

## The *Relational* Approach and Social Epistemology in Educational Leadership: A Rejoinder

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Calls for a social epistemology in educational administration and leadership are not new. As a field of inquiry, parallel monologues have come to dominate scholarly outlets and forums. But, parallel monologues arguably violate the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – with significant implications for the rigor and robustness of knowledge claims. This Special Issue sought to provide a forum for sustained dialogue and debate on the problems and possibilities of the relational approach that I am advancing. As the concluding paper, and a rejoinder to the contributions, here I highlight the difficulties of generating dialogue and debate and how going beyond our own complicity is challenging, but arguably rewarding, academic work.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      June, 30, 2019   <i>Accepted</i>                      July, 05, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  <i>Relational, auctor, organizing activity, spatio-temporal conditions, social epistemology</i></p>

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## Introduction

A social epistemology arguably calls for a collective understanding of how the world works before we can discuss it (Fuller, 2016). Appeals for a social epistemology in educational administration and leadership are not new (Eacott, 2017). Despite this, there is a general absence of dialogue and debate across different research traditions (Blackmore, 2010; Donmoyer, 2001; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). As an intellectual / scholarly community, our research infrastructure (e.g., peer-reviewed journals, conferences, and so on) is simply not set up, or at least functioning in such a way, to engage in rigorous and robust argument and refutation. The pressure to publish at volume and in certain outlets can be all consuming (Eacott, 2018b). The time to read and think through the ideas of others is a luxury rather than common practice. While the absence of dialogue and debate beyond an immediate research tradition does little to stifle the proliferation of journals, books, book series, and so on, it does have a significant impact on the social epistemology of the broader field of research. The potential side effect of closed system research traditions is little advancement of knowledge claims as scholarly reading and writing is arguably limited to a select group of self-legitimizing researchers.

This Special Issue, dedicated to discussing the problems and possibilities of the *relational* approach (Eacott, 2018a), is an intervention – albeit small – for a social epistemology in the field. It sought to bring together academics from a range of career stages, socio-geographic locations, and most importantly research traditions to argue and/or refute the core logic of the *relational* approach as either a methodological framing or its key theoretical resources of *auctor*, *organizing activity*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. Engaging with the

various contributions to the Special Issue, there is little doubt that there are diverse positions taken and each contribution takes up the task in a different, even if related, way. For Elonga Mboyo there are ontological and epistemological issues still to be nuanced, Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene have queries around the nature of the *relational* as an organizational theory, Branson and Marra have questions concerning a practical version of relational leadership and in the case of Gurr, even the value of a social epistemology is called into question.

While the Special Issue originally sought to discuss the problems and possibilities of the *relational* program, as the papers came in it became clear that any attempt to generate a rejoinder would need to instead focus on the role of social epistemology in the field. In remaining somewhat true to the original intent, in this final paper I offer a *relational* analysis of the contributions to argue that:

1. Complicity with the idea of 'leadership' makes it difficult to for educational leadership researchers epistemologically break from the ordinary language of the everyday;
2. Rigorous and robust social scientific inquiry calls into question the underlying generative assumptions of leadership;
3. The contemporary focus on leadership is at once constitutive of and emergent from the image of leadership;
4. Foregrounding relations enables us to overcome analytical dualism of theory and practice inherent in orthodox positions; and
5. In doing so, there is a generative – rather than critical – space to engage across research traditions in the interest of advancing knowledge in the field.



In crafting my argument, I mobilize the key concepts of the *relational* approach: *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. This serves multiple purposes. First, it provides an opportunity to achieve (to some extent) my original intent of the Special Issue for dialogue and debate on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* program. In explicitly engaging with many of the queries or critiques raised by the contributors, this paper and the Issue in general engage (albeit in a somewhat truncated manner) in the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – with specific attention to the *relational* approach. This is specifically so given that the contributors for the most part confirm the queries and stimulus for the *relational* approach. Second, it also provides an opportunity to demonstrate the *relational* approach in action. This includes how the five points above constitute my argument and therefore serve as the structure for this paper.

