

Editorial

Positive psychology interventions in organizations

Background

We are happy to present this special issue in the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology on 'Positive Psychology Interventions in Organizations'. In this special issue, we bring together papers that are inspired by positive psychology, which was launched more than twenty years ago as the 'science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Ever since that time, the attention to positive phenomena in organizations has increased. More and more scholars and practitioners have become convinced that health and well-being in organizations should not only be explored from a pathogenic perspective focusing on risk factors and diseases, but also from a salutogenic perspective, focusing on resources for the positive promotion of health and well-being (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

The increasing interest for positive psychology in the context of work and organizations has led to the publication of many lay management books, thereby presenting managers with the challenge to sort fact from fiction (Mills, Fleck, & Kozikowski, 2013). At the same time, the empirical evidence for the supposed beneficial effects of positive psychology interventions is still sparse, which constrains practitioners from implementing positive psychology practices (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011). With this special issue, we aim to bring together rigorous research that strengthens the evidence-based underpinnings of the positive psychology approach in organizations. In doing so, we have a particular focus on positive psychology interventions, referring to any intentional activity or method (training, coaching, etc.) based on (a) the cultivation of valued subjective experiences, (b) the building of positive individual traits, or (c) the building of civic virtue and positive institutions (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Bakker, 2013). Systematic reviews and a meta-analysis have pointed out that these interventions had a small positive impact on improving desirable work outcomes, and a small to moderate effect on reducing undesirable work outcomes (Donaldson, Lee, & Donaldson, 2019; Meyers et al., 2013). However, the dual purpose of intervention studies (i.e., both conducting high-quality research and addressing organizational and employee needs) presents researchers with several challenges regarding optimizing the effectiveness of these interventions (Michel, O'Shea, & Hoppe, 2015). One of the explicit goals of positive psychology is to apply psychological knowledge to the betterment of individuals and society by helping individuals discern what qualities are authentic to them, what makes their lives meaningful, and what goals are intrinsically motivating to them (Norris & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Therefore, positive psychology interventions cannot be based on a one-size-fits-all approach to well-being (Norem & Chang, 2002) but need to be tailored to the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization. Scholars in this area are

therefore faced with the challenge of making the most fitting selection from a large toolbox filled with change mechanisms, types of interventions, and delivery modes.

In this editorial, we provide a brief discussion of some of these challenges and we discuss how each of the nine articles included in the special issue expands our understanding of each of these issues.

Mechanisms of change: Why do positive psychology interventions work?

Positive psychology interventions aim for change in terms of improving desirable work outcomes such as well-being, and reducing undesirable work outcomes such as job stress and burnout by building upon a wide variety of theories of change (Donaldson et al., 2019). For example, job crafting interventions are often based on JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Tims & Bakker, 2010). This theory postulates that if workers proactively optimize the balance between their job demands and job resources by seeking resources and optimizing demands, they can increase their person-job fit, leading to higher levels of work engagement. Mindfulness-based interventions are often based on the two-component model of mindfulness (Bishop et al., 2004), positing that by practising with being present in the moment, and accepting momentary experiences, people can improve their mindfulness and in turn improve their well-being and reduce their job stress.

Whereas early intervention studies tended to focus on intervention outcomes, more recently the attention has shifted to understanding the specific mechanisms through which interventions have their effect (Michel et al., 2015). However, it is often difficult to pinpoint the specific elements of a theory that link the intervention to specific outcomes. The paper by Demerouti et al. in the special issue shed more light on the operating mechanisms of their job crafting intervention, by showing that an increase in seeking challenges (and not seeking resources or optimizing demands) was responsible for the effect of the intervention on attitude towards change. The paper by van Dorsen-Boog et al. uncovers the active element of a self-leadership intervention by showing that work engagement was responsible for transferring the effect of the intervention on general health and performance two months after the intervention.

