, such as in a photograph, painting, dance, sculpture, song, poem, or ritual (Langer, 1953). What Langer (1953) and others call 'significant form' in art is its dynamism—be this of lines and color in painting, of sound and rhythm in music, of mass and space in sculpture and architecture, and of sound, meter, and meaning in poetry. The elements of art are "tensions" that engender structure by acting upon one another.<sup>6</sup> A great deal of art, perhaps most art, objectifies the feelings and forms of social life (Sandelands, 1998b). Social life is what we sing, dance, paint, sculpt, enact in ritual, and tell stories about (e.g. Boje, 1991; Phillips, 2005). On an intellectual plane, the forms of social life are understood by seeing them represented, literally "re-presented," in works of art. And on an emotional plane, the feelings of social life are understood as they are remembered, literally "re-remembered," by the feelings of art. Because art objectifies the feelings and forms of social life, it produces representations that form the basis for dialogue, study, and debate. We have appealed to photography for this reason—that its images objectify social life, holding it still for study.

That others may find in our photos different dynamics of division and unity, fantasy and reality, or person and group represented in the photographs is important, for it opens the possibility of a dialogue through which scholars can deepen their understanding of these fundamental moments of social life.

### **Knowing and Saying: Positive Organizational Studies Revisited**

We believe that this article makes explicit what has been implicit in positive organization studies for some time. By its focus on positive phenomena that betoken social life, POS declares an interest in human being. We believe this interest has remained implicit for want of a way to think about this human being apart from the science of human nature (a case of knowing without saying). We have offered the *social life perspective* in answer to this want. In this final section of the article we show how this perspective contributes to our current understanding of the positive in organizations and how it thereby opens up new avenues for research. To this end we consider in detail two descriptions of positive organization: “collective flow” (Quinn, 2005) and “compassion organizing” (Dutton, Worline, Frost & Lilius, 2006).

Building on Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Quinn (2005) defines the psychological state of “flow” as a high-performance experience marked by “temporal merging of one’s situation awareness with the automatic application of activity-relevant knowledge and skills” (p.10). According to Quinn, flow becomes a state of positive organization when socially realized as an experience called *collective flow*:

For flow to be social, it must require people’s awareness of the situation to be similar or at least complementary, and for the automatic application of their knowledge and skills in that situation to be interrelated; it requires us to conceive of the social as interrelated action. If people experience flow in interrelated action—i.e., mutual adjustment—then their individual experience of flow is contingent on the other parties to the interaction experiencing flow as well, and this would make the flow a collective experience. (p. 38)

Quinn illustrates this idea of collective flow with the example of conversation, which he describes as a fundamental constituent of organization:

If flow is the experience of merging situation awareness with activity-relevant knowledge and skills, then in a conversation where the quality of each contribution is dependent on previous and subsequent contributions collective flow would mean that people experience themselves moving toward shared or complementary goals, adjusting in real time to each other’s expectations, needs, contributions, learning how others work and how to interact effectively along the way. Presumably, this would require people to have or develop shared or complementary goals that people care about achieving enough to prioritize above their personal agendas and the sensitivity and vigilance to keep up with the unique unfolding circumstances of the conversation. (p. 38)

Quinn begins in human nature with material individuals who operate independently and who carry personal agendas that must be overcome in order for collective flow to be realized. But within this conception the collective flow concept is difficult to apply because leaves to ask how similar and/or how complementary people must be for their activity and experience to qualify as collective flow. By defining collective flow as an aggregate condition of separate entities, Quinn declares the idea an intellectual construct, rather than an actual condition of social life. Collective flow is not something unto itself, but a collection of individual experiences.

In contrast, the social life perspective begins in human being with moments of love, play, and individuation. It defines collective flow as a form of social life—a particular expression of the tensions of division and unity, fantasy and reality, and person and group. Collective flow is not an idea about people in the aggregate, but its own being. In the example of a conversation, collective flow is a play of persons who, in spite of (or perhaps because of) their differences, are committed to taking part in its unfolding life. Collective flow is a form of being that has specific dynamics of division in unity, fantasy in reality, and person in group and that registers as specific feelings in its participants. Thus the social life perspective identifies and explicates an essence of conversation that Quinn can define only as a sum. A conversation is not simply an interaction of individuals; it is a life in which persons distinguish themselves (individuate) through play on the basis of love. Its “individuals” are as much effect as cause of conversation. In the collective flow of conversation persons come alive both in themselves and in communion with others. This integration of persons and conversation is beyond Quinn’s idea of collective flow to say.

