A social epistemology for educational administration and leadership

Scott Eacott

To cite this article: Scott Eacott (2017): A social epistemology for educational administration and leadership, Journal of Educational Administration and History, DOI: 10.1080/00220620.2017.1315380

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2017.1315380

Published online: 19 Apr 2017.
A social epistemology for educational administration and leadership

Scott Eacott
School of Education, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT
As a field of knowledge production, educational administration and leadership scholars do a substantial amount of talking past one another. These parallel monologues are a major issue for the advancement of knowledge. Original contributions can only be made in relation to others. That is, the innovation or significance of scholarship is an act of (social) scientific distinction. This means purposely engaging with the other. In this paper, I argue that the knowledge frontiers of educational administration and leadership are highly fragmented and siloed. I do not, however, see diversity of scholarship as a fatal flaw nor do I argue for a form of knowledge centrism. Rather, my intervention is to propose a social epistemology for moving knowledge claims.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 August 2016
Accepted 5 October 2016

KEYWORDS
Social epistemology; knowledge production; educational administration; educational leadership; research

With the establishment of educational administration departments in US universities in the early 1900s (Tyack and Hansot 1982), educational administration (as it was then known), as a field of study, was granted ontological status. Its foundations however, according to Bates (2010), were based on the artificial partitioning of what Dewey (1902) labels the ‘mechanics of schooling’ and ‘educational ideals’. The partitioning of knowledge production has remained an issue for the field since its inception. With the proliferation of higher education and accreditation/licensing requirements, educational leadership (as it is now known) has expanded and splintered into various sub-fields and/or scholarly communities. The field has become organised around different intellectual traditions (e.g. Gunter 2016), each with their own discourse communities, complete with conferences, journals and international networks. This is often presented as an evolutionary and inevitable product of scholarly fields, but for educational administration and leadership at large, as both a domain of knowledge production and one of practice, it poses a significant inhibitor to substantive shifts in thinking. This is especially so when there is a well-identified lack of meaningful engagement across research traditions (Blackmore 2010), and a state of tacit agreement where those with whom we disagree, we treat with benign neglect (Donmoyer 2001, Thrupp and Willmott 2003).

In the concluding chapter of Questioning leadership: new directions for educational organizations (Lakomski et al. 2017), I argue that parallel monologues are a major issue in educational administration and leadership scholarship. As this is a contested position...
(e.g. Bush 2017), this paper is a further nuancing of my claim built on the argument that parallel monologues (e.g. failing to acknowledge other perspectives and most importantly, the critique they may raise with your position) are a violation of the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – and significantly inhibit knowledge advances. It is through the (social) scientific struggle, played out in the scientific system (namely peer-reviewed scholarship), that knowledge frontiers are recognised and pushed further. My argument concerns the ontological insecurity of educational administration and leadership as a field of knowledge production and the implications this has for the (social) scientific system – with particular reference to journals. The intervention of this paper is to propose a relational alternative that overcomes the analytical dualisms (structure/agency, individualism/holism, universalism/particularism) and solutions (e.g. conflationism, co-determinism) that have come to dominant contemporary thought and analysis. In doing so, I offer a ‘general theory of organizing’ as a basis for a social epistemology for educational administration and leadership.

Our relations with the field

Any claim to advance the scholarship of educational administration and leadership needs to confront the ontological question of what is the object of our collective endeavours. As Oplatka (2009) notes, the primary question of ‘What is educational administration?’ has not been answered with any sense of adequacy. That said, the hegemonic positivist image of organisations, orthodoxy since Taylorism supplanted the ordinary language of the everyday and then strengthened during the Theory Movement, has generated and legitimised a particular ontology for educational administration. Organisations, as with the actors that labour within them, are conceived as external knowable entities – ‘social facts’ to think with Durkheim (1982[1895]). The subjectivist alternative, led by the pioneering work of Thomas Barr Greenfield (1973, 1974, Greenfield and Ribbins 1993) and continued through post-modern (e.g. Maxcy 1993, English 2003), feminist (e.g. Blackmore 1999), post-colonial (e.g. Blackmore 2010) and post-structuralist scholarship (e.g. Niesche 2011, 2014), has yet to significantly de-stabilise the substantialist foundations of a modernist science of educational administration and leadership. Mindful of the dangers of over-simplifying the complexity of sophisticated theoretical arguments, for illustrative purposes, Table 1 displays an overview of some of the major theoretical positions in educational administration and leadership. Although the ontological and epistemological distinctions between these positions prevent a universal acceptance of concepts, causal claims, and procedure, there is demonstrable interest, at scale, in educational administration and leadership as worthy of scholarship. As noted earlier though, there is a distinct absence of dialogue and debate between positions. More often than not, arguments are raised without any attention to the critique that could be raised by different perspectives, yet alone how one could overcome such critique.

