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## **The Mouse is Mightier than the Lion: Should TAMARA be a Science or a Pomo Poetic Aesthetic?**

*Ngairé Bissett & David Boje. Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 1; pg. 84, 7 pgs*

**Abstract** (Article Summary)

### **Part one - Preface**

This discussion piece sets the tone for this new journal in its narrative presentation form. It will run over two issues and is open to include feedback from readers. In debating the case for TAMARA to represent either a) a postmodern science approach to organisational analysis or b) a postmodern aesthetic appreciation, the two participants reflect on the relevance of critical theory to their life and work. Hence rather than the intellectual exchange taking place in a disembodied form, they situate their intellectual history via issues of social location and lived experience. They reflect on the integral connection between theory and practice with the objective of furthering their commitment to effecting social change.

The first short article takes the form of initially introducing the authors and then moves to a discussion of the role of critical pedagogy. The detailed references to teaching content are broached in order to demonstrate the efficacy of critical analysis for pedagogical purposes; not to focus on the relative achievement of the individual lecturers involved.

The second longer article entails a debate of central relevance to the Journal, addressing: what type of orientation a critical postmodern analysis of organisational politics might take? The discussion begins with a dialogue between the two protagonists on the pros and cons of adopting a scientific approach. The focus then switches to situating the plurality of postmodernism; analysing the 'affirmative' versus 'sceptical' opposition. The contribution of the 'White French Pomo Boys' is interrogated in relation to the late modernist thesis. Finally, Boje proposes an eclectic integration between modernist and postmodernist influences in the name of 'narrative ethics'. Bissett responds, outlining the dilemmas of employing unreconstructed narratives. She deconstructs the notion of the aesthetic as a modernist cultural category, in order to propose a postmodern 'political poetic' alternative.

**Full Text** (3,072 words)

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### **Introductory biographies**

Bissett: In typical postmodern style, this piece is an eclectic mix of issues. As a feminist I find it problematic to talk about my work divorced from my life. I am a trans-

disciplinary trained social and political theorist (as a critical postmodernist I avoid the label social scientist) who has studied and taught in a range of countries (e.g. Britain, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia). My Ph.D. was a 'big picture' analysis exploring the transition from modernism to postmodernism. I critiqued what I saw as a premature celebration of the 'death' of scientific rationalism and attempted to demonstrate how, as a hegemonic meaning system, it still dominates our daily existence. I drew connections between the production of knowledge, power processes and social relations through reference to a number of research accounts.

Boje: When I did my dissertation, news of the postmodern had not yet reached the University of Illinois. My Ph.D. training was in phenomenology (my mentor Lou Pondy was into it and so was I), and trying to articulate social definitionism (a term by Ritzer that did not catch on once social construction became the fashion), while getting all that behavioral leadership, lab study, and structural functionalist science from the rest of the faculty. Postmodernism became my passion in the early 1990s, at first affirmative, and now like you, more into critical postmodernism (labels do oppress).

Bissett: Integrating feminist cultural analysis with a sociology of knowledge perspective, I chose two specific areas in the thesis to substantiate my claims. Examining the politics of the body vis-a-vis representations of gender in everyday life, and post-Fordist workplace change depictions, I ascertained that both theory and practice were still enacted in the shadow of rationalism. I concluded by deliberating on a range of feminist poststructuralist approaches that attempt to move beyond rationality.

Boje: I too examine the relationship of post Fordist and poststructuralism/postmodern theory and practice. I seem more interested in depictions of workers than gender issues, but I like the feminist perspective very much. In terms of critical postmodernism, my current interest is to link Marxism and postmodernism in a critique of global sweatshop work that is the fashion of the transnational corporate scene. In my view post Fordist or postindustrial capitalism oppresses half (some say 3/5ths) of the world's population in sweat work. And, when I look at the apparel industry, this is 80% female sweat-labor.

Bissett: The sweatshop industry is a prime example of the persisting/interconnecting themes of race, gender and class exploitation and domination; providing an impetus to more effectively theorise links between materialist and postmodern explanatory potential. It appears that your passionate empathy, directly orientated to changing people's lives through empirical research, is partly related to your more recent radical intellectual training. My journey has taken a somewhat different route. As a late-start student my introduction to tertiary education began with exposure to Marxism.

Bissett: Reading Marx's structuralist deliberations on the systemic issues of class and

society had the dramatic effect of liberated me personally from the oppression I had learned to internalise. It was apparent to me that his complex portrayals of the middle-class world of capitalism reflected the intimate knowledge of a culture he understood first-hand. However his deliberations on working-class life (in the humanist body of his work) struck me, as a woman of working-class origins, as overwhelmingly romantic. Reflecting on my lived experience in such a community, it seemed that what was lacking was an understanding of this class as a cultural phenomenon, not just an economic one. Thus from the early 1980s I became aware of the 'crisis of representation' in relation to positionality. This led to a lifelong preoccupation with reflexive praxis issues, which eventuated in my undertaking an exegesis type thesis. This journey became an extremely time-consuming process such that, while more savvy fellow candidates chose instrumental topics to speedily 'gain the necessary ticket', somehow my identity politics drove me to continue with the more exploratory venture.

