

## Chapter 10

# Sociological Approaches to Educational Administration and Leadership

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In this chapter, I examine the question of whether social theory—and, in particular, sociological approaches—can be mobilised to understand the leadership, management, and administration of educational institutions. This may seem an odd question to pose, given that orthodoxy in both scholarly and lay communities establishes and sustains both educating and leading as social activities, yet social theory remains marginalised in educational leadership, management, and administration despite a well-established sociology of education and a sociological tradition of organisational studies. Sociology is, however, a large and intellectually diverse scholarly discipline. Given the brevity of a chapter, I pay particular attention to critical social theory, especially that rooted in French social thought, to describe its history, outline current usage, and provide *a* (not *the*) means of mobilising a sociological approach for the scholarship of educational administration and leadership.

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### What Do I Mean by Sociology?

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Sociology, at its simplest, is the study of human social behaviour and its origins, development, organisation, and institutions. Understandably, given its focus, sociological thinking predates the establishment of sociology as an academic discipline in universities. The analysis of the social world was central to early Western philosophy, and the generation

and classification of data about society and social groups was pivotal in the establishment and advancement of public administration.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the moment of origin for sociology as an academic discipline, three scholars considered to be the founding architects of contemporary sociology are Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. Durkheim held a strong belief in a *science* of the social world—comparable to the natural sciences—and it is this stream of sociology that was influential during the early phases of the *Theory Movement* in educational administration. Marxist analysis of the social world, and the centrality of power, remains prominent—even if not always identified—in the critical stream of scholarship. Weber, who incidentally was writing at around the same time as Frederick Winslow Taylor—arguably the father of contemporary management sciences—wrote a highly influential, but significantly misunderstood, account of the role of the economy, administration, and society, and initiated discussion of charismatic leadership. The work of Pierre Bourdieu, which is experiencing popularity in contemporary educational leadership, management, and administration discourses, draws from and extends the work of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber.

In addition to its multiple traditions, sociology also operates at two distinct—although deeply connected—levels: sociology *of* and sociology *for*. In other words, there is sociology of a field of practice, and the sociology of and for knowledge production. The former, a sociology *of*, is concerned with describing events in the social world, and the latter, a sociology *for*, is concerned with the epistemological and ontological preliminaries of knowledge production. This is not to suggest the simplistic and unproductive binary of theory and practice or theoretical and applied. Rather, it is to recognise the different levels of the research object and its implications for scholarship. An approach that merges both of these levels in the research process is articulated in a text by Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude

Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron (1968/1991) entitled *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*. Attention to the epistemological preliminaries of research is particularly important in the context of educational leadership, management, and administration, given the “embedded and embodied” nature of the researcher (Eacott, 2014).

This embedded and embodied context is important for a sociology of knowledge production in educational administration. The central issue is that educational administrators are, as are all social agents, *spontaneous sociologists* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 66). This is particularly so in the professions, such as education. In the case of educational administration, most, if not all, academics are former administrators at school and / or systemic levels (a quick scan of recruitment advertisements will attest to the privileging of this). Further to that, many hold administrative positions in the academy, further blurring the boundary between the native (naïve) perception of the spontaneous sociologist and the research objects constructed through the *scientific* method of the researcher. Following Bourdieu, this does two (considerably overlapping) things, first, the manner in which the social world is perceived is the result of the internalisation of the objective structures of the social world in the cognitive schemata through which they apprehend the social world. Alternatively, the social world exists in the body as much as the body exists in the social world. Second, there exists a belief in administration and, most importantly, the stakes of the task at hand. That is, administration functions only in so far as it produces a belief in the value of its product (e.g., policy, security, order) and means of production (e.g., governance). What I have brought to attention here is the importance of engaging with the epistemological (and ontological) preliminaries that shape, and in turn are shaped by, scholarship in educational administration.

The potential of sociology and a sociological approach to educational leadership, management, and administration has long been acknowledged. In 1965, Burton R. Clark noted:

. . . sociology should be able to make a major contribution to the study of administration within formal structures. It is also notably a discipline whose sensitivity to emergent phenomena and informal patterns should aid greatly in extending the study of educational administration to the many influences on policy and practice that are located outside of formal structures.

