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**Scott Eacott**

## The Problems and Possibilities of the *Relational* Approach: An Introduction to the Special Issue

Scott Eacott

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This Special Issue Editor's introduction provides an overview of the rationale for the Issue and a summary of the papers. Importantly, it does two things: first, it locates the work in the field and in particular the absence of sustained dialogue and debate – or more specifically the logic of academic work (argument and refutation) – concerning theoretical research programs; and second, it demonstrates how journals (or other scholarly outlets/forums) can facilitate a social epistemology. In doing so, the introduction (and the Special Issue at large) identify an issue of timely relevance and provides a generative alternative that works towards overcoming (not necessarily resolving) the issue.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <i>Received</i> June, 30, 2019  <i>Accepted</i> July, 03, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Relational, auctor, organizing activity, spatio-temporal conditions, organizational theory</i></p>

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## **Introduction**

Very few research programs in educational administration and leadership have achieved at-scale reach. It is even possible to argue that in recent times there has been an absence of rigorous and robust advancement of theoretical programs in the field. This is not to deny the presence of some large scale empirical projects (e.g., the International Successful School Principalship Project) or even that some figures in the field have managed to build productive (and often very lucrative) careers. Rather, it is to say that if you read the core literatures of the academic field (e.g., major international peer reviewed journals), there is the distinct absence of major theoretically driven research programs. There are different research communities (e.g., the social critical, the effective/successful leaders/ship, and so on), but there are not many individuals or groups of academics developing at-scale coherent research program. Again, this is not a total dismissal of their existence, just that they are insignificant in number compared to the countless proliferation of empirical work in the field. While the history of educational administration and leadership can speak of the Theory Movement of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Barr Greenfield's humanist science (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993), Richard Bates' Critical Theory of Educational Administration and Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakomski's (1991, 1996, 2000) naturalistic coherentism, one would be hard pressed to name too many research programs in the contemporary academy.

One of the possible explanations for this is that insufficient space at conferences, in journals and books, and seminars is devoted to engaging with the central ideas of proposed research programs. Too often, ideas are presented in parallel monologues and papers offer new ideas without seriously engaging with con-current



developments within and beyond the field (Eacott, 2017). Despite similar claims being made by many others since the turn of the century (e.g., Blackmore, 2010; Donmoyer, 2001; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), Tony Bush (2017) rejects – not refutes, and this is a matter I will return to – this claim. In contrast, he contends that such a claim is contentious but offers no evidence to the contrary, abdicating his role to meet the burden of proof given the present of evidence to support the parallel monologues case. While it may be contested as to whether there is deliberate and intended dialogue and debate in the field, one would be stretched to find too many systematic examples of explicit engagement with ideas and evidence of the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – at many educational leadership outlets (e.g., journals, conferences, books).

This Special Issue sought to explicitly engage with this matter by presenting an overview of Scott Eacott’s (2018) emerging *relational* research program and having invited scholars argue and refute / debate its core tenets. In doing so, this Special Issue would embody the social epistemology it espouses by focusing on the logic of academic work and providing an explicit forum for argument and refutation.

### **The *Relational* Research Program**

Scott Eacott’s *relational* approach offers a distinctive variant of the relational sociology project. By not fitting neatly into any one field, the *relational* approach arguably charts new territory and promotes important dialogue and debate for understanding the organization of society.

Beginning in studies of educational leadership, the *relational* approach has since been mobilized to explore supplementary

education, Indigenous epistemologies, understandings of causality, future-focused learning, digital platforms, school consolidation reforms, and principals' time use, among others. It has been central to multiple successful grants, over 45 publications, 25 conferences presentations, 10 theses, and is taught in masters and doctoral programs in Australia, Canada, and China.

It contributes to what Richard Niesche (2018) labels as the 'theory turn' in educational leadership. First explicitly articulated in *Educational Leadership Relationally* (Eacott, 2015), but with its most comprehensive explanation in *Beyond Leadership: A Relational Approach to Organizational Theory in Education* (Eacott, 2018), it has been the stimulus for a Special Issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundation* (Vol. 25 Iss. 2), and attracted commentaries from many leading scholars in the field such as Helen Gunter (2018), Fenwick English (2018), Izhar Oplatka (2016), Megan Crawford (2016), Tony Bush (2018), Gus Riveros (2016), and Dawn Wallin (2016). Book Reviews of *Beyond Leadership* have been written by Taeyeon Kim (2018), Jim Palmero (2018), Carmen Mombourquette and Leonard Sproule (2019), and with more currently in-preparation. This Special Issue continues this ongoing dialogue and debate on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* research program with contributions from Jean Pierre Elonga Mboyo, Christopher Branson and Maureen Marra, Ira Bogotch, Scott Bauer and Eleanor Su-Keene, and David Gurr. This body of work represents an emerging literature on the *relational* program and is generative of a social epistemology for advancements in educational leadership research.

To set the scene for the Special Issue and for those unfamiliar with the *relational* program, in the first paper of this issue, *Starting points for a relational approach to organizational theory: An overview*, Scott



Eacott provides an overview of the *relational* research program. In this contribution to the dialogue and debate – but also serving as the stimulus paper for other contributors – Eacott outlines the two key contributions of the work: i) a methodological framing; and ii) the theoretical resources to think relationally.

As a methodological framing, the *relational* approach is built on five extensions. These relations argue that: the centrality of organizing in the social world makes it difficult to break away from ordinary and common-sense understandings; there is a need to problematize the ways in which we think of organizing; contemporary conditions are at once constitutive of and emergent from the image of organizing; foregrounding relations enables the overcoming of orthodox analytical dualisms of structure/agency, universal/particular, and individual/collective; and in doing so, there is a generative rather than merely critical space to theorize organizing.

Mindful of other calls for relational approaches in educational leadership (e.g., Branson, Marra, Franken, & Penney, 2018; Giles, 2019), and critique from the likes of Pierpaolo Donati (2011) that many calls for relational approaches lack a theory of relations from which to base their claims, Eacott's relational approaches has three key concepts: *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. These provide the means through which to inscribe relations into description of unfolding activity in the social world.

The contribution of *Starting points for a relational approach to organizational theory* is to articulate the methodological framing and theoretical resources of the *relational* program. It was also the material that was sent to contributors to the Special Issue with their invitation

to serve as the basis from which they discussed the problems and possibilities of the *relational* for educational leadership.

### A Social Epistemology

As noted earlier, as a field of knowledge production, educational administration and leadership scholars do a substantial amount of talking past one another. Knowledge frontiers in the field are highly fragmented and more often than not, siloed. These parallel monologues are a major issue for the advancement of knowledge and the establishment and sustainment of rigorous and robust research programs. Original contributions can only be made in relation to others. That is, the innovation or significance of scholarship is an act of (social) scientific distinction. This means purposely engaging with others. Importantly, calls for a social epistemology are not an attempt at knowledge centrism and instead see diversity of scholarship as a strength rather than flaw in a field. To that end, the genesis of this Special Issue was to create a space for sustained (at least in journal article length) and explicit argument and refutation of the core claims of the *relational* approach.

In *Moving forward amidst the swirls: reframing the relational approach as a step 'beyond' leadership*, Jean Pierre Elonga Mboyo acknowledges the momentum of relational theorizing but argues that more needs to be done to bolster the robustness of the *relational* approach. Rather than a refutation he re-engages with the *relational* to locate it within historical developments of educational leadership as a field of specialized knowledge. In doing so, he asks questions of the underlying generative assumptions (mostly ontological) and their relations to binary thinking before offering alternate avenues and resources to further its aims.



Christopher Branson and Maureen Marra in *Leadership as a relational phenomenon: What this means in practice* offer support for the intention of promoting a relational approach but not necessarily the one promoted by Eacott. In contrast, their paper offers what they describe as 'a far more research-informed and practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon'. This alternate draws heavily on corporate literatures to argue for a relational foundation of leadership captured in seven fundamental principles of relational leadership practice. It concludes by articulating a pathway for those wishing to work towards enhancing their relational leadership capacity.

In *New beginnings, repeated: The continuing search for educational leadership* Ira Bogotch, Scott Bauer and Eleanor Su-Keene seek not to praise or criticize Eacott's *relational* approach and instead engage in the logic of academic argument. After acknowledging their location in the USA-based field, they work with notions of leadership as contested/seductive theories, leadership as an organizing activity and leadership as praxis. Drawing on the work of Weick they offer a series of counter-examples to the *relational*. Significantly, they point out that every academic argument presents its own theoretical, communicative and practical challenges all of which often necessitate a new beginning for the ontological status of leadership.

David Gurr's *Educational leadership research: Is there a compelling reason to change?*, as the title arguably indicates, acknowledges the *relational* approach but sees no reason to abandon his current line of research. Similar to Bogotch and colleagues, Gurr notes that the *relational* asks questions of the ontological, epistemological and normative assumptions of leadership research, but he does not see merit in engaging with such matters. Instead, drawing on his own

experience from the International Successful School Principalship Project he argues that his work is worthwhile, trustworthy and appropriate and therefore sees no compelling reason to abandon it.

### A Rejoinder

The final paper in this issue, *The relational approach and social epistemology in educational leadership*, is a rejoinder to Elonga Mboyo, Bogotch and colleagues, Branson and Marra, and Gurr by Eacott. While not perfectly capturing the idea of argument and refutation (by denying the contributors a chance to respond to the rejoinder – but at some point, the Special Issue has to be published), it does demonstrate how a social epistemology can (but not the only way) play out through the pages of a scholarly journal. The logic of the issue is one of putting an argument out there (Eacott), others refuting the claims and providing alternate understandings (Elonga Mboyo, Bogotch and colleagues, Branson & Marra, and Gurr) and then continuing the discussion by justifying claims in the face of critique to either strengthen them or extend/evolve and in some cases leaving them behind (Eacott).

The final product of the Special Issue therefore arguably does work on two fronts (just as does the *relational* program). As one contribution, there is the ongoing content debate about the problems and possibilities of the *relational* program. This was the primary intent of the Special Issue but as the generation of the issue unfolded it became more secondary or peripheral. The larger contribution of the Special Issue turned out to be the methodology for scholarly dialogue and debate. How it is possible to structure academic activity (e.g., editing a Special Issue – but equally relevant to a conference, book, seminar series) to move beyond parallel monologues and/or the



premature dismissal of ideas, and instead engage in the logic of academic work – argument and refutation.

### Conclusion

This Special Issue set out to deliver a scholarly dialogue on the problems and possibilities of the *relational* research program. Did it deliver? The short answer is both yes and no. From a positive perspective, at face-value it did bring a diverse group of academics from various career stages and socio-geographic locations together to discuss an emerging research program. From a more robust assessment, the dialogue and debate did not live up to the potential of rigorous and robust argument and refutation. The reasons behind this are complex, and arguably worthy of a paper in their own right (at least beyond what was possible in a rejoinder). It is possible that academics working in educational leadership (or at least those accepting the invitation) are too kind to one another and instead, as with earlier claims by Robert Donmoyer (2001), and Martin Thrupp and Robert Willmott (2003), treat those with whom we disagree with benign neglect. It could also be that the field itself does not operate on the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – and therefore expecting such is outside the boundaries of field specific norms. Possibly those contributors were simply not up to the task. My position, at this point, is that as a field, educational leadership does not operate on the logic of argument and refutation. There are too few examples of researchers presenting an argument and systematic refutation of claims and then a chance to respond. Our conferences are not set up in such a way and neither are our peer review processes (which essentially remain a one-way conversation). Therefore, despite the intent to advance dialogue and debate on the *relational* research

program, arguably the greatest contribution of this Special Issue is stimulating discussion about the logic of academic work in the field.

As is always the case with any scholarly activity, this Special Issue would not have come about without the support, encouragement, and assistance of many colleagues. Specifically, it is important to acknowledge the contributors to the issue. Your time and attention to engaging with the initial invitation, the stimulus paper, and then ongoing discussion is much appreciated. To the many anonymous reviewers who read the papers and provided meaningful constructive feedback, your contribution to the individual papers and the overall Special Issue is again, much appreciated. My colleagues in the Educational Leadership and Policy Research Group at UNSW Sydney, particularly Colin W. Evers and Richard Niesche, who supported and encouraged this idea despite it being published in an open access currently unranked journal during a period of increasing performative metrics. The ongoing collegiality and robust pushing of ideas is a significant, if not always recognizable, contribution to this work. Finally, it is important to thank and acknowledge the work of Kadir Beycioglu and team at The REAL. We lost a few contributions to this project along the way but the support to generate this Special Issue and most importantly the willingness to accept a proposal for an idea that is not common in the field is a testament to The REAL and how as a field we can better support rigorous and robust dialogue and debate on ideas.



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## Starting Points for a Relational Approach to Organizational Theory: An Overview

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>Classic organizational theories build on substantialist assumptions and grant ontological status to organizations. Relational theorizing provides germinal resources for an epistemological breakthrough in how we come to understand organizations and organizing. This paper, based on my 2018 book 'Beyond leadership: A relational approach to organizational theory in education', serves two purposes. First, it provides an overview of the relational research program – both the methodological framing and the three key intellectual resources of 'organizing activity', 'auctor', and 'spatio-temporal conditions'. Second, it serves as the stimulus paper for the contributors to this Special Issue dedicated to dialogue and debate on the potential contribution of the relational research program to the field of educational administration and leadership.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <b>Received</b>                      March, 30, 2019   <b>Accepted</b>                      June, 30, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Relational, auctor, organizing activity, spatio-temporal conditions, organizational theory</p>

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## Introduction

In what Alan Daly (2015) labels the ‘era of relationships’, it is not surprising to see relational scholarship on the rise in educational administration and leadership literatures (mirroring moves across many disciplines in the social sciences and beyond). While there is an increasing breadth of scholarship identifying with various forms of relational approaches (e.g., Branson, Franken, & Penney, 2016; Cardno, 2012; Daly, 2010; Helstad & Møller, 2013), there are few systematic research programs emerging or any coherent agenda beyond an agreement that relations are important. Two emerging programs, incidentally both emanating from Australia, that are building a critical corpus are the work of David Giles and his team at Flinders (e.g., Giles, 2019; Giles, Bell, Halsey, & Palmer, 2012; Giles, Bills, & Otero, 2015) and my own *relational* research program (e.g., Eacott, 2015, 2018). It is the latter that is the focus of this Special Issue. In the interests of further investigating, and arguably assessing, the rigor and robustness of the *relational* research program, this paper and the others in this issue engage in a form of social epistemology centered on the core ideas of the program and what it offers for the field of educational administration and leadership.

Best captured in *Beyond leadership: a relational approach to organizational theory in education* (Eacott, 2018), the *relational* approach offers a distinctive post-Bourdieuian variant of the relational sociological project. Shifting the focus of inquiry from entities (e.g., leadership, the organization) to *organizing activity* and describing how *auctors* generate – simultaneously emerging from and constitutive of – *spatio-temporal conditions* unsettles the orthodoxy of organizational theory in education. By not fitting neatly into any one field, the *relational* approach arguably charts new territory and promotes

important dialogue and debate for understanding the organization of education. It has been described by Taeyeon Kim (2018) as a sophisticated analytical lens for in-depth epistemological and methodological inquiry. Richard Niesche (2018) adds that the *relational* approach provides “great insights into thinking differently and productively” (p. 153) in educational administration and leadership. Dawn Wallin (2016) notes:

*Eacott’s developing work is of interest because it attempts to deal with the messiness and complexity of social organizations and its legitimation. ... The advocacy for openness to multiplicity in perspective, attention to temporality and sociospatiality, and the dangers of hegemonic discourse provide fruitful and exciting avenues for scholarly theorizing and research in educational administration. (p. 38)*

The *relational* approach is however not without critique. Ranging from the difficulties of thinking through context relationally (Oplatka, 2016), how it aligns with existing critical (Riveros, 2016) and feminist / post-structuralist approaches (Wallin, 2016), its value in an applied field (Crawford, 2016; Palmero, 2018), a romanticized view of (social) science (English, 2018), and whether it offers anything ‘new’ compared to existing theorizations (Bush, 2017, 2018). In particular, Tony Bush (2018) argues that the *relational* approach could quite readily be regarded as a different approach to conceptualizing and understanding leadership. Despite these critiques, which have been engaged with elsewhere (e.g., Eacott, 2016; Eacott, 2018), there is some momentum in the trajectory of the *relational* research program and this Special Issue is the latest.

Within the confines of a single journal article, this paper provides an overview of the *relational* approach. To do so, the paper adopts the following analytical structure: First, I outline what I see as the two fundamental problems of organizational theory in education for which



the *relational* is intended to overcome (as resolve is too absolute a claim). To nuance these claims I then offer my argument – the five *relational* extensions which serve as the basis of the methodological offering of the approach – before advancing my reasoning through the articulation of the three key intellectual resources of the *relational* program: *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*. I then articulate the significance of the program and what it offers the field before concluding with an invitation to others to refute or support my arguments in the interests of advancing knowledge claims in the field.

### **The Problem**

The *relational* approach privileges a concern with contribution to the explanatory and empirical problems with which we are faced. Bringing a transdisciplinary reading to educational administration and leadership, two problems requiring further investigation are: i) the defaulting to leadership as an explanation for organizational performance; and ii) the assumed stability of ‘the organization’. Both leadership and the organization are, for the most part, uncritically accepted in educational administration and leadership. The vast majority of contemporary thought and analysis in the field begins with these concepts as though they are real (e.g., external stable knowable realities) and waiting to be discovered, and proceeds from there. But what is meant when people use the label of leadership, how is it studied, and what are the relations between the underlying generative assumptions and knowledge claims are just a few key questions. Similar queries can be raised against the concept of the organization.

## **Leadership as the Default**

Building on a well-rehearsed critical literature (e.g., Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Lakomski, 2005; Pfeffer, 1977), troubling the explanatory and methodological assumptions of 'leadership' has been an enduring focus of mine (Eacott, 2013, 2015, 2018; Lakomski, Eacott, & Evers, 2017). As I have argued elsewhere, there is no empirical referent for leadership. There is nothing in the empirical world that directly corresponds with the label leadership. Instead, it is an epistemic construct, only coming into being through analysis. As such, leadership is little more than the articulation of a pre-existing normative orientation on how organizations ought to be. This explains the seemingly endless proliferation of adjectival leaderships. Without any corresponding object, empirical evidence that supports the pre-existing normative confirms it and that which does not is dismissed as non-leadership (e.g., management, administration) or less desirable leadership (e.g., bad leadership, or some other less desirable adjectival leadership). This is how leadership studies have become tautological and unable to reflexively interrogate the underlying generative assumptions of their knowledge claims. Methodologically, there is an a priori belief in the existence of leadership, but it is studied post event. Leadership (as an epistemic), is a methodological artefact, constitutive of and emergence from its own study. Rarely is this acknowledged and engaged with in the international literatures. It is the lack of engagement with the underlying generative assumptions of research that is most problematic for the idea of leadership. Similar assumptions can be found with the idea of 'the organization'.

## **The Organization**

Arguably the most significant challenge to the ontological status of the organization in educational administration and leadership can



be found in the work of Thomas Barr Greenfield, beginning (to some extent) with his 1973 American Educational Research Association annual meeting paper 'Organizations as social inventions' (Greenfield, 1973) and then his more well-known address at the International Inter-visitation Program in Bristol the following year (Greenfield, 1974). Through his pursuit of a humane science he sought to remove the entity-based substantialism of classic organizational theory and instead weave the social throughout knowledge production. As articulated by Greenfield and Peter Ribbins (1993):

*In common parlance we speak of organizations as if they were real. Neither scholar nor layman finds difficulty with talk in which organizations 'serve functions', 'adapt to their environment', 'clarify their goals' or 'act to implement policy'. What is it that serves, adapts, clarifies or acts seldom comes into question. Underlying widely accepted notions about organizations, therefore, stands the apparent assumption that organizations are not only real but also distinct from the actions, feelings and purposes of people. (p. 1)*

This represents a substantial intellectual challenge for organizational theory in education by breaking down the perceived distance between the observer and observed and the perceived realness of organizations. The centrality of organizing in how we have come to know and be in the social world makes it very difficult to break with orthodox thought and think differently. Both leadership and the idea of the organization are significant explanatory and methodological problems for educational administration and leadership. Engaging with these problems requires attention to the underlying generative assumptions of knowledge claims as much as the claims themselves. What the *relational* approach offers is the transformation of a topic of research (the realness of leadership and organizations) into a resource for theorizing.

## My Argument

Building on a transdisciplinary corpus of relational theorizing, and most comprehensively outlined in *Beyond leadership: a relational approach to organizational theory in education* (Eacott, 2018), I have sought to articulate a methodological framing that pays attention to the underlying generative assumptions of knowledge claims and the claims themselves. Built on a very Bourdieusian craft of scholarship (e.g., Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991[1968]; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992[1992]), but without any great loyalty or reverence, the approach is based on five *relational* extensions:

- The centrality of ‘organizing’ in the social world creates an ontological complicity in researchers (and others) that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from the ordinary language of the everyday;
- Rigorous (social) scientific inquiry calls into question the very foundations of popular labels such as ‘leadership’, ‘management’, and ‘administration’;
- The contemporary condition is constitutive of, and emergent from, the image of organizing;
- Foregrounding relations enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, tensions of structure/agency, universalism/particularism, and individualism/holism; and
- In doing so, there is a generative – rather than merely critical – space to theorize organizing.

In shifting the focus of inquiry from entities to relations the *relational* approach moves beyond the application of an adjective (e.g., relational leadership), does not limit the conceptualization of relations



to measureable relationships, nor seek to conflate analytical dualisms. Instead, the *relational* approach offers a means of composing theoretically inscribed descriptions of unfolding activity. It directly engages with: the relational foundations of knowledge claims; the uncritical adoption of everyday language (e.g., leadership, the organization); the role of *spatio-temporal conditions* in shaping understanding; the limitations of analytical dualism; and seeks to generatively theorize – not just critique. As an approach, it does not resolve all of the explanatory and methodological issues of educational administration and leadership, but it does explicitly offer a viable (and I would argue rigorous and robust) alternative. In doing so, it offers the potential to bring about new ways of understanding more so than simply mapping the intellectual terrain with novel ideas and vocabularies.

### **Ontological Complicity**

As noted earlier, the absence of a direct empirical referent means that educational administration and leadership is primarily – if not exclusively – dealing with the epistemic. This is not to say that there are not empirical problems, but the concepts, categories, and labels that the field concerns are the product of thought and analysis. Failing to acknowledge this means that research frequently credits its object (e.g., leadership, the organization) with the researcher’s vision of things. Our complicity with the world as it is means that what feels natural and makes sense experientially grants ontological status (and a sense of realness) to the epistemic. Everyday language and concepts such as ‘leadership’ and ‘the organization’ are primary instruments in the ongoing generation of the social world.

Current explanatory and methodological approaches in educational administration and leadership do not provide the

necessary tools to meaningfully break from the ordinary experience of the everyday. The uncritical acceptance of notions such as leadership and the organization means that current thinking is limited in what it can offer for the field. To think differently is however not without challenges. After all, to question the value or worth of canonical concepts would be to not only question the very core of the domain but to question the value of the self and one's role in the social fabric. Most, if not all, academics in the field are former administrators at school and/or systemic levels. A quick scan of recruitment advertisements will demonstrate the significance of school administrative experience. They research educational administration and leadership and teach into programs to prepare and develop school leaders. Being embedded in and embodying the social world means that the researcher is implicated in it. One cannot withdraw from the world in order to construct a (partial) re-creation of it through a manuscript or lecture.

This is to make a fundamental point about social scientific inquiry, particularly in the professions. The *relational* approach I am advocating breaks free of the ambition of breaking down activities into the smallest measurable units and instead take for its focus the enduring constitution and emergent representation of the social world. A key move here is to acknowledge one's positionality – relations – with the focus of inquiry. It requires some recognition of the advocacy embedded and embodied in social scientific inquiry. From a *relational* standpoint, following Christopher Powell (2013), this positionality is not a liability but a resource. Making it explicit generates greater trustworthiness in knowledge claims by illuminating their underlying generative assumptions. To do so however requires a deliberate effort to understand the origins, and enduring legitimacy, of questions,



concepts, and constructs. An important aspect of this is to interrogate the role played by language.

### **Under-problematized Language**

Language has long been recognized as having a significant influence of scholarly thought (e.g., Cassirer, 1942). In fields that are ontologically insecure (e.g., those based on epistemic constructs) it is arguably more important to articulate the underlying generative assumptions of thought and analysis. To that end, I propose that:

*A group (i.e.,  $n \geq 2$ ) requires some form of organizing.*

The point of origin for a social group (to which organizations are a form of) requires some form of organizing. Without such, it is really nothing more than a random collection related primarily through spatio-temporal proximity. Peter Gronn (2010) argues that leadership becomes part of this equation because above a certain numerical threshold the self-organization of collaborating groups proves to be difficult. The choice of leadership over other labels such as management and/or administration is arguably reflective on contemporary thought and analysis more so than anything else (e.g., note that Max Weber (1978[1922]) spent very little time discussing 'leadership'). The genesis of leadership is a perceived organizational need that goes beyond administration and/or management. There are at least two forms of this potential distinction. Initially:

*'Leadership' involves 'administration' and/or 'management' but offers something more.*

Here, leadership is something more, a variant or mutation representing 'administration plus' or 'management plus'. Leadership embodies the previous labels, it is not a separate entity, but does something more. This poses challenges for coming to know leadership

as the line of demarcation lacks clarity and any criterion used to establish the more is subjective – part of a pre-existing normative orientation. Alternatively, there is the claim that:

*‘Leadership’, ‘management’, and ‘administration’ are three distinct, even if related, analytical categories.*

In this case, leadership is constructed as a distinct and separate concept to administration and/or management. This has proven problematic overtime as establishing the distinctions requires increasing artificial partitioning of activity for classificatory purposes more than anything else. From an analytical standpoint, and building on the earlier call to articulate and interrogate self-evident truths and pre-existing normative orientations, the ordinary language of the everyday (e.g., leadership, the organization) needs to be problematized. In doing so, the relations between popular labels can be located in time and space. Significantly, to think with relations is to recognize that the contemporary condition is simultaneously shaped by and shaping of the image of organizing.

### **The Importance of Context**

Well-rehearsed arguments in educational administration and leadership stress that context is important. What exactly this means is rarely made clear, but it remains somewhat axiomatic. I argue that context is causal, and in doing so there is a need to nuance claims regarding the role of context and activity. Beginning with social structures, as is often the case with the social scientific study of organizations, there is the causal assumption of:

*context (social structures) → activity*

This is a deterministic logic, where activity is dependent upon – or determined by – social structures. Bureaucratic accounts that stress the



downward linearity of policy and the constraints of environmental factors are aligned with this logic. This is not a common position in educational administration and leadership as it requires acknowledging that there are significant limitations on what can be done. In other words, the explanatory value of leaders is insignificant when compared to external social structures.

The counterclaim to the dependent logic is the independent. Unlike the foregrounding of social structures in the dependent, the independent privileges agency. Activity, conceived as synonymous with agency, is granted freedom from social structures. This directly overcomes claims that structuralist accounts, especially those of the social deterministic kind, overlook the agency of actors to influence the world around them. This is more common, if not hegemonic, in educational administration and leadership as it centers on the ability of leaders to overcome contexts. Expressed differently:

*activity (agency) → context (social structures)*

An alternate approach plays off both arguing that activity is both dependent and independent at the same time. It can be expressed as:

*activity (agency) ↔ context (social structures)*

The double headed arrow conflates activity and contexts but does not overcome the original separation of the two. A hybrid, following François Dépelteau (2013), is:

*context (social structures) → (+/-) activity (agency) → transformed or reproduced*

While the last two logics move beyond opposing ends of the structure-agency continuum, they continue to construct activity and contexts as separate entities. These causal logics enable the mapping of ties and chains of interactions that can be measured or described in

terms of direction and strength – leaving relations as a ‘measurement construct’ and separate to entities (e.g., activity, contexts).

Taking context to be the ongoing configuration of temporal and spatial conditions provides the basis for an alternate conceptualization of contexts and causality that removes the linear logic. The enacted nature of organizing as a relational construct shifts attention to the unfolding description of activity and greater theorizing of *spatio-temporal conditions* – relating activities to one another rather than necessarily applying a linear cause and effect set of claims. What is enabled is descriptions where the contemporary condition is simultaneously shaped by and shaping of the image of organizing. Relations become causal rather than effects. Recasting *organizing activity* through *relational* theorizing generates the necessary resources to negate analytical dualisms.

### **Analytical Dualism**

For the most part, educational administration and leadership as a domain of inquiry has been built on binary thinking. One of the most common, leadership against management (and/or administration), has been central to advancing knowledge claims in the field. As epistemic categories it is not surprising to find analytical dualisms used to advocate for one over another. This, particularly when the underlying generative assumptions of research are not made explicit, significantly limits the possibilities of different research traditions engaging with one another. The core assumptions of differing positions are conceived (by many) as incommensurate. The *relational* approach overcomes analytical dualism by denying the original separation that is their genesis.



Unfortunately, in not explicitly acknowledging and articulating the underlying generative assumptions of scholarship, educational administration and leadership researchers have remained complicit with common analytical dualisms. The latest proposal is pitched against the past and claims some sense of superiority (often removed from the historical roots of past claims). For example, the next adjectival leadership is argued for on the grounds it offers something that past attempts did not. Similarly, the agentic freedoms of school autonomy are pitted against constraints of bureaucratic structures, or the holist distributed leadership against the individualism of heroic leadership. The logic of these is a choice between a superior and inferior option – without any reference to the underlying logics and instead appeals to normative orientations.

To think relationally, and particularly with the *relational* approach, offers a means of advancing knowledge claims without needing to call upon analytical dualism and dismissing other approaches. Going beyond analytical dualisms not just for critique but for contribution means the *relational* approach is concerned with recognizing the frontiers of knowledge claims and pushing them further. This, I would argue is a useful exercise in and of itself. The *relational* program is less concerned with critique (for its own sake) and instead focused on providing the intellectual resources to recast educational administration and leadership. With the provision of a methodological framing for knowledge production and the intellectual resources for descriptions of unfolding activity, the *relational* offers a means of engaging across intellectual traditions – a social epistemology – and generating a productive space for theorizing.

## Generative Theorizing

Analytical dualisms rarely lead to productive contributions as they are rarely employed to anything other than to claim some form of superiority. Given the parallel monologues of educational administration and leadership (Eacott, 2017), bringing multiple positions into conversation for contribution is uncommon. To contribute productively, I argue that scholarship needs to advance in relation. A common criticism of social theory (e.g., social critical, post structuralism, feminism, and so on) in educational administration and leadership is that it critiques without providing viable alternatives. This is not helpful to the field. What is somewhat missing from these alternate positions is a test of equivalency, a means of opening up dialogue and debate across research traditions without assuming superiority.

This can be achieved through an approach that highlights the underlying generative assumptions of scholarship and provides the necessary theoretical resources. Anthony Riffel (1986) argues that if debate in educational administration and leadership is to become more fruitful it must extend to include critical attention to the assumptions of others. Fenwick English (2006) adds that advancing scholarship in the field requires critique of itself philosophically, empirically, and logically. The *relational* approach explicitly engages with these matters by illuminating the underlying generative assumptions of research, problematizing language, and locating knowledge claims in the contemporary condition. To that end, the *relational* works in advancing knowledge production and describing the social world. Facilitating pluralism without relativism, it is built on a social epistemology where knowledge claims are in relation.



The *relational* approach has the potential, or at least promise, of providing ‘a’ (not ‘the’) methodological framing to facilitate purposive and meaningful engagement with alternatives and privileging of the logic of academic work – argument and refutation. It is the absence of dialogue and debate, that which violates the logic of academic work, that is arguably central to any perceived morbidity of the field in England (Gunter, 2010), Australia (Gronn, 2008), and a broader departure of scholars to more intellectually rewarding endeavors (Smyth, 2008).

Through a focus on relations, the *relational* approach provides the methodological framing to locate knowledge claims in relation to alternate descriptions. It is not about critique for its own sake and instead focused on making a contribution to understanding the social world. What has been missing to this point in making a relational approach viable in educational administration and leadership is a suite of intellectual resources to mobilize a theory of relations. To meet this requirement, the *relational* approach offers three key concepts: *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions*.

### **My Reasoning**

Moving from ‘the organization’ or ‘leadership’ to *organizing activity* generates the possibility of engaging with fluidity and the constant flux of the social without granting too much explanatory value to structures or agency. Attempts at describing (and understanding) this activity, even partially, requires more than just mapping a terrain or overlaying it on an external time and space. Instead, what is required is locating activity in *spatio-temporal conditions*. These terms are not just semantics. Orthodox notions of time and space construct a distance between activity and conditions,

frequently privileging measurement over the relations, including historical, that are significant in attempts to understand activity. In breaking down any constructed distance, traditional conceptualizations of actors (acting upon) or agents (exercising agency) no-longer capture the generative role played in ongoing activity. To that end, *auctor* (s/he who generates) provides the necessary resources to recast the generation of activity. Taken together, *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions* represent the key theoretical resources of the *relational* program. The core logic of the *relational* approach is:

*Auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions through organizing activity.*

The substantive claim of this paper is that in shifting the focus of inquiry (and at a more foundational level, explanatory and methodologically) through key *relational* terms provides the necessary intellectual resources to overcome many of the well-rehearsed limitations of contemporary (and historical) educational administration and leadership studies.

As stylistic points, *relational* when referring to the explicit research program is always italicized. The concepts of *auctor*, *organizing activity*, and *spatio-temporal conditions* are in lower case, and the latter is always plural. Such specificity may appear as prescriptive, and to some extent it is, however, it is also important for establishing distinctions, maintaining theoretical coherence, and reminding the reader that there is a sophisticated set of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions in such terms. In what follows I outline in greater detail the theoretical assumptions that sit behind the key concepts of the *relational* program.



## Organizing Activity

Destabilizing the ontological security of organization has important explanatory and methodological implications. We cannot rely on an assumed stability of external structures and orthodox labels and instead need to generate an image, however partial, of the social world with which we are inquiring. Shifts from a substantialist perspective to a *relational* approach means thinking not of organizations and instead through *organizing activity*. Attention shifts from overlaying the social with structural arrangements to a focus on describing (or inscribing) activity played out through relations. Unlike substantialist approaches which focus on the relationships between entities, a *relational* approach is concerned with relations and how relations are constitutive and emergent from *organizing activity*.

As with Greenfield's intervention, the *relational* approach opens the door for explanatory and methodological reconstruction without necessarily defaulting to esoteric theory. There is consequentially a craft of scholarship underway in this move. *Organizing activity* as a focus demonstrates an awareness that what we have is only a partial take on the social, but that it represents the empirical manifestation of a larger theoretical question. It does not make the description less significant, as the activity is articulated in relation to other activity. These relations, or *organizing activity*, are generative of further activity and contributing to the enduring unfolding of activity.

## Auctor

Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) traces relational scholarship back to at least the time of Heraclitus, and in particular his observation that "no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man". Working with *organizing activity*, any

perceived distance between individuals and contexts is broken down and replaced with a more nebulous notion privileging relations rather than relationship. *Auctor*, meaning s/he who generates, provides the explanatory resource necessary to make this shift. Rather than act upon or acted on, *auctors* are generative. This is an alternative to accounts stressing the structural constraints on activity (primarily through bureaucratic structures) and/or the agentic abilities of ‘effective’ leaders in overcoming context. The generative perspective overcomes the deterministic without defaulting to a naïve form of autonomy / agency. Even through inactivity *auctors* are generative of unfolding activity as there is no separation between individual, activity and context. While I have (somewhat artificially) partitioned *organizing activity*, *auctor*, and *spatio-temporal conditions* here for explanatory purposes, they work in relation to generate an elaborated description of activity. This is distinct from the substantialist basis of orthodox organizational theory in educational administration and leadership.

Theoretically, *auctor* has considerable potential. Both agent and actor are too general and essentially stable. Importantly, neither is robust enough to refute those with the necessary resources to critique on the basis of counter examples – even those limited to circumstantial denunciations or personal criticism. When claims are confronted with lived experience, notions of absolute agency and/or determinism simply do not hold up. To think with *auctor* is to move beyond the specific vocabulary of structural determinism and autonomy and instead weave *spatio-temporal conditions* into our descriptions.

### **Spatio-temporal Conditions**

Philip Hallinger (2018) argues that in focusing on what (successful) organizational leaders do, educational administration and leadership researchers have unwittingly relegated context to a



secondary concern. Constructed as an external variable, one that may influence practice and/or require adaptations in practices, there is a perceived distance between activity and contexts. Rather than simply adding adjectives to describe different types of contexts as Hallinger does (e.g., socio-cultural, political, economic, institutional community), or defaulting to the layered conceptualization of the social world (e.g., micro, meso, macro or local, national, global), it is possible to re-cast context where it is not separate to activity.

Hegemonic approaches to educational administration and leadership limit contexts (e.g., time and space) to entities that interact with individuals and/or organizations to influence activity. The underlying causal principles remain limited to deterministic (external forces act upon) or agentic (overcoming contexts) descriptions. However, in thinking with *auctor* and its generative causality, we cannot simply map activity on to a pre-existing external terrain as though they exist separately (even if related). With attention to *organizing activity* and *auctor* it is not surprising that the *relational* approach recasts time and space. Context, an aggregation of temporality and spatial dimensions, even if not always discussed as such, has always played an important role in educational administration and leadership and granted explanatory value to contexts. This has enabled analytical dualisms (e.g., structure/agency, individualism/holism, universalism/particularism) to legitimize and sustain themselves. Any shift to relations requires a recasting of the temporal and spatial. Rather than separate to, they are instead simultaneously constitutive of and emergent from *organizing activity*. Orthodox conceptualizations cannot handle this shift. Therefore, the *relational* approach mobilizes *spatio-temporal conditions* to reflect how *auctors* generate conditions through *organizing activity*. What was once conceived as external measures of time and space are embodied and

embedded in activity. This *relational* lens considers the contemporary condition to be constantly shaped by, and shaping of, the image of organizing. As with *organizing activity* and *auctor*, *spatio-temporal conditions* require a recasting of orthodox causal matters and a shift in the focus of research from substances to relations. In doing so, they ensure the theoretical coherence of the *relational* program through a sustained explanatory and methodological focus on relations.

### Relevance

Despite sustained calls for embedding the relational in descriptions of organizations (e.g., Follett, 1927, 1949; Mayo, 1933; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012) and educational administration and leadership (Griffiths, 1959; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Yauch, 1949) what has remained somewhat illusive is a robust theory of relations and the intellectual resources to make it happen. Aligning with the ‘relational turn’ in the social sciences (Dépelteau, 2018; Prandini, 2015) and a ‘theory turn’ in educational administration and leadership (Niesche, 2018), it is arguably not surprising to see the emergence of a relational alternative. Significantly, the *relational* approach that I am advancing here offers a methodological framing and the necessary theoretical resources to enact it.

Kalervo Gulson and Colin Symes (2017) argue that to constitute a turn there must be an epistemological breakthrough offering a blueprint for a field moving forward. I argue that relational scholarship, in its broadest sense as an alternative to substantialism, offers an ontological and epistemological breakthrough. As Pierpaolo Donati (2015) states, society does not have relations but is relations. We cannot have a *relational* approach unless we see relations as emergent and constitutive of the social. Relations are not things (e.g., entities,



substances) they are the social. It is not possible to articulate what is, and is not, a relation. To do so would be to construct the relation as an entity – one prone to becoming a measurement construct – and contrary to a relational approach. Instead, what are needed are the explanatory and methodological resources to make it viable. I claim, that the *relational* approach, both as a methodology and a set of theoretical resources (*organizing activity, auctor, and spatio-temporal conditions*) meet this requirement. In addition to being a contribution in its own right, it also serves as the basis for a social epistemology for educational administration and leadership. As an enduring project – as relations are always in motion – it is a generative space constantly needing to understand its own claims in relation to alternatives. This social epistemology moves beyond parallel monologues and fosters dialogue and debate in the field based on the logic of academic work – argument and refutation.

### Conclusion

In unsettling orthodox ways of understanding the social world the *relational* approach challenges our complicity with the everyday and disrupts our sense of perception. The contribution of the *relational* program is not simply about mapping the social world with a new lexicon and instead focused on understanding organizing in new terms. These terms not only allow for an unsettling of many of the normative assumptions regarding organizing, activity, and context, but they also allow for questioning the underlying generative assumptions of organizational theory in education.

Before dismissing this as a purely theoretical exercise, François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell (2013) note “relational analysis is always ‘conceptual’ since it involves a re-casting of the basic terms of

our perception, and always ‘applied’ since it invites us to use different modes of perception and orientation in this world” (p. xvi). As highlighted throughout the paper, the *relational* approach explicitly recasts the canonical terms of educational administration and leadership and explicitly invites us to think differently about our orientation and perceptions of the world as it is.

Through the provision of a methodological framing and intellectual resources the *relational* program goes beyond calls to take relations serious in educational administration and leadership. It offers a breakthrough in thought and analysis aligned with moves in the broader social sciences – a transdisciplinary movement – for understanding and working through the social. This work does however remain peripheral in the social sciences, organizational theory, and in particular, educational administration and leadership. But as James Ladwig (1998) reminds us, often the most exciting work takes place on the periphery of a field while the center changes little. Following Peter Berger (1966), and in the interests of advancing a social epistemology, I encourage others to think with, through, and where necessary against the *relational* approach. Such work, consistent with the logic of academic work is necessary if we are to increase the rigor and robustness of knowledge claims in educational administration and leadership.



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## Moving Forward Amidst the Swirls: Reframing The Relational Approach as a Step 'Beyond' Leadership

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### Abstract

*Embedding the relational approach as a research project is a viable alternative to normative conceptualisation and practice of leadership. However, as the shift from substantialist assumptions to relational theorising gathers momentum, the evolving nature of the argument so far suggests that more needs to be done to bolster its robustness. Rather than being a refutation, this commentary reengages with the relational approach in a way that attempts to locate it within the historical development of theorising in educational leadership as a specialised field. More specifically, it focuses a large part of its analysis on the strength of underpinning ontological theorising which, arguably, nullifies binaries without accounting for (assumptions about) them as it shifts its focus on relations. To ensure parallel monologues begin to engage and that auctors draw on an array of knowledges, the commentary reviews the relational approach and provides alternative avenues and resources to further its aims*

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## **Introduction**

One way of contextualising Scott Eacott's (2018a) championing of the relational approach (RA) in educational leadership and management theory and practice is by seeking to grasp the different traditions from which the field has evolved, in order to validate (or not) the call to move 'beyond' where it is currently situated. By using the adverb 'beyond', Eacott invites us to look past 'leadership' and take the next step in the theoretical chronology of the field which would bring us to a new theoretical age themed RA. It is this combination of chronological and thematic remapping of a theoretical field (Kamler & Thomson 2014), such as educational leadership and management, that this commentary seeks to review and retool.

As synthesised in the table below, the commentary disputes the suggestion that the field is moving from an atheoretical era (normative leadership) to a theory-based era (beyond leadership). If 'beyond' is taken to represent a theoretical movement, then the commentary suggests that what is taken as an atheoretically dominated normative leadership field is actually theoretical, an 'already beyond' field. To be chronologically accurate, Eacott's call to move 'beyond leadership' represents a move 'beyond' an 'already beyond' field: hence, "moving beyond 'beyond'". Thematically, under the heading "what could be lying beyond 'beyond' (or beyond leadership) for Eacott", the commentary highlights the pertinence of some notable features of RA while critiquing others, particularly the current ontological basis of RA which seeks to overcome essentialist binaries by recasting them as relations without accounting for substantialist assumptions. A clearing of the ground exercise is therefore undertaken where subjectivity and activity within RA's core logic are problematised and given a more refined understanding within an arguably broader perception of



reality. Drawing on the discussion thus far, the final part of the commentary is dedicated to a nuanced critical realist informed version of RA as an alternative theorising to Eacott's post-Bourdieuian approach and hopefully provides another viable (perhaps more productive) way of furthering RA's main concerns.

Table 1.

*Emerging theoretical traditions within RA for ELM*

Chronological mapping of Educational Leadership & Management (ELM) theory (ies).		Eacott	Elonga Mboyo
Eacott	Elonga Mboyo		
	ELM's theoretical roots recognised		Sociology, political science, economics and general management
ELM is an atheoretical field (Nische)	ELM's 1 <sup>st</sup> theoretical step: an already beyond field making a <i>horizontal</i> theoretical expansion based on <i>diversity</i> theories.	Leadership with normative approaches, models of leadership, atheoretical and binary-dominated parallel monologues.	Leadership with theoretically-informed models of leadership and binary-dominated parallel monologues with implied and fragmented contestations and criticality.
ELM's 1 <sup>st</sup> theoretical step: beyond leadership (Era of sustained criticality within ELM)	ELM's 2 <sup>nd</sup> theoretical step: beyond an already beyond field making a <i>vertical</i> theoretical ascent based on <i>difference</i> . (Era of sustained criticality within ELM)	Overcome binaries through a core logic that recasts them as relations where auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions through organising activity.  A major ontological obstacle unresolved.	Drawing on their formless capabilities, auctors engage in organising activity of various stakeholders' actions in order to generate spatial temporal conditions configured in (in)complete stages of actuality.  Layered ontology.
Thematic/philosophical traditions of RA as a beyond leadership theory.		Post-Bourdiesian informed RA	Nuanced critical realist informed RA



### **An Already 'Beyond' Field?**

Educational leadership and management is an amalgam of concepts that have drawn from theories outside the field of education and in other settings / disciplines such as sociology, political science, economics and general management (Bush, 2011). For example, the 'countervailing tendency away from hierarchy towards egalitarianism' (Gronn, 2010, p. 407) seen through normative bureaucratic and democratic models of leadership arguably draws its theoretical roots from Weberian and post-modern sociology (Bush 2011). Even an egalitarian, democratic or distributed normative approach is not without its own critical theorising as Lumby (2013), for example, demonstrates. Gronn (2010, p. 417) even sees distributed leadership not as a normative approach but simply as 'a situation'. These developments, although fragmented and without an overarching critical theoretical template, have, understandably, led Bush (2011) to argue that the field 'has progressed from being a new field dependent upon ideas developed in other settings to become an established discipline with its own theories' (Bush, 2011, p. 15). Hence, educational leadership and management is, arguably, an already 'beyond' field theoretically which has delivered formal, collegial, authentic, to name but a few, models of (Bush, 2011) or approaches to (Northouse, 2013) leadership. These normative theories, that are multifaceted in nature (Bush, 2011, p. 27), may not be explicit in different works but underpin them. This, therefore, questions Niesche's (2018, p. 151) generalised suggestion that the 'field is largely atheoretical' even though the author focuses on a specific connotation of theory. While outlining the various 'models', which is arguably a bridging term for theory-based practices of leadership in schools, Bush notes not only the diversity but also the (inherent) contested nature of these approaches.

The tensions, contradictions and ‘discord of multiples voices’ (Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 11) suggest the existence of a ‘critical’ element in the new body of knowledge being produced.

It is not the intention here to engage in an extensive review of criticality within the literature in this era beyond the indicative contestations illustrated at the start of this section. Suffice to say that the very suggestion that ‘parallel monologues’ inhabit the field implies silent criticality that, if not engaged, assumes the mainstream position in different pockets or enclaves. Analogously, the far-right and far-left political camps could be said to adopt parallel discourses in their separate spaces without necessarily suggesting the lack of ideological contestations that could be overcome. Although the diversification of theories is embedded in the very emergence of the field, this first stage of ‘beyond-ness’ within which the field supposedly lies from its original sociological, political roots has, arguably, come to symbolise orthodoxy. Any (implied) criticality and contestation in and across parallel monologues have ‘hovered in the wings of mainstream educational leadership studies’ (Niesche, 2018, p. 145). To move beyond these normative approaches is moving beyond ‘an already beyond’ field; hence, the subheading below.

### **Moving Beyond ‘Beyond’**

Niesche (2018) cites the drive for the field to provide ‘best practices that work’ to justify its impactful viability in an increasingly (marketised) knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2003) as one of the reasons for the field’s cosy and stagnant state of play. Context is important (Hallinger, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017; O’Donoghue & Clarke, 2007) for generating knowledge about policy and practice. Hence, a possible other explanation to enduring normative approaches



could, arguably, lie in the internationalisation of outlets of scholarly works that rightly seek to expand their multidimensional coverage of leadership practices all over the world. In that process, *diversity*, which celebrates not only practices across the world but also theories underpinning those practices (e.g. Gur & Day, 2014), seems to have taken precedence over *difference* which seeks wider (cross-theory and practice) significance (Schweisfurth, 2001). This horizontal siloed expansion (in the way of application and testing of existing theories further afield) seems to have slowed the vertical theoretical ascent. Unlike Nietzsche and Eacott, who see the quest for *difference* as the field's first theoretical step beyond leadership, this commentary suggests the quest for *diversity* as an earlier theoretical step (an already beyond field – see previous section).

Nietzsche evidences the vertical ascent in theory with the distinctively sustained level of published literature that specifically focuses on critical perspectives in the last decade. It is worth noting that the term 'critical' is used in the way of Derrida's (1997) deconstruction that, in this case, 'engages with terms such as leadership in order for its limitations, tensions and contradictions to be identified' (Nietzsche, 2018, p. 146). As one among other critical approaches (Nietzsche, 2018), RA is not necessarily a superior argument as critiqued by English (2018) but a different one with the potential to break new grounds in theorising, researching and practising 'leadership' in (educational) organisations. However, RA is somewhat different from some approaches listed by Nietzsche (2018) which, in line with the theme of *diversity* above, seek to give voice where 'there has been vast silence' (p. 150). This rather dialogic approach claiming 'a space for lost voices' is short of critical which seeks 'to reform the social world' (Deetz, 2009, p. 30) and could lead to counter narratives that are positioned alongside each other.

As such, “the already ‘beyond’ field” presents theory-based models of leadership that are only partial (Bush, 2011) and knowledge domains that are singular (Ribbins & Gunter, 2002) which leaves the field fragmented (Eacott, 2015a). RA, arguably, seeks to look beyond ‘beyond’ (or beyond leadership - in Eacott’s terminology) by weaving these monologues into a ‘dialogue’ with wider significance in a way that reforms the social world. That ontological and, especially for Eacott, epistemological reformation of the social world is presumably the infinite *organising activity* within relations. Despite Eacott’s success in developing sociological resources to that effect (see stimulus paper and key features revisited in the following paragraphs), it is legitimate to ask, as does Bush (2018), if this simply recycles old ideas and that the deconstruction is somewhat engaged in the contestations that have characterised the field (Bush, 2011) since its first stage of ‘beyond-ness’. This argument is, however, dependent on whether our understanding of theories in the field’s first stage of beyond-ness and Eacott’s evolving clarity in unpacking RA (Eacott, 2015a; 2018a) are aligned. That said, even dissonances, refutations and reinterpretations are essential ingredients in re-mapping the field and moving forward amidst the swirls. Otherwise, it could also be argued that RA’s current sociological resources bring a different and fully-fledged lens through which to recast old and new ideas. These pertinent concerns and claim that RA is a different lens of criticality are discussed and problematised further in the following paragraphs.



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### **So, what could be lying beyond 'beyond' for Eacott?**

This question, aimed at exploring the thematic / theoretical nature of RA, is purposely poorly framed to underscore the tendency for normative epistemologies to quantify, pinpoint and reify an external entity that has to be known in advance or in the end. Owing to the indeterminacy of human interactions outside normative epistemology, RA's social epistemology breaks out of this confine and could be best grasped as a methodological theory of 'leadership' where the process is part and parcel of resulting new realities in theorising and practising leadership.

This explains why Eacott has, in this special issue, implicitly or explicitly recognised that the process is, in itself, the outcome. The methodological artefact that is RA does not only lead to but also represents his much needed 'at scale theoretical breakthrough' (Eacott, 2018b). This bold move will certainly attract various reactions including the following critical embrace. For example, it is worth bearing in mind the view that a 'single at scale breakthrough', however critical in nature, could lead to a guru-like normalising effect (Eacott, 2017) and, therefore, stifle as it recasts (as well as replaces other bodies of knowledge) and acquires mainstream status. RA's 'at scale breakthrough' status can only hold in as far as it brings marginalised perspectives to the fold, in order to make plurality centre-stage without amplifying THE single at scale thinking as mainstream. Like all theories that must recognise their inherent limitations (Morgan, 1997), RA is boxed into the same paradox that must be skilfully negotiated. This does not imply that RA itself as a theory has to be indeterminate and shrouded in imprecision. However, while locating and asserting its theoretical self-identity on the one hand, it is called to engage in or promote (relational) conversation which, according to

Maurice Blanchot's notion of conversation, should lead to deprioritising itself (Bojesen, 2018), on the other hand. As it is explained later on in this commentary, this tension could be resolved by introducing the concept of 'relay point' where RA oscillates between foregrounding and deprioritising its 'at scale' theoretical self-identity.

That said, whether RA is constitutive of or single-handedly represents an (at scale) 'theory turn', to have pitched it as 'beyond' leadership (or beyond the first stage of beyond-ness) needs clarifying, at least, on two fronts. Firstly, it is not for the first time that relationality is deployed when discussing leadership. That said, some writers who use this concept discuss it as a form of distributed leadership, which recognises the shared, collaborative or connective nature of organisational interactions, particularly of women leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), as opposed to the heroic one-person show (e.g. Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). To this extent, Bush (2018) is right to question whether RA brings anything new to the debate. But RA, as a vertical theoretical ascent, is different from distributed leadership in that it engages not only with how leadership should be practised but also with the way (normative or not) theories of educational leadership can be simultaneously deconstructed and reconstructed with the envisaged benefits that such relational dialogue would bring. Secondly, Eacott does with RA what other scholarly works of the first stage of beyond-ness did / do by drawing on theories from the field of sociology, for example, to formulate a reasoning whose distinctiveness can be traced in the way that it reforms the social world and brings marginalised approaches to the centre of the debate. It is, however, the sociological blocks that Eacott draws on to build his relational intellectual edifice that deserve further scrutiny.



### The Ontological Sticking Point with RA at Present

For a theory like RA, which relies on sociology, the questions of how ontology and epistemology are represented are unavoidably central to its sustenance. Without rehearsing the entire argument, what is notable is the use of Greenfield's (1973; 1974) critique to highlight the untenability of the scientific approach. Siding with the view that sees subjects as constitutive of organisational reality, and not external to it, Eacott's RA is built on the premise that 'breaks down binaries (e.g., structure/ agency, individualism/ holism, and particular/ universal) and provides for the possibility for productive theorising' (2018a, pp. 8-9). In so doing, Eacott sees the social as constitutive of relations and that organisational theory and practice should look beyond leadership to '*organising activity* through which *auctors* generate *spatio-temporal conditions*'. This is now RA's basic core logic (see stimulus paper).

It is important to note that breaking down boundaries does not eliminate them. Agents and structures still underpin much of organising. While breaking them down is theoretically novel and perhaps aspirational (if only all stakeholders bought into the idea), it only sets the stage for articulating the internal workings of the reformed social system. The *social a priori of rationalism* that Eacott adopts as a possible productive theorising beyond ontological binaries completely sidesteps this question and, in doing so, arbitrarily eliminates this issue. Bearing in mind that the primary mission of RA is to engage parallel (theoretical) monologues, it is unclear how the supposedly inclusive 'methodological artefact' (Eacott, 2018a, p. 3) would promote criticality when individual ontological defining features of normative leadership theories are nullified.

In reality, the binaries are not nullified; they or assumptions about them that affect beliefs and actions are, like twigs, left burning while attention shifts to theorising about the resulting smoke (activities). This seems to be the essence of focusing on organising activities that Eacott (2018a) takes as self-evident truths and that 'structure/agency binary do little to reflect the lived experiences of actors' (p. 7). It is like saying; we should 'solely' focus on interrelations of the swirling smoke since the twigs have little effect on us. This, arguably, represents a fundamental obstacle for RA in its current state. It is not necessary to adopt a binary approach and Eacott's rejection of it is somewhat justified if agent and structure are taken in isolation or combined in a way that fails to overcome various forms of conflation. It is, nevertheless, imperative to coherently articulate what becomes of (assumptions about) them so that a productive theoretical and practice dialogue can emerge between parallel monologues that have dominated the field and pave the way for further critical approaches. Let us say, for example, that the substance 'love' does not exist and that the focus should instead be placed on loving relations. This recasting does not eliminate assumptions and expectations about 'love' of the players / stakeholders involved in loving.

Eacott (2018a) lists some key thinkers who have provided several sociological thinking resources to construct relational approaches, implying, therefore, that while RA could be represented as an 'at scale perspective', it has various ways of thinking underpinning it and that his approach is one among many others. One of the names cited is Bruno Latour for, presumably, his seminal work around actor network theory (ANT). As an example of a theoretical building block that breaks the objective subjective binary, ANT is commendable not only in providing the shift from singular and binary approaches but 'clearly' showing what happens to old binaries in new networks of



relations. Structures and agents are not eliminated but, with other entities, are part of the complex web of relations (particularly ontologically, whether based on assumptions or not). The same is asked of RA here unless it is rooted on the pragmatic paradigm that empties the world of ontological questions, in order to focus solely on the nature of activities and their desired effects (Morgan, 2007). Otherwise, RA's privileging of the epistemic over ontology does not necessarily have to be built on a form of recasting that is a zero-sum game for it to achieve its aims. Hence, the possibility for further (ontological) theorising of RA still remains.

### **An Alternative Productive Theorising?**

#### **Comparativism vs Relationality**

It is debatable whether comparative approaches are a by-product of relationality (Ozibilgrin & Vassilopoulou, 2018) or vice versa (Elonga Mboyo, 2018b) or two sides of the same coin. The point, however, is that both approaches seek wider (cross-theory and practice) significance (Schweisfurth, 2001) which requires multidimensional processes (Crossley & Watson, 2003) of relationality or cross comparison. While appropriating some of Eacott's concepts and reviewing others, the following discussion draws on embodied cognition (Wislon, 2002) to problematise Eacott's apparent idealist departure when thinking about subjects which, arguably, leads him to a compartmentalised (rather than layered) articulation of their externally projected realities such as leadership. Activity theory (Bakhurst, 2009) is also deployed to delineate important nuances between activity and actions, in order to better grasp the process of emergence of relations that do not nullify substances (monologues) but complete / transform them (or not) through organising activity.

Without dwelling on intricate theoretical complexities of embodied cognition and activity theory, using these theoretical insights is necessary to clear the way for the development of a new core logic of RA using nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). Hence, the whole commentary is more of a retooling exercise than a (caricatural) refutation of RA.

### **A Priori vs Subjectivity**

To return to the critique of RA around ontology, Eacott's view that leadership is an *a priori* concept 'beyond the senses and [...] somewhat unexperienced' (Eacott, 2018a, p. 7 citing Eacott, 2017) is problematic to the extent that it equates cognition with subjectivity. This has some implications. Firstly, that human existence is broader than its cognition. Theorising around embodied cognition makes several claims, one of which being the co-existence of thought and environment (Wilson, 2002). Without being liable to ontic or epistemic fallacies (Bhaskar, 1989), this proposition only highlights the need to consider ontology concomitantly as RA proceeds with its epistemic logic. Secondly, that the combination of various aspects of agents as reality cannot be subjected to a compartmentalised internal and possibly external projection of existence. Hence, the futility of the search for a (as in one) concrete referent out there as the only form of embodied existence of leadership. In fact, those from a Hume-an tradition have argued, rather convincingly, that reality has no concrete referent but it, instead, manifests itself as a conjunction of different activities, qualities, events (Magill, 1994). Much like leadership, there is no such a thing as a house, pen and the paper on which the ink you (the reader) are reading is inscribed. Hence, even if the thought that relations may not have a stable and substantialist concrete referent in the environment, their concomitant conjunctive and / or experiential



embodiment as well as their existence in the very constitution of substances (see 'nuanced critical realism: causality vs in/completion' section) cannot be ruled out.

### **Actions vs Activity(ies)**

Despite the above apparent conflation (cognition and subjectivity), Eacott settles for a (partially) legitimate representation of leadership as an *organising activity*, reminiscent of Deertz's (2009, p. 24) 'constituting activity', to arguably emphasise the relational nature of leadership beyond positivistic and constructivist ontological binaries. However, productive relations resulting from *organising activity* do not emerge *ex-nihilo*; and, this is where another conflation goes undetected when (organising) 'activity' is equated with 'actions'. This is neither a question of semantics nor a creation of a binary but rather a recognition of the interrelation of distinct processes, particularly from an activity theory perspective (Bakhurst, 2009) that attributes actions to individuals and activities to a community. Stakeholders at different levels within the education system can propose (practice, policy or research) actions that may take a substantialist dimension or not, but they remain incomplete actions in that they are a means to an end (O'Rourke, 2004). Besides, the object and motive of (human) action could 'come apart' (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 200). A successful marital relationship, for example, does not come out of nothing but the actions of those involved in those relations. Actions need *organising activity* for the realisation of successful (educational, marital...) goals, which effectively define the spatio-temporal conditions. Even if some sociologists see actions being subsumed in predetermined scripts which humans must perform (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), this logic of predetermination and causality arguably eclipses agency and needs to be replaced by the (in)completion criterion. This will meaningfully

rehabilitate auctors' agency and provide further clarity as to the configurations of spatial and temporal conditions being generated as (in)complete stages of actuality when framed through the nuanced critical realism informed RA to be introduced shortly.

For now, distinguishing between action and activity is useful in making the following propositions about leadership theories and practice from a relational approach. Firstly, an auctor (among other stakeholders) is primarily a generator of actions. Secondly, although leadership may exist as an *a priori* motive (or 'go through' an *a priori* state of knowing) with no symmetrical relationship with a concrete outside referent, the motive-spurred (in)actions of the auctor are inextricably linked to the overall group (in)activity that may seem unconnected. Thirdly, auctor does not only respond to his or her own expectations; *a priori* motives and expectations as well as actions they generate are not an exclusive preserve of auctors. Fourthly, in addition to generating actions, an auctor's other role is to engage in *organising* (the subtotal of in-actions called) *activity*. Fifthly, the success of an auctor's *organising* (in)activity, as a catalyst for complete actions (O'Rourke, 2004), is dependent not necessarily on the causality criterion but on the degree to which insufficient but not redundant substantialist assumptions and incomplete actions are used for the realisation of a (in)complete stage of actuality / *spatio-temporal conditions*. While the first four propositions are arguably clear, the fifth one is better understood within nuanced critical realism, discussed below, which flips causality into (in)completion criterion, in order to meaningfully capture how auctors' *organising activity* of various actions leads to different stages of actuality (layered reality).



### **Partial vs Wholesome Social World**

It is the contention here that the fusion that makes up human subjectivity and other entities can generate actions that, when taken together through organising activity, form the preferred relations that configure the spatio-temporal conditions or what nuanced critical realism would call (in)complete stages of actuality. In other words, the act of generating actions (by auctor or actions as the result of assumptions of whichever ontological side of the binary) is distinct from the life of the generated activities or events that may, in turn, have a different relation with generating 'entities'. As described so far, RA's fourth and most fundamental theoretical extension underpinning Eacott's thinking (see stimulus paper) foregrounds organising activities as events of leadership. In so doing, it only captures the relations of activities / events and, therefore, leaves the effect (and the process thereafter) of those activities on relation-generating entities (other states of being and doing leadership) unaccounted for. Ontological relationality should be able to articulate how these positions (including assumptions that have conjured an ontological complicity) interrelate in order to create avenues for dialogue between different theories and practices in the area of leadership, administration or management. Otherwise, the partial image that RA captures can only account for relations within that 'segment' of reality.

