Is leadership a myth?
A ‘new wave’ critical leadership-focused research agenda for recontouring the landscape of educational leadership

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Abstract
Intentionally provocative, this article identifies weaknesses in mainstream educational leadership scholarship, and draws upon ‘new wave’ critical leadership studies to propose a new, potentially paradigm-shifting, direction for the field. The central argument is that educational leadership researchers, in focusing predominantly on how institutional heads and other formal ‘leaders’ may best ‘do’ leadership, are addressing the wrong questions and setting off from the wrong departure point. The unit of analysis should shift, it is argued, from leadership to influence, within a new research agenda that replaces surface-level, causality-assumptive ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions that have shaped mainstream educational leadership research for over thirty years, with more fundamental ‘who?’ and ‘what?’ questions, aimed at identifying who is in fact doing the influencing. An aspect of such inquiry is leadership scepticism and agnosticism, which confronts the question: Does leadership exist, or is it a myth that we have reified? A highly original feature of the proposed new research agenda is the adoption of the author’s theoretical notion of a singular unit of micro-level influence as an ‘epistemic object’ – a concept derived from STEMM research, denoting a vague and undefined potential focus of inquiry that may (or may not) turn out to be significant.

Keywords
Epistemic object, micro-level influence, epistemic development, epistemic controversies, fields of disagreement, ‘new wave’ critical leadership studies, critical leadership research, distributed leadership, leadership scepticism, leadership agnosticism

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Not everyone is convinced that studying leadership is a good idea. Not everyone is convinced that leadership even exists. And a significant group of leadership researchers think there is much wrong with how leadership is researched.

Such statements sum up, in a nutshell, what fuels critical leadership scholarship.

There is, of course, far more to critical leadership research or scholarship than is conveyed in the opening paragraph above, and as my argument unfolds I discuss the range and nuanced gradations of perspectives that shape and distinguish critical discourses. In this intentionally provocative article I bring what has been called ‘the new wave of critical leadership studies’ (Kelly, 2014: 907) to the table in the form of a proposed research agenda for recontouring the landscape of educational leadership scholarship. Focused on an original notion – a theoretical singular unit of micro-level influence, which I present and explain below as an ‘epistemic object’ – my proposed agenda has the potential to lead educational leadership scholarship to a crossroad from where it could either take a ‘new wave’ critical turn in the direction of a new paradigm, or simply continue along the road well-travelled by mainstream scholars.

This article incorporates a Janusian perspective that combines a critique of the educational leadership scholarship field’s development over the last half-century with prescription of the nature, shape and direction of its development over the coming decades. Essentially focused on the educational leadership research field’s epistemic development, my argument is presented within a contextual frame that draws upon the overlapping fields of epistemology and the philosophy of science.

I begin by outlining the nature of the educational leadership scholarship’s ‘epistemic state’, and then discuss how, by unsettling that state, critical discourses can fuel the field’s epistemic development.

**Fields of disagreement**

From its earliest days (including those of its precursors: educational management and educational administration), the educational leadership research field, in common with most fields of scholarship, has been a site of internecine epistemic disputes and persistent disagreement about analytical foci, theoretical perspectives, and methods and methodology; as Ribbins (1999: 228) puts it: ‘educational administration/management has had a turbulent history full of violent debates and substantial shifts’.

It was in the 1970s that Canadian scholar Thomas Greenfield first provoked widespread hostility (outlined in Ribbins, 1993) – mainly in North America – by challenging the positivist paradigm, dubbed ‘the theory movement’, that many early educational administration researchers had embraced. During what Blackmore (1989: 113) calls ‘[t]his “intellectual turmoil” in educational administration’, researchers accordingly picked their allegiances between two broad ‘camps’, each headed by prominent scholars, and Greenfield (1980: 28) was prompted to declare in a response paper: ‘When it comes to saying something about reality and describing action within it, Hills and Willower live in one world while I inhabit another. We argue from different premises and, therefore, see different facts in the world and build very different interpretations’.

The Greenfield episode is an example of what Kitcher (2000: 22) calls a scientific controversy, noting that ‘the focus of a controversy is not always some statement, hypothesis, or theory. In some instances, what is in dispute is the significance of particular questions or the reliability of an instrument’. Scientific controversies are a feature of a research or scholarship field’s ‘epistemic state’ (Kitcher, 2000) – a term that I interpret as essentially denoting the
knowledge ‘landscape’ and what is shaping it, including the range and foci of a field’s practices (defined below by Kitcher); knowledge generated and perpetuated; approaches to knowledge generation; beliefs and belief systems that underpin the knowledge, and the stability, fluidity, history and future direction of each of the above. Now firmly logged in the annals of educational leadership, management and administration research history, the theory movement controversy was the educational leadership and management scholarship field’s first major epistemic dispute, and its legacy, I argue below, lingers on to this day in mainstream educational leadership scholarship. Yet, while they may convey images of frustration, dissatisfaction and acrimony, there is a bigger picture that shows epistemic disputes and controversies to be essential to a field’s epistemic development.

**Mainstream scholarship and critical discourses**

In examining the nature and patterns of scientific controversies and disputes, Kitcher (2000) refers to ‘the core’ of a scientific community’s ‘practice’. By ‘practice’ he means (p. 22):

>a language, a set of questions taken to be significant, a set of explanatory schemata, a set of accepted statements about the natural phenomena that are the community’s distinctive concern, experimental techniques, instruments, assessments of authority, methodological canons, and statements about how the community’s project relates to human well-being.

He points out that '[i]ndividual practices plainly outrun consensus practice’ (p. 23), and that this deviation from consensus is the basis for controversy, which occurs when one or more members of the community argue(s) for change to any of the aspects of practice listed above. Sometimes controversy ends because the argument for change succeeds in winning over enough community members to allow the consensus practice to be modified. Sometimes, however – ‘because the attention of the community is limited, only a few proposals for modifying consensus practice can be seriously considered at any one time’ (p. 23) – dissenting individuals or groups effectively set themselves up as challengers to the consensus. Kitcher (p. 27) remarks that ‘complete homogeneity is frequently a very poor distribution in terms of advancing the community’s epistemic state’ – in other words, it is generally through disagreement and disputes that a field’s epistemic development eventually occurs.