In addition to theories of the psychological processes that are impacted by an intervention, and that explain how the desired change in well-being occurs, the design and the interventions themselves also rely on theories on how to best facilitate learning and behaviour change (Michel et al., 2015), such as goal-setting theory, nudge theory, and experiential learning theory. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) proposes that setting clear goals enables individuals to channel their attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities, thereby improving their self-regulation and helping them in accomplishing positive and proactive behaviours (e.g., job crafting, strengths use). Nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) proposes that forms of positive reinforcement can prime individuals to make favourable choices, by enabling the choice to participate in such behaviours so easily that they become the default heuristic. Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) proposes that concrete experiences form the basis for observation and reflection on what is working or failing, followed by thoughts on how to improve future experiences and active experimentation.

Because interventions are usually based on a combination of theories, it is hard to establish the active elements of the intervention. In particular, two papers in this special issue shed more light on this issue. Verelst et al. investigate participants' adherence to different elements of their job crafting e-intervention, and how this was associated with

the effectiveness of the intervention. They found that the adherence to the development of a job crafting plan was predictive of an increase in job crafting behaviour, whereas information seeking, reflection, and plan execution were not. Weintraub et al. provide more insight into the active elements of their goal-setting intervention by exploring the different types of goals that participants set for themselves and analysing the predictive role of goal themes on self-reported flow. They found that particularly mastery goals, resource acquisition goals, and understanding goals were significant predictors of daily flow, whereas goals pertaining to self-management, physical well-being, and social responsibility were not. This type of knowledge about the specific elements of an intervention that are responsible for its effectiveness may help to optimize future positive psychology interventions.

Top-down or bottom-up interventions?

Interestingly, most positive psychology interventions tend to focus on the first two pillars of positive psychology that focus on the individual (positive experiences and positive traits), thereby neglecting the third pillar that refers to positive institutions that enhance positive experiences and positive traits (Mills et al., 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). To generate more knowledge on work environments that support the well-being among workers, there is a need for more top-down interventions that are initiated and driven by organizations and senior managers and applied across whole teams, departments, or organizations (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2019; Meyers et al., 2013).

Two papers in this special issue focus on positive top-down interventions that target supervisory support behaviours. Because supervisors are able to cultivate a culture of support for employees and hold positions at which they can provide critical resources to alleviate for work-related stress, these types of interventions may lead to sustainable effects that remain to be present long after the intervention has stopped. Mohr et al. show that a training that targets emotional and instrumental support behaviours, role modelling, and redesigning work to support conflicting work-life demands improved the well-being of military veterans who transitioned to civilian workplaces. In their systematic review, Slemp et al. have brought together the interventions that help leaders to provide support for basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness of their subordinates. Their findings also reveal a disadvantage of top-down interventions; although these interventions do create changes at the proximal level of leader behaviour, the effects at the distal level of subordinates are much smaller and may take more time to materialize.

Another downside of top-down interventions targeted at supervisors is that this assumes that workers are passive recipients of the interventions (Nielsen, 2013), and that they are largely dependent on their supervisors for having their needs fulfilled (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2017). In contrast, bottom-up interventions involve employees initiating and making changes (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017). These interventions may be particularly relevant for workers who have little contact with their supervisor or those who do not even have a supervisor or an employer (Nielsen, 2013). Further, bottom-up interventions are in line with studies showing that self-initiated and proactive behaviours can have an important influence on the well-being of workers (Oprea, Barzin, Virga, Iliescu, & Rusu, 2019; Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010), and with the trend to encourage workers to take responsibility for their own work behaviour and well-being (Neck & Houghton, 2006).

Demerouti et al. show the added value of a bottom-up intervention over and above top-down interventions. They found that a job crafting intervention aimed at enhancing the

adaptation to organization change was effective in addition to top-down interventions such as providing workers with high-quality information regarding the change process and leadership concerned with facilitating change behaviours. Other papers in this special issue target how online self-training (Althammer), self-instruction (Mohr), and goal-setting nudge interventions (Weintraub) can support worker initiatives to enhance their well-being. Weintraub et al show that a goal-setting nudge intervention that was deployed through a smartphone application helped participants to influence themselves, leading to more flow experiences, less daily stress, higher engagement and subjective performance when compared to the control group.