Mobilizing the *relational* as a methodological framing and its theoretical resources (*organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*) to describe a social epistemology (grounded in the contributions of the Special Issue) in action, this paper complements the stimulus paper and brings the Issue to a close. The contributors rarely, if at all, refer to (or possibly even know of) each other's work. It is these divergent positions, yet common defense of leadership and the organization that makes the work of weaving their claims together all the more interesting. That said, as with any call for further dialogue and debate, this Special Issue is more an invitation to think with, through and where necessary against the *relational* approach than a definitive conclusion.

### **'Leadership' As an *Organizing Activity***

In the stimulus paper for this Special Issue one of my key claims is that complicity with the idea of 'leadership' is one of the major problems in contemporary studies (complicity with 'the organization' is another). Such a claim is arguably confronting for those working in the field usually labeled educational leadership and who are frequently tasked with the preparation and development of leaders. As embedded and embodied *auctors*, educational leadership researchers are constantly generating *spatio-temporal conditions*, namely the field and its expansion over time and space, through attention to leadership as an *organizing activity*. It is the uncritical acceptance of leadership (as an *organizing activity*) that is generative of the field and for the most part, researchers (*auctors*), many of whom are current or former administrators and/or leaders, are at stake in the work they do. To challenge the focus of inquiry is to not only challenge how educational leadership researchers come to understand the world, but also how they come to see themselves in and through the social world. This means that leadership is at once constitutive of and emergent from the social world – it is an *organizing activity*.

English (2006) reminds us that advancing scholarship requires criticism of it, philosophically, empirically and logically. While reviewing a book featuring a chapter mobilizing the *relational* approach, Finn and Gardiner (2018) note, the *relational* approach disrupts current ideological ideas by placing scholarly attention on how leadership has come to be the dominant idea in the field. Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene recognize this argument (the need to debate foundational premises and assumptions) and how it holds everyone to a high standard, sufficiently high to challenge orthodoxy. However, they also believe that such a position is already held by most



educational leadership researchers. This is a claim that I am not convinced holds up to scrutiny.

Granting ontological status to epistemic concepts is not uncommon in the social sciences. In both the stimulus paper and the book I argue that there is no empirical referent for leadership. Elonga Mboyo, Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene, and to a lesser extent, Branson and Marra all note my observation and claim it is unhelpful for leadership research. To some extent, they are correct. Calling leadership into question is not particularly helpful for advancing leadership research, at least not at face value. That said, granting ontological status to leadership and uncritically accepting it as a real thing is equally problematic. It grants realness to what is a pre-existing normative orientation and assigns attributes or labels to confirming activities after events (Eacott, 2013). For a community of scholars, and the credibility of the field, this matters. In and of itself, it is insufficient to denounce the field free of any rigor and/or robustness knowledge claims, but it needs to be acknowledged and attended to. If there is no empirical referent – to which the burden of proof falls to advocates – then leadership can be whatever one wants it to be.

Elonga Mboyo expresses concern at my position, arguing that it equates cognition with subjectivity. He uses the specific examples of a house, pen and paper to make the claim that it is futile to search for or assume a single concrete referent. This mis-recognizes my argument. The notion of subjectivity is not one I subscribe to. The very idea of subjectivity as an analytical dualism with objectivity employs to the extreme that individual thought exists in parallel to others. This is contrary to any sense of relationality. What I am highlighting is that leadership is an epistemic, something brought into existence through analysis of the social world. Our collective comfort with the label

means that this social construction is rarely called into question. It is these relations, the social construction as an *organizing activity*, that are of significance in understanding the social world. In more theoretical terms, how our ontological complicity with the world is at once constitutive of and emergent from the social world (with corresponding implications for scholarship). What this means is that research in educational leadership needs to acknowledge both the social construction of knowledge and the social construction of the research object (e.g., leadership). This is difficult work and does not require a single empirical referent but does call for clarity as to what is (and is not) the focal object of analysis. Generating contributions to knowledge is not easy and requires a degree of scholarly rigor and robustness that is beyond the technical enactment of method.