There have been many attempts to classify different approaches to organisational theory (e.g. Burrell and Morgan 1979, Hage 1980, Scott 1981), and its mobilisation in educational administration and leadership (e.g. Griffiths 1988, Evers and Lakomski 1991, Rowan and Miskel 1999). Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) paradigms model is one of the most popular. Originally welcomed in educational administration (e.g. Griffiths 1985), it has not been without critique (e.g. Griffiths 1988, Evers and Lakomski 1991). The
Table 1. Overview of major theoretical positions in educational administration and leadership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logical empiricist</th>
<th>Naturalistic coherentism</th>
<th>Subjectivist</th>
<th>Social critical</th>
<th>Relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Research is characterised by objectivity, reliability, operational definitions, coherent or systematic structure, and comprehensiveness</td>
<td>A post-positivist approach concerned with coherency through super-empirical virtues of consistency, simplicity, comprehensiveness, conservatism, fecundity and explanatory unity</td>
<td>A phenomenological approach to scholarship concerned with how we see and experience the social world</td>
<td>Concerned to reveal and emancipate leaders and followers from social injustice and the oppression of established power structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontological assumptions</strong></td>
<td>Organisations are an external knowable reality</td>
<td>The most coherent ontology is that the natural world exists (e.g. organisations are real)</td>
<td>Organisations are not things, have no ontological reality and there is no use studying them as though they do</td>
<td>Reality is created and shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender-based forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemological assumptions</strong></td>
<td>Objective knowledge claims justified through empirical verifiability</td>
<td>Epistemological diversity, assuming that theories meet the criteria of coherentism</td>
<td>All of our knowledge contains an irreducible subjective component (denial of objectivity)</td>
<td>We cannot separate ourselves from what we know and this influences inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Normative/ethical assumptions</strong></td>
<td>Improvements can be achieved through objective knowledge of what works. Dichotomy between what is and ought. Separation of fact and value</td>
<td>Fact and value cannot be separated and the goal is to improve through the best (e.g. coherent) theories</td>
<td>Organisations are conflicted. Find out what values are embodied in organised activity and whose they are. Change the people or change the values</td>
<td>Concerned with promoting ‘collective social value’, such as participatory democracy and human emancipation, to build a better society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theory of the subject</strong></td>
<td>Organisations are real in the world and individuals are a product of them</td>
<td>The basic unit of analysis is individual interactions with the natural world</td>
<td>Individuals acting singly or together</td>
<td>Organisations as the embodiment of power relations/structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
limitation of the paradigm approach is that it essentialises work, and in the case of Burrell and Morgan, relies upon an initial analytical dualism (e.g. subjective/objective; regulation/radical change). In doing so, competing theories are conceived of as incommensurate. For my purposes, such a conceptualisation is not particularly useful. It is dependent upon a shared ontology and then epistemological diversity. I argue that the ontological question of what is educational administration and leadership remains unattended to and that illuminating such underlying generative principles (which Table 1 seeks to do, even if just as an illustrative exercise) in relation to those held by others offers a productive space to theorise the organising of education.

The ascendancy of educational administration and leadership within the global social scientific community has seen the establishment of a Division within the American Educational Research Association (Division A – Administration, Organization and Leadership) and networks/special interest groups within the Australian Association for Research in Education, British Educational Research Association, European Educational Research Association and Nordic Educational Research Association, among others. In addition, there are field-specific associations such as the National Council for Professors of Educational Administration (Hayes 1966) and the University Council for Educational Administration in the USA, national level associations (e.g. British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society, Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration) and supra-national entities such as the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (e.g. Thomas 1971, Ewing 1975). The presence of such scholarly networks, legitimising the ontological status, frequently leads to the uncritical acceptance of educational administration and leadership as a worthwhile object of analysis without ever raising questions of its ontological security.

Despite some significant handbooks (e.g. Boyan 1988, Murphy and Louis 1999, English 2011) and meta-commentaries (e.g. Evers and Lakomski 1999, Gunter 2016, Oplatka 2010, Burgess and Newton 2015), there is very little dialogue and debate about ontology and epistemology in educational administration and leadership. However, in the broader leadership literature (Drath et al. 2008, Crevani et al. 2010, Denis et al. 2010, Kelly 2014) and to some extent recently in educational administration and leadership (e.g. Lakomski 2005, Eacott 2013, Lakomski et al. 2017), there has been some concern with the ontological foundations of leadership. A significant move in this questioning is the recasting of leadership as a social rather than physical object (e.g. Kelly 2014, Eacott 2015). As a social construct, educational administration and leadership covers a ‘multitude of ideas and activities representing considerable differences of view between various groups’ (Bates 1980, p. 2). The multi-disciplinary nature yet fragmentation of educational administration and leadership scholarship has been long identified (e.g. Hills 1978, Campbell 1979, Riffel 1986, Oplatka 2009). However, with minimal – if any – inter-tradition dialogue and debate, the competing theoretical positions remain insular (e.g. Griffiths 1997, Fritz 1999), a form of theoretical relativism (as opposed to pluralism). The possibility of within-field regulation based on shared principles of legitimation (e.g. legitimate forms of knowledge) is highly unlikely, if not impossible. It is not that there is enduring contestation of the ontological (and epistemological) preliminaries rather the possibility of any significant convergence, or even mutual recognition, at the ontological level is lost due to the absence of dialogue and debate.
As a potential solution to address this concern, Oplatka (2009) argues:

…the field needs a widespread general agreement over its core contents and central purposes, which in turn demarcate its intellectual and epistemological borders and sharpen its distinctiveness in relation to other fields of study. (p. 27)

The desire to identify a core set of problems or questions to demarcate educational administration and leadership is a well-rehearsed argument (e.g. Tschannen-Moran et al. 2000, Oplatka 2010). As has been attempts to historically demarcate epistemological foci (e.g. Culbertson 1988, Park 2001, Oplatka 2010), which has not been without critique (English 2001). Rarely do these accounts go beyond the epistemological and confront the ontological question. This is not surprising, as the social foundations of educational administration and leadership mean that it is always epistemological (even ideological) rather than ontological.

Over 30 years ago Riffel (1986) argued that if debate in educational administration and leadership is to ultimately become more fruitful it must extend to include critical attention to the assumptions of others. Alternatively, as English (2006) put it, advancing scholarship requires criticism of it philosophically, empirically and logically. To locate this further in an historical dialogue, Bachelard (1984) denies science the certainties of a definitive heritage and reminds us that it (science) can only progress by perpetually calling into question the very principles of its own constructs.

Making sense of the heterogeneous contributions to educational administration and leadership literatures is complex. For many, the competing theories of organising in education are incommensurate and the possibility of any form of equivalence is limited to artificial merging or conflation of theoretical positions (e.g. as is often done in the ‘mixed methods’ approach) without due attention to the distinctions of their underlying generative principles. Apart from a very superficial, and for the research field rather useless, level of agreement, there is a significant confrontation between different truths expressed by scholars. Overcoming such requires a conceptualisation of the field based on scholarly pluralism rather than relativism. I use ‘theoretical pluralism’ in a different sense to Griffiths (1997). He mobilises it as a form of conflationism where multiple perspectives are brought together to engage with a single problem. In contrast, I propose that pluralism is a recognition, and acknowledgement, of alternate positions without the prescription of a single approach. Here, the logic of academic work – argument and refutation – becomes of primary importance. This repositions engagement with (‘other’) scholarship within emergent distinction generation activity. The attribution of quality to scholarship becomes about the justification of claims and their defence in the face of critique from alternatives. In short, scholarship is a generative relational activity.

Following Donati (2015), I consider scholars to be auctors – meaning s/he who generates – rather than actors. The subtle, but significant, shift is to move beyond conflationism (actors shaped by, and shaping of, conditions) to a relational ontology (auctors as the generators of spatio-temporal conditions). The theoretical contribution/s of auctors owe as much of their constitution to the set of relations they share with other positions as they do anything else. Concern is less with the exhibitionism of data and procedure – a trend common in US-centric scholarship – and more with the distinctions one has with competing theories. Contributing to and potentially recasting the field is difficult.
However, as the pioneering Australian scholar Bill Walker (1976) notes ‘scientists cannot be held back by the constraints of mere difficulty’ (p. 423).

**From a field to traditions**

The paradigm wars of the 1970s and 1980s had a significant effect on an already fragmented educational administration and leadership field (e.g. Waite 2002). Different epistemological positions – although often limited to the analytical dualism of quantitative or qualitative (and this is why the most common usages of ‘mixed methods’ is nothing more than conflationism) – were pitted against one another and the traces of deep-seated divisions remain in contemporary scholarship. Gronn (2017) ponders whether the current fragmentation and insular dialogue is the legacy of the post-paradigmatic warfare settlement. To some extent I agree, as the paradigm wars have arguably strengthened divisions, however, the social rather than physical foundations of educational administration and leadership had already legitimised the fragmentation. As with any social scientific field, there are collections of researchers built upon specific interests, informal activities (e.g. workshops, symposium, and colloquia), projects and publications (Fitz 1999, Gunter 2000, Oplatka 2009). The theoretical position held by group members provides the ‘intellectual lenses through which problems are defined and their solutions sought’ (English 2001, p. 32) primarily through determining what ‘knowledge and practices are to be regarded as legitimate and in what knowledge forms and practices they are prepared to invest’ (Fitz 1999, p. 313). Again, for illustrative purposes, Table 2 displays an overview of major theories in educational administration and leadership and what they mean for problems and possible resolutions.

