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**Toward a Reconsideration of Biography as an Instrument for  
Studying Leadership in Educational Administration**

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The thesis of this paper is that "biography" does offer something valuable to educational administration that it currently lacks, and that biography ought to be reconsidered as a legitimate instrument for the study of educational leadership. Traditional research methodologies (questionnaire surveys, for example) normally associated with positivist approaches to the study of educational leadership remain theorists' predominant mode of inquiry. Such methods, however, do not pay sufficient attention to the role played by institutional contexts in the social construction of leaders and leadership systems. The difference between biography and social science also relates to the level of generality – a sort of micro/macro distinction. Educational leadership theorists, by training and inclination, look to the general, while biography deals with the particular. Biography can be moved beyond narration and storytelling to the construction of case studies to test or evaluate theories. And it can be argued that to understand a system, we need to look at leadership both "close up" and from a "long view." Previous approaches to the study of educational leadership decontextualized not only the decisions but also the "process" involved in developing them. Biography can restore the "wholeness" of the entire act of leadership.

Biographies are not unwelcome visitors to the history of education in Canada. Sissons's (1947) remarkable biography of Egerton Ryerson's administration during the mid-nineteenth century will attest to that. Regardless of the precise effect of his influence, Ryerson's dictum that "to be a State system of Public instruction, there must be State contoul (sic) as well as State law", was implemented across the country (Allison, 1991, p. 227, citing Ryerson). In fact, Ontario's school superintendents must still qualify for their position through an examination process initiated in 1871 when Ryerson consolidated his hold over the Ontario inspectorate (Allison, p. 203, citing Ryerson). Thus it seems odd that the field of educational administration, where leadership is of central concern, has shunned biography both as a legitimate instrument for the study of educational leadership and as a legitimate instrument for teaching educational administration. The main reason for this situation stems from positivist approaches to leadership.

Simon's book, Administrative Behaviour (1945, 1957), was the first major work centred on behaviourism/logical positivism in public administration. While his work made no mention of educational administration, it had considerable theoretical scope, partly because of the theoretical vocabulary employed, and partly because it attempted to derive a theory of administration from the logic and psychology of choice. And, it was Simon's work that provided the most direct conduit (in the 1940s - 1950s) for the flow of "administrative science" into educational administration in a form known as the New Movement. Modern practitioners of educational administration know it under a different rubric namely, the Theory Movement.

Despite its fall from grace, the legacy of the theory movement is still evident in much of the leadership research today, even though different methodologies and analytical approaches derived from the interpretive paradigm, emerging in the 1980s, have enlarged the scope of educational leadership research and alternative methodologies available to researchers. Notwithstanding, educational leadership research can no longer abide studies which still rely on simple correlation analysis of a finite number of variables, reputational approaches, or the most convenient methodologies (questionnaire surveys, for example), because such methods pay insufficient attention to the role played by context in the definition and structuring of leadership.

Leadership is both enabled and constrained by social context, including the people within it. Hence, the freedom to do as one pleases or to assert one's individual will is mediated by the leader's social relationship with others. To the extent that an individual's actions are determined or dictated by others, to that extent he or she becomes less morally blameworthy. Leadership, therefore, is intimately connected with responsibility (in common usage, responsibility refers to the human struggle to reconcile one's individual will with accountability) and the self-reflexive awareness of the limits and possibilities of the exercise of leadership, and whatever rights public servants may sacrifice in return for their employment. Freedom, asserts Harmon (1995), has to be seen as an intrinsic aspect of a public administrator's responsibility, rather than subordinated to it or apart from it.

Structure refers to social and cultural entities (the state, nation, or family) which shape and mould leadership. Gronn and Ribbins (1996) explain that no matter how clear an interpretation of an action from the point of view of its meaning, it alone does not explain the individual's action because both conscious and unconscious motives always drive the individual concerned. One must also appreciate how social and cultural constructs or abstractions, such as leadership, have a powerful - often decisive influence on the course of action of real individuals, serving to guide, control or regulate proper and acceptable behaviour. Leaders orient themselves to these entities which, in turn, structure leadership but also act as constraints on the exercise of leaders' free will (p. 466). So, it would seem that constraint is itself a precondition of freedom.

