
1. Critical work and organizational psychology: organizing an emergent critical field

*Severin Hornung, Gazi Islam, P. Matthijs Bal,
Parisa Dashtipour, Premilla D'Cruz, Johanna L. Degen,
Edina Dóci, Nathan Gerard, Matthew McDonald,
Zoe Sanderson, Francesco Tommasi and Wolfgang G. Weber*

This chapter introduces the handbook and presents a narrative that contextualizes its composition. In the following, we provide a background of the need for, and emergence of, critical work and organizational (W-O) psychology, from early critical voices within the broader W-O psychology discipline to increasing growth and consolidation, related to the role of the “Future of Work and Organizational Psychology” (FoWOP) initiative and allied trends in critical, feminist, decolonial, and other alternative academic movements. In our discussion, we focus on critical and radically humanistic perspectives on existing debates, the uncovering of implicit dynamics within the field, and the aim of promoting emancipatory W-O psychology, focused particularly on the subject and subjectivities embedded within societal, cultural, and historical contexts. The chapter also provides an overview of the various parts of this edited volume and closes with some remarks regarding the experiences and hopes of the editorial collective for the reception and future uses of this handbook.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of organizing a handbook of critical work and organizational (W-O) psychology, the first of its kind in the field, arose with a sense of urgency. The diverse strands of critical thought in W-O psychology, increasingly emphatic and frequent in a time of multiple and intersecting crises, can find a common forum in such a compilation, which is always a sign of its times. A project of this size, involving so many academics from within the field of W-O psychology, as well as neighboring voices offering their perspectives on how critical scholarship in other fields has the potential to enrich psychology applied to work and organizations, took a considerable amount of time, spanning over several years from inception to publication. It has been a work of professional and personal involvement and passion for us all, and we will return to our experiences and hopes as editors and authors of this volume towards the end of this introductory chapter.

This book is testament to the need for more collaborative infrastructures and cultures in academia; it materializes collective effort and critical values. A handbook of critical W-O psychology aims to resist academic individualization, competition, and instrumentalization—the defining characteristics of the neoliberal university—and represents a collective achievement of collaboration across continents, academic traditions, backgrounds, and theoretical

perspectives. The handbook is a deliberate attempt to showcase a range of ideas, theories, and concepts that are marginalized within conventional W-O psychology, and to organize collectively according to the aspirations of a critical community: a project and achievement of participatory and prefigurative organization and collaboration, living an ethos of criticality, solidarity, and emancipation. The following paragraphs will lay out the background of this collective endeavor. Specifically, this refers to the non-reflexive, reified managerial orientation of conventional “value-neutral,” positivist W-O psychology; the sporadic and fragmented character of critical streams and traditions within this field; and current efforts to revive, channel, and develop these critical potentialities. Although we will introduce a network that is carrying the current wave of critical scholarship forward, we neither “invented” nor “own” critical W-O psychology. Rather, we are in the privileged position to present our attempts to organize and energize an emergent field that is continuously evolving, drawing on a multitude of rich historical and theoretical foundations, interdisciplinary traditions, global perspectives, and methodological plurality. But most of all, critical W-O is embodied in the lives and work of critically-minded researchers, practitioners, and students all around the world, to whom we dedicate this volume.

WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: A DISCIPLINE OF SERVITUDE?

Since its emergence at the turn of the 20th century, W-O psychology has been haunted by the specter of a critical scholarly movement that would emerge from its very fabric and throw into question what came before and after. While W-O psychology has lacked a unified, coherent internal critical stream, critical perspectives have always been present, lurking with latent disruptive potential, but never quite emerging from the folds of the field. After occasional stirrings that were often thematically focused or region-specific (Hollway, 1991; Kornhauser, 1947; Prilleltensky, 1994; Steffy & Grimes, 1992; Volpert, 1975), and which were followed by long periods of dormancy, critical perspectives have begun to coalesce in a more systematic way (Abrams et al., 2023). Critical W-O psychology as a movement seems to have finally arrived in W-O psychology (cf., Bal et al., 2019). It has gathered momentum that is likely to give it staying power and is backed by an ever-widening coalition of voices from larger parts of the world, calling for a radical reimagining of what W-O psychology is and can (or should) become (Gerard, 2023; Islam & Sanderson, 2022). In light of the colossal challenges and crises facing the world, however, the role of the psychology of work and organizations in these developments is still a largely underappreciated and underdeveloped issue. Moreover, despite our efforts to address widespread marginalizations, there is still not even close to adequate representation of different regions of the globe in critical W-O psychology.

All things considered, it may be argued that much of W-O psychology has traditionally been a discipline of servitude (Baritz, 1960): a field that was and is to this day preoccupied with “fitting” workers into capitalist organizational life and making them more productive, all the while maintaining their well-being as a sign of the benevolence of managerialism (Watson et al., 2023). A central motivating ideal of W-O psychology has been that organizations can be designed and developed as “high-performance systems,” where workers contribute to the economic profit of the firm while sustaining well-being in a perpetual and individualized search for work–life balance, personal growth, and self-exploration (Miller & Rose, 1995).

W-O psychologists have theorized, researched, and consulted with organizations for decades to support their programs of recruitment and selection, employee–organization fit, training and retention, and broader culture change and strategic planning initiatives (to name a few), most of which, wittingly or unwittingly, have been guided by assimilation to the dominant social and economic order (Lefkowitz, 2003). The need to facilitate employee adjustment and “fit,” which can be seen as a form of social and psychological violence, was and still is deeply internalized by many W-O psychologists, and consequently transmitted to new generations through university curricula, textbooks, popular management handbooks, role modeling, and societal norms regarding what is the “proper place” for the field of W-O psychology in organizational and academic life. Some have even argued that W-O psychology in itself is misconstrued (Rose, 1990), separated from other fields of psychology and gravitating towards business administration (human resource) management, submitting to and internalizing the economic imperatives of these fields. A case in point is the reincarnation of W-O psychology in business schools as “Organizational Behavior,” even carrying the behavioristic, managerial focus in its name.