Boje: Truth be told I did an empiricist structural functionalist dissertation on centrality in interorganizational networks. I got the quick ticket out rather than doing the painful work of diving into narrative/story analysis from a phenomenological perspective. My long journey was to convert myself from structural functionalist socialization to turning now to dismantle it using critical postmodern science.

### **Critical pedagogical praxis**

Bissett: I have presented such a detailed description of my Ph.D. (a topic I avoid in traditional management forums) because, while its subject matter may appear esoteric to many, it has direct application to my everyday teaching. Since it serves as an endless practical resource I believe it is testament to the value of critical reflective theorising. In terms of its reception over the last few years that I have been teaching full-time in business schools, I have found that students, after initial reservation, respond very positively to critical analysis when it is linked to the posing of more positive alternatives and the building of skills. I stress the latter because, as 'postmodern citizens', they exhibit a degree of cynicism which I attempt to overcome by structuring assessment activities that require their engagement. Student feedback indicates they find significant application in relation to their lived experience of both organisations and society at large. They tend to use rich metaphors to describe the transformation process they undergo in developing critical reflective awareness and skills (e.g. reinterpreting everyday experience with 'new eyes'; learning a new stroke that enabled her to swim in deep waters; generating a 'third' organisational eye).

Boje: My teaching scores soared when I taught non-critical storytelling and joined in the search for quality and customer service; I earned racks of teacher of the year trophies. As I turned to Nietzsche and Marx and assigned students chapters from Braverman, the scores fell to the bottom of the college. I have bounced back, and

student evaluations are once again hitting the high marks, but this time I am helping them become (critical) 'postmodern citizens,' as you put it. My metaphors have to do with students' participation in the Age of over-consumption, media-fed ideals of happiness through consumption, and the idiocy of motivation theories that ignore sex, greed, power and surveillance.

Bissett: The critical pedagogic line I take is facilitated by the Australian University scene which, despite the hegemony of economic rationalism, still allows considerable academic discretion. For example in an Organisational culture and politics course I teach (comprised of school leavers and mature part-time students), I utilise innovative texts like Knights & Willmott's (1999) *Management Lives*. These authors make use of literary novels to build complex organisational characterisations pertaining to issues of power and identity. As part of their assessment activities, students form small groups to research their organisation applying an ethnographic framework. Focusing on the everyday 'informal' processes of work-as-culture enables them to make sense of and name their experience of complex, contradictory daily interactions. They learn to deconstruct 'formal' rationalist managerial discourses and disembodied imagery.

Boje: In New Mexico we have two hegemonies: what you call economic rationalism (as spoken by Rush Limbaugh) and religious fundamentalism (for example, Dr. Laura). For many, critical postmodern science offends both the Rush and Laura types. When Steve Best gave a lecture at my College in an organization theory class, I got hate mail for four months. He told them "forget religion, instead of service, go for a walk in the desert and find some real spiritual teaching" and if you are serious about ethics "become a vegetarian." In one breath he offended the sensibilities of the meat-eating economists and the religious right. My own teaching about Nike, has caused such a furor, that I have been asked by administrators, not to mention that four-letter word in my classroom. Then there is my class in qualitative research methods. You have to realize that, like most Ph.D. training, our students take a half a dozen statistics and quantitative research-focused seminars and only one qualitative course. Too many heads come in with an attitude about the "rigor, objectivity, and true-science" of quantitative and the "subjectivity, bias, and non-sense" of anything qualitative.

Bissett: My students initially also express such concerns having undergone training in traditional quantitative, stimulus-response, scientific methodology. However since the literature and teaching forums are framed to stimulate open debate, linking epistemological and ontological issues to organisational praxis, students begin to open their minds to alternative ways of knowing/being. The crucial turning point, to my mind, comes from this opportunity to participate in imagining a different kind of organisation. Since a lifetime of educational training, that emphasises descriptive, prescriptive and rote learning principles, leaves the students ill-equipped to begin this process of foresight, they require a taught skeletal structure to facilitate and stimulate their own creative exploratory potential. Ethnography

serves this purpose allowing students to acquire reflective capacities and practices. As a *modus operandi* it enables them to learn: how to learn differently; to conduct embodied meaningful research; and to become more appreciative managers. Exploring repressed difference is the set focus, which is related to the 'embedded ethical', accountability aspects of the ethnographic perspective (they are expected to attempt such practice in their research endeavour). The overall pedagogical intention is to provide a context that allows them to consider possibilities for developing meaningful consultative management processes.

