



Book Review

Jan Ch Karlsson: Organizational Misbehaviour in the Workplace. Narratives of Dignity and Resistance. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

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If you have any doubts about the importance of dignity and autonomy to employees at all levels of an organization, then this book surely is a must read for you. Should you lack good research-based examples of what happens when management tries to impose a “suitable” culture on the employees, forces employees to work in presumably more efficient ways, or implements control measures that are perceived as intrusive and unjust, then this book provides you with numerous references. In fact, this is a book very much suited for work life researchers, for general management, and within organization and management studies.

The book is divided into three separate parts. First, the theme of organizational misbehavior is shortly introduced in relation to theories that address problems of organizing work processes or dignity and autonomy more indirectly, for example, socio-technical theory, the control-demand model, and Lysgaards study of the workers’ collective. The second part of the book consists of a total of 66 short narratives on organizational misbehavior drawn from various research literature from the 1950s onward; approximately half of them stem from the years between 2000 and 2011. The third part of the book consists of two chapters. The first introduces what the author describes as the focal point of organizational misbehavior, *the rationales behind the breaking of management rules*, through the introduction of an empirical example/research study from the Norwegian Health Care Sector. The second chapter discusses numerous approaches relevant to organizational misbehavior and presents a model of possible subsets of organizational misbehavior in relation to the command hierarchy at the workplace.

The main bulk of this book, the narratives, is perhaps also the most interesting one. There is no doubt that the author has done a great job selecting interesting, illuminating, and relevant examples of organizational misbehavior in various contexts. There is, however, a slight problem with regard to the lack of systematic analysis of the presented narratives. After reading 128 pages of narratives, you get surprised that Karlsson chooses to present another empirical study over a whole new chapter. It is as if he does not after all regard the 66 narratives as anything else than, well, just narratives. Another question also presents itself—why has not the narratives been placed directly within, or more clearly in relation to, the model in the concluding chapter? The book would also benefit from presenting an overview of the narratives—country of origin, year, type of business, size of business, and so on—it just is not enough to write one paragraph to sum up all of these characteristics.



The narratives may be perceived as a summary of every possible way management can go wrong in their quest for more control and how the (more clever) employees manage to be productive anyway. They make you smile, they may shock you, but even more so they come across as essential insights for anyone interested in the organizing and development of organizations. Some of the narratives illustrate the classical struggle of middle management when they are made responsible for implementing top-down initiated restructuring processes, often put forward as cultural change projects, but with the hidden agenda of making the workers more productive. In some of these cases, middle management then overrules top management by joining forces with the employees. Management is not homogenous and managers do not always threaten the subordinates' dignity. On the contrary, managers may themselves be without the necessary dignity and influence in their work. In other words, organizational misbehavior—the breaking of management rules—can be found at every level of an organization and is not an exclusive worker strategy. It has, however, the inherent possibility of constructive change and efficient production of goods and services and should be treated as such. But not all kinds of rule-breaking are considered being organizational misbehavior. It is the social work situation, defined by the social relations involved in each case, which is the decisive criterion (p. 155). Moreover, it is not a specific set of actions; the actions that break rules are situated within the power hierarchy at the workplace in specific situations. Organizational misbehavior is an expression of something gone wrong in the organization and/or the command hierarchy and should therefore be analyzed and regarded as a constructive activity.

In his model, presented in part III, Karlsson stresses that the concepts of *resistance*, *abusive supervision*, *collective discipline*, and *private business* should be seen as subsets of organizational misbehavior and in relation to the command hierarchy of the organization. He defines these counter-forces at the workplace as *anything you consciously are, do, and think at work that you are not supposed to be, do, and think and that is directed either: (1) upward through the hierarchy (resistance), (2) downward through the hierarchy (abusive supervision), (3) outward from the hierarchy (private business) or laterally through the hierarchy in order to maintain discipline in self-organized groups (collective discipline).*

At first sight, one may object that the narratives presented are one-sided, as they consist almost entirely of poor management examples, where attempts to manipulate or exploit workers presumably is the norm. The absence of “normal” work situations, where decent leaders try their best to run any kind of business, is also mostly left out. In this sense, Karlsson places himself close to Critical Management Studies even if he draws upon a multitude of organizational theories in parts I and III. The restoring of dignity and autonomy that takes place tells a more complex story—especially when middle managers are included in the narratives and in the analysis. It would however be interesting to know more about organizational misbehavior in organizations that try to do their best. Is organizational misbehavior always constructive? Does the model include destructive behavior between colleagues which is not aimed at preserving or restoring collective norms?

The book may be read as an interesting critique and as a necessary correction to mainstream management literature that often focuses on how cultural change can and should be done. In this book, the point seems to be the opposite; management cannot create an organizational culture through attempts of manipulation of the employees' attitudes and behavior. The book is however also a strong contribution in the debate

on control in working life. Stripping the employees of autonomy and control over work processes does not bring about good results; management should to a larger extent trust and value their subordinates' competencies. The Norwegian Health Care Sector study also illustrates how organizational misbehavior may be about supplying better service. The employees are breaking management rules in order to fulfill the legitimate needs of the third party.

All in all, this is a book that entertains, teaches, communicates, and sends out an important message. All the three parts of the book could function well alone, on their own terms. This is both the strength and the weakness of the text. Perhaps more could have been done in order to connect the parts even tighter together.