While many W-O scholars would contest the characterization of being servants of power (much research in the field could be argued to promote benefits for workers and society), it nevertheless remains the case that much of W-O psychology has not substantially engaged with developments in critical psychology, or critical approaches more broadly (Gerard, 2023). In particular, practices of reflexivity, such as examining one’s own methods, theoretical assumptions, positionality, and the impact these may have on the subjects of study and on society are still rare in the field (Seubert et al., 2023). As implied in the chapters in this book, from philosophers to sociologists, feminists to decolonial and postcolonial theorists, a wide range of thinkers have long emphasized that researching and theorizing without reflection, or without critically examining one’s own role and positionality, risks passively reproducing dominant ways of seeing and becoming complicit in oppressive systems (e.g., Arendt, 1963; Harding, 1991; Said, 1978).

Despite the above characterization, since the early days of the field, there have been critiques of and within W-O psychology, and its tendency to psychologize workplace behavior, resulting in the concealment of the role of wider institutional frameworks of economic systems (e.g., Bell, 1947). Pleas for alternative approaches to doing W-O psychology that are not conducted from management’s point of view, but focus on broader long-run socially significant problems, are also not new (Kornhauser, 1947). In more recent decades, there have been calls for humanistic democratic/bottom-up approaches, in which the standpoint of the “subjects,” and consequently also worker well-being and dignity, are not merely instrumentalized for organizational benefit, but regarded as values in themselves; inherent properties of human existence that ought to be protected through organizing, including against the dominant social order (Bal, 2020; Weber et al., 2020). The role of the critical W-O psychologist, therefore, is not to comply with managerial discourse that instrumentalizes humanity for corporate outcomes, but to argue for the respect of humane and planetary values.

WHY A CRITICAL HANDBOOK IN WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY?

While the network of critical W-O psychologists that underpins the realization of this edited collection is growing rapidly, it is also a rather small group, existing for less than 10 years. While Critical Psychology has a long tradition, it was sidelined for many years, especially in W-O psychology. It is only during the last decade that critical voices have started to emerge in a more structured form, through publications in work psychology journals, the organization of conferences, and a Special Issue of *Applied Psychology: An International Review* (Abrams et al., 2023). This handbook is a continuation of the growth of this critical movement, but also a way to reach out to the wider community by offering a deep and broad collection of insights on what critical work psychology can contribute to the field. In other words, the handbook is both a means to continue this critical scholarly movement and a way to sustain its vitality and drive it forward.

The handbook is not just that, however: it is also a landmark piece that exemplifies the necessity of critical W-O psychology at a time when academia, including W-O psychology, faces at least three challenges. First, artificial intelligence makes the possibilities of producing text endless: with a simple prompt, text (e.g., journal articles, student assignments) can be generated that simulates profound exploration, but in reality, is nothing more than a sequence of words determined through quantified likelihood (e.g., in large language models). With increasing numbers of scholars feeling the pressure to use these tools, the full impact on scholarship and education is yet to be realized, not to mention the impact on environmental and ecological systems. Second, increasing censorship restricts academic freedom and research outcomes to an extent unknown before in liberal democracies, such as in the current extreme case of the Palestinian genocide (Tatour, 2024). Moreover, the administrative denigration of Critical Management Studies (CMS) in the UK has damaged a stronghold of critical scholarship, likely with lasting effects (Hartz, 2024). Third, the position of academia is becoming increasingly more precarious under an economic neoliberal model where, within the space of a few years, numerous universities were in acute financial distress, pushing privatization and accelerating the precarization of academics and science. This is a trend that hurts universities' quality and direction equally. All of these developments raise important questions about the meaning, relevance, and sustainability of academia and universities, which are themselves situated within unsustainable systems of governance.

While the predominant ontological and epistemological position of the W-O psychologist holds that the field is neutral, objective, and apolitical, such a view is already violently disrupted by a lack of independence, deceleration, and reflexivity, which comes at the expense of depth and meaning and responsibility for stance and action. It is here that critical work psychologists can contribute: based on a long history of thought about dynamics in society and work, the handbook offers critical – in the sense of reflection and positioning – insights into the most contemporary challenges not only in the field, but also in society generally.

This handbook is also unique in the way it complements and builds on critical traditions in other fields, such as social psychology, theoretical psychology, sociology, philosophy, and management studies, but finds its own way by articulating a critical focus on the relevance of psychology in and around work and organizations. Indeed, the volume captures a large spectrum of topics in the emerging field of critical W-O psychology, building from philosophical

traditions such as Marxism and psychoanalysis while engaging with ethics, practice, methodological pluralism, and global crises that are challenging people and the planet, but also articulating critiques of traditional W-O psychology in a unique way, grappling with debates, concepts, theories, and methods that have rarely been discussed in related fields.

On the one hand, a number of chapters deal with concepts, theories, and methods with their attendant philosophies, ontologies, epistemologies, and applications (Parts II and V of this handbook), and on the other hand, several chapters address specific phenomena (e.g., social identity, employee relations, bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, power, control and resistance, leadership, climate, digitalization) speaking to pressing contemporary concerns of power and inequality, technological advancement, and environmental crises (Parts III and IV of this handbook). For instance, a unique perspective on climate change and the role of organizations and work psychology is offered, bringing together systemic approaches (to the need for fundamental transformation of our political-economic systems to ensure human and non-human survival on a rapidly changing planet) and individual perspectives (e.g., the rise of climate anxiety and grief), jointly conveyed through a narrative about how this plays out in organizational life, and how this can be conceptualized in our contemporary times. Another chapter seeks to elaborate how democratic organizing can be leveraged for social change and achieving alternative economic systems, promoting the common good and critical understandings of genuine ecological and social sustainability. While these are topics that are especially salient due to the ongoing threat of the climate crisis to human civilization and planetary life, others, particularly how the current political economic system capitalizes on and exploits social inequality, and how W-O psychology colludes with this organized abuse, are equally pressing global issues. Issues of social inequality and the political-economic and institutional structures and power-dependence relationships that create and sustain it, are addressed in several chapters and on different levels, including individual, interpersonal, group, organizational, societal, and global perspectives. For instance, this includes abusive interpersonal work relationships, exploitative management regimes, an economic system rigged against the interests of workers, and neocolonial and racist structures of systemic discrimination and marginalization. These, however, are but a few of a larger number of avenues opened up by this handbook, which, aside from critical perspectives on leadership, bullying, emotional abuse, harassment at work, employee relations, workplace inequalities, and power, control and resistance, also include new views on careers, individual differences, digitalization, and ethical issues in W-O psychology, to name a few.

