

### **Abstract**

Despite the proliferation of positivity research in Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship over the past 25 years, conceptual ambiguity and fragmentation persist regarding what constitutes individual positivity at work, posing a risk to theoretical and empirical progress. We adopt an integrative approach, complementing a selective review of core positivity constructs representing individual positivity in Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship with lay perspectives from semi-structured interviews, incorporating image- and vignette-based discussions, with an international group of 19 working professionals. We identify concepts of individual positivity from data and group them along modal (cognitive, affective, behavioral) and referential (the self, others, and the environment) dimensions. We then map existing positivity constructs onto this framework, revealing a skew toward self-centric and limited attention to behavioral manifestations of individual positivity, and compare theoretical meanings of 'positive' with those evident in lay perspectives. Finally, we position the data-derived concepts within the PP, POS, and broader literatures, extending current frameworks with novel concepts and adding nuance to established ones. Our typology of individual positivity provides a systematic framework for organizing the construct's conceptual diversity, challenging the reduction of positivity to intrapersonal single-faceted phenomena. While treating positivity as an umbrella construct may serve both theoretical integration and practitioner needs, we propose explicitly specifying and justifying the conceptualization and operationalization of particular facets in given contexts and samples. Our typology offers a practical tool for assessing and developing individual positivity across its various manifestations, emphasizing specific competencies and behaviors.

*Keywords:* individual positivity a work, positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship, typology of individual positivity, conceptual clarity.

## **Obvious or Evasive? The Ambiguous Case of Defining Individual Positivity at Work: A Selective Conceptual Review and Qualitative Investigation**

Over the past two and a half decades, positivity has become a focal construct in psychology and organizational behavior. Positive Psychology (PP), which focuses on the study of positive emotion, positive traits, and positive institutions (Seligman, 2002), examines positivity in relation to individual wellbeing, health, and life satisfaction. In turn, Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), investigates positive organizational processes, dynamics, states, conditions, perspectives, and such outcomes as job performance, leadership effectiveness, and employee health (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Despite the abundance of research on the effects of individual positivity, confusion remains about what positivity constitutes, with no clear criteria guiding its conceptualization (Van Zyl et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024). Such ambiguity risks contributing to construct proliferation, blurred distinctions between related constructs, difficulties in specifying nomological networks, and mismatches between concepts and their operationalizations, undermining theoretical and empirical progress (Podsakoff et al., 2016).

‘Positive’ carries a range of meanings, potentially implying (a) appropriate; (b) pleasurable; (c) valuable; (d) good; (e) having good outcomes; (f) desirable; (g) not negative; (h) virtuous; (i) adaptive/functional; (j) culturally normative (Caza, 2021; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Kristjánsson, 2010; Van Zyl et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2024; Wong & Roy, 2017) although the standpoint from which such judgments are made is often unspecified. Consequently, positivity has been used as a broad umbrella term “encompassing and accounting for a set of diverse phenomena” (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p.200), and challenged for exemplifying the jingle fallacy, where the same label is applied to distinct constructs. As such, positivity appears to be at a critical juncture in its construct lifecycle, going through the validity challenge stage (Hirsch & Levin, 1999).

Despite the conceptual issues, positivity has gained widespread traction in organizational practice (e.g., Donaldson et al., 2019), attracting a substantial “nonacademic constituency” (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p. 207). Yet, lay perspectives on individual positivity remain under-studied, which, coupled with the definitional ambiguity, limits our ability to assess and apply it effectively (Caza, 2021). To advance conceptual clarity on individual positivity at work, we take an integrative approach, first examining its existing conceptualizations in PP and POS and complementing these with lay perspectives, drawn from semi-structured interviews with an international group of nineteen professionals. Through iterative coding, we identify concepts from the interview data, grouping them along the modal (cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations) and referential (the self, others, and the environment) dimensions, map PP and POS conceptualizations onto the resulting typology of individual positivity, and compare the meanings of 'positive' embedded in PP/POS conceptualizations with those evident in lay perspectives, revealing differences in theoretical assumptions and empirical representations. Finally, we position the data-derived concepts in existing theoretical frameworks in PP, POS, and other literatures, as relevant.

We contribute to advancing the existing classification systems for positivity (Luthans & Youssef, 2007) and typological tidying of the construct (Hirsch & Levin, 1999), clarify meanings of ‘positive’, and challenge the reduction of individual positivity to a single intrapersonal facet or mode of expression by offering a multidimensional typology of individual positivity at work and mapping conceptualizations from PP and POS literature. By juxtaposing the identified concepts with theoretically-derived PP and POS constructs, we extend current frameworks with novel concepts and add nuances to those already established. Our study offers practical relevance for organizations by encouraging a reconsideration of overly simplified conceptions of positivity and identifying specific competencies and behaviors along the modal and referential dimensions that can inform its development.

### **A Selective Conceptual Review of Individual Positivity in PP and POS**

“To create some theoretical order” (Hirsch & Levin, 1999, p.205), we adopt a selective approach to reviewing conceptualizations of individual positivity (Krevel et al., 2025), focusing on core constructs that: (1) are commonly invoked to represent positivity in PP's foundational and influential works in PP and POS (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Lopez et al., 2018; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); (2) represent major theoretical frameworks within PP (e.g., broaden-and-build theory, PERMA model, hope theory); and/or (3) explicitly contain 'positive' in their conceptualization. We also include 'positive thinking' as a lay concept (Kelly, 2003) that has found resonance in research (e.g., Diener et al., 2009a). We assess how the existing conceptualizations collectively meet the conceptual clarity criteria (Podsakoff et al. (2016) for individual positivity, including the type of property the concept represents, the entity (object or event) to which the property applies, the concept's central attributes, dimensional structure, and stability over time and across situations.

### **Conceptualizations of Positivity in PP**

PP attaches six implicit meanings to 'positive', including the discipline's orientation contrasting pathology-focused psychology, topics of the study, the target population of primarily psychologically healthy individuals, the processes of achieving desired outcomes, the aim of PP (empirical evidence of understanding and cultivating the good life), and what is subjectively preferred to its absence (Pawelski, 2016a). Normatively, 'positive' is defined as something simply preferred over its absence or alternatives and as “sustainable across time, persons, effects, and structures” (Pawelski, 2016b, p. 362), though it remains unclear whose preference is being considered. Regardless, the definition is not integrated into empirical work, often using 'positivity' to refer to individual subjective experiences, traits, strengths, virtues, and abilities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) (Table 1).

