

Relational Educational Leadership Development: From interactions in learning and creating leadership value to a relational inquiry research method

Educational leadership development in current complex contexts requires a more befitting understanding of learning processes in leadership interactions. Workplace learning is conceived commonly as relying on knowledge, material, or skills to be known prior to an event or action. However, we have surpassed the fourth industrial revolution brink of technological, social, economic, and environmental pressures. Our lives and work are now both fundamentally challenged and open to possibilities presented on a day-to-day basis. These challenges are real, novel and tell us what is at stake if solutions are not created with and for people to engage in the work they do. Workplace learning and leadership development are anchored in premises of previously relied on stable and transferable knowledge that now are unreliable in this current state of flux. For importantly, global forums signpost educational organisations as central drivers for growth to navigate this complexity. Educational leadership matters more than ever on every level, from educational professionals to educational organisations, and the wider world. Yet empirical understandings in research literature is scant on conceiving learning processes conducive for conceiving leadership development for a time such as this. Against this background, the demand for leadership who must be prepared to transition and negotiate unanticipated roles, requires a personal capacity from within yet connected to the world around, to change, rethink values and leadership assumptions. Current leadership development programs risk perpetuating existing leader knowledge, practices, and processes and thus engendering a reality gap. The central paradoxical learning challenge is to create both new leadership understandings and new ways of learning leadership that is commensurate to the current situation unfolding.

This study utilises relational social constructionist leadership theory as an explicit lens to inquire into interactions as the research unit of analysis. Relational interactions as a joint accomplishment ongoing in everyday leadership experiences was a means for understanding novel impacts emerging in learning processes. It provided fresh insights for understanding constructions of knowledge, skills, and values. This research is underpinned by the ontology of temporality or tangible flow of experiences, events, and activities. Such a perspective examines the past and the future connected to the present redefining and reconfiguring ways of learning and leading. Complex learning processes are explored through semi-structured dialogical interviews, in person field observations, and visual data analysis, with a group of leadership professionals in eight school organisations represented by four schools in England and four in Australia. Chosen research sites served as examples of similar cultures of professionalism and educational organisational structures yet represented by diverse group interactions dealing with sources of tension in their day-to-day. The instance of complexity in each organisation was captured using thick descriptions presenting the themes and lived experiences. This includes data representing dialogue, embodied interaction descriptions, types of knowledge constructed, and finally, meanings resultant from interactions. Participants within each organisation were chosen as they demonstrated a leadership capacity in some form and represented a balance of gender, professional experience, and leadership roles. Semi-structured interviews conducted with leadership scholars and policy actors in England and Australia were added to interweave a focus on the historical and cultural complexities of each setting. Through the novel combination of methodologies: phenomenological inquiry and an inductive grounded theory approach, the contextual and

interactional approach enabled findings that captured two understandings and the associated meanings. Firstly, the interactions residing in the interpersonal ways or processes of learning how to co-configure and reconfigure leadership roles. Secondly, the themes arising from interactions connecting to emergent leadership roles and conditions. Preliminary findings are presented as to the learning figurations and the leadership qualities that emerged. The empirical material was collected for understanding the journey to current leadership roles, lived experiences in the everyday, and observing ways of learning in events that participants signalled as key to their development. This includes visual data collected from touring the school workspaces and offices, school websites, or social media posts indicative of novel leadership initiatives. Data analysis was conducted using a reflexive process involving a collective array of interactions ensuring a nuanced exploration.

Title: Seeing Leadership Potentials: Navigating the field through ontologies of relationality

“There is no such thing, for example, as the way the Milky Way looks. There is only the way it looks to each instrument” (Giere, 2006, p. 28).

What it means to talk about relational leadership? What is understood by relationality? How to view leadership? These are some of the questions that relational leadership scholars are called to address (Uhl-Bien & Ospina (eds), 2012). Moreover, this relational turn in the leadership field challenges ingrained assumptions and makes tensions around underlying perspectives salient. While two broad camps of entity (objectivist) and constructionist (subjectivist and inter-subjectivist) scholars occupy relational leadership research landscape (Sánchez et al., 2020), their ontologies and epistemologies differ.