Each of the contributors to this Special Issue has in some way defended 'leadership' without necessarily refuting my claims for going beyond leadership. In some, if not all, cases, they have managed to shift my argument for a *relational* approach to the adjectival 'relational leadership'. The difficulty of breaking from, or even being aware of, one's ontological complicity with the idea of leadership has negated the potential for a social epistemology. A particularly telling comment on this matter was made by Gurr:

*It is not from arrogance or a lack of interest in the discussions that I can say I am very comfortable in the research I do. Rather, it is a statement that in terms of how I understand knowledge generation for the areas that interest me, I am well settled in how I go about this.*

He then later goes on to say:

*I haven't [referring to some early papers] got back to write about how I critically reflect on what I do, and I am not sure that the invitation to this special issue is going to change that.*



Although the above quote is only an *n* of one, if someone explicitly accepting an invitation to contribute to a Special Issue engaging with the underlying assumptions of knowledge claims dismisses such a call, then the likelihood of spontaneous attempts among those in the broader field at scale is not particularly likely. To that extent, this is more than an *n* of one and on the basis of a body of literature stating the lack of explicit argument and refutation across research traditions in the field (e.g., Blackmore, 2010; Donmoyer, 2001; Eacott, 2017; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), it is possible to generalize from this single case study (Evers & Wu, 2006).

Working with, through and where necessary against the arguments of the contributions shows the ontological complicity researchers in the field have with leadership. Even when explicitly asked to engage with, and arguably defend, the ontological status of leadership, it is a difficult task. For the most part, this complicity is never called into question and it plays out as *auctors* generate the field through ongoing activities based around leadership (as an *organizing activity*). While this is problematic for the reasons I have argued here and elsewhere, it also has potential for opening new lines of inquiry and the *relational* provides the framing and resources to do so.

### **Researchers as Embedded and Embodied *Auctors***

The *relational* approach is not grounded in the orthodox literatures of educational administration and leadership. This is why the work can find a home in sociological texts (e.g., Dépelteau, 2018) and is cited in diverse fields such as politics (Pan, 2018), rural studies (Darnhofer, D'Amico, & Fouilleux, 2019), and language and literature (Hasegawa, 2019) in addition to educational leadership. It is therefore not surprising to see Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene note:



*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.*

They go on to argue that regardless of whether the *relational* approach offers new vocabulary and possibly novel constructs for theorizing educational leadership to what extent does the *relational* actually help us to understand leadership in action better. Their specific concerns are that ‘the theory of relational leadership as explained neglects some important aspects of organizing’ and ‘in what ways does relational leadership build on existing theories of organizing and offer an advance from these perspectives’.

Both of these queries are valid. However, to engage with them requires attention to the underlying generative assumptions of knowledge claims particularly given the coupling of leadership and organizing. Beyond the move from a *relational* approach (my position) to a critique of ‘relational leadership’ (the representation taken up by Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene), questions are raised regarding: why organize at all; to what extent do leaders and followers engage in organizing; and where do structures and processes, the stuff of organizing, come from exactly – as an outcome of what relational interaction(s) and under what conditions. In raising these queries Bogotch and colleagues expose a number of their underlying assumptions such as structure and processes as the very stuff of organizing, the leader-follower relationship, and a conceptualization of relational interaction under particular conditions.

Unlike *organizing activity* which seeks to describe how unfolding activity is organized, a pre-existing belief in structures and processes means that organizational theory is interested in the organization of activity. The difference is subtle but significant. It is similar to the



distinction Pierpaolo Donati (2015) makes between those holding the idea that society has relations and those that believe society is relations. To privilege structures and processes grants ontological status to organizations and conceives of them as external knowable entities constituted through objective structures. These underlying assumptions matter. They are fundamental to being able to have dialogue and debate across different positions.