But, if critical W-O psychology draws upon and finds alliances with various other scholarly traditions and movements, then what *is* it exactly? Is it a distinctive entity by itself, or is it merely an idea for another way of doing psychology? We attempt to provide one answer to this question by narrating the story of the current wave of critical W-O psychology, explaining how the focal network came about as a context of inquiry into the potential of this area of scholarship.

THE STORY OF THE CRITICAL WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY NETWORK

Critical perspectives are shapeshifters, appearing differently depending on the time and place they emerge from, but maintaining a distinctive value-based paradigmatic core (e.g., Mumby,

2019). As a result, to understand critical scholarship, we need to delve into two aspects of its context. First, we must consider the nature of the world that the critical scholars seek to engage. While the twin modalities of critical theory—critique of the status quo and the development of alternatives—persist in most of the scholarly traditions that identify as “critical,” the critiques that are advanced and the imaginaries that are pursued vary widely, holding up a mirror that reveals the unique features of the contexts they encounter. Part III of this handbook is full of such critical encounters within the contemporary workplace, and the ways it is usually understood in W-O psychology, giving a sense of the distinctive character of critical W-O psychology that is starting to emerge. Second, we must consider the nature of the environments that enable critical scholarship to be produced. Some of the critiques presented in this handbook have been made before, but have not been collected and applied to current developments in W-O psychology and/or the voices that articulated them have not been loud or sustained enough to be heard above the general noise of W-O psychology-as-usual. The reason this handbook exists, now, like this, is because a group of scholars has organized to create it. Who we are, how and why we work together, what this project has emerged from, are key elements in explaining the nature of critical W-O psychology as we are helping to (re-) generate it, including as it is manifested in this book.

Context matters to us for several reasons. It resists the intellectualization and dislocation of critical scholarship by insisting upon anchoring it socially, materially, disciplinarily, institutionally, geographically, culturally, and so on. It focuses attention on *how* critical scholarship is produced, not just on *what* is produced, bringing into the frame issues such as whether we work inclusively, fairly, or with care and kindness. It embraces diversity, inclusion, and equality, recognizing the varied and complex settings in which human life and work unfold. It resists closure: when we describe how this context has contingently produced a particular result, it is clear that this is a work in progress, not the final word on what critical W-O psychology is or is not. Contrary to the commonplace framing of non-generalizability as a limitation, we see this as a strength, because it serves as an invitation to others to take the work forward. Indeed, rather than being confined to an abstract valorization of statistical generalizability, we emphasize the more analytical notion of theoretical generalizability and explanatory power. Our hope is that this book will inspire many innovations that meet the unique demands and opportunities of other contexts to create a ripple effect of positive and impactful contributions to the world. Since critical W-O psychology is a collective endeavor, we hope that you will do this in fruitful, positive, mutually-acknowledging, and respectful relationships with others. In other words, we invite you to view this handbook as one of the springboards that catapults critical W-O psychology into the future, not a box that contains or defines it. To this end, we describe below the history that has enabled this particular group of people to coalesce for this project, not as a means of describing boundaries or creating an in-group–out-group aggregation, but simply to contextualize the writing and compilation of this handbook.

In a field dominated by mainstream, managerialist perspectives, 2017 can perhaps be marked as a notable year for the emergence of the current critical W-O psychology network, largely in the European context. While there had been previous isolated contributions (Gerard, 2016; Islam & Zyphur, 2006, 2009; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2017), in that year, a panel debate took place at the biannual conference of the *European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology* (EAWOP) in Dublin on the “Future of Work and Organizational Psychology”. The panel debate consisted of a range of brief introductions, in which mid- and senior career scholars shared some of their reflections about the state of the field, the

publication system, and the research environment. Critical reflections were shared of a field where obsession with publishing in certain A-ranked journals dominated, causing academics to craft their research more and more in line with how the dominant scholars in the field shaped expectations. Participants felt that this produced a line of research which had become increasingly dissociated from the realities of the contemporary world, and narrowly focused on modeling relationships of individualistic attitudes and behaviors in organizational life. The session, whose attendants included both scholars and practitioners, formed the starting point for many discussions revolving around the need to think more systematically about the future of the field, and how academics can collectively and collaboratively shape it for the strongest impact on the working lives of individuals across the world. The panel discussion was followed by a Small Group Meeting in Breda (in 2018), the Netherlands, under the auspices of EAWOP, where the “Future of Work and Organizational Psychology” (FoWOP) network was officially founded. From this point on, the group organized regular meetings, online events, and special sessions at conferences. Notably, an emphasis was put on organizing full-day pre-conference workshops at the EAWOP conferences in Turin (in 2019), Katowice (in 2023), and Prague (in 2025), to connect with and support scholars early in their careers, often disenfranchised by academic precarity and publication pressure, and increasingly disillusioned with the state of the field. These activities were flanked by increasingly self-funded small group meetings in Brussels (in 2022) and Milan (in 2024). After several postponements due to the global pandemic, in summer 2022, the first dedicated full-scale “International Conference on Critical and Radical Humanist Work and Organizational Psychology” was convened in Innsbruck (Hornung et al., 2023) with overwhelming resonance.

