



The role of positive illusions in employment relationships



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ABSTRACT

Drawing from existing research and concepts in social psychology, we identify “positive illusions” as an important construct for understanding long-term, stable, and satisfying employment relationships. We argue that the cognitive processes that modify the way in which individuals view their world can aid in promoting and enhancing the quality of employment relationships. These largely non-conscious processes often aid in the construction of positively distorted beliefs, referred to as positive illusions, which act to diffuse feelings of uncertainty, and drive satisfaction and commitment in close relationships. Our theoretical analysis suggests the relevance of positive illusions in the context of employment relationships, and highlights its role specifically during negative organizational shocks. We explore theoretical connections and offer testable propositions on the role of positive illusions in understanding employment relationships. These propositions have important theoretical and practical implications for the (a) applicant stage of employment, (b) organizational entry and socialization, and (c) adapting to organizational change.

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Life is seldom as unendurable as, to judge by the facts, it ought to be.

[Brooks Atkinson.]

Why is it that some relationships seem to be immune to the vicissitudes of time while others are dissolved by even the slightest hardship? One explanation for this phenomenon is that individuals have a system of cognitive processes that can help them to modify their views about the world in which they live, and the relationships that they form (Sharot 2011; Wilson & Gilbert 2005). These largely non-conscious processes often promote positively distorted perceptions, known as *positive illusions*, which act to diffuse feelings of uncertainty and drive satisfaction and commitment in close relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 2003; Taylor 1983). We propose that positive illusions may also be important from an organizational perspective because such perceptions may endow individuals with important resources that can enhance the stability of the employment relationship. Without them, it is likely that both the employing organization as well as the individual employee would be left more vulnerable to the psychological, physical, and financial costs incurred in the event of employment dissolution.

Although a vast body of research has examined and identified varying constructs concerned with psychological attachment to organizations, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined the presence of positive illusions in the context of employment relationships. Positive illusions are cognitive biases that “color” even mundane relationships, often causing them to be perceived in a more positive light than objectivity would permit. We suggest that these cognitive biases exist in employment

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relationships as well, and play a unique role in determining their stability and quality. In this paper, we seek to examine the nature of such biases and their effects on employment relationships. We reason that these biases may be important determinants of long-term, stable and satisfying employment relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 1996a; Taylor 1983).

Utilizing research and theory on positive illusions in the context of the employment relationship helps us to make several important contributions to organizational scholarship. First, our conceptualization of positive illusions in the context of employment relationships extends understanding of the development, maintenance, and stability of such relationships. Although many aspects of organizational life, such as unmet expectations, unsatisfying work, mistreatment, and radical change can and do lead to the dissolution of the employment relationship, often these circumstances do not end the relationship (e.g. most people who report job dissatisfaction and even turnover intentions do not immediately exit, Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman 2010). Second, we identify organizational conditions when positive illusions are likely to be most salient and important; for example, we discuss the role of positive illusions in dealing with the uncertainties of organizational entry and in promoting successful coping in response to organizational shocks (i.e., particularly jarring events that trigger the intrapsychic analyses involved in quitting; Lee & Mitchell 1991). Third, we discuss how this research may help us integrate disparate findings relating to the role of transparency in organizations (e.g., why and when transparency can have potentially negative repercussions). Finally, we discuss the extent to which positive illusions are potentially beneficial to employees' organizational lives.

In what follows, we begin with a review of existing theory and research in the area of positive illusions and define it in the context of employment relationships. Next, we discuss how it is similar and different from several major constructs in organizational scholarship. Third, we explore the theoretical underpinnings of positive illusions, drawing from interdependence theory to explain how they promote stability in employment relationships. We then progress to a discussion of how they help individuals to overcome negative organizational shocks by drawing from Taylor's (1983) seminal work on cognitive adaptation theory. Fifth, we address the counterintuitive possibility that organizational transparency, meant to reduce uncertainty and act as a signal of trust, may reach an inflection point at which it is no longer beneficial to employment relationships. Sixth, we consider what happens when positive illusions are shattered and how this can affect stability in employment relationships. Throughout, we offer propositions to guide future empirical investigation, and we conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, provide some guidance on empirically testing positive illusions in an organizational context, and consider opportunities for future research.

1. Positive illusions: seeing what one wants to see

Extant scholarship on positive illusions provides a theoretical and empirical context for understanding how individuals experience satisfaction in close relationships and cope with major negative life-events (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 1996a; Taylor & Armor 1996). Positive illusions- a term coined by Taylor (1983), evolved to capture the phenomenon of positively distorted beliefs emerging in the face of ambiguity or threat. They are constructed, story-like narratives and cognitive representations meant to diffuse feelings of uncertainty or doubt (Murray & Holmes 1993).

Scholarship in the area of positive illusions provides a compelling case that when individuals idealize their relationships and their circumstances, they often experience realities that become a reflection of their desires and expectations (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin 1996b). This research suggests that it is not necessarily accurate and objective representations of one's employment relationship that shape the nature of these relationships and employee behavior within them. Rather, it is the lens through which individuals view their employment relationships that defines their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, and which ultimately determines relationship outcomes.

When individuals view their employment relationships through the rosy lens of positive illusions, this has the potential to transform their experiences and lead to more positive outcomes for employees and their organizations. For instance, positive illusions have been shown to predict an individual's adjustment to stressful encounters and threatening events, foster satisfaction, quality, and stability in interpersonal relationships, and positively influence mental health and psychological and emotional well-being (Spacapan & Thompson 1991; Taylor 1983; Taylor & Brown 1988).

Positive illusions are said to occur when individuals' ratings on specific features are more positive than those that reflect a more objective or "realistic" perspective (Taylor & Brown 1988). Early research in this area assumed that normal mental functioning meant that one would have an accurate perception of the world. As Lazarus (1998: 1) stated:

"...to be sophisticated [meant] accepting accurate reality testing as the hallmark of mental health...Everyone knew that self-deception was tantamount to mental disorder".

However, work in the area of social psychology has confirmed the counter-intuitive possibility that positive illusions, and not accurate perceptions, tend to promote adjustment to threatening events and enhance relationship stability even in the face of uncertainty (e.g. Taylor 1983, Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald 2000). That is not to say that positive illusions require one to deny reality or lack understanding. Instead, individuals tend to distort their cognitions and beliefs about reality by mentally linking less desirable aspects of one's relationships to more important virtues, without necessarily denying or masking them.

In a study of romantic relationships, Murray, Holmes, & Griffin (2003) demonstrated that individuals tend to find redeeming features in a partner's weaknesses, constructing "yes, but..." refutations that minimize faults, and link virtues to faults within more integrated, general mental models. Such evaluative integration in cognition (i.e., finding good in the bad) predicted greater levels of satisfaction and stability in these relationships. Positive illusions thus seem to involve the type of forgiving acceptance of a partner's shortcomings that is utilized in more effective therapeutic treatments for relationship distress (Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Eldridge 2000).

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