The consensus practice of a community, Kitcher (2000: 23) explains, ‘is a multidimensional entity each component of which contains exactly those elements universally shared within the community’, and this entity ‘identifies the core of the community’s commitments’ (original emphasis). Applied to the context of the educational and the wider (i.e. the non-education-specific) leadership scholarship fields, as I discuss in a section below, the consensus practice identifies leadership as a form of influence; this is probably the only belief that is more or less shared across these fields’ expanse of mainstream and critical scholars. What I identify elsewhere (Evans, 2022) as the field’s mainstream belief system also reflects evident broad consensus amongst a sizeable majority of educational leadership scholars, denoting what is generally termed ‘mainstream’ educational leadership scholarship. Dissension from this mainstream is represented by critical discourses and communities – some of whose members, to varying degrees, retain an affiliation with the mainstream despite holding deviant beliefs, while some break away from it, taking their belief systems with them. In neither case does the deviant belief system represent the mainstream one.
Critical leadership scholarship, then, essentially represents deviance from – and, we may infer, dissatisfaction with – mainstream leadership scholarship. Yet, as I note elsewhere (Evans, 2018: 49–50),

just as there are degrees of dissatisfaction, there are degrees of criticality; so we may imagine a continuum, ranging from, at one (arguably, the ‘moderate’) end, perspectives that deviate only slightly from those dominant in the mainstream, to the paradigm-shifting perspectives located at what could be called the ‘radical’ end. (original emphasis)

Cutting across this continuum, on the basis of their substantive foci and the purposes that these foci imply, I discern two distinct, but complementary, interpretations of critical scholarship within the educational leadership field. One is now a widely recognised discourse that, as McGinty et al. (2022) note, has steadily gained traction within the field; indeed, having begun as a marginal discourse, it is perhaps now insinuating itself comfortably within the mainstream. Consistent with Robinson’s (1994: 56) description of critical theory in educational administration as ‘a morally based vision of socially just administrative arrangements and the means for achieving them’, this discourse’s purpose is summed up by John Smyth (2021: xviii) in the following terms: ‘critical educational leadership sees its project as being deeply moral as well as a democratic and political project’. Tending to define itself through a dominant focus on social justice-related issues – including the distribution and appropriation of power; as Courtney et al. (2021: 5) argue, ‘critical approaches deal fundamentally with power’ (original emphasis) – this particular policy- and practice-focused discourse, and those who contribute to it, are typically, as one of them explains,

concerned with enduring power structures and the impact these have on the lives and work of educationalists and communities … there are features of critical research which are about challenging accepted interpretations, focusing on those who are marginalised, locating questions within social, political and economic contexts, emancipatory in seeking equity, and inclusive of the researcher role within the process. (Gunter, 2001: 400)

But not all critical leadership researchers buy into so narrow a definition of critical scholarship. My own affiliation is with what I discern as the second interpretation of criticality, which Alvesson and Deetz (2021: 7) explain as follows: ‘[o]ur take on critical research is … a bit different from researchers strongly focusing on groups they find to be the victims of oppression and injustice’. Incorporating a wider critical focus than social justice-related issues, such research is described as including the following features:

- ‘Identifying and challenging assumptions behind ordinary ways of perceiving, conceiving, and acting;
- Recognizing the influence of history, culture, and social positioning on beliefs and actions;
- Imagining and exploring extraordinary alternatives, ones that may disrupt routines and established orders;
- being appropriately sceptical about any knowledge or solution that claims to be the only truth or alternative.’ (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021: 5-6²)

Criticality so-interpreted reflects what has been called ‘new wave’ critical leadership scholarship or research. ‘New wave’ criticality finds much more wrong with leadership research – and, by extension, with educational leadership research.
‘New wave’ critical leadership scholarship

What Kelly (2014: 907) calls ‘the new wave of critical leadership studies’ is, he notes, essentially ‘about the nature and limitations of the scientific study of leadership’ (emphasis added) – a description that distinguishes it from the social-justice focused criticality outlined above, whose focus is directed at policy and practice. Encompassing what Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012: 204) describe as ‘an expanding sceptical literature on leadership, questioning a range of dominant assumptions’, this scholarship, Spoelstra et al. (2021: 301) explain, ‘takes aim at the romanticization, essentialism, and positivism at the heart of leadership studies and offers an alternative set of theoretical perspectives that subject the phenomenon of leadership to a broader sociological and philosophical analysis’. Kelly’s ‘new wave’ label – which, to the best of my knowledge appears within only one output, other than where I adopt it – seems neither widely known nor widely used; rather, within the wider leadership scholarship field or ‘broader organisational sciences’ (Eacott, 2017: 17), the wider-than-social-justice-focused criticality that I describe here tends to be labelled simply ‘critical’ research, or, more specifically, as Wolfram Cox and Hassard (2018) note, ‘critical leadership studies’. Those whom I identify as its affiliates are therefore, simply as a result of unfamiliarity with it, unlikely to apply the specific ‘new wave’ term (not least, since many of them – or, more precisely, their scholarly activities – pre-date Kelly’s introduction of it). Yet I adopt it as a neat umbrella label that concisely denotes the criticality whose wider focus distinguishes it from the social-justice-related criticality that is now well established within educational leadership scholarship.

While it was not at the time referred to as such, the ‘new wave’ critical discourse first surfaced in the later decades of the twentieth century, as robust criticism of many aspects of leadership scholarship – with Pfeffer (1977: 104), for example, identifying three ‘problems with the concept of leadership’, and Miner (1982: 293) proposing that ‘leadership itself has outlived its usefulness’ (a view that he first expressed in the 1970s). The discourse extends through ‘questioning leadership as a normalizing template’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 369), to scrutiny of the very concept of leadership, including consideration of whether it is a socially constructed myth, or is otherwise ill-conceived or in need of reframing (Meindl, 1993; Raelin, 2016). Gemmill and Oakley (1992), for example, suggest that ‘[b]elief in hierarchy and the necessity of leaders represents an unrecognized ideology which takes its power chiefly from the fact that it is an undiscussable aspect of reality based upon epistemological and ontological beliefs outside of conscious awareness’ (p. 113), and that, through ‘reification’ – ‘a social process which converts an abstraction or mental construct into a supposed real entity’ (p. 114) – ‘the social construction of leadership is mystified and accorded an objective existence’, yet leadership is, in fact ‘a social fiction’ (p. 114).

Reflecting ‘leadership agnosticism and leadership as the extra-ordinarization of the mundane’ (Fairhurst, 2009: 1616), new wave criticality includes the features not only of what Alvesson and Spicer (2012: 373) call ‘critical assumptions’, but also many of what they categorise as ‘interpretive assumptions’ (pp. 372-373, original emphasis), and which, they argue, ‘have opened up new vistas by highlighting how leadership is constructed, as well as the ambiguities and uncertainties associated with it’ (p. 372). The discourse incorporates consideration of leadership as an ‘egalitarian, two-directional, and collaborative’ (Fletcher, 2012: 87) form of agency that is potentially practised by anyone, in any context – and is never more evident as such than in the subtly differing interpretations of it that extend it ‘beyond the individual located within the upper echelons of an organization’ (Currie et al., 2009: 1738), and which variously describe it (leadership) as ‘plural’,
‘democratic’, ‘collaborative’, ‘distributed’, ‘participative’, ‘shared’, ‘community’ or ‘collective’ – with the last of these adjectives tending to be the most widely used one, to denote a theoretical umbrella under which the others sit. So-interpreted, as a pervasive dimension of ‘new wave’ criticality, collective leadership reflects a ‘processual view’ of leadership, which Schweiger et al. (2020: 413) present as ‘an alternative to the romanticism of leader-centred and post-heroic approaches’, and which Tourish (2016: 80) explains as a conceptualisation of leadership as ‘a fluid process emerging from the communicatively constituted interactions of myriad organisational actors. It is not a finished category, standing apart from the complex organisational processes that produce it’. In similar vein, Crevani (2018: 84) argues for considering leadership as ‘a phenomenon produced and sustained in interactions, a situated and relational phenomenon’, and proposes that ‘[m]ore attention should be paid to how leadership emerges and evolves in concrete social contexts’. More recently, ‘Leadership-as-practice’ (L-A-P) – described as ‘a new approach to leadership’ that ‘look[s] for leadership in everyday practices’ as ‘a process of co-creation’ that is ‘not dependent on particular individuals to mobilize and make decisions for others’ (Raelin, 2020: 1) – is beginning to establish a foothold within ‘new wave’ critical leadership studies (see, for example, Youngs and Evans, 2021).

While, today, it is disseminated in organisational studies journals such as Human Relations and The Leadership Quarterly, ‘new wave’ leadership criticality features prominently in what is perhaps considered its ‘home’ journal: Leadership. Rarely does such research appear in specialist educational leadership journals in what I call ‘undiluted’ forms (that incorporate an unmistakably central, rather than a more subtly peripheral, focus on such scholarship); Peter Gronn’s (1996) seminal article – an expansion of his keynote address to the 1995 conference of what was then the British Educational Management and Administration Society (BEMAS)\(^5\) – is a notable exception. This observation supports my contention, presented below, that few educational leadership researchers currently engage with ‘new wave’ criticality; it perhaps also reflects the difficulty in securing publication for such critical perspectives in specialist educational leadership and management journals, whose reviewers, being (statistically) more likely to represent the majority of mainstream rather than the minority of ‘new wave’ critical scholars, may be resistant to the latter’s leadership scepticism. Kitcher (2000: 29) argues that ‘scientific controversies’, occurring on a ‘field of disagreement in which alternative individual practices compete as candidates for the modification of consensus practice’ (original emphasis), have beginnings, middles and endings, and may persist for substantial periods of time – often several decades. While its increasing assimilation within mainstream scholarship suggests that we may now be seeing the ‘ending’ part of the ‘scientific controversy’ created by the social justice-focused critical educational leadership discourse, ‘new wave’ criticality, in contrast, seems to be at its beginning stage as one of educational leadership scholarship’s scientific controversies.

As I imply above, the ‘new wave’ of critical leadership studies has its origins in, and is largely perpetuated by affiliates of, the wider leadership or organisation studies field(s) – though also well represented among its researchers are applied linguists, whose approaches to data-gathering and -analysis lend themselves to capturing leadership conceived of as a relational activity, expressed through oral or written communication. Yet a key problem for the educational leadership scholarship field is that, for the most part (which connotes the field’s mainstream), it has kept its distance from this wider leadership field, with the result that most educational leadership researchers are entirely unaware – literally, ignorant – of the nature of and the issues addressed within the wider field’s ‘new wave’ critical discourse, and are therefore oblivious to what it identifies as weaknesses in leadership scholarship.
The roots of ignorance: Delusions of distinctiveness

Educational leadership scholarship is for the most part identified as a sub-field of educational scholarship; Ribbins (1999), in fact, in referring to educational management, identifies research in education as its ‘parent field’ (p. 236). Educational leadership scholars typically locate themselves within this wider educational research field, often self-identifying as educational researchers with a specialist focus. Such taxonomically related identities reflect the kind of hierarchically layered connecting landscapes that delineate most fields of academic scholarship, but educational leadership scholarship’s long-standing affiliation with educational research has set it on a rather cloistered development path – one that has led to a narrowly framed perspective, whose fine focus on education as the contextual backdrop to its activity seems to have fostered a myopic disregard of what is going on in other, related and relevant, fields – particularly the wider (non-education-specific) leadership scholarship field.

Eacott (2018: 15) observes that ‘[t]he artificial partitioning of the social world for the purpose of classification and categorization is an act by the social scientist. This is evident in the mobilization of context in educational administration literature’. With a few exceptions, the work of mainstream educational leadership scholars perpetuates a tradition of parochialism that seems to have developed from the perception that, as a context and a site for leadership, education – that is, educational institutions and organisations, and/or activity that is focused on (formally) educating – represents a special case to which the wider field of leadership scholarship generally has little or limited relevance. Such a perception is reflected, for example, in Hodkinson’s (1991: 164) argument that ‘educational administration is a special case within the general profession of administration’, and in Bell’s (1991: 136) highlighting as a ‘weakness’ in the field that was known as educational management, the ‘borrowing [of] perspectives, models, concepts and even theories from the world of industry and commerce’. More recently, Bess and Goldman (2001: 419) go further, arguing that “leadership” may take on different forms and must be understood and explained uniquely for each sector: higher education and compulsory education. As a consequence, leadership scholarship and educational leadership scholarship have for the most part remained distinct and separate, their respective affiliates ploughing their own furrows that very rarely intersect.

Certainly, as Bess and Goldman (2001: 425) note, ‘[e]ducational leadership researchers have drawn selectively from the work of the broader leadership research community and have been especially drawn to such concepts as transformational and charismatic leadership’. Yet, as these authors continue, ‘[a]t the same time, they have produced little research, either theoretical or applied, on trait theory, path–goal theory, contingency theory, or normative theory’. If this is so, then the tendency may be a legacy of the theory movement controversy, referred to above, which may have spawned a tradition of steering clear of any theorising considered to stem from a positivist paradigm – though, as Bush (2008) chronicles, in the UK at least, to align with the national policy agenda, the potential relevance of theoretical perspectives and approaches from fields outside education entered the educational leadership discourse from 1995. Nevertheless, as books’ and articles’ content and references lists show clearly, educational leadership researchers’ serious engagement with (as opposed to superficial dabbling in) other fields – particularly the wider leadership and organisational studies field(s) – is quite rare. Indeed, Wang (2018: 28) identifies several ‘dominant leadership approaches’ that educational leadership scholars have eschewed, and Myan and Sutherland (2019: 683-4) argue that ‘[t]he learning sciences offer some promising perspectives that may be used to ground educational leadership theory to authentic learning’ but which have ‘been largely
ignored by the field of school administration and leadership’. Foskett et al. (2005) similarly bemoan the rarity of educational leadership and management researchers’ engagement in inter-disciplinary work, while Heck and Hallinger (2005: 232) highlight a problematic lack of communication and collaboration within the educational leadership field, where ‘researchers employing different conceptual and methodological approaches often seem to pass each other blindly in the night’.

Adding detail to this broad-brush picture of epistemic parochialism, Wang (2018: 28) highlights ‘the limited number of theoretical studies and the marginalized role of theory in the [educational leadership] field’, and issues a rallying cry to educational leadership researchers to conduct ‘empirical inquiries to refine concepts and theories’ and to address ‘theoretical gaps’. Within current mainstream educational leadership scholarship there is probably no better example of the need to ‘refine concepts and theories’, and no better illustration of a theoretical gap that reflects the dangers of epistemic myopia, than the field’s treatment of the notion of distributed leadership.