The theoretical relativism of educational administration and leadership does not grant equivalence to competing positions but instead they exist in parallel – ignoring the ‘other’. Unlike the Kuhnian (1962) ‘normal science’, more common in the natural sciences, where scholarship coalesces around the dominant paradigmatic position of the time – through a consensus of concepts, procedures, and forms of argument – in the social sciences traditions matter. The consequences of the ontological insecurity of educational administration and leadership and its social rather than physical foundation have led to a splintered field based on ideology (e.g. Samier 2016). Ideological divisions are far greater to overcome than epistemological and this is arguably the single greatest challenge for educational administration and leadership both now and into the forthcoming.

For those new to the field, or socialised into the ‘recent literature’ phenomenon (Hallinger 2013), the trajectories of positions can often be missed. Scholarship can only be understood through an examination of the intellectual histories that have shaped inquiry. Educational administration and leadership has a trajectory built upon history, or at least the past (e.g. Baron and Taylor 1969), and according to Samier (2006) should be an historical field. This history, and historical lens, is often overlooked in the obsession with ‘currency’ and ‘the future’. My personal preference is ‘the forthcoming’ rather than ‘future’ as the latter assumes a distance between the here and the now, whereas the former recognises the forthcoming embedded in the present – that which itself is the manifestation of the past. This is more than mere semantics, it speaks to the longevity of ideology and arguably how despite well over a century’s work of research the field continues to have as many, if not more, questions than it does answers.
Table 2. Overview of approaches.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logical empiricism</th>
<th>Naturalistic coherentism</th>
<th>Subjectivity</th>
<th>Social critical</th>
<th>Relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The problems that have been identified (issues that have caught authors’ attention)</td>
<td>Organisations not performing to the desired level</td>
<td>Organisations are not functioning optimally until they demonstrate coherence</td>
<td>Conflict between individual/collective values and those of organisation or beyond</td>
<td>Existing explanations of organising activity are limiting the possibility of alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisations can be more effective and efficient (perpetual improvement)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social institutions function as a technology of oppression on individual freedoms</td>
<td>Contemporary attempts to move beyond orthodoxy do not provide alternatives but iterations of existing theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The solution</td>
<td>Find out how do organisations work and what works most effectively/efficiently in bringing about desired outcomes</td>
<td>Human behaviour is not random and failures/errors can be filtered out</td>
<td>Find out whose values are (and are not) embodied in organising activity</td>
<td>Find out in the ways in which power is exercised in existing social structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Science (of the naturalistic coherent kind) is best for understanding human behaviour</td>
<td>Alignment of individual/collective values. May involve changing the people and/or the values</td>
<td>Remove barriers to individual freedom for the purpose of a better society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Illuminate the underlying generative principles of existing theorisations and methodologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inscription of organising activity in spatio-temporal conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is rejected</td>
<td>That high performance is not a universal possibility</td>
<td>That science is not appropriate for understanding educational administration</td>
<td>Organisational activity can be explained solely through structures and data</td>
<td>Existing power relations are a logical progression of society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explanations that cannot be empirically verified (e.g. the metaphysical)</td>
<td>That all forms of knowledge are of equal worth</td>
<td>The organisation as a thing</td>
<td>There is no alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The possibility of a single collective voice/shared meaning/group mind</td>
<td>Social structures are a fait accompli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emancipation is not possible at scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Uncritical adoption of the ordinary language of the everyday (pre-scientific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The separation of activity from time and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Analytical dualisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Critique without the provision of alternatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Static forever more conceptualisations based on substantialist things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
without any serious deviation in the object of analysis. As with Gronn (2017), I believe we need to accept the fragmentation of educational administration and leadership. Significantly though, as with many others before me, this diversity should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. Kuhn (1962) argues that such diversity is a sign of a healthy science. The field is not ‘over-diversified’ (Oplatka 2009) but does have a problem with dialogue and debate. To this end, I propose that a solution to ideological division is to be found in the logic of academic work.

While contemporary educational administration and leadership is quick to reject any sense of ‘science’, critics are quite happy to argue for greater accumulation of knowledge, building upon one another, and the centrality of ideas, concepts and procedure – basically, what Kuhn (1962) labels ‘normal science’. What is lost in this appeal for linear progression and rational process is that the rejection of science is nothing more than a rhetorical game. As a post-Theory Movement move (even if unrecognised), there is an attempt to distance oneself from positivism and the somewhat naïve belief in an objective reality and objective observer. The equating of ‘science’ with ‘positivism’ (or more often ‘logical empiricism’ as a particular branch of positivism) is highly problematic. There are multiple forms of science, and the simplistic dismissal of science does little to advance the standing and credibility of the field within and beyond the academy or, more importantly, generate the conditions for original contributions to knowledge.

