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Beyond leadership: towards a "relational" way of thinking

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Introduction

Since the turn of the century, if not earlier, leadership has been the dominant focus of research attention in educational administration (Bush, 2004; Oplatka, 2010). I argue that claims to the explanatory importance and robustness of leadership as a construct go too far as too many theoretical and methodological matters remain unresolved by simply accepting it at face value. Epistemological dialogue and debate was vast during the Theory Movement, the Greenfield revolution and numerous other interventions such as Bates' Critical Theory of educational administration and Evers and Lakomski's naturalistic coherentism. However, recently the absence of methodological debate in educational administration has allowed for an under-developed act of human cognition to assume not only ascendency but dominance. This is not to say that leadership has advanced without critique in the broader organisational sciences (e.g. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Calder, 1977; Miner, 1975; Pfeffer, 1977) and in educational administration (e.g. Eacott, 2013, 2015; Gronn, 2003; Lakomski, 2005), but this

critique has been infrequent and not sustained at scale. These alternative stances remain peripheral to the field of educational administration, which at its core changes little despite their presence.

In this chapter, I seek to honour the rich epistemological literatures of educational administration and the many scholars working in the space, with the sort of rigorous analysis that is encouraged in the scholarly exercise embodied by thinkers such as Halpin, Griffiths, Greenfield, Bates, Willower, Hodgkinson, Culbertson and contemporaries such as Evers, Lakomski, English, Gunter and Samier. In particular, I argue that leadership is an epistemological in addition to, if not more so, an empirical problem, mindful that as Bourdieu contends every act of research is simultaneously empirical (confronting the world of observable phenomena) and theoretical (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Importantly though, this chapter does not argue that we should (or even attempt to) "apply" or "map" the works of a great thinker or an alternate meta-narrative onto events commonly described as leadership. As Adkins (2011) argues, such application or mapping is neither desirable nor helpful as it leaves the received terms of those events entirely intact. Instead, I mobilize the *relational* approach that I am advancing both here and elsewhere (e.g. Eacott, 2015) to understand these events in a new light, unsettling many of the normative assumptions regarding leadership and its explanatory value. And in the face of the recasting of our ways of thinking about organising outlined here, it may well be that the work of educational

administration theorists will increasingly involve such recasting procedures, making the everyday experiences of organisational life strange.

Leadership is …

Over fifty years ago Bennis (1959) stated that the concept of leadership continues to elude us, or turns up in different forms to taunt us with its slipperiness and complexity. After a comprehensive review of literature, Stogdill (1974) claims there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are definers. In one much used definition, Yukl (1981) outlines leadership as influence, linking that with performance and collective tasks. If this is so, then leadership is redundant. What does it offer that influence does not? Similarly, Caldwell (2007) argues that leadership is change. Once again, leadership is rendered useless by its very own definition. It is a mere proxy for another term. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) argue that the variation in definitions of leadership indicate the non-correspondence between it and something specific out there in organisations and other social settings. The origins of leadership as an empirical phenomenon are the result of subjects being subordinate to the expressions of the observer's assumptions and methodologies. It is the pre-existing – that is, unconscious – orientation of the observer that is the most common experience of leadership. This experience embodies a circular logic built upon an ontological complicity with the dominant ideology of the contemporary social condition. In other words, a leadership worldview is confirmed in experiencing and thinking through events

using a leadership worldview. Failure to live up to the expectation of this worldview is perceived as a deficit in individual actors or organisations rather than the value of leadership being brought into question.

Every body of leadership literature includes a degree of advocacy – as it cannot escape its normative generation. Even calls to radicalise leadership (e.g. Bogotch et al., 2008) are frequently replacing one meta-narrative with another. Despite this voluminous literature and regular usage in the ordinary language of the everyday, leadership does not offer itself to the senses. It passes largely unnoticed. This makes leadership somewhat unexperienced. When leadership is described or articulated, it is almost always through past events (the mapping of historical accounts with the lexicon of leadership, such as with contests and the glorification of victors and influential figures) and/or a projection into the forthcoming (a romanticised "by design" agenda built on sequential steps and perpetual manipulation of materials in pursuit of an idealised future state). This mapping or projection ensures that leadership as a construct is essentially devoid of grounding in time and space. It is beyond context – something I will return to later. For now, suffice it to say that leadership language is reflective of an ideological position on organisational life. Notions of leadership serve as symbols for representing personal causation of social events (Pfeffer, 1977). Therefore, it is the innate human desire to matter, to be significant, that which gives meaning to actions that is embodied in the language of leadership.