(p. 69)

Weber's (1922/1978) work on bureaucracy highlights the potential of sociology for the study of administration, as does the work of Talcott Parsons (see 1956a, 1956b) and many others. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970/1990) also showed the potential of sociology for bringing to the level of analysis the many structural means in which education serves to (re)produce the existing social order. A key, and ongoing, challenge is the reciprocity between sociology and educational administration. As Beryl Tipton (1977) identified over 35 years ago:

It follows from this argument that educational administration needs sociology (or the social sciences). But does sociology need educational administration? Sociology, after all, already has a well-developed sociology of education and sociology of organisations, and constitutes the backbone of social administration.

(p. 47)

Sociology, including the sociology of education, has continued on with little reference to leadership, management, and administration. This also includes the recent trend towards

education policy sociology. A cursory scan of the table of contents of flagship journals such as *Sociology of Education*; *British Journal of Sociology of Education*; and sociology-informed journals such as *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *Critical Studies in Education*, and *Journal of Education Policy* supports such a claim. This highlights a fundamental challenge for any interplay between sociology and educational administration.

Moving beyond the sociology of knowledge production in educational administration for a moment, there are two ways of using sociology for education administration. The first is to use sociological writings or great thinkers and apply or map these onto events. This is arguably the most common usage of sociology, yet in doing so, the research object remains intact, just described using new or different language. The second approach is to mobilise the intellectual resources of sociology to understand the research object(s) in new ways. These new ways may unsettle some, or many, of the existing ways of thinking. Both approaches hold potential but it is in moving beyond novelty of applying or mapping onto educational administration that the second provides for innovative and possibly discipline-defining contributions.

Gaston Bachelard (1934/1984) argued that a key distinction between the social and natural sciences is that in the social, research traditions are most important, whereas in the natural, it is the pursuit of perfect theory. When making any claim to be using sociology, it is imperative to locate your argument within a particular research tradition of sociology. This may be through adherence to a particular great thinker or to a research methodology. Whatever it is, it should be clear for the reader.

In short, sociology is many things but is fundamentally concerned with human activity. In an increasingly globalised world, where the boundaries between policy, administration, and social behaviour are blurred, sociology offers important intellectual

resources for understanding the different ways in which the socio-political and temporal nature of the social world influences the leadership, management, and administration of educational institutions.

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## **Sociology and Educational Administration**

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The role of sociology within the study of educational leadership, management, and administration is one of many ebbs and flows. Initially, in the pursuit of validity within the academy, educational administration established boundaries around itself as a discipline. In doing so, any disciplinary knowledge from beyond the boundaries of educational administration was excluded. Then, during the early phases of the *Theory Movement*, sociology played a role, but this was a particular brand of sociology—one based on logical empiricism. The contemporary discipline of educational administration and leadership is seeing a re-emergence of sociological approaches, but unlike the earlier stream, these contributions have a grounding in critical social theory, and the most prominent thinker mobilised has been Pierre Bourdieu.

### **To the Exclusion of All Others**

Richard Bates (2010) argued that the history of educational administration and leadership as a field of knowledge production and practice is evidence of what John Dewey (1902) observed as “the habit of regarding the mechanics of school organisation and administration as something comparatively external and indifferent to educational ideals” (pp. 22–23). In particular, Bates cites the establishment of departments of educational administration in US universities in the 1900s as a key point for the field. Notably, it was the recruitment of early professors who had little disciplinary training in education that highlighted the problem. An

important appointment was that of Ellwood Cubberly at Stanford. With a background in geology and physical science, he had little background in the study of education, with the exception of having served as a superintendent in San Diego for two years (Tyack & Hansot, 1982). During this period, he came to the conclusion that school boards should be apolitical. This was consistent with the Municipal Reform Movement, which, in drawing from industry management research, sought to develop large school systems and administrative structures (e.g., much like what Weber described in his work on bureaucracy). This is why the take-up of Taylor's (1911) scientific management was so successful in the US, as described by Raymond E. Callahan (1962) in his classic *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. The construction of these disciplinary boundaries, legitimising the educational administration professor as *the* teacher of the profession, enabled the de-legitimation of those who might stake a claim to offering something of use for educational administrators (English, 2002). As a result, the critical stream of sociology became *othered* in the scholarship of educational administration.

