Bringing back theory choice: comparative epistemology in educational administration and leadership research

Author:

Adam Bongers

UNSW Sydney, Australia

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3525-6204

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Abstract

In the past, theory choice was a key concern in educational administration and leadership: there were a range of theories on offer and explicit epistemological criteria for deciding between them. This is no longer the case. Leadership now stands as the default explanatory option, and theory choice criteria have become largely implicit. Against this tide, this article argues for restoring genuine choice between theories. First, it contends that theory choice has been limited by a contemporary reliance on 'consistency' as an epistemic criterion. Second, it challenges these limits by recovering 'coherence' as an alternative tradition in which consistency is held in tension with other criteria. Broadening the definition of consistency and resituating it within a coherence framework provides a basis for adjudicating leadership and administrative theories. Doing so can restore theory competition in the field and reopen the different problems and courses of action that alternative theories bring into view.

Bringing back theory choice: comparative epistemology in educational administration and leadership research

From the 1950s to the early 2000s, educational administration and leadership had a dual focus, on both theories of organising and theories of knowledge (Culbertson, 1989). Firstly, the field accommodated competition between administrative and leadership theories. Administrative theories approached organising through problem-posing, information-processing, and decision-making (e.g. Immegart & Boyd, 1979); leadership theories through interpersonal influence, building commitment, and visions/missions of change (Bush & Glover, 2014). Second, there were robust epistemological debates about how to best choose between theories (Evers & Lakomski, 1991). In short, there were theories to choose from, and explicit criteria for choice.

Since the turn of the century, these have both receded. Explicit attention to epistemology has dwindled (Wang et al., 2017), while leadership has increasingly become the field's dominant language for theorising educational organisation (Oplatka, 2010). What was once a choice among administrative and leadership theories has increasingly become a foregone conclusion (Evers & Lakomski, 2013; Gronn, 2003a). While the field has produced more and more empirical data on leadership, less attention has been paid to justifying why this data should make leadership preferable to an administrative alternative. This matters because theories do not merely provide different answers; they shape what questions are posed and what counts as a valid answer.

This article argues for restoring genuine choice between theories. The argument is supported by a historical analysis of changing approaches to theory choice. It draws on Fleck's (1979) comparative epistemology, which reconstructs historically situated ways of thinking ('thought styles') through their systematisation in textbooks and other field-level literature ('vademecum' or handbook science).

The argument proceeds in two parts. Firstly, the article contends that theory choice has become limited by a new thought style based on 'consistency.' This consistency thought style evaluates new theoretical contributions according to how well they square with an established knowledge base. This had the effect of favouring leadership as an incumbent theory against which alternatives are judged. The consistency thought style emerges in the early 21st century and should not be regarded as a simple extension of the positivism or paradigm thought styles diagnosed by earlier accounts (e.g., Evers & Lakomski, 1991).

Second, the article argues that consistency alone is insufficient for choosing between theories. The history of the field contains an alternative 'coherence' framework in which consistency is held in tension with other theory choice criteria. Recovering this framework suggests two changes. Consistency should be broadened to consider alternative bodies of knowledge, beyond the usual reference to leadership survey studies. Consistency should also be resituated within a coherence framework in which it competes with other theory choice criteria. Together, these moves can restore administrative theories as live options alongside leadership, thereby restoring genuine theory choice without deciding in advance which option should prevail.

Comparative epistemology and thought styles

This study uses Fleck's (1979) comparative epistemology to examine how theory choice criteria have changed in educational administration and leadership. Comparative epistemology places different ways of knowing alongside one another so that each can be seen in relation to the others. This comparison makes visible what

Fleck calls ‘thought constraints:’ established expectations that condition subsequent thought but may be difficult to recognise from within a particular way of knowing.

Fleck (1979) calls these ways of knowing ‘thought styles.’ A thought style is characterised by common objects (e.g. ‘leadership influence’), problems (‘building commitment’), and terminology (‘vision,’ ‘mission’) that are taken as given within a community. Fleck calls these communities ‘thought collectives,’ and they span professional boundaries. To the extent that academics, policymakers, and practitioners such objects, problems, and terminology, they can be said to participate in the same thought collective and thought style. Fleck illustrates the concept of thought styles through the history of venereal disease. He shows that the same disease was approached through a range of styles: from mystical and astrological traditions, through therapeutics and pathology, to bacteriology to serology. These not only shaped how the disease was investigated and explained, but how practitioners diagnosed and treated it. His example of the acquired ‘serological touch,’ for instance, shows medical practitioners developing a ‘feel’ for using new instruments and interpreting the readings they gave. Thought styles therefore connect ways of knowing with ways of acting.

A thought style should not, however, be understood as the epistemology of an entire historical period. