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Methodological Notes on the Study of Educational Leadership Relationally

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Abstract

The social sciences are paying increasing attention to relations. In contributing to this ongoing dialogue and debate Educational Leadership Relationally (Eacott, 2015) articulates a relational research program for the study of educational administration and leadership. This paper provides an overview of the relational program with particular attention to the five central tenets of the methodology. Key aspects of the relational program concern the complicity of the researcher with the ordinary language of the everyday, problematizing the research object, locating activity in spatio-temporal conditions, overcoming binary thinking, and productive theorizing. This paper and the collection of papers in the special issue, continue to dialogue and debate on the merits of the relational program.

Keywords: relational, relations, methodology, epistemology, sociology

Introduction

Mustafa Emirbayer's (1997) germinal paper, *Manifesto for a Relational Sociology*, declares that "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" (p. 311). As part of an increasing global (social) scientific community, the end of the Cold War, colonialism shifting from physical occupation to the epistemic production of territories, and the need to understand and communicate with non-Western societies, relational approaches offer a productive direction for scholarship (Prandini, 2015). The catalyst for these approaches – the plural is deliberate, as it is not a homogenous space – is the critique of the substantialist, or entity-based, epistemologies that have come to dominate contemporary social thought and analysis. Key thinkers in contemporary relational

sociology include: Nick Crossley (2011), François Dépelteau and Christopher Powell (2013; Powell & Depelteau, 2013), Pierpaolo Donati (2011), Jan Fuhse (2015), and Ann Mische (2011). While originally very much centered in New York (notably Harrison White at Harvard University and Charles Tilly at Harvard then Columbia, and what Mische labels the "New York School of Relational Sociology"), Italian Donati has been developing his position for over 30 years (1983, 1991, 2011, 2015), Fuhse hosted an international symposium at Humboldt University in Berlin in 2008, and there is a strong Canadian network – primarily advanced through a research cluster within the Canadian Sociological Association (La Société Canadienne de Sociologie). Riccardo Prandini (2015) reminds us that while major methodological advances occurred in the United States, relational sociology has strong roots and seeds in the European tradition, owing to the work of Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Gabriel Tarde, Norbert Elias, Niklas Luhmann, Pierre

Bourdieu and Bruno Latour, just to name a few. As Emirbayer notes, interest in relational scholarship is beyond national boundaries.

A similar shift, although far less diverse, is taking place in the broader management/leadership sciences. Covering perspectives such as social exchange, leader-member exchange, vertical dyadic linkage, among others, and well captured in Mary Uhl-Bien and Sonia Ospina's (2012) *Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue Among Perspectives*, relational approaches now feature prominently in key journals (Dinh et al., 2014), and are perceived to be at the cutting-edge of contemporary thought and analysis (Hunt & Dodge, 2000). However, the mobilization of relational approaches remains problematic. Sociologists argue the distinction between substantialist and relational accounts, whereas in the leadership literatures both entity-based (substantialist) and relational approaches are grouped together under the label of relational (e.g., Uhl-Bien, 2006). To further highlight some of the tensions of language across fields, Emirbayer uses *transactional* (somewhat synonymously with relational) as a label, yet in the leadership literatures it has a very different history in opposition to transformational leadership. What remains however is a shift from role-, or person-, centric accounts to recognition of practice being co-constructed by actors, something that to be understood requires attention to relations.

If the social world is relational, to which there is at scale multidisciplinary support, then it cannot be understood from an individualist point of view or a collective (or holist) perspective. After all, both the individualist and holist assume stability of the object – a scalable equivalence. It is however difficult to define, once and for all, relations. Donati (2015) contends 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. But in moving beyond the substantialist or entity-based approaches, relations need to be thought of as not a thing. They are once, the process of, and emergent from, action. This requires conceiving of the object of scholarship in new ways. Privileged within such a perspective are the abstract systems of distance played out in action

and the unfolding description of practice. But as Michael Savage (2009) argues, this form of description is not about a linear or mechanistic causality, rather the relating of actions to other actions. The task of the scholar is not to define *fields* in any universal terms (as is often done with the appropriation of Bourdieu), but to observe and describe actions as they are, with all their complexity and diversity. This requires the mobilization of methodological resources facilitating the inscription of actions in particular spatio-temporal conditions. The inscribing of action is fundamental to avoiding the errors of essentialism, substantialism and/or reductionism.