Calder (1977) argues that there is no unique content to the construct of leadership that is not subsumed under other, more general models of behaviour. This is arguably why at a certain point in the analysis the boundaries between leadership, management and administration blur until all that is left are the pre-existing normative assumptions of the researcher. Yet surprisingly, considerable, and far too much, intellectual space in journals, books, theses, and at conferences, seminars and graduate school classes is taken up trying to construct and sustain the distinctions. It is possible to characterise the logic of educational leadership research into a series of steps:

i)   A perceived normative organisational need that goes beyond administration and/or management;

ii)   The development of a tentative (leadership) theory for that normative requirement;

iii)   Overlaying organising practice with the normative requirement; and

iv)   Transporting the normative beyond the organisation.

This logic raises a series of questions concerning the relations between the observer and the observed and our ways of knowing. The first step articulated in the above framing is concerned with the unquestioned belief in leadership. The ontological complicity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), or intellectual gaze of the educational administration scholar (Eacott, 2015), obscures the relations between the researcher and the researched and the origins of the research object. Failure to

attend to this leads to the projection and misrecognition of the objects of human cognition as though they are external and knowable. The unconscious orientation of how the researcher believes organisations *ought* to behave is used as a lens to evaluate how they are currently acting. Any distinctions created between leaders and others (e.g. non-leaders, or followers), or leadership and non-leadership (e.g. administration and management), are the manifestation of the pre-existing normative orientation of the researcher.

The explanatory power of leadership theory is based on its perceived correspondence with organisational behaviour. I want to propose an alternative here that directly engages with the rejection of objective or positivist science and the lack of correspondence. My argument, as will become clear, is based on the belief that leadership is not an external knowable entity, but the product of cognition – a social construction. Attempts to get to this point have yet to take effect at scale, or their intents have been misappropriated. For example, Greenfield's body of work has been used to legitimise the choice, and subsequent explosion, of qualitative works in educational administration. Yet the depth of his epistemological critique is diluted, if not confused, when taken to be synonymous with qualitative methods and the legitimation of what are essentially relativist accounts of organisations. The conflation of theory (e.g. post-modern theorising) with method (e.g. qualitative research) is too frequent in the literatures of educational administration. Relational approaches have the potential to attend to

the epistemological and content matters raised in the critique of leadership while also offering new ways of thinking through the organising of education.

Thinking relationally

Well-rehearsed arguments of leadership stress that it is relational (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). While the importance of relationships has been around since some of the earliest studies in management and administration, namely the Hawthorne studies of Mayo and Roethlisberger (e.g. Mayo, 1933) and the Human Relations movement, in recent decades there has been somewhat of a relational turn in leadership studies. This mirrors a similar turn in sociology towards relational theories (Prandini, 2015). As Emirbayer (1997, p.311) argues, "social thinkers from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, national traditions, and analytic and empirical points of view are fast converging upon this [a relational] frame of reference". Relational sociology has strong roots in the USA, primarily through what Mische (2011) labels the "New York School of Relational Sociology" (notably Harrison White at Harvard University and Charles Tilly at Harvard then Columbia), but also European scholars such as Donati (1983, 1991, 2011, 2015), Depelteau and Powell (2013; Powell and Depelteau, 2013), Fuhse (2015), and Crossley (2011), with an intellectual tradition drawing upon Marx, Simmel, Tarde, Elias, Luhmann, Bourdieu and Latour among others. The catalyst for relational approaches is the critique of the individualist and collectivist

epistemologies and methodologies that have come to dominate social thought and analysis.