A second description of positive organization studies appears in Dutton, Worline, Frost & Lilius' (2006) case study of compassion organizing. The authors define compassion in individual terms as "an expression of an innate human instinct to respond to the suffering of others," which is manifest as a three-part experience of "noticing, feeling, and responding to another's suffering" (p. 4). According to Dutton et al., individual compassion becomes *compassion organizing* when "a collective response to a particular incident of human suffering ... entails the coordination of individual compassion in a particular organizational context" (p. 5). Based on a close study of how one organization responded to the misfortunes of three of its members, the authors describe compassion organizing in terms of five mechanisms that 'activate' and 'mobilize' individual compassion: 1) contextual enabling of attention; 2) contextual enabling of emotion; 3) contextual enabling of legitimacy and trust; 4) agents improvising structures; and 5) symbolic enrichment.

Because Dutton et al. begin, as does Quinn, in human nature with material individuals, compassion organizing poses the same puzzle as collective flow; namely, why and how should an individual feeling be organized? In the social life perspective, which begins in human being with moments of love, play, and individuation, compassion organizing arises as an adaptation of the living group to a breach in its unity. Rather than being an individual inclination to respond to separate others, compassion organizing unfolds as people take their places in a social life defined by tensions of unity and division, fantasy and reality, and person and group. Compassion organizing is no mere conglomeration of individual reactions that are somehow and for some reason activated and coordinated mobilized. Instead it is a form of social life felt in a moment of love when a rupture (a new division in unity) evokes a healing response (a new unity in division). Moreover, from a social life perspective, compassion organizing is not only a moment of love, it is also a moment of play as people create a new reality for those harmed and a moment of individuation as people take stock of persons in the group to establish new formal structures and processes for its good. Thus the idea of compassion organizing, like the idea of collective flow, is enriched by seeing it as an instance of social life. To speak of social life is to begin to say what positive organization studies has known without saying

### **Revisiting the Meaning of the Positive**

By identifying the feelings and forms of social life, the social life perspective clarifies what is "positive" about positive organizational studies. As we've seen, social life is a dynamic of love (of unity and division) that is created in play (of fantasy and reality) and that culminates in individuation (of person and group). Where there are these things, there is human being—an integral vitality of the human spirit. The phenomena of POS—such things as virtue, excellence, collective flow, compassion organizing, resilience, and courage—are "positive" as they conduce to human being in moments of social life. Their positive meaning is the social life they serve.

Further, if the positive meaning of POS phenomena is their bearing on social life, then we have an answer to the question about why many phenomena of POS are apparent in the breach. Human being is an assertion of life against death, an assertion most plain under conditions of duress and uncertainty. This is to see in Worline's (2004) analysis of courage as a form of social life in which an individual, acting on his/her own internalized image of the group stands up to meet a threat to its being. The positive is any expression of social life against the diminution or death of human being. Further, and in answer to Fineman's criticism, this idea of the positive is not culturally specific but is a universal to grasp by careful study of why and how forms of social life unfold in different human societies. At its heart, the social life perspective makes the universal claim that the moments of social life (of love, play, and individuation) underlay the myriad forms of human being.

### **New Ways and Means**

Finally, the social life perspective augurs an enlarged study of organizations. By its conception of the vitality of human being in moments of love, play, and individuation, this perspective opens upon a more expansive understanding of human organizations. As we have argued and shown by example, the social life perspective reaches beyond empirical observations of natural objects and events to the spiritual feelings and forms of social life. Such attentiveness to feeling opens a door to modes of understanding human being—such as story, literature, painting, theatre, cinema, music, photography, and dance—that have been left out, or kept out, of the social sciences (Zald, 1993). By our appeal to art in this article we join a growing rank who have studied human organization using the arts of jazz (e.g., Bougon, Weick, & Binkhorst, 1977; Eisenberg, 1990), aesthetics and photography (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990; Strati, 2000; Taylor & Hansen, 2005), chant, folkdance, and architecture (e.g., Barry & Rerup, 2006; Guillen, 1997; Linstead, 2002; Sandelands, 1998b; Yanow, 1998), theatre (e.g.,