Notwithstanding the paramount paradigmatic dialogue between entity and constructionist leadership scholars (Uhl-Bien & Ospina (eds), 2012), which I will touch upon briefly in this review, there are important differences and nuanced perspectives among the social constructionist scholars themselves. These different perspectives take their roots in ways scholars conceive of the social world (Emirbayer, 1997): Are there static “things” or dynamic, unfolding processes? Are there primordial substances or are the entities always already in relation? And if we study relational processes as constructionist scholars, are the relations ontologically given or not ontologically settled (Mauthner, 2021)? Are scholars oriented towards performative (doing) functioning or take on representationalist (standing for) approach (Shotter, 2014)? These and many other questions matter in our leadership scholarly discourse and research as we come together to realize that methods used are not value-neutral and represent ways of *doing* philosophy (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Cunliffe, 2022; Duberley & Johnson, 2016; Gergen, 2009; Mauthner, 2020). Moreover, as we come together to move the needle towards alternative leadership potentials, understanding nuances in our theorizing for “how to live a good life” (Hosking et al., 2012, p. 531) presents to be of vital importance. Hence, this critical review is performing both, at the level of abstraction, speaking to the nature of good research, and on the practical level, being “intensely practical” (Hosking et al., 2012, p. 529) in exploring and opening up avenues for new, changed leadership aesthetic.

The purpose of this paper is to provide metatheoretical clarity and understanding of the leadership field, specifically focusing on the richness within the social constructionist perspective. Adopting the words of Sonia Ospina in her response letter to Boas Shamir (Hosking et al., 2012), this critical review aims is to access and open up “new vistas to exploring different ways in which leadership can emerge and manifest itself” (p. 514). These new vistas go beyond the popularized leadership theories towards nuanced understanding within the constructionist perspective. Beyond the novel synthesis of philosophical foundations within the leadership field, I offer a theoretical advancement for innovative, fresh ways to conceptualize leadership and systems change. This paper, thus, clears up our ‘theoretical’ lenses and helps to “see things with fresh eyes”, specifically leadership itself and pressing systemic challenges.

Category of Action	Self-action	Inter-action	Trans-action	Intra-action
Perspective	Entity	Entity	Constructionist	Constructionist
Phenomena of study	Individual entities	Relationship dynamics between individual entities	Primacy of <i>social</i> processes; actor identities being constituted through co-action	Naturacultural / material-discursive intra-actions
Metaphysics	Cartesian dualism	Cartesian dualism	Inseparability	Indeterminacy
Ontology	Objectivist	Objectivist	Subjectivist / Inter-subjectivist	Relationalism
Starting point	Objective reality out there	Objective reality out there	Relations are ontologically given and are points of departure	Ontologically indeterminate; continual state of becoming
Approach to knowledge production	Representationalist		Performative	

Table 1. Journey of ontological perspectives (adopted and revised from Barad, 2007; Emirbayer, 1997; Simpson, 2016).

Word Count: 585 (with table contents included)

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Exploring connection as the substrate of the relational leadership craft

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Abstract

This paper is positioned at the intersection of two key themes in leadership research – relational leadership and leadership as a craft. We explore the phenomenon of *connection* as a key constituent of both. Empirically, we explore connection through the contemporary dance form called *Contact Improvisation*.

Building on process ontology (Langley et al., 2013), recent work in leadership has applied a relational lens to understand how leadership – as socially constructed – is produced and how it influences organizing practices (Crevani, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006). This lens focuses on leadership as being in relation to others (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and, consequently, as something that is taking place between people (Uhl-Bien, 2006) when connections are established, transformed, and dissolved (Cooper, 2005). Such a decentered view conceptualizes leadership as emerging through continuous interactions between people in everyday organizational life. Accordingly, researchers have explored how leaders and managers in organizational settings engage in relational dialogue (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011), create conditions for connections to flourish (Taylor & Karanian, 2008), identify and elevate affordances (Margolin, 2013), and bring diverse actors together (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

However, while most studies have concentrated on more cognitive relational leadership practices, recent work has turned to dance and sports to explore how their embodied aspects (Biehl, 2019; Ryömä & Satama, 2019).

Within the tradition of aesthetic leadership (Hansen et al., 2007), one strand of inquiry considers leadership as an artful practice or a craft (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). Steven Taylor posits that if leadership is a craft, the material that the crafter works with is *connection*. We wanted to explore this empirically, thereby also elucidate one of the underlying premises of relationships. Following the embodied approach and the view of relational leadership as decentered, this paper aims *to explore the emergence, sustenance, and dissolution of connection* as it unfolds in a co-created achievement without appointed leaders or followers. Contact improvisation (CI) (Novack, 1990; Paxton, 1975) is a contemporary dance form in which dancers improvise around a shared point of contact. Because the next move is never known in advance, the dancer can only mindfully experience the dance as it emerges, listening inwards and acting outwards at the same time. In this way, the dancers participate in a shared co-creation while simultaneously dancing their own dances. It is an embodied experience of relationality as it unfolds.

Nine deep interviews were done with contact dancers from different countries, with a range of experience levels, where seven of them were CI teachers. The interviews, lasting for 30-70 minutes, sought to capture the dancers' subjective experience of connection in the dance. The interviews, as well as the subsequent analysis, were conducted with a phenomenological approach.

