Moving Forward Amidst the Swirls: Reframing The Relational Approach as a Step 'Beyond' Leadership

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Abstract	Article Info
Embedding the relational approach as a research project is a viable alternative to normative conceptualisation and practice of leadership. However, as the shift from substantialist assumptions to relational theorising gathers momentum, the evolving nature of the argument so far suggests that more needs to be done to bolster its robustness. Rather than being a refutation, this commentary reengages with the relational approach in a way that attempts to locate it within the historical development of theorising in educational leadership as a specialised field. More specifically, it focuses a large part of its analysis on the strength of underpinning ontological theorising which, arguably, nullifies binaries without accounting for (assumptions about) them as it shifts its focus on relations. To ensure parallel monologues begin to engage and that auctors draw on an array of knowledges, the commentary reviews the relational approach and provides alternative avenues and resources to further its aims	

Introduction

One way of contextualising Scott Eacott's (2018a) championing of the relational approach (RA) in educational leadership and management theory and practice is by seeking to grasp the different traditions from which the field has evolved, in order to validate (or not) the call to move 'beyond' where it is currently situated. By using the adverb 'beyond', Eacott invites us to look past 'leadership' and take the next step in the theoretical chronology of the field which would bring us to a new theoretical age themed RA. It is this combination of chronological and thematic remapping of a theoretical field (Kamler & Thomson 2014), such as educational leadership and management, that this commentary seeks to review and retool.

As synthesised in the table below, the commentary disputes the suggestion that the field is moving from an atheoretical era (normative leadership) to a theory-based era (beyond leadership). If 'beyond' is taken to represent a theoretical movement, then the commentary suggests that what is taken as an atheoretically dominated normative leadership field is actually theoretical, an 'already beyond' field. To be chronologically accurate, Eacott's call to move 'beyond leadership' represents a move 'beyond' an 'already beyond' field: hence, "moving beyond 'beyond'". Thematically, under the heading "what could be lying beyond 'beyond' (or beyond leadership) for Eacott", the commentary highlights the pertinence of some notable features of RA while critiquing others, particularly the current ontological basis of RA which seeks to overcome essentialist binaries by recasting them as relations without accounting for substantialist assumptions. A clearing of the ground exercise is therefore undertaken where subjectivity and activity within RA's core logic are problematised and given a more refined understanding within an arguably broader perception of

reality. Drawing on the discussion thus far, the final part of the commentary is dedicated to a nuanced critical realist informed version of RA as an alternative theorising to Eacott's post-Bourdieusian approach and hopefully provides another viable (perhaps more productive) way of furthering RA's main concerns.

Table 1.

Emerging theoretical traditions within RA for ELM

Chronological mapping of Educational Leadership & Management (ELM) theory (ies).		Eacott	Elonga Mboyo
Eacott	Elonga Mboyo		
	ELM's theoretical roots recognised		Sociology, political science, economics and general management
ELM is an atheoretical field (Nische)	ELM's 1st theoretical step: an already beyond field making a *horizontal* theoretical expansion based on *diversity* theories.	Leadership with normative approaches, models of leadership, atheoretical and binary-dominated parallel monologues.	Leadership with theoretically-informed models of leadership and binary-dominated parallel monologues with implied and fragmented contestations and criticality.
ELM's 1st theoretical step: beyond leadership (Era of sustained criticality within ELM)	ELM's 2nd theoretical step: beyond an already beyond field making a *vertical* theoretical ascent based on *difference*. (Era of sustained criticality within ELM)	Overcome binaries through a core logic that recasts them as relations where auctors generate spatio-temporal conditions through organising activity. A major ontological obstacle unresolved.	Drawing on their formless capabilities, auctors engage in organising activity of various stakeholders' actions in order to generate spatial temporal conditions configured in (in)complete stages of actuality. Layered ontology.
Thematic/philosophical traditions of RA as a beyond leadership theory.		Post-Bourdieusian informed RA	Nuanced critical realist informed RA

An Already 'Beyond' Field?

