



BOOK REVIEWS

***Whistleblowing: Toward a New Theory*, by Kate Kenny. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 296 pp.**

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Like all heroic stories, this book starts with a fairy tale of a whistleblower in which an employee—soon to be a whistleblower—discloses wrongdoing internally and to the public and experiences major retaliation for doing the right thing. With her new theory of whistleblowing, Kate Kenny is trying to change this ever-present tale of a whistleblower. She is proposing novel ways to perceive whistleblowers' identity at its core and comprehend their conflict against powerful organizational and external influences. Her arguments critique the current literature's descriptive view of a whistleblower as an independent agent who acts alone. As a remedy, she suggests that attachment to the organizational and institutional norms also governs one's life and sense of who one is as a whistleblower in the broader society. To wholly understand the difficulties experienced by the whistleblowers, we need to examine the "affective and desire-driven dynamics" (9) powered by the cultural norms and political and institutional structures. Kenny is drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) concept of "affective recognition" to capture the richness of whistleblowers' complex and multifaceted experiences.

With her affective-recognition approach to whistleblowing, Kenny aims to answer four main questions that are fundamental to understanding the relationship between the whistleblower and the context: 1) "How are individual whistleblowers affected, day to day, by the macro-level influences, whether laws or norms?" 2) "What are the dynamics by which they engage with the powerful institutional structures in which they are embedded?" 3) "We know that whistleblowers are retaliated against, but what fuels the extreme and vitriolic nature of some reprisals, and how do whistleblowers survive such attacks?" Finally, 4) "Is the fate of the whistleblower predetermined, as suggested by classic narratives, or can it be altered?" (30).

To answer these questions, Kenny conducted qualitative, in-depth research with thirteen prominent participants working in global financial institutions who had been given the label "whistleblower." The majority of her participants had worked in watchdog roles in which their job descriptions involved discovering and disclosing wrongdoing. Inspired by recent developments in qualitative data analysis, Kenny used what she calls a "politically-engaged theory of performativity" methodology to

analyze the data both at the micro and macro levels and to specify primary themes that shaped chapters of the book (219).

The first chapter outlines what we already know about the current whistleblowing literature and points out its limitations. Kenny groups previous research into three broad categories: “studies of whistleblowing laws and policies and how these relate to organizations, descriptive approaches to whistleblowing in organizations that examine what happens when people speak out, and theoretical explorations of whistleblowing” (14). She argues that current research is helpful in understanding some of the organizational and personal variables in predicting whistleblowing behaviors and the laws and regulations that protect the whistleblower, yet it is limited in examining whistleblowers’ complex and nuanced selves with respect to broader social norms and structures. To move past the classic narrative of whistleblowers as “clichéd, tragic heroes” (31), Kenny’s affective-recognition approach offers a novel psychoanalytic take on whistleblowing.

In the second chapter, to lay the theoretical foundation of the book, Kenny fleshes out the connection between affective recognition and whistleblowing by incorporating various concepts from philosophy. For readers unfamiliar with affective recognition, “it explores how and why people’s lived experiences are influenced by structures of power both within their organizations and beyond” (32). This approach is suitable for the whistleblowing case and contributes to the literature because it not only emphasizes the complexity of whistleblowers’ experiences and elucidates the reasons why some of them are considered as “impossible beings” who are denied a valid position in society (37) and worthy of extreme retaliation; it also explains how the public shapes perceptions of whistleblowers over time.

Kenny’s argument builds on Butler’s “account of subjectivity,” which mainly discusses “how we as subjects are formed by, and formative of, power” (33). Kenny argues that, in pursuit of a stable sense of self and longing for recognition, people subject themselves to ever-changing and contingent norms. A norm is contingent because it depends on and operates in a particular cultural, social, or historical context. Similarly, normative categories emerge from various contextual forces and attach to the foundational aspect of a person. Therefore we cannot separate that normative category of a person (e.g., a whistleblower) from cultural and social intersections of norms. To unpack how the intersection of norms disseminates, Kenny introduces the concept of “discourse,” which refers to “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that support these” (Weedon 1997, 105). These discourses are taken for granted by organizations, industries, and the general public and can work to serve the interests of various privileged groups. Kenny argues that discourses of power fabricate who we are and how we are perceived by others, and hence they are fundamental to our existence.

In the case of whistleblowing, influential discourses involve the “ideals of professionalism in the sphere of global business” (36). For whistleblowers to highlight their positions, they subject themselves to powerful discourses and occupy legitimate subject positions that are necessary for their survival. Otherwise, in the absence of recognition, they become “impossible beings” engaged in “impossible speech”

and are denied a valid position in social life. Retaliation caused by this normative rejection can be internalized by a whistleblower and lead to struggles against one's sense of self-coherence. Even though I appreciate the argument that "normative emotional demands are a part of our subjection to discursive categories" (50), I found the assertion that emotions are socially composed by our experiences of subjections to normative categories to be limiting to agency of the self.