Engaging with alternate positions requires being open to different ontological, epistemological and normative/ethical positions (which does not mean needing to change and align with, but at least being open to). There is a major ontological distinction here between one based on relations (my position) and one based on substances (Bogotch and colleagues). For the former, organizing is not an a priori but takes place through unfolding activity. You do not lose stability and durability through relations but it is not about static forevermore or change and instead on how things endure and last. The latter gives rise to structuralist accounts of the social world due to an a priori belief in social facts brought about through entities / things (e.g., leadership). This goes part of the way to explaining the defense of leadership in the final paragraph before the conclusion in Bogotch and colleagues' paper. They argue for a circular logic where without a belief in leadership (which they acknowledge as a social construction) that leadership would be stymied and/or default to management (where they engage in an artificial partitioning of what are leadership and/or management without articulating the distinction). The uncritical adoption of leadership (and management) and the organization as social facts means that as a field educational leadership simply accepts those terms as a starting point rather than necessarily asking questions of their genesis and ongoing (re)production. In the broader social

sciences the questioning of one's complicity with the world as it is has been much written about. As some examples, Pierre Bourdieu and colleagues write about the importance of subjecting to inquiry the genesis of our constructs in *The craft of sociology* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991[1968]) and again in *Invitation to reflexivie sociology* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]).

The uncritical acceptance plays out through the conflating of organizing and leadership or that organizing has leader(s) and followers. In doing so, there is the embedding of a somewhat static social hierarchy (another structure), corresponding labels based on locations in that hierarchy, and the potential for abstractions of those labels beyond the contexts that generated the social positions in the first place. This is not only in Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene. Branson and Marra claim that 'leadership is constructed in the common daily social inter-actions among the nominated leader and those they are tasked with leading' and Gurr argues that 'I am interested in people, and these people have key roles, I make the attribution that they are educational leaders engaged in leadership work'. In their own way, each of these assumptions is consistent with structuralist depictions of the social world and employs an Anglo-American form of causal interaction (based on systems thinking) that focuses on questions of how with a little why. Working on the idea – whether consciously or unconsciously – that everyone shares the same underlying generative assumptions leads to false equivalences often based on word choice / labels rather than anything more substantive (a matter I will return to in the next section).

Bogotch and colleagues' second concern is how the *relational* approach builds on and advances existing theories of organizing. A particularly telling comment here is their claim that 'the fact that he



[Eacott] has not engaged the scholars we have already cited here, nor those we rely upon heavily in the following page [Karl Weick] is exactly the limitation any attempt to develop a coherent / correspondent / comprehensive theory [of leadership] faces'. There is a lot here, but to start with, I am not seeking to develop a theory of leadership. At no point do I claim to be developing a theory of leadership and if anything what I offer asks serious questions as to the value of leadership as an object of inquiry (hence the title of the book – *Beyond leadership*). Instead, what I offer is a *relational* approach to organizational theory in education (and elsewhere) and the theoretical resources (*organizing activity, spatio-temporal conditions, auctor*) to bring that to life. It does not require me to have engaged with all authors – an impossible and unhelpful task – and what I offer is a methodological framing with a theory of relations embedded and embodied.

Highlighting the difficulty of getting beyond parallel monologues, the qualifier by Bogotch, Bauer and Su-Keene of 'I could not get passed that since virtually nothing that follows is reminiscent of the theory I know on organizing' is telling. As a statement, and mindful of the critique I have taken it out of context, what this highlights is the influence of ontological complicity and the difficulty of epistemologically breaking from the status quo. In generating my argument for the *relational* approach I have stressed that existing explanations of organizing are limiting the possibility of alternatives and that many contemporary attempts to move beyond orthodoxy do not provide alternatives but iterations of existing theories. The challenge is therefore not simply to advance existing theories but to generate alternatives that offer a different, if not better, description of unfolding activity. My argument, in both the stimulus paper for this

Special Issue and the book from which it is based, explicitly sets out the limitations of existing theorizations of organizational theory in education (especially those based on leadership) and provides a means of working through how our relations are constitutive of and emergent from our theories. I believe that the *relational* approach offers a more rigorous and robust means of describing unfolding activity. Illuminating the underlying generative assumptions of existing theorizations and methodologies to establish a basis from which cross tradition dialogue and debate can take place is a requirement of such scholarship. To do otherwise is to remain in the parallel monologues of the field where there is ‘benign neglect’ with those with whom we disagree (Donmoyer, 2001, p. 558).