What is badly needed in educational administration at present is to better understand the critical role that context (the sum of the situational, historical, institutional, and socio-cultural circumstances that constrain leadership and give it its meaning) plays in the construction of an individual's leadership. Biography puts context back into the study of leadership. Hence, the perspective advanced in this paper is that the study of leadership through biography ought to be reconsidered as a viable means of studying leadership in educational administration, because it affords a better understanding of how contextual circumstances influence an individual's actions, behaviours, and style of leadership.

**The Case for Biography**

The study of leadership through biography is slowly gaining ground among scholars in the field of educational administration. Biography is one form of life writing. Life writing has several labels: portrayals, portraits, profiles, memoirs, life histories, oral histories, and case studies. According to Stone (1981), the three most advanced exemplars of life writing are biography, autobiography, and prosopography (group biography).

In the proposal for her 1992 case study entitled, Dr. Elizabeth Murray of Tatamagouche: A case study in the meaning of educational leadership, Carol Harris points out that the dominant view of leadership has been strongly influenced by psychological thought. This view focuses on the characteristics of individual leaders, typically, charisma, vision, communication skills, and sensitivity to the conflicting demands of the organization. The predominant emphasis on personal attributes has resulted in a downplaying of more philosophical notions of leadership that would focus on values, ethics, and morality as well as the pursuit of valued ends. Support of the more philosophical view allows us to examine the character, traced as beliefs, attitudes, and values expressed in action, of leaders and the meanings that bind leaders, followers, and indeed all participants together in the same social setting.

Character, asserts Kaplan (1990), is the point of anchorage because it directs us to try to determine the essential properties of people who hold and want institutional responsibility (pp. 417-422). Kets de Vries (1990) extended this argument by proposing an "interpsychic model of the mind," claiming that if one really wants to understand a person's life, he (or she) must know the context of that life and analyze it over time as a "patterned continuum". He also observed that a study of character actually serves to highlight the impact of the interplay of genetic predispositions, parental influence, and the effects of society at each stage of one's life. Kets de Vries defined character as the basic core of the individual, representing one's singularity, uniqueness and predictability. Thus, character is manifest in a leader's outlook and style of work. And, the best way to portray and understand character is through psychobiography. For Kets de Vries, then, biographical writing is basically a "semiotic analogue" in which, "a human life thus becomes a 'text' to be 'read'" (p. 424).

Westley and Mintsberg (1988) advocate the use of biography as a means of better understanding vision and leadership style, especially visionary leadership and leaders' vision content styles (pp. 162-212). Ralston (1995) seems to have taken Westley and Mintsberg's advice, because she used biographical techniques to illustrate the aspects of vision formulation and implementation in her biography of Australian scientist and explorer, Dr. Phillip Law. Ralston was able to show that visionary leadership is aimed at engineering the transformation of organizational culture (pp. 97-110).

Stone (1981) draws our attention to the fact that not only is personal biography important but prosopography in particular adds a further dimension to the study of leadership. It provides insight into the larger problems of social structure and social mobility. Networks, connections, and family relationships (support) are built on individual people interacting together for their own interests. Mapping those linkages is an important means of delving into the motives, personalities, and characters of a movement, family, organization, government, or social reformers. Group biography can also link together constitutional and institutional history and personal biography, two of the oldest and best developed parts of the historian's craft, but ones that have run too independent of each other. Oral history, investigative journalism in the political domain and the making of archives offer an array of possibilities to the historian, because the roots of political actions lie in the motives, personalities, and characters of key individual actors in any set of important historical events (pp. 286-305).