Boje: Not only ethnography, but for me, critical postmodernist science is a way to become reflective, on our complicity in the production and consumption system. I am not interested in developing appreciative managers. There is too much "appreciative inquiry" already. I would rather develop "unappreciative inquiry" and critical managers. My hope is that they will rediscover in reading Adam Smith, his conviction that economics without ethics is pure exploitation.

Bissett: You may be interested therefore in Kevin Tribe's (1999) reconstruction of Adam Smith as a theorist of civilisation and human conduct. I understand your purpose however I prefer to use the limited reading space available to cover more dynamic contemporary critically orientated literature. I also have reservations with the orientation of such work. It is no coincidence that Milton Friedman had a particular predilection for Smith's *Wealth of Nations*; furthermore Sayer & Walker (1992) claim that Smith preceded Taylor in developing a theory of fragmentation (in relation to the division of labour). I am also wary of the modernist 'logic of ethical life'. Derrida's deconstruction reveals it to be aporetic rather than dialectical: 'not a logic of redemption but a logic of repression' (Durst 2000:681). Modernist approaches to 'ethics', like the modernist reference to 'appreciation', restrict such concerns to the metaphysical terrain; hiving-off the latter to the elitist high-arts domain, whilst confining the former to philosophical or religious considerations, thereby leaving the economic field unfettered by such 'politics'.

'Teaching management by appreciation' is a more mundane phrase I employ to identify the critical ingredient lacking in organisational life: understanding. For all the attention to science, information, strategy, planning, decision-making, visions, motivations etc, etc, the supremacy of 'Witch Doctor' managerialism ensures managers fail to appreciate the intricate environment they inhabit (see Mickelthwait & Wooldridge 1997; Introna 1997; Alvesson & Willmott 1996). In turn (prior to exposure to more critical representations) management students depict phantasmic work environments that only exist as textbook created realities. A critical evaluation of the gap between rhetoric and reality turns 'appreciation' also into an operative term as their studies reveal the politics of domination intrinsic to capitalist structures.

Despite my forceful introduction here, the course is not structured didactically. I encourage them to take their own line and to experiment in the manner in which

they present their material. They have scope to use multimedia sources, reflect on novels, film, TV, etc. Initially they are reluctant to be innovative and complain about not being given the basic prescriptive 10 point plan. However, after a period of intensive support and exposure to particularly innovative guest lecturers, the desired liberating outcomes eventuate. One guest presentation involves a Ph.D. candidate presenting her research of a group of individuals who have faced a number of organisational restructures and downsizing. Her performance takes the form of a dynamic multimedia presentation where artwork, produced by the respondents, is imaged along with a running commentary by these individuals documenting the pain and sense of loss they experienced. The presenter concludes by reading a poem and singing a song, reflecting her response to the whole process.

Boje: Critical pedagogy is extremely important. And, I agree that creativity is a good way to cut through the resistance. For example, I encourage students to find film clips that express critical and postmodern conditions. Last Tuesday, a group used the Drew Barrymore speech in the movie "Ever After" as a way to teach motivation theory. In this scene, Drew confronts a nobleman, with her demand to turn loose a servant, who is being carried on a horse-drawn cart to her doom. The noble turns loose the servant, but Drew confronts him about how he was totally unaware of the plight of the others, the peasants and thieves in the cart. The noble protests that they are not servants and are responsible for their crimes. Drew counters that it is the nobles that set up the conditions of (non) employment and starvation that leave peasants no recourse but to steal. It's a wondrous moment in which MBA students see what Marx means by political economy. Their song for the evening was 9 to 5.

Bissett: There's no doubt that introducing such narrative scenarios can serve as a powerful catalyst to facilitate reading-against-the-grain of capitalism.

Another course I run 'Organisational Analysis' for postgraduate middle management HRM and IR practitioners exposes them to a range of theorised empirical studies (mainly neo-labour process theory) of contemporary workplace change/relations. The fads and fashions of management, that the students all directly experience, are critically interrogated and possible alternatives, premised on applying postmodernist ideas that cater to diversity, considered. I also teach a fundamental management knowledge course 'Organisations: perspectives of theory and experience' to senior management DBA candidates (a professional doctorate involving course work and research, paralleling US practice). An array of frames of reference from positivism to feminist postmodernism are contemplated through the prism of critical organisation theory and situated in relation to the historically changing depictions of management.

While the latter small group courses are more conventional in their programming

compared to the large undergraduate group infrastructure, the nature of the critical material addressed and the intensive face-to-face discussion forums achieve parallel positive outcomes. For example, senior execs report being viewed with new respect by their CEO in meetings after rejecting the traditional knee-jerk reaction to everyday organisational problems (invariably diagnosed as mere 'technical' failures) in favour of spending time deliberating on the substance (usually 'social' issues) of the dilemmas faced. This significant shift in mindset (beyond instrumentalism) validates the relevance of critical analysis to practising managers, at the same time as it offers the potential for instigating more consultative type processes.