Labeled as at the forefront of emerging scholarship on leadership (Hunt and Dodge, 2000) and recognised as an established perspective in contemporary leadership studies (Dinh et al., 2014), relational approaches still have some ambiguous use of language. Not surprisingly, there are considerable epistemological implications with any language slippage. Sociologists argue the distinction between substantialist (a focus on things) and relational accounts, whereas in the leadership literatures both entity-based (substantialist) and relational epistemologies are grouped under the label of relational if they focus on relations or relationships (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006). To further highlight some of the tensions of language across intellectual fields, Emirbayer's (1997) classic article *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology* uses "transactional" somewhat synonymously with relational as a label, yet in leadership literatures it has a very different history in opposition to transformational leadership. What remains however is a shift from leader-, or person-, centric accounts to a recognition of practice being co-constructed by actors (although Uhl-Bien (2006) mobilises a leader-follower binary), something that to be understood requires attention to relations.

It is worth noting that Leithwood and Duke (1999) articulate a form of relational leadership in their contribution to the *Handbook of Research on Educational*

Administration. This is built upon four discrete constructs (leadership and followers; environment; organisation; and relationships) and the relationships between them. This is what White and colleagues (2007) refer to as relations through a "measurement construct", where relationships are constructed as a way to measure (directionality or strength) or map organisations (activity networks). Recent trends in network analysis/theory do similarly. The reduction of a complex social reality to a series of 1s (ties) and 0s (non-ties) imposes an external reading upon action but also disassembles the very action it claims to measure. In contrast, I take up the Bourdieusian (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) inspired focus on the abstract systems of difference or distant (e.g. distinctions) in social spaces and Donati's (2015) argument that society does not have relations but *is* relations. Therefore, relations are the very stuff of what we call "the social" and the basic unit of analysis for the social sciences.

It is the shifting of the research object that is the primary point of departure for the argument that I am building. In bringing a *relational* approach to educational administration scholarship there are the intellectual resources to interrogate the ongoing construction of the research object and its relations with others (including the researcher). Thinking relationally goes beyond a focus on traits, behaviours, roles and/or organisational outcomes. Located at the intersection of the humanities, social sciences and the professions, a *relational* approach to educational administration thought and analysis privileges the situated nature of actions. As Crossley (2015) argues, attributes are rethought as positions in a social

space not as determinants of actions and outcomes. This overcomes the essentialising arguments that often come to dominate educational administration studies by inscribing actors in time and space through rigorous and robust description. Rather than seeking a linear-rational cause and effect and/or generalisability I argue for detailed accounts of the relations that constitute organizing activity. This requires careful attention to grounding description in the particular temporal and socio-spatial conditions. If context matters, something that is almost universally accepted in the leadership literatures, then this is *a* (not *the*) means of acknowledging that actors embody as much as they are embedded in a given temporal-spatial condition. In other words, rather than taking place in a context, relations constitute contexts. This is counter to approaches built upon systems thinking that construct multiple discrete entities with varying degrees of implied causality determining outcomes. Educational administration scholarship cannot meaningfully engage with relations through theoretical resources that explain practice as determined by social structures, or even that actors interact with social structures. The artificial partitioning of the social world, a scientific reduction required to conceive of the "individual" or the "organisation" is an example of an entity-based or substantialist epistemology.

In *Educational Leadership Relationally* (Eacott, 2015), I articulate a particular form of *relational* approach. Built upon a very Bourdieusian craft of scholarship, but without any great loyalty or reverence, I name five *relational* extensions:

- The centrality of "organising" in the social world creates an ontological complicity in researchers (and others) that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from ordinary language;

- Rigorous social scientific enquiry calls into question the very foundations of popular labels such as "leadership", "management", and "administration";

- The contemporary condition is constantly shaping and shaping by the image of organising;

- Foregrounding social relations enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, tensions of individualism/collectivism and structure/agency; and

- In doing so, there is a productive – rather than merely critical – space to theorise educational administration and leadership.

Depelteau (2015) contends that relational approaches are only useful if they can propose new solutions to fundamental issues when compared with existing theorizations. The type of analysis made possible by the *relational* approach offers a means of composing theoretically inscribed descriptions of situated action. It directly engages with the relations between the researcher and the researched, the uncritical adoption of everyday language in scholarship, the role of spatio-temporal conditions in shaping understanding, the limitations of binary thinking, and seeks to productively theorise – not just critique. As an approach, it does not definitively resolve the epistemological issues of educational administration, but it does engage with them. In doing so, it offers the potential to

bring about new ways of understanding more than simply mapping the intellectual terrain with novel ideas and vocabularies.

The *relational* approach does more than problematise leadership. It illuminates a pre-existing normative assumption at work in the defence and critique of leadership. Specifically, my intervention is to disrupt the dominant epistemologies and methodologies of educational administration. The scholarship of leadership can only proceed on the assumption of stability and equivalence of the research object across time and space. This is pivotal if leadership is to serve as a reference point for dialogue and debate. My argument is that these claims – stability and equivalence – are indefensible. This is not to say that the study of organising and administration is a flawed pursuit. Rather, that the focus on leadership is more the result of a failure of the dominant intellectual resources to handle alternate epistemologies and methodologies for understanding organisations.

Rigor and robustness

Educational administration, and particularly leadership, has contributed to its own legitimacy crisis by failing to deliver on its own promise. In seeking to provide the definitive "what works" in organisations and increasingly accurate measures of success, educational administration has been stuck within its own normative bounds and sought to replicate hegemonic notions of scientific methods. I argue that educational leadership research is constrained by three matters: i) the

legitimacy of knowledge claims; ii) the nature of scholarly debate; and iii) the matter of relevance. Failure to engage with these matters will continue to draw into question the rigour and robustness of educational leadership research.

A weak quality profile has been an enduring issue for educational administration and is well rehearsed in the literature (Gorard, 2005; Griffiths, 1959, 1965, 1985; Immegart, 1975). Attempts to get beyond this perception have focused on the adoption of particular scientific (usually equated, falsely, with logical empiricism) methods. This creates a problem for leadership research. There is no external knowable object to which the label of leadership refers. It does not correspond with material in the empirical world. Leadership is a product of cognition. This construction is overlaid on the empirical. As an act of cognition, there is nothing that is beyond classification and categorisation. To attend to these matters greater attention should be given to making visible the epistemological preliminaries of work. Following Bourdieu and colleagues (1991), this argument is distinctive in educational administration for its central concern with the logic of discovery as opposed to the logic of validation – so far as the distinction can be sustained. In the case of leadership, this means attention to the constructedness of knowledge and scholarship. Researchers are not external observers of the social world. What distinguishes the knowledge claims of the scholar from the everyday are the scientific methods – making the basis of these explicit goes a long way towards increasing the legitimacy of knowledge claims and lays the foundation for the organisation and functioning of scholarly communities. This has been argued

systematically in educational administration by Evers and Lakomski (1991, 1996, 2000) for 25 years.

Educational administration journals and conferences are somewhat devoid of debate. This is not to say there is a singular overarching narrative, rather it is the absence of engagement with the other that is dominant. For the most part, those with whom we disagree are treated with benign neglect (Donmoyer, 2001; Thrupp and Willmott, 2003). As a result, not only is there a lot of talking past one another but also many parallel monologues. The logic of scholarly life, argument and refutation, is lost in discourse communities that do not meaningfully engage with alternate ways of understanding. Perhaps the most important outcome of this situation is that the available options for understanding educational administration are not particularly satisfactory. There is need for an alternative contribution, one that pays attention not only to the outputs and outcomes of knowledge production but to the actual process of knowledge production. Thinking *relationally* requires attention to the construction and ongoing maintenance of the research object. Doing so locates the work and understanding in wider dialogue and debates. Through attention to matters of ontology, epistemology in addition to content matters, *relational* thinking provides the intellectual resources to think anew.

Holding strong ties to the notion of an applied field, much of the scholarship of educational administration is focused on the improvement of practice. Many classifications and categories are uncritically adopted in research for the purpose

of solving empirical problems. Leadership literatures therefore have an underlying generative principle of intervention, a desire to generate understandings that can be implemented in schools and preparation programs at scale. Consistent with contemporary public policy moves which see leadership as a key leverage point for education reform, particular forms of cause and effect and generalisability dominate educational leadership literatures. For the most part, there is a belief in the stability and equivalence of leadership as a construct across time and space. Additionally, leadership is conceived of as having an effect on organisational performance. In both cases, leadership is constructed as a discrete entity that interacts with others (e.g. context) and has utility. Although the finer details of how it is enacted across time and space may be different, the very idea of leadership remains.