Alongside these events, a growing body of scholarship on critical W-O psychology was published. The receptions of these articles are documented in many of the chapters of this handbook. Nonetheless, the galvanizing “Manifesto for the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology” (Bal et al., 2019), an outcome of the 2018 Breda meeting and published in EAWOP’s flagship journal, warrants mentioning. Further, the analysis of the role of neoliberal ideology in shaping contemporary W-O psychology (Bal & Dóci, 2018) has triggered intensive discussions and has become influential within the critical W-O psychology movement and beyond. In the most comprehensive review of critical perspectives in W-O psychology, Islam and Sanderson (2022) have, among others, elaborated similarities and differences with the allied movement of CMS. Proponents of CMS have taken a keen interest in, and have even assumed an advisory role for, the emergent field of critical W-O psychology (Parker, 2023) and the affinity of these two pluralistic critical movements is also evident by the presence of CMS scholars in this volume. Accordingly, CMS is one of the scientific lineages discussed by Weber (2023), along with Frankfurt School Critical Theory, dialectical materialist psychology, analytical social psychology, and various streams of critical psychology, in outlining a “family tree” of critical W-O psychology. The pluralist and discursive approach of the critical W-O psychology network is possibly best illustrated by the documentation of two panel discussions in the form of scientific bricolages (Dóci et al., 2025; Röhlmann et al., 2023). Finally, the tendency to engage with, but also to infiltrate the conventional “mainstream” is exemplified by the subversive presence of critical W-O psychology in a recent *Encyclopedia of Organizational Psychology* (Bal, 2024; Sanderson, 2024). A most recent reflexive contribution on the role of ethics in W-O psychology (Dashtipour et al., 2025) can be taken to indicate some level of maturation. Although numerous other activities, projects, and publications

would warrant mentioning (cf. Hornung, 2025), these few selected highlights serve to make our point.

To sum up, within a few years, the initial panel discussion evolved into a thriving network of academics under the umbrella of the FoWOP initiative, continuing to organize and bring together academics and practitioners striving for a more sustainable future of the discipline. The overall FoWOP network grew to between 500–600 members, of which a tenth is regularly active within one of the initiatives or activities (organizing events, writing activities, reading club, etc.), and the remaining members are more occasional participants and/or silent supporters. Critical W-O psychology has always been a core division and at the forefront of organizing within FoWOP. While not all FoWOP activities and members would necessarily self-identify as “critical scholars,” the critical W-O psychology initiative has grown in prominence from this context. In this sense, the history of this latest wave of critical W-O psychology has been closely interlinked with two key activities within FoWOP: (1) the development of a community of academic work and organizational psychologists that would form its own grouping (as the FoWOP network of scholars), but which would also extend to the broader network of work psychologists (such as through connecting with EAWOP or the North American Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, SIOP), and (2) the provision of practical recommendations for the betterment of the field as such, and work psychology in general. In this way, “critical” would not be merely indicative of a critical stance, or the uncovering of hidden, ideological elements in research and practice, but also an emancipatory intent, working towards creating workplaces in the interest of people and the planet, rather than profit: a goal that (at least in theory) many psychologists support. Hence, this critical W-O psychology network has carefully avoided growing as a separate entity from the existing W-O psychology networks (as was observed with CMS which developed largely disconnected from the wider management discipline), and having their own journals, networks, conferences, and fora. This also places the current project in a relationship of difference, with family resemblances, to the history of CMS (Parker, 2023), in its attempts to both deconstruct existing hegemonic theory, while also putting an emphasis on interrogating how existing discourse, terminology, and concepts can be approached differently with respect to the possibility of emancipation.

Specifically, critical W-O psychology has started to have both its own dedicated events, and a strong presence at events directly connected to the biannual EAWOP conference (e.g., Turin in 2019; Katowice in 2023; Prague in 2025). In this way, connections and exchanges were made and retained with the wider W-O psychology community, whereby one of the aims was around “criticalizing” research and perspectives within the field (Abrams et al., 2023). This meant that the network tried to avoid the reification of simplistic binary oppositions between “critical” and “mainstream,” oppositions which would function as two mutually exclusive domains and spaces of self-identification, limiting dialogue (Sanderson, 2024). Instead, a process of criticalizing would involve the identification of critical spaces within the field itself, and finding ways to approach existing debates, theories, and topics from a more critical perspective. This handbook, we think, is a testament to this process, and we hope the reader finds multiple points of connection, provocation, and hope for a different way of doing work and organizational psychology.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This handbook consists of five sections. While the first section (Part I) comprises this introductory chapter, the second section (Part II) compiles the historical and conceptual foundations of critical W-O psychology. The third section (Part III) offers critiques of existing and dominant concepts in conventional or “mainstream” W-O psychology. The fourth section (Part IV) focuses on alternative frameworks within W-O psychology that have been neglected or not fully developed with regard to their critical potential. The fifth and final section (Part V) of the book provides an overview of the pluralistic range of methodological approaches in critical W-O psychology. Below, each of these sections is briefly introduced.

Part II: Historical and Conceptual Foundations of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology

Presenting historical and conceptual foundations of critical W-O psychology, Part II of the handbook comprises six chapters (Chapters 2 to 7) that cover topics regarding: (1) dialectical interactions between individuals and society; (2) the related question of subjectivity; (3) humanist ethical foundations; (4) connections to social theory; and (5) emancipatory interest. These five aspects are based on previous theorizing (Weber, 2023, cf. Bal & Dóci, 2018; Islam & Sanderson, 2022; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012). However, they are not comprehensive, for instance, concerning a pluralistic methodological orientation (see Part V). Nonetheless, they may be useful for thinking about subsequent parts and chapters of the handbook.