Boje: You and I have much in common. I include labor process theory in my MBA teaching and in my Ph.D. qualitative methods class I cover the differences between social construction, critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. One of the more moving classes involved the use of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed exercises. I loaned the students a tape Dale Fitzgibbons sent me and gave them a lecture on modern and postmodern theatrics. They put together some exercises on Theater of the Oppressed that graduates still talk about today. I took the show to the Academy last year and worked with Simon Malbogat of Toronto's Mixed Company. In the Organizational Development and Change division, we cleared out the chairs, and Simon went to work on the audience. He came with a dozen masks that he believes corporate actors wear at work. The group theatric events let us see new possibilities for organization change, a change to look at corporate spectacle using audience-involved theatrics.

Bissett: I agree that the power of participation can be profound. The impact of the performative lecturer I referred to earlier is such that previously resistant students find themselves extremely moved by the sensual experience of being sung to, and read evocative poems. The sense of release is tangible and from that point on the course takes a different direction with students becoming much more comfortable to be open and intimate in their discussions with each other. Even an arch-managerialist in one class, who decried his capacity for such creativity, ended up proudly producing a combined-effort poem. This particular group performed an inspiring and informative role-play of selections from taped interviews where each individual re-enacted a specific role - employee, middle manager and senior manager - in dialogue with the fourth member, posing as an interviewer.

However while I feel privileged to be able to teach the issues I am passionate about, there are stresses and strains associated with critical pedagogy. The major drawback relates to the intensity of work output. Teaching conceptual and critical analysis skills to students largely trained to rote-learn adds a variety of editing and tutoring roles to the job. There is also the 'fear of freedom' reservations to contend with and their initial resentment of being made to 'think for themselves'. While as employees they are prepared to perform Herculean tasks when nominated by senior management, initial requests for course engagement are actively resisted.

The whole process thus requires considerable commitment to weather the considerable lows that precede the eventual highs that somehow always seem to come.

My overall impression however is that the arts and humanities, in conjunction with the social sciences (as demonstrated in 'cultural studies') have a great deal to contribute to management praxis, particularly in terms of recovering the corporeal dimensions of organisation life. Relatedly, reflection on the current crisis of management knowledge, derived from an inability to substantively address the dynamic factors of post-industrialism, suggests a postmodern approach to management education could play a considerable role in the future.

Boje: I also think the humanities have much to contribute, as well as the social sciences. I just do not want to surrender all of science and even social science. I hold out the possibility for a critical postmodern science. Best and Kellner (1997) describe postmodern science work. But, when I write about it to the Organization Science crowd, they say "postmodern is only about literary criticism, it is not true science." To this I say, "TAMARA, journal of critical postmodern organization science."

**[Author(s) Affiliation]**

Ngairé Bissett is a New Zealander, lecturing in the School of Management, RMIT (Melbourne's University of Technology), Australia. Ngairé's current research endeavours include an empirical study of organisational culture that critically interrogates the post Fordist empowerment thesis and a joint empirical/theoretical study of 'productive diversity', committed to developing a mutually empowering diversity training framework. Ngairé is also involved in the international Nike project, particularly in relation to the action research/ethnographic components. Ngairé's general academic concerns, as a public intellectual, are with general issues of power and inequality and ecology. Hence in her theoretical work she is developing an expansive 'corporate citizenship' model that reframes the workplace as an ecospace, from the perspective of critical postmodern theory.

David Boje edits TAMARA, and is a professor of management in the Management Department at New Mexico State University. He is division-chair elect of the Research Methods Division of the Academy of Management and a Board member of International Academy of Business Disciplines. He serves on the editorial board of Academy of Management Review, Management Digest, Organization, Journal of Management Inquiry, Management, Organization Studies, EJ-Radical Organization Theory, & Emergence: A Journal of Complexity Issues in Organizations and Management, and the Management Communication Quarterly. Recent books include *Managing in the Postmodern World: America's Revolution Against Exploitation* (1993, 2000) with Bob Dennehy; *Postmodern Management and Organizational Theory* (1996), with Robert Gephart & Tojo Thatchenkery, and *Narrative Research Methods for Communication Studies* (Sage, 2001). David is currently circulating a research proposal to study the

working conditions of Nike factories in Asia and Latin America

[http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/nike/call\\_for\\_nike\\_research.html](http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/nike/call_for_nike_research.html)

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Subjects:

People: Bissett, Ngaire; Boje, David

Author(s): Ngaire Bissett & David Boje

Publication title: Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 1; pg. 84, 7 pgs

Source Type: Periodical

ISSN/ISBN: 1522-55

Text Word Count 3,072