Educational leadership and management is an amalgam of concepts that have drawn from theories outside the field of education and in other settings / disciplines such as sociology, political science, economics and general management (Bush, 2011). For example, the 'countervailing tendency away from hierarchy towards egalitarianism' (Gronn, 2010, p. 407) seen through normative bureaucratic and democratic models of leadership arguably draws its theoretical roots from Weberian and post-modern sociology (Bush 2011). Even an egalitarian, democratic or distributed normative approach is not without its own critical theorising as Lumby (2013), for example, demonstrates. Gronn (2010, p. 417) even sees distributed leadership not as a normative approach but simply as 'a situation'. These developments, although fragmented and without an overarching critical theoretical template, have, understandably, led Bush (2011) to argue that the field 'has progressed from being a new field dependent upon ideas developed in other settings to become an established discipline with its own theories' (Bush, 2011, p. 15). Hence, educational leadership and management is, arguably, an already 'beyond' field theoretically which has delivered formal, collegial, authentic, to name but a few, models of (Bush, 2011) or approaches to (Northouse, 2013) leadership. These normative theories, that are multifaceted in nature (Bush, 2011, p. 27), may not be explicit in different works but underpin them. This, therefore, questions Niesche's (2018, p. 151) generalised suggestion that the 'field is largely atheoretical' even though the author focuses on a specific critical connotation of theory. While outlining the various 'models', which is arguably a bridging term for theory-based practices of leadership in schools, Bush notes not only the diversity but also the (inherent) contested nature of these approaches.

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The tensions, contradictions and 'discord of multiples voices' (Bolman and Deal, 1997, p. 11) suggest the existence of a 'critical' element in the new body of knowledge being produced.

It is not the intention here to engage in an extensive review of criticality within the literature in this era beyond the indicative contestations illustrated at the start of this section. Suffice to say that the very suggestion that 'parallel monologues' inhabit the field implies silent criticality that, if not engaged, assumes the mainstream position in different pockets or enclaves. Analogously, the far-right and far-left political camps could be said to adopt parallel discourses in their separate spaces without necessarily suggesting the lack of ideological contestations that could be overcome. Although the diversification of theories is embedded in the very emergence of the field, this first stage of 'beyond-ness' within which the field supposedly lies from its original sociological, political roots has, arguably, come to symbolise orthodoxy. Any (implied) criticality and contestation in and across parallel monologues have 'hovered in the wings of mainstream educational leadership studies' (Niesche, 2018, p. 145). To move beyond these normative approaches is moving beyond 'an already beyond' field; hence, the subheading below.

Moving Beyond 'Beyond'

Niesche (2018) cites the drive for the field to provide 'best practices that work' to justify its impactful viability in an increasingly (marketised) knowledge society (Hargreaves, 2003) as one of the reasons for the field's cosy and stagnant state of play. Context is important (Hallinger, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2017; O'Donoghue & Clarke, 2007) for generating knowledge about policy and practice. Hence, a possible other explanation to enduring normative approaches

could, arguably, lie in the internationalisation of outlets of scholarly works that rightly seek to expand their multidimensional coverage of leadership practices all over the world. In that process, *diversity*, which celebrates not only practices across the world but also theories underpinning those practices (e.g. Gur & Day, 2014), seems to have taken precedence over *difference* which seeks wider (cross-theory and practice) significance (Schweisfurth, 2001). This horizontal siloed expansion (in the way of application and testing of existing theories further afield) seems to have slowed the vertical theoretical ascent. Unlike Niesche and Eacott, who see the quest for *difference* as the field's first theoretical step beyond leadership, this commentary suggests the quest for *diversity* as an earlier theoretical step (an already beyond field – see previous section).

Niesche evidences the vertical ascent in theory with the distinctively sustained level of published literature that specifically focuses on critical perspectives in the last decade. It is worth noting that the term 'critical' is used in the way of Derrida's (1997) deconstruction that, in this case, 'engages with terms such as leadership in order for its limitations, tensions and contradictions to be identified' (Niesche, 2018, p. 146). As one among other critical approaches (Niesche, 2018), RA is not necessarily a superior argument as critiqued by English (2018) but a different one with the potential to break new grounds in theorising, researching and practising 'leadership' in (educational) organisations. However, RA is somewhat different from some approaches listed by Niesche (2018) which, in line with the theme of *diversity* above, seek to give voice where 'there has been vast silence' (p. 150). This rather dialogic approach claiming 'a space for lost voices' is short of critical which seeks 'to reform the social world' (Deetz, 2009, p. 30) and could lead to counter narratives that are positioned alongside each other.

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As such, "the already 'beyond' field" presents theory-based models of leadership that are only partial (Bush, 2011) and knowledge domains that are singular (Ribbins & Gunter, 2002) which leaves the field fragmented (Eacott, 2015a). RA, arguably, seeks to look beyond 'beyond' (or beyond leadership - in Eacott's terminology) by weaving these monologues into a 'dialogue' with wider significance in a way that reforms the social world. That ontological and, especially for Eacott, epistemological reformation of the social world is presumably the infinite *organising activity* within relations. Despite Eacott's success in developing sociological resources to that effect (see stimulus paper and key features revisited in the following paragraphs), it is legitimate to ask, as does Bush (2018), if this simply recycles old ideas and that the deconstruction is somewhat engaged in the contestations that have characterised the field (Bush, 2011) since its first stage of 'beyond-ness'. This argument is, however, dependent on whether our understanding of theories in the field's first stage of beyond-ness and Eacott's evolving clarity in unpacking RA (Eacott, 2015a; 2018a) are aligned. That said, even dissonances, refutations and reinterpretations are essential ingredients in re-mapping the field and moving forward amidst the swirls. Otherwise, it could also be argued that RA's current sociological resources bring a different and fully-fledged lens through which to recast old and new ideas. These pertinent concerns and claim that RA is a different lens of criticality are discussed and problematised further in the following paragraphs.

