New Beginnings, Repeated: The Continuing Search for Educational Leadership

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Abstract	Article Info
The purpose of this scholarly essay is to offer a number of logics of academic arguments as follows: leadership as contested/seductive theories, leadership as an organizing activity, and leadership as praxis. Each academic argument presents its own theoretical, communicative and practical challenges, often necessitating a beginning again in search of leadership's ontological status; that is, in what sense is leadership real? Methodologically, the authors rely on asking pragmatic and constructivist questions (i.e. what difference does it make?) regarding problematic relationships among diverse researchers and between themselves and practitioners. With some amount of courage and a great deal of ignorance, the authors jump into the rabbit hole of relational sociology, leaving answers as next steps to the wisdom of our readers.	

One doesn't have to be a baseball fan to believe that with every spring comes a rebirth. Last year's won-lost record is wiped clean. Everyone has a chance to be this year's champion. So it is with books and articles on the topic of leadership and management. There is always hope that the next book will open one's mind to new beginnings and new insights to improve public education. (Bogotch, 2015, p. 3.)

Introduction

In the world of book publishing, management texts trump the topic of leadership 6 to 1 (Ngram Viewer, 11/29/2018). However, when the word "education" is inserted into the Ngram Google search, the ratio flips in favor of leadership over management, 8 to 1. For the past few decades, educational researchers have become fascinated, if not obsessed, with writing about leadership. Putting aside, for now, the question whether more writing translates into deeper understandings or improved practices, we have to account for the obvious attraction/seduction as well as the many contested views on leadership. The context for this scholarly essay is the publishing of yet another book on leadership that calls for a *new beginning*.

The text in question *Beyond Leadership* (2018) is by Scott Eacott, a professor at UNSW in Sydney, Australia. Our purpose is not to praise or criticize the text, but rather to follow his plea to educational researchers to more fully and honestly engage in dialogues or as Eacott calls it, a *logic of academic argument*. In so doing here, we have treated ourselves to combining discourses on leadership as theory and practice, relationships among organizational members, organizing activities, and praxis. And we do so in a manner that does not require readers to have read this text in question, unless you want to on your own.

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One admission upfront: as US educators, we try not to make a fetish of the word *theory* or its companion section titled *conceptual or theoretical framework*. Both theory and conceptual frameworks are essential, but not until and unless we can answer the following leadership question: to what extent do researchers who study educational leadership contribute new knowledge, skills and dispositions to those tasked with doing educational leadership? For us, the scholastic fallacy of leadership theory is that practicing educators do not deliberately apply leadership theories to their everyday practices. The fact is that most organizational leaders, particularly those outside education, have never taken a formal, three-credit university course titled "leadership." If they had, we are sure that the ideas promulgated by such leadership theories would be as follows: imposing, complicated, unwieldy, impractical, and privileged. Moreover, the existing theories come with no guarantees of results nor are they predictable. We have yet to find a theory for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Worse still, the theories themselves often substitute words and analyses in place of actions (Bogotch, 2011; Maxcy, 1995).

If every article and every book is an opportunity for a new beginning, then the question we confront in 2019 is "where are we as a discipline or a field?" Are we as Bogotch and Waite (2017) argue "working within radical pluralism," a conclusion reached by a review of literature of twenty-four prominent scholars in educational leadership? Is leadership variously about purpose, context, creativity, emotion, consistency, ideology, data, sustainability, advocacy, political economies, freedom, autonomy, teaching and learning, decision-making, administration, agency, diversity, closing gaps and disparities, culture, geography, and/or management? As to *praxis*, how far have educational leadership theories/scholars traveled in order to

distance themselves from schools and the practices of school leadership? If true, and our readings of the literature say so, then we wonder whether this distance is real ontologically, or has this distance been deliberately and professionally constructed by educational researchers for their own purposes? Eacott's (2018) call for engagement is among and across educational researchers, stopping short of the relationship between researchers and practitioners. This is an important point for him and for us, but for different reasons. For us, many of the disagreements among researchers dissolve into insignificance when we subject it to the pragmatic test of truth as in "does it make any difference?" (James, 1904). In other words, much of the analyses on leadership would need to be taken off the table, not added to the table, for there to be meaningful argumentation and refutation within the logic of academic work. For Eacott, too, the table needs to be cleared as follows:

Major Premise: Neither agreement nor disagreement with previously stated views should stand as the bases for "validating" the truths, the realities, and the knowledges of educational leadership.

Minor Premise: Educational leadership researchers have ignored points of view of those with whom they disagree.

Conclusion: Therefore, the absence of engagement [on disagreements] invalidates research findings in the field of educational leadership.