The holy grail of leadership studies is therefore to find the definitive list of behaviours, traits, practices and so on, that have maximum, if not complete, utility. To do so requires making some compromises. This utility is only possible through a de-contextualised, or context free, version of leadership. Leadership is therefore beyond conventional time and space. Simultaneously, there is the rejection of the idea of a leader-less organisation courtesy of an inbuilt organisational effect from leadership in its conceptualisation. These assumptions, among others, are rarely, if ever, acknowledged in the educational leadership literatures. The mobilisation of more sophisticated methods of analysis (e.g. increasingly powerful statistical tools) or appeals to approximate the standards of

internal and external validity of intensive large-scale quantitative research (see Leithwood, 2005) cannot overcome flaws in the original construction of the research object. Irrespective of claims to rigorous and robust research designs, the construction of leadership remains as an organisational variable. The key point is that what is overlooked in the majority of contemporary scholarship is the very thing that many argue is most important in understanding organisational action – relations.

Buber (1970) stresses the importance of the "space between". He argues that meaning emerges not from discrete entities, or even their relationships, but the spaces between. Although at face value this implies a degree of separation the argument is actually concerned with the inseparability of action/actors. The attention to space between is even found in what are usually conceived of as the hard sciences. As Bradbury and Lichtenstein (2000) note, in their quest to identify the basic building blocks of the natural world, quantum physicists found atomic particles to be more relational than discrete objects with space itself full of potential rather than vacuous. Coming into question here is the explanatory power of leadership research. If leadership is mobilised in such a way that it is an organisational variable interacting with other variables internal and external to the organisation – as is the case in systems thinking – then the spaces between are reduced, at best, to measurement constructs. Irrespective of the sophistication of measures, the meaning of action is lost in the measuring process.

An important contribution here is the work of Geertz (1973), in particular where he draws on Ryle's (1971) discussion of the wink. Ryle discusses two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. This action could range from an involuntary twitch through to a conspiratorial signal to a friend (and much in-between), and becomes more complex as we add a third child into the mix. The two movements are identical in the instrumental measurement of action. It is the relations between actors and their location in temporal and socio-spatial conditions that enables meaning. To a certain extent, this was picked up in a debate between Gronn (1982, 1984, 1987) and Thomas (1986; Thomas et al., 1981) primarily in the pages of *Educational Administration Quarterly*. Gronn (1982, p.18) challenged the notion of observational studies arguing that they "seriously misconstrue the phenomenon they purport to explain: they fail to explicate what it means to 'do' something". For the most part, educational leadership research does not entertain the question of whether leadership was present or not. Instead, what we have is the identification of it as effective or less effective based on a pre-existing normative orientation.

The explanatory value attributed to leadership is problematic. How we come to know organisations and their relations to other groupings does not necessarily warrant the leap to leadership. The overarching interest appears to be in the organisation of action, or more specifically, organising. This is not to discredit the effect of hierarchies, history, gender, race, and so. Rather, it is to open up the prospect that such things matter. Rigour and robustness can be achieved through

grounding the scholarly narrative in the contemporary temporal and socio-spatial conditions. This includes what is actually meant by leadership, why it matters in this place at this time, and in what ways. The research object and the researcher are embedded in and embody the contemporary social conditions. Scholarship is the extension of these relations. To illuminate what this means requires description.

Description

The act of description is methodological work. The threshold for scientific description is having the best resources for the task. As an example, Savage (2009) notes that it is the Hubble telescope rather than the personal digital camera pointing to the skies that defines the high ground, or cutting edge, of scientific practice. Inscription devices serve as a key distinction between the physical and social sciences. While increasingly detailed visuals that enable measurement might be useful in the analysis of celestial entities, the mechanical reproduction of social relations through numbers, variables and visual diagrams are not necessarily useful for illuminating the ongoing work of organising.

There are mixed views in educational administration regarding the scholarly value of description. It is frequently mobilised in a derogatory manner, dismissing work as merely descriptive and the lowest form of scholarship. Central to such thinking is the artificial partitioning of arguments and the lack of problematising of the

research object. The failure to locate work in the broader dialogue and debates of the field means that the specific empirical problem is privileged over the larger theoretical problem. The result is that the description is of little, if any, value beyond itself. In contrast, locating work in broader debates facilitates a contribution to contemporary thought and analysis in the discipline (see Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997) and even possible to generalise from a single case study (Evers and Wu, 2006).

What is important here is the embedding and embodying of arguments in broader thought and analysis while also illuminating the particular socio-spatial and temporal conditions of action. Thinking *relationally*, the social world is not divisible into a series of separate – even if inter-related – layers, as is depicted in concentric circles building from the individual/local to the global, but rather flat. This blurs the constructed binaries of the universal and the particular, individual and collective, and structure and agency, and provides the basis for the role of description. It becomes no longer appropriate to assume that the particular is separate to, or merely interacts with, the universal. Spatio-temporal conditions become of central importance in constructing meaning for organising action.

Description provides an avenue to explain, potentially in new ways, what is taking place in the organising of the social world and specifically for the purpose of this chapter, educational institutions. It is very much a cumulative project, a generative programme contributing to increasing elaborated descriptions of relating actions

to other actions. In doing so, a *relational* approach to educational administration and leadership is not defined by the problems it solves, but the questions it asks.

Conclusion

Arguments for leadership as the label and practice of choice against administration and management mirror historical tensions between objectivists and subjectivists in educational administrative theory. The leadership programme is positioned as bringing the human element to the structural arrangements of organising. The overarching bureaucratic structures described by Weber (1968) were no longer seen as capable of delivering the types of organisational outcomes expected of contemporary institutions. Herein lays one of the major paradoxes of leadership inquiry. On the one hand, the literatures argue for the uniqueness of every context yet at the same time, leadership is conceived of as having utility. The result is that leadership becomes beyond context. The establishment of separate knowable objects (entities) that impact *on* leadership is central to the systems thinking evident in much of the educational administration literatures.

Leadership does not offer itself to be felt or sensed and passes largely unnoticed. It is, for the most part, unexperienced. As a product of cognition, leadership is the articulation of a pre-existing normative orientation. It is based on how one believes an organisation, and individual actors associated with it, *ought* to behave. The *is*, is then evaluated against the *ought* and this constitutes the basis of a

substantive proportion of contemporary thought and analysis in educational administration. This leads to significant confusion concerning the meaning of leadership, its relations to management and administration, and has implications for educational administration as a branch of administrative and organisational sciences. In this chapter I have mobilised a *relational* approach to expose and explain some important misconceptions about how the social construction of leadership relates to the possibility to make true statements about the world. Significantly, in asking questions of leadership, I have provided an alternate programme that gets beyond the circular logic of leadership and illuminates the situated nature of action. The particular form of *relational* approach that I am advancing seeks not to reduce all social relations to issues of power as many Marxist inspired accounts do, nor to strategies enacted to optimise individual or collective interest. Instead, I call for elaborated descriptions of the unfolding of organising action mindful of the abstract systems of difference and distance in the social space. Such descriptions do not necessarily assume the presence, or even desirability of leadership for the achievement of action.

This chapter is not the definitive word on the *relational* approach. But it offers a generative programme that will constantly call into question its own knowledge claims as well as the status quo. Its genesis, and the origins of my critique of leadership, is grounded in a belief that there is a need to promote a narrative of rigorous and robust scholarship in educational administration while at the same time remaining critical of any narrative promoting versions of rigor and

robustness. That is, the *relational* approach, or any for that matter, to scholarship must remain critical of its own agenda as much as it is of others. Pursuing this agenda, I encourage others to think with, through and where necessary against what I have argued in the interest of the scholarly enterprise. As English (2006) argues, the advancement of any discipline requires deep and sustained criticism of it, philosophically, logically, and empirically.

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