### **Nuanced Critical Realism: Causality vs (In)completion**

Although not in the same way that relations between layers of ontology are represented here, it should be acknowledged that even (self-contained) substances such as monads and atoms can be involved in relations of some sort (Ferber, 2011). From a critical realism relational sociology (CRRS), Donati (2015, p. 87) argues that 'relations cannot fade away substances (layers of reality), although the latter are

constituted by relations'. Hence, the relationality beyond binaries which accounts for them as constitutive of substances is a viable proposition that can be captured in critical realism which, arguably, represents a wider (not partial) socio-ontological theorising available. Eacott, in his stimulus paper, would label this approach as substantialist for arguably focusing 'on the relationships between entities' when RA is instead 'concerned with relations and how relations are constitutive and emergent from auctors' *organising activity*'. This is the case if the only way for substantialist approaches to lose their assumed stability is by not thinking about them that way and recasting them as relations that, as already stated, are constitutive of substances. Eacott's post-Bourdiesian RA leans away from Bourdieu's structuralist stance on relations towards an approach that departs from an *a priori* subjectivism towards a form of what Donati (2015) calls conflationary relationism represented by *auctors'* causal *organising activity* that subsumes both agency and substances.

Although Donati (2015) avoids various forms of conflation, the critical realist relational sociology (CRRS) that he espouses is not entirely helpful as it is based on the scientific norm of causality which misleadingly attributes primacy to causes (the real and the actual) over effects (the empirical). In this sense, the overcoming of binaries by *auctors* will always be conceived of as a smaller reality within presumably bigger relations which are constitutive of substantive mechanisms that Eacott's version of RA breaks down without nullifying. Individual and / or collective agency of auctors' *organising activity* also needs to be accounted for within a layered ontology by problematising the causality criterion. Nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo 2018a), therefore, flips causality into *(in)completion*. Here, relations that are constitutive of substances (Donati, 2015) are not redundant but incomplete (Mackie, 1988) and in need of auctors'



*organising activity* to turn incomplete actions into complete ones (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). It is through the moral argument shift from *causality* to *(in)completion* that the remainder of this commentary seeks to demonstrate the potential for RA to methodologically burst taken-for-granted stability of substantialist assumptions while departing from or thinking through them as relations.

One of the questions that ‘scholars rightfully ask of any research programme [is], to what ends?’ (Deertz, 2009, p. 23). Ethics and morality are essential in understanding leadership and management (Grace, 2000). There is, therefore, the need to develop a moral argument consistent with RA’s critical nature reflected in its robust core logic. This would be beneficial not only in an academic sense but also in the field’s ultimate goal of improving lives. This endeavour is made complex by the plurality of value actions; what those dictate education should be about; and how they should be managed (Zembylas & Lasonos, 2010). In response, ethical leadership based on normative approaches has had the tendency to ‘focus on the structure and process’ within essentialist models of leadership (Bush, 2011, p. 188) in a way that, for example, prescribes altruism to a transformational leader (Northouse, 2015) or that culturally attuned leaders should navigate local and international binaries by considering personal motives before connecting them to the wider context (Begley, 2000). The overall deontological (the rightness of an action in itself) and teleological (the rightness of an action in relation to other actions and others) ethical norms (Northouse, 2015) can be reconsidered more productively within RA. This could mean recasting isolated normative ethical actions such as egoism, utilitarianism, altruism, pragmatism etc. (Johnson, 2015, p. 156; Northouse, 2013) within social ethics based on *organising activity*. That said, the moral purpose of ontologies (not nullified but interlocked in relations within and across) is discernible

from the very nature of interactions that define ontologies. Elonga Mboyo (2018c) has used structuration theory or Ubuntu to demonstrate how four ontological ethical isomorphs can emerge from the intersection of structure and agency and aid the ethical valuation process of, to use Eacott's terms, *auctors' organising activity*. For its part, nuanced critical realism arguably presents an even more productive moral argument when thinking about the moral purpose, the 'what ends?' (Deertz, 2009, p. 23), of RA-informed *auctors' organising activity*.

There is, on the one hand, the causality argument that, according to critical realism, for example, is the defining feature linking structures, cultures and agents (Archer, 1995; 2010) or mechanisms, events / activities and experiences (Bhaskar, 1989). A legitimate argument could then be made that normative literature on educational leadership and management has, for a long time, socialised us to relations that are constitutive of normative or parallel monologues and, therefore, served the purpose of education set by causal forces present in structural (national and institutional) contexts (Hallinger, 2018) or subjective (post-modern) narratives of education. Even as it captures a partial image of reality, relations in Eacott's Post-Bourdieuian RA are still built on the causality criterion. Of course, RA does not favour the 'successionist' (Reed, 2009, p. 435) or what Eacott (see stimulus paper) calls 'the linear [cause and effect] logic' of causality. Like critical realism that opts for a form of causality built around 'tendencies that inhere particular social entities... over time and space... with effect in sociohistorical contexts' (Reed, 2009, p. 435), RA also sees causality in a similar way by focusing on how an activity relates to another in the emergence of *organising activity*. Causality is unsustainable for RA not because science attributes causes primarily to substances rather than non-substantialist relations as, from a critical realism perspective, relations are constitutive of substances. What



critical realism and RA do not do, however, is clearly articulate the nature of non-linear relating of (substantive monologues or not) actions in a way that rehabilitates the agency of auctors in the purposeful / moral emergence of relations through the process of *organising activity* resulting in spatio-temporal conditions.

As an alternative to CRRS (built on critical realism) and RA's current stance, on the other hand, nuanced critical realism recasts *causality* as *(in)completion* criterion when seeking to understand the nature of leadership beyond the habitual binaries and of which activities / events are a partial image. This is fully discussed elsewhere (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). Briefly here, the layered reality made-up of mechanisms, activities/events and experiences are recast as stages of actuality. Agency then consists of the deployment of one's 'formless capability'. 'Formless capability' could be understood as a non-substantialist and non-neutral 'stock' of potential that an agent develops from his/ her history of relating. This knowhow is used with some degree of voluntarism and intentionality for the emergence of productive relations out of various stakeholders' actions. The nature of those realised relations can be framed as either incomplete stages of actuality (mechanisms, events and therefore the perpetuation of orthodoxy) or a complete stage of actuality (the empirical) (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). The field within which an agent has the latitude to realise any stage of actuality is a zone of (in)completion. The moral purpose of the (in)completion process is measured by the extent to which an agent's (in)action can generate new ontological and practice relationality that can(not) improve lives in the evolving fluidity of time and space. Here, substantialist entities (stages of actuality) are no longer immutable. They can undergo a relational transformation that Archer (2010) has called 'double morphogenesis/ morphostasis'

captured as ‘double incompleteness’ in nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a).

Nuanced critical realist informed RA’s reasoning, arguably, resolves Eacott’s concern regarding parallel monologues without nullifying or conflating various substantivist assumptions that still affect educational leadership theory, research, policy and practice. A possible rebuttal to the position that this commentary outlines should be considered within the set of questions below.

### **A Moment of Pause**

It is worth asking ‘to what extent can auctor re-invent the wheel?’ This rather defeatist line of questioning presupposes the pre-existence of a wheel. However, even if the wheel as an entity did not exist, how different will the creative generation of relations be from normative assumptions that RA is recasting? Even if they turn out to be different, how capable is an auctor of replacing normative orthodoxy with relational normativity developed from ‘enduring unfolding of activity’ or an auctor’s history in relations as cautioned by Horsthemke and Enslin (2009) when discussing the potentially essentialist nature of African education developed as a counter-narrative to normative Western education in Africa? And even if it is argued that RA generates infinitely fluid relations, how does that leave auctor’s identity formation? Supposing that an auctor’s ‘I(d)-entity’ is replaced with ‘I-relations’, it will not escape (beliefs around) the non-monolithic and bounded histories of, for example, African as opposed to Western relations, as well as other race and gender flavoured critical approaches.



### **Resituating an Auctor's Organising (In)activity in Spatio-temporal Conditions of Nuanced Critical Realist (In)complete Stages of Actuality**

The above questions are not intended to awaken the author's, Eacott's or others' well documented exasperation towards an either-or normative dichotomisation of reality. Instead, they point to the (in)complete nature of the sort of (organising of) education contexts that auctors would generate. Relations (in education) are entangled in various tensions, contradictions and historical assumptions that cannot be nullified but should instead be brought together for the emergence of purposeful stages of actuality that are constitutive of relations. Eacott's Post-Bourdieuian methodological and theoretical resources of *organising activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions* do not adequately resolve the ontological and other issues raised thus far. When RA adopts the resources provided here, an auctors' generative *organising activity* of various stakeholders' actions gains its traction as they (auctors) bring about or explore new knowledge and practice (as a complete stage of actuality), rather than replicating (assumptions about) orthodoxy or normativity (as incomplete stages of actuality/spatio-temporal conditions).

It is legitimate to think of an auctor in this way since s/he (representing real people in research and workplaces) is not a mere bundle of unstructured relations that are generated on their own. Auctor is embedded in his / her history of relations sometimes built around stories. Just like Santa, some of these stories may not be real although their adult equivalent in the 'already beyond field' stage of leadership may have enduring effects that need to be accounted for when recast as relations. This can be thought of differently by acknowledging that an auctor's generative actions are not always a (or

in) response to his/her expectations. Expectations that may not have been part of an auctor's subjective history of relations, or have become a patterned repertoire of actions in emergent relations matter in the same way that his or her generative inactions must be explained in the overall unfolding of activities that are experienced by others.

These substantive (or not) expectations that can be read through people's actions and abstracted through (critical or not) research and rolled out as policy initiatives cannot be ignored or even stifled. Recognising them calls on RA to play the role of 'relay point' where it sustains its theoretical self-identity only by deprioritising itself as it foregrounds the dialogical recasting of various monologues through further analytical tools of its own and/ or those from other theoretical traditions. Its 'at scale breakthrough' status is not theoretical a point of no return where, for example, a computer would supersede and make a typewriter redundant. On the contrary, *organising activity* is only that 'relay point' which shows how auctors can avoid (a possible return to) parallel monologues (leading to incomplete stages of actuality) and instead continually use these incomplete actions to realise spatio-temporal conditions that configure complete stages of actuality. RA is then best thought of as engaged in a heuristic construction of a shift that is (could be) the result of coalescing and fragmenting intellectual (or practice-based) formless capabilities that would come to commit to a particular stage of theoretical actuality (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). On those grounds, it would be logical for RA's main aim (of developing a template for plurality and dialogue) to take precedence over its 'at scale' theoretical self-identity and settle for the apparent intensification of scholarly critical theorising from different angles that, according to Niesche (2018), represents a 'theory turn' in educational leadership.



With all additional concepts emerging from embodied cognition, activity theory and nuanced critical realism thus far, it is, therefore, possible to reformulate Eacott's Post-Bourdieuian RA's core logic that says '*auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions through organising activity*' to what follows:

Drawing on their *formless capability*, *auctors* engage in *organising activity* of various stakeholders' *actions* in order to generate *(in)complete stage of actuality / spatio-temporal conditions*.

Hence, like culture, identity, time (etc.), context is inseparable with an auctor's (in)ability to deploy his/ her formless capability through organising activity of others' actions in (dis)favour of a particular stage of actuality (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a) that effectively becomes the *spatio-temporal conditions*. This is arguably the most productive way to visualise how external variables of context (stages of actuality) (Hallinger, 2018) are not separate from activity without conflating and / or nullifying ontologies.

Situated within nuanced critical realism, and anecdotal as it may seem, it is worth wondering whether relations do still need leadership, at least, as an ability to influence the maintenance and/ or re-storying of those relations. Beyond the anecdote lies the real challenge for scholars and practitioners, as auctors, to equip themselves with further resources to give purpose to their organising activities that are subsequently experienced by others within organisations. The extent of this shake up through an auctor's research and practice that generate (in)complete spatio-temporal conditions beyond binaries, while accounting for their assumptions, may not necessarily be as daunting as initially thought (Crawford, 2018).

## Examples of Educational Leadership Research and Practice in Light of This Retooling of RA

Attempts to overcome theoretical and practice partiality, singularity and monologues has been an ongoing project, although without the defining tools such as *organising activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions*. The above reformulation of RA's core logic has now added *formless capability*, *actions*, *(in)complete stage(s) of actuality*. There are other units of analysis with the potential to shake up normative thinking. A further illustrative example to show how auctors attempt to overcome binaries as they deploy their formless capabilities and bring about *(in)complete spatio-temporal conditions/ stages of actuality* comes from Reed and Swaminathan (2016).

After suggesting their contextually responsive leadership framework, which consists of auctors (1) understanding existing local context, (2) acting with creative ingenuity to address the needs of the context and (3) balancing interplay between approaches, Reed and Swaminathan (2016, p. 1120) urge 'researchers [...] to look comprehensively across leadership frameworks to learn how leaders implement a combination of leadership approaches in urban schools'. In his empirical study comparing urban primary school leaders' experiences of leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo and England, Elonga Mboyo (2017) heeds this call by showing how head teachers (auctors) can rise above objective or subjective ontological spaces (assumptions) that define personal and professional selves, in order to act comparatively (or relationally) across various ontologies and epistemologies based on the values of risk taking, inclusivity, integrity and success-mindedness.

From RA's perspective, school cultures can be framed as *spatio-temporal conditions* which cannot be divorced from auctors' generated



relational expression. If this is the case, then Alvesson's (2013) notion of culture as a root metaphor becomes another useful resource. The proposed 'relay point' for an RA research programme needs to assemble these theoretical and practice resources and assess their impact in the overall (in)completion moral purpose of *organising activity*.

### Conclusion

This commentary has sought to reengage with Eacott's Post-Bourdieuian RA to resolve what it deems as an ontological nullification without accounting for insufficient but not redundant substantialist assumptions when such ontologies and epistemologies are recast as relations. It began by framing the theoretical history of educational leadership from "an already beyond field" to an attempt to "move beyond 'beyond'". Through the deployment of embodied cognition, activity theory and nuanced critical realism to problematise concepts such as a priori, activity, partial image of reality and causality in relation to subjectivity, actions, wholesome reality and (in)completion criteria, it has been possible to advance another reasoning that provides an additional set of resources and avenues. As a result, the commentary has led to suggesting a new core logic that would, hopefully, be more productive in RA's research project's quest to reform the social world in order to better theorise the field of educational leadership and management.

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## Leadership as a Relational Phenomenon: What This means in Practice

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>This article stands in support of Eacott’s primary intention of promoting a relational approach to leadership. However, its distinctiveness is in how this relational quality of leadership is understood, described and defended. In contrast to the essentially philosophical description provided by Eacott, this article offers a far more research-informed and practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon. It begins by highlighting widespread international corporate research, which is paving the way for the general acceptance of leadership being a relational phenomenon. Also, the article draws upon a multidisciplinary array of understandings to illustrate what can be considered as the relational foundational of leadership, which are then captured within seven fundamental principles of relational leadership practice. The final section of this article offers a pathway for those who wish to work towards enhancing their relational leadership capacity.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b>  <i>Received</i>                      February, 25, 2019</p> <p><i>Accepted</i>                      May, 22, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Relational leadership, leadership foundations, relational leadership principles</p>

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## Introduction

As evident in our recent publication, *Leadership in higher education from a transrelational perspective* (Branson, Marra, Franken & Penney, 2018), we actively support and promote the understanding that, essentially, leadership is a relational phenomenon. Indeed, within this text we argue that ‘leadership is best understood as a transrelational phenomenon as its essence is to move others, the organisation and the leader to another level of functioning by means of relationships’ (p. 49). Although the application of this understanding of leadership within this text was in higher education, we argue that the basic principles of leadership are independent of context unlike the application of these principles. In other words, while the observable practices of leadership are somewhat variable across contexts, the values and beliefs upon which these different practices are founded are consistent. Hence, this article stands in contrast to that described by Eacott (2018, 2019) because it provides a far more research-informed practical understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon rather than a predominantly philosophical perspective.

