The (potentially) dark side of relational responsibility: Insights from PRME data

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The Issue

In recent student interviews I and my colleagues conducted in connection with the implementation of the PRME (Principles for Responsible Management Education) programme at CBS, I was intrigued to hear students talk about 'responsible management education' not primarily as a question of *what* they were taught, but of how responsibly their learning experience was *managed*. Students expected their teachers to be role models for how 'good managers' should behave; and looked to their school to set an example of good management. In appraising their teachers as responsible managers (or otherwise), students spent a lot of effort trying to attribute responsibility, wrestling with questions about the demarcation between their own responsibilities and those of their teachers and other BS actors, including the administration and students from other specialization. Notably, they saw responsibility as a *relational* construct where their responsibilities and those of other BS actors demarcated one another on an ongoing basis, partly based on role attributions.

Thus, in struggling with dilemmas about who was responsible for what, students would ruminate along the lines of 'Is it her responsibility as a teacher to ensure that I am well informed about the course, or mine as a student to find out about it?' In resolving such dilemmas, students looked to (often tacit) cues about behavioural expectations in the learning environment, e.g. teacher behaviours. And, once they had attributed responsibility, they seemed to feel exempted from any further responsibility for the matter in question: 'Teacher X couldn't be bothered to arrive on time so I don't have to either'. Along similar lines, students defined their own professional disciplinary responsibilities in contrast to disciplinary 'others' at their own BS. Thus, for instance, maths majors insisted that they were 'only geeks' who took care of number crunching, and had nothing to do with the leadership and management types who were the ambitious, morally dubious ones who ran the show. We see here a cautionary precursor of the responsibility denial at the heart of corporate scandals such as Enron (Bansol & Kandola 2003)

My Concern

These findings suggest that students take their cues for their own behavior from how they perceive their own professional role ascriptions and compliance in relation to that of significant others in the BS context, as well as from contextual cues that signal the different ways in which those roles can be enacted. This is both intriguing but also disturbing, since most scholarly attention on responsible management learning and business ethics education has so far been devoted to exploring how change might best be effected in *individual* student's values and dispositions, through curricular interventions in content, didactics or the school environment (Baker 2014; Giacolone & Thompson 2006). Indeed, more broadly, responsibility as a construct tends to be discussed in *entitative* terms (Cunliffe & Eriksen 2011: 1430), and premised on a liberal notion of the self as a rational entity capable of autonomous deliberation independently of 'the surrounding context of values, personal relationships, or community influences' (Mcnamee & Gergen 1999: 8).

Our data suggest that this does not capture the relational way in which students think about responsibility. Neither were the relational responsibility dynamics we detected necessarily underpinned by positive dynamics such as trust, sociality, solidarity, reciprocity or integrity (DiNorcia 2002 in Sama & Shoaf 2008: 41), as they are often assumed to be, but instead often by responsibility disavowal, exemption and negative emulation.

My question

So my question is: how might we conceptualise the relational dimensions of responsibility attribution that seem so important to students? And how might we teach responsibility through relationships in responsibility enhancing ways at business schools in practice?

References

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