Table 1

*Conceptualizations of individual positivity in PP and POS*

| Construct/<br>Category                    | Definition (source)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Meaning of ‘positive’ | Aspect of functioning |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>PP</b>                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                       |                       |
| <i>Positive affect</i>                    | A state of high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement (Watson et al., 1988, p.1063)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Pleasant, energetic   | Affective             |
| <i>Positive emotions*</i>                 | “Psychological state defined by subjective feelings” (Peterson, 2006, p.56) “about some personally meaningful circumstances (i.e. they have an object)” (Fredrickson, 2004, p.1368). They “facilitate effective management of and response to opportunities, presented by the current environment, to acquire material, social, and/or informational resources that are crucial for promoting fitness” (Shiota et al., 2017, p.17). Examples include joy, interest, contentment, surprise, curiosity, love, pride, amusement, gratitude, awe, enthusiasm (Fredrickson, 1998)) | Beneficial            | Affective             |
| <i>Life satisfaction</i>                  | Propensity to make positive evaluations in general (Diener et al., 2000, p.160)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Satisfying            | Cognitive             |
| <i>Hope</i>                               | “Perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways” (Snyder, 2002, p.249)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Enabling              | Cognitive             |
| <i>Optimism</i>                           | A generalized expectancy of positive outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1985)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Self-serving          | Cognitive             |
| <i>Explanatory/<br/>Attribution style</i> | The way of explaining the causes of events in terms of personalization, pervasiveness, and permanence: attributing positive outcomes to internal, global, and permanent causes and negative ones to external, specific, and temporary causes (Seligman & Schuman, 1986)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Self-serving          | Cognitive             |

|                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                              |                              |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Wellbeing</i>                                   | <b>PERMA</b> (psychological wellbeing), including:<br><i>Positive emotions</i> (feeling and being immersed in happiness, joy, love, gratitude, and contentment in the present moment);<br><i>Engagement</i> (being deeply involved or absorbed in activities);<br><i>Relationships</i> (establishing and maintaining strong, supportive connections with others);<br><i>Meaning</i> (having a sense of purpose and belonging to something greater than oneself);<br><i>Accomplishment</i> (a sense of achievement, mastery, and success in a particular area of interest) (Seligman, 2011)    | Pleasant, engaged, connected, meaningful, accomplished                       | Affective, cognitive, social |
|                                                    | <b>Subjective wellbeing</b> , comprising affective and cognitive components, such as frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and high life satisfaction (Diener, 1984)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Pleasant, satisfying                                                         | Affective, cognitive         |
|                                                    | <b>Flourishing</b> , denoting complete mental health, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing:<br><i>Emotional wellbeing</i> : the presence of positive feelings about life;<br><i>Psychological wellbeing</i> : self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, and autonomy;<br><i>Social wellbeing</i> : social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution (Keyes, 2002)                                                                                | Mentally healthy, pleasant, functioning                                      | Affective, cognitive, social |
|                                                    | <b>Thriving</b> , denoting “the state of positive functioning at its fullest range—mentally, physically, and socially.”:<br>The dimensions include <i>Relationships</i> (support, community, trust, respect, belonging, and absence of loneliness), <i>Engagement</i> , <i>Mastery</i> (skills, learning, accomplishment, self-efficacy, self-worth), <i>Autonomy</i> (control), <i>Meaning</i> (meaning and purpose), <i>Optimism</i> , and <i>Subjective Wellbeing</i> (life satisfaction, the presence of positive feeling, and the absence of negative feelings) (Su et al., 2014, p.256) | Functioning, pleasant, connected, engaged, masterful, meaningful, autonomous | Affective, cognitive, social |
| <b>POS</b> (adopted from Luthans & Youssef (2007)) |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                              |                              |
| <i>Traits</i>                                      | Hard-wired <i>traits</i> , such as intelligence, talents, and positive heritable characteristics (Luthans & Youssef, 2007)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Beneficial                                                                   | Cognitive, unspecified       |

|                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                        |                                  |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Trait-like constructs</i>    | <p><i>Big Five</i> personality dimensions: conscientiousness, emotional stability, extroversion, agreeableness, and openness to experience (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007)</p> <p>Core <i>self-evaluations</i>: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and emotional stability (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007)</p> <p><i>Character strengths and virtues</i>: wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective), courage (bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality), humanity (love, kindness, and social intelligence), justice (citizenship, fairness, and leadership), temperance (forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, and self-regulation), and transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality (Peterson &amp; Seligman, 2004)</p> | Beneficial, self-serving, virtuous                     | Cognitive, affective, behavioral |
| <i>State-like capacities</i>    | <p><i>Momentary feelings</i> (e.g., pleasure, positive moods, and happiness) (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007) and <i>psychological resources</i> (e.g., PsyCap, creativity, mindfulness, flow, gratitude, forgiveness, emotional intelligence, spirituality, authenticity, and courage) (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007, p.334)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Pleasant, beneficial                                   | Affective, cognitive             |
| <i>Psychological approaches</i> | <p><i>Emotion-focused</i> (e.g., subjective or psychological well-being, flow); <i>cognitive-focused</i> (e.g., self-efficacy, goal setting, wisdom); <i>self-based</i> (e.g., authenticity, humility); <i>interpersonal</i> (e.g., forgiveness, gratitude, empathy); <i>biological</i> (e.g., toughness); <i>coping</i> (e.g., humor, meditation, spirituality) (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Pleasant, efficacious, virtuous, connected, beneficial | Affective, cognitive, social     |
| <i>Positive behaviors</i>       | <p>Intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways and can be managed to improve performance, such as organizational citizenship behavior and courageous principled action (Luthans &amp; Youssef, 2007, p.338)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Norm-exceeding, beneficial                             | Behavioral                       |

\* Reviewed as a general category. We do not include ‘happiness’ as a “scientifically unwieldy term’ encompassing (a) positive emotion and pleasure; (b) engagement; and (c) meaning “ (Seligman et al., 2005, p.413) included in PERMA, which we review.

The various conceptualizations (Table 1) indicate that individual positivity has been represented through single (e.g., *positive emotions*, *hope*) and higher-order (e.g., *PERMA*, *flourishing*) constructs, with some (e.g., positive affect, optimism) used both on their own and as part of more complex models. This conceptual variety has been reflected in empirical studies. For instance, a search for ‘positivity’ in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (144 papers) and *The Journal of Happiness Studies* (168 papers) shows that the term is often used interchangeably with *positive affect* (e.g., Raghunathan & Izadi, 2024), *positive emotions* (e.g., Oh, 2022), *positive experiences* (e.g., Yen et al., 2019), *life satisfaction* (e.g., Stephens et al., 2024), *optimism* (e.g., de Guzman et al., 2012), *happiness* (Sheldon et al., 2021), *hope* (Feldman et al., 2023), *general health and income* (e.g., Iliev & Bennis, 2023), and various types of *wellbeing* (e.g., Zambelli & Tagliabue, 2024).