So, what could be lying beyond 'beyond' for Eacott?

This question, aimed at exploring the thematic / theoretical nature of RA, is purposely poorly framed to underscore the tendency for normative epistemologies to quantify, pinpoint and reify an external entity that has to be known in advance or in the end. Owing to the indeterminacy of human interactions outside normative epistemology, RA's social epistemology breaks out of this confine and could be best grasped as a methodological theory of 'leadership' where the process is part and parcel of resulting new realities in theorising and practising leadership.

This explains why Eacott has, in this special issue, implicitly or explicitly recognised that the process is, in itself, the outcome. The methodological artefact that is RA does not only lead to but also represents his much needed 'at scale theoretical breakthrough' (Eacott, 2018b). This bold move will certainly attract various reactions including the following critical embrace. For example, it is worth bearing in mind the view that a 'single at scale breakthrough', however critical in nature, could lead to a guru-like normalising effect (Eacott, 2017) and, therefore, stifle as it recasts (as well as replaces other bodies of knowledge) and acquires mainstream status. RA's 'at scale breakthrough' status can only hold in as far as it brings marginalised perspectives to the fold, in order to make plurality centre-stage without amplifying THE single at scale thinking as mainstream. Like all theories that must recognise their inherent limitations (Morgan, 1997), RA is boxed into the same paradox that must be skilfully negotiated. This does not imply that RA itself as a theory has to be indeterminate and shrouded in imprecision. However, while locating and asserting its theoretical self-identity on the one hand, it is called to engage in or promote (relational) conversation which, according to

Maurice Blanchot's notion of conversation, should lead to deprioritising itself (Bojesen, 2018), on the other hand. As it is explained later on in this commentary, this tension could be resolved by introducing the concept of 'relay point' where RA oscillates between foregrounding and deprioritising its 'at scale' theoretical self-identity.

That said, whether RA is constitutive of or single-handedly represents an (at scale) 'theory turn', to have pitched it as 'beyond' leadership (or beyond the first stage of beyond-ness) needs clarifying, at least, on two fronts. Firstly, it is not for the first time that relationality is deployed when discussing leadership. That said, some writers who use this concept discuss it as a form of distributed leadership, which recognises the shared, collaborative or connective nature of organisational interactions, particularly of women leaders (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011), as opposed to the heroic one-person show (e.g. Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). To this extent, Bush (2018) is right to question whether RA brings anything new to the debate. But RA, as a vertical theoretical ascent, is different from distributed leadership in that it engages not only with how leadership should be practised but also with the way (normative or not) theories of educational leadership can be simultaneously deconstructed and reconstructed with the envisaged benefits that such relational dialogue would bring. Secondly, Eacott does with RA what other scholarly works of the first stage of beyond-ness did / do by drawing on theories from the field of sociology, for example, to formulate a reasoning whose distinctiveness can be traced in the way that it reforms the social world and brings marginalised approaches to the centre of the debate. It is, however, the sociological blocks that Eacott draws on to build his relational intellectual edifice that deserve further scrutiny.

The Ontological Sticking Point with RA at Present

For a theory like RA, which relies on sociology, the questions of how ontology and epistemology are represented are unavoidably central to its sustenance. Without rehearsing the entire argument, what is notable is the use of Greenfield's (1973; 1974) critique to highlight the untenability of the scientific approach. Siding with the view that sees subjects as constitutive of organisational reality, and not external to it, Eacott's RA is built on the premise that 'breaks down binaries (e.g., structure/ agency, individualism/ holism, and particular/ universal) and provides for the possibility for productive theorising' (2018a, pp. 8-9). In so doing, Eacott sees the social as constitutive of relations and that organisational theory and practice should look beyond leadership to '*organising activity* through which *auctors* generate *spatio-temporal conditions*'. This is now RA's basic core logic (see stimulus paper).

It is important to note that breaking down boundaries does not eliminate them. Agents and structures still underpin much of organising. While breaking them down is theoretically novel and perhaps aspirational (if only all stakeholders bought into the idea), it only sets the stage for articulating the internal workings of the reformed social system. The *social a priori of rationalism* that Eacott adopts as a possible productive theorising beyond ontological binaries completely sidesteps this question and, in doing so, arbitrarily eliminates this issue. Bearing in mind that the primary mission of RA is to engage parallel (theoretical) monologues, it is unclear how the supposedly inclusive 'methodological artefact' (Eacott, 2018a, p. 3) would promote criticality when individual ontological defining features of normative leadership theories are nullified.

In reality, the binaries are not nullified; they or assumptions about them that affect beliefs and actions are, like twigs, left burning while attention shifts to theorising about the resulting smoke (activities). This seems to be the essence of focusing on organising activities that Eacott (2018a) takes as self-evident truths and that 'structure/agency binary do little to reflect the lived experiences of actors' (p. 7). It is like saying; we should 'solely' focus on interrelations of the swirling smoke since the twigs have little effect on us. This, arguably, represents a fundamental obstacle for RA in its current state. It is not necessary to adopt a binary approach and Eacott's rejection of it is somewhat justified if agent and structure are taken in isolation or combined in a way that fails to overcome various forms of conflation. It is, nevertheless, imperative to coherently articulate what becomes of (assumptions about) them so that a productive theoretical and practice dialogue can emerge between parallel monologues that have dominated the field and pave the way for further critical approaches. Let us say, for example, that the substance 'love' does not exist and that the focus should instead be placed on loving relations. This recasting does not eliminate assumptions and expectations about 'love' of the players / stakeholders involved in loving.

Eacott (2018a) lists some key thinkers who have provided several sociological thinking resources to construct relational approaches, implying, therefore, that while RA could be represented as an 'at scale perspective', it has various ways of thinking underpinning it and that his approach is one among many others. One of the names cited is Bruno Latour for, presumably, his seminal work around actor network theory (ANT). As an example of a theoretical building block that breaks the objective subjective binary, ANT is commendable not only in providing the shift from singular and binary approaches but 'clearly' showing what happens to old binaries in new networks of

relations. Structures and agents are not eliminated but, with other entities, are part of the complex web of relations (particularly ontologically, whether based on assumptions or not). The same is asked of RA here unless it is rooted on the pragmatic paradigm that empties the world of ontological questions, in order to focus solely on the nature of activities and their desired effects (Morgan, 2007). Otherwise, RA's privileging of the epistemic over ontology does not necessarily have to be built on a form of recasting that is a zero-sum game for it to achieve its aims. Hence, the possibility for further (ontological) theorising of RA still remains.

An Alternative Productive Theorising?

Comparativism vs Relationality

It is debatable whether comparative approaches are a by-product of relationality (Ozbilgrin & Vassilopoulou, 2018) or vice versa (Elonga Mboyo, 2018b) or two sides of the same coin. The point, however, is that both approaches seek wider (cross-theory and practice) significance (Schweisfurth, 2001) which requires multidimensional processes (Crossley & Watson, 2003) of relationality or cross comparison. While appropriating some of Eacott's concepts and reviewing others, the following discussion draws on embodied cognition (Wislon, 2002) to problematise Eacott's apparent idealist departure when thinking about subjects which, arguably, leads him to a compartmentalised (rather than layered) articulation of their externally projected realities such as leadership. Activity theory (Bakhurst, 2009) is also deployed to delineate important nuances between activity and actions, in order to better grasp the process of emergence of relations that do not nullify substances (monologues) but complete / transform them (or not) through organising activity.

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Without dwelling on intricate theoretical complexities of embodied cognition and activity theory, using these theoretical insights is necessary to clear the way for the development of a new core logic of RA using nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). Hence, the whole commentary is more of a retooling exercise than a (caricatural) refutation of RA.

A Priori vs Subjectivity

To return to the critique of RA around ontology, Eacott's view that leadership is an *a priori* concept 'beyond the senses and [...] somewhat unexperienced' (Eacott, 2018a, p. 7 citing Eacott, 2017) is problematic to the extent that it equates cognition with subjectivity. This has some implications. Firstly, that human existence is broader than its cognition. Theorising around embodied cognition makes several claims, one of which being the co-existence of thought and environment (Wilson, 2002). Without being liable to ontic or epistemic fallacies (Bhaskar, 1989), this proposition only highlights the need to consider ontology concomitantly as RA proceeds with its epistemic logic. Secondly, that the combination of various aspects of agents as reality cannot be subjected to a compartmentalised internal and possibly external projection of existence. Hence, the futility of the search for a (as in one) concrete referent out there as the only form of embodied existence of leadership. In fact, those from a Hume-an tradition have argued, rather convincingly, that reality has no concrete referent but it, instead, manifests itself as a conjunction of different activities, qualities, events (Magill, 1994). Much like leadership, there is no such a thing as a house, pen and the paper on which the ink you (the reader) are reading is inscribed. Hence, even if the thought that relations may not have a stable and substantialist concrete referent in the environment, their concomitant conjunctional and / or experiential

embodiment as well as their existence in the very constitution of substances (see 'nuanced critical realism: causality vs in/completion' section) cannot be ruled out.

