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Book Review

Organizational behavior and work: a critical introduction

Fiona M. Wilson

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“Dirty” work, human trafficking, workplace romance and the Holocaust are not topics that one would usually find in a book on organizational behavior, nor are recommendations to watch popular Hollywood movies such as *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Nine to Five* (1980). These are but some of the points that make this book piquant and individualistic. Although presented as a textbook, with standard features like a case study and research questions at the end of each chapter, this book has several unique features that differentiate it from others in the field.

The field of organizational behavior has certainly seen its share of rapid advances in the last few years – globalization of organizations, increasing diversity of the workforce and seismic societal changes, to name a few. An examination of recent volumes of journals such as the *Organizational Management Journal* and *Journal of Organizational Behavior* indicates that topics such as teamwork, leadership and motivation continue to be researched, and also that newer issues such as telework, corporate social responsibility and social media are generating interest. Books in the field continue to reflect this as well.

At one end of the spectrum of available books in the field are those that have a narrow and specific focus. For example, a view that posits looking at organizational behavior through a neuro-genetic lens is explored by Silverman (2000); Gruneberg and Wall (1984) do so from a purely sociological and psychological perspective. Another approach is taken by Greenblatt (1981) where the scope is limited to one country and culture – namely, China. Fiona Wilson herself has previously written a well-researched book that examines various facets of organizational behavior in the context of women (Wilson, 2003). At the other end of the spectrum are the numerous texts that are aimed at organizational behavior courses taught in undergraduate and graduate programs. These textbooks typically cover a broad array of topics – including personality, groups, motivation, leadership, and organizational structures (see Schermerhorn *et al.*, 2008). The textbook approach is to present existing and well-established theories and to periodically, through different editions, update the content. Wilson’s book, though similar to textbooks in its coverage of a standard range of topics, nevertheless differs in both the content and presentation, and could, in a sense, be seen positioned somewhere in between the categories of books.



The author herself signals that the reader can expect something different right in the title and the "Introduction" section. The title includes the phrase "a critical introduction" which the author clearly takes seriously. The author mentions (pp. 4–5) that most textbooks present a rather sanitized version of the workplace, and implies that they follow a "scientific" and psychology-based approach wherein theories are presented as de-facto explanations of behavior and are not to be questioned too deeply. The author seeks to correct that in this book with a more critical approach, which could be said to be the "sociology" based one. Here theories are presented, but are evaluated critically, along with the caveat that they are, at best, partial explanations. Indeed, that is explicitly done in Chapter 6. That chapter, which discusses classic theories on motivation, includes a critique after each theory. For instance, the author discusses the lack of empirical support for Maslow's theory and the too-neat fit between Herzberg's intrinsic and extrinsic factors to satisfaction and dissatisfaction of employees. This approach supports the author's contention that real life is not as neatly packaged as an uncritical acceptance of theories would imply. The reader needs to accept that there may be aspects of organizational behavior that these models cannot explain.

This book, as the author says in the introduction, does cover most of the topics found in "mainstream" texts. It is divided into three sections. Section 1, labeled "Approaching Management Critically" is essentially an analysis of the environment, both internal and external, with special emphasis on work. Section 2, called "Classic Organizational Behavior and Critique," addresses the standard topics of motivation, leadership, perception, personality, learning, culture, teams, structure and change. Although these are *de rigueur* for organizational behavior textbooks, the approach is non-traditional on occasion. For instance, Chapter 13, on Structure, addresses standardization via a detailed discussion of McDonald's, even using the term "McDonaldization." Textbooks do use real life companies as illustrative examples, but not usually in the main body of the chapter to discuss a concept. The third and last section, "The Core of Critical Approaches," differentiates this book in terms of content from other texts. It includes chapters on power, misbehavior, voluntary and alternative organizations, and health, with a novel treatment of these topics. Chapter 15 discusses standard concepts such as bases of power, but also

has significant coverage of uncommon issues such as workers' power and resistance, and surveillance. Finally, throughout the text, the author attempts to maintain a thread reflecting the critical approach by including "Stop and Think" boxes. These pose questions, clearly with the goal of provoking the reader to explore the subject in a non-linear manner. Examples of these are: "Why is the number of women in top positions falling" (p. 23) and "Can technology present two faces at the same time? Can you see how this might be the case?" (p. 284). Two topics that are usually found in most texts, and are omitted here are decision making and conflict resolution.