Our concern with Eacott’s predominantly philosophical discussion of organizational and leadership theory is threefold. First, despite a desire to avoid such an outcome we believe that an essentially philosophical description is highly likely to create analytical dualisms whereby each philosophical point of view becomes an arena for contention. While academics might 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. A philosophical emphasis can increase complexity and decrease practicality.

Secondly, although it is argued in by Eacott that moving from ‘the organization’ or ‘leadership’ to *organizing activity* ‘generates the



possibility of engaging with fluidity and the constant flux of the social without granting too much explanatory value to structures or agency', we believe that this is completely unnecessary because a word is not a concept. For example, the word 'chair' is not the concept 'chair'; it denotes the concept, but it is not the concept itself. Hence the words 'organization' and 'leadership' communicate a concept, but these do not define or delimit what constitutes an organisation or leadership. Indeed, we argue that organisation and leadership have been an integral aspect of human existence at least since the early Holocene era some 11,000 years ago when it became advantageous for humans to gather together in well organised groups or clans for safety and sustainability reasons (Eerkens, Vaughn & Kantner, 2010). The problem is not the words, themselves, but the alignment of these to the very specific actions of industrial magnates and business tycoons during an era in which the western world was being dramatically altered by the industrial revolution. Arguably such actions were not those of leaders but more akin to those of social manipulators – actions designed to change social and work habits in order to create the perfect employee. Unfortunately, due to the incredible success and profitability of the industrial revolution's achievements during this period, many of these magnate and tycoon actions gained universal acceptance as best practice even by some today. Fortunately, as will be described later in this article, contemporary largescale research by multinational companies including Deloitte, MIT Sloan, Gallup, McKinsey and Harvard Business are challenging the effectiveness of these outdated practices and promoting a more cooperative and relational approach. It seems grossly unnecessary to be abolishing the very familiar terms of organisation and leadership just as the organisational and leadership world is ready to be influenced towards

the development of far more universally applicable and acceptable conceptualisations.

Thirdly, Eacott argues that the introduction of the new key concepts of *organizing activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions* is not semantics, but to the leadership practitioner it will most likely appear so – more jargon to cloud comprehension. Arguably, given that relationships are an everyday facet in the lives of most people, it appears unnecessary to apply new and unfamiliar descriptive words to a common phenomenon. We are of the opinion that, in order to promote understanding, it is far more effective to use words commonly associated with human relationships in order to highlight and describe what truly constitutes leadership practice.

Thus, while the aim of this article is to support the understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon its purpose is to provide a far more practical description and argument as to why this is so. This description will not only be based on research and teaching at the Australian Catholic University but also on the extremely positive outcomes achieved in our consultancy activities involving profit, not-for-profit, and government personnel nationally and internationally. Specifically, this article will use research and experiential data to support and describe the relational foundations of leadership and its practice. However, given the structural limitations of this article it is not possible to adequately describe the organisational implications of this perspective. However, these are very comprehensively described in our 2018 text, *Leadership in higher education from a transrelational perspective*.



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## Research Supporting a Relational Approach to Leadership

We differ from Eacott's claim that 'there are few systematic research programs emerging or any coherent agenda beyond an agreement that relations are important.' Rather, we claim that there is an abundance of current largescale international research in the corporate world clearly promoting a relational approach to leadership. A discussion of some of these follows.

The 2018 Deloitte *Global Human Capital Trends Report* highlights a profound shift facing organisational leaders worldwide. Specifically, this report showcases 'the growing importance of social capital in shaping an organization's purpose, guiding its relationships with stakeholders, and influencing its ultimate success or failure' (p. 2). This report goes on to argue that the success of today's organisations is no longer simply assessed on traditional metrics such as financial performance, or even the quality of their products or services. Rather, it is claimed that organisations are now increasingly being judged on the basis of relationships amongst employees, with their clients, and with their communities, as well as their impact on society at large. Such expectations not only impact on what the leader needs to be able to accomplish but also on how they are to be a leader. One can't create such a holistic relational and socially influential culture without personally being relational and socially involved. Hence, this Report labels the highest priority in today's organisations as *The Symphonic C-suite* (p. 7) and adds that the current organisational trends 'demands an unprecedented level of cross-functional vision, connectivity, and collaboration' from the leaders. Being able to model and create harmonious team-work through healthy and mutually beneficial relationships is now considered to be the epitome of good leadership.

Similarly, in a Gallup article (2018), Robison refocuses and redefines the outcomes that organisational leaders need to achieve. Here she argues that, now, leaders need to focus on ‘people and the finish line’ the outcomes (p. 1). This way of leading is described as defining the end goals and then leaving it to individual contributors and the line-managers to determine the processes and practices in order to create the essential efficiencies and adaptability. Importantly, Robison adds, that as well as handling the usual administrative tasks leaders ‘have to know their people as people – and sometimes better than their people know themselves’ (p. 1). Something that can’t be done second-hand or by casual observation. Authentic knowledge of another person can only evolve out of a close relationship.

Also, what Robison is alluding to in this article is the issue of employee engagement – describing how the leader is able to increase an employee’s commitment and performance. Data from Gallup’s 2014 worldwide employee engagement research indicates that only 13 per cent of employees are actively engaged in their workplace, while over 50 per cent merely go through the motions of being fully engaged, and the rest are actively disengaged whereby they act out their discontent in counterproductive ways. For Kim and Mauborgne (2014), the solution to this unsustainable worldwide issue of employee non-engagement is what they refer to as ‘Blue Ocean Leadership’, with its underlying insight that leadership must be thought of as a service. More specifically, they argue that the leader should create the organizational conditions in which those they are leading want to accept their leadership. ‘When people value your leadership practices, they in effect buy your leadership. They’re inspired to excel and act with commitment. But when employees don’t buy your leadership, they disengage, becoming noncustomers of your leadership’ (Kim and Mauborgne, 2014, p. 62). Hence it is unsurprising that the Gallup (2015)



research conducted by Buckingham and Goodall supports the view that as much as 70 per cent of the variance in the employee engagement can be traced back to the influence and practices of their leader. According to Buckingham and Goodall (2015) one simple way that a leader can begin to enhance employee engagement is to ensure they actively support a mutually beneficial relationship with them. These authors suggest that such a relationship keeps priorities in focus and gives the employee the opportunity to talk about how best to do their work. Simply, employee engagement needs to be understood by leaders as an outcome influenced by their relationship with the employee.

At the heart of this relationship, according to Han Ming Chng and colleagues in their 2018 MIT Sloan Management Review article, is the leader's credibility amongst those they are tasked with leading. Furthermore, the research performed by these authors highlights that the leader's credibility is founded on 'two critical elements: perceived competence (people's faith in the leader's knowledge, skills, and ability to do the job) and trustworthiness (their belief in the leader's values and dependability)' (p. 1). More specifically, this research found that leaders were perceived as competent if they placed an emphasis on sustaining the organisation and employee's future, on promoting and acknowledging the achievement of the desired organisational outcomes, and on supporting the well-being of the employees. This research also identified the leadership behaviours that built trustworthiness as including communicating and acting consistently, protecting the organisation and the employees, embodying the organisation's vision and values, consulting with and listening to others, communicating openly, valuing employees, and offering support to employees.

Describing key leadership practices is also the focus of Gardner's 2017 Harvard Business Review article titled, 'Getting your stars to collaborate' but, in this instance, the desired outcome is that of enhancing performance quality and retaining high performers. Essentially, Gardner argues that organisational success in today's highly competitive, changeable and nonconforming corporate environment is dependent upon 'smart collaboration' (p. 102). By this she means that leaders must learn how to pool knowledge, skills and resources across boundaries within the organisation so that the most able and suitable employees can connect together in order to create new and better practices and products. Based upon her extensive research, Gardner highlights that such an essential outcome can only occur if the employees see smart collaboration amongst the leader and their leadership team. The leader must 'model the kinds of collaboration [they] want to see take root' (p. 108) Moreover, Gardner urges leaders to reinforce this commitment to collaboration by simply recognising and publicly acknowledging it wherever and whenever it is seen since 'people like seeing someone on more or less their level getting public recognition for collaborating' (p. 108). According to Gardner, a collaborative culture built upon healthy relationships from the leader down is at the heart of how today's organisations can survive and thrive.

Finally, in the McKinsey Quarterly journal (2018) Bourton, Lavoie and Vogel describe how in the current 'age of accelerated disruption ... even the best, most prescient leaders will be steering their company into, and through, a fog of uncertainty' (p.61). These authors go on to claim that:

*when faced with continual complexity at unprecedented pace, our survival instincts kick in. In a mental panic to regain control, we fight, flee, or freeze: we act before thinking ("we've got to make some kind of decision, now!"), we*



*analyze an issue to the point of paralysis, or we abdicate responsibility by ignoring the problem or shunting it off to a committee or task force. We need inner agility, but our brain instinctively seeks stasis. At the very time that visionary, empathetic, and creative leadership is needed, we fall into conservative, rigid old habits. (Bourton, Lavoie & Vogel, 2018, p. 62)*

The alternative solution provided by these authors to these reactive but unhelpful leadership habits is one that is clearly relationally-based. First, 'pause to move faster' which involves remaining personally engaged in the problem by taking the time to listen to the opinions and perceptions of others rather than feeling an obligation to find a quick fix. This involves 'embracing your ignorance' which is the second step. Accepting that others might have more relevant and helpful knowledge and skills within the current situation. Hence, instead of feeling compelled to personally solve the problem, the third step posits that the key role of the leader is to be asking the right questions of those who are more likely to come up with the solution. In this way the leader is able to achieve the fourth step which involves 'setting the direction, not the destination'. The questions asked by the leader ensures that the outcomes generated by all involved in the problem-solving process remain aligned to the vision, mission and values of the organisation. Then, the final leadership step is to guide those involved through the following two comprehensive review processes. First, before the solution implementation to anticipate consequences and prepare management strategies and, second, after the implementation process to review the outcome to ensure its desirability and sustainability. The common factor in each of these steps is the level of personal involvement, the closeness of the relationship, between the leader and each of the people involved in the process. Furthermore, it is a mutually beneficial relationship. Those

involved are not at the beck and call of the leader but rather the leader is creating work practices and culture that brings the best out of others.

Arguably, when viewed in isolation from each other, these and other research outcomes point to rather than definitively confirm the perspective that leadership is fundamentally a relational phenomenon. However, when such research outcomes are collated and compared, we argue that this perspective becomes unequivocal. A relational approach to leadership is the common factor while each research adds its own unique understanding to the inherent characteristics of such a relationship. Thus, the next section provides what these research articles could not do - a unified overview of the relational foundations of leadership. A multidisciplinary corpus of theoretical perspectives is used to achieve this end more comprehensively.

### **The Relational Foundations of Leadership**

Complexity theory urges us to acknowledge the daily presence of surprise and emergence. Not only do unanticipated things regularly happen but also new ways of successfully dealing with these happenings can unexpectedly emerge. Moreover, no matter how determined we are to control our environment in order to maintain predictability and security, surprise and predicaments invariably arise. Hence, it is argued that today's leaders cannot totally prevail over an organization's internal environment or control future outcomes as traditional leadership research suggested. If leaders cannot control the organization's internal environment or predict and manipulate the future state of the external environment, they need to acknowledge and accept that this emerges from the interactions among people throughout the organization. Much more than what the leader might choose to do, it is the people in the organization who bring about what



will happen in the organization. It is through the willing involvement of the people that the leader is able to enact their leadership. This is a contrary view to the common taken-for-granted, but misguided, belief that a person can immediately enact leadership in whatever way they wish once they are appointed to a leadership role. The formal acknowledgement of a person's public designation as a leader is also usually encapsulated in the belief that this person occupies a particularly important and essential role, which is distinguishable and discrete from that of those they are to lead. Moreover, the desired outcomes and expected actions of the role holder are often captured in a role statement to which the leader can be held accountable. Thus, both the establishment of the role and the description of the role promote a detached, line management view of the affiliation between the leader and those they are to lead.

Recent advances in sociology call into question these common assumptions associated with 'roles' and prefer to label these as 'positions' (Davies and Harré 1999; Harré and Moghaddam 2003; Harré and Slocum 2003). Seeing the responsibility of leadership as a role gives the impression that the nature of its enactment, and how others experience it, is the prerogative of the role holder and their line managers. In this sense, a role has the potential to be imposed. However, the reality of imposed roles rarely equates with the ideal. The natural tendency of those being led is to use whatever subtle or explicit means they can to cause the leader to modify their style of leadership to that of a more acceptable form. Hence, there are no real leadership roles, but rather, only negotiated leadership positions. In other words, in order to become a leader, the person must realize that the genesis of their leadership is in the everyday human interactions they have with each and every person they have the responsibility to be leading (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff 2010).

Leadership as a 'position' acknowledges that the practice and outcomes of leadership evolves largely in response to the effects generated by their interactions with those they are leading (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999). Thus, the leader is enacting a 'position' rather than performing a 'role'. Positions are socially shaped behaviours around patterns of mutually accepted beliefs, needs and expectations. Roles, on the other hand, are prescribed behaviours that are more explicit, precise, individualistic, and practical in formation and nature, and often reflect an ideal rather than the reality. To become a leader, the person needs to first negotiate with those they are leading, to build a mutually understood and accepted view of what the inherent responsibilities of the leadership position are, and how it is best to be performed (Harré and Moghaddam 2003). As a negotiated position, the ultimate image of leadership is co-constructed through the realization and consolidation of mutually accepted values, beliefs and expectations. Furthermore, Davies and Harré (1999) posit that the concept of position readily embraces the dynamic aspects of externally structured and imposed human engagements 'in contrast to the way in which the use of "role" serves to highlight static, formal and ritualistic aspects' (p. 32).

Essentially, leadership is constructed in the common daily social inter-actions among the nominated leader and those they are tasked with leading. This implies that the commonly held view of the individualism on leadership needs to be challenged. Rather, leadership is co-constructed such that the effectiveness of a leader cannot be measured by their achievement of certain practical competencies but more on how well they are able to establish mutually beneficial relational processes with those they are leading. These processes are authentically human in nature and cannot be reduced to mechanical, technical or clinical intentions designed to achieve the self-interests of



the supposed leader. They 'are characterized by a social flow of interacting and connecting whereby organizations, groups, leaders, leadership and so forth are constantly under construction and reconstruction' (Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorff 2010: 79). Thus, leadership is not formed from key or significant or prescribed actions initiated in particular circumstances in certain ways or at given times by a person appointed to a leadership role. Declaring a vision or implementing a policy or publicizing a new development or presenting an annual budget and so forth have little to do with the person's leadership reputation. Quite the opposite – the acceptance of a person as a leader and judgements about them as a leader are things that are incrementally formed as they move around the organization and interact with individuals and groups (Lichtenstein and Plowman 2009). Those being led are slow to judge the leadership capacity of the formal leader. They need to trust that what they first see is not only acceptable, but also authentic and typical. They need to firmly believe that the formal leader can be trusted and is reliable in their leadership behaviours. The person can only enact true leadership when, and only when, they are accepted as the leader. This means that 'leadership is not a one-way influence process but rather a reciprocal influence relationship. ... As in any other relationship, both sides contribute to its formation, nature and consequences' (Shamir 2011: 310). Essentially, the relational cornerstone of leadership is the reciprocal and dynamic interaction process between the formal leader and those to be led.