Actions vs Activity(ies)

Despite the above apparent conflation (cognition and subjectivity), Eacott settles for a (partially) legitimate representation of leadership as an *organising activity*, reminiscent of Deertz's (2009, p. 24) 'constituting activity', to arguably emphasise the relational nature of leadership beyond positivistic and constructivist ontological binaries. However, productive relations resulting from *organising activity* do not emerge *ex-nihilo*; and, this is where another conflation goes undetected when (organising) 'activity' is equated with 'actions'. This is neither a question of semantics nor a creation of a binary but rather a recognition of the interrelation of distinct processes, particularly from an activity theory perspective (Bakhurst, 2009) that attributes actions to individuals and activities to a community. Stakeholders at different levels within the education system can propose (practice, policy or research) actions that may take a substantialist dimension or not, but they remain incomplete actions in that they are a means to an end (O'Rourke, 2004). Besides, the object and motive of (human) action could 'come apart' (Bakhurst, 2009, p. 200). A successful marital relationship, for example, does not come out of nothing but the actions of those involved in those relations. Actions need *organising activity* for the realisation of successful (educational, marital…) goals, which effectively define the spatio-temporal conditions. Even if some sociologists see actions being subsumed in predetermined scripts which humans must perform (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), this logic of predetermination and causality arguably eclipses agency and needs to be replaced by the (in)completion criterion. This will meaningfully

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rehabilitate auctors' agency and provide further clarity as to the configurations of spatial and temporal conditions being generated as (in)complete stages of actuality when framed through the nuanced critical realism informed RA to be introduced shortly.

For now, distinguishing between action and activity is useful in making the following propositions about leadership theories and practice from a relational approach. Firstly, an auctor (among other stakeholders) is primarily a generator of actions. Secondly, although leadership may exist as an *a priori* motive (or 'go through' an a priori state of knowing) with no symmetrical relationship with a concrete outside referent, the motive-spurred (in)actions of the auctor are inextricably linked to the overall group (in)activity that may seem unconnected. Thirdly, auctor does not only respond to his or her own expectations; a priori motives and expectations as well as actions they generate are not an exclusive preserve of auctors. Fourthly, in addition to generating actions, an auctor's other role is to engage in *organising* (the subtotal of in-actions called) *activity*. Fifthly, the success of an auctor's *organising* (in)*activity*, as a catalyst for complete actions (O'Rourke, 2004), is dependent not necessarily on the causality criterion but on the degree to which insufficient but not redundant substantialist assumptions and incomplete actions are used for the realisation of a (in)complete stage of actuality / *spatio-temporal conditions*. While the first four propositions are arguably clear, the fifth one is better understood within nuanced critical realism, discussed below, which flips causality into (in)completion criterion, in order to meaningfully capture how auctors' *organising activity* of various actions leads to different stages of actuality (layered reality).

Partial vs Wholesome Social World

It is the contention here that the fusion that makes up human subjectivity and other entities can generate actions that, when taken together through organising activity, form the preferred relations that configure the spatio-temporal conditions or what nuanced critical realism would call (in)complete stages of actuality. In other words, the act of generating actions (by auctor or actions as the result of assumptions of whichever ontological side of the binary) is distinct from the life of the generated activities or events that may, in turn, have a different relation with generating 'entities'. As described so far, RA's fourth and most fundamental theoretical extension underpinning Eacott's thinking (see stimulus paper) foregrounds organising activities as events of leadership. In so doing, it only captures the relations of activities / events and, therefore, leaves the effect (and the process thereafter) of those activities on relation-generating entities (other states of being and doing leadership) unaccounted for. Ontological relationality should be able to articulate how these positions (including assumptions that have conjured an ontological complicity) interrelate in order to create avenues for dialogue between different theories and practices in the area of leadership, administration or management. Otherwise, the partial image that RA captures can only account for relations within that 'segment' of reality.

Nuanced Critical Realism: Causality vs (In)completion

Although not in the same way that relations between layers of ontology are represented here, it should be acknowledged that even (self-contained) substances such as monads and atoms can be involved in relations of some sort (Ferber, 2011). From a critical realism relational sociology (CRRS), Donati (2015, p. 87) argues that 'relations cannot fade away substances (layers of reality), although the latter are

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constituted by relations'. Hence, the relationality beyond binaries which accounts for them as constitutive of substances is a viable proposition that can be captured in critical realism which, arguably, represents a wider (not partial) socio-ontological theorising available. Eacott, in his stimulus paper, would label this approach as substantialist for arguably focusing 'on the relationships between entities' when RA is instead 'concerned with relations and how relations are constitutive and emergent from auctors' *organising activity*'. This is the case if the only way for substantialist approaches to lose their assumed stability is by not thinking about them that way and recasting them as relations that, as already stated, are constitutive of substances. Eacott's post-Bourdieusian RA leans away from Bourdieu's structuralist stance on relations towards an approach that departs from an *a priori* subjectivism towards a form of what Donati (2015) calls conflationary relationism represented by *auctors*' causal *organising activity* that subsumes both agency and substances.

Although Donati (2015) avoids various forms of conflation, the critical realist relational sociology (CRRS) that he espouses is not entirely helpful as it is based on the scientific norm of causality which misleadingly attributes primacy to causes (the real and the actual) over effects (the empirical). In this sense, the overcoming of binaries by *auctors* will always be conceived of as a smaller reality within presumably bigger relations which are constitutive of substantive mechanisms that Eacott's version of RA breaks down without nullifying. Individual and / or collective agency of auctors' *organising activity* also needs to be accounted for within a layered ontology by problematising the causality criterion. Nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo 2018a), therefore, flips causality into *(in)completion.* Here, relations that are constitutive of substances (Donati, 2015) are not redundant but incomplete (Mackie, 1988) and in need of auctors'

organising activity to turn incomplete actions into complete ones (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). It is through the moral argument shift from *causality* to (*in*)*completion* that the remainder of this commentary seeks to demonstrate the potential for RA to methodologically burst taken-for-granted stability of substantialist assumptions while departing from or thinking through them as relations.

One of the questions that 'scholars rightfully ask of any research programme [is], to what ends?' (Deertz, 2009, p. 23). Ethics and morality are essential in understanding leadership and management (Grace, 2000). There is, therefore, the need to develop a moral argument consistent with RA's critical nature reflected in its robust core logic. This would be beneficial not only in an academic sense but also in the field's ultimate goal of improving lives. This endeavour is made complex by the plurality of value actions; what those dictate education should be about; and how they should be managed (Zembylas & Lasonos, 2010). In response, ethical leadership based on normative approaches has had the tendency to 'focus on the structure and process' within essentialist models of leadership (Bush, 2011, p. 188) in a way that, for example, prescribes altruism to a transformational leader (Northouse, 2015) or that culturally attuned leaders should navigate local and international binaries by considering personal motives before connecting them to the wider context (Begley, 2000). The overall deontological (the rightness of an action in itself) and teleological (the rightness of an action in relation to other actions and others) ethical norms (Northouse, 2015) can be reconsidered more productively within RA. This could mean recasting isolated normative ethical actions such as egoism, utilitarianism, altruism, pragmatism etc. (Johnson, 2015, p. 156; Northouse, 2013) within social ethics based on *organising activity*. That said, the moral purpose of ontologies (not nullified but interlocked in relations within and across) is discernible

from the very nature of interactions that define ontologies. Elonga Mboyo (2018c) has used structuration theory or Ubuntu to demonstrate how four ontological ethical isomorphs can emerge from the intersection of structure and agency and aid the ethical valuation process of, to use Eacott's terms, *auctors' organising activity*. For its part, nuanced critical realism arguably presents an even more productive moral argument when thinking about the moral purpose, the 'what ends?' (Deertz, 2009, p. 23), of RA-informed *auctors' organising activity*.

There is, on the one hand, the causality argument that, according to critical realism, for example, is the defining feature linking structures, cultures and agents (Archer, 1995; 2010) or mechanisms, events / activities and experiences (Bhaskar, 1989). A legitimate argument could then be made that normative literature on educational leadership and management has, for a long time, socialised us to relations that are constitutive of normative or parallel monologues and, therefore, served the purpose of education set by causal forces present in structural (national and institutional) contexts (Hallinger, 2018) or subjective (post-modern) narratives of education. Even as it captures a partial image of reality, relations in Eacott's Post-Bourdieusian RA are still built on the causality criterion. Of course, RA does not favour the 'successionist' (Reed, 2009, p. 435) or what Eacott (see stimulus paper) calls 'the linear [cause and effect] logic' of causality. Like critical realism that opts for a form of causality built around 'tendencies that inhere particular social entities… over time and space… with effect in sociohistorical contexts' (Reed, 2009, p. 435), RA also sees causality in a similar way by focusing on how an activity relates to another in the emergence of *organising activity*. Causality is unsustainable for RA not because science attributes causes primarily to substances rather than non-substantialist relations as, from a critical realism perspective, relations are constitutive of substances. What

critical realism and RA do not do, however, is clearly articulate the nature of non-linear relating of (substantive monologues or not) actions in a way that rehabilitates the agency of auctors in the purposeful / moral emergence of relations through the process of *organising activity* resulting in spatio-temporal conditions.