The reviewed conceptualizations converge on emphasizing affective and/or cognitive aspects of individual positivity. With notable exceptions, such as relationships and social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998; Seligman, 2011; Su et al., 2014), the definitions are predominantly self-oriented. They variously frame positivity as a trait, state, or cognitive pattern, with varying degrees of stability over time and across situations. The meanings of ‘positive’ derived from the conceptualizations (Table 1) can be categorized as *experiential* (e.g., feeling good, satisfying, virtuous, thriving, flourishing, optimally functioning) and *instrumental* (e.g., resource acquisition, coping, self-enhancement, goal achievement). In other words, a phenomenon/characteristic appears to be considered positive because of its present experiential quality or its capacity to facilitate desired outcomes in future.

### **Conceptualizations of Positivity in POS**

The POS’ definition of ‘positive’ involves adopting alternative lenses to reinterpret phenomena in a positive way, such as viewing obstacles as opportunities, focusing on extraordinary performance outcomes achieved through positively deviant behaviors, and

espousing an affirmative bias to prioritize the positive over negative in energy, climate, relationships, communication, and meaning in organizations (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). ‘The positive’ includes strengths, capabilities, and possibilities as opposed to problems, threats, and weaknesses (ibid). The criteria for considering phenomena as positive include adding sustainable value, improving the context, process, and outcomes, and enabling learning, growth, and enhancement (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013a). As such, the definition of ‘positive’ is largely organization-centric and outcome-focused.

The definition of positivity is similarly broad as “an integrated system of antecedents, processes, practices and outcomes that can be readily identified and agreed upon by diverse observers and stakeholders as uniquely surpassing standards of adequate functioning and adding sustainable value to both the individual and the context” (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013b, p. 149). Positivity is also negatively defined by what it excludes, such as “neutrality, complacency, resistance to change, or maintenance of the status quo” (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2013a, p.540). In sum, the definition frames positivity as a system, recognizes context and social consensus, asserts normativity, but does not specify the expressions of individual positivity.

In contrast to the macro-level definitions of ‘positive’ and ‘positivity’ recognizing context, the existing POS conceptualizations of individual positivity (Table 1) are largely self-centric, emphasizing cognitive and affective aspects, including both dispositional and malleable characteristics, spanning multiple property types (trait, state, behavior) and varying stability over time and across situations, with the meaning of ‘positive’ leaning toward ‘instrumental’. Overall, the conceptualizations heavily rely on lists of borrowed constructs organized into a classification scheme rather than a unifying framework.

### **Conceptualizations of Positive Thinking**

While positive thinking, commonly used as a lay concept analogous to individual positivity, has not received much attention in POS, in other disciplines, it has been defined in various ways too (Table 2). The definitions are largely self-centric (except for Diener et al.'s (2009a), referring to oneself, other people, and the world), and unidimensional, focusing on cognition as the central attribute. The property and stability are variably defined, from state- to trait-like, and while most definitions do not specify manifestations, some attempt to capture multiple forms, such as 'talking and acting' (McGrath, 2004). Some definitions imply cognitive regulation, with the generation of thoughts with favorable content and suppression of those containing non-pleasurable information (e.g., Ruthig et al., 2012). Overall, 'positive' in 'positive thinking' appears to denote *favorable* interpretations and *desirable outcomes*.

### **Aboutness and Recognizability of Individual Positivity**

Our approach to the examination of lay understandings of individual positivity, including how individuals understand, define, notice or associate positivity with is based on two theoretical assumptions. First, positivity is often applied and has implications even when reduced to positive subjective experiences. As such, positivity is not an isolated, abstract quality that the individual merely holds but a directed stance toward a referent, whether it is an event, person, or situation. The aboutness of positivity aligns with the pragmatist notion that concepts acquire meaning through their function and application (Simpson, 2017). Therefore, individuals may come to recognize themselves as positive not merely through introspective evaluation but in relation to what it entails, such as relating to or interacting with the world. Existing research supports the aboutness of individual positivity by documenting its practical utility, as discussed earlier in the paper.

Table 2

*Some definitions of positive thinking in the literature*

| Category             | Definition (source)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attitude             | “A way of talking and acting that reflects an optimistic or positive attitude or feeling state” (McGrath, 2004, p.26)                                                                                                                                                               |
|                      | Positive judgements about others, groups, topics, things, and circumstances (Peterson, 2006)                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                      | “A mental attitude that permits into the mind thoughts, words, images, and behaviors that are conducive to growth, expansion, and success” (Hong & Lin, 2012, p.275)                                                                                                                |
| Cognitive regulation | “A cognitive process that creates hopeful images, develops optimistic ideas, finds favorable solutions to problems, makes affirmative decisions, and produces an overall bright outlook on life.” (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2013, p.3)                                                |
|                      | “A positive outlook or a mode of viewing reality and facing life events that capitalizes on positive past experiences, retrieving and making them salient in the various occurrences of life” (Caprara & Steca, 2006, p. 604)                                                       |
|                      | “Intentional cognitive strategies to be positive that include experiencing and expressing positive thoughts (which may include positive expectations, positive healing imagery, and a positive attitude) and suppressing negative thoughts and fears” (Ruthig et al., 2012, p.1245) |
|                      | “Focusing on the positive aspects of a situation, including the use of uplifting thoughts, images or sounds” (Hall-McMaster et al., 2016)                                                                                                                                           |
| Disposition          | “The propensity to view things in positive versus negative terms, when thinking about oneself, one’s past and future, other people, and the world in general” (Diener et al., 2009a, p.253)                                                                                         |
|                      | “The tendency to have a preponderance of positive (pleasant, favorable) thoughts relative to negative (unpleasant, unfavorable) thoughts” (Ji et al., 2021, p.449)                                                                                                                  |
| Multi-construct      | “Any derivative encompassing hope, optimism, positive mental attitude, including ‘being positive’” (McCreaddie et al., 2010, p.284)                                                                                                                                                 |
|                      | A cognitive component of subjective well-being including life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism (Caprara & Steca, 2006)                                                                                                                                                       |
|                      | Optimism and hope (Peterson, 2006)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

Further, we argue that positivity is recognizable and socially meaningful through observable cues (Blumer, 1969). While individuals may not access others' positivity directly, they can infer based on such observable signs as language, gestures, tone, or conduct interpreted in their context. Positivity is expressed or enacted in ways that others can detect and interpret. People attribute positivity to others when certain cues or behaviors are perceived as reflective of it. We therefore view positivity as a phenomenon that manifests in socially legible ways, enabling others to recognize and make sense of it. In other words, positivity is encouraged because its presence or absence is visible and open to judgment. This is indirectly supported by anecdotal evidence suggesting the desirability and encouragement of employee positivity (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2009).