In *Educational leadership relationally* I articulate a particular form of *relational* approach (Eacott, 2015). Built upon a very Bourdieusian craft of scholarship (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1968/1991; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992/1992), but without any great loyalty or reverence, I name 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 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 shaped by, the image of organizing;

- 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 theorize educational administration and leadership.

Dépelteau (2015) contends that relational approaches are only useful if they can propose new solutions to fundamental issues when compared with existing theorizations. I want to take this further to argue that if relational approaches do not generate the type of intellectual turmoil that Griffiths (1979) argued

for, or later Eugenie Samier (2013) sought in educational administration, namely by problematizing some of the canons of contemporary scholarship, then they offer little more than noise.

The type of analysis made possible by the *relational* approach I am advancing 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 theorize – 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 so than simply mapping the intellectual terrain with novel ideas and vocabularies.

Relational Extensions

To deliver on the above claims, mindful that having initially built the argument in *Educational Leadership Relationally* I devote an individual chapter in the forthcoming book to each one, the current analysis extends the *relational* approach to consider the importance of the extensions in understanding contemporary thought and analysis in educational administration.

Ontological complicity

The separation of researcher and researched has been central to the proliferation of popular scientific rhetoric. When the notion of a detached, objective, observer first emerged in the West during the 15th century, it was a breakthrough in thought that laid the foundations for modern science and industrialized societies (Berman, 1981) by giving credibility to empirical research and breaking with the dominant theocratic ideology of the Middles Ages (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000). From the *relational* perspective, two matters warrant attention here: first, the separation of the observer from the observed; and second, the blurring of scientific and ordinary language.

Greenfield, among others, denies that there is a clear distinction between theory and observation (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993). For him, there are no observational data – as evidence to justify theories – independent of the theoretical lens through which data is generated and analyzed. Specifically he argues that our theories create the facts that are relevant to them, and we can, therefore, only explore truth with a framework that defines what it is (Greenfield & Ribbins, 1993). This argument destabilizes the rationalist and empiricist agendas that continue to dominate educational administration scholarship. Relational approaches break with the Cartesian approaches in which administration and organizational scholars presume themselves separate from their organizational subjects, and that organizations, can be conceived of separately from the humans who are constructing them (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; McKelvey, 1997). In the case of schools, this is not to denounce the materiality of buildings, fences, playgrounds or actors (e.g., students and teachers), but to problematize at what point the notion of school is possible. After all, the role of actors within a school can only be understood in relation to other actors, and these actions are defined as much by their relations to other actions and social groups – those which give meaning to the actions. To understand, even partially, actions, one has to engage in the unfolding description of practice. This remains a key methodological problem due to the complicity that researchers bring to understanding the social world as it is – or more specifically, the uncritical acceptance of the well-rehearsed narrative of entities (social institutions, such as schools, governance, but also nation-states, and so on) that constitute the orthodoxy of the social world.

Administration, or at least organizing, has been a central element in the trajectory of human society (Gronn, 2010). Organizing is intimately connected to our understanding of the social world. We are at once, embedded and embodying, of this world view and it shapes the intellectual gaze, and by virtue, (social) scientific inquiry. The challenge for the scholar is to cast doubt on the orthodoxy, or in other words, to make the familiar strange. This requires attention to the construction of the re-

search object as an embodied actor opposed to the empirical confirmation or disconfirmation or the enquirer's model of reality.

The somewhat singular relationship, our histories, with the orthodoxy orients our thoughts and both legitimize and sustain it. Following the work of Gaston Bachelard (1934/1984), with reference to Louis Althusser (1965/1969) and Pierre (Bourdieu at al., 1968/1991), the concern for scholarship (i.e., scientific inquiry) is to break with the ordinary language of the everyday and create a distinction. To not do so, is to be complicit with the orthodoxy of the social world and potentially limit any contribution to the mapping or overlaying of the social with an alternate narrative that offers little to nothing for thinking anew.

