

Who is it that would make business schools more critical? A response to Tatli

Abstract

Our short paper, as a response to Tatli's recent comment on our work, provides the opportunity to develop further an exploration of problems that both Tatli and ourselves identify in CMS. Here, we articulate ideas that we shied away from in our original paper, notably regarding an unreflexive masculinity that dominates some aspects of CMS. We suggest that many of Dr. Tatli's concerns resonate with our own. This response therefore aims to generate further debate about CMS and how it may be perpetuating some of those very practices it abhors in management and organizations.

Our original paper was explicitly intended to stir up debate about CMS, so it is in this spirit that we very much welcome Ahu Tatli's response. Indeed, we find ourselves rather sympathetic towards several of her criticisms of CMS, a number of which echo points we ourselves have made in other places (for example, Currie et al, 2010). Furthermore, we take her point that CMS is hardly short of 'warnings made by CMS scholars themselves on the problems of CMS' (Tatli, 2011, p.6). There is clearly a need to effect concrete beneficial action to make CMS friendlier to those who might otherwise be sympathetic to its broad aims.

On the other hand, however, we found Tatli's overall verdict on CMS rather too harsh. For example, like the rest of academia, CMS is certainly still dominated by white men, but white men are not a homogeneous group and some, at least, are responding thoughtfully and changing their ways of working as a result of the challenges from those of us who are not white, male, heterosexual or middle class. This is at least a start! And unlike Tatli, we see hope for change. One cause for optimism, for example, is in the significant strand of post-colonial scholarship present within CMS – a strand of scholarship that has attracted men and women who are not always 'white, heterosexual, most probably western, [and] able bodied'

(2011, p.5). We are thinking here, for example, of the postcolonial streams at CMS conferences, or the recent special issue of *Organization* devoted to the issue. There is also burgeoning work using queer theory (from Parker, 2002 to Harding et al, 2011) for example, and while feminist thought sometimes languishes in its own ghetto, feminist-inspired work appears in *BJM* (e.g. Fotaki, 2011), *Organization* and other journals that publish critical management papers. CMS, in other words, is not as homogeneous as Tatli presumes.

But perhaps where we disagree with Tatli most strongly is on the way to find ‘solutions to the false assumptions and exclusionary practices that dominate CMS’ (2011, p.8). Such solutions (which, for us would be to develop business schools as places of mutual respect, where difference underpins actions, the overly-voluble become capable of listening, the silenced encouraged to speak, new ways of relating in workplaces are developed and so on) are solutions that can never be imposed – indeed they cannot be imposed *by definition*. They will only start to emerge (if at all) through encouraging debate and self-understanding, something which is inhibited by the extremely competitive, if not aggressive, institutional context in which CMS, like other business school scholars, have to work (Harding, Ford and Gough, 2010). In our view, then, Tatli’s tone of criticism was problematic – at times it tended to undermine her own espoused aims. But first, let’s respond to her substantive concerns about our paper.

Dr. Tatli, following Bourdieu, argued that our paper failed because our reflexive account should have analysed the ‘social and institutional contexts’ that allowed us to speak. However, we follow Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Butler and others who require that we go back a step, so to speak, and analyse what makes those social and institutional contexts possible.

Gender and sexuality precede these contexts, and it is from a gendered perspective that we worry about the seemingly never-ending reign of heterosexual masculinity. It seems to us likely that an unreflexive masculinity is, in part, what bred colonialism and homophobia alongside a denigration of the female and those with disabilities.

So let's set out our views on the implications of such thinking for business schools in a more straightforward way than we dared to in our original paper. For us, taken as a whole, CMS is pretty much like the business schools in which most CMS scholars work: it is often, misogynistic and unreflexive, and therefore needs to examine more rigorously how its own practices contradict its stated ideals. That was why we called for more reflexivity – in making business schools more critical, CMS needs to recognise that it is part of those very business schools, and it perpetuates some of the very practices it decries in 'mainstream' colleagues. CMS (whatever that amorphous 'identity' is) cannot claim a moral higher ground if it does not itself maintain those morals.