Meisiek & Barry, 2007), story (e.g., Boje, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; O'Connor, 1995; Phillips, 2006; Worline, 2004), and choral singing (e.g., Stephens, 2009). We see no reason for parochialism in understanding human organizations, which are expressions of a human being that encompasses the spiritual as well as the material. We call organizational scholars to the testimonies of feeling, inviting them to see, with Pascal, that the human heart has reasons that are essential to our understanding. Social life challenges students of organizations because it is to grasp not by methods of natural science, but by methods open to feeling and spirit. By engaging the intuition of social life in positive organization studies, we are called to think about human being as well as human nature, to think about spiritual form in addition to material substance; and to think about growth toward the divine in addition to an indifferent social physics. Social life is a mystery of love (of division and unity), elaborated by play (of fantasy and reality), that comes to fruition in individuation (as person and group). To see social life thus is to see with eyes open to the spirit that is human being.

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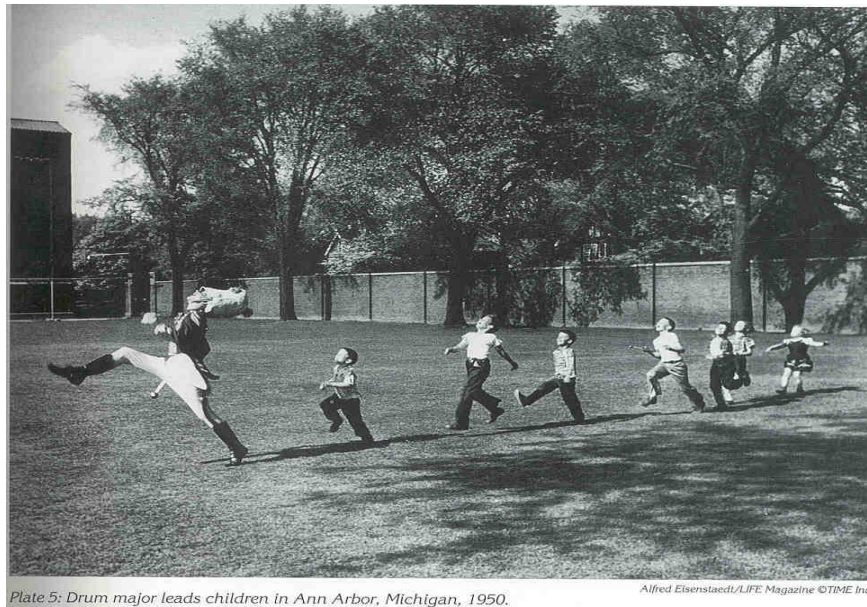
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**Figure 1: Drum Major and Children – Eisenstaedt**



Figure 8.3



Photographer: Dan Weiner  
Source: Ewing, W.A. (1989) *America worked*. New York: Abrams.

**Figure 3: Packard Motors Executives – Weiner**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Harvard Business Review*, February, 2004, pp. 13-37.

<sup>2</sup> For a notably prescient exception, one of the founders of psychology, William James, saw in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1908) that most people most of the time understand their lives as somehow part of and beyond nature; that is, as human being.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper we speak of spirit and of spirituality in the most general terms we can manage; to mean that which is transcendent, that which is “above and beyond the material universe” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). A more precise spirituality rooted in a more precise theology is possible and desirable, but articulation of such must be the subject for another paper.

<sup>4</sup> This may also be the moment that sets human life apart from that of all other animals (Trefil, 1997). We alone organize formally into groups in which each member understands his/her place in the life of the whole.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this final moment of social life is the first moment of social science which takes the individual and the group as its material “first facts.” This is a point of significant comparison between the scientific metaphysic of human nature and the spiritual metaphysic of human being. As shown by Sandelands (2007) the two metaphysics engender different ideas of person and different ideas of society. Their differences are such, he goes on to explain, that our self-understanding is incoherent and inconsistent in the one while it is coherent and consistent in the other.

<sup>6</sup> “Pure form,” writes Langer (1967) “does not exist as material, but as polarity, as lines of force, as tensions, perhaps as longing ...” (p. 163).