To conclude, while individual positivity has been identified as an elevating force, it appears to be conceptually fragmented, with definitions spanning various categories, including attitudes, cognitive strategies, personality traits, and multi-constructs, without clear unifying principles. Gaining a better understanding of 'positive' (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017) by examining the various meanings and assumptions surrounding individual positivity at work can complement the top-down and directive approach of POS (Joseph, 2020) and advance its "conceptual terrain" (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012, p.11). As discussed next, we undertake a qualitative approach to investigate how individuals understand, define, and detect individual-level positivity at work and how individual positivity manifests as a way of engaging with the world.

### **Methods**

To ensure a comprehensive inquiry and understand how the construct manifests in organizational settings, we complemented our review of individual positivity

conceptualizations with insights from those with experiential knowledge (Van de Ven, 2007). We adopted a qualitative approach to understand how people perceive, recognize, and define individual positivity at work. Our theoretical assumptions that positivity is a referential and socially recognizable phenomenon informed our methodological approach, for example, by shaping interview questions that probed directedness (e.g., 'positive about what?') and by incorporating images and vignette-based discussions into semi-structured interviews to examine observable expressions of positivity in context, as detailed later in the section.

### **Participants**

Our inclusion criteria stipulated that participants were over 18 years of age, employed by a formal organization (not self-employed) in the current role for at least 3 months, either as an employee with a direct manager or as a manager. To address the overrepresentation of homogeneous and privileged samples in positive psychology research and prevent the dominance of a single cultural lens in defining positivity (Fineman, 2006; Ryff, 2022), we recruited an international group of 19 working professionals (Table 3). These included employees, who are end users of policies and practices and experience their day-to-day impact (53%) and managers (47%), who have a better strategic understanding of underlying policies and practices (Smith & Elger, 2014). Participants comprised 9 women and 10 men, aged 31-66 years. Participation in the study was voluntary, with informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity assured and ethical approval granted by the first researcher's host institution at the time. We assigned fictitious names to participants and changed or removed any identifying information (e.g., locations and names of any other persons or organizations) from direct quotes.

Table 3

*Sample characteristics*

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Position</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Industry</b> | <b>Work area</b>           |
|--------------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| P1                 | Employee        | Female        | 33         | UK              | Consultancy     | Project management         |
| P2                 | Manager         | Female        | 44         | UK              | Marketing       | Client services            |
| P3                 | Manager         | Female        | 31         | Maldives        | Hospitality     | Customer care              |
| P4                 | Manager         | Female        | 35         | UK              | Banking         | Project management         |
| P5                 | Manager         | Female        | 46         | UK              | Public sector   | Organizational development |
| P6                 | Employee        | Male          | 36         | UK              | Public sector   | Project management         |
| P7                 | Manager         | Female        | 39         | UK              | Consultancy     | HR                         |
| P8                 | Employee        | Female        | 32         | UK              | Gaming          | Customer care              |
| P9                 | Manager         | Male          | 40         | US              | Oil and gas     | Drilling                   |
| P10                | Employee        | Male          | 66         | US              | Oil and gas     | Operations                 |
| P11                | Employee        | Male          | 32         | US              | Banking         | Risk assessment            |
| P12                | Employee        | Male          | 50         | UK              | Recruitment     | Recruitment                |
| P13                | Employee        | Male          | 33         | UK              | Finance         | Accounting                 |
| P14                | Employee        | Male          | 52         | Oman            | Oil and gas     | HR                         |
| P15                | Manager         | Male          | 53         | OAE             | Oil and gas     | Engineering                |
| P16                | Employee        | Female        | 45         | Azerbaijan      | Oil and gas     | HR                         |
| P17                | Manager         | Male          | 65         | UK              | Oil and gas     | Production                 |
| P18                | Manager         | Male          | 40         | Azerbaijan      | Oil and gas     | Communication              |
| P19                | Employee        | Female        | 38         | Azerbaijan      | Oil and gas     | Logistics                  |

**Procedure and Data Collection**

We utilised semi-structured interviews that took place in the researchers' or participants' offices and online and lasted approximately an hour on average. We started discussed participants' understandings of positivity at work using such questions as *"How do you understand positive thinking?"*, *"How does positive thinking feature in your organization?"*, or *"Positive about what?"*. To initiate and facilitate participants' reflections on the meaning and experience of positivity, we incorporated the use of visual prompts early in interviews (Banks, 2001). This involved presenting participants with a

selection of neutral, color photographs (A4 size), sourced from the internet, depicting a range of everyday and abstract scenes without overtly positive or negative connotations. Participants were invited to select any images and explain how they related to their understanding of positivity at work. Along with serving as an effective conversational entry point that helped establish rapport (ibid), the use of images encouraged participants to situate their understanding of positivity in relation to something or someone, enabling us to access situated meanings and more personal interpretations of positivity that might have been difficult to do through questioning alone. Once rapport had been established, we introduced vignettes (Figure 1) to obtain complementary and more nuanced insights into participants' interpretations (Kandemir & Budd, 2018). We had developed vignettes with subject matter experts, including a UK-based academic who was a former HR director, and organizational psychologists.

Figure 1

### *Vignette examples*

David is having a performance discussion with his team leader:

TL: You are doing okay but you could improve your performance significantly if only you thought more positively!

D (looking puzzled): How is thinking positively related to my performance?

TL: Well, ...

What might David's team leader mean? How would you complete the sentence if you were David's team leader?



Your friend Jasmine gets promoted to a team leader role. How would her subordinates' positive thinking help her manage the team?