The complexity of pluralist scholarly communities is often lost with the uncritical adoption of labels (e.g., leadership, relational) and granting them equivalence. For example, Branson and Marra claim to refute my argument that there are few relational research programs emerging or any coherent agenda beyond an agreement that relations are important. Their counter-claim is that there is an abundance of current large-scale international research in the corporate world clearly promoting a relational approach to leadership (which is not my argument), and they provide some references to such work (although they conflate leadership, relationships, engagement, motivation, commitment, credibility, trustworthiness, among others). Yet they also note that ‘when such research outcomes are collated and compared, we argue that this perspective become unequivocal. A relational approach to leadership is the common factor while each adds its own unique understanding to the inherent characteristics of such a relationship’. By failing to subject the corpus to analysis of the underlying generative assumptions, Branson and Marra actually



prove my argument rather than their own without realizing. There is no coherent research agenda beyond a belief that relations are important. Such oversights do little to establish and advance credibility of knowledge claims.

In the absence of acknowledging the underlying assumptions of work, parallel discourse communities abound in educational leadership research. These self-legitimizing communities fail to subject to inquiry the underlying assumptions of their work. What the *relational* approach does is require a sense of reflexivity (not surprising given its grounding in Bourdieusian social theory) as not only important but imperative for improving the rigor and robustness of knowledge claims. This is not to negate theoretical pluralism, but instead to have researchers explicitly recognize and articulate their assumptions and by virtue the implications they may have for their knowledge claims. Whether we admit it or not, these assumptions are constitutive of and emergent from the way we understand the social world. Explicitly articulating them makes it possible to have dialogue and debate across research traditions by generating a grammar for communication. Instead of allegiance to particular labels and/or approaches, articulating assumptions enables conversations about the coherence of arguments with assumptions and facilitates judgement on that adherence rather than whether one aligns with it. As a means of improving the rigor and robustness of knowledge claims, such a position holds great potential. The logic of academic work is then on argument and refutation based on what is presented on its merits and not those imposed by the reader.

### Generating Spatio-temporal Conditions

Too often in educational leadership research alternatives are dismissed without due attention. There are many reasons for this. As has been discussed already, one is the absence of acknowledging the underlying generative assumptions of research. Another is the imposition of one's own framework on to another. Take for example Gurr's response to the *relational* approach:

*The challenge posed by Eacott is largely that this knowledge base [his own body of work] is false – it has been researched poorly, about ideas that are poorly formed.*

As a statement, this confirms the argument that it is difficult to break from our complicity and problematize the very concepts we research. Rather than engage in argument and refutation, the logic of academic work, Gurr has opted to generate an analytical dualism (true or false) not on the generative assumptions of claims but on whether they conform to his version of the world. The defense of his position against the *relational* argument is limited to the level of agreement (or not) and not the quality of the research and/or the rigor and robustness of knowledge claims. Any sense of superiority is based on appeals to an imposed normative without any consideration as to whether the knowledge claims actually attend to the matter(s) they claim to. Once again, this supports my argument that articulating our underlying generative assumptions are important for understanding knowledge claims.

In *relational* terms, researchers as *auctors* generate *spatio-temporal conditions* (fields of study) through *organizing activity* (theory, methodology, concepts, methods etc). Through an uncritical extension of their own complicity, researchers simply advance their own



position, self-legitimize by only engaging with like-minded colleagues and/or supporters and are unable to recognize the limitations of their own knowledge claims because their discourse communities do not bring them into question. In the specific case of Gurr's argument, I have previously devoted a chapter to exploring limitations of the International Successful School Principals Project and a similar project (the An Exceptional Student Outcomes Project - AESOP) and how the *relational* could add rigor and robustness to its knowledge claims (see Ch. 6 in Eacott, 2015). Rather than engage in the any degree of argument and refutation as a means of advancing his position Gurr has instead appealed to 'a practical level', where his 'ideas match well with what people do, in that those in schools can relate to ideas and make use of them in their practice'. The uncritical acceptance of leadership, that which is constitutive of and emergent from a pre-existing orientation becomes the *organizing activity* that is constantly reproduced by *auctors*. Appealing to and finding legitimation at a practical level works to sustain and expand the reach (*spatio-temporal conditions*) of leadership but does not necessarily add any rigor or robustness to its knowledge claim. It grants equivalence to quantity of an argument (e.g., how many outputs, or how many find the ideas useful) rather than quality of its contribution.