The positivist philosophy of linear progress and knowledge accumulation cannot cope with the diversity of educational administration and leadership. Research traditions are relational. They cannot be clearly demarcated as they can only be understood in relation to others (this is not to endorse an analytical dualism, rather to illuminate the relational and enduring dynamics of knowledge production). The presence of different scholarly communities is not a problem and arguably a sign of a potentially fruitful field of inquiry. Numerous intellectual resources have been crafted to engage with this diversity, including Ribbins and Gunter’s mapping (Gunter 2001, Gunter and Ribbins 2002, Ribbins and Gunter 2002), Thrupp and Willmott’s (2003) work on textual apologists and, to a lesser extent, Evers and Lakomski’s (1991) commentary on methodological controversies, just to name a few. In the past decade however, this work has been primarily limited to Oplatka (2009, 2010) and Gunter (2016). Despite these resources, it is quite possible educational administration and leadership scholars have become resigned to the fragmentation of the field and looked elsewhere for intellectual stimulation. Any resignation of the field to fragmentation and the lack of need to engage with the other does particular things to the literatures, especially academic journals.

**Locating in literatures**

Academic outputs, and particularly journal articles, are the currency of researchers (Eacott 2016). Journals remain an arena where dialogue (not necessarily debate) about knowledge production, the nature of the field and promising lines of inquiry takes place (Immegart 1990, Gunter 2002, Oplatka 2009, Thomas 2010). Analysis of academic productivity (Tschannen-Moran et al. 2000, Eacott 2009, 2014, Hallinger and Bryant 2013a, 2013b), journal rankings (Mayo et al. 2006, Richardson and McLeod 2009, Cherkowski et al. 2012, Eacott 2016) and journal citation analysis (Rodríguez-Ruiz 2009, Wang and Bowers 2016) have become more common in the past 10 years. Many of the founding
journals of educational administration are into, or about to enter, their sixth decade: *Journal of Educational Administration* (founded in 1963), *Educational Administration Quarterly* (established in 1965), *Journal of Educational Administration and History* (established in 1968) and *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* (established in 1972). Significant anniversaries are often reason for reflection and projection (e.g. Campbell 1972, 1979, Thomas 1982, 1987, 2012, Pounder and Johnson 2007, Fitzgerald and Gunter 2008, Gunter and Fitzgerald 2008, Bush and Crawford 2012) and as Helen Gunter and Tanya Fitzgerald’s editorship of *Journal of Educational Administration and History* comes to a conclusion, this issue and the following are no exception.

Recently, Wang and Bowers (2016) sought to understand how knowledge is exchanged and disseminated in educational administration and leadership through a journal citation analysis. Building on past citation analyses in the field (e.g. Haller 1968, Campbell 1979, Haas et al. 2007, Richardson and McLeod 2009) they used social network analysis to illuminate the relationships between different journals. Not surprisingly, there was a geographic skew in journal clusters, with the core cluster being US-centric featuring *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Journal of Educational Administration* (mindful this is based in Hong Kong currently, after a long history in Australia) and *Journal of School Leadership*, but also broader journals such as *American Educational Research Journal* and *Teachers’ College Record*. Richardson and McLeod (2009) had previously built an argument on where academics should publish to get noticed based on what ‘they see’ (as there is no empirical justification on the choice) as the two leading journals in the field: *Educational Administration Quarterly* and *Journal of School Leadership*. Subsequent work by Cherkowski et al. (2012), using an active scholar assessment (although a small and unrepresentative sample), showed that awareness is not necessarily positively correlated with quality. For example, *Journal of Educational Administration and History* was 35th for ‘awareness’ but 8th for ‘quality’ (see also Eacott 2013). Their argument for such data is that it is ‘possibly reflective of a relatively new, developing, top quality journal or for a top quality journal in a relatively small niche field’ (p. 218). The latter is an interesting observation. Fitzgerald and Gunter (2008) note the specific readership that *Journal of Educational Administration and History* attracts. This is potentially true of all journals as the theoretical fragmentation of the field has been further legitimised.