To combine the benefits of top-down and bottom-up approaches, we call for future research on participative processes (see, e.g., Holman & Axtell, 2016; Kompier, Geurts, Gründemann, Vink, & Smulders, 1998), where employees and employers have a joined responsibility for the design of an intervention and that target the combination of leader and employee behaviours as mutually supportive ways to foster employee well-being. In addition to improving employees' capacity to thrive in difficult circumstances, management and employees would benefit from collaborative interventions that enhance the capacity of workplaces to support employee thriving while also fulfilling its core mission. Such approaches would focus on the space between people and workplaces rather than focusing exclusively within people or within work design. For example, a workgroup intervention to improve workplace civility in social encounters among people in workgroups (Leiter, Day, Oore, & Spence Laschinger, 2012; Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011) contributed to the workgroup culture while also generating more positive experiences for the individual workers. Workgroups were asked to participate in the intervention for which management provided logistic support, making it collaborative rather than top-down or bottom-up. The intervention resulted in changes in individual social behaviour, such as more frequent expressions of appreciation, as well as in workgroup processes, such as including respect as a continuing agenda item on workgroup meetings and improving procedures for registering complaints about mistreatment at work.

Delivery methods

The delivery method is one of the most important aspects to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention (Knight et al., 2017). Designers of positive interventions may opt for group or individual interventions. Some reviews suggest that group interventions are more effective than individual interventions, possibly due to the potentially motivating effect of the participative nature of group interventions. Participation may stimulate a social support climate, thereby fostering the commitment and motivation that is needed to sustain participation interventions (Knight et al., 2019). However, another review shows that individual interventions may be more effective to decrease undesirable work outcomes, possibly because of the corrective nature of such interventions, and because they are more similar to positive psychotherapy techniques (Donaldson et al., 2019).

Another choice regarding the method of delivery is related to the face-to-face versus online nature of interventions. Previous studies found the effectiveness of online interventions to be comparable to the effectiveness of face-to-face interventions (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart, & Wisher, 2006), and to be a less time-consuming and expensive option (Virgă, Maricuțoiu, & Lancu, 2019).

However, online interventions are also associated with high dropout rates of 50 percent and higher (Bausch, Michel, & Sonntag, 2014; Nistor & Neubauer, 2010).

The delivery methods of the interventions that were central in the empirical papers in this special issue varied from online self-trainings or self-nudge interventions using smartphone apps (Althammer et al., Michel et al., Weintraub et al., Verelst et al.), face-to-face workshops, and trainings (Demerouti et al., Mohr et al.) to blended interventions (van Dorssen-Boog et al.). The theoretical paper by Baker et al. on building resilience in the workplace makes a strong plea for the important role of facilitators in face-to-face group interventions to promote resilience, in line with the important role of the therapeutic relationship in psychotherapy. In contrast to trainers who only teach skills, facilitators work relationally with individuals within a group context – developing supportive relationships with participants and paying close attention to group dynamics. Facilitators can pay attention to the idiosyncratic nature of resilience and facilitate the learning process by drawing on an awareness of individuals' learning needs. This allows for decisions to be made about which modules should be used at what time for each person, thereby ensuring that each participant achieves the maximum benefit from their experience in the training.

Interestingly, Van Dorssen-Boog et al. investigate the effects of a blended self-leadership intervention, including face-to-face group workshops at the beginning and at the end of the intervention, and online trainings in-between. This type of intervention may combine the best of both worlds, as was supported by meta-analytical study of research on distance education (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). On the one hand, the group workshops may have a motivating effect by encouraging participants to cooperate with each, discussing questions they might have concerning the implementation of self-leadership, and by positively rewarding participants for their reflections and change behaviour. On the other hand, the e-learning modules enable participants to train self-leadership skills at their own time and place.

For whom are positive psychology interventions effective?