## **A Re-Injection**

In the US, the WK Kellogg-supported Cooperative Program in Educational Administration (CPEA) centres were important mechanisms for encouraging sociologists, psychologists, and others to conduct scholarship on educational administration during the mid-1900s. As a result, psychology and sociology were influential during the importation of *science* in the lead-up to the *Theory Movement* (Bates, 2010). The sociological influences in the *Theory Movement* were built upon an appropriation of Talcott Parson's systems theory through Jacob Getzel's (1952) *A Psycho-Sociological Framework for the Study of Education Administration*. From a sociological perspective, this approach reflects a very particular form

of scholarship, one built upon logical empiricism as *the* way to do science. In mainstream discourses, this approach was popular. The use of survey techniques and the construction / classification of social groups for analysis provided the basis of substantive applied research. From a knowledge production standpoint, however, there remain issues around the artificial partitioning, or epistemic categories, of such research and the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

When Thomas Greenfield launched his attack on the apparent objectivity of the *Theory Movement* he received far greater support from Commonwealth-based scholars than he did from US-based ones. There had long been a general agreement across the Commonwealth academy that the social sciences were a useful source of theory and methodology for educational administration (*see* Baron & Taylor, 1969). Unlike in the US, where early professors and then the *Theory Movement* sought to establish an apolitical account of educational administration, across the Commonwealth there was a stronger recognition or conceptualisation of educating as a political activity. In England, for example, schooling had a long history of class warfare, and scholarship could not easily overlook this socio-cultural context. At scale, and contingent on temporality, the effects of colonialism / imperialism still linger across the Commonwealth, and socio-political accounts of educational administration are far more evident in both practice and scholarship. The closest equivalent in the US is the attention to matters of race, particularly through the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) and general education societies such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA). However, this takes less of an explicit sociological approach, drawing from a range of social sciences.

## **The Rise of the Phoenix**

It has long been recognised that contemporary educational administrators are faced with increasingly complex problems (Biesta & Miron, 2002; Maxcy, 1993). As a result, the last 30 years has seen a diversity of scholarship in educational leadership, management, and administration. Within the opening-up of the field—the extent to which remains in question (*see* Wilkinson & Eacott, 2013)—Helen Gunter (2010) identified an emerging trend of using sociological approaches in educational leadership, management, and administration. In many ways, this is not surprising, given the global spread of the managerialist project, the neo-imperialism underway through education interventions (including school leadership preparation and development) in developing countries, policy borrowing, and the comparative turn in educational administration and policy. This opening-up was captured by Helen Gunter and Tanya Fitzgerald (2008), when they argued that

the demand for evidence is stifling understandings and explanations of practice, and at the same time the self-reverence of a person's story of their victory in turning round a failing school does little to explain who determines whether a school is failing and for what purposes.

(p. 7)

Sociological approaches have the potential to open up scholarship and ask large-scale or theoretical questions that are then explored through their empirical manifestation. As Clark (1965) noted:

there are no boundaries around a sociology of educational administration, but rather open terrain and rambling roads that connect to the interests of researchers in a number of other specialities in sociology, and the interests of psychologists, anthropologists, economists and political scientists.

(p. 51)

Currency within sociology, and in broader public discourse, is easiest maintained when the subject of research is of heightened or sustained public interest. In the case of education, there is almost always sustained public and scholarly interest. After all, as Bates (1980) noted, “the processes through which learning is organized in society are of central importance in both the production of knowledge, the maintenance of culture, and the reproduction of social structure” (p. 1).

It is arguably for this range of reasons that the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has found increasing traction in education, and, in particular, in educational administration and leadership. Although he never wrote on educational administration per se,  and earlier claims that his work is minimally used in educational administration despite his theoretical attention to the relationship between individual agency and structural determinism (Lingard & Christie, 2003), the use of Bourdieusian social theory in educational administration and leadership has increased substantially since his death in 2002. His theoretical resources have been used to interrogate aspects of educational administration, such as school reform (Gunter, 2012), leadership preparation and development (Eacott, 2011), leadership standards (English, 2012), strategy (Eacott, 2010), autonomy (Thomson, 2010), questioning *leadership* as a concept (Eacott, 2013a), educational leadership at large (Thomson, 2014), its application for undertaking case studies in educational leadership (Eacott, 2013b), or even the intellectual field of educational administration (Gunter, 2002). A cursory scan of the geographic location of the key people working in this space does continue the trend of Commonwealth-based (Gunter and Thomson in England, myself in Australia) as opposed to US-based scholars (the exception being English). That being said, with the global spread of ideas courtesy of conferences, but more importantly electronic access to journals,

the increased usage of Bourdieusian social theory is a trend, albeit a small one, in the discipline.