In the case of administration, the complicity of the researcher is often based on a general belief that the social world is at stake. Administration functions only so far as it produces a belief in the value of its product (e.g., policy, security, and order), and means of production (e.g., governance). In addition, educational administration primarily owes its existence to the currency of public concern over particular social issues. If thinking with Gronn's (2010) claim earlier on the establishment of social hierarchies, then it is of little surprise that power-based stratification of social groups is an orthodox means of conceptualizing, understanding, and experiencing the social world. To think otherwise is to not only challenge the canon but also the self. As scholars it is impossible to withdraw from the social in order to construct a (partial) re-presentation of it. What I am calling for here is not the abandonment of the intellectual project that is educational administration, rather, to ask questions that for the most part, educational administration researchers, irrespective of the voluminous and fast expanding literatures, do not ask themselves. To overcome these matters, and following Bachelard (1934/1984), requires the denial of certainty for a definitive heritage of educational administration and the perpetual calling into question the very principles of one's own constructs. Familiarity with the social world is a central, and enduring, epistemological obstacle for educational administration scholarship. It continuously generates conceptualizations (e.g., leadership)

and simultaneously the conditions to legitimize and sustain them. Getting beyond the ordinary language of the everyday, illuminating our own complicity with the social world, is an inexhaustible project of the social scientist – and one in which a *relational* approach explicitly engages.

Problematizing foundations

As noted earlier, Klaus Weber challenged management scholars to study fads and fashions rather than chase them (see Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby, & Weber, 2014). His argument has utility, and poses significant questions, for educational administration. Who is it to say, and on what grounds, that leadership for example is any more than the latest fad? Is it not possible that the very foundations of educational leadership are nothing more than a fad? Callahan's (1962) classic describes how school administration reformers looked to Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911) in their efforts to reshape schools, specifically how the infusion, dissemination, and legitimation of business ideals (e.g., efficiency), took hold in education. More recently, Craig Peck and Ulrich Reitzug (2012) provided an explanatory conceptual model for how business management concepts become school leadership fashions. This argument is not limited to the contemporary title of leadership either. The establishment of departments of educational administration in US universities during the early 1900s was based on an assumption that matters of educational administration were separate to education (Bates, 2010). Stimulus for such was at scale interest and currency in the administration of educational organizations – an enduring project. This brings temporality into the argument, something that I will return to, but for now, it is mindful to consider Samier's (2006) call for educational administration as an historical discipline, and a focus on the study of educational administration under different historical conditions. I believe this notion of history to be not just a chronological account or mapping of past events leading to the present, but the locating in spatio-temporal conditions. This argument is equally relevant for the field of knowledge production as it is the field of practice.

In order to move away from these problems, or more precisely, to explicitly engage with them, requires going beyond the notion of using pre-existing concepts (the social *a priori*) as the starting point of analysis. There is a need to define the object of research in different ways. Calling into question the ontological complicity with the social world, makes the act of operationally defining concepts – that which is a canon of the logical empiricist – inappropriate. The assumption of stability and equivalence of the research entity (e.g., Durkheim's (1982) social facts) across time and space simply cannot be defended. Rather than looking for absolutes like the school, leadership, administration, policy, and so on, it might be more fruitful to respect the diversity of the social world and observe specific occurrences of organizing. Such a position recognizes the empirical example as just that, a particular manifestation of the larger theoretical problem in the social (empirical) world. This is not to legitimize the binary of the theoretical and empirical, or to deny the possibility of an at scale coherence or stability, but to call into question the assumption that there is stability, scale and equivalence of socially constructed content. The rationality and order which the logical empiricist requires, is built upon the artificial partitioning and exclusionary practice of scientific reduction that is used to construct the discrete and knowable entity (e.g., school, leader, and leadership). Shifting the research object to the dynamic notion of relations negates the need for operational definitions and instead has the researcher engaged in the ongoing (co)construction of the object. This is not to grant permission for an anything goes approach, rather openness to the messiness of the social and not imposing a predefined narrative on the empirical. Objects are at once present and emergent of the empirical.

Opening up scholarship blurs, if not breaks down, disciplinary boundaries. While locating work within an understanding of the history of the field remains, particularly from a publication standpoint, there is merit in recognizing that a field is not the sole possessor of knowledge on a particular phenomenon. Imperialist claims that educational administration is the only legitimate body of knowledge for itself and overlooking, or ignoring, contributions from other areas of education (e.g., teaching and learning, and child development), humanities, social sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, philosophy, and economics), and the professions (e.g., business and management), is problematic for the advancement of knowledge and the possibility of going beyond the orthodoxy.

With the contemporary focus of thought and analysis on leadership, there is a concern with a fairly narrow phenomenon (especially when it is uncritically accepted), in an almost exclusively perceived universal environment (namely formal educational organizations/institutions – particularly the school), with a privileging of currency (over history), usually limited to developed economies of western democratic societies. To problematize the canons calls into question, without necessarily refuting, such claims. If anything is defeated by such a position it is the possibility of work claiming to articulate "best practice". While I strongly defend the development of theory, our understanding of educational administration will never be complete. As participants and scholars of the social world we engage with a constantly renegotiated target. With the goal of generating rigorous and robust scholarship, the problematizing of foundations means going beyond the perspectives of predefined concepts as though they are independent of the enquirer and locating our accounts in particular spatio-temporal conditions.