_**Educational leadership research jumps onto the distributed leadership bandwagon – but how far has it travelled?**_

The wider leadership scholarship field typically uses the term ‘collective leadership’ to denote a theoretical umbrella that incorporates a range of subtly different concepts, whose labels I list above. The ‘new wave’ critical discourse incorporates a sharp focus on this expansive interpretation of collective leadership, on the basis that, if leadership exists at all, it does so in one or more ‘collective’ forms. Educational leadership scholarship, in contrast – certainly, in the mainstream – has for the most part embraced only one such form of collective leadership over much of the last two decades. In thus limiting its focus, it has disregarded (or is perhaps unaware of) the broader theoretical and epistemic implications of conceptualising leadership as a collective endeavour or form of fluidly reciprocal agency that the ‘collective leadership’ label and notion denote. Moreover, mainstream educational leadership scholarship reflects very limited understanding of the particular form of collective leadership by which it is evidently enthralled: distributed leadership.

While mainstream educational leadership researchers may defiantly hold up their field’s focus on distributed leadership as evidence of theorisation or of engagement with and appropriation of knowledge from the wider leadership field, in reality, it is neither of these, for, in leaping onto it in droves, these researchers have confined themselves to a relatively small area of the distributed leadership bandwagon – which, in turn, represents but one of the collective leadership fleet of vehicles for reconceptualising leadership. In this increasingly crowded and narrow space that mainstream educational leadership research has appropriated and fitted out after its own fashion, ‘collective leadership’ is read only as ‘distributed leadership’, which in turn is typically interpreted narrowly as devolved leadership. The landscape of research into distributed leadership in education contexts remains dominated by a discourse that is focused narrowly on what Gronn (2002) labels an additive or numerical view of leadership, neglecting examination or consideration of the various forms of what he (Gronn, 2002) categorises as ‘distributed leadership as concerted action’. Despite Hulpia et al.’s (2011: 754) emphasising that ‘distributed leadership is more than delegating and dividing leadership functions’, the distributed leadership in education literature is replete with examinations of contexts and situations that seem limited to just such delegation and division.

In confining itself in this way, educational leadership scholarship – with the exception of a minority of contributions (see Crawford, 2012, for examples of such exceptions) – has in many respects only scratched the surface of consideration of distributed leadership as a unit of analysis.
Gronn’s work on distributed leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2000, 2002, 2009) is widely acknowledged (by, *inter alios*, Bennett et al., 2003; Bolden, 2011; Kelly, 2008) as deeply analytical. Yet, despite its belonging to one of educational leadership scholarship’s luminaries, Gronn’s voice is all too often left crying in the field’s wilderness, where his work certainly seems to be read, but most often superficially and/or selectively, leaving his most intellectually challenging analyses un(der)examined and un(der)appreciated. In the face of such pervasive superficiality, it is unsurprising that McGinty et al. (2022) find the educational leadership research field ‘under-theorised’.

Criticism of mainstream educational leadership scholars’ narrow interpretation, misapplication, and evident misunderstanding, of the concept of distributed leadership is well-rehearsed by those who, not least on account of their exposure of such weak scholarship, perhaps count amongst the field’s ‘new wave’ critical researchers (e.g. Bennett et al., 2003; Bolden, 20117; Corrigan, 2013; Harris, 2013; Lakomski, 2008; Lumby, 2016; 2019; Torrance, 2013; Mayrowetz, 2008; Niesche, 2018; Youngs, 2009; 2017; Youngs and Evans, 2021). Yet without revisiting old ground, it is important to note that, although it is certainly voluminous, most of the mainstream educational leadership scholarly output relating to distributed leadership incorporates simplistic interpretations that reflect definitional and conceptual opacity and superficiality. Effectively, while the field’s traditional fine focus on ‘solo’ or ‘stand-alone’ leaders(hip) may certainly have been diffused by distributed leadership mania, it has not really shifted. It may attach the ‘leader’ label to a wider range of individuals than those holding headship or principalship posts, but such narrowly focused work on distributed leadership represents mere toe-skimming over the surface of the much more expansive theoretical pool that the wider leadership field calls collective leadership. In contrast, the new research agenda that I propose below is focused precisely on the kind of interpersonal agency that Gronn calls ‘concertive action’ – though, as I go on to explain, its (the agenda’s) key feature is its *initial* dissociation of such agency from the leadership label.

In diverting its researchers’ gaze from the wealth of knowledge that the wider leadership (or organisational studies) field’s critical scholarship has accumulated, educational leadership scholarship’s epistemic parochialism seems to have stifled its own field’s epistemic development. This (educational leadership) is a field, as I indicate elsewhere (Evans, 2022), whose knowledge claims have been under fire for several decades, whose mainstream belief system has been exposed as unreliable, and whose epistemic worthiness has been shown to be shaky. It is surely time, then, for educational leadership scholars to remove their blinkers and, in colloquial terms, wake up and smell the coffee.

**Intellectual expansionism and theoretical pluralism: The path to epistemic development**

The educational leadership scholarship field’s path to epistemic development is to be found through engaging with other fields’ relevant discourses, and giving serious consideration to the ideas they incorporate. The field’s critical researchers know this. They know the value of theoretical pluralism, accepting that, as Kraatz (2020: 257) observes, ‘[w]hen we are faced with rival views, we are forced to question (and perhaps rethink) our own. When we take these alternatives seriously, deeper forms of learning and development become possible’.

Yet it seems that, for the most part, educational leadership researchers have been so focused on the contextual specificity of the ‘educational’ part of their field’s label that they have overlooked the potential of exploring the width of applicability of the ‘leadership’ part, and where this might take them. Some of the likely reasons for this tendency are understandable; researchers may be
keen to align themselves closely with prevailing educational policy agendas - indeed, the take-up of a distributed leadership focus in the field has been attributed (by, for example, Bolden (2011) and Corrigan (2013)) to the policy context, including, in the UK, the establishment of the National College for School Leadership, and the introduction in the 1980s of local management of schools. Such alignment on the part of researchers may reflect strategic, career-enhancement-related, motives – to increase research funding opportunities or the potential for research impact, for example, or to forge a pathway to a publications profile, for while Richardson and McLeod (2009: 638) note the ‘pressures on many educational leadership researchers to be published in the “top” journals’, there is much that rings true in Alvesson’s (2020) cynical and satirical analysis of mainstream leadership scholarship, presented in the form of tongue-in-cheek advice to (early career) leadership researchers intent on making names for themselves, by, inter alia, ‘taking artificial data seriously’, ‘disregarding reality’, ‘addressing’ as much as possible as “leadership” and ‘suppressing’ any sign or irony or doubt in your research (p. 5). And, viewed against the backdrop of the increasingly competitive world of work that is the twenty-first-century academy, it is difficult to criticise researchers for delineating the substantive and methodological parameters of their work on such bases. But, as I note above, myopic scholarship that perpetuates intellectual insularity comes at a cost: erosion of the field’s epistemic worthiness.