First, critical approaches often conceptualize relationships between person, activity, and society as a *dialectical interaction*, reflecting the societal, cultural, and historical genesis of psychological phenomena, and the continuous production of socio-cultural structures and processes through human activity. Scholars of German Critical Psychology (Chapter 4) outline how the socio-cultural environment, human agency, collaboration, and artifacts (e.g., technology, cultural products) shape subjectivity while being influenced by the persons interacting with their environment. In this dialectical process between individuals and social environments (e.g., organizations, institutions), the re-/productive function of work activity for persons and society is central. Knowledge development within societies is historico-culturally shaped, depending on, among other factors, how people can actualize their subjectivity at work (e.g., knowledge, skills, needs), making it accessible to others and interacting with their subjectivities. A precursor to German Critical Psychology is Activity Theory, developed in Russian Marxist Psychology (Chapter 5). Here, the authors outline two streams converging in the assertion that psychological structures result from interaction processes between individuals and their environment, and that the psychological, in turn, manifests in interactions and artifacts. In this person–environment dialectic, the Rubinstein tradition of activity theory emphasizes the internal subject as an actor, choosing and pursuing their own meanings and goals. The Leontiev tradition, by contrast, focuses on external sources of knowledge, motives, or attitudes, resulting from the environmental structure of material activities. German Critical Psychology does not share this deterministic view, but follows the Rubinstein tradition in concepts of agency, subjective premises and reasons for action in the analysis of everyday life conduct at work, without losing sight of societal and organizational possibilities for—and restrictions on—action.

Second, an important cross-sectional topic is the question of *subjectivity*. German Critical Psychology, adopting a phenomenologically-influenced epistemology, is distinct from Adorno's position in Critical Theory (Chapter 2), which conceives of subjectivity primarily as a result of capitalist hierarchical work organization and commodity exchange. However, hermeneutic and reconstructive analytical procedures in German Critical Psychology (Chapter 4) relate to critical psychoanalytic methodology (Chapter 3), although they do not share a psychoanalytic ontology. Critical psychology analyzes how individuals integrate everyday work experiences in a reflexive and communicative manner, resulting in subjective premises and reasons for action (Chapter 4). Such integration can involve expanding control over one's life conditions, but also internalizing socially imposed constraints and ideologies. Critical approaches to psychoanalysis, namely the object relations tradition following Melanie Klein, the Lacanian tradition, and the psychodynamics of work traditions (Chapter 3), emphasize unconscious processes of human subjectivity (e.g., drives, desires, emotions, fantasies, defense mechanisms). Shaped by capitalist economic and labor practices, these may serve to maintain exploitative, oppressive, and damaging symbolic orders, organizational structures, and work tasks. Within the framework of critical theory, Erich Fromm's theory of social character provides a structurally accentuated explanation of how oppressive or damaged subjectivity arises through socialization (Chapter 2). In this volume, scholarship on feminism, gender studies, and queer theory (Chapter 6), and on postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race perspectives (Chapter 7) offer further insights into how, through historically shaped processes of asymmetrical interactions, conditioning, exclusion, and marginalization, oppressive forms of subjectivity (e.g., patriarchy, gendered identities, repressed desires) arise in organizations—and can be challenged through critical consciousness-raising and solidarity-based cooperation.

Third, ethical foundations of critical approaches to W-O psychology explicitly or implicitly evoke *humanistic values* (Chapter 21). Following Erich Fromm, humanism involves a normative principle stressing the absolute, unconditional value of all human beings and postulating their freedom and dignity as the objective of personal, social, economic, and political endeavors (Weber, 2023). Most approaches in Part II (and other parts) of this volume incorporate ethical concepts rooted in humanism. Specifically, this involves protecting the dignity of working people, promoting human flourishing and reducing suffering, and championing and institutionalizing justice and equality in the workplace (e.g., Chapters 2, 4, and 7). Along with the value of equality, feminist, gender and queer theories (Chapter 6), postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race perspectives (Chapter 7) also advocate for the protection of diversity, plurality in lifestyles, and engagement against the marginalization of non-Western epistemologies and oppressed groups (e.g., class, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity). Reflecting a growing discourse on the role of humanism in critical W-O psychology, contributions on feminism and queer theory (Chapter 6), postcolonial studies (Chapter 7), German Critical Psychology (Chapter 4), and Critical Theory (Chapter 2), all warn against a possible misuse of humanist values. For instance, this refers to the instrumentalization of allegedly humanistic motives for the vested interests of economic elites to justify exploitative profits or harmful organizational restructuring and work design. It is also problematic when principles of humanization of working life developed in Western capitalist contexts are introduced to workplaces in other cultures without regard for local needs, experiences, and ethos. Nevertheless, the psychological analysis of economic and organizational structures, principles, and practices requires *criteria* for the assessment of power, domination, instrumentalization, exploitation, inequality, marginalization, suffering, etc. Without guaranteeing basic human rights (e.g., life, health,

voice) as a necessary precondition, debates regarding respect for cultural diversity in organizations or inter-cultural transferability of work design or leadership principles inspired by humanistic values seem premature and counterproductive. Only if human rights are secured, can debates on the further development or limitations of humanistic principles be led with credibility.

Fourth, theoretical approaches in Part II refer—to varying degrees—to concepts from *social theory*. These enable a critical analysis of structures, processes, and phenomena related to power, domination, instrumentalization, oppression, and suffering in the context of economics, organizations, and work. German Critical Psychology offers a phenographic elaboration, that is, the analytical move from conflicting, partial perspectives toward situated generalizations, to identify neoliberal and other repressive social ideologemes penetrating the everyday consciousness of working people (Chapter 4). This corresponds to a core theme in critical theory, also adopted in socio-critical currents of psychoanalysis. Specifically, the analysis of socially generated ideological elements in individual consciousness requires relating these to an overarching framework offered by social theories (e.g., neo-Marxism, Foucauldian, post-structuralism). Otherwise, psychological research on attitudes or behaviors of employees and managers risks becoming a relativistic personalization and psychologization of problems and risks obscuration of their causes in social or organizational domination (Chapters 2, 3, and 4). Postcolonial and decolonial studies (Chapter 7), as well as feminist, gender, and queer studies (Chapter 6), share this ideology-critical perspective, drawing on a wider range of social-theoretical foundations. The compatibility of theoretical approaches presented in Part II and their conceptual and methodological contributions and limitations with regard to empirical studies is a relevant subject for future discourse within critical W-O psychology. Intersectionality, which considers overlapping systems of oppression concerning race, gender, class, and other identities, offers a valuable conceptual orientation (Chapter 7). Postcolonial and decolonizing theories have developed insights concerning the critique of Western (capitalist and paternalistic) economic thinking, both in science and in practice. By privileging authoritarian, exploitative, and unjust organizational structures and instrumental reason over employee autonomy, well-being, and equality, prevailing systems neglect workers' lived experiences and marginalize alternative knowledge that transcends positivist epistemology (Chapter 7). These topics confirm substantial commonalities among theoretical approaches presented in Part II.

Fifth, critical approaches to W-O psychology explicitly pursue an *emancipatory epistemological interest*. Essentially, all chapters in this handbook refer to alternatives to an exploitative, oppressive, or psychologically damaging status quo within and beyond organizations. Parodic practice and other forms of resistance in direct interactions as proposed by queer theory (Chapter 6), counter-storytelling as recommended by Critical Race Theory, and applying indigenous practices of consensus-based decision-making and participatory action research, as suggested by decolonizing studies (Chapter 7, see also Chapter 26), for instance, aim primarily at meso-organizational change. The extent to which these approaches also imply macro-level changes in the capitalist economy is an ongoing debate, addressed in the respective chapters. By contrast, transformation concepts of Critical Theory, like Herbert Marcuse's cultural-revolutionary "Great Refusal" or Erich Fromm's vision of economic democracy (Chapter 2), explicitly target macro-organizational change. What is envisioned is a humane transformation of the capitalist economy through long-term, broad-ranging collective action by "enlightened" actors, building metaphorical bridges to many chapters in this handbook.

Part III: Critiques of Work and Organizational Psychology

The differentiation between Parts III and IV emerged organically based on the rationale that some streams of research in W-O psychology seem deeply ideologically biased, strongly colored by a managerial perspective, while other topics hold more latent critical potential that needs to be developed both theoretically and empirically. However, eventually it was left to the chapter authors to decide whether to put a stronger emphasis on the critique of extant research or to outline alternative approaches to their respective topics. Thus, the allocation of chapters to these parts follows the logic outlined above, according to which efforts aimed at critiquing and criticizing W-O psychology need to be balanced and dialectically complement each other.

Part III presents systematic critiques of established domains within W-O psychology—classic topics that are presented and discussed widely at conferences, in leading journals, and other publications—exposing how seemingly neutral psychological constructs and frameworks serve managerial interests while obscuring worker experiences and structural inequalities. These chapters draw on diverse theoretical lenses, yet together they reveal the ideological foundations underlying core areas of the field, demonstrating how W-O psychology often functions as a “servant of power.” The chapters examine careers (Chapter 8), individual differences (Chapter 9), group and social identity processes (Chapter 10), positive psychology applied to work and organizations (Chapter 11), employee relations (Chapter 12), leadership psychology (Chapter 13), and W-O psychology practice (Chapter 14), revealing how each domain perpetuates neoliberal ideology while marginalizing worker interests.

These critiques expose four fundamental limitations, in line with McDonald and Bubna-Litic (2012): (1) methodological positivism; (2) a highly individualistic focus neglecting organizational and societal conditions; (3) a managerialist orientation that prioritizes organizational interests by focusing on productivity and performance over human dignity and freedom, justice, and societal and planetary well-being; and (4) the lack of ethical foundations that enables the field’s complicity with exploitative practices. Leadership (Chapter 13) and employee relations (Chapter 12) research exemplify the managerialist perspective, while research on careers (Chapter 8), individual differences (Chapter 9), and social identity processes (Chapter 10), and positive psychology (Chapter 11) demonstrate how systemic issues are psychologized and individualized, obscuring structural influences on subjectivity and workplace suffering. The chapter on individual differences (Chapter 9), in particular, exposes the problematic history of W-O psychology and its use of psychometrics that served eugenic and discriminatory agendas while masquerading as neutral science. Finally, while all topics can be characterized by the absence of ethical considerations, this applies most problematically perhaps to W-O psychology in practice (Chapter 14), which highlights how practitioners often operate unreflexively, serving dominant interests and inadvertently perpetuating systems of oppression. Collectively, these chapters lay the groundwork for a fundamental reimagining of W-O psychology through methodological pluralism, structural analysis of power relations, centering of worker experiences, and robust ethical foundations that challenge, rather than serve, capitalist exploitation.

Part IV: Alternatives: Theoretical and Empirical Advancements of Critical Work and Organizational Psychology

Complementing the preceding section, Part IV seeks to identify and develop critical potentialities in W-O psychology and outline our vision for an alternative reconceptualization of the field, which addresses the most pressing social, ecological, and ethical crises of our times. Rather than merely critiquing existing approaches, these chapters chart pathways toward a genuinely emancipatory W-O psychology that serves human flourishing and planetary well-being. Although summarizing the breadth of contributions is impossible, five common denominators of the chapters in this section are overarching themes of power, resistance, context, reflexivity, and transformation.

Abusive and violent relations entailing inequality, exploitation and injustice at the interpersonal, workplace and societal levels are explicitly addressed in the chapters on workplace bullying, emotional abuse, and harassment (Chapter 15), inequality (Chapter 16), and power, control and resistance (Chapter 17). However, systemic power also plays a central role in exploitative forms of workplace digitalization (Chapter 18), the inability or unwillingness of W-O psychology to address the pressing issues of the climate crisis (Chapter 19), and the development of egalitarian, participatory and democratic versus hierarchical, managerialist, and authoritarian forms of organizing (Chapter 20). Last but not least, power is also a critical issue in building and implementing the ethical foundation of critical W-O psychology (Chapter 21). Socio-ecological transformation is at the very core of chapters on the climate crisis and democratic organizing for social change (Chapters 19 and 20), but is also inherent to workplace digitalization, power, inequality, and bullying as well as new ethics (Chapters 18, 17, 16, 15, 21). Indeed, Chapter 15 on workplace bullying, emotional abuse, and harassment provokes deeper engagement with the concept of context through delineating sociocultural context, occupational/professional/sectoral context, the nature of the employment contract, the workplace location, and institutionalization, thereby underlining context as multi-layered, nuanced, complex and entrenched. Reflexivity, in the sense of calling into question and critically interrogating common interpretations and practices, is addressed in all chapters, specifically in accounts of workplace inequality, power, digitalization, and climate crisis, but is centered as a core focus of the chapter on ethical foundations (Chapter 21).