Spatio-temporal grounding

Crossley (2015) argues that:

> our lives, thoughts, feelings, and actions are always interwoven with those of others such that they cannot be understood atomistically: we affect others, they affect us, and breaking that circle by reducing the social world to discrete atomic entities renders both that world and the actions within it unintelligible (p. 67).

As noted earlier, operational definitions and that uncritical acceptance of labels as though they represent external, stable and equivalent entities is highly problematic from a *relational* standpoint. The artificial partitioning of the social world for the purpose

of classification and categorization is an act by the social scientist. This is evident in the mobilization of context in the educational administration literatures. Context is recognized as important, if not most important, in almost all accounts of education, but what is meant by context is of interest here.

So far, at least in this section, I have used context as synonymous with spatio-temporal conditions. This has been a deliberate move to ease the transition for the reader, but at the same time, is fundamentally flawed. Context, as it is commonly used in educational administration, is constructed as another variable within a systems thinking approach to scholarship. In the partitioning of the social world, context – or what is sometimes referred to as the *environment* or *environmental factors*, – is just another variable that can be manipulated (and my use of manipulation is not intended as necessarily a negative here) in a malleable external world. The interplay of context and practice is not seen as deterministic, as might be the case in some appropriations of Bourdieu's theorization of reproduction, rather as possible of being overcome. As an example, David Gurr (2014) argues:

> Whilst successful school leaders are culturally sensitive, they seem to be less constrained by context than would be expected, or as seen in less successful leaders. Fundamentally they seem to show an ability to work with contexts and cultures to ensure success (p. 75).

And again "for successful principals they seem to be able to adapt, use and influence context to foster success" (p. 85).

In many ways, this is not surprising given that for some researchers the very purpose of educational administration as a field of knowledge production is to generate understanding that can provide universally applicable insights. Yet the limitations of such a substantialist and decontextualized approach are well recognized, including by the same author, who elsewhere notes "it does not explain why these interventions work in some circumstances and not in others" (Gurr, Drysdale, & Goode, 2010, p. 124). For a more extended critique of the *International Successful School Principal Project* see chapter six in *Educational leadership relationally* (Eacott, 2015). The limitations in what Gurr (and Drysdale), and others adopting similar approaches, can say about action could have been overcome with attention to locating the scholarly narratives in the particular spatio-temporal conditions. In conceiving of context as just another variable, it is granted a transactional status with other variables. To think here with Andrew Abbot (1988), this approach assumes that variables have "only one causal meaning at a time" and that "this causal meaning does not depend on other attributes, on the past sequence of attributes, or on the context of other entities" (p. 181). In other words, a conceptualization of context that is beyond context.

From a *relational* standpoint, actions are not the outcome of interactions with social structures. To do so would require the reduction to a substantialist (entity-based) approach mobilizing relationships as a measurement construct and structures as somewhat immovable objective entities. The rise of leadership is very much caught up in a rhetoric of agency and interaction with social structures, and this results in a central thread of causal vocabulary in educational administration literatures. What is overlooked in this approach is the reciprocity of the social world. In other words, the ways in which the social is simultaneously shaping of, and shaped by, action. As Fuhse (2015) contends, "social relations are themselves definitions of the situations that are tentatively established and continuously renegotiated" (p. 27). These social conditions are not necessarily layered, as may be the case with macro (global), meso, and micro level analytical frames. In contrast, relational approaches see the social world as flat (Prandini, 2015). Actions can only be understood in relation (and with reference) to other actions. While this may read as a causal logic, it is not mobilized in the same way that a logical empiricist would use it. The argument is actually that understanding is achieved through describing the unfolding actions of the social world in temporal and spatial conditions. This is not to go as far as Greenfield's subjectivism, but it is to argue that educational administration can only be understood in relation to contemporary social conditions. The generation

of action is the interplay of trajectories, both observable and abstract, that create systems of distance in the social. To that end, action does not take place on context rather it is enacted in context. An analysis that separates action from contexts destroys that which it sought to understand.