After a strong, if jargon-intensive, theoretical background, in the following chapters, Kenny applies the affective-recognition lens to the whistleblowing trajectory through explication of various prominent whistleblowers' experiences. In chapter 3, Kenny outlines the empirical framework of the study and introduces the norms that lead to complicity in the global finance industry. She characterizes the culture of finance as excessively short-term oriented, gaming the rules, and lacking transparency and regulation by nation-states. Drawing from whistleblowers' experiences, Kenny argues that organizational cultures do not function in a vacuum; rather, they are powered by wider institutional and regulatory norms. These wider societal norms and our need to preserve the sense of security toward complex systems like the finance industry result in organizational silence, which is also promoted by the society more generally. In chapter 4, we discover whistleblowers' self-construction as naïve professionals. They position themselves in line with existing normative categories to receive recognition under the terms of dominant norms in the finance industry.

With chapter 5, Kenny shows us that there is an implicit acceptance of retaliation in society toward whistleblowers and that this extreme punishment is powered by censorship and impossible speech. Such powerful mechanisms of control function as a regulation of recognition through granting or denying one from valid position (or "subjecthood") in the society. These dynamics also exist at the micro level, and whistleblowers become impossible beings, targets of normative violence and retaliation. In chapters 6 and 7, Kenny moves beyond the organization and discusses how the public's perception of whistleblowers and whistleblowers' subject positions of themselves are shaped by the media, recruitment, and friends. Since whistleblowers' "presence threatens the norms that hold our world together" (158), they are expelled from organizational life and become unacceptable by society. However, we see that, through achieving the status of a recognized whistleblower, one can gain public attention, change how one is perceived, and be legitimized by the powerful supporters of the cause. In chapter 8, Kenny discusses how the rejection of recognition by others can be internalized and intensified by whistleblowers, make them question their position, and result in self-destructive outcomes.

Chapters 9 and 10 delineate the ways whistleblowers cope with exclusions. Kenny argues that whistleblowers continually employ affective recognition from others (e.g., friends, family, whistleblower support group) to affirm their sense of self and maintain affective connections. She discusses whistleblowing as an intrinsically social experience and a mutual recognition dynamic between the whistleblower and other parties, which sometimes results in the exclusion of others whom the whistleblowers deem unethical. After the reconstruction of whistleblowers' "collective self, embedded in and constructed through multiple others" (195), Kenny

presents the shifts and alterations of the label “whistleblower” over time. She discusses how whistleblowers started repositioning themselves as “winner[s] of small victories” and began regarding the whistleblower label as a joke. Toward the end of this journey, through this reconceptualizing, whistleblowers problematize the previously held meaning attached to them and, in doing so, subvert the norms and the implicit narrative that results in extreme retaliation.

Overall, Kenny proposes a holistic understanding of whistleblowing. Not only does she consider how employees are positioned with respect to organizational norms and broader social, economic, and political structures; she also examines how these norms play out at the individual level. While I strongly agree that we are in need of reconstructing the “brand” of whistleblowers and the public’s perception of them, it is not entirely clear how to effectively apply Kenny’s novel approach to all whistleblowing cases, specifically in industries outside the financial sector. Furthermore, I am curious to see how Kenny’s new theory can be applied to other types and levels of seriousness of organizational misconduct. Her theoretical approach offers a new lens to study whistleblowers, but it is not very clear how her framework meshes with existing literature that examines who blows the whistle when they observe wrongdoing. Finally, the implications of this new theory for organizations that want to improve whistleblowing are less than thoroughly explored.

While her arguments mainly apply to the global finance industry and its deep-seated and systematic culture of complicity, I believe, through future research, that implications of Kenny’s research can be applied to various types of wrongdoing and various contexts. That said, the affective-recognition approach to whistleblowing offers new perspectives through which business ethics scholars and practitioners can understand many aspects of the whistleblowing process, including how to prevent retaliation and support whistleblowers. It examines the connections between whistleblowers and dominant organizational, institutional, and social norms, showing that through striving, recognition, and affective attachments, whistleblowers can discover their social selves. With her new theorization, Kenny treats whistleblowing as an “intrinsically collective phenomenon” (212) and not just as an individual acting independently. By examining emotional struggles attached to the collective features of whistleblowing, Kenny is contributing a fresh perspective to the whistleblowing literature and altering how people view whistleblowers. Given the importance of whistleblowers and their ongoing exposure to retaliation, Kenny’s novel approach helps us understand our collective role in the phenomenon of whistleblowing and guides us toward rewriting the classic narrative of the whistleblower.

REFERENCES

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