In other words, Eacott questions whether the epistemological and ideological stances taken by educational leadership researchers allow for serious and on-going debates over disagreements. Who can deny that specializations and structural silos of networks, divisions, disciplines, and special interest groups in our research organizations choke off dialogue? Other researchers, too, have called for stronger

professional alliances (Townsend, Pisapia & Razzaq, 2015), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, Agosto & Roland, 2018), and interdisciplinary work in educational leadership. So yes, of course, Eacott is correct in naming one aspect of a serious problem among educational researchers, to which we would push to ask: how can our research support practitioners who are struggling with bringing theories of inclusion and equity to our schools? (Ryan, 2012)

Eacott calls for a more honest and deeper engagement with whom we agree *and* disagree. He describes, quite correctly, an absence of relational interactions among scholars whom he sees as talking past one another, somewhat akin to what Piaget, years earlier, referred to in children as "parallel play." Eacott calls for an ontology of leadership research, which is meant to remedy this failure in communications. Eacott uses the phrases "benign neglect" and "well-rehearsed" to mean lazy and biased scholarship, and thus the use of citations become a matter of confirming already existing and agreed upon ideas, rather than a scholarly challenge to researchers to seek out others who perceive the world of educational administration differently. He writes: "In short, to advance one's position requires seriously engaging with those of differing positions (p. xii)", "when combined with the uncritical acceptance of the everyday, the production of knowledge rarely gets beyond the pre-existing normative orientation of the observer" (p. 19), and, "results in researchers talking past rather than to one another" (p. 17[1]). However, the fact that he has not engaged the scholars we have already cited here, nor those we rely upon heavily in the following page (e.g., Karl Weick) is exactly the limitation any

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[1] In our opinion, what justifies the splicing together of sentences from different sections in the text is the redundancies by Eacott who uses almost the same phraseology such as "pre-existing normative…", numerous times.

attempt to develop a coherent / correspondent / comprehensive theory [of leadership] faces.

A Short Parenthesis

It was the US critical theorist, William Foster, who introduced two words he believed would help explain not only the phenomena of leadership, but also its application: contested and seduction. According to Rottman (2007), "He [Foster] conceptualizes administration as a contested field and as such demands that it is the ethical responsibility of educational administrators to deny the "universalization of oneness" and support "the empowerment of difference" (p. 61). Earlier, Foster (1989) himself wrote: "[The] idea of leadership is a seductive idea because it is an attempt to solve the problems of order, metaphysics, language and history. To solve those very postmodern problems, leadership must seduce" (pp. 107-108). Rottman (2007), however, challenged the universalizing of seduction based on the dominant, masculine, hegemonic and peer-reviewed conceptions of leadership. She argued that

> *…, I am led away from despondency and paralysis in a structural system thinking that it is possible for people on the margins of dominant society to refuse to take their/our seats. This sort of hope may seem Utopian but without an ideal world to strive for, our daily actions reinforce the inequitable social structures that exist today. (p. 73)*

Rottman, like many other researchers who choose to insert an ideal, a normative purpose into education, strives to connect pragmatic realities, that is, meaningful consequences to our actions, with an idealism embedded in education. Thus, she, along with other progressive educators, challenges material inequities found everyday inside schools in terms of actions. Maxcy (1991) concludes his critical

pragmatic thesis on educational leadership with the admonition that analyses are not actions and that only the latter, in terms of consequences, matter.

Two more very short parentheses, with very different conclusions

1.

Better late than never? Maybe not. Hope springs eternal. Anyway, it snowed today so I finished venting at Scott Eacott. I should mention that this was truly writing for discovery; strangely, I'm a little jazzed about the idea of having to make our collective ideas conform to something coherent. Long story short – Eacott starts his work claiming that our theorizing has to focus on organizing rather than on leaders, leadership, etc. I could not get passed that, since virtually nothing that follows is reminiscent of the theory I know on *organizing*. For this reason, I picked Karl Weick's work and drilled that observation into oblivion. It's a better option than commenting on every one of my marginal notes (that tended to say things like "how did you come to that conclusion" and "where did that come from"). Feel free to omit, add, tear apart, ignore. I feel better having gotten this done.

2.

Eacott's relational approach to educational leadership has meaning in *praxis*. That is, leadership as practice and theory is constrained, not determined, by management structures. For example, in a relatively small high school in Palm Beach County, Florida, a hierarchical administrative structure exists similar to others found in large organizations (Weber, 1973). In this particular school there is one principal, four assistant principals, a smattering of deans, roughly 150 faculty and staff, and nearly 2500 students. The administration system is highly structural, bureaucratic, and formally instituted. Leadership

and administration, though not mutually exclusive, are not synonymous. Leadership shapes what the future of the organization looks like and moves the organization towards that vision, while management, more synonymous with administration in Palm Beach County, involves planning, budgeting organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem solving (Kotter, 2012). In the case of this specific school, leadership has little to do with the formalized administrative position. Leadership, if it exists at all, exists in a relational manner. Specifically, leadership – as opposed to management – can exist only as a social construction within and between the levels of teachers, faculty, and administration. But the more significant point has to be that describing organizational structures tells us very little about the who/where/how/why of leadership.