Beyond binaries

Grounding scholarly description in spatio-temporal conditions challenges binaries frequently mobilized in educational administration literatures. The enduring tensions of individualism/holism and structure/agency have been central to the explanatory power of knowledge in the field for over a century. Substantive theoretical and methodological interventions have yet to overcome them. Greenfield arguably underestimated the role of social structures in shaping action and the critical (both *C* and *c*) arguably overplay structures. In the latter, social structures operate in a very deterministic manner, while in the former, the somewhat denial of structures is equally problematic. However, as noted earlier, the causal power of social structures is canonical in educational administration literatures. The starting point of analysis, educational administration, does specific work here. Attention to administration has a tendency of privileging structural accounts through the complicity of observer with the object and subsequent analytics. Similarly, a focus on leadership and its effect frequently plays to the role of agency in action. Logically, there exists a flaw in attempting to understand action at either end, yet the privileging of structure or agency remains.

A question this raises is whether educational administration can overcome the underlying generative principles of such binaries. Following Bourdieu (2000/2005), I stress that in what is frequently perceived as heavily administered societies, much like a gravitational field, even the person considered to have absolute power – or decision making authority – is him/herself held within the constraints of spatio-temporal conditions. It is impossible to know definitively who is/are the subject of the final decision and the location of that decision is both everywhere and nowhere. Likewise, accounts stressing the ability of any

individual to overcome obstacles and achieve if they work hard enough or even simply want it bad enough, overlooks the spatio-temporal conditions that generate such opportunities. In breaking from our ontological complicity with the world as it is and problematizing the foundations of educational administration there is quite plausibly the opportunity to provide an alternate to the binary thinking that is orthodoxy.

Parallel monologues have become commonplace in the literatures of the field. This is not only evident in the absence of responses to papers in journals (which potentially has many reasons, including the delay between submission and publication), but also the engagement with other works. As noted by Robert Donmoyer (2001) and then more forcefully by Martin Thrupp and Richard Willmott (2003), there is a state of tacit agreement in educational administration where those with whom we disagree, we treat with benign neglect. I argue that binary thinking is a significant factor in this phenomenon. The explanatory power of accounts built upon binary thinking are read sympathetically by supporters and refuted – if not quickly dismissed – by alternative positions. In and of itself, this is not a problem as the logic of academic work (argument and refutation) requires such. However, when combined with the uncritical acceptance of the everyday, the production of knowledge rarely gets beyond the pre-existing normative orientation of the observer. The prospect of generating a common understanding, a basis from which dialogue and debate can occur across intellectual traditions, is negated and results in researchers talking past rather than to one another.

The relational turn is a response to individualist and collectivist (holist) ontologies that have come to dominate contemporary thought and analysis. In shifting the unit of analysis to the ongoing relations that define the social there are the theoretical resources to overcome the tensions of structure/agency and individualist/collectivist by denying their existence in the first place. This poses a very significant challenge to leadership literatures – those which rely on an initial distinction between leader and follower (e.g., Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014). Rather than

undertaking the scientific reductionism that is required to partition the individual from the collective, or adopting the absolutes of structure or agency, the *relational* does not seek to bring order and rationality to its logic. Without legitimizing binary thinking, I contend that a more defensible position is that neither end of the continuum is productive. Instead, if the social world is messy then scholarship should embrace such messiness rather than seek to bring artificial order to it.

Productive theorizing

With the scale and scope of the managerialist project ever expanding, intellectual work has been discredited as exotic, indulgent, and not in the public interest (Gunter, 2013). Alternatively, as Colin Evers and I have previously argued in relation to more overtly theoretical work, it is not popular and even more so, "seen as illegitimate in a disciplinary space that is prone to faddism, privileges a conservative, rational, and somewhat atheoretical, set of discourses that seek to maintain a highly applied nature" (Eacott & Evers, 2015, p. 310). While this line of argument reflects a professionalization, or instrumentalist account, of knowledge and knowledge production, it also highlights an underlying issue with scholarship, namely that which has an overt theoretical edge – particularly the social critical. The critical project is, by its very nature, critical. This is not to say that the theoretical resources mobilized or the significance of its narrative is not quality scholarship, rather to say that it frequently offers little beyond illuminating the ways in which actors are oppressed or constrained. As Jonathan Jansen (2008) argues:

> show me a theoretical framework particularly in the critical tradition that begins to grapple with this imperfect practice. There is none, for what critical theory does is to stand self-righteously at the other end of the struggle and declare the impossible ideals that real practising teachers and principals – the ordinary ones – must but simply cannot attain without working through the ruins of a troubled past, a testing present, and a future from which the lifeblood of hope is drained by the burden of the everyday (p. 155).