How then does leadership practice become a tangible experience? Leaders who are attuned to the pivotal relational dimension underpinning their leadership allow multiple futures and are open in terms of what these might be. Rather than controlling futures they cultivate conditions where others can produce innovations that lead to somewhat unpredictable yet largely productive future states

(Plowman et al. 2007). Their influence derives from their ability to allow rather than to direct and is grounded in people in the organization remaining engaged and connected. Through recognizing the importance of interactions as the ideal source of employee engagement, high performance and innovation, these leaders build 'correlation': the emergence of a common or shared organizational vision and a recognizable widespread pattern of positive organizational behaviour. Through this focus everyone in the organization can find meaning and purpose in whatever is unfolding.

In addition, these leaders enable the emergence of new ideas and behaviours that sustain and grow the organization by directing attention to what is important to note from contrasting the internal and external organizational environments. From this perspective, building collegiality, cooperation and teamwork should not be seen as only part of leadership but, rather, be understood as its very essence. Leadership is contextual and not generic because it emerges out of a sincere interpersonal engagement of the leader with those they are leading. In short, leadership is first and foremost relational, which implies that it is specifically suited to the unique context. Furthermore, its essence is a relationship that seeks to create a culture based upon the shared values of trust, openness, transparency, honesty, integrity, collegiality and ethicalness (Branson 2009, 2014). This is a culture in which all feel a sense of safety and security because they each feel that they can rely on each other in order to achieve their best. Through facilitating and supporting mutually beneficial relationships, the leader enables the organizational conditions to be created whereby those they are leading willingly and readily perform at their best. This, in turn, allows the leader to actually become the leader, and to continue to enact true leadership, which ensures the growth and sustainability of the organization.



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## The Fundamental Principles of Leadership

In light of the above description, and to provide further clarity and understanding of leadership as a relational phenomenon, we propose that its practice is constituted upon the following seven fundamental principles.

*Leadership is earned* – being appointed to a leadership position does not make the person a leader. Rather, based upon the judgements of others about the quality of the relationship, the appointed leader must earn the right to be accepted as the leader, which comes from becoming trustworthy. Thus, the appointed person must first create the conditions in which they can be trusted by those they are responsible for leading. But this must be founded upon sincerity and authenticity, and not dishonesty and opportunism. Those being led need to trust that what they first see in the person appointed to the leadership position is not only acceptable, but also authentic and typical of their beliefs and actions. The person appointed to the leadership position must consistently ‘walk their talk’; they must model what they expect of others. Also, those to be led will want to see that what is expected of them by the appointed person is reasonable, fair, achievable and beneficial. Those to be led need to firmly believe that the appointed leader can be trusted and is reliable in how they enact their leadership behaviours. If there is no trust, there can be no leadership.

*Character trumps control* – people want to be led, not managed, and so the perceived character of the leader, as formed through the breadth and quality of the relationships they engender amongst those to be led, is far more effective in achieving the organisation’s desired outputs than is the traditional actions of command, control and management. What those to be led are seeking is an appointed leader

whose character exemplifies competence, confidence and empathy. It must be clear to others that the appointed leader is highly competent in that they have the required knowledge and skills both relevant to the functioning of the workplace as well as to becoming a leader. But this competence is enhanced by confidence, also. Confident leaders not only voice their views and opinions stridently but also, they are willing to acknowledge the limitations of their own knowledge and skills in order to learn and be supported by others. Their character reflects a growth mindset whereby they appear keen to overcome their personal limitations, to learn from alternative points of view, even criticism, and find lessons and inspiration from the success of others. Moreover, this interest and appreciation of others extends to being empathically concerned for the professional and personal wellbeing of each of those they are leading. All of these qualities necessitate a character incorporating a heightened level of emotional intelligence, which enables the leader to foster the essential positive interpersonal relational workplace environment.

*The power of influence* – people look to their leader for influence and not control. They want to be guided, not directed. The power of the leader to influence and guide is centred within their person and not in their position. Today it is widely held that leaders must first show loyalty and respect to those they are leading before these will be returned in kind. Without loyalty and respect leaders have generally depended upon discretionary rewards and punishments, or upon the presumption that they solely possess the required expert knowledge, or that they could charm and cajole others when necessary as sources of power to influence others. But such mechanisms have much less effect than previously assumed. Rather than the source of a leader's power emanating from their role, or from their capacity to reward or punish, or from their superior knowledge, or from their capacity to



charm and cajole, it arises out of the outcomes generated by the interactions between the leader and those they lead. A leader's true influential power needs to be understood as embedded in and expressed through relationships. In other words, power to influence emanates from the dynamics of the relationship between the leader and their group. Although we frequently assume that a leader's level of power is derived from their appointment to a particular role, or their inferred level of authority to reward or punish to some degree, or their perceived amount of relevant knowledge, their power is always and strictly relational. Moreover, the essence of this relational power is said to be access to truth about the organisation. Where a leader is willing and able to create and support relationships with their group that encourages an open, transparent and shared discussion about the organisation, relational power is generated. What this means is that the power of a leader to influence the beliefs, thoughts and actions of others emanates from their willingness and capacity to generate knowledge and truth in a cooperative, relational manner.

*Engagement is an emotional response* – contrary to the traditional belief that engagement is a rational issue influenced by rewards and punishments, neuroscience illustrates that it is far more of an emotional response to rewards and threats. Increasing engagement from the traditional management perspective posits that the person will become engaged and improve performance through the technical accountability processes of annual goal setting and performance reviews and the motivational processes of bonuses and career advancement possibilities. However, such well-established processes now have little impact on employee engagement given that current world-wide employee engagement figures are at an all-time low. Current research data unequivocally shows that employees have become disengaged mostly from an emotional response to

management practices that include micro-management, the loss of autonomy, being ignore by leaders, being provided with unclear purposes, being involved in poorly managed change, being adversely affected by favouritism and unfairness, and experiencing inequity in career opportunities and workload. What really increases engagement is the person's feeling that their leader invariably treats them with respect, integrity, honesty and transparency. In order to do this, the leader needs to know them well, which can only happen by means of a close and mutually beneficial relationship.

*People make the difference* – ultimately it is the people who produce the desired outputs, which create the success of the organisation, and not visions, missions, policies, procedures, structures and performance goals. People will choose to be fully engaged in their work if it has meaning for them whereby they are utilising their strengths and growing their skills, and if they are free to innovate and share their successes. Thus, a prime concern for a leader is about striving to create a sense of work-related meaning and purpose in the minds and hearts of each person they are leading. If the workplace provides meaning and purpose, those being led will naturally perform their work more efficiently and effectively, and so do not require to be closely managed and controlled. Meaning and purpose comes from a sense of personal autonomy, control and contribution over what and how they are able to perform their workplace duties and responsibilities. People want to feel a strong sense that they have the freedom to use their workplace strengths in the way they believe is best suited to the tasks at hand. Also, they want to be able to contribute their knowledge and skills towards not only finding solutions to new workplace problems but also in how to prepare their self and the organisation to meet future demands. It is the person's judgement of the level of personal autonomy, control and



contribution, which provides them with a sense of purpose and meaning rather than any sense of duty, obligation or loyalty to the person in the leadership position or to the organisation. In other words, the leader who can relate easily and openly with those they are leading in order to ensure that each person is maximising the use of their physical and mental strengths will automatically maximise the organisation's desired outputs.

*It takes a team to innovate* – gone are the days when the leader had all the answers. No one person has all the answers. Today, organisational sustainability depends on the emergence of creative and innovative solutions that are more likely to arise from within a team than from within one individual. Also, sociological and psychological research shows that people today prefer to work collaboratively, to use their knowledge and skills in support of others, and to be a part of a successful team. Moreover, it is widely accepted that an expert team will always out perform a team of experts. Thus, the essential role of the leader is not only to build connectivity, networking and teamwork amongst those they are leading but also to actively support and appropriately participate with these teams. Working with highly effective teams directly involves the leader in a relationship and not just in a structure. Within this team relationship the responsibilities of the leader are, first, to provide a compelling direction by ensuring that the purpose of the team is clear and strongly aligned to the organisation's strategy so that each and every team member knows how their work contributes to the ongoing success of the organisation. Secondly, the leader must create a strong team structure by personally ensuring that the roles and responsibilities for each team member are clearly articulated, that each team member is working to strengths and is learning and upskilling, that all required support and resources are provided, that innovation and initiative are encouraged, and that the

team is able to work autonomously but supported in its endeavours by clearly defined communication channels. Thirdly, the leader must be seen as a part of the team in order to be trusted by the team to not only fully support its activities but also to ensure that each team member is fulfilling their specified role. Finally, the leader must see themselves as a member of the team and have clear team-membership responsibilities. They must maintain a close relationship with the team so that they can readily and aptly acknowledge, reward and celebrate short and long-term individual and team achievements and successes.

*Inclusion, diversity and well-being: new pillars of leadership* - in order to create successful, sustainable and healthy organisations in today's highly competitive and ever-changing workplace environment, leaders need to know more about the people they are leading and not just about what people do at work each day. First and foremost, leaders must ensure that the people they are leading feel they are important to the organisation and that they feel included regardless of ethnicity, rank, gender, age or ability. Only those who feel truly included will consistently give of their best. Secondly, in our current unpredictable and complex workplace environment, leaders need to see, acknowledge, and utilise the diversity of skill, knowledge, experiences and perspectives amongst those they are leading because this creates the deepest pool of wisdom, creativity and innovation. Where there is diversity of abilities and knowledge, the organisation has the potential to come up with new ideas, innovations and opportunities to learn and grow. Finally, as the line between work and life blurs, providing a comprehensive array of well-being programs focused on physical, mental, financial, and spiritual health is becoming a leader's responsibility and a strategic intention to drive employee productivity, engagement, and retention. Well-being is a personal matter, so any commitment to the enhancement of well-being must be



closely aligned with individual needs. In sum, the essential leadership knowledge and practices associated with properly attending to the importance of inclusion, diversity and well-being in today's organisations comes from healthy relationships and not from observations and performance metrics.

What these seven principles illustrate is that, when it comes to leadership, *relationships count* – essentially leadership is a relational phenomenon. What establishes the existence of leadership are *relationships* not particular words or actions. Deeply effective leadership actions have their origins in the quality of the relationships that the person establishes with those they are tasked with leading. Moreover, this relational quality influences the degree of acceptance of the leader's words and vision by those to be led. Thus, deeply effective leadership is founded on the reciprocal and dynamic relational processes formed between the appointed leader and those to be led. Furthermore, these relationships are not based upon a one-way influencing process but rather a reciprocal interpersonal influencing interaction. The forming of this relationship is not a moment in time happening but evolves over time based on the interplay of ongoing conversations, social connections, and professional networking. It is not so much about what beliefs and assumptions each person has about the other, but rather what they think about their self in relation to the other and how this makes them feel about the other. In other words, authentic leaders are those who are able to engender confidence, wellness, purposefulness and optimism in others by means of the nature and quality of the relationship they have established with them.

### The Relational Pathway to Leadership

Although we have claimed that the unique relational demands required to become a leader most likely means that not every person can be a leader, this does not imply that it is impossible to learn how to become a leader. We do not accept the axiom, 'leaders are born and not made'. To the contrary, we teach current and aspiring leaders about the relational pathway to leadership so that they are better prepared to respond appropriately, if they authentically can, to each of its demands. This pathway had its genesis in the research of Haslam, Reicher and Platow (2011) but evolved further as additional multidisciplinary research provided practical responses to the key theoretical principles. Although this relational pathway to leadership has been more comprehensively described elsewhere (see for example Branson et al, 2018; Branson, Franken & Penney, 2016, 2015; Franken, Branson & Penney, 2016; Franken, Penney & Branson, 2015) suffice to say, within the structural limitations of this article, it involves the following four sequential leadership learning phases.

The *Beginning Phase* necessitates learning how to become an authentic member of the group you are to lead by being able to develop mutually beneficial relationships with all. This involves developing sincerity in your desire to be a dedicated and active member of this 'group' so that you are able to come to know and understand the people, their strengths, their culture and values. In this way you can model and promote these values thereby enabling others to build trust and confidence in your capacity to lead. This requires a high level of emotional intelligence in conjunction with a firm commitment to openness, honesty, predictability and ethical decision-making.

*Phase Two* involves learning about the positive impact of honest and heartfelt recognition and affirmation on increasing the



responsibility and engagement of others. This involves learning how to become a champion for the people you are responsible for leading. By first becoming an accepted member of the group, you are then far more able to recognise and acknowledge the good work that individuals and teams are doing. Also, this means that you are more willing and committed to filtering and protecting the group from unnecessary or unsuitable demands. This is about acknowledging and appreciating the current levels of commitment and engagement, and thereby understanding the incapacity of the group to fully or partially take on any additional responsibilities. Fundamentally, this form of championing is about the leader being willing to defend the group's right to accept, amend or reject additional commitments or responsibilities. This form of championing provides those being led with the greatest sense of trust in their leader.

*Phase Three* comprises learning how to encourage individuals and teams to be continually seeking ways to improve upon their work. This involves utilising the principles of appreciative inquiry to grow the group. To do so requires the leader to learn how to lift the workplace aspirations of others towards higher levels of achievement by fostering curiosity, possibility, and innovation; by encouraging growth mindsets; by ensuring new workplace learning is shared and celebrated; by having people working to their personally recognised strengths; and by growing relational team memberships that you personally and fully support.

*Phase Four* includes learning how to non-controversially draw the attention of the group towards what is relevant for them to be aware of in their external environment. This involves the leader learning how to keep the group connected to its wider environment so that workplace knowledge and skills remain highly relevant and secure in

the future. This involves the group being supported in looking to the future in order to determine what is necessary to be initiated in the present. Rather than telling the group what needs to happen, the leader needs to learn how to draw attention to the future possible challenges for the group in an open, honest and inclusive manner, and seek feedback from the group members as to what this might mean for the group, what individually and collectively the members of the group now need to do in order to meet these challenges, and how it would be best to initiate these required developments.

### **Concluding Comments**

Essentially, this article unashamedly stands in support of Eacott's primary intention of promoting a relational approach to leadership. However, its distinctiveness is in how this relational quality of leadership is understood, described and defended. To this end, we have argued that our current theoretical understanding of leadership is most likely an aberration due to its relatively recent historical development. It's important to acknowledge that there have been great leaders throughout human history, probably ever since humans formed into well organised groups in order to better survive and prosper. We argue that an exploration of the practice of leadership across the entire time span of human existence would produce a far different theoretical understanding of leadership. Furthermore, we posit that such an anthropological scan would highlight that leadership is, and has always been, a relational phenomenon. Hence the key challenge for today's leaders is to revert back to this traditional relational way of leading by letting go of any habits which have their genesis in theoretical premises formed only last century.



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## New Beginnings, Repeated: The Continuing Search for Educational Leadership

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Abstract	Article Info
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <i>Received</i> February, 6, 2019</p> <p><i>Accepted</i> May, 08, 2019</p> <hr/> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Pragmatism, Organizational Theory, Ambiguity, Uncertainty, Non-Predictability</i></p>

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*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.

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<sup>1</sup>). 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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<sup>1</sup> 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

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*

*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 propositional 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,

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

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

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).



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## 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

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.



## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

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*. *Praxis*, 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

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.



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## 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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## Educational Leadership Research: Is There a Compelling Reason to Change?

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### Abstract

*This paper is a response to recent challenges to educational leadership research from Eacott. Using a personal narrative approach, and drawing, in the main, on research from the International Successful School Principalship Project, it is argued that current research questions are worthwhile, the methodologies used are trustworthy and appropriate, and that there is no compelling reason to abandon these.*

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This paper is not written in a conventional academic style and it emphasises narrative and experience. I need to state at the beginning that in writing this piece I do not seek to diminish the work of others. Occasionally it might seem that this is the case, but many of the people I will write about are people that I know and I have enormous respect for them personally and professionally. Nevertheless, Scott Eacott has for several years challenged people, such as myself, to engage with his ideas, and from the respect I have for Eacott, I think this is the time to do this, albeit briefly.