Within an indictment of the wider leadership field’s mainstream scholarship and its journals, ‘new wave’ critical scholar Tourish (2015: 137) complains that ‘The same sterile preoccupations dominate the literature, in which the identification of ever more mediating processes and moderating factors takes precedence over interrogating fundamental assumptions’ (emphasis added). The same charge may be directed at mainstream educational leadership scholarship – whose journals, Heck and Hallinger (2005: 239) note, ‘at worst … publish work related to perspectives that were mined and abandoned years ago’, while Eacott (2017: 23) calls for more debate in such fora: ‘it is the absence of engagement with the other that is dominant. For the most part, those with whom we disagree are treated with benign neglect’. Of such potential ‘others’ that Eacott urges educational leadership researchers to engage with, ‘new wave’ critical leadership scholars(hip) should, I argue, appear at the top of the list.

Engagement with the ‘new wave’ critical discourse is likely to widen many educational leadership researchers’ perspectives – as it has widened mine; for, as Alvesson and Deetz (2021: 154) remark, ‘all social researchers benefit by viewing their objects of study with fresh eyes’. Such engagement is likely to prompt researchers to reflect not only on knowledge beliefs and claims that the critical discourse continues to expose respectively as unfounded and un(der)evidenced, but also on the alternatives that critical scholars advance. Most notably, one such alternative is leadership-agnosticism: consideration that leadership may not exist; that it may be, as Gemmill and Oakley (1992) contend, a myth that we have reified, and that there are other, better, ways, not only of influencing but also of conceiving of, organisational effectiveness. Yet, as I note in concluding my epistemic-worthiness-informed analysis of mainstream educational leadership research (Evans, 2022), ‘new wave’ critical leadership scholarship has a problem:

the critical leadership discourse is, for the most part, just that: a discourse – a ‘talking shop’ that is big on ideas, and vociferous in highlighting the limitations of mainstream leadership-related scholarship, but short on specific proposals for practical ways of addressing them, through research with the potential not only to justify but also to kick-start the paradigm shift promised by well formulated critical theoretical perspectives …
If we are to continue discussing and debating the epistemic worthiness of educational leadership scholarship, then – if we are serious about addressing whether educational leadership is (still) worth studying – we must, going forward, seek compelling evidence to support the discourse. The search for such evidence calls for a new research agenda: one that prioritises testing, through rigorous empirical research, the theoretical perspectives that are the mainstay of the critical leadership discourse.

Taking up the ‘story’ of educational leadership scholarship’s epistemic development from where that paper (Evans, 2022) leaves off, in what remains of this article, I delineate the features of such a new research agenda.

‘Interrogating fundamental assumptions’: From ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ to ‘who? and ‘what?’

Epistemologically, mainstream educational leadership scholarship is addressing the wrong questions. It has established a tradition of focusing on how (e.g. in what ways, and under what circumstances), and with what consequences, leader(ship)-exerted influence occurs – a tradition that keeps leaders and leadership always in the frame, as the presumed influencing agents. Yet, from the decades-long, seemingly indefatigable, search for the elusive ‘how’ or ‘why’ missing link in the leadership→student achievement causality chain, educational leadership researchers, as many scholars have noted (e.g. Angus, 1989; Bates, 1989; Courtney and Gunter, 2019; Gronn, 1996; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Levačić, 2005; Murphy, 1988; Niesche, 2018; Van de Grift, 1990; Watkins, 1989; Witziers et al., 2003), and as I discuss elsewhere (Evans, 2022), have for the most part returned empty-handed – and certainly without the holy grail of leadership. In trying to understand what might enhance the quality of education provision – potentially, through effective teachers and teaching – it is therefore time to start thinking outside the fixation-with-leadership box that, having entombed mainstream scholarship for the last few decades, has failed to provide complete and convincing answers to the questions being posed and addressed. It is time to start addressing new questions – the kinds of questions that preoccupy the radicals among ‘new wave’ critical leadership scholars: the leadership sceptics and agnostics.

From leadership to influence: A new research agenda

‘Why should it make any difference what the head’s like? … It doesn’t make any difference to me … really, [my headteacher] has very little influence on me’, remarked schoolteacher Brenda, during a research interview within a study of teacher morale, job satisfaction and motivation (Evans, 1999: 34). Reflecting acceptance of Pfeffer’s (1977) point that if one wants to understand what is happening in organisations, leadership is often a bad place to start, I propose a new research agenda that, by way of ‘interrogating fundamental assumptions’ as advocated by Tourish (2015, cited above), initially takes leaders and leadership out of the equation, rather than taking their agency as the point of departure, and their influence as a ‘given’.

As Gronn (1996: 9) noted more than a quarter of a century ago, it is consensually accepted that leadership involves influence: ‘There is now increasingly broad acceptance that leadership is a form of direct or indirect influence’. This consensus is reflected in definitions of the concept: ‘The broad range of definitions and understandings of leadership seem to have little in common except for addressing “influence” in some way’ (Alvesson and Blom, 2022: 64). Without influence, there is no leadership, and the causality claim that has fuelled educational leadership and management
scholarship over the past 50 years has been underpinned by a widespread acceptance that headteachers (synonymised as leaders) are key influencers of the teachers they are purported to lead. A great proportion of educational leadership research has therefore variously addressed the question: ‘How do headteachers (best) influence others [most notably, teachers]?’ or, ‘Why is this or that approach to influencing through doing headship/school leadership effective [or not]?’ Indeed, Leithwood et al. (2020: 571) argue that ‘[t]he contribution of school leadership to student learning is now sufficiently well-documented that one of the most important questions now facing practicing leaders and leadership scholars is about “how”. How does school leadership influence student learning?’ Their study’s central purpose is moreover reported as being ‘to help unpack how school leaders contribute to improved student achievement in their schools’ (p. 590, emphasis added).

But surface-level, causality-assumptive ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ questions represent the wrong place from which to be setting out. Researchers should, rather, be delving below, or testing, such assumption by asking: ‘Who (or what) influences teachers?’ – followed up by questions such as: ‘We’ve been assuming it’s those we call leaders, and some of our work (for example, on teacher leadership) ascribes leadership status to those who evidently do influence others; but is this the right way to go about things? Are we perhaps putting the (leadership) cart before the (influence) horse?’ These questions may lead researchers to find that they have long been unable to see the wood for the wrong trees they have been barking up, or it may confirm formally designated leaders as key influencers – and to open-ended inquiry either outcome is as feasible as the other.

In proposing influence rather than leadership as a focus and unit of analysis, I am not attempting to reduce leadership to influence, as one of its constituent parts, for I accept Kelly’s (2008: 772) point that ‘a detailed study of … [influence] as an object of inquiry does not itself constitute a study of leadership’. Rather, I am proposing, much more radically, to circumvent or bypass leadership, by cutting right to the chase: examining the more fundamental agency that really counts, rather than that to which we have attached a more emotive and, arguably, palatable, label. I propose ‘parking’ the well-worn leadership vehicle on a side road, and then setting out on foot from a new starting point to explore unfamiliar territory, in the borderlands and beyond, in search of influence.