## ***A Relational Approach***

If this chapter is to have an audience beyond itself, then it is vital that I can demonstrate further how a sociologically informed mode of scholarship plays out in educational administration and leadership. To do so, I am going to outline a *relational* approach to the study of educational leadership, management, and administration that I am advancing here and elsewhere (Eacott, 2014) that explicitly fuses multiple sociological analytical frames. The intellectual heritage of this *relational* approach is eclectic, drawing heavily on French social theory, such as the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski, but also critical management studies, political science, organisational studies, and given my own disciplinary location, recognised educational administration thinkers such as Richard Bates, Colin Evers and Gabriele Lakowski, Thomas Greenfield, and contemporaries such as Helen Gunter, Pat Thomson, and Fenwick English. Centrally, in bringing critical pluralism to scholarship, I engage with what I see as the key theoretical problem of the legitimation of the social world and its empirical manifestation in the administration of educational institutions. Through this theoretical and empirical focus, the *relational* research programme investigates how the production of knowledge about the legitimacy, effectiveness, efficiency, and morality of administration connects with the practices of administration. In doing so, this *relational* approach blends a focus on knowledge production with a sociology of the field of practice. Questions are raised regarding the extent to which *new* forms of administration—leadership, participatory, distributed, authentic, and so on—are generative or thwarting of new knowledge and ways of being. Such a move is not

surprising, given that for the most part scholars, at least those who take such matters seriously, are looking for an alternate ontology as the Newtonian / Cartesian universe inhabited by self-interested, atomistic individuals—that which fits nicely with managerialist accounts of administration—does not logically fit prescriptions for collaborative practice nor the image of educational institutions as a nebular unit. A *relational* focus enables scholarship to move beyond internal tensions and external pressures by opening up institutions and engaging with the dynamic relations that they hold with other social institutions and those that constantly redefine their very existence. As a means of highlighting the key features of my argument, below I list five identifying features of the *relational* approach:

- The centrality of *administration* in the social world creates an ontological complicity that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from our spontaneous understanding of the social world;
- Rigorous social *scientific* scholarship would therefore call into question the very foundations on which the contemporarily popular discourses of *leadership*, *management*, and *administration* are constructed;
- The contemporary social condition cannot be separated from the ongoing, and inexhaustible, recasting of administrative labour;
- Studying administration *relationally* 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 administration.

The primary point of departure I make with mainstream educational leadership, management, and administration scholarship is my attention to matters of epistemology and ontology, or knowledge production. However, rather than locate this work in a more philosophy of science space, I explicitly bring this into discussion with contemporary discourses of educational leadership, management, and administration. This move enables the argument to speak across intellectual (e.g., education, political science, philosophy, economics, management, organisational studies) and socio-geographic boundaries through the provision of a theoretical argument that is not confined to any one empirical problem or socio-geographic location. Adopting this analytical strategy enables an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship while also fusing multiple lenses for the specific intent of opening new lines of inquiry and renewal in a field of knowledge production—educational leadership, management, and administration—under question for its scholarly value within the academy.

The type of analysis made possible by this *relational* approach offers a means of crafting theoretically charged narratives illuminating the situated nature of administration. Struggles for legitimacy are at the very core of institutions (Barley, 2008). Social institutions, particularly modern institutions such as education, are the configuration of individual actors in a particular socio-geographic space. As such, groups are an epistemic construction as much, if not more so, than an empirical reality. While individual actors exist in the empirical, it is the epistemic classification of groups on the basis of a particular attribute (that could include physical locality) that gives rise to institutions. In addition, administrative analysis is frequently based on an underlying generative assumption that this collection of individuals operates as a coherent whole. However, I, as with many others, argue that such configurations of individuals in a particular time and space are dynamic contested terrains. The binding attributes of institutions, as social groupings, are performative in the sense that they only exist

in practice and cannot be solely reduced to particular structural arrangements of the empirical. The binds that hold a group of individual actors together in the form of a social institution are therefore problematic, active, and, by virtue of these qualities, fragile.

The work of institutional actors is the ongoing construction of the social world through the embedding and embodying of it with meaning centred on what is legitimate. Therefore, change in institutions can only take place through shifts in the logics whereby legitimacy is assessed, or, in other words, the standards whereby alternatives are deemed to be appropriate. For the purpose of this chapter—outlining the potential uses of sociological approaches to scholarship—this *relational* approach provides an analytical lens for interrogating the moment-to-moment social relations that define the political activity of educating. Specifically, it opens up analysis that breaks down the unproductive binaries that have existed in the scholarship of educational administration and leadership centred on individualism / collectivism and structure / agency. Furthermore, it brings to the fore the role of description in the scholarly narrative. Following Michael Savage (2009), I mobilise *description* not as the enduring rhetorical criticism that constructs description as a lowly, if not the lowest, form of scholarly work, but rather the rich or *thick* (to think with Clifford Geertz [1973] following Gilbert Ryle [1971]) description of the scholarly narrative.