Vignettes constituted short hypothetical but realistic stories related to positivity at work, materializing such an elusive concept, to which we invited participants to respond and share views on. The use of vignettes enabled the examination of individual perceptions and beliefs about positivity in the context of work and workplace scenarios. As an opportunity to discuss positivity from a non-personal perspective, vignettes

triggered shifts to the discussion of participants' own experiences, often without a prompt from our side, as participants projected their feelings and views onto vignette characters (Törrönen, 2018). In addition to open-ended questions or sentences to complete in vignettes, we used direct questions, such as "*Have you ever been in a situation like this one? What happened? Why?*". Participants noted that the scenarios reflected the reality of their personal workplace experiences and were interesting, highlighting the external validity of the vignettes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Analytic Approach**

We first inspected the transcripts to identify any data addressing our focal question "*How do individuals understand positivity at work?*", accumulated relevant data into one file, and adopted the analytic procedures of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to organize the data. We noticed that individuals often described what positivity entails and what it does not, analyzing both instances. We employed a two-level coding approach (Gioia et al., 2012), starting with line-by-line coding to identify descriptive, concrete first-order codes that stayed close to data, including in vivo codes, and addressed such questions as "What is this?" and "Why is this interesting?"

Through iterative analysis and constant comparison, we moved to more interpretive, abstract second-order concepts, asking "What does this mean?" and "How does this relate to individual positivity at work?". As we developed a set of concepts capturing distinct manifestations of individual positivity at work, we identified that our concepts shared characteristics along two organizing dimensions: modal (cognitive, affective, behavioral) and referential (the self, others, and the environment). Table 4 presents our analytical progression from first-order codes through second-order concepts,

organized within our dimensional framework. We integrated the first author's viewpoint as a former practitioner with seventeen years of work experience in international organizations in the business and non-profit sectors with the second author's neutral perspectives and participant checks.

### Findings

We present a narrative summary of key insights from interviews and a data-based typology of individual positivity at work across the self, others, and the environment, operating along cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions based on common patterns in data (Table 4). The typology organizes the identified concepts with descriptions, supported with illustrative quotes, and indicates their representation in PP and POS, which is elaborated in Discussion.

There was no single understanding of positive thinking as participants expressed vague ideas, often remarking with some surprise that explaining the concept was more challenging than they had anticipated. To illustrate their understanding, participants frequently cited role models they considered ‘positive thinkers’, primarily referring to individuals in leadership positions, as illustrated by this excerpt:

*My senior manager, she really is in my opinion, a very positive thinker... she always has a lot of energy...And so just someone who is just very naturally positive, full of energy, can guide you in a positive way, makes you feel like, you get their energy and it's really noticeable if you're working for that person, she's quite keen to develop and guide you (Emma).*

They also defined positivity by contrasting with what positivity is not, as well as in terms of its implications and other constructs. For example, Neil initially framed positivity as a feeling before moving to its implications (problem-solving, affective impact):

*I've been thinking about it, it actually is quite difficult to define. To me, it's more of a feeling. But I'm not even sure I can define it...if you're a positive thinker, you can generally solve problems actually more easily...Plus, a positive thinker tends to influence the team in the way they actually feel better.*

Notably, the cognitive facet did not involve generating thoughts with positive content, suppressing thoughts with negative one, or encouraging positivity in others. The self-oriented affective manifestation of positivity, largely involving positive affect, was often the first reference point when participants in managerial positions formulated their understanding, suggesting its salience as an employee characteristic compared to cognitive and behavioral expressions. Yet, participants distinguished between enthusiasm *at work* and *about* one's work, with managers accentuating the former and employees the latter. To employees, feeling enthusiastic about work signaled being in the right work environment, where one can learn, utilize their skills and competence, and grow.

Table 4.

*Typology of Individual Positivity at Work: Identified Concepts and Their Representation in PP and POS*

| Dimension<br>(Modal ×)<br>Referential | Concept<br>Description                                                                                                               | Second-Order<br>Concept                | First-Order Codes                                                                                                                                       | Illustrative Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Presence in<br>PP/POS   |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Cognitive ×<br>Self                   | A strong conviction in the capability to achieve goals and can-do mindset focused on how to accomplish rather than whether one could | <i>Capability confidence</i>           | believing in yourself; confidence in abilities; self-confidence; belief that I can do better; knowing I can achieve it                                  | <i>Thinking positive might mean like someone's belief in herself or himself, like, confidence and self-confidence for example, so if David believes that, if he's positive about the fact that he could do better, for example, could perform better and then this would help him to improve his performance (Yasmin)</i> | Present (self-efficacy) |
|                                       | Anticipating good results                                                                                                            | <i>Expectancy of positive outcomes</i> | thinking everything will be okay; expecting good results; believing it will work out; focus on what will go right; thinking positive from the beginning | <i>It's thinking positive about what you do, thinking from the beginning that everything will be okay, trying to improve something that isn't right, you need to focus (Sajiv)</i>                                                                                                                                        | Present (optimism)      |
|                                       | A degree of dissatisfaction with the present and a development drive characterized by constant                                       | <i>Development drive</i>               | always thinking of the next big idea; not satisfied with where you are; wanting to improve; thinking about what's next                                  | <i>I'd say one of the signs of someone who is always positive is that he's always thinking of the next big idea. So he's not satisfied or happy with where he's at the moment (Majid)</i>                                                                                                                                 | Not present             |

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                     |                              |                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|                    | forward-thinking about next projects                                                                                                                                                |                              |                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                       |
| Cognitive × Others | One's belief in other people's capabilities. Particularly valuable in leaders for driving follower motivation                                                                       | <i>Other-efficacy belief</i> | belief that we will get there; confidence that they will achieve; believing in the team; they carry others with them; infectious confidence | <i>There is a belief in positive people that we will get there...and they carry that with them. And the value is that they carry other people with them... it's almost infectious...It gives you confidence actually...people around them have confidence that they will achieve what they set out to do... because this person believes we can do it, we believe we can do it too (Yvonne).</i>                             | Not present                           |
|                    | Inquisitiveness in understanding others' behavior, looking beyond surface behaviors for underlying impetus and seeking positive drivers rather than judging negative manifestations | <i>Perspective taking</i>    | attempting to understand; thinking about positive reasons; looking behind the behavior; understanding the psyche; seeing their perspective  | <i>One thing he said to me was 'When people react badly, or seem to be not wanting to agree to something, try and think about ... the positive reasons why they might be doing this rather than focusing on the negative traits and characteristics and the impact it was creating... you need to understand the psyche behind why it is that they're reacting or responding in a certain way' (Helen about her manager)</i> | Related but distinct from perspective |

