

## Authentic leadership and positive organizational behavior: A meso, multi-level perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Authentic leadership (AL) and positive organizational behavior (POB) are two important emerging approaches in the organizational sciences. To date, published work on AL and POB has been primarily leader-focused and based on individual differences. In this article, after verifying this individual-level focus via content coding of AL articles, AL and POB are explicated and integrated using a meso, multi-level perspective. Essentially, viewed in terms of multiple levels of analysis, AL promotes various multi-level “primary” criteria and outcomes of POB that, in turn, enhances various multi-level “secondary” criteria and outcomes of performance. Direct effects of AL on performance at multiple levels of analysis also are plausible. Implications for future meso perspectives on leadership theory and research in general and on AL and POB in particular are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Two approaches, positive organizational behavior (POB) and authentic leadership (AL), are becoming increasingly important in the organizational sciences literature. POB has been most fully developed by Luthans et al. (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Luthans, Hodgetts, & Luthans, 2001). Building on the work of Seligman (1998) and Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) on positive psychology, Luthans proposes POB as focusing on positive feelings, in general, and on the sub-concepts of confidence/self-efficacy, hope, optimism, subjective well-being/happiness, and emotional intelligence, in particular. Specifically, Luthans (2002) defines POB “as the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement” (p. 59).

Somewhat similar in many respects, AL (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005a) has its roots in the work of Bass (1985, 1990) and Bass & Steidlmeier (1999). Building on the notion of socialized charismatic leadership (Howell, 1988), Bass focuses on the components of transformational and charismatic leadership that highlight the ethical and moral character of leaders who are authentic transformational or socialized charismatic leaders (as opposed to pseudo-transformational or personalized charismatic leaders). Luthans & Avolio (2003) define AL “as a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive development” (p. 243). Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa (2004) define authentic leaders as

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“those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/morale perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (p. 4).

## 2. Purpose and overview

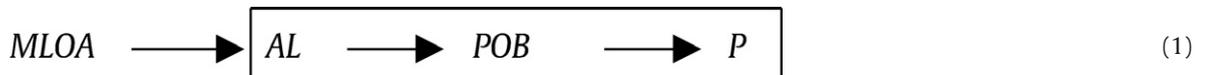
To date, in our opinion, there has been no real attempt to fully integrate these related notions of POB and AL in a meso, multi-level approach. Given (1) the increasing importance of these concepts in the organizational sciences, (2) the potential their integration offers for enhanced understanding of both organizational behavior in general and leadership in particular, and (3) the acknowledged importance of considering levels of analysis issues in both theory building and theory testing (see below), it seems critical to pursue such a multi-level approach. As we will demonstrate below, the work of Avolio, Gardner, Luthans and their colleagues on AL and POB, however, is primarily limited to the individual level of analysis, focusing on individual employees or leaders and the characteristics of the person as an individual, i.e., individual differences. While there may be nothing particularly inappropriate about using a solely individual perspective (Eden, 1998), there is an opportunity to explore and develop more fully the concepts of AL and POB at higher (e.g., group, organizations) levels of analysis or in terms of multiple levels of analysis. In this way, we might advance our understanding of AL and permit more comprehensive multi-level tests of this approach to leadership.

While our work ultimately focuses on AL, it seems critical to include some focus on POB for several reasons beyond those noted above. First, it is very difficult to discuss AL without mention of POB, as the former literature has direct links with the latter literature, as evidenced by the citations and quotations provided and the interconnections among the authors most closely associated with each approach (i.e., AL—Avolio and POB—Luthans). Second, and related to the first point, POB can provide a context for understanding AL and vice versa, so it is critical to deal with both concepts together in an integrative fashion. Third, while the POB literature acknowledges a primary individual-level focus, the AL literature claims a multi-level focus, a contention with which we disagree, so the contrast is important for us to highlight.

Our purpose here is not to provide an extensive critique and review of POB or the “positive movement” in general, as these have been presented in detail elsewhere (e.g., Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Fineman, 2006a,b; Roberts, 2006; Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentimihalyi, 2000). Nor is it our purpose to provide a detailed critique and review of AL or “authentic leader development”, as this too has been presented previously (e.g., Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005a,b; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Rather, our intent is to first demonstrate, through content coding of previously published AL articles, that this work resides primarily at the individual level of analysis. The POB literature generally acknowledges the importance of and primary focus on the individual level in conceptual work; empirical studies in this literature are conducted at the individual level of analysis; and critiques of the POB literature make the point that the focus is individual differences (see Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). In contrast, the AL literature implies and often refers to or claims that it is conceptually multi-level in nature. Thus it seems important to verify (or refute) this assertion from the AL literature before proceeding to multi-level theory building. As such, we conducted a content coding of AL (but not POB) articles. Moreover, we have identified and included the extant population to date of conceptual and empirical work, or feasible set of articles, for coding (as described below).

Then, building from this levels-of-analysis assessment, our second intent is to develop a preliminary meso, multi-level model of AL and POB that can be the subject of future multi-level testing. To accomplish this second purpose, we draw on several prior multi-level leadership approaches (e.g., Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984; Dansereau, Yammarino, & Markham, 1995a; Hunt, 1991; Hunt & Ropo, 1998; Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou, & Yammarino, 2001; Yammarino, 1996; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, & Dansereau, 2005).

Overall, the purpose of this paper is to integrate and explicate AL and POB using a multi-level perspective on leadership (see Dansereau & Yammarino, 2000, 2006; Dansereau et al., 1984; Dansereau, Yammarino, & Kohles, 1999; Dansereau et al., 1995a; Yammarino, 1995, 1996; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008; Yammarino, Dionne, & Chun, 2002; Yammarino et al., 2005). The key notion developed here can be summarized diagrammatically as follows:



where AL is authentic leadership, POB is positive organization behavior, and *P* is performance, all of which operate in terms of multiple levels of analysis (MLOA). Essentially, AL, viewed in terms of multiple levels of analysis, has direct and indirect effects via POB (also viewed at multiple levels) on performance (at multiple levels of analysis).

To accomplish our purpose and more fully explicate this general model, we first present a levels-of-analysis content coding of previous published articles on AL in the subsequent sections of this paper. Again, a similar analysis of the POB literature is not undertaken as its proponents, as far as we can determine, do not make multi-level claims, choosing to focus solely on the individual level of analysis. After drawing conclusions from this analysis (in which we find AL to be primarily an individual-level phenomenon), we next explore and integrate a variety of past multi-level leadership and related works to enhance the conceptualization of POB and AL in terms of multiple levels of analysis. In particular, we show how AL and POB can be viewed and conceptualized from a multi-level perspective. Finally, we discuss some implications of our approach for future multi-level research and testing of the proposed AL–POB–*P* framework.

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