Finally, all seven chapters in Part IV of the handbook do not stop at bemoaning an unjust, abusive, exploitative, or dysfunctional status quo, but provide concrete recommendations for resistance—both for workers subjected to these conditions and for scholars doing research in these domains. A vivid example can be found in the chapter on workplace digitalization (Chapter 18), outlining how workers can resist the psychological grip of technologies of control and distance themselves from the self-optimization demands of digital capitalism. Similarly, the chapter on workplace bullying, emotional abuse, and harassment (Chapter 15) underscores the significance of worker agency and mastery, whose attempts at rebalancing unequal workplace relations are buttressed by democratic, ethical, and responsible leaders, human resource practitioners, and managers endorsing common good HRM, and the collective action of unions, co-workers/bystanders, and other worker aggregations. Further, the chapter on the climate crisis (Chapter 19) is partly directed at stimulating the resistance of researchers against the silence and collusion of W-O psychology with the powers that have no interest in real socio-ecological transformation. Finally, the chapter on ethical foundations of

critical W-O psychology (Chapter 21) provides a nexus for scholars refusing to perpetuate the current uncritical, socially and ecologically destructive trajectory of W-O psychology.

Collectively, Part IV demonstrates that a reimagined alternative W-O psychology is not only eminently possible but urgently necessary—one that is reflexive, ethically-oriented, and contextually-sensitive, and serves as a force for social justice and inclusion, ecological sustainability, and human liberation and flourishing, rather than organizational and capitalist exploitation and accumulation.

Part V: Methodological Approaches within Critical Work and Organizational Psychology

For readers who are inspired by the concepts, theories, critiques, and topics discussed in the preceding sections of this handbook and wish to experiment with critical W-O psychology research, what might that look like in practice? Within critical W-O psychology, methodology is viewed as both political and personal. At a field-wide level, W-O psychology is predominantly positivist and quantitative, combined with limited explicit engagement with ontology and epistemology (van Rossenberg et al., 2024). The field predominantly features knowledge forms that emanate from the USA and Western Europe, often exporting these to the rest of the world as if they were generalizable as “universal truths,” further entrenching geopolitical inequalities (Islam & Sanderson, 2022). This hegemony is reinforced by leading journals that recognize and replicate what counts as normal, legitimate, and valid psychological research. Against this backdrop, researching differently becomes politically consequential, because it signals thoughtfulness about how knowledge production is inherently shaped by power relations. Methodology is personal because it requires us to consider what we think is important in our research approach and to act on those convictions. Key questions emerge: What motivates our research? How do our identities, values, histories, and contexts shape our methodological choices? What constraints do we face? What futures do we want to create? Ultimately, methodological choices should reflect what we believe, value, and aspire to.

In this final part of the handbook, we offer a series of methodological provocations and inspirations to support critical W-O psychology researchers in assembling bespoke toolkits of ideas and practices. Practicing what we preach, here we explicate some of the principles we prioritized in compiling this section. Since we are working towards field-level diversification, rather than replacing one hegemony with another, we present onto-epistemological perspectives that challenge the current status quo. This part of the handbook examines “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” (Barad, 2007), that is, the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology when engaging in knowledge production. As a world-making activity, scientific production and practices actively shape both the phenomenon under investigation and the world itself, including the human beings and the non-human beings within it. Therefore, W-O psychology, like all disciplines, cannot engage with the world as innocent, apolitical, or neutral bystanders merely observing reality. The idea of ethico-onto-epistem-ology coined by Barad (2007), a feminist physicist-philosopher, urges us to rethink scientific knowledge production as an encounter of the world that requires a “response-ability.” The perspectives in this final part of the handbook reveal how within W-O psychology, ethics, being, and knowing are inseparable from politics, theory, and methodology (Barad, 2007; Geerts, 2016).

Reflecting the emergent nature of critical W-O psychology, we aim to strike a balance between established traditions of alternative research within W-O psychology and novel

approaches that could develop further in the future. Wherever possible, we foreground perspectives from places outside the traditional geographic powerhouses of W-O psychology research, recognizing how our efforts cannot fully meet our aspirations. Finally, we unapologetically blend the political and personal, presenting marginalization, reflexivity, ethics, and activism as methodological matters.

Chapter 22 presents phenomenological and experiential methods for approaching subjects' lived experiences within their context, arguing for situated and embedded research in the organizational and socio-political context. Being essentially concerned with understanding in the study of phenomena as they appear, phenomenology draws on a vast family of intellectual works whose cross-fertilization creates a critical alliance for onto-epistemological and methodological frameworks. The authors present this approach as applied in organizational contexts based on the observation and the "social praxis" toward workers' lived experiences and their backgrounds. To reclaim the primacy of experience, this experiential character reflects broader recognition of the contextual understanding of phenomena. The application of phenomenological-experiential methods is represented as an ethical consideration.

Similarly, Chapter 23 delves into the role of the "linguistic turn" for reconceptualizing the role of language and its function in research. The authors discuss how central for discursive and language-based methods is the very idea that language makes subjective meanings real. This challenges mainstream methodologies in W-O psychology, portraying themselves as scientific, value-free, and apolitical "tools." Discursive and language-based methods draw on social constructivism to problematize the individualistic decontextualization of human behavior in W-O psychology research. Central to this approach is the role of power in knowledge construction and legitimation. Concerned with the ways language is used to build accounts and representations of people and events in work and organizations, these methods offer possibilities for revealing how language is used to legitimate and naturalize structures of power, while also aiming to contribute to change. Beyond the onto-epistemological and methodological considerations, the authors demonstrate how such critical methods align ethically with the commitment to social change and emancipation of marginalized groups.