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                     |                             |                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                       |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Cognitive × Environment | The determination to try and resolve even the least promising situation despite uncertainty or low likelihood of success, as opposed to surrendering without trying | <i>Solution orientation</i> | approaching with better mindframe; trying to think it through; figuring out solutions; positive mindset toward problems; not having defeatist attitude | <i>If David is faced with a problem, he could perhaps approach it with a better mind frame...like a positive mindset, so instead of having a defeatist attitude sort of be like even if it's a problem you can't solve, at least try to think it through' (Rose)</i>                                                                                       | Related but distinct from hope        |
| Affective × Self        | Experiencing positive affect                                                                                                                                        | <i>Positive affect</i>      | being happy; feeling enthusiastic; being energetic; pleasant mood                                                                                      | Being “content, pleasant, happy, funny, enthusiastic, energetic” (across accounts)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Present (positive affect)             |
|                         | Steady calmness experienced by others as positive and reassuring, viewed particularly remarkable in critical situations                                             | <i>Grounded presence</i>    | being calm and focused; exerting calmness; staying composed in crisis; not getting dragged into drama; steady presence                                 | <i>Something catastrophic can happen and they'd go 'Okay, what are we going to do about this?' rather than getting dragged into drama...I think it [PT] can actually be about being calm and focused...sometimes, those people I've seen in the in the crisis have been very calm, they exert that positivity through that calmness and focus (Yvonne)</i> | Related but distinct from mindfulness |

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Affective ×<br>Others | Non-interventionist support allowing emotional processing for those facing difficulties and validating their experience, as opposed to attempting to encourage positivity without acknowledging distress | <i>Emotional space-holding</i> | allowing them to be sad; letting them process; acknowledging the issue; empathizing first; not rushing to reframe | <i>You need to acknowledge the issue and empathize, if needed. So that person needs to be allowed to be sad, to be stressed about it... if you start with an attempt to reframe it before you do all that, then you're just not acknowledging really (Olivia)</i> | Related but distinct from compassion |
|                       | Demonstrations of emotions that naturally invite connection and elicit positive affect (e.g., smiling, welcoming), contrasted with depleting others' energy                                              | <i>Emotional warmth</i>        | being smiley; welcoming attitude; friendly demeanor; warm presence; inviting connection                           | <i>Being "smiley, welcoming, friendly" (across accounts)</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Not present                          |
| Behavioral ×<br>Self  | Taking action to come back after setbacks,                                                                                                                                                               | <i>Sustaining action</i>       | keep coming back; getting up again; bouncing back;                                                                | <i>P: You need a lot of resilience to keep coming back... If you don't have</i>                                                                                                                                                                                   | Related but distinct from resilience |

|                     |                                                                                                                                 |                                    |                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                      |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
|                     | not just feeling resilient                                                                                                      |                                    | need resilience to survive; not giving up                                                                                                    | <p><i>positive thinking you're done, you can't survive.</i></p> <p><i>R: It's interesting that you you've interchanged positive thinking with resilience. Do you see them as a similar or the same thing?</i></p> <p><i>P: Yeah. I do, because... if you don't have resilience, you're just not going to get up from that, you're just going to think 'oh my god, what happened, this is too hard'.. ' so that's why I guess I tied these two things together (Majid)</i></p> |                      |
| Behavioral × Others | Inclusive engagement and attentiveness to people across hierarchies                                                             | <i>Interpersonal inclusiveness</i> | talks to everybody; knows all the gardeners; people drawn to her; remembers maintenance staff; inclusive across levels                       | <p><i>She has this thing about her that a lot of people are drawn to her... She talks to everybody so, as the executive director one of the things that I love about her is that she knows all the gardeners, all the people in maintenance, like people who are usually forgotten by the other HRDs (Rose)</i></p>                                                                                                                                                           | Not present          |
|                     | Physical, emotional, and psychological availability during critical situations, engaging in dialogue, explaining decisions, and | <i>Supportive presence</i>         | being there during layoffs; talking to people at all levels; buzzing about helping; spending time with staff; visible during difficult times | <p><i>our CEO, who is friendly kind of guy, who spends time talking to people at all levels and he was really on the day of the payoffs [when] the majority of people got to know, and he was on our floor but he was really kind of buzzed about, you know, yes, it's a dramatic change, but it will put us in a better place as an organization'. So that was kind of</i></p>                                                                                               | Partial (compassion) |

acknowledging  
rather than  
concealing  
issues

*positive thinking (Norman in the  
context of a re-organization resulting  
in a number of people losing their  
jobs)*

|                             |                                                                                                                                                                       |                                       |                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                          |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Behavioral ×<br>Environment | Identifying<br>conditions that<br>can enable<br>one's<br>development,<br>stretch the<br>person to the<br>best of their<br>capabilities,<br>and facilitate<br>learning | <i>Environment<br/>selection</i>      | figuring out challenging<br>environments; choosing<br>where to grow; finding<br>healthy stress; selecting<br>learning spaces; identifying<br>good fit | <i>So figuring out what sorts of<br/>environments challenge you, with a<br/>healthy amount of stress, figuring out<br/>what sorts of environments you're<br/>learning and growing in (Vail)</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Not present              |
|                             | Taking<br>intentional<br>actions to<br>create positive<br>change in one's<br>surroundings as<br>opposed to<br>passively<br>accepting a<br>dissatisfying<br>state.     | <i>Environment<br/>transformation</i> | we can change it;<br>positively changing things;<br>changing the culture; using<br>positive thinking to<br>transform; changed through<br>effort       | <i>I didn't like it at first, but then slowly,<br/>slowly, my thoughts that we could<br/>change it got more positive...we can<br/>positively change things...And slowly,<br/>slowly we tried to change the culture<br/>and probably I don't think we ever<br/>managed it because it takes years and<br/>years but we certainly got about 70%<br/>of it [changed] ...So we used positive<br/>thinking (Neil)</i> | Partial<br>(proactivity) |

## Discussion

### Reconceptualizing Positivity: A Multidimensional Perspective

Interview data reveal individual positivity at work as a multimodal capability of *constructive enriching engagement with the self, others, and environment that manifests variably through cognitive, affective, and behavioral expressions in response to context*. Individual positivity is actively generative, agentic, and connective, grounded in the present and future-oriented, and not simply pleasant, functional, or non-negative. Based on data, we offer a unifying structure of individual positivity at work, organizing it into combinations of distinct modal (cognition, affect, and behavior) and referential (the self, others, and the environment) dimensions, departing from the literature largely focused on the intraindividual level. Table 5 summarizes the mapping of existing positivity constructs onto this 3x3 framework, highlighting such limitations as the underrepresentation of other- and environment-oriented facets, as well as behavioral manifestations. Our findings support the theoretical stance of our study that positivity is directed and socially legible, rather than an abstract and isolated quality residing inside the individual. As such, we extend limited prior research that has assumed that positivity manifests interpersonally, focusing on *team* positivity in interactions, including such acts as encouraging others, showing support, or viewing colleagues in a positive light (e.g., Gherghel et al., 2018; Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2017; Lei et al., 2013).