Wilson's (1978) biographical account of Daniel McIntyre's life and educational leadership as Superintendent of the Winnipeg School Division from 1885 to 1928, especially his commitment to social control in the interests of preserving, promoting and perpetuating the system of values which were represented in the British Protestant middle class in Winnipeg affords a unique opportunity to assess his life's work as the builder of an educational system in Winnipeg. McIntyre's work is viewed through his organizing of the system, his pursuit of his guiding principles of unity and harmony in society, and his work through the public school system to achieve a unified, harmonious, structured and orderly society (pp. 1-270). Wilson's biography of Daniel McIntyre affords a better understanding of what educational leaders do and why they do what they do than studies based on traditional mainstream methodologies, because it puts context back into the study of leadership. In fact, Wilson's biography of Daniel McIntyre is a superb source for understanding not only the context in which a "master practitioner" functioned, but also how that context shaped his leadership. However, educational administration, as a discipline, does not enjoy an extensive literature of master practitioners. Biography can provide whole lives in context as exemplars of "artists in action", provided one is willing to painstakingly map the experiences and career passages of an individual leader onto the structural features of the system that produced them.

Nothing is more difficult than achieving insight into "the figure under the carpet," as Edel (1979) has observed. And nothing is more important to the biographer than coming to know the essence of one's subject. The best one can do is to construct a pattern that fits well the data one has gathered about the life of one's subject. Or, as Stone (1981) has observed, "The figure under the carpet is not so much found as constructed" (p. 291).

**The Significance Of Leadership Contexts**

Leadership research makes use of a variety of methodological approaches and draws from both a structural-functional paradigm (traditional science, behaviourism) and an interpretive paradigm (hermeneutics). But one of the most curious things about leadership research is its continued reliance on approaches using simple correlational analysis of a limited number of variables, or approaches that use outdated questionnaires, or the use of a traits or attributes approach or simple descriptive procedures or approaches that use the most convenient samples or methods, and a general failure to account for possible alternative explanations, or to consider issues of reliability and validity. The continued use of questionnaire data from constructed, simulated, or hypothetical (or otherwise contrived or controlled) situations raises serious problems of validity with much inquiry. On the other hand, while the use of reputational approaches might be justified in getting at leadership style (for example), these kinds of data are not as defensible in studying behaviour, especially in the sense of what leaders actually do. At an even more telling level, given what is known from inquiry about leadership and leadership behaviour, its complexity, its situational nature, and the two-way nature of effects makes this approach to data collection (without corroboration) more than just suspect. The need, suggests Immegart (1988), is not only to investigate and collect data about actual leadership situations, but also to systematically accumulate a large number of incidents portraying actual examples of leader behaviour in leadership situations.

Much of what we know of leadership in educational administration, or in other fields of human endeavour, observes English (1995), has been gleaned through research methods in which the context in which leadership is exercised has been neglected. Worse, introductory texts in administrative studies in education present a decontextualized notion of leadership. If the objective in leadership research is to understand and illuminate behaviour, only the use of data acquired from real settings/contexts will move the study of leadership beyond the presumptuousness of trying to ascertain what leaders do from reputational approaches (p. 204).

In addition, both Hodgkinson (1991) and Greenfield (1988) argue for the relevance of feelings, values, moral issues, and real, lived experience in research on educational leadership. Greenfield insisted that leadership research should focus on the new invention of social realities; he called for a new science that "will require methods and instruments that are adequate to these, [sujective] realities" (p. 155). Hodgkinson proposed the use of maxims that reside between guesswork and empirical assertions for educational leadership research.

Interestingly, if one examines past educational leadership research beginning in the 1960s, one cannot help but notice that some practitioners in educational administration (Broad, 1963; Kearns, 1976; House and Baetz, 1979; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1984; and Bennis and Nanus, 1985) advocated the use of biography, because it would allow leadership researchers to look at a greater number of variables than scientific inquiry, such as the cultural or environmental aspects of situations; the goals and motivations of leaders in various situations; the role of second-level or subordinate leaders or leadership structures; how leaders use resources and array organizations and their members to achieve results, and how leaders get from here to there.

If one' s primary objective is to understand how a former school superintendent, for example, came to be a superintendent, or how he was able to guide, motivate and influence the actions of others, or why he was able to do his job differently than other superintendents faced with similar circumstances, one must first find a way to organize the biographical details of his life. Gronn and Ribbins have devised a contextual framework or pathway for ordering the biographical detail of leaders' lives. By using "leadership career" as a conceptual pathway through time, there is the added advantage of being able to determine the dialectical interplay between any leader's own sense of autonomy and the social structure in which his/her autonomy is embedded (p. 465). What, then, does a leader's career comprise?