Moving from the "language" turn to the "visual" turn, Chapter 25 offers a problematization of the current status of post-positivist methodologies in W-O psychology. Dominated by the use of quantitative methods, the field has recently drawn attention to qualitative methods. This shift, however, remains within the positivist orientation of the natural sciences, rendering qualitative research published in W-O psychology homogeneous and formulaic. The authors challenge the uncritical application of mainstream quantitative and qualitative approaches in W-O psychology by offering a non-logocentric approach based on the "visual turn" as a way to resist universalistic and hegemonic assumptions. Chapter 25 thus presents visual methods (i.e., drawings, photo elicitation, photovoice, digital storytelling) as a way to approach the rich, multi-layered and complex world of work and organizations. Visual artifacts (e.g., pictures, videos) offer possibilities for thick descriptions of social phenomena while accessing the indescribable, eliciting emotions and elevating feelings beyond verbal communication. Visual methods are participatory and have the capacity to bridge different spheres of meaning.

Chapter 26 explores action-oriented and participative research approaches in critical W-O psychology. Drawing on political-pedagogical projects and liberation psychologies originating in Latin America, the authors show how action research emerged as emancipatory praxis in opposition to colonization and oppression. As activist scholars, they share insights from their experiences developing action-focused praxis that is reflexive and emergent, while

nurturing relational spaces. While previous chapters share similar purposes of resistance, emancipation, liberation, and social change, Chapter 26 emphasizes the potentials of participatory, action-oriented approaches to inquiry and researcher activism. The “political” role of W-O psychology is thus put at the center and emphasized for “developing a critical movement unique to the current historical moment” (Islam & Sanderson, 2022, p. 3).

In Chapters 24 and 27, the authors offer visions of reflexive W-O psychology. Chapter 24 engages with the unproblematic and unquestioned “use of numbers” in W-O psychology. Inspired by the sociology of numbers and initiatives to add reflexivity and critique of the “quantitative technique,” the author offers the opportunity to enhance awareness of the social effects of mainstream quantitative approaches. Quantitative techniques are used to make sense of—and categorize—the social worlds with the subtraction of qualities of phenomena to numbers and metrics. One implication is overlooking the social and political effects of these instruments (i.e., organizational control, individualization, inequality). Chapter 24 represents an occasion to rethink the fantasy of the “quantitative” and build capacities for using numbers reflexively, critically, and pragmatically.

Similarly, Chapter 27 closes Part V of the handbook, leaving spaces for the development of a responsible and reflexive critical W-O psychology. The author presents three streams of reflection for W-O psychology. First, he introduces the psychology of *with/for* people. While traditionally psychology has been *about* people, using concepts that apply *to* people, critical approaches aim to develop a psychology *with and for* people. Although this last is not simply a personal decision as embedded in institutional, professional, and societal power structures, the priority must be in acknowledging the *other*, which can perhaps be a principle for psychology to not serve the interests of people with the most power in society. Second, related to the previous point, given the complexity of the *with/for choice*, the distinction between pragmatic (purposeful), ethical (good), and moral (just) thinking becomes relevant (Habermas, 1991). This thinking can advance reflexivity and support the development of pragmatic, ethical, and moral psychology that is generalizable, systemic, and value-oriented. Third, the author argues that equity, diversity, and inclusion are not merely organizational and societal values but epistemic research principles as well. The chapter concludes with a vision for a reflexive W-O psychology that is international, democratic, and moral.

CONCLUSION: OUR EXPERIENCES AND HOPES AS EDITORS OF THIS HANDBOOK

Before ending this introductory chapter, a few thoughts about our experiences as editors and our vision for this handbook seem warranted. Editing this volume has, at times, been an intimidating and challenging task—as any project of this size would be—yet it has also proven tremendously valuable as a learning process. Connecting with a wide range of scholars, both across geography and interests, has afforded us a better understanding of the landscape of critical research within and well beyond W-O psychology. Moreover, our editorial group has been intentionally (albeit unusually) large, and we thank the publisher for being receptive to our explanation that this reflects our inclusive commitment as a collective; an approach that has succeeded in previous publication projects and organizing events, and which has proven successful once again. Reviewing our colleagues’ chapters, including each other’s work as editors, has taught us that there is another way to organize the peer review process that both

improves the quality of scholarship and respects the authors' autonomy and discretion. Finally, our monthly virtual meetings over three years were not only enjoyable and reassuring, but also offered structure and mutual support in a world that often seemed to deteriorate all around us. Political and economic events continuously reinforced the meaningfulness of our work, and critical scholarship in general, as we struggled to think, write, and debate amid ever-growing precarity and instability, whether at home or abroad.

As this project nears completion, pressing questions arise with renewed urgency regarding our visions for future uses of the product of our passionate collaboration. We acknowledge that there are countless handbooks out there, and in one of our final meetings, we discussed the anxiety that ours could become just another handbook that falls by the wayside, pandering to the academic machine and useful, at best, only for the theoretical exploits of other academics. Indeed, there is a danger that the very term "handbook" gives the impression that we are offering a "cookbook" of recipes for "how to do critical W-O psychology," intended for a small in-group of researchers. Nothing could be further from our vision. Instead, we hope this project not only transcends disciplinary boundaries, but also breaks through the confines of academic research to stimulate wider reflections, courageous discourse and debate, and ultimately transformative action in the world. Rather than replicating our approach, we invite readers to imagine and experiment with new directions to take further the critical thoughts in this book. We hope that the scholarship presented here will inspire a multitude of networks and initiatives that create novel pathways of critique, resistance, and social transformation. Most importantly, we seek to encourage the next generation of learners and teachers to think and act differently, to ask and discuss critical questions in classrooms, challenge and critique conventional wisdom, and create something new. We believe the most impactful audience we can reach includes students and emergent scholars, who represent the future of the field, and may benefit from a collection of ideas that many of us wished someone had shared with us earlier in our careers. We hope to reach scholars who have felt uneasy with the rigidity of methodologies, ontologies, and epistemologies in the field, and their complicity with dominant groups in society, but may not previously have found ways to voice these concerns.

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