Furthermore, the analysis of Wang and Bowers (2016) did not show evidence of a canon for educational administration and leadership. There was reference to the Murphy and Louis (1999) *Handbook of research on educational administration* but not the earlier Boyan (1988) edition. Not that too much can be made of simply counting citations as it does little to illuminate the ways work was cited. That said, throughout Wang and Bowers’ list of most cited works there is no mention of Halpin, Griffiths, Willower, Greenfield, Hodgkinson, Bates, Foster, Evers and Lakomski, Blackmore, Baron and
Taylor, or (Bill) Walker. Pioneering scholars from various theoretical positions have been silenced, a forgotten foundation. Hallinger (2013) warns that we should not forget the roots of our scholarship and that despite a privileging of current literature, high-quality research retains an especially long shelf life. However, with an increase in ideological papers (Oplatka 2012) and a decline in epistemology as a topic of interest – at least in *Educational Administration Quarterly* (Wang et al. 2016), there is a lack of continuity in the field’s dialogue. Decoupling discourse from its history, a lack of attention to the underlying generative principles of research, and the absence of dialogue and debate between competing theories further destabilises the field and reduces scholarship to parallel monologues.

### Parallel monologues

Willower (1981) argues that constructive controversies give a field its vitality. The lack of rigorous and robust internal dialogue in educational administration and leadership is a well-rehearsed claim (e.g. Campbell 1979, Haas et al. 2007, Pounder and Johnson 2007). The expansion of writing in the field, mindful that Taylor (1969) noted this over 40 years ago, has not facilitated internal dialogue. This may be the result of the orthodoxy of a functionalist (classic) empiricism – that which is privileged in the field on the basis of an ‘applied’ focus – frequently leading to a selective engagement with the literature (often only supportive or superficial critiques) rather than what Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) describe as positioning one’s work to make a contribution through establishing a stance on the coherence of the literatures and problematising the existing body of work. It has been some time since systematic debate, the scholarly act of argument and refutation, appeared in educational administration and leadership journals.

While reading for my doctorate two exchanges inspired and frustrated me in an enduring way. In short, they sparked my intellectual curiosity. The first was a series of exchanges between Gronn (1982, 1984, 1987), Thomas (1986, Thomas et al. 1981) and Willower (1983) following the publication of Martin and Willower (1981) and Kmetz and Willower (1982). Making public the disagreements between academics on how best to theorise, study and argue educational administration and leadership was exciting. It set up my expectations for academic conferences and reading journals – a primary concern for the debating of ideas. That said, educational administration and leadership research conferences and journals have not lived up to this expectation (at least for me) as there is little dialogue and debate and more talking past one another or to a sympathetic audience. Tony Bush (2017) does reject my claim here though. To some extent, this talking past one another played out in the Gronn and Thomas discussion as neither altered from their original position as a result of the dialogue – simply remained resolute. The second example appears in the (ongoing) work of Evers and Lakomski. Following their germinal text *Knowing educational administration* (Evers and Lakomski 1991), there were special issues of *Educational Administration Quarterly* (volume 32, issue 3), *Educational Management and Administration* (volume 21, issue 3), some dialogue in *Journal of Educational Administration* (volume 32, issue 4), and the reproduction of these exchanges as a section in *Exploring Educational Administration* (Evers and Lakomski 1996). After originally advancing their naturalistic coherentism research programme by articulating what they saw as flaws or limitations in alternate positions, Evers and Lakomski recognised that to convince others of their evolving framework they needed more evidence,
argument and examples on what their alternate approach would look like. To achieve this they sought to strengthen their framework through debate against critics. These debates helped to shape the programme by encouraging – if not forcing – greater clarity and substantial extensions to the work. Embodying an openness and ongoing approach to scholarship, matters that could be defended were retained (although arguably changed as a result of the exchange) and those that could not be were refined or left behind. This engagement with others, and thinking programmatically rather than from project-to-project was central to my coming to understand what scholarship is and can be.

Moving beyond parallel monologues and explicitly engaging with alternative approaches is central to asking questions about knowledge frontiers, building on their successes and pushing those further. As I have argued previously:

To overcome potential scepticism about new claims and/or substantial departures from the orthodoxy, arguments need to be grounded in the logic of academic work – argument and refutation. If we embrace the notion that scholarship is pedagogical, then the publication of an argument is not the end of it. Publication serves, as Berger (1966) argues, as an invitation – an invitation to think with, through, and where necessary against, in the spirit of the scholarly enterprise. Through the composing of a systematic argument others can engage with your knowledge claims to support, extend or challenge them. This is only possible through engagement. By engaging with counter claims, refinements lead to greater clarity. With greater clarity come advances in knowledge. If educational leadership aspires to advance knowledge and not simply produce more, then it is imperative to engage with the other and move beyond parallel monologues. (Lakomski et al. 2017, p. 188)