The conceptual complexity is not unique to positivity as similar patterns of construct proliferation (e.g., work-life balance, resilience (Casper et al., 2018; Hillmann & Guenther, 2020)) embraced with a multidimensional framework (e.g., wellbeing (Diener et al., 2009b)) have long been established for similarly broad constructs. Typological tidying may result in three possible outcomes: override of validity challenges through conceptual refinement, acceptance as a permanent issue with ongoing pluralistic dialogue, or construct collapse

(Hirsch & Levin, 1999). Treating individual positivity as a unifying umbrella construct can facilitate theoretical openness while acknowledging the substantial practitioner interest (ibid).

Table 5

*Mapping of PP and POS Positivity Constructs onto Data-Derived Dimensional Framework*

| Construct                                | Modal dimension      | Referential dimension       |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Positive affect                          | Affective            | Self                        |
| Positive emotions                        | Affective            | Self                        |
| Life satisfaction                        | Affective            | Self                        |
| Hope                                     | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Optimism                                 | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Explanatory/Attribution style            | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| PERMA - Positive Emotions                | Affective            | Self                        |
| PERMA – Engagement                       | Behavioral           | Self                        |
| PERMA – Relationships                    | Affective/Behavioral | Others                      |
| PERMA - Meaning                          | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| PERMA – Accomplishment                   | Cognitive/Behavioral | Self                        |
| Subjective Wellbeing                     | Affective            | Self                        |
| Flourishing – Emotional                  | Affective            | Self                        |
| Flourishing – Psychological              | Cognitive/Affective  | Self/Others                 |
| Flourishing - Social                     | Cognitive/Affective  | Others                      |
| Thriving – Relationships                 | Affective/Behavioral | Others                      |
| Thriving – Engagement                    | Behavioral           | Self                        |
| Thriving – Mastery                       | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Thriving – Autonomy                      | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Thriving – Meaning                       | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Thriving - Optimism                      | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Big Five                                 | All three            | Self/Others (agreeableness) |
| Core Self-Evaluations                    | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Character Strengths                      | All three            | Self/Others                 |
| PsyCap                                   | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Positive Mindset                         | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Work Engagement                          | Affective/Behavioral | Self                        |
| Organizational Citizenship               | Behavioral           | Others                      |
| Courageous Principled Action             | Behavioral           | Others/Environment          |
| Proactivity                              | Behavioral           | Environment                 |
| Positive Thinking - Attitude             | Cognitive/Affective  | Self                        |
| Positive Thinking - Cognitive Regulation | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Positive Thinking – Disposition          | Cognitive            | Self                        |
| Positive Thinking - Multi-construct      | Cognitive            | Self                        |

To ensure empirical rigor, we propose balancing this approach with the context-specific conceptualization and operationalization of individual positivity, providing justification for both the selection of facets and the treatment of positivity as a composite construct in given contexts and samples.

### **Positioning Identified Concepts in Existing Research**

We position the data-derived typology of individual positivity at work within the broader literature by (1) juxtaposing the identified concepts with existing constructs in PP/POS and other literatures and (2) highlighting conceptual nuances that have not been previously captured.

#### **Cognitive manifestations**

While *capability confidence* and *expectancy of positive outcomes* align with *self-efficacy* and *optimism* and are echoed in POS via the concept of *PsyCap* (Luthans et al., 2007), *development drive* appears absent from existing frameworks. Similar concepts of personal growth (as part of psychological wellbeing under flourishing (Keyes, 2002)) and strength-based improvement (Luthans & Youssef, 2007) do not entirely capture the specific fusion of constructive dissatisfaction with the present and a forward-leaning ideation about future pursuits. Similarly, the concept of *other-efficacy belief*, referring to confidence in others' abilities, is not present in existing PP or POS literature. It is possible that other-efficacy belief arises from one's own self-efficacy, such that individuals who feel confident in their own capabilities are more likely to assume others are capable too (Bandura, 1997). The closest conceptual approximation is POS's *positive leadership*, which involves focusing on followers' strengths and affirming their potential (Cameron, 2012) but our data did not suggest this as an exclusively leader quality.

*Perspective taking* shows partial resemblance to *Perspective in Character Strengths and Virtues* taxonomy (under Wisdom and Knowledge) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

However, the latter, defined as ‘taking stock of life in large terms, in ways that make sense to oneself and others’ (p.106) and measured with such items as ‘*I’ve a broad outlook on what’s going on*’, appears to apply primarily to ideas, diverging from the deliberate cognitive effort to understand the motives of individuals responding with opposition or unwilling to cooperate. Perspective-taking also resonates with the understanding component of compassion (Dutton et al., 2014), although compassion is assumed to apply to those who suffer (ibid), whereas data suggest perspective-taking directed toward individuals who exhibit resistance. This suggests a form of constructive engagement with differing views, aligning more closely with openness to new perspectives (McCrae & Costa, 1997) and interpersonal curiosity denoting a desire for new information about people (Litman & Pezzo, 2007). Finally, despite the apparent similarity to the pathway component of *hope* (deriving routes to desired future goals) (Snyder, 2002), the concept of *solution orientation* is distinct in approaching a problem with determination to solve, even when success is doubtful.

### **Affective manifestations**

*Positive affect* is central in PP (Fredrickson, 2001), though its elaboration in POS, largely focused on leader compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude (Cameron, 2012) is less explicit. A notable nuance in our data concerned the distinction between positive affect *at* work and *about* work with the differing emphasis placed on each by participants in managerial/employee roles. *Grounded presence* may appear similar to mindfulness, which is ‘the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145). However, mindfulness is inwardly cultivated through present-moment awareness and nonjudgmental attention, whereas grounded presence manifests through embodied calmness, focus, and unreactive engagement as a response to challenging situations. This suggests that mindfulness as a metacognitive practice may act a precursor to grounded presence.