We use 'misogyny' to suggest not so much that it is 'woman hating', but to suggest that it tends to valorise the masculine and negate the feminine. So when we call for CMS and business schools to become places of mutual respect, we are calling for them to become places where oppressive and destructive masculinities are made unwelcome. But we must also emphasise that we do not call for a more 'feminine' approach in the stead of masculinity, because the normalizing discourse of 'the feminine' is as oppressive and limiting as is that of 'the masculine' (Nor do we think that increasing the proportions of women in CMS and business schools would bring about changes – women speak through normalizing masculine discourses just as men do, so women can participate as equals of men in perpetuating

destructive aggression.) Rather, our hope is that CMS academics will start to build on the work of the now relatively established groups of feminist, queer, crip and race theorists who have struggled to open avenues through which the non-white, non-middle-class, non-abled, non-heterosexual, non-male can share the public stage with that minority which has, to date, kept the stage largely for itself. But if that equality is to become more than the freedom for those who are not white heterosexual men to be as destructive and misogynistic as those in currently dominant groups often are, then our calls will have failed. Business schools and universities will continue to trample over the lives of academic staff, and the arrogant will (continue to) silence the voices of those who would speak truth to (masculine) power. Unfortunately, Dr. Tatli's comments on our paper tended to fall within and perpetuate those very traditions that she, like us, is trying to combat.

One of several illustrations of the problematic tone of Tatli's paper is that we are accused of providing 'yet another addition to this collection of warnings...rather than well researched, theoretically rigorous pieces of work' (p. 6). There are two issues here. Firstly, the three vignettes that we explore within our analysis are all extracts from such empirical and theoretically rigorous accounts – all of which we have referenced in our paper. Secondly, the question of what is 'theoretical rigour' cannot be taken-for-granted (Learmonth et al, forthcoming): definitions of 'rigour' have been foundational in a Western Enlightenment project that has excluded the very voices which Dr. Tatli, like ourselves, are concerned with. But our paper seeks to go beyond this. In other words, rather than the 'rigorous research' Dr. Tatli calls for, we call for better theory and through better theory to better understanding. Of course, better understanding is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for beneficial change. Change will doubtless be slow, perhaps tortuously so.

As Currie, Knights and Starkey noted in their editorial introduction to the special issue, the papers were selected on the basis that they offered an orientation towards ‘how we might improve matters rather than those that offer a critique of business school activity’ (Currie et al, 2010: s1). They also reminded readers (p. s4) that our paper sought to ‘raise unsettling questions not only about CMS but also about CMS’s relationship with the wider business school – and our place(s) within both’. Dr Tatli invites us to reflect on why we did not conceive the points raised in her comments (p.8). Rather than us second-guessing the multiplicity of ways in which readers may interpret our paper, it is perhaps more relevant for us to remind readers that our purpose (as reinforced in the final paragraph of our paper, p. s79) ‘is to start a more far-reaching and more reflexively aware debate about what we mean by “making the business school more critical”’. Indeed, more extended versions of that argument can be found in our other work. Dr Tatli has clearly added to that debate, for which we applaud her.

The CMS field has grown and diversified during the course of the last two decades and we are heartened by the continuing plurality of critical approaches that it embraces, its broader affinities with a range of social movements, and the ways in which it is slowly beginning to influence ‘mainstream’ business school work. Indeed, the boundaries between what is ‘critical management studies’ and the ‘critical’ work undertaken by other business school scholars are not as clear cut as the above arguments suggest – boundaries are blurring, and the question of what can be regarded as ‘critical’ should be opened to debate. The issue about what CMS is ‘for’ should be part of the more general exploration of the role of business and management schools more generally. We look forward to reading, contributing to, and

engaging with, such future debates. We value the opportunity BJM offered Dr.Tatli and ourselves to engage in this debate, to develop further the importance of looking at ourselves, as academics with some influence over the lives of others. We thank the editor for the opportunity to develop this discussion.

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