This is particularly true for the socially constructed cultural concept of teacher leadership. Unlike the formal roles played by principals and the leadership team members, teacher leadership represents a relational status that is not inscribed by formal structures, but rather is enacted through activities. While teacher leadership can, certainly, be narrowed down to naming particular individuals, it has an ontological status in relationships fostered by a school's culture (Flood & Angelle, 2017). The framework of teacher leadership that best fits this relational concept comes from Wenner and Campbell (2017) where teacher leadership is a construct that goes beyond the classroom walls, supports professional learning, creates a sense of shared decision-making, improves student learning, and promotes school improvement or a formal structure. These key relational components result in collaborative efforts and leadership similar to Eacott's "organizing activity". Flood and Angelle (2017) note the importance of trust and collective efficacy towards the development of a school's

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teacher leadership culture. While these relational qualities can be influenced by individuals in administrative positions, it is still a by-product of collective "organizing activity" if indeed influenced. The *praxis* of leadership at school from the relational approach breaks down the binary between administrator and teacher, teacher and student, and leadership. Leadership, in praxis, can be a concept that relies heavily on relationships and interactions. It may also be a result of formal school leadership actions, but that is separate question that still remains unresolved.

Relational Sociology

Eacott (2018) makes a generational distinction of scholarship in educational administration, that is, he contrasts those who were educated decades ago inside interdisciplinary traditions versus the more recent Ph.D.'s of educationalists whose emphases are more on technical proficiencies and methodological sophistications. This, of course, is a common critique that extends beyond educational leadership into many other vocations including economics, business, finance, political consulting and meteorology. The gist of this critique holds true for social theories in terms of the repeated failures of academic disciplines to be able to predict major world events (think 9/11) or their outcomes (think the fall of the Berlin wall). And yet, academic intellectuals stubbornly persist in their teachings and beliefs in the power of their imperfect theories. Thus, a call to return to social theory for the field of educational administration seems to us as predictable as it is problematic.

The social theory in question seeks to privilege relations over entities, structures, which become taken-for-granted assumptions that reflect an "inherent determinism" of the organization. This relational

approach is both an organizing activity and methodological framing. That is, relations are constitutive of the way we think and act as researchers. Eacott asserts that

…productive contributions are relational. The strength of productive contributions comes in the ways in which they are built on argument and refutation of alternatives. This relational approach to knowledge production is a form of social epistemology. It is not a form of knowledge centrism. Pluralism remains. (p. 161)

This point of view, Eacott asserts, would provide scholars with the needed spaces to ask "why" questions regarding structures, educational policies, school leaders' decisions, and institutional / environmental arrangements. It would move the field forward beyond describing the "what" and the "how". He is optimistic that theories, models, and implications could be scaled up beyond the local contexts, and that dialogues across contexts would be more productive than what we now exchange as knowledge. His point is that when foundational premises and assumptions are debated, we would have more rigorous and robust dialogues among scholars. It is a view that holds everyone to a high standard, high enough to challenge the hegemonic managerial models of leadership.   These asserted propositions, however, are already held by most educational leadership researchers. The difference, then, would have to be the ontological status of relational sociology. We turn to another scholar writing on the same topic in 2006, Mary Uhl-Bien.

…the ontological emphasis is on leadership as something that cannot be known independently and outside of the scientific observer—what is seen is the leadership reality as leadership observers have constructed it (Dachler, 1988) (i.e., there are no leadership "truths," only multiple realities as constructed by participants and observers). In entity perspectives, it is assumed that there is an objective reality and the researcher's job is to uncover facts that reveal this

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reality; the ontological goal of knowing as completely as possible the real nature of leadership is answered through the authority of science (Dachler, 1988). As such, relational constructionism assumes a relational ontology (i.e., all social realities—all knowledge of self and of other people and things—are viewed as interdependent or co-dependent constructions existing and known only in relation (Hosking & Bouwen, 2000). (p.665)

For Eacott, relational sociology is grounded in the work of Emirbayer (1997). Relational theorists reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pre-given units, such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points of sociological analysis. In other words, individuals are inseparable from trans-actional contexts within which they are embedded. The same holds true for societies. The ontology of our social reality are all relational, and this social reality holds for central concepts such as power, equity, freedom, agency and even leadership. Relational sociology moves away from units of analysis as individual variables. Instead, relational theorists propose conceptual frameworks around ecology, environment, social network, and intersectionality as well as "processes in relations". The advantages are that we move away from fixed and universal realities to relational and temporal realities. Leadership is no longer viewed as an entity, an observable thing-by-itself, but rather patterns of unfolding relationships.

Relational leadership assumes that we can construct new meanings of leadership by carefully studying relationships-in-process; it assumes that new methods will emerge for understanding these dynamics; it assumes that there is something new, not to be discovered, but already there that we are missing. These are a lot of assumptions that go way beyond critique of existing theories of leadership. Yet, the proposition is made that research objects that lack any concrete referent but are based on a form of organizing activity,

such as leadership, are best understood through theories of organizing. Theorizing built on the social *a priori* of rationalism can only take our understanding of organizing as far as our pre-existing orientations, the relational approach offered is a more productive way of advancing scholarship (Eacott, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Counter/Complementary Arguments Followed by Counter-Examples

We keep saying that all good theories are practical, but then ignore the axiom and engage in philosophical discourses as if the search for theoretical answers is separate from the need to solve real everyday problems, be they ignorance, poverty, or ill-health. We cannot ignore the dynamics of practical engagements, relationships, ranging from democratic to authoritarian. And that these relationships involve communications *with* other educators, not 'on behalf of' or 'to' or 'for' them. Education, and especially educational leadership, is prepositional knowledge, meaning that there is nothing of practical value in looking *beyond.* Our search for leadership, relationally, comes with our abilities to actively listen and learn from other educators, communities, and most of all, our students. When our learning, listening, and acting are deliberate, then, at that moment of *praxis* or dialogue or organizing activities, we socially construct a theoretical framework.