I have read through Eacott (2018), which seems to be a call for reconsideration of Eacott's ideas by providing another account of his views on leadership and then asking several colleagues to comment on this. This special journal issue seems to be doing the same. 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. Nevertheless, the summary of Eacott's views was useful and the commentaries came from a variety of perspectives, and so the volume makes a contribution to educational leadership discussions. The commentaries, whilst mostly polite, are also mostly critical of the contribution of Eacott's relational leadership; Bush's (2018) location of relational leadership in the story of educational leadership research rather than as an addition to it; English's (2018) positionality and language critique; Oplatka's (2018) counter to the need for a constructivist approach to leadership study; Wallin's (2018) critique of the lack of engagement with feminist and non-normative perspectives; Riveros' (2018) supportive application of the relational perspective to a leadership framework; and, Crawford's (2018) call for more clarity, purpose and a sense of the way forward if critical debates are to seriously challenge dominant views.

I am not a critical theorist, or some derivative of this view, and rarely do I write in a way that engages with reflections about fundamental concerns about how educational leadership is researched and conceptualised. Others do that better than I would do. In more than 180 publications I think I have only done so twice, and both of these were early in my career. My first published peer reviewed paper was for Peter Gronn in the journal he founded for the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, *Leading and Managing* (Gurr, 1996a). In it I considered whether the idea of transformational leadership was useful for education, and I was somewhat critical of some of the ideas of Gronn and Gabriele Lakomski. In his generous style, Gronn asked me out to Monash University to chat about the draft of the paper, and to show me how to better dispute his views. Gronn published the paper and arranged for Lakomski (1996) and he (Gronn, 1996) to provide a reflection, and then for me to have another reflection (Gurr, 1996b). It was really my only foray into anything approaching critical commentary. Since these papers, I have largely written about empirical research I have been involved in, reviews of research about an area, and conceptual papers assembling various ideas to explore a topic. I haven't 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. Let me explain.

I am very comfortable in the research I do. I find people in key roles in schools endlessly fascinating, I enjoy talking to them, and I still, after 55 years in schools as a student, teacher, researcher and consultant, enjoy being in schools, talking to students, teacher and parents, and thinking that in some small way I contribute to school success. Now, I use the term educational leadership (or school leadership) to describe the field I work in. But that, of course, is an attributional statement because in reality I am interested in people, and



these people have key roles in schools, and to those people in those roles, I make the attribution that they are educational leaders engaged in leadership work. In my early academic career I used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, but over time have largely settled into a qualitative orientation, relying on interviews and observations in a light-touch, relatively unobtrusive manner. A multiple perspective, observational case study holds a lot of joy for me, and provides what I consider to be a trustworthy glimpse into what people do in schools. It is no longer an innovative or ground-breaking methodology, but it is a quality way to engage with people, in a manner that is not too intrusive, but which still provides useful and complex information about people and their connections to others. My area of interest is educational leadership but within that I have diverse interests including: principal leadership, middle leaders, technology and leadership, school governance, school supervision (inspection, self-review), and so forth. From this corpus of research and writing I can easily provide a statement about educational leadership and one that has both person and person-in-context perspectives. One I constructed recently was this:

*There is now consensus that leadership matters to schools. Not only does it matter, but also there is an expectation that school leaders will make a difference to the school they are in, and for those in more senior leadership roles, that they will make a difference across schools. There is broad agreement that there are four areas of common practice. Successful leaders tend to have a long-term view of education, and they have the skills to bring a school community together to establish an agreed direction. They are able to articulate a vision for ten or more years, and make sense of this so that school communities not only understand what is happening in the present, but also how this fits with the future progress of the school. These leaders are people-centred. They help people to develop, and in more senior leadership roles, the focus is mainly on developing the adults in the school. They are good at leading change and putting in place the*

*organisational aspects that will lead to sustained success. Successful school leaders know about good curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and how to help improve teaching and learning in their school. The four leadership areas – vision, developing people, leading change, and improving teaching and learning – transcend contexts and work across all levels of education across the world. Yet there is no formula for successful leadership. These leaders do not subscribe to one view of leadership – they are not instructional, transformational leaders, or aligned to a leadership standard - rather they take ideas from various views of leadership and use these as sign-posts to construct a personal view of leadership that makes sense for their current role and context. To these four areas of practice, there are at least three other areas that promote school success. Leaders understand that ultimately they are responsible for their own professional development and are proactive in their development and restless for new ideas. They also understand that leadership is about influencing the behaviours of others in a deliberate process that leads to behaviour change. Finally, they understand the multiple contexts in which their school exists, and they are able to respond to, and influence, these contexts. They become a sense maker to help others understand a school's place in a complex set of contexts.*

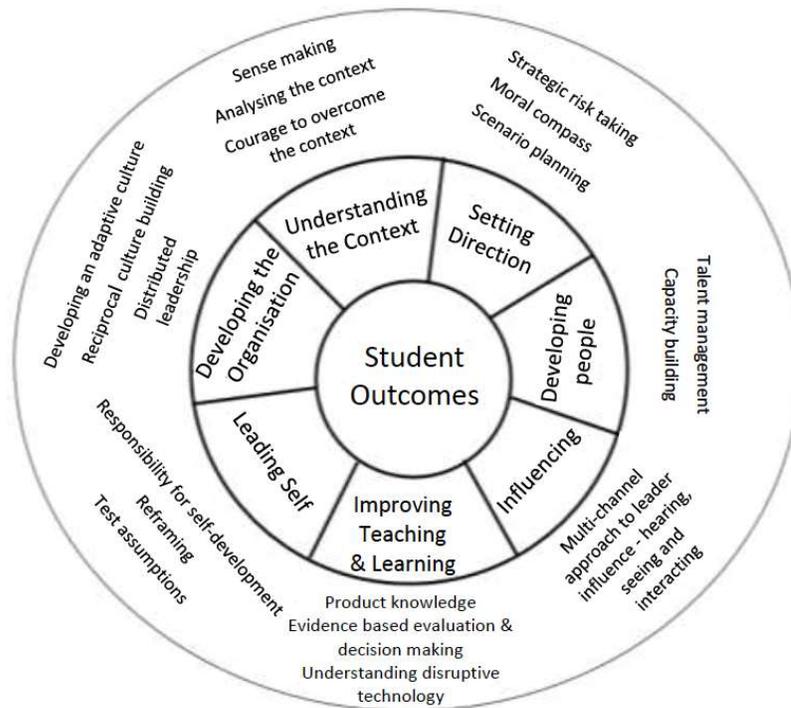
*There are qualities that successful leaders have that promote success and traits such as acumen, alertness, benevolence, curiosity, empathy, honesty, humbleness, openness, optimism, persistence, resilience, respectfulness, and tolerance are evident. They have expectations that are high, yet reasonable, which are applied to all in the school community. They are not afraid to be heroic leaders, to put their own reputation and career on the line for what they believe is best for their school. Yet they don't do this alone, because they understand the importance of involving many in the leadership of a school, and indeed they seek collaboration to instil a sense of collective endeavour. These leaders engender trust because they act with integrity, are transparent with their values, beliefs and actions, model good practice, are fair in dealing with people, and involve many in decision making.*



In partnership with my colleague and collaborator, Lawrie Drysdale, several models and conceptual frameworks have been produced to describe our knowledge, with the most recent being the one shown in Figure 1 (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017). This uses the seven element conceptual framework mentioned in the leadership description above, with each element supported by several leadership capabilities which we consider important for leading in times of uncertainty; it is an adaptation of empirically grounded framework we have used to guide our teaching programs, with the adaptation in this case focusing on what capabilities school leaders might need to develop to help them work in a VUCA world (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity; Johansen, 2012).

Now, perhaps after 25 years of researching this is not enough, but, of course, the statement, and the models and conceptual diagrams, describe some of what I think I know, and it is supported by the 60 theses of my research students, my own research and publications, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of research papers of the other researchers I have used to help describe elements of the work of people in schools. The challenge posed by Eacott is largely that this knowledge base is false – it has been researched poorly, about ideas that are poorly formed. Yet I know at a practical level that the ideas match well with what people do, in that those in schools can relate to the ideas and make use of them in their practice.

Figure 1  
*Leadership Domains and Capabilities Framework*



So, what does Eacott’s view have to offer? It is essentially a constructivist view that fits with the complexity of work at this time, is emphasising ideas that have been around for some time (e.g. Bell & Palmer, 2015; Eacott, 2018; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Uhi-Bien, 2006), and which, through the work of people like Spillane on his relational view of distributed leadership, remain important. In their influential review of successful school leadership research, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) described how one of their five foundational understandings



about leadership was the relational nature of the work; the other four related to purpose and direction, leadership as an influence process, leadership as a function, and the contextual and contingent nature of leadership.

Understanding behaviour in context is clearly important. Personally, I have been interested in this in several ways but mostly at the broader levels of context and not the day-to-day interactional level. Much of this has been through my involvement in the most comprehensive study of educational leadership, the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP – <https://www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/>). For example, I have been involved in considering our research on successful school leadership through country contexts (Day & Gurr, 2014; Gurr, 2014), or through a multi-layered approach using Hallinger's (2018) context and culture framework for school improvement to help understand how school leaders work (Gurr, Drysdale, Longmuir & McCrohan, 2018). Both of these strains of research led to the conclusion that successful school leaders seem to be less constrained by context, and that whilst context matters, perhaps it matters less than is commonly claimed. Nevertheless, there is a reciprocal element that may be important, in that whilst some principals were clearly able to influence contexts, their behaviours were also influenced by the contexts they worked in (e.g. Doherty, 2008). In the case of Doherty's (2008) research, it was the ISSPP multiple-perspective interview and observation research method she used, in an intensive study over a year on the work of a principal in a successful school, that allowed her to develop a reciprocal influence version of the Australian successful school leadership model. Now, the ISSPP is a research project that continues to develop and reflect on what, why and how issues. In addition to the original strand that

focussed on successful principals leading successful schools, the ISSPP has added strands that have focussed on leadership of underperforming schools, and principal identity. It continues to develop with new foci on middle leaders, teacher quality and governance being developed in 2019. It also continues to reflect on how the research is conducted. I have been part of many deep, engaging and, occasionally, confronting debates about the project's protocols. These have, in the main, confirmed the core methodology (multiple perspective and observational case studies) as the best way to explore the areas of interest.

Independent of these developments I have explored successful leadership in additional ways. For example, pre-dating the discussions by Eacott and others, but only emerging now, Nicholas (in press) has extended the ISSPP research by considering how leadership is dispersed in successful schools. His research used network analysis of work connections and individual interviews to both map and understand the leadership and management connections in three secondary schools. The study showed that all three schools had a distributed pattern of leadership, with this primarily attached to various roles that reflected school leadership structures and strategic goals and planning, and that the enactment of leadership in these roles was influenced by interpersonal factors including leader expertise, professional relationships, behaviours that are supportive of other people, and the development of trust.

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. Yet, as I am working on this paper I have been sitting in a conference and



hearing someone talk about their research and it sounds like me and sounds like what is found in chapters that provide standard methodology overviews such as Brooks and Normore (2018) – but my over-riding impression is that perhaps it is not enough. What does this paper that I am writing sound like? Is it perhaps merely a justification for inaction? And so, the next part of this article describes how I respond at a research level to a book like *Beyond Leadership. A relational approach to organizational theory in education* (Eacott, 2018); does it influence what I do?

One response 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. That is not likely to happen, as I can see no compelling arguments in Eacott (2018) that would cause me to do this. But, taking a less intrusive view, and just focussing on successful school leadership research as part of the ISSPP, is there anything about relational leadership that would cause me to add to, or modify, the way I have researched successful school leadership? A multiple perspective approach to research proceeds on the premise that studying a phenomenon needs to be done from several perspectives. This seems to be an important idea when considering the work of principals, and was one of the driving forces for the construction of the ISSPP, as most prior studies on principals had relied on principal perceptions only. The nature of the questions of the ISSPP are invitational, and the invitation is mostly about respondent perceptions in a broad sense. For example, we ask of the principal: 'What has been your contribution to the success of the school? How do you know? How have you acted to bring about success? (Evidence/concrete examples).' We ask of the teachers a similar question: 'What has been the principal's contribution to the success of your school? (How? Evidence/concrete examples)?' Questions like these are only examples

from a complicated research protocol that is described in 13,000 words and 52 pages. Typically, the responses are rich and detailed, especially as we ask for respondents to describe examples of what principals do. For example, in relation to a question about what a principal had contributed to a school's success, a teacher participant said:

*Some would say buildings, but I would say the relationships he has established within the VGS community – people feel listened to, that they are heard and are important. This is priceless and far better than any building. He works tirelessly, he is constantly thinking, meets with people, he is at sport every Saturday, chatting to parents. You can feel that you are part of a phenomenon working with him [principal]. (Doherty, 2008, p. 84).*

There is complexity in this. Whilst the teacher noted the obvious impacts in terms of new/refurbished buildings, the more substantial impact was to do with culture through the way the principal modelled positive relationships. As mentioned previously, Doherty's research also highlighted how the school had influenced this principal's behaviour, with, for example, the need to run a Saturday sport program also being an opportunity to connect with parents. Findings like these partially reveal some of the relational nature of principal leadership. We probe this further through questions related to how principals relate to the stakeholders in the school – students, parents, staff, external people. A student involved in Doherty's (2008, p.121) research commented:

*He's open, he's welcoming, he's nice. He's really friendly and always interesting to talk to. He's also a really honourable guy. He doesn't promote himself. He tries to cater for everybody not just purely academic or purely sport. He tries to get a range of things and interests. He's genuinely interested in like everything that goes on, and he's always looking for ways to make things better, and he gets the respect of everyone.*



In those cases, in which the ISSPP researchers included observation, we also observe some of the work of principals. Again, following the principal from Doherty's (2008) research, Goode (2017) observed the retirement assembly of the principal. At this assembly, all the students had, under the formal school uniform, a t-shirt with the principal's image in an Andy Warhol style. At a cue, they all stood-up, took their blazers and shirts off, and stood wearing the t-shirts in appreciation of the principal's service to the school.

The relational nature of principal work is part of the focus of the ISSPP research, it is evident in the information we collect and it allows for general statements to be made. For example, reviewing cases across the ISSPP project, Gurr, Drysdale, Swann, Doherty, Ford & Goode (2006, p.43) described how the quality of relationships throughout the school community was a vital component of the work of principals. Working with and through others was a feature of the way the principals worked, even in those cases where principals adopted a very strong, almost authoritarian leadership style. Gurr and Day (2014), in a synthesis of findings from 15 principal cases from 13 countries, identified 13 generalisable themes that included: high expectations; post-heroic leadership; collaboration/collective effort/share vision/alignment; symbolic role; integrity, trust and transparency; people centred; the power of 'AND': transformational AND instructional leadership; improving schools in challenging circumstances; developing as a leader; personal qualities, beliefs and values that include themes related to personal acumen, qualities and dispositions and beliefs and values. These, with summaries contained in the other three project books (in sequence: Day & Leithwood, 2007; Ylimaki & Jacobson, 2011; Moos, Johansson & Day, 2011), provide a deep and complex insight into the work of successful principals.

The writings and reflections of people such as Eacott are important to remind educational leadership researchers to reflect upon what they do, why they do it, and the extent to which their research is trustworthy. What I have suggested in this paper is that the challenge/provocation of Eacott over the past several years, is not sufficiently compelling for me to change what I am interested in researching and how I go about this. The research of international research projects, like the ISSPP, is well-developed, extensive, contextually rich and relies on methodologies that are trustworthy and appropriate (see Gurr, Drysdale and Goode, in press, for a discussion of the four major international educational leadership research project of the last two decades: the ISSPP, the International Study of the Preparation of Principals, Leadership for Learning, and the International School Leadership Development Network). I see no reason to doubt these findings and readers should similarly feel assured about the robustness of our educational leadership knowledge base. That is not say that there will not be new questions to answer and new ways to do research; see for example the edited collection of methodology chapters in Lochmiller (2018). But, for me, my core research work will not change substantially with the current challenges presented by critical authors such as Eacott.

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## 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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