Appeals to the practical are the basis of the dismissal of my calls to examine the strength of leadership and to a lesser extent the organization as meaningful concepts. As Branson and Marra argue:

*It seems grossly unnecessary to be abolishing the very familiar terms of organization and leadership just as the organizational and leadership world is ready to be influenced towards the development of far more universally applicable and acceptable conceptualizations.*



They have three (at least) concerns with the *relational* approach: first, that as a philosophical description it can increase complexity and decrease practicality; second, words are not necessarily concepts; and third, my use of jargon clouds comprehension and it is unnecessary to apply unfamiliar descriptive words to a common phenomenon. The first concern is arguably one of audience. The stimulus paper (and the book) is not written for a practical – by which I believe my critics mean those working in educational organizations – audience. It is intended to provide an elaborated communication (something only achievable in a book length manuscript) of the underlying generative assumptions and theoretical resources that are constitutive of and emergent from the *relational* program. Taking the time to carefully nuance my arguments is not only consistent with what I am advocating, but also crucial to enable others to engage in argument and refutation of my knowledge claims. Not to mention, as someone who continues to teach and work with schools and systems, I have an applied version of the *relational* approach built around clarity, coherence and narrative (the translation of the *relational* extensions) but this is pursued through outlets more appropriate for the target audience.

Branson and Marra’s second and third concerns are easy to refute by turning their own claims upon themselves. The correspondence between words and concepts is the basis of my argument for the vacuous nature of leadership. Their claim is that the problem is not the words themselves but the alignment of those words with particular meanings. If anything, that is my point and the basis of my claim for needing to articulate the underlying generative assumptions of knowledge claims. My shift to the theoretical resources of *organizing activity*, *spatio-temporal conditions* and *auctor* is about bringing



theoretical coherence to my position and preventing myself (and others) from defaulting to the ordinary language of the everyday. The defense of leadership and the organization as words commonly associated with human relationships assumes that just because words are commonly used that their meaning has equivalence. However, when arguing for a body of literature with a relational focus Branson and Marra conflate work on leadership, relationships, engagement, motivation, commitment, credibility, trustworthiness, among others while acknowledging that each one has its own unique understanding of what constitutes the relationship. To assume that using common everyday language is more effective for understanding does not hold up to scrutiny.

In contrast, Elonga Mboyo recognizes the way in which the *relational* is both methodological and a theoretical resource. He notes that as a social epistemology it could best be ‘grasped as a methodological theory of “leadership” where the process [of generating knowledge claims] is part and parcel of resulting new realities in theorizing and practicing leadership’. However, there remain a few points of contention. Elonga Mboyo focuses on the generative or emergent nature of the *relational* approach but not the constitutive and this reduces it to relationalism rather than a relational position. Additionally, the *relational* approach is not about breaking down boundaries or analytical dualism but rather denying their existence in the first place. The difference is subtle but matters. Accepting their existence means that any proposed resolution takes the form of conflationism – bringing them together without attending to the original separation. The nuance that is the basis of this distinction between Elonga Mboyo and the *relational* can be explained through an example.

The attempted revision of '*auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions through organizing activity*' to '*drawing on their formless capability, auctors engage in organizing activity of various stakeholders' actions in order to generate (in)complete stage of actuality / spatio-temporal conditions*' reflects employing substantialist arguments to then claim that the *relational* cannot answer the substantialist question. While acknowledging the inseparable nature of context and *auctors*, Elonga Mboyo still opts for the 'deployment' of formless capability and others actions as the most productive means of visualizing how 'external variables of context' are not separate from activity without conflating or nullifying ontologies. These additions to the *relational* approach offered by Elonga Mboyo reflect an engagement with the approach (and the goal of the Special Issue) that is much appreciated, but at the same time highlight a potential limitation of much theorizing in educational leadership: the absence of a theory of context.