Hall and Lindsey (1957) taught us that a primary function of theory is to simplify, that is, to allow us to deal with extremely intricate phenomena and prevent us from being overwhelmed by the extraordinary complexity of the social world we seek to understand. For instance, in using the term *relational extensions* for a central part of relational theory, we wonder "extension of what?" As stated above,

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Eacott claims: "Shifting the focus of inquiry from entities (e.g., leadership, the organization) to *organizing activity* and describing how *auctors* generate – simultaneously emerging from and constituent of – *spacio-temporal conditions* unsettles the orthodoxy of organizational theory in education (p. 86)." This results, he says, in new insights and thinking differently about school leadership. Regardless of whether the relational approach offers us new vocabulary and possibly novel constructs with which to theorize educational leadership, does employing these actually help us see leadership in action better? Do we know something more about leaders and leading, or is this another academic exercise in coining "new" terminology? Theorists often do a better job explaining what their theories are rather than explaining what they look like in action, enacted, in practice.

To be clear, notions of a unified theory that encompasses leadership with respect to both micro- and macro-perspectives on organizations do not exist. In the emerging years of the field of organization theory, we saw the creation of top-tier journals like *Human Relations* and *Administrative Science Quarterly* that seemed to privilege either the psychological or sociological perspectives (though in fairness, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* – at least in its name and mission – seemed to try to honor both).

Any construct in any social or behavioral science is contested; that is the nature of science. To claim, as Eacott does, that there is "no empirical referent for leadership" (p. 88) is unhelpful; the same can and has been said for intelligence, satisfaction, etc. To claim that a focus on relationship is novel seems to ignore the overall trend in scholarly work over the past half-century as theory and research tended to shift from a focus on the person of the leader to leadership as a process, to leading as a relationship between leader and follower(s), and to

leadership capacity of whole organizations (Brazer, Bauer, & Johnson, 2019; Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016; Leithwood & Sun, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Urick & Bowers, 2014). Of course, the applicability of this criticism belies an answer to the question: relations between or among what? The above-mentioned work answers this question as between leaders and followers; work on distributed leadership focuses on leaders, followers and situations (Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2002 & 2008; Harris 2008 & 2010; Spillane, 2006; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). It is less than clear to us how *relational leadership* answers this query in a unique fashion.

Bacharach (1989) teaches us that theory is composed of sets of constructs connected by propositions outlining their purported relationships, framed within some set of boundary limitations describing time, space, place, etc. within which the theory is purported to hold. Relational leadership, as presented, mostly fits this description. But whether it offers a "transformation of a topic of research" (p. 90) returns us to the question of whether the model augments or significantly alters existing conceptions that have been shown to be useful in describing, explaining, and predicting organizing. We selected *organizing* here rather than leadership, following Eacott's claim that organizing activity is the most appropriate focus.

From this narrow perspective, we have significant concerns that stem from twin observations. First, the theory of relational leadership as explained neglects some important aspects of organizing, for instance, why organize at all? To what end do leaders and followers engage in organizing? Where do structures and processes, the stuff of organizing, come from exactly – as an outcome of what relational interaction(s) and under what conditions? Second, and much more

central to our observations, if a shift to a focus on *organizing* is a crucial advance to understanding educational leadership in theory and practice, in what ways does relational leadership build on existing theories of *organizing* and offer an advance from these perspectives?

Eacott comments on the relation between relational leadership and existing theories of leadership and leading; but what of the organizational theory literature? In particular, we find Weick's theory of organizing or the more recent work of Czarniawska (2014) to offer more generative ways of knowing. Weick's theory (now almost a half century old) offers answers to some of the most critical questions required for connecting organizing to leading. A fuller discussion of Weick's organizing can be found in Bauer (2019); the following section provides a brief summary.

Weick's Organizing

Weick (1979) asserts that the noun, *organization*, is an inappropriate and insufficient focus for theorizing and that the more active *organizing* is preferred to explore how individuals and groups bring meaning to action in the context of work (Czarniawska, 2008). For Weick, static structures fail to account for the dynamic process of individuals coming together to face the complexities inherent in collective undertakings. Weick asks us to think in terms of verbs rather than nouns to emphasize process, which he writes "implies impermanence. The image of organizations that we prefer is one which argues that organizations keep falling apart and that they require chronic rebuilding" (1979, p. 44). Organizing reflects the perspective that both organizations and their environments are constantly enacted by individuals and groups. Weick eschews linear notions of cause-and-effect; the world is fluid in nature, cause-and-effect are as likely to be circular as linear. Ambiguities are confronted constantly as actors

make sense of the world *retrospectively*. Goals may precede or emerge from collective action; interdependence can be seen as a means to pursue ends that need not be common at all (Weick, 1979).

Weick defines organizing as a "*consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behavior. To organize is to assemble ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes*" (Weick, 1979, p. 3). Weick asserts that we are constantly enacting environments and structures in our attempt to deal with equivocality, and that this is the main purpose for organizing. That is, when leaders and followers – or any other organizational participants - are faced with equivocality and ambiguity embedded in a puzzle they face, they engage in organizing to seek mechanisms to puzzle-solve. For emphasis, to the degree that puzzle-solving is successful, newer or innovative structures, processes, and practices may emerge.

Weick not only embraces the concept of ambiguity in his theory, but the concept of equivocality "is *the* engine that motivates people to organize.... In Weick's model, individuals enact environments that vary in their degree of equivocality, which in turn leads to everything that 'happens' in and around organizations to be subject to multiple (and often competing) interpretations" (Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1696). Reduction of equivocality or interpretation of events makes coordinated action plausible. Organizations are socially constructed entities that are literally *talked into being* and continuously reinvented through sensemaking; to the degree that this puzzle-solving is successful, organizational structures, routines, and processes may emerge.

Organizing provides a grammar of sorts that represents "systematic account of some rules and conventions by which sets of

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interlocked behaviors are assembled to form social processes that are intelligible to actors" (Weick, 1979, p. 3). This results, Czarniawska (2005) writes, in "…interlocked cycles which can be represented as causal loops rather than a linear chain of causes and effects" (p. 269). The unit of analysis in organizing involves *patterns of action* by individual actors, which Weick terms *the double interact*. Organizing, as a process, is composed of individual behaviors that are connected or interlocked between individuals. "The behaviors of one person," Weick (1979, p. 89) writes, "are contingent on the behaviors of another person(s), and these contingencies are called *interacts*." From this perspective, Weick explains the inherent *relational nature* of organizing *AND* describes what it looks like in practice. Attributes of what we call *organization* emerge from individuals' actions and interactions (double interacts); structures, for example, come about as repeated patterns of behavior that emerge as useful to collective action. We wonder if belief systems and values play a role here, too, such that these patterns of behavior are useful to collective action and also embody a motivating theory of action (Warshaw, personal communication).

Building on concepts borrowed from systems theory, Weick claims that organizing involves three stages: enactment, selection, and retention. Enactment reflects the notion that actors play an active role in giving meaning to their environment by selecting or noticing certain aspects of the environment as relevant for action (Czarniawska, 2005). Action prompts enactment, through which individuals invent their environment (Griffin, 2006) rather than discovering it as a pre-existing context. Selection and retention are contingent on interpretation of events and the meaning ascribed to them as they try to make sense of ambiguous or equivocal events (Hernes, 2008). Selection involves retrospective sensemaking: "…We can only interpret actions that we've already taken. That's why Weick thinks chaotic action is better

than orderly inaction. Common ends and shared means are a result of effective organizing, not a prerequisite. Planning comes after enactment" (Griffin, 2006, p. 284).

Retention permits the collective to remember, and may result in the creation of rules, routines, etc. Retention involves "saving" successful patterns of interaction.

Organizing is thus an ongoing encounter with ambiguity, ambivalence, and equivocality; being part of a larger attempt to make sense of life and the world. It is this assumption that sets Weick's theorizing apart from the rest of the organization studies' field that evolved around the notion of "uncertainty," understood as a negative state that must be eradicated for organizing to take place. Weick cherishes ambiguity and gives it a central place in evolutionary processes. Whereas organizing is an effort to deal with ambiguity, it never completely succeeds. Furthermore, the ordering it involves is a complex and inherently ambiguous process of sensemaking rather than that of imposing the rules of rationality on a disorderly world. (Czarniawska, 2005, p. 269-70)

For Weick, groups and organizations are a result of a process of structuring actions, not the reverse; organizing is ongoing rather than episodic; change is continuous and evolving rather than discontinuous or intermittent (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Information is thus the heart of organizing; sensemaking is the process actors use to reduce equivocality, develop interlocked behaviors, and shape their environments even as they reflect them. "Enactment implies that organizations are constantly reorganizing and that ambiguity and uncertainty create options" (Starbuck, 2015, p. 1296). *Cause maps* emerge that reflect actors' hypotheses about how the world works; "The present is not the means to a meaningful future. The future is the

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means to a meaningful present" (Weick, 2004, p. 201-2). Reflection and analysis – sensemaking after-the-fact – makes retention possible. Sensemaking, Weick et al., (2005) note, is an interaction of activity and interpretation; "Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (p. 409). Change is continuous; organizing is a dynamic opportunity leaders have to create, invent, communicate, and engage [with] others. It is *relational*.

Actions and choices exist in information processing cycles; hence we are always building on and making sense of the past as we enact the present and future. Organization emerges from communication between and among actors; conversations enable collective and interconnected actions who are "endlessly organizing and reorganizing as participants develop new perceptions, influence each other, and take actions that alter relationships and the environments of their organizations" (Starbuck, 2015, p. 1287). Organizations, Weick states, are "talked into existence locally" (p. 121).

In closing our brief discussion of Weick's organizing, it may be useful to summarize several lessons we derive from Weick's *organizing* that we suggest scholars studying school leadership and teachers of would-be leaders might take to heart (again, these are elaborated in Bauer, 2019):

1. Weick's theory demands that we acknowledge and come to terms with the essential ambiguity in our world, and to appreciate that to make sense of ambiguity, we often have to increase it (Weick, 2015) rather than minimize it. "To increase ambiguity is to grasp more of the situation, to refrain from simplifications, and to strive for a workable level of ambiguity…. To grasp ambiguity is to adopt an attitude of wisdom" (p. 117). Tolerance for ambiguity has long been a

theme in leadership studies, but ambiguity itself is treated as an aberration. From Weick we learn that ambiguity and equivocality are essential to the organizing process.