*Emotional space-holding*, allowing others to experience and express emotions without immediate attempts to reframe or fix, echoes the acting component of *compassion* (also involving noticing, feeling, and sense making) (Dutton et al., 2014). Acting compassionately can take many forms, including withholding actions when it is believed to be most helpful (ibid), which our finding adds to by highlighting emotional space-holding as psychological room for others to process their emotions. Emotional space-holding as non-interventionist support is not explicitly recognized in PP and POS. Further, neither PP nor POS theorizes *emotional warmth*, denoting the demonstration of emotion that invites connection and elicits positive affect in others, as a standalone concept. While these disciplines acknowledge *positive regard* (a feeling of being known or being loved) (Stephens et al., 2012) and character strengths like *love* and *kindness* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), they primarily focus on intrapersonal experience rather than interpersonal expression. Emotional warmth is also different from *positivity resonance* implying co-experiencing positive emotional states with other people (Fredrickson, 2016) and *the heliotropic effect* involving the inclination of individuals toward positive energy (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003).

### **Behavioral manifestations**

While *sustaining action* was linguistically equated with resilience, “a capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility” (Luthans, 2002, p. 702), it represents action (“coming back”, “getting up”) with an emphasis on continuing despite setbacks. *Interpersonal inclusiveness*, exemplified by outreach and recognition of often-overlooked colleagues, is not present in PP or POS although it could extend such constructs as high-quality connections and positive leadership (Cameron, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012) with the element of inclusive interpersonal practices. In addition, the enactment of inclusion through everyday relational micro-practices and communicative cues that convey respect and recognition is not fully captured in the

existing model of inclusive leadership (Randel et al., 2018). The latter represents a set of leader behaviors that facilitate group members' belongingness in the work group while maintaining their uniqueness (ibid). *Supportive presence*, understood as being physically, emotionally, and psychologically present for others in difficult situations, builds on the acting element of compassion involving the behaviors intended to alleviate suffering (Dutton et al., 2014) by emphasizing attuned presence itself as a form of action that creates a supportive interpersonal space.

*Environment selection*, or actively seeking out environments conducive to learning and growth, not reflected in PP or POS, fits with *person–environment fit theory* (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), where individuals actively seek out environments aligned with their values, needs, and abilities. Deliberate *environment transformation* connects to job crafting theory (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), which posits that individuals actively shape their tasks, relationships, and perceptions to enhance work meaning and engagement, by emphasizing the role of optimizing one's physical environment as part of broader job crafting strategies. Such an effort to align one's surroundings with personal standards resonates with *proactivity* involving future-focused and "self-initiated efforts to bring about a change in the work environment and/or oneself" (Wu & Parker, 2012, p.84), adding the element of shaping one's surroundings in accordance with personal standards (e.g., those related to maintenance).

In sum, while some concepts map onto established constructs (e.g., capability confidence aligns with self-efficacy), others (e.g., emotional space-holding) represent novel contributions or important nuances not captured in current PP/POS literature. Our findings underscore that individual positivity at work is often expressed through interpersonal and environment-oriented behaviours, marking a departure from the predominantly intrapersonal focus of existing conceptualizations (Table 5). Further, affective manifestations of individual

positivity included contained and expressive forms, rather than energized ones, whereas its cognitive manifestations did not involve cognitive regulation. Overall, our findings underline the importance of acknowledging the multidimensional nature of individual positivity and its context-specific conceptualization and operationalization.

### **Practical implications**

The reconceptualization of individual positivity at work as multidimensional and relational carries implications for workplace practice and development initiatives. First, organizations should reconsider overly simplified conceptions of positivity that treat it as an intrapersonal trait or a purely affective state. Instead, interventions aimed at fostering workplace positivity should recognize the multidimensionality and contextual situatedness of positivity to avoid miscommunication and tension. Further, our findings point to the contrastive construction of positivity in lay definitions, with participants frequently defining positivity in opposition to what they viewed as negative (e.g., draining others' energy), consistent with personal construct theory (Kelly, 2003). This insight may inform reflective exercises in development conversations, helping employees articulate not only what positivity involves but also what it does not, offering a more accessible entry point for engaging with the concept of positivity in practice.

Second, as positivity is often enacted through functional behaviours, such as development drive, solution orientation, and environment transformation, it may be more effectively developed by enabling individuals to act purposefully toward growth and problem-solving. Practically, this may involve including scope for job crafting, encouraging forward-thinking, and recognizing behaviors that enhance the quality of work environments. The identification of interpersonal expressions of positivity, such as emotional space-holding, supportive presence, and interpersonal inclusiveness, suggests that efforts to enhance positivity should move toward developing such relational competencies. Finally, the typology

of individual positivity can be used in developmental conversations to assess how positivity is currently expressed (or constrained) across its modal and referential dimensions.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Several limitations of our study warrant consideration. First, while our purposefully diverse sample enabled broad conceptual development, we did not systematically compare across contexts. Our relatively heterogeneous sample could have culturally framed positivity, yet we found convergence across data in participants' understandings. Future research could examine how sector-specific demands, organizational cultures, or national contexts may shape positivity conceptualizations. Further, our reliance on interview data captures participants' reflective understanding but not necessarily their enacted positivity. Observational studies could reveal gaps between espoused and practiced positivity, particularly examining how situational factors influence which dimensional manifestations emerge.

Future research should build on our findings regarding the behavioral manifestations of individual positivity, which warrant particular attention due to their limited reflection in existing PP and POS research and greater recognizability by others (compared to cognitive manifestations, for example) in workplace settings. Our typological approach identified distinct manifestations without examining their relationships. For instance, future research could investigate whether manifestations of positivity develop in a particular sequence. In addition, while our findings reveal that positivity involves environment transformation, future research could explore a potential reciprocity between individual positivity and the environmental. While we noted role-based differences in emphasis, our design did not permit systematic comparison. Future research could examine how hierarchical position (e.g., employees vs. managers), functional area, career stage, or cultural influences may shape individual understandings and enactment of positivity. While our focus was on typological

organization, we observed instances where constructs conflate descriptive content with evaluative criteria (e.g., positive emotions defined by their 'effective' outcomes), which may confound the measurement of positivity with its presumed effects. Future research should examine existing conceptualizations for such valence-based conflation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) to distinguish what positivity *is* from what it *does*.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the conceptual confusion surrounding positivity, we reviewed existing conceptualizations of individual positivity and investigated how individuals working in organizations understand and define positivity at work. Our findings, which offer a structured typology of individual positivity across *modal* (cognitive, affective, behavioural) and *referential* (the self, others, and the environment) dimensions, encourage acknowledging its multidimensionality and specifying and justifying its conceptualization and operationalization in a given context. We offer an integrated and nuanced perspective on the conceptualization of individual positivity, enabling future research and practice to move beyond generic invocations and toward more context-sensitive engagement with the construct. The reconceptualization towards the recognition of positivity's multidimensionality can enable more nuanced approaches to studying and developing positivity.

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