As an alternative to CRRS (built on critical realism) and RA's current stance, on the other hand, nuanced critical realism recasts *causality* as *(in)completion* criterion when seeking to understand the nature of leadership beyond the habitual binaries and of which activities / events are a partial image. This is fully discussed elsewhere (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). Briefly here, the layered reality made-up of mechanisms, activities/events and experiences are recast as stages of actuality. Agency then consists of the deployment of one's 'formless capability'. 'Formless capability' could be understood as a non-substantialist and non-neutral 'stock' of potential that an agent develops from his/ her history of relating. This knowhow is used with some degree of voluntarism and intentionality for the emergence of productive relations out of various stakeholders' actions. The nature of those realised relations can be framed as either incomplete stages of actuality (mechanisms, events and therefore the perpetuation of orthodoxy) or a complete stage of actuality (the empirical) (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). The field within which an agent has the latitude to realise any stage of actuality is a zone of (in)completion. The moral purpose of the (in)completion process is measured by the extent to which an agent's (in)action can generate new ontological and practice relationality that can(not) improve lives in the evolving fluidity of time and space. Here, substantialist entities (stages of actuality) are no longer immutable. They can undergo a relational transformation that Archer (2010) has called 'double morphogenesis/ morphostasis'

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captured as 'double incomplesionem' in nuanced critical realism (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a).

Nuanced critical realist informed RA's reasoning, arguably, resolves Eacott's concern regarding parallel monologues without nullifying or conflating various subsustantlist assumptions that still affect educational leadership theory, research, policy and practice. A possible rebuttal to the position that this commentary outlines should be considered within the set of questions below.

A Moment of Pause

It is worth asking 'to what extent can auctor re-invent the wheel?' This rather defeatist line of questioning presupposes the pre-existence of a wheel. However, even if the wheel as an entity did not exist, how different will the creative generation of relations be from normative assumptions that RA is recasting? Even if they turn out to be different, how capable is an auctor of replacing normative orthodoxy with relational normativity developed from 'enduring unfolding of activity' or an auctor's history in relations as cautioned by Horsthemke and Enslin (2009) when discussing the potentially essentialist nature of African education developed as a counter-narrative to normative Western education in Africa? And even if it is argued that RA generates infinitely fluid relations, how does that leave auctor's identity formation? Supposing that an auctor's 'I(d)-entity' is replaced with 'I-relations', it will not escape (beliefs around) the non-monolithic and bounded histories of, for example, African as opposed to Western relations, as well as other race and gender flavoured critical approaches.

Resituating an Auctor's Organising (In)activity in Spatio-temporal Conditions of Nuanced Critical Realist (In)complete Stages of Actuality

The above questions are not intended to awaken the author's, Eacott's or others' well documented exasperation towards an either-or normative dichotomisation of reality. Instead, they point to the (in)complete nature of the sort of (organising of) education contexts that auctors would generate. Relations (in education) are entangled in various tensions, contradictions and historical assumptions that cannot be nullified but should instead be brought together for the emergence of purposeful stages of actuality that are constitutive of relations. Eacott's Post-Bourdieusian methodological and theoretical resources of *organising activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions* do not adequately resolve the ontological and other issues raised thus far. When RA adopts the resources provided here, an auctors' generative *organising activity* of various stakeholders' actions gains its traction as they (auctors) bring about or explore new knowledge and practice (as a complete stage of actuality), rather than replicating (assumptions about) orthodoxy or normativity (as incomplete stages of actuality/ spatio-temporal conditions).

It is legitimate to think of an auctor in this way since s/he (representing real people in research and workplaces) is not a mere bundle of unstructured relations that are generated on their own. Auctor is embedded in his / her history of relations sometimes built around stories. Just like Santa, some of these stories may not be real although their adult equivalent in the 'already beyond field' stage of leadership may have enduring effects that need to be accounted for when recast as relations. This can be thought of differently by acknowledging that an auctor's generative actions are not always a (or

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in) response to his/her expectations. Expectations that may not have been part of an auctor's subjective history of relations, or have become a patterned repertoire of actions in emergent relations matter in the same way that his or her generative inactions must be explained in the overall unfolding of activities that are experienced by others.