My ‘umbrella’ definition of interpersonal influence is human agency that may reasonably be considered to directly or indirectly prompt an individual’s shift or deviation (however slight), from one position or direction to another. But since researching such influence in a meaningful way requires fine-grained analysis aimed at revealing and explaining its complexity as a process, we need initially to focus our attention on examining not ‘big picture’ influence, but its most basic, potentially discernible, unit: what I call a singular unit of micro-level influence. Such a unit is notional: a theoretical concept that cannot easily be discerned in practice, and must remain an idea in theory until it can be evidenced empirically. I propose making it an epistemic object.

**Epistemic objects**

The concept of an epistemic object was derived by Hans Jörg Rheinberger (1997) from the context of cancer research. Epistemic objects, Rheinberger explains, ‘usually begin their lives as recalcitrant “noise”, as boundary phenomena, before they move on stage as “significant units”’ (p. 21). Their value is their promise – the possibilities they offer. Offering no certainty, an epistemic object may be described as something considered worth a bet in terms of knowledge gains or breakthroughs; something that, at the time of its inception, is relatively undefined and hazy to conceptualise. It
offers potential as being worthy of researching or examining, and hence has potential epistemic worthiness. Miettinen and Vurkkunen (2005: 438) explain epistemic objects as

not things with fixed properties but … open-ended projections oriented to something that does not yet exist, or what we do not yet know for sure. For this reason, they are also generators of new conceptions and solutions and can be regarded as a central source of innovation and reorientation in societal practices (emphasis added).

Rheinberger (1997: 21) cites Wittgenstein to explain epistemic objects’ fundamentality: ‘And he [Wittgenstein] continues: “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a ‘proto-phenomenon’. That is, where we ought to have said: this language game is played”. These words chime with my argument that, in making leadership its focus, educational leadership scholarship is looking in the wrong place – for, as Kelly (2014: 910) argues, ‘leadership has no ontological foundation of its own, it is always epistemological; a second-order construct through which judgements about persons, processes and outcomes can be arrived at post-hoc’; Eacott (2017: 19) similarly notes that ‘leadership is not an external knowable entity but the product of cognition – a social construction’.

In its entirety, and over the course of the many years that it must inevitably span, my proposed research agenda should be directed at uncovering the nature of and the processes by which the higher-order construct of influence occurs – in the context of education and educational institutions as, inter alia, workplaces, sites of social interaction, and organisational units for delivering education. It should address, through an accumulation of multiple complementary studies, questions that include Who is really doing the influencing here? How frequently? With what typical ‘reach’ and span? Under what circumstances and in what situations? Are we seeing any key influencers emerging, or is influence widely and relatively evenly dispensed? – and does the answer to this question depend on the circumstances? What is the nature of the influence? How is it evidenced? How should it be labelled? How – if at all – do the answers to the above questions alter our perceptions and understanding of what we have become used to calling educational leadership, and of whether such a thing exists? and, above all: What are the implications of these answers for how educational institutions are organised and run?

But, as a starting point, research must focus on identifying the building blocks of the bigger constructions of influence that are the focus of some of these questions. It is this idea of a building block – influence reduced to what I call its fundamental constituent: a notional singular unit of micro-level influence – which seems to approximate to what Wittgenstein, as cited by Rheinberger (1997: 21) above, calls a ‘proto-phenomenon’: the smallest unit of conscious experience. A highly original feature of the new research agenda that I propose is its incorporation of such an epistemic object.

A notional singular unit of micro-level influence as an epistemic object: Implications for research(ing)

Rheinberger (1997: 28) warns that, as ‘material entities or processes … that constitute the objects of inquiry’, epistemic objects ‘present themselves in a characteristic, irreducible vagueness … because, paradoxically, epistemic things embody what one does not yet know’. Incorporating such inevitable vagueness, a singular micro-level unit of influence (as I define it) – if it were to turn out to be evidencable – would take the form of an individual’s changing tack in some way, through rethinking or revising, for example, a stance, view or perception, as a result of a stimulus
or ‘prompt’ of some kind – *but potentially on a very minute scale, effecting minuscule, or barely perceptible, attitudinal or positional shift*. Occurring fleetingly, such a stimulus might be conveyed through a chance remark in the staffroom, or a pithy soundbite articulated in a team meeting, or in one line of an email message, or a tweet, or in a silent action or gesture that prompts an onlooker to think, ‘I like how she did that; it worked surprisingly well’. If ‘big picture’ influence, as we *normally* perceive, experience or research it (by, for example, asking people to identify key influence(r)s on their work), could be captured and placed under a microscope, enabling us to ‘zoom’ in on its most fundamental element: the proto-phenomenon referred to above – or, to use the language of physics, its elementary particle – then it is this fundamental element that I propose as an epistemic object.

In the professional learning and development scholarship field, micro-level development-oriented influence is recognised as *implicit* professional learning. Yet, as implied by Michael Eraut’s (2004: 249) observation that implicit workplace learning ‘is largely invisible, because much of it is either taken for granted or not recognized … thus, respondents lack awareness of [it]’, researching such a phenomenon or process poses significant challenges. Since micro-level units of influence may be barely perceptible (including to influencees and influencers – for influencing is not necessarily a conscious or intentional form of agency) – trying to capture them may take educational leadership researchers out of their methodological comfort zones. Methods that rely on semantic or episodic memory to identify what or who influences the ways in which teachers go about their work are not only susceptible to confirmation bias, but are also limited in being able to capture only what participants recall and identify. Calling for observational methods to replace ‘(over)reliance on questionnaires and self-report that give practitioners’ perceptions of how they, or others, do influence’, Clifton (2009: 59) goes on to argue that:

> the dynamic nature of influence cannot be satisfactorily captured by a zero-sum concept of influence, which categorizes it in relatively fixed directional terms and which implicitly casts some participants as active agents and others as passive subjects … by providing descriptions of how influence is achieved as an in situ accomplishment, researchers may be able to provide a practical cutting edge to research on influence based on what actually happens in … meetings. (pp. 76-77, emphases added)

In the social sciences – as is implied by Clifton’s reference to pursuing ‘cutting edge’ research – influence does not seem to have been examined or researched to the extent of pinpointing what I call a singular unit of it. Certainly, there have been examinations of what the researchers have called ‘leadership’ at the micro-level; Choi and Schnurr (2014: 11), for example, examined discourse within ‘leaderless teams’ in universities, to uncover ‘leadership … performed at the micro-level of interaction’, and White et al. (2016) focused on ‘leadership influence networks as constituted in the influence relationships that emerge among actors’, in order to ‘offer a unique micro-level perspective of the enactment of pluralized leadership’, while Watson and Drew (2017) used discourse analysis to examine how humour in collegial exchanges may serve as a vehicle for exercising influence and exercising leadership, and Sklaveniti (2020: 545) ‘zoom[ed] in on leadership moments’ that manifested themselves as ‘single instances’. Clifton and Mueni (2021) similarly applied actor-network theory to analyse transcripts of interview talk to ‘make visible … the way in which a follower constructs (transformational) leadership in her own lay terms’ (p. 397), and Clifton (2019) used conversation analysis to expose the fine-grained features of leadership-in-action. Yet, valuable though it is, none of this research seems to seek, *on its own merits and detached from leadership, the agency that is consensually accepted, by mainstream and ‘critical’ scholars alike*, as the essential
basis of leadership practice or agency: influence. Whether it is the start or end point, leadership remains in the picture in all such studies.