Gronn and Ribbins (1996) argue that leadership ought to be thought of as four career phases or stages. The first is formation, when all leaders of every type, in all sectors, and at every institutional level learn their leadership. As part of this formation, prospective leaders are socialized into various institutional norms and values by three key agencies: family, school, and reference groups. These groups and agencies shape a prospective leader's character by generating a conception of self and the beginnings of a work-style and outlook. During the second stage, accession, the rate, direction, and timing of upward mobility are all determined by well-documented mechanisms, such as training, succession, selection, and induction. While they are waiting for their call to office, prospective leaders rely on networks of peers, patrons, and sponsors for support. At the third stage, incumbency, leaders who are called to office undergo formal or informal induction into their new institutional roles. Each new role requires further induction, and transformations, into organizational and workplace norms. But, regardless of their location or status within an organization, institutional roles comprise three elements: constraints, demands, and opportunities. In turn, the precise mix of these elements and nature of the leader's role shape and give expression to the new leader's sense of self, style, and outlook. During incumbency, the new leader develops a distinct persona, projects his/her authority, expresses his/her potency, ambition and vision, and exercises the responsibility of his/her office. The final stage, divestiture, signifies the end-point of a leader's career, because of factors associated with aging, incapacity, mandatory or voluntary retirement, or death. Divestiture connotes the relinquishing of office, the almost certain loss of influence by the leader and the potential loss of one's heritage of leadership at the hands of a successor (pp. 466-467).

Gronn and Ribbins's conceptual framework can also be used to guide the collection of biographical data (primary and secondary sources). The concepts comprising their framework serve to identify the type of data needed and where such data might be found. Primary data sources in the case of a retired school superintendent, for example, would consist of personal interviews conducted with the superintendent and with those who worked with him, or, alternatively, selected minutes excerpted from the "Minutes" of school board meetings. Secondary sources of data might consist of articles excerpted from the local newspapers that could be used to confirm or clarify past events. One might also use Gronn and Ribbins's framework in conjunction with different theoretical models of leadership in order to organize the collection of data, to interpret such data, and thus to better understand the leadership of career public servants (more has been written about private sector leadership than public sector leadership) in different contexts. So, for example, one might adapt Larry Terry's theoretical model of the bureaucratic leader as "conservator" (see Terry, 1995) to Gronn and Ribbins's third stage of their framework, incumbency, to better understand the behaviours and actions of the school superintendent to adapt the school system of which he was the administrative head to changing conditions in society.

Implicit in Gronn and Ribbins's framework, however, is the proposition that any leader's myriad life events can be encompassed by four stages, and that any individual's leadership career consists of four stages . In effect, the four-phased framework described above actually screens for (or selects for) individuals whose leadership careers and myriad experiences can be chronologically ordered into four neat, distinct, and sequential stages, as opposed to two or three stages. In short, the framework is not perfect, but it does provide a starting point for understanding an individual's leadership as well leadership reproduction processes, and for appreciating the variety of ways in which leaders of different cultures define complex problems and the actions they take to resolve them, and why.

**Biography Facilitates Theorizing About Leadership**

According to Gronn and Ribbins (1996) there are at least three ways in which biographies facilitate theorizing about leadership. First, as detailed case histories, biographies may be examined for evidence of the development and learning of leadership attributes. Second, biographies afford "analytical balance sheets" on the goals to which leaders have directed their attributes throughout their leadership careers within the shifting demands on, and options available to them. Third, a comparative analysis of leaders' career paths, as revealed in biographies, would answer broader institutional-level questions, such as whether a particular set of leaders share common attributes and whether societies and organizations screen their leadership cohorts in such a way as to guarantee conformity to preferred cultural models or types (pp. 452-470). In other words, biography can be used to generate more holistic, contextually grounded theories of leadership.