Context is recognized as important, in various ways, across the contributions to the Special Issue (and the field in general). However, employing a form of scholarship with ties to systems thinking, context is frequently thought of as a variable for activity. When combined with a belief in the value and significance of leadership this plays out in a particular way. It is what enables claims that while context is important, leadership – at least the desirable kind – can overcome context. The result is an appeal to a universal 'leadership', and context only plays out in the details of enactment rather than the desire or need for leadership. Leadership becomes beyond context. It becomes the *organizing activity* through which *auctors* are constitutive of and emergent from and continually generative of *spatio-temporal conditions*. As it is beyond context, leadership achieves a sense of epistemic imperialism, constantly expanding its reach without ever being called



into question. Unquestioned belief means that there is no way of turning claims back on themselves. In the absence of argument and refutation, and complicity with the importance of leadership through everyday language, and questioning can be dismissed through an appeal to the analytical dualism of theory and practice.

### Theory and Practice

The orthodoxy of substantialist / entity-based thinking has theory (often used synonymously with the work of academics in universities, or at least outside schools) and practice (often used synonymously with those working in schools) constructed as separate, even if related, domains. As *auctors*, field members legitimize and sustain the theory and practice divide by assuming that some forms of knowledge (and audiences) are of greater value than others. In particular, work that can be immediately translated into practice is most highly valued. The relations of *organizing activity* and *spatio-temporal conditions* means that in privileging a particular form of emergent knowledge claims *auctors* are further legitimizing it without recognizing its constitutive nature – this is embodied in the circular arguments that by challenging leadership as a construct I am not helping leaders to lead. By not asking questions of the underlying generative assumptions the ontological status of leadership and organizations are not called into question and the world continues on as is. The possibilities of seeing something different are limited to iterations of existing approaches rather than any potential disruption of that trajectory. The theory and practice dualism is prevalent across the contributions of this Special Issue. Bogotch and colleagues go so far as to seek to qualify their contribution by noting:

*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?*

This statement highlights what I argue is a major limitation to the credibility of educational leadership as a field of inquiry. The minimal attention to the underlying generative assumptions of knowledge claims and the uncritical acceptance of the ordinary language of the everyday means as a field we are constrained by a circular logic. Accepting the world as it is limits contributions to knowledge to iterations of the existing and the sustainment of self-legitimizing discourse communities ignorant of advances elsewhere.

The idea that theory and conceptual frameworks are secondary to practical tasks (e.g., knowledge, skills and dispositions) fails to acknowledge the constitutive and emergent nature of our underlying assumptions. It assumes that theory and practice are separate. Similarly, Gurr's interpretation that one response to the challenge of the *relational* is to 'abandon the questions I have explored, and the qualitative and quantitative ways I have researched for more than 30 years, and begin again', misses the point of the *relational* approach. The methods and/or focus are not the problem. Rather, it is the minimal attention to how the underlying generative assumptions shape the work and turning knowledge claims on themselves to heighten their rigor and robustness. Without doing so, the best that can be offered are iterations of existing ways of doing things (e.g., more efficient, effective, and so on) based on a pre-existing normative position.



Failing to acknowledge that there are other interpretations, which could be through problematizing constructs (e.g., leadership) or engaging with refutation/critiques, and understanding what they mean for contributions leads to nothing but the sustainment of parallel monologues. To trivialize the work of thinking through such matters as Branson and Marra do in noting 'while academics relish such mental jostling, it can be a source of ambiguity and confusion for those who need to practice leadership and seek guidance from its theory', only serves to de-professional knowledge in the field. If no one is asking questions in the field than research is reduced to finding ways of being more effective, efficient, successful without ever calling into question activity. As Thomson (2010) argues, it becomes about playing the game better without ever asking questions about the game and its formula for success.