The explicit ‘response’ and/or ‘rejoinder’ are rare, if even present, in contemporary educational administration and leadership journals (a search of Table of Contents for journals over the past decade confirms this claim). The same can be said for many conferences too. Instead of engaging with one another, we (as I am equally complicit in this agenda) are more inclined to ignore those of a different persuasion. Nicety prevails in journals, examinations of theses and the like. Rarely do we call each other out apart from in blind/anonymouse reviews where there is little dialogue and instead one-way communication. This has arguably led to a reduction in the field of research programmes and an increase in projects. It is not uncommon to find researchers jumping from hot topic to hot topic in the pursuit of the next grant (or at least in trying to be competitive for the next grant as educational administration and leadership has never been well funded; Campbell and Newell 1973, McCarthy and Kuh 1997, Mulford 2007). The possibility of being able to write Evers and Lakomski’s Knowing educational administration now, being able to identify contemporary scholars building distinctive research programmes – not just a body of work – is questionable. Despite the ongoing expansion of the literatures, where theory is constructed as self-indulgent and exotic (Gunter 2013), is there even the prospect of a looming theoretical crisis or significant disruption? As Samier (2013) notes:

In the field I eventually settled in, educational administration, significant changes were taking place, beginning in the late 1960s and the 1970s and accelerating throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with feminist critiques, the School of Critical Theory, the emergence of hermeneutics and phenomenology, the transformation of organizational behaviour into organizational studies as a broadly encompassing pursuit that included culture, micro-politics, aesthetic analysis, and psychoanalysis, all spilling into administrative theory as postmodern critiques appeared in English. And then … Not nothing, as this might have been a state preferable to
the rise of neo-liberalism, the New Public Management, and the market model fostered and distributed internationally through globalization. (pp. 234–235)

While neo-liberalism, managerialism and the like have come under consistent attack – so to the performance of education systems and educators, across the globe, there is somewhat surprisingly (and troublingly) an absence of theoretical crisis in contemporary educational administration and leadership. I am not saying there is an absence of critique, as such work continues to advance – even if on the margins (Wilkinson and Eacott 2013) – rather, it is difficult to point out any signs of deep ruptures or confusions in dialogue and debate. Most concerning about this situation is that no significant breakthrough is possible within the confines of the status quo. Greenfield did not disrupt the hegemonic logical empiricism of the Theory Movement by only engaging with a sympathetic audience. Instead he took them on, engaged with their ideas, refuted their claims, advanced his own and pushed knowledge frontiers. It is, however, to be noted that this came at a cost, both professionally and arguably less well documented, personally (e.g. Greenfield and Ribbins 1993).

A social epistemology

Consistent with my goal to intervene and not just critique, I propose an alternate, a relational approach that focuses on illuminating the ontological and epistemological preliminaries of scholarship to foster dialogue and debate. It is the absence of debate, the violation of the logic of academic work, that I would argue is central to any perceived morbidity of the field in England (Gunter 2010) and Australia (Gronn 2008) among others, and a broader departure of scholars to more intellectually rewarding endeavours (Smyth 2008), leaving for the most part, those primarily concerned with ‘getting things done’ (Thomson 2001). A social epistemology has the potential, or at least promise, of providing ‘a’ (not ‘the’) set of theoretical (taking theory as method) resources to facilitate purposive and meaningful engagement with others and privileging of the logic of academic work.

The uncritical adoption of a social construction is highly problematic for educational administration and leadership. There is great difficulty in studying the social world in which one is involved. The boundaries between the empirical and the epistemic blur through our ontological complicity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Alternatives get rejected rather than engaged with. However, if we go beyond our investment in the world as it is, we can begin to subject to scientific scrutiny everything that makes the orthodoxy possible. In short, we illuminate the ontological and epistemological preliminaries of our claims rather than engage in premature empiricism or editorialising based on a pre-existing normative orientation. This opens up an avenue for engagement with the other that is not solely about a particular model but the generation of knowledge production.

Whether they are acknowledged or not, all research mobilises ontology and epistemology. This is not to argue that all contributions to educational administration and leadership are ontological and/or epistemological pieces rather that authors make explicit their contribution to the field. Articulating the underlying generative principles of scholarship enables a clear demonstration of distinctions from others. What is the same, different, new, how does it relate to others? Not what supporting literature can one find, but doing work on the state of knowledge production and how a piece contributes to
ongoing dialogue and debate. Attempts at conflations cannot resolve deep-seated positions of difference in the field, but scholarship is a relational activity and distinctions are only possible in relation to others.

The primacy of the empirical problem has created an issue for educational administration and leadership research. The universalism of education yet the perceived particularism of practice have meant that context has been reduced to localised physical space. Thinking of scholars as auteurs means that context is not separate from knowledge production, but part of it. Contemporary dialogue and debate finds it roots not in the issues of today but in the trajectories of past. There is a reason that a number of social critical theorists are located in Australia given the legacy of the Deakin School (e.g. Bates, Blackmore, Smyth – and alumni such as Thomson). Despite the denial of the Theory Movement in current discussions, and the absence of historical recognition (e.g. the Tayloristic roots of many departments of educational administration), logical empiricism (and a functionalist version of that) remains the orthodoxy of US-based journals and conference. This is not to say that all knowledge producers are the product of their locales – as such a deterministic logic is highly flawed and contrary to my alignment with auteurs – but to draw attention to how as scholars we are both emergent and generative of our spatio-temporal conditions. The embedded and embodied auteur is to be recognised and acknowledged.