Gronn and Ribbins (1996) also point out that biographical subjects provide useful tests of or "counterfoils" to existing models or theories of leadership, and neglect of them as legitimate sources of theoretical insight carries important consequences for the study of leadership. For example, there is a clear lack of understanding in the literature of how individuals become leaders, because ignorance of culturally diverse patterns of defining leadership and knowledge of the culturally different ways prospective leaders learn their leadership is still in its infancy. In short, there is no satisfactory answer to the question: "What determines who will become a leader and who will not?"

At present, biographies provide the most powerful evidence of the institutional effects of induction and socialization in the preparation of leaders and the values informing their subsequent actions, whatever the particular setting. But, as Immegart (1988) wryly points out here, "A number of things that can be gleaned from case accounts and biographies that warrant the attention of leadership researchers have escaped conscious and systematic attention" (p. 269). If leadership researchers heeded Immegart's advice, what kinds of contributions would biography make to our understanding of leadership?

**Uses of Biography in Leadership Research**

By regarding biographies as case studies, it is possible to link theory and practice, and to test and evaluate theories about educational administration. Inasmuch as all case studies, by definition, deal with the exceptional, the scope for generalization is reduced/qualified, though this limitation can be overcome by the use of multiple and comparative, as opposed to single, case studies. And clearly, to the extent to which case studies emphasize the importance of context (historical, institutional, and cultural) is a strength when it comes to understanding what leaders do and why they do what they do in a particular setting, especially when their organizations are confronted by challenging situations.

Comparative biography also makes sense as a research tool because leadership in educational organizations is perhaps best studied and analysed from a historical perspective, focusing on the evolution of educational institutions and leadership actions and roles over long time periods. According to Leavy and Wilson (1994), long timeframes of analysis have the advantage of lending a perspective to the varying potency and powerlessness of individual action. As importantly, comparative biography can illustrate the different ways in which leadership is exercised in an educational organization, including the opportunities for and constraints on leadership. In other words, a biographical approach to leadership affords a means to connect individual biographies to key developments in the history of an organization.

Furthermore, useful lessons can be learned by studying the biographies of acknowledged leaders; by looking at their personal qualities, their methods, their successes, and their failures. Moreover, according to Riccucci (1995), if one compares individual biographies of educational administrators, one can generalize about the skills, qualities, traits, career-experiences, and other factors associated with effective leadership. Thus, an important factor in explaining the effectiveness of certain leaders is their possession of relevant knowledge and expertise. Similarly, important career experiences may, in some ways, influence an individual's outlook and approach to leadership.

Since biography claims that individuals do matter, the challenge is to determine how much leaders matter and to identify under what conditions or in what circumstances they do make a difference. In biographical research, therefore, one has to pay attention to the connections between the individual story and the person's institutional location and historical scope in terms of the character of the system, the prevailing traditions and the general circumstances of the period, what their achievements were and whether in retrospect some years later they are seen as having made an important contribution, otherwise the result is a sort of journalistic "bio-pic".

**Problems Associated with the Use of Biography**

There are, however, certain problems that attend the use of biographies. First, any approach to leadership that affords the subject an opportunity to define or evaluate his or her leadership invites a distortion of the truth. Here documents, public records of events, and the perceptions and recollections of peers and subordinates, for example, about the subject's leadership are critical in terms of supporting (or contesting) the accuracy of the subject's recollection or interpretation of key events in the history of an organization.

Second, biography that emphasizes the leadership of a specific individual does so at the expense of the contributions of the wider group or collectivity: the so-called "lesser lights." And, while there is scope for individual interpretations and actions, the number of times a leader exceeds his "institutional self" can be exaggerated. In short, leadership without the collaboration of others, advises Theakston (1997), may be theoretically pure but historically arid (p. 656).

Third, biographies of administrative leaders are problematic when it comes to establishing a clear link between individual actions and public policy outcomes: was the action performed by the leader one that would have been performed by any leader in the same situation or role? Assessing an individual's actions (and impact) against what might be predicted or expected on the basis of his or her institutional identity (and authority) and context may be useful, suggest Burch and Holiday (1996), in connecting an administrator's actions to particular policy outcomes. Greenstein (1970) restates the problem as establishing actor and action dispensability. It is up to the biographer to establish whether a particular action taken by the subject was a necessary condition of a historical outcome (action dispensability), and if so whether the action is one that needs to be explained in terms of the actor's personal characteristics (actor dispensability).  
Fourth, certain ethical problems always attend the biographies of administrative leaders. Such problems concern the relationship between the subject and the biographer. The biographer, cautions Novarr (1986), should not "love" or "hate" the biographee, nor should the biographer become unduly involved with him or her. Put simply, attempts at reconstruction ought to be comprehensive, open, logical, inclusive, non-reductionistic, and non-polemical. Auty (1981) is also concerned about conveying a "true portrait" of the subject. The biographer is irresponsible if he or she does not ensure that the facts about the life of the subject are arranged in such a way as to achieve a proper balance between his/her private and public life. Further, does the biography convey the real and whole human being, does it make him/her a living person, and does it show why the individual is a suitable subject for biography?

**Conclusion**

Thus far, biography has not figured prominently in a field in which so much significance is attached to the actions and behaviour of individual leaders. And despite the advantages of using biography in educational administration, a majority of theorists refuse to be swayed; instead, many remain committed to the provision of behavioural technologies of leadership with narrowly defined categorical views of context, even in the face of more appeals for naturalistic and longitudinal studies (Foster, 1989 and Bryman, 1992, for example). Yet, paradoxically, as soon as concerns are raised about the quality (enhanced performance), and effectiveness of leadership, the searchlight of research is likely to be refocused on the social structures of which leaders are products. So, the search begins anew for ways of guaranteeing the production of preferred outcomes, and, inevitably, answers to how it is that competing organizations or how some cultures seem to do things more efficiently.

It was the classical management theorists who first drew attention to the significance of the quality of leaders' institutional socialization arrangements. If anything, the interest currently attached to the production and performance of key organizational leaders has increased. The appeal of leadership has increased because of the promise of change, for the better, to be wrought by highly placed individuals. The study of leadership through biography affords a legitimate means of understanding leadership reproduction processes, and especially the important role that context plays in the construction of an individual's leadership. And for those critics of biography who seem to think that reliance on biographical data constitutes a reversion to hagiography and theories of heroic leadership, scrutiny of the so-called "heroic leaders" and a thorough analysis of what made them the kind of individuals they were affords the "best corrective" to the residuum of the "great man" theory of leadership.

At present, the number of biographies written about the achievements of "heroic" private sector leaders who single-handedly saved their corporations from disaster greatly outweigh the number of biographies written about the life, times, and achievements of career public servants. Hence, we know more about private sector leadership than we do about the public sector leadership. How, for example, do these so-called "non-heroic" leaders chart future courses for their organizations, motivate and inspire people to follow their leadership, and make difficult decisions to achieve success? What role does "context" actually play in the construction of a school superintendent's leadership? Biographies which examine the circumstances that educational leaders pay attention to as context during their leadership careers would contribute to our understanding of how contextual forces shape the leadership of public administrators that is currently missing from the study of leadership in educational administration.

**New Avenues for Research**

Increasingly, a growing number of scholars are leaving the lofty seclusion of the so-called "ivory tower" to chart new territories and to interact with people to describe phenomena both as he or she believes them to be and as perceived by others, and to evaluate the data gathered from multiple sources in light of a specific theoretical framework and new concepts as they emerge. One way to hear those voices is biography. However, re-centering educational administration on leadership through biography (and other forms of life writing) means abandoning the traditional academic "boxes" and "specialties" which have come to dominate approaches to the preparation of school administrators. Accordingly, how universities approach the preparation of future leaders will change.

Avenues for further research aimed at developing a curriculum for future educational leaders might include: (1) improved efforts to integrate qualitative and quantitative methodologies and to use several approaches in one study, including life writing; (2) understanding, applying, and integrating knowledge from the social sciences, the humanities and the arts into the training process, and (3) renewed efforts to focus on real leaders in real settings, and in real situations in order to develop a curriculum that will help potential leaders engage in the practical/real problems which will confront them on the job.

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