2. Weick's model demands that we acknowledge the ever-changing nature of school organization. The fact that we are continuously enacting the organization and its environment has implications for our conceptions of leadership. Leaders, it seems, do not only set goals and strategize before-the-fact, but rather puzzle-solving is more fluid, in process, and requires adaptation during change and after-the-fact. Flexibility, the ability to rethink and adjust, and continuous rather than episodic improvement are critical leadership attributes.

3. Weick's admonishes us to focus on action and that meaning is apt to _follow_ . "Accuracy is less important than animation. Any old map will do, if it gets you moving so that you learn more about what is actually in the environment. A map is not the territory; a plan is not the organization" (Weick 2001, p. 53). Since we cannot think or plan ourselves out of ambiguity, having a bias for action is critical; "Action generates outcomes that ultimately provide the raw material for seeing something" (p. 53). We cannot wait for ambiguity or equivocality to disappear or plan so thoroughly that certainty results. Leading requires that we take actions _and_ learn from them.

4. Sensemaking, therefore, is an inherently retrospective process. Taking this notion to heart, Carter and Colville (2003) suggest that organizational change might be thought of as mediating between sensemaking and leading, that is, change has to be enacted for meaning to emerge. This has dramatic implications for understanding the leaders' role in change.

5. Sensemaking, in Weick's formulation, is a process of developing ideas with explanatory possibilities that promotes speculation and conversation (Weick, 1995). Organizational change, from this perspective, is far from selecting an optimal option from a list of preferred solutions; it is a part of the organizing process. The ability to reflect, and developing dispositions consistent with taking the time to reflect, become critical components of leading.

6. Since the unit of analysis, Weick suggests, is the double interact, Weick's model suggests that leadership research likewise has to be more able to drill down as far as possible to this fundamental relational process to understand organizing. This suggests a focus on in-process action, as well as an appreciation for the reality that meaning is likely to be attributed retrospectively (which may suggest a bias for longitudinal designs).

7. Since organizing is fundamentally an information processing phenomena, Weick's work suggests that our leadership development efforts build on the notion of organizing as a process of taking in equivocal information, trying to make sense of that information, and using what was learned to frame collective activity. To lead requires the capacity to judge information of all kinds efficiently and effectively. Inquiry as a disciplined process of taking in, working with, and communicating about evidence of all kinds is important to learning to lead and organize (Bauer & Brazer, 2012).

Back to Relational Leadership

The above account of Weick's theory is at least as truncated and problematic as Eacott's short version of relational leadership. We should note that Weick has been explaining, modifying, and elaborating his theory for fifty years, and we have certainly not done justice to its richness here. It suffices, though, to make a few relevant points.

First, there is a kinship between Eacott's relational leadership and Weick's organizing, or at a minimum there are points raised by Eacott that are certainly evident in Weick's work. The "enacted nature of organizing" (Eacott, 2019, p. 28), the problematic nature of linear and uni-directional claims of cause-and-effect, the impermanence of organizing and the emphasis on process rather than the person of the leader are among them. There are a number of ways Weick's model answers questions that seem unanswered in at least the shortened presentation of relational leadership, among them why actors engage in organizing to begin with and how aspects of organization emerges and become adopted as at least semi-permanent practices. And there are a number of common questions that might be raised about both theories that seem unanswered, for instance, who exactly are leaders apt to be in organizing and in what ways might we expect them to impact anything consequential? If organizing is indeed an emergent process, why do we observe organizations that are as often characterized as bureaucratic and difficult to change?

Leadership, based on position and authority, is inadequate for the challenges we face today. We need leadership which increases our capacity to learn new ways of understanding, defining, and solving the complex problems we are facing. Ron Heifetz (1994) calls these complex problems adaptive challenges. They demand leadership

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models that develop the capacity of organizations and people to respond to these challenges. Waiting for great individual leaders to guide and direct organizations, as well as guarantee our safety and security, is no longer possible (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 2017).

Like Heifetz (1994), both Eacott and Weick infer that while traditional notions of organization are static (Czarniawska 2005, 2006), to focus on "organizing" is to acknowledge that organizations are dynamic and ever-changing and that to lead is to *act in relationship* with others. Leading and following are constantly enacted and negotiated, and both are much less to do with position than opportunity. Ambiguity and indeterminacy are normal states, and indeterminacy, Weick (2001) writes, leads to adaptive actions (Heifetz, 1994). Cause-and-effect are as likely to be non-linear as linear; our causal maps are the theories of action we formulate to deal with puzzles confronting us, which we test and derive meaning from through sensemaking.