The intellectual history of educational administration and leadership has generated multiple research traditions. Their presence – mindful that the points of demarcation are not easily identified – is less problematic than the lack of engagement. The analytical dualism constructed by scholars to create the ‘other’ as a separate entity is not helpful for advancing knowledge claims. Thinking relationally does not negate different research traditions but instead is based on the notion that understanding a tradition (and its legacies) can only be done in relation. That is, you cannot understand one position without conceiving of it in relation to another. They are not separate at all, different yes but not separate. Failing to acknowledge this leads to parallel monologues and the inability to generate robust scholarly distinctions that can hold up in the face of critique. Relational thinking facilitates moving beyond the critique for the sake of critique and provides alternatives. In doing so, a social epistemology of knowledge production is a productive space.

**Conclusion**

Educational administration and leadership is ontologically insecure. As a field of inquiry, it has a long-standing reputation for low-quality scholarship (Coladarci and Getzels 1955, Walton 1955, Eacott 2016) and conservatism (Waite 1998). Surprisingly, educational administration and leadership literatures frequently express dissatisfaction with the status quo – a change-focused agenda. Anniversary issues (e.g. 50th volume and/or changes in editorship) are opportune times to take stock and make contributions to advancing knowledge more explicit.

Hallinger (2013) argues that reviews of research are the ‘under-appreciated workhorses of academic publication’ (p. 127) and Bush (1999) contends that the ‘prize for a successful review could be a new beginning and continued growth’ (p. 249). Orthodox reviews of educational administration and leadership research have focused on content (Hallinger and Chen 2015), method (Byrd 2007, Byrd and Eddy 2009), geographic location (Eyal and Rom 2015, Hallinger and Bryant 2016), or a combination in the form of descriptive
analysis of contributions (Murphy et al. 2007, Bush and Crawford 2012). These approaches rely upon a substantialist-based ontology that separates the social world into various entities capable of being identified and measured. What I have sought to offer is a commentary on contemporary educational administration and leadership literatures – primarily journals – with particular attention to the underlying generative principles of scholarship. Foregrounding relations has enabled me to move beyond the positivist ideal, concerned with the accumulation and linear progression of knowledge – the next big thing, or breakthrough being the incremental development of all that has gone before. In contrast, the logic of academic work, argument and refutation, has been central to my claim.

Engaging with issues of knowledge production is a demanding task (Gunter and Ribbins 2002, Oplatka 2009) and whether what I have offered qualifies as a ‘successful review’ cannot be known in advance. Journals play a major role in the artificial partitioning of knowledge claims and the proliferation of ranking systems and managerialist requirements combined with incentives to only publish in certain outlets is shifting the ways knowledge production works (Eacott 2016). The relational alternative that I advance here, and elsewhere, is based on the premise that we can only come to understand our knowledge claims in relation to others. This is not about establishing a binary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, rather, it is about unfolding knowledge production.

There is considerable interest in educational administration and leadership as a domain of inquiry, yet the quality of scholarship has been consistently questioned enduringly. Core to this matter, both now and into the forthcoming, are the foundations of (social) science and its manifestation in the social scientific systems of knowledge production, dissemination and translation. In concluding, following Berger (1966), in the interests of advancing a social epistemology of education administration and leadership, this paper is an invitation. An invitation to think with, through and against what I have argued, publication is but the continuation of a conversation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Helen Gunter and Tanya Fitzgerald for the invitation to contribute to this special issue. Their ongoing support of scholarship that does not fit the norm of educational administration and leadership research is much appreciated. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of an earlier version of this paper and the questions they asked which sharpened my thinking. That said, all errors and omissions remains my fault alone.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Scott Eacott is currently senior lecturer in the School of Education, UNSW Sydney. His research interests and contributions fall into three areas: i) advancing relational theorising; ii) Bourdieusian theory; and iii) knowledge production in educational administration and leadership.
References


Hallinger, P., 2013. A conceptual framework for systematic reviews of research in educational leadership and management. *Journal of educational administration*, 51 (2), 126–149.


Richardson, J.W. and McLeod, S., 2009. Where should educational leadership authors publish to get noticed by the top journals in the discipline? Educational administration quarterly, 45 (3), 631–639.


Rodríguez-Ruiz, Ó., 2009. The citation indexes and the quantification of knowledge. Journal of educational administration, 47 (2), 250–266.


Samier, E., 2013. Where have the disruptions gone? Educational administration’s theoretical capacity for analysing or fomenting disruption. International journal of leadership in education, 16 (2), 234–244.


