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# Some features of organizational behavior knowledge and the resulting issues in teaching organizational behavior



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## ABSTRACT

The existing literature indicates that management research, of which organizational behavior (OB) is a part, has declined in usefulness and relevance for teaching. As a reflection of this, the research-teaching gap also has been noted in the literature. Possibly as a consequence of this, concerns have been expressed about inadequate transmission of OB knowledge body through OB teaching and about the impaired legitimacy of behavioral coursework in the business education. These concerns in the existing literature suggest a need for examining the nature of OB knowledge body and for exploring the issues it may create for OB teaching. The present paper addresses this research requirement. It first points out the need to examine OB knowledge features and the resulting issues in OB teaching. It then explains why the nature of OB knowledge is likely to affect OB teaching and create issues in OB teaching. It then describes some limiting features of the specific elements—concepts, theories, and empirical findings—in OB knowledge body. In light of the limiting features of the OB knowledge discussed, it then explores some of the resulting issues in OB teaching. Finally, it outlines directions for future research and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Why do we need to examine the nature of OB knowledge and resulting issues in OB teaching?

Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) reviewed five decades of research in the Academy of Management Journal and noted that the theory building and theory testing components in research have increased over the period of five decades. However, examining the published research in the Academy of Management Journal (and also in Administrative Science Quarterly) over a similar period, Pearce and Huang (2012) concluded that the research has become increasingly less actionable and hence less useful for teaching. Thus, ironically management research's increasing sophistication is not positively associated with its usefulness for teaching.

The existing literature has acknowledged this limitation of management research by noting that it is not useful to those who are “outside ivory towers” (Pearce & Huang, 2012, p. 260), it is a part of “closed, incestuous loop” where only academicians become producer and consumers of their own work (Hambrick, 1994, p. 13), and it is “esoteric and irrelevant” (Burke & Rau, 2010, p. 133). Thus, it is not surprising that the literature (e.g., Burke and Rau, 2010) points out the existence of research-teaching gap.

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The above discussion suggests the necessity and importance of bridging the gap between research and teaching. While the above observations and views about the reduced relevance of research-generated knowledge for teaching apply to management field in general, they are also applicable to organizational behavior (OB) because OB is a part of the management field. Therefore, the process of bridging the teaching-research gap in OB will require focusing on the nature of research-generated knowledge available specifically in OB and the issues for OB teaching that result from the OB knowledge features. Clear understanding of the nature of research-generated OB knowledge and the resulting teaching issues will help future research to explore the ways to address the OB teaching issues and facilitate greater use of research-generated OB knowledge in OB teaching. The present paper adopts such a focus. This focus and the place of the present paper in addressing the OB research-teaching gap is depicted in Fig. 1.

Adopting the above focus within the framework depicted in Fig. 1, this paper makes three distinct and original contributions. First, to the author's best knowledge, no paper in the existing literature has provided a unified and comprehensive description of the limiting features of all three OB content aspects namely; concepts, theories, and empirical findings in OB. Second, this paper identifies the OB teaching issues emerging from these limiting features of OB knowledge described. Third, as one of the ways of knowledge advancement is characterized by the metaphor of "gradually adding light to a darkened room" (Weick, 1989, p. 518), the first effort, which this paper does, cannot be expected to completely address all aspects of the issue under consideration. The pioneering effort made in this paper brings, for the first time, to the light the relevant issues in a unified manner and future research will be needed to throw further light on these issues. To facilitate such future advancements, this paper points out future research directions and practice implications that may direct the systematic exploration and devising of the solutions to address the issues pointed out in this paper. These three contributions of this paper form a part of a larger framework depicted in Fig. 1.

This paper's focus is bounded at three levels. First, it focuses specifically on OB and not on the entire management field which, as noted by Peng and Dess (2010, p. 282), includes many other areas. Second, it focuses on examining only the limiting features of OB knowledge and not all features. As concepts, theories, and empirical findings are the main elements of OB knowledge/contents (e.g., Cummings, 1978), the limiting features of OB knowledge are identified by focusing on these three content elements of OB. Third, it focuses on the issues an OB teacher may face while teaching OB because of the limiting features of OB knowledge. It is relevant and necessary to examine these aspects specifically for OB in light of the serious situation in OB pointed out by the conclusion of Rynes, Trank, Lawson, and Ilies (2003, p. 277) that "unfortunately, both our result and others' (e.g., EBI, 1997) suggest that we have failed to legitimate the knowledge base of behavioral management to two of our most important constituencies, recruiters and students." Thus, this serious situation in OB along with the earlier described decreased usefulness of research-generated management knowledge in teaching and research-teaching gap in management all point out a need to examine the limiting features of OB knowledge and the resulting issues in OB teaching.

The limiting features of OB knowledge outlined in this paper may not be unique to the OB field. However, OB field deals with the phenomena—behavior in organizations—which are affected by multiple situational factors which themselves are evolving. This makes the field of both complex and dynamic as Cummings (1978, p. 97) noted, "... realities in organizations change so rapidly that our descriptions (ways of thinking, constructs and technologies) do not keep pace with the rate of change in the objects of our study." Thus, the limiting features of OB knowledge can have significant implications for OB teaching as reflected in some of the assessments from the literature outlined above and as elaborated in the subsequent parts of this paper.

### 1.2. *Why the nature of OB knowledge is likely to affect OB teaching?*

"Learning involves a modification or increase in knowledge" (Burke & Rau, 2010, p. 133). By implication, teaching can be viewed as a teacher's dissemination of knowledge to modify or enhance students' knowledge. Consistent with this, Keys and Wolfe (1988, p. 205) define management education as "the acquisition of a broad range of conceptual knowledge and skills in formal classroom situations in degree-granting institutions." Similarly, Trank and Rynes (2003, p.199) note, "Developing a scientific body of knowledge and using it as the main resource for instruction were the goals of those who sought professional status for business schools 4 decades ago." More recently, Brown, Rynes, Charlier, and Hosmanek (2013) noted that while knowledge/content and reflection/experience are two aspects of OB teaching, the knowledge/content part is dominant in the contemporary OB teaching.

These multiple views of learning, management education, instruction, and specifically of OB teaching indicate that the subject matter content/knowledge is an important ingredient in teaching. It follows that the nature of OB knowledge/content is likely to affect OB teaching. This, however, raises a relevant question: What is the content or knowledge element in OB?

### 1.3. *What are the elements of OB knowledge?*

For identifying the limiting features of OB knowledge, it is necessary to consider what the key elements of OB knowledge are. Cummings (1978, pp. 93–95) characterized the OB field using three dimensions namely; a) a way of thinking, b) a collection of concepts, models, and facts, and c) a system of tools and technologies. Of the last two elements—a collection of concepts, models, and facts and a system of tools and technologies—OB tools and technologies are applied in nature and are likely to be derived from OB concepts, models, and facts (empirical findings). Thus, the collection of concepts, models, and facts can be regarded as the core content element of OB.

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