The issue of gender and sexuality in the workplace is one that the author has written about previously, and also one that is typically not found in detail in standard texts. These topics are examined from different angles over a few chapters in sections such as: Men and Women Working (p. 21), Men, Women and Management (p. 22), Class, Gender and Meaning of Work (p. 46), Management and Men (p. 71), Double Jeopardy: The reality for the black and ethnic woman manager (p. 72), the entire chapter on Sexuality, Sex Typing and Gender, and Gender and Leadership (p. 153). The reader is provided with a good view of how gender intersects with organizational functioning.

Another significant difference in terms of content is in this book's presentation of the point of view of non-management workers. This is particularly poignant to read, since most business and management courses indubitably present management's perspectives. Although we might expect texts on labor management to discuss employee perspectives, most of them such as Ballot *et al.* (1996) focus exclusively on issues such as unions, collective bargaining and administrative processes, and not at all on employees as people. Wilson's text does a splendid job of filling the gap. Chapter 2, "The View from Below," offers a worker's view of what work actually means, and raises the question of work that is particularly challenging, but not well paid, such as emotional labor or working at a call center. A societal concern in many western economies has been the prospect of falling wages, and many formerly "middle" income employees transitioning into lower-wage, "blue" collar work (Kazis and Miller, 2001). In that regard, this chapter is prescient, and likely to become a more important topic in the years to come.

As the structure and composition of organizations continues to evolve, so do the bounds of



acceptable organizational and societal behavior. One such is the experience of men crying in public, triggered by recent behavior of political leaders (Steinhauer, 2010). This opens up a discussion of whether such behavior is acceptable and what the interpretations and impact of such behavior might be. Along with the introduction into the popular lexicon of terms like emotional intelligence, emotions in organizations has been a frontier that has been explored (Fineman, 2006). Wilson's textbook explores emotions in the workplace through issues such as compassion, feelings and drawing the line between public and private behaviors. Again, these are rarely found discussed in detail in standard texts, and this book is likely a front-runner in that regard.

This book is an easy, even entertaining, read. The unusual topics brought up for discussion, such as unpleasant work, "uncooperative teamwork," and undesirable organizational behaviors, are thought provoking, topical and important. The link to popular culture through suggested movies to view, at the end of each chapter, makes the material appear more approachable. Each chapter also includes a case, suggested readings, and research

questions. Case analysis is a well-established pedagogical method in business education, and cases are usually self-contained descriptions of business situations poised for analysis by students. In contrast, cases in this book are fairly short and terse, and sometimes may be viewed more accurately as detailed questions. However, the research questions are challenging, and potentially effective assignments. For students habituated to texts delivering theories and concepts in a comprehensive, clearly categorized and neatly identified manner, this will be a challenging book. In addition, some topics, such as sexuality in the workplace, may be difficult to discuss in certain student environments. A minor weakness in the book is the exclusive focus on the UK in a few sections.

Overall, this book would be an excellent choice as a supplementary text or as recommended reading in courses not only in Organizational Behavior, but also in Labor Management, Women in Business and Leadership. Practitioners would find the book illustrative and useful; it poses questions that arise often in practice and suggests possible answers.

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Sambhavi Lakshminarayanan obtained her Ph.D. in Management Science. Her initial research was in quantitative models and integer programs. Since then she has done work in diversity modeling, as well as written on more general management topics. Her current interests include developing business cases. She teaches courses in Operations Management, Organizational Behavior and Business Strategy. She can be reached at sLakshminarayanan@mec.cuny.edu.