Although this may at first appear to be a vague account of the *relational* approach to scholarship in educational administration and leadership, it is in adhering to the five identifying features that the research takes shape. Rather than an a priori definition of the research object prior to the study (e.g., an operational definition of what is *leadership*) the research object is deconstructed and the re-constructed (arguably partially) as a result of initial analysis. In the context of a thesis or dissertation, this initial phase may replace the traditional literature review. In doing so, careful attention is paid to ensuring that the

construction of the research object is not merely the reproduction of ordinary language, but a systematic scholarly act. This research object is then considered in relation to the various key influences that seek to redefine its existence. This is where empirical work may or may not be mobilised for greater insight. In crafting the scholarly narrative, the goal is a theoretical informed description of what is taking place in the empirical. It is not about trying to understand why someone is doing something or creating linear flowcharts, but relating actions to other actions. Establishing causality is not the purpose; rather, the purpose is the description of the unfolding political work of social groups and institutions in a particular time and space. Importantly, it is about producing scholarship that suspends judgement (as this frequently is based on an original normative orientation) and sees value in description.

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## Conclusion

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In this chapter, I have argued that in social theory we find unexpected and surprising resources to think through leadership, management, and administration. As Jill Blackmore (2004) stated, to understand how educational leadership, management, and administration are “perceived, understood and enacted, one has to have a sense of the broader social, economic and political relations shaping educational work” (p. 267). Within the confines of a chapter, I have sought to provide a brief history of the role of sociology in educational administration and leadership, focusing on its initial role through to contemporary trends including the Commonwealth bias in the usage of sociological approaches. In addition, I provide articulation, albeit brief, of a *relational* approach to educational administration and leadership scholarship that is built upon a sociological tradition. If you seek to undertake a sociological approach to your study, you will need to go well beyond this single chapter. As with any approach, there is a need to read and read widely. Most importantly, sociology is an

intellectually diverse discipline—if working in the space, it is important to name the tradition in which you are working. There is substantial potential in sociological approaches for advancing our understanding of the ways in which educational institutions go about their work, and because of the dynamic and contradictory nature of the social world, this is an ongoing and inexhaustible intellectual project.

## Notes

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i. As a case in point, Tony Bush (2014), among others, described Weber as the developer of “the bureaucratic model of leadership”. This is not accurate. In *Economy and Society* (1922/1978), Weber, as a sociologist, described the bureaucracy and in doing so provided a set of conceptual tools for thinking through the administration of the social world. This is very different from the highly applied provision of a conceptual framing to be used to improve practice—as is often the case in educational administration discourses. An often-overlooked aspect of Weber’s work is his initiation of a dialogue around charismatic leadership.

ii. While Greenfield’s attack is often credited to his 1974 paper at the International Intervisitation Programme at Bristol, others consider it to have actually begun at the 1973 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New

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Orleans (see Bates, 1980). This supports the argument that it is impossible to demarcate an exact point of origin for thought.

iii.

A somewhat overlooked thread in Bourdieusian scholarship is his work around “prophets”. Building from his study of Martin Heidegger, Bourdieu argued that a prophet is a person who expresses already existing, albeit intuitive, presumptions or values within a social field. The status of the prophet, much like that of a leader, comes from acting upon latent social needs. The strength of the prophet rests on the dialectic relationship between authorised, authorising language and the group which authorises it and acts on its authority (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, p. 171).

iv.

In addition to the 2014 book, I have in-press papers at *European Studies in Educational Management, Educational Philosophy and Theory, Leadership & Policy in Schools* (with Judith Norris), and *Critical Studies in Education* (with Kimbalee Hodges), and a number of doctoral supervisions.

v.

Boltanski was a former collaborator with Bourdieu, but since breaking away has developed a pragmatic sociology based around situated moral judgement and logics of worth (see also the work of David Stark). In *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1990/2005, which pays homage to Weber’s classic: *The Spirit of Capitalism*), Boltanski and Eve Chiapello use management literatures to build their argument, and this work is being increasingly taken up in organisational studies, but has yet to gain traction in educational administration and leadership.