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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Problem

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

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Leadership as the Default

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

The Organization

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

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

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

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

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My Argument

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

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

- Rigorous (social) scientific inquiry calls into question the very foundations of popular labels such as 'leadership', 'management', and 'administration';

- The contemporary condition is constitutive of, and emergent from, the image of organizing;

- Foregrounding relations enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, tensions of structure/agency, universalism/particularism, and individualism/holism; and

- In doing so, there is a generative – rather than merely critical – space to theorize organizing.

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

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

Ontological Complicity

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

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

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

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

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

Under-problematized Language

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

A group (i.e., n=≥2) requires some form of organizing.

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

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

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

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

> *'Leadership', 'management', and 'administration' are three distinct, even if related, analytical categories.*

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

The Importance of Context

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

> *context (social structures) → activity*

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

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

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

activity (agency) → context (social structures)

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

activity (agency) ↔ context (social structures)

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

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

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

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

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

Analytical Dualism

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

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

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

Generative Theorizing

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

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

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

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

My Reasoning

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

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

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

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

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

Organizing Activity

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

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

Auctor

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

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

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

Spatio-temporal Conditions

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

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

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

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

Relevance

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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