The relational nature of organizing is central to both theories. Organization, Weick writes, emerges through communication. "The intertwining of text and conversation turns circumstances into a situation that is comprehensible and that can then serve as a springboard for action" (Weick, 2009, p. 5). In a sense, what leaders lead is the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and perspectives which "gives voice to the collectivity and enables interconnected conversations and conversationalists to see what they have said, to understand what it might mean, and to learn who they might be" (p. 5). Leading is thus a *social process* of *learning together.* As one next step, integrating Weick – and maybe Heifetz - into Eacott would be worthwhile.

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Counter Examples

As one social reality, entities, institutional controls delimit social relationships based on pre-determined goals and objectives embedded in structures, policies, rules, regulations, and, just as importantly, in the "what is" of everyday situations. Individual beliefs, values, and alternative ideas are present, but always subsumed by the dominant pre-existing institutional and bureaucratic arrangements. Hence, the question: what would institutionalized education be if it were given to us repeatedly, generation by generation, as an already completed body of knowledge? It would result in central authorities, whomever they happen to be at any given time, prescribing the correct curriculum followed by instructional methods demonstrated to deliver this correct curriculum with fidelity. Many educators today, particularly in state-run school systems, live inside this very real social reality. Empirical educational researchers look for spaces in which to experiment – often on the margins - by testing alternative practices (as variables) of leading and instructing so as to measure significant differences, perceptions, and preferences among treatment and control groups. With each statistically significant finding, curricula and teaching materials are prepared for adoption and used inside schools and public school systems. That is, when research evidence is even considered.

Thus, as adult educators of the 21st century, we all are familiar with "implementation with fidelity" models and the transmission of "craft" knowledge. On the school leadership front specifically, how often do positional roles within this scenario devolve into directing teachers [students and parents] where to find answers to questions and how to present instruction for the day's lesson? These practices persist despite scholarly critiques regarding the democratic purposes of education, the intellectual professionalism needed to lead and teach, and the

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various theories of socially, culturally and normatively constructing knowledge for students and teachers to learn (e.g., see Apple, Freire, Giroux). Regarding educational purposes, it is as if any relationship between deep democracy and education may be ignored without consequences (Spring, 1999). Yet even as generations of educators and their students work within institutional constraints, it cannot be said that the day's "what is" is any more permanent than were past curricula. What seems to be fixed and static is fixed and static *for the moment* and only *for us*. The day's dominant realities never represent a universal theory of education, which is an illusion in terms of control to reassure the public that its children are receiving the highest levels of instruction. The illusion is also reassuring to educators themselves who need to be able to imagine ideals for the work they are doing and to remain optimistic for the possible futures of their students. In this sense, the ideals are both necessary and contingent. Necessary as the search for meanings is a fundamental human activity, and contingent in terms of space-time possibilities. Theories are partial truths, and hardly predictable, despite the absurdly high numbers of statistically significant findings by educational researchers, mostly in small scale studies that should not be brought to scale.

But in the spirit of Weick and Eacott, let us imagine some alternatives. What if each and every time educators came together within schools and communities, the *possibilities* for and of education, curricula, instructional methods and leadership, could be born anew. Imagine if "conceptions of possibility, progress, free movement and infinitely diversified opportunity ... have displaced… the heritage of immutable and the once-for-all ordered and systematized … organization and established institutions" (Dewey, 1920/1950, p.163). Yes, Dewey did imagine a reconstruction of philosophy that liberated human's capacities such that "making a living economically speaking,

will be at one with making a life that is worth living" (p. 164). But now let's ask whether humans in general, and educators in particular, would function any better with these many choices and freedoms of opportunity? Is not education, and educational leadership specifically, a source of both freedom and control? Do we not as adult educators accept our responsibilities to delimit the freedoms of children as they grow and develop? Following Dewey, the teacher is the mediator of curriculum for the purposes of "securing of the right social growth" of students (1987). The question is how do educators make educational judgments regarding individual freedoms and social controls? If we let Dewey translate freedoms and social controls, he calls for educators to have autonomy and be participants, rather than remain as spectators to world events (1916). Such is the adoption of intellectual initiative, discussion, and decision throughout the entire school corps (Dewey, 1916, p. 65)

Thus, education as a human activity [within and beyond school] and, from a scholarly perspective, calls for continuous investigations by both researchers and practitioners. For Dewey and William James (1904) it comes down to *praxis* as to the "simple test of tracing a concrete consequence" (p. 25). The method, therefore, is *a posteriori*. P*raxis,* then is the application of educational theory and research to the prior activities of the educator. And these applications in a research agenda become systemic rather than procedurally-driven.

> *Interest in community welfare, an interest that is intellectual and practical, as well as emotional – an interest, that is to say, in perceiving whatever makes for social order and progress, and in carrying these principles into execution – is the moral habit to which all the special school habits must be related if they are to be animated by the breath of life. (Dewey, 1909, p. 17)*

Thus, along with questions of freedom and control, educational researchers must grapple with the intellectual, the practical, the

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emotional all in the service of community welfare. Democracy, for Dewey, emerges as "special school habits," practices, related to this purpose, these human activities. Yes, language, discourse, and text (analyses) all matter, but they are – in the pragmatic sense – useful tools for understanding practices as consequences, as supporting that which is good, bad, educative, and promoting democracy. In other words, education is a particular social ontology, with specific, normative and purposeful relationships. We might also add that education is a necessary social ontology, unlike other academic disciplines or careers. And in this sense, education is a fundamental human activity, despite its being under-studied, under-theorized and under-valued in the hierarchical ordering of academic discourses.