In wishing to bypass leadership in order to dig below causality-focused assumption, what I propose, in contrast, is to attempt – for, with epistemic objects, the processes and outcomes are always unpredictable – to capture influence-in-process (or influence-in-action), manifested as micro-level singular units of influence that are not necessarily or explicitly identified or labelled as leadership. Such influence-in-process potentially occurs through a plethora of interactions, in the kinds of fora where Kelly (2008: 770) suggests leadership may be expressed – ‘through the holding of budget meetings, team meetings, through the telling of jokes, a chat over a coffee, giving speeches, dealing with complaints, sending e-mails, opening post and generally getting on with everyday ordinary work’; somewhat similarly, Crevani (2018: 89) highlights the importance of focusing on ‘the tiny’ of conversational flows and direction’. Capturing influence-in-action will undoubtedly be challenging, and while it is not the purpose of this paper – nor is there the space here – to delineate in fine detail how such research could be carried out, I sketch out below some broad, potentially workable, approaches.

Observation presents itself as a frontrunner for identifying potential influence-in-process, by repeatedly addressing the question: who, at this precise moment, seems to be influencing (an) other(s)? – and which may reveal one or a small number of seemingly frequent influencers, or uncover more of a dynamic and evenly dispersed form of influential agency that reflects Gronn’s (2002) ‘concertive action’, and that I liken to a ball being quickly thrown and caught repeatedly across a group (Evans, 2018). Observers would aim to discern, by pinpointing the moment of its potentially fleeting occurrence, when one person’s agency seems likely to have prompted another’s second thoughts, revision of viewpoint, softening or hardening of stance, or backtracking on resolution – or other examples of deviation from or adjustment (however slight) to pre-influenced ones. Yet the key words here are ‘potential’ and ‘seems likely to’, for, where it is carried out by outsiders, observation can do no more than identify possibilities; converting identification into capture requires more certainty – in the form of participants’ verification that these were, for them, episodes of micro-level influencing (or not), as well as their own identification of episodes of influence that were not picked up by the researcher. Observation would therefore need to be followed-up promptly with conversation – ideally, aided by memory-jogging video replays.

Ethnographic approaches – or, more precisely, ‘ethnographying’ (van Hulst et al., 2017: 223, original emphasis) and all that it entails, including, at the fieldwork stage, ‘prolonged and intensive engagement with the research setting and its actors, combining different fieldwork methods’ (van Hulst et al., 2017: 224) – seem to offer much potential, particularly by incorporating what Roth (2014: 180) explains as ‘a particular combination of methods … that brings together more traditional participant observation with apprenticeship as field method … where the researcher signs up as a helper or … completes a trade apprenticeship program’ (original emphasis). Adapting what Roth describes, it may be feasible to recruit, train and employ selected insiders – education professionals themselves – to act as supplementary co-researchers (even if only on a part-time or partial basis) of their own influencing (predominantly, though not exclusively, as ‘influencers’), through a combination of what may be called ‘self-observation’ and introspective analysis that encompasses observation and analysis of the socio-cultural processes that frame influence-in-action.

It is important to clarify the scale and limits of such proposed research. First, influence – being influenced – particularly at the micro-level, is one of life’s constants: a pervasive ontological feature that is a persistent background hum that seldom registers on consciousness. Sources of influence on
individuals are manifold and complexly intertwined, and it would be impossible to capture all of
them, with all their complexity, in relation to any individual – even limiting capture to within
the confines and context of a working day; as Lakomski and Evers (2017: 9) explain, drawing
upon cognitive neuroscience, ‘cognition … “leaks” into the world … and can thus be … understood
as constituting a system comprising dynamic, reciprocal interactions between people, artefacts and
other environmental resources’. Comprehensive coverage of influentiality that takes account of so
vast a range of interactions is not a realistic aim for any single study. Rather, the aim would be to
provide pieces of what would build up to becoming an enormous jigsaw: to identify and capture
samples of micro-level influence, with a view to generating indicative snapshots that would,
over time, contribute to an accumulation of findings from numerous studies, to compile a more
extensive and colourful portrait of micro-level influence in education contexts, revealing who
seem to be key influencers in this or that situation.

Second, the research agenda that I propose is not aimed at seeking causal chains, which, as I
discuss elsewhere (Evans, 2022), have been shown to be extremely difficult to evidence convincingly. Eacott (2018: 17) argues that

in what is frequently perceived as heavily administered societies, much like a gravitational field, even
the person considered to have absolute power – or decision-making authority – is him/herself held
within the constraints of spatio-temporal conditions. It is impossible to know definitively who is/are
the subject of the final decision and the location of that decision is both everywhere and nowhere.

With this observation in mind – and having argued that seeking the holy grail, not only of leader-
ship, but also of professional development (Evans, 2022), has met with little, if any, success – I have
no wish to set up a holy grail of collegial influence for researchers to shift their focus onto. Rather, I
envision a research agenda that, cumulatively and in due course, may generate evidence that indi-
cates trends, tendencies and patterns of influential agency, and the broad direction towards which
paths of influence may be considered to lead.

De-labelling and re-labelling influence captured. In researching ‘the empirical lived reality of leader-
ship’, Kelly (2014: 908) notes, ‘as the data begin to accumulate, researchers must find a means of
identifying the leadership concept at work’. Yet if, as I propose, it is not leadership but influence
that is the unit of analysis – even if influence has been chosen as a form of agency for which
leadership is a proxy – must the ‘concept at work’ necessarily be identified, in the final analysis, as
leadership of some form or configuration? Indeed, why should ‘complex interactions’, asks Kelly
(2014: 910), be reduced ‘to instances of leadership in the first place’? Similarly, Schostak (2016: 4)
questions the need for leadership: ‘I do not take for granted that leaders or any form of leadership is
necessary to the organisation of societies in general and education in particular’, while Eacott
(2017: 27), in calling for ‘elaborated descriptions of the unfolding of organising action that are
mindful of the abstract systems of difference and distance in the social space’, makes the point that
‘[s]uch descriptions do not necessarily assume the presence or even the desirability of leadership
for the achievement of action’ (emphasis added).

Consider the following quote: ‘leadership – influencing the thinking, values and emotions of fol-
lowers, rather than, and distinct from, management, working directly with instructions, structures or
results as means of influence – is arguably a potentially valuable element in making organisations
function’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 368). If we remove the first word, we are left with a perspec-
tive on a form of agency that outlines what it (the agency) broadly involves and what purpose it may
serve, but not how it is labelled (in this context). This de-labelling – as a prelude to potential re-labelling – must be a significant part of the process of examining influence on education professionals’ work because it reinforces both the proposed shift of focus from leadership that is central to my argument, and the accompanying notion that, in researching a form of agency, understanding what it involves and how we may recognise it when we see it, is – at least, initially – more important than the name we give to it. The distinction between these two features of influence-as-agency is a distinction between substance and name – or definition and term. Removing any names that are attached to the agency of influencing education professionals’ work is essential to focusing our attention narrowly on its (the agency’s) more fundamental properties as the unit of analysis itself, rather than on the more superficial labelling that ‘sells’ it, with implicit claims of its (potential) effectiveness in doing or achieving this or that. If, within the parameters of my proposed research agenda, we wish to confront the issue of whether leadership exists or whether it is a myth that we have reified, we must first take down all the leadership pictures that have been lining the corridors of our minds, in order to create space for mounting new – potentially different – images that may better portray the world(s) we inhabit.