Positive interventions are not equally effective for everyone because individual features may influence the effectiveness of positive activities on well-being (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). For instance, participants scoring high on well-being or personal resources have been found to benefit less from positive psychology interventions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009), possibly because these participants have less room for improvement. According to Briner and Walshe (2015), well-being interventions should only be conducted if there is a practically significant well-being problem in the target group that the intervention is aiming to fix. However, since positive psychology interventions do not aim to fix problems, but to develop positive qualities in organizations (Donaldson, Lee, & Donaldson, 2019), a low level of well-being in the target group may not be a legitimate argument for inclusion, even though researchers need to make sure that their measures are sensitive enough to capture change over time. A more relevant criterion for inclusion in positive interventions is that participants are self-selected and are not 'forced' to participate (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Forced participation weakens the effects of positive interventions because individuals who do not choose for an intervention themselves might doubt its effectiveness and have little motivation to partake (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019), whereas self-selectors are likely to be highly motivated and have high outcome expectancy, ensuring that they will benefit from interventions.

To shed more light on the participants who benefit the most from positive psychology interventions, Meyers et al., (2013) made a call for more research on the moderators of intervention effectiveness. The papers in the present special issue reveal several individual factors that may moderate the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions. For example, Althammer et al. found that participants with low segmentation preferences profited more from an online self-training intervention teaching mindfulness as a cognitive–emotional segmentation strategy. Mohr et al. revealed that for veteran employees who were diagnosed with PTSD, the supervisory support intervention reduced negative emotions, whereas for veterans with negative PTSD screens, the intervention enhanced positive emotions.

However, researchers can also design interventions in such a way that as many participants as possible will benefit from the intervention. Because not everyone benefits from the same positive activities, and positive activities are more effective when people are motivated to perform them (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Schueller, 2010), interventions can ensure a good person-activity fit by incorporating choice and variety (Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). The paper by Michel et al. addresses the person-activity fit by offering a variety of different positive activities and involving participants in the selection of activities based on how much they liked the different activities, how easy they found it to carry out the activities, and how much they thought they benefited from them.

The potential effectiveness of positive psychology interventions is, of course, limited to those participants who adhere to the intervention instead of dropping out prematurely. Analysing which participants drop out of the intervention may therefore also provide important information on the effectiveness of an intervention. For example, van Dorssen-Boog et al. found that people who were lower educated, younger, or reporting lower work engagement tended to drop out of their intervention. This type of information is important to optimize the effectiveness of future interventions.

How should the effectiveness of PP interventions be assessed?

While a pre- and post-measurement design with randomized controls has been considered the ‘gold standard’ for evaluating interventions, there is also a need to consider process evaluations of organizational interventions (Nielsen and Abildgaard, 2013, Michel et al., 2015; 2013). After all, if the intervention process is inhibited, this will most likely reduce the long-term effectiveness of an intervention. Three papers in this special issue pay particular attention to the change process during the intervention period by applying diary designs. Althammer et al. use daily assessments to study how variables change throughout the intervention, thereby indicating how outcome variables change over time. Mohr et al. examined the effects of a supervisor training and self-monitoring intervention on employee emotions at six months post-intervention, controlling for baseline emotions using daily diary data aggregated across two 32-day diary waves. Weintraub et al. conduct a five-day experimental experience sampling methods design during the intervention period.

Conclusion

The papers that have been included in this special issue provide examples of high-quality intervention studies while at the same time drawing attention to challenges in optimizing

the effectiveness of positive psychology interventions. Positive psychology is about helping individuals to explore their natural qualities and the goals that are intrinsically motivating to them, and helping organizations to bring out the best in each of their workers. Therefore, positive psychology interventions cannot be based on a one-size-fits-all approach to well-being (Norem & Chang, 2002), facing scholars and practitioners with the challenge of making the most fitting selection from a large toolbox filled with change mechanisms, types of interventions, and delivery modes. In this editorial, we call for more research that uncovers the mechanisms of change and the optimal choice for top-down versus bottom-up interventions and effective delivery methods. In addition, we need to expand our knowledge of the effectiveness of interventions by learning more about the participants who benefit most from such interventions, and applying different methods in evaluating both the process and outcome of interventions. We hope that this special issue may inspire future researchers to strengthen the evidence-based underpinning of positive psychology by conducting high-quality intervention studies.

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