The search for relational characteristics of educational researchers must also be investigated among school leaders. While there are only seven and a half contracted hours in a work day, there is a culture amongst educational practitioners to arrive early and stay late whenever necessary. Often, this is without additional compensation. Communication skills and emotional intelligence become incredibly valuable skills that enhance the relational approach to the practice of school leadership in terms of kindness, care, trust, and generosity – all invaluable characteristics to successfully navigate the complex relational networks in school organizations. Over time this *organizing activity* may grow into a positive school-wide culture. Then again, it may not. Hence, the pragmatic and practitioner response to theory as "so what." The way educational researchers communicate typically shuts out practitioners. Unless and until theorists see this as a problem, "so what" will remain a problem.

The Way Forward

American pragmatism and Weick's sensemaking offers just two of many alternative pathways describing the processes-in-education. Nevertheless educators are not likely to become engaged in theoretical discourses without seeing meaningful connections: a number of scholars are experimenting today with new methodologies to motivate practitioners to begin again. Research methods such as biography, memoir, bricolage, critical discourse analysis, ethnography, connoisseurship, etc. combine theory and methods so as to offer new educational insights. According to Bogotch and Waite, (2017), educational leadership is nowhere near an end of its search for original, meaningful consequences and methods.

Roland Barth (1991), a teacher, leader, and researcher illuminates the existing tumultuous relationship between practitioners and researchers:

> *Schools are unforgiving, inhospitable places for academics, where foreign bodies are rejected as a human body rejects an organ transplant […] both school and university people come to new conversations harboring antibodies that each has built up to protect against the other. It seems to many in the university that schoolpeople want to improve things without changing them very much; from the point of view of schoolpeople, university folks offer to change things but without improving them very much. (p. 104)*

As our fellow teachers often say to us, "research is meaningless. It changes all the time, and as soon as we get one thing right, they are on to the next new fad. First growth mindset, now resilience theory." From the other side, research colleagues have shared similar feelings about teachers. Some have suggested that "teachers now days" show "no sign of weakness" and that this is an indication of "lacking in

reflectiveness". Thus, the finger pointing on both sides have built up callous.

While there are many reasons for these general ill feelings towards one another, a specific obstacle is the idealism in theory and practice. In fact, it might be better stated as theory *versus* practice. Barth (1991) sums up the perception with axiom, theory resides in universities and practice resides in schools However, Barth argues that there is not a single educator that does not have some kind of framework from which they are operating and very few academics that have not been an educational practitioner themselves.

Barth (1991) argues that one of the ways to breakdown this barrier is to provide practitioners with *useful* research. One of the ways in which to do this is to work from the ground up, to help "school teachers and principals to clarify and to reveal their *own* rich thinking about good schools" (1990, p. 110). This is where Eacott's relational approach to leadership may be lost in translation. Eacott's search for a new beginning in educational leadership from an ontological, epistemological, and relational perspective does not come from the ground up, but rather argues the importance of coming from a non-existential approach. Here, Eacott's work may be seen as an example in which theory is irrelevant to practice.

There is another critical reason for which Eacott's relational approach may not appeal to practitioners. Eacott's search for a new beginning in educational leadership removes the *raison d'être* that is essential to the social construction of leadership within schools in the first place. Without a shared belief in purpose, would the social construction (a set of shared assumptions and understanding) of leadership exist? Without this essential component, leadership would stymie or rather, leadership would default to management where the

focus of activities (e.g., planning, budgeting, staffing) results in a reinforcement of the status quo (Kotter, 2012; Shields, 2016). Is asking for an ontological and epistemological shift in educational leadership perhaps counterintuitive of leadership to begin with? If the purpose of educational leadership is to provide equal opportunities in learning and citizenship to ALL students, then we believe that Eacott's approach, in a pragmatic sense, is indeed counterintuitive.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we presented and re-present the arguments for and against a "new beginning" with respect to the study of leadership theory and actions as relations. We believe that discussions from those with whom we agree and disagree, however, will not erase differences of opinions, which are as real as the premises of logical argumentation and systematic methods for conducting research. In other words, human relationships are to be privileged socially, educationally, economically, politically and aesthetically, not as sameness, but as diversity. Our holding of idealized versions of ourselves, others and societies should not be erased from our sense of reality as educators or as citizens. Philosophically, our thinking behind what is real, what we know, and what is good, comes into play as background because leadership is first and foremost an applied field to be put into motion through actions.

In ending, we return to our first parenthesis, William Foster (1989):

Leadership, in the final analysis, is the ability of humans to relate deeply to each other in the search for a more perfect union. Leadership is a consensual task, a sharing of ideas and a sharing of responsibilities, where a leader is a leader for a moment only, where the leadership exerted must be validated by the consent of followers, and where leadership lies in the struggle of a community to find meaning for itself. (p. 101)

In these instances, and others, leadership remains both a question and a challenge; we are sure you, our readers, agree, but maybe not. Eacott insists that the field of educational administration is ontologically insecure (p. 162). To which we respond: is this state of being a theoretical strength or a weakness of the field?

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