Preliminary findings focus on the dancers' subjective experience of how connection is continuously established, maintained, and dissolved through embodied micro-level processes. The dance emerges as the dancers draw upon the rich landscape of affordances made available through connection, which, in turn, alters the circumstances for further interaction.

This paper contributes to illuminating important core preconditions for relational leadership practices identified in previous studies. As a practical implication, we discuss the possibility of using CI as an intervention to invite an embodied experience of relationality.

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Tracing leaderful affects at work with LEGO® bricks

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In this paper, we seek insights on accessing and sensitising researchers towards *leaderful affects* at work. Recent developments in leadership studies have begun to acknowledge the affective dimensions of leadership processes (e.g. Ford et al., 2017; Knights, 2018; Munro and Thanem, 2018; Pullen and Vachhani, 2013). Inspired by philosophers such as Spinoza (1996) and Deleuze (1988), ‘affective leadership’ aims to understand the forces and intensities that circulate between bodies (Ahmed, 2004) and how such flows of energy increase or decrease the organisational capacities to animate and lead collective action (Munro and Thanem, 2018). Affect, as Massumi (in Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: xvi) describes, is “an ability to affect and be affected”, passages of intensity that either increase or decrease the body’s capacity to act and to be acted upon (Deleuze, 1988). Consequently, scholars argue that organisations are led not by heroic individuals but by flows of affect emerging in encounters between bodies. Attending to affect can bring forth the invisible forces that circulate ‘in-between’ human and more-than-human entities, transforming leadership into a dynamic interplay of relations and energies that propel organizations in diverse directions (Knights, 2018).

However, to date, this embryonic field remains highly theoretical and empirical evidence to support affect as a ‘leaderful force’ remains underdeveloped. Moreover, an additional problem is found when asking what to look for and what kind of data to collect when studying affect due to its elusive and immaterial nature, making it challenging to capture through conventional methods (Fotaki et al., 2017; Knudsen and Stage, 2015). The indeterminacy of affect opens rich opportunities for methodological experimentation and ‘fleshing out’ the affectivity of the field site (Gherardi et al., 2019). Scholars have variously discussed novel approaches to collect and analyse the affective dimensions of data (cf. Fox and Allred, 2022; Gherardi, 2019; Knudsen and Stage, 2015). Gherardi et al. (2019) hold the view that the effects of affective encounters “are situated in the senses”; thus, to study affect we need to go beyond the purely linguistic attending instead to bodily experiences and encounters (Fotaki et al., 2017). Researchers have employed a number of art-based techniques and materials (e.g. Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) to capture embodied data (Pink, 2015) and ‘know’ leadership differently through dolls (Yost, 2013), dance (Ryömä and Satama, 2019), masks (Hughes, 2011), poem houses (Grisoni and Collins, 2012), drawings (Schyns et al., 2011), animal figures (Meltzer, 2016), and LEGO (Peabody and Turesky, 2018). However, even though these techniques have the potential to produce meaningful epistemological contributions eliciting rich and emotional responses (Ward and Shortt, 2020), we argue that scholars tend to focus on highlighting *cognitive* data hidden at the level of the subconscious (e.g. Hughes, 2011) dealing poorly with the fleeting nature of affect. Likewise, such techniques are often

employed as a means to develop or test leadership styles and skills perpetuating heroic and competency-based assumptions (Schweiger et al., 2020).

In the context of a larger research project within a design and software development micro-business, the first author employed LEGO bricks to explore the affective dimensions of leadership asking participants to build three-dimensional models of the topic under study. In doing so, through a set of participant-built LEGO models, we show that the bricks not only reveal what is dormant and unconscious within participants' cognition, but bodies hidden and often ignored in plain sight. LEGO had the capacity to bring to the surface the affective presence/absence of bodies at work projecting, or rather *re-mattering*, human and nonhuman actors (such as employees, clients, and tools) and its multiple capacities at work. We argue that the brick serves as a sensitising device that allowed us to uncover connections and relationships between bodies contributing to obtaining meaningful research insights on the doings of bodies and their effects in the workplace. This finding challenge over-cognitive approaches revealing invisible forces and the affective potentialities they transport bringing to the fore mundane data that might pass unnoticed by researchers. Using skeletons, bugs, snakes, and other LEGO pieces, participants revealed the affectivity of their situated realities revealing data hotspots or 'glows' (MacLure, 2010), redirecting the attention of the researcher and the participants towards affective relationships and their leaderful capacities. LEGO has the capacity to reveal flows that unfold and emerge when bodies encounter each other and the ways they co-lead organisational practices increasing our sensibilities toward leaderful affects at work.

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