### **Productive Contribution**

If this Special Issue is to find an audience beyond itself, then it needs to offer something that matters. Whether that is for the advancement of the *relational* research program or for educational leadership research more generally, it needs to be more than a critique of the status quo or just another parallel monologue. As Gurr provocatively asks:

*I am left wondering why there is a need to reflect so much on ideas that appear to be largely reinterpretations of views that already exist and have done so for many years.*

While Gurr's attempt to engage in some form of a social epistemology is to be appreciated, his lack of attention to the *relational* arguments and/or reflections on his own underlying generative assumptions in his paper makes it easy to refute. As with Branson and

Marra, Gurr does not provide any serious reflection on the *relational* ideas before moving on to advocate for (not defend) his own position – despite implying that the *relational* is contrary to his position. Although this could be a source of frustration, it has provided empirical support for the value of the *relational* approach. Within the confines of this Special Issue there is sufficient material to demonstrate how the methodological framing and theoretical resources of the *relational* approach can explain what is taking place within a broader trajectory that provide insights into the forthcoming.

At face value, this Special Issue is a failure. The intent of dialogue and debate on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* approach was arguably not achieved. However, a more analytical approach to assessing the contributions relationally demonstrates what the *relational* has to offer. As a methodology, the *relational* approach provides a framing to facilitate dialogue and debate across distinct research traditions without imposing a singular world view. This is important as Bogotch, Bauer, and Su-Keene note, discussions with those with whom we agree and disagree will not erase difference. Nor should they, but this does not mean we should not be relating our knowledge claims with those of others and thinking through these relations. Greater attention to our underlying generative assumptions and being able to defend our position in the face of criticism can only serve to strengthen knowledge claims.

Through the mobilization of the theoretical resources of *organizing activity, auctor, and spatio-temporal conditions*, I have been able to not only explain what is going on through description of unfolding activity but also predict what will take place. The status quo is constitutive of and emergent from orthodox approaches to understanding the social world. The self-sustaining legitimacy of leadership is only made



possible by *auctors* continuing to generate *spatio-temporal conditions* through ongoing *organizing activity* based on leadership. To break from this circular logic requires attention to the underlying generative assumptions – which the *relational* approach provides – and testing the strength of those knowledge claims. After all, the only way of changing the world is to change the ways of seeing the world.

Rather than simply critique the field or advocate for the *relational* approach in parallel to other developments in the field, this Special Issue offers a productive contribution. My argument is that once we articulate the underlying generative assumptions then our knowledge claims become testable. This enables them to be assessed for their rigor and robustness. By obscuring our underlying assumptions, as is the orthodoxy of educational leadership studies, they remain hidden and rarely brought into question. For educational leadership as a field of study, this is highly problematic. It manifests itself in parallel monologues and minimal, if any, dialogue and debate across research traditions.

Overall, the Special Issue has highlighted the problems and possibilities of a social epistemology in educational leadership studies. The logic of academic work, argument and refutation, has enabled the issue to achieve what a single paper advocating for the *relational* approach could not – scale. As *auctors*, the contributors have generated reach for the *relational* approach (a.k.a. *spatio-temporal conditions*) through *organizing activity* (the issue and the focus on the *relational*). However, there is no doubt that this work is happening at the periphery of the field. An enduring challenge for educational leadership, as with other fields of study, is how do you get a field to take notice of interesting work at the margins (Wilkinson & Eacott, 2013)? Ladwig (1998) goes so far to claim that often the most interesting



work takes place at the periphery without the core ever changing much. My response is to relate our knowledge claims, focus on the underlying assumptions and assess them for their coherence. But this work cannot be done alone. To borrow from Berger (1966), this Special Issue is an invitation to the reader and therefore warrants a generative reading. Thinking through the issues raised in the papers it will become clear that ‘the reader will need to go beyond this collection if the invitation is to be taken seriously’ (p. 7). Therefore, in closing, I encourage readers to think with, beyond, and where necessary against what has been argued in this pages in the spirit of the intellectual enterprise that is scholarship. With greater attention to the strength of our knowledge claims and relating them to the claims of others the field will only improve in rigor and robustness with positive outcomes for all.

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