These substantive (or not) expectations that can be read through people's actions and abstracted through (critical or not) research and rolled out as policy initiatives cannot be ignored or even stifled. Recognising them calls on RA to play the role of 'relay point' where it sustains its theoretical self-identity only by deprioritising itself as it foregrounds the dialogical recasting of various monologues through further analytical tools of its own and/ or those from other theoretical traditions. Its 'at scale breakthrough' status is not theoretical a point of no return where, for example, a computer would supersede and make a typewriter redundant. On the contrary, *organising activity* is only that 'relay point' which shows how auctors can avoid (a possible return to) parallel monologues (leading to incomplete stages of actuality) and instead continually use these incomplete actions to realise spatio-temporal conditions that configure complete stages of actuality. RA is then best thought of as engaged in a heuristic construction of a shift that is (could be) the result of coalescing and fragmenting intellectual (or practice-based) formless capabilities that would come to commit to a particular stage of theoretical actuality (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a). On those grounds, it would be logical for RA's main aim (of developing a template for plurality and dialogue) to take precedence over its 'at scale' theoretical self-identity and settle for the apparent intensification of scholarly critical theorising from different angles that, according to Niesche (2018), represents a 'theory turn' in educational leadership.

With all additional concepts emerging from embodied cognition, activity theory and nuanced critical realism thus far, it is, therefore, possible to reformulate Eacott's Post-Bourdieusian RA's core logic that says '*auctors* generate *spatio-temporal conditions* through *organising activity*' to what follows:

> Drawing on their *formless capability*, *auctors* engage in *organising activity* of various stakeholders' *actions* in order to generate (*in*)*complete stage of actuality / spatio-temporal conditions*.

Hence, like culture, identity, time (etc.), context is inseparable with an auctor's (in)ability to deploy his/ her formless capability through organising activity of others' actions in (dis)favour of a particular stage of actuality (Elonga Mboyo, 2018a) that effectively becomes the *spatio-temporal conditions*. This is arguably the most productive way to visualise how external variables of context (stages of actuality) (Hallinger, 2018) are not separate from activity without conflating and / or nullifying ontologies.

Situated within nuanced critical realism, and anecdotal as it may seem, it is worth wondering whether relations do still need leadership, at least, as an ability to influence the maintenance and/ or re-storying of those relations. Beyond the anecdote lies the real challenge for scholars and practitioners, as auctors, to equip themselves with further resources to give purpose to their organising activities that are subsequently experienced by others within organisations. The extent of this shake up through an auctor's research and practice that generate (in)complete spatio-temporal conditions beyond binaries, while accounting for their assumptions, may not necessarily be as daunting as initially thought (Crawford, 2018).

Examples of Educational Leadership Research and Practice in Light of This Retooling of RA

Attempts to overcome theoretical and practice partiality, singularity and monologues has been an ongoing project, although without the defining tools such as *organising activity*, *auctor* and *spatio-temporal conditions*. The above reformulation of RA's core logic has now added *formless capability*, *actions*, (*in*)*complete stage*(s) *of actuality*. There are other units of analysis with the potential to shake up normative thinking. A further illustrative example to show how auctors attempt to overcome binaries as they deploy their formless capabilities and bring about (in)complete *spatio-temporal conditions/ stages of actuality* comes from Reed and Swaminathan (2016).

After suggesting their contextually responsive leadership framework, which consists of auctors (1) understanding existing local context, (2) acting with creative ingenuity to address the needs of the context and (3) balancing interplay between approaches, Reed and Swaminathan (2016, p. 1120) urge 'researchers […] to look comprehensively across leadership frameworks to learn how leaders implement a combination of leadership approaches in urban schools'. In his empirical study comparing urban primary school leaders' experiences of leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo and England, Elonga Mboyo (2017) heeds this call by showing how head teachers (auctors) can rise above objective or subjective ontological spaces (assumptions) that define personal and professional selves, in order to act comparatively (or relationally) across various ontologies and epistemologies based on the values of risk taking, inclusivity, integrity and success-mindedness.

From RA's perspective, school cultures can be framed as *spatio-temporal conditions* which cannot be divorced from auctors' generated

relational expression. If this is the case, then Alvesson's (2013) notion of culture as a root metaphor becomes another useful resource. The proposed 'relay point' for an RA research programme needs to assemble these theoretical and practice resources and assess their impact in the overall (in)completion moral purpose of *organising activity*.

Conclusion

This commentary has sought to reengage with Eacott's Post-Bourdieusian RA to resolve what it deems as an ontological nullification without accounting for insufficient but not redundant substantialist assumptions when such ontologies and epistemologies are recast as relations. It began by framing the theoretical history of educational leadership from "an already beyond field" to an attempt to "move beyond 'beyond'". Through the deployment of embodied cognition, activity theory and nuanced critical realism to problematise concepts such as a priori, activity, partial image of reality and causality in relation to subjectivity, actions, wholesome reality and (in)completion criteria, it has been possible to advance another reasoning that provides an additional set of resources and avenues. As a result, the commentary has led to suggesting a new core logic that would, hopefully, be more productive in RA's research project's quest to reform the social world in order to better theorise the field of educational leadership and management.

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