While I do not align with the argument that all scholarship needs to be directly transferrable into practice, as there are many audiences and purposes for scholarship, there is an argument to be made here. What is the worth of theory? How is its utility measured? This is not necessarily about impact – at least how it is being operationalized within many research assessment exercises. More so, it is about how we ascertain the contribution of theory to be a resource for understanding the social world.

Throughout this paper I have argued for a descriptive approach. But how can one describe yet offer something beyond the particular? This is where the power of spatio-temporal locating and problematizing of the foundations is important. The locating in particular temporal and sociospatial conditions is useful for facilitating dialogue and debate with other accounts. In addition, it is the attention to the construction of the research object that enables a touchstone between studies. Rather than focusing on difference based on methodological accounts, we can have a conversation around the content.

Conclusion

What is perhaps most striking and troubling in contemporary thought and analysis in educational administration is the absence of theoretical crisis. This is not to say there is a dearth of critique, as such scholarship continues to thrive (although this is at the margins), rather that it is difficult to point out any signs that there are deep ruptures or confusions in academic dialogue and debate. Nor, I might add, is there any reason to suspect a looming crisis in the near future. Yet, there is widespread disquiet about the advancing managerialist project, the role of context and fundamental problems of individual/collectivism and structure/agency remain unresolved. The *relational* approach that I advance does more than problematize the hegemony of educational administration. It illuminates theoretical and methodological issues with origins in the orthodoxy of contemporary thought and analysis, and, more importantly, the pre-existing normative assumptions of researchers. Specifically, my intervention is to disrupt the dominant epistemologies and methodologies

of educational administration by challenging them not at the level of content but the underlying generative principles of scholarship.

Early scholarship in educational administration mainly concerned developing techniques for understanding administrative phenomena and as a result the field was slow to develop sophistication (Park, 2001). The underdeveloped theoretical/methodological preliminaries have been an enduring issue for the study for the study of educational administration. Quite simply, the most commonly mobilized theoretical resources cannot contend with the embodied and embedded nature of the researcher and the uncritical adoption of the dominant ideologies of the time. Similarly, the appropriation of great thinkers (e.g., Foucault, Bourdieu, Lyotard, Arendt, and Butler) to map the terrain does little more than bring novelty, as the received terms remain intact.

Relational approaches, and the version in this paper in particular, are a critique not only of methodological individualism and holism but also of the failures of dominant theoretical resources in educational administration. These failures are not new. They have been pointed out by many before me, namely by Greenfield, Bates, Evers and Lakomski. The *relational* approach I advance is characterized by its attempt to deepen understanding of the fabric that constitutes educational organizations. The fundamental thesis presented here is that understanding the social world can only be done relationally. Scholarship that achieves this is less concerned with extensive articulation of methods and analysis (see for example the extended descriptions of methods in many of the fields journals – namely *Educational Administration Quarterly*) and more concerned with underlying generative principles of such scholarship. This is difficult work but as Fenwick English (2006) reminds us, intellectual work "is never efficient, perhaps not even cost effective, but then, true discovery and significant intellectual and practical breakthroughs rarely are" (p. 470).

My intention is not to disregard all that has gone before. That said, the proposal I offer is characterized by a dissatisfaction and restlessness with contemporary thought and analysis. If scholarship is intended to be pedagogical,

then I believe that for the most part, educational administration has yet to deliver on its promise. Despite voluminous, and rapidly proliferating, literatures we know relatively little beyond the common-sense logic of the everyday. To this end, Dana Rapp (2002) suggests, we must commit to looking beyond the current perceived elites and loudest voices in the field that situate themselves and a somewhat narrow narrative of what educational administration is. In a 2010 paper I argued that:

> an influential theoretical contribution, one which commands widespread intellectual attention, will make visible much of the underlying assumptions of actions. Lesser educational leadership scholarship operates with naïve, taken-for-granted conceptions, or with old theories that have passed into common discourse, such as that involving people in decisions that directly affect them will lead to better outcomes for all. Educational leadership scholars at their best have been constructing social theory, although they have not always discussed it as such (p. 63).

While I am now a little more guarded in my accounts of *lesser* and *best*, the theorizing of educational administration socially I stand by. The *relational* approach that I am arguing for is my attempt to engage in this space and provide theoretical resources that may hold potential for overcoming some enduring issues in the scholarship of the field. As a generative research program, this special issue is far from the final word. In the interests of advancing the agenda I encourage others to think with, through and against it. Use it, refute it, modify it, but most of all, engage with me about it.

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