But, having de-labelled for the research process of capturing influence-as-agency, the follow-up examination process must incorporate consideration of re-labelling what was – and remains throughout this examination – the unit of analysis. Do we revert back to calling it leadership, and, if so, with what – if any – new qualifying or explicatory clarification? Or do we consider re-branding it, and, if so, as what, and on what basis? As Pfeffer (1977: 105) remarked over four decades ago:

To treat leadership as a separate concept, it must be distinguished from other social influence phenomena … Apparently there are few meaningful distinctions between leadership and other concepts of social influence. Thus, an understanding of the phenomena subsumed under the rubric of leadership may not require the construct of leadership.

In an interview for the Guardian newspaper, in which he recalls key incidents in his life and career, professor of clinical psychology Richard Bentall is reported as having said, ‘I realised that schizophrenia wasn’t a thing. It was just this name, which had been invented for a ragbag of different symptoms’ (Usborne, 2021). Could a parallel assessment – that it is just a term for many different forms of collegial influence – be applied to leadership? My proposed research agenda incorporates the facility to address the question: Is leadership a myth?, for re-branding is indicative of acceptance that leadership may not exist; that it is, as Gemmill and Oakley (1992) argue, a ‘social fiction’ that we, through naming it, have reified into our own ‘fact’. Re-branding is the stuff of paradigm shifts, but it is also the more susceptible to rejection – either overtly, via opposition and counter-argument, or covertly, by being swept under the carpet and conveniently ignored, as seems to have been the fate, as I note elsewhere (Evans, 2022), of much of the criticism directed at mainstream educational leadership scholarship over the last few decades.

Similar to my proposed shift of focus is Alvesson and Spicer’s (2012: 383) suggestion that a linguistic shift – from ‘leadership’ to terms such as ‘influence processes and co-workership … or organizing processes’ – might encourage those processes that are often associated with effective leadership, yet without conveying a sense of an authoritative figure, and ‘clarify when leadership could be evoked and when it might not be’, giving rise to the notion of ‘deliberated leadership’. This notion of ‘deliberated leadership’ represents a backlash to the tendency to see all roads as leading back to leadership. An attempt to limit the over-use of the term ‘leadership’, it connotes
recognition ‘that there are multiple modes of authority and leadership is only one of them’ (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012: 383), and it ‘highlights the need to engage in collective processes of deliberation about whether leadership might be needed, when, by whom, and why … [and] the need for a collective deliberation about authority … [and] for serious consideration of other modes of authority and organizing instead of leadership in many other situations’ (p. 384). I understand Alvesson and Spicer’s deliberative leadership as a form of what I identify as the ‘re-labelling’ of ‘captured’ influence – one that represents a retrospective, collective, attempt to identify what counts as leadership and what does not, or, as Denis et al. (2012) put it, where leadership begins and ends.

Yet where what I propose differs from their ‘deliberated leadership’ is that my re-labelling does not start out from what I infer to be the core question that Alvesson and Spicer (2012) imply should be addressed: Is what we are ‘seeing’ leadership, or not? Reflecting my wish to avoid ‘the category mistake of treating leadership as a linguistic construction representative of a potentially knowable reality’ (Kelly, 2008: 775), my examination of captured influence would start off by asking: What is this that we are ‘seeing’? – Is it indeed the epistemic object that I call a notional singular unit of micro-level influence? If so, is any specific form – for example: developmental, (de-)motivational, epistemological – of influence discernible? Can/should we give it a name, other than ‘influence’ – and why? If so, what name(s)?

This re-labelling process may involve consideration of whether to get back into the leadership vehicle that was parked during the search for influence, and return in it along the road well-travelled to the original place from which educational leadership researchers started out towards the end of the last century – or whether to take another form of transport to a different location that offers what Smyth (1989: 5), cited above, calls ‘more robust possibilities’ for educational leadership research.

**Concluding remarks**

‘In recent years’, argued Heck and Hallinger (2005: 239) almost two decades ago,

the field has been long on intellectual critique, but short on sustained action (and demonstrated results) about alternatives that will enhance schooling for children. This has created a crisis of credibility … Researchers adopting new intellectual perspectives have a responsibility to promote programs of disciplined scholarship.

With the research agenda outlined above, the shift of focus and new direction that I propose for educational ‘leadership’ scholarship represents a step towards delineating such a programme, incorporating ‘new intellectual perspectives’. It also represents a response to Wang’s (2018) rallying cry, referred to above, to conduct ‘empirical inquiries to refine concepts and theories’. But, with its initial search for a singular unit of micro-level influence as an epistemic object, where such a research agenda might lead is impossible to predict, for such a notional unit may prove un-evidencable, and thus un-researchable.

Yet, if they do materialise, the manifold potential permutations of ‘influencing-influenced’ and of ‘influencer-influencee’ patterns and correlations, and the numerous options for making sense of them, have the capacity to effect a turning-the-page-onto-a-new-chapter moment in the story of what may ‘enhance schooling for children’ (to requote Heck and Hallinger), through the agency of education professionals. As a sense-making project, its vastness will make for a lengthy and complex chapter, requiring multiple drafts and repeated revisions that could span the next 50
years. But through a research agenda such as that proposed here, educational ‘leadership’ researchers could be persuaded to start drawing a line under an epistemic culture and traditions that are built upon the shaky foundations of assumption, blind faith, and parochialism; for, as Heck and Hallinger (2005: 239) warn, ‘We must be able to separate what moves the field intellectually from what continues to spin it in ideological or methodological circles. Otherwise, the field will revert back to the times of folklore and alchemy’ – and, they might have added, ‘mythologising’.

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Notes
1. Throughout, I use ‘research’ and ‘scholarship’ interchangeably.
2. Alvesson and Deetz acknowledge the influence of Brookfield (1987, referred to in Alvesson and Deetz, 2021: 5-6) in compiling this list.
3. In fact, Miner (1982: 306) makes the point: ‘My quarrel is not so much with the concept of leadership itself, as with the limitations of the paradigm that has governed thinking and research in the area for so many years’.
4. Fairhurst acknowledges Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) as the term-coiners.
5. Now the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS).
6. Following Harris (2003: 316), I include teacher leadership – succinctly explained as ‘the exercise of leadership by teachers, regardless of position or designation’ – as a form of distributed leadership.
7. Employed within a university business school, Richard Bolden is most often associated with the wider leadership or organisation studies field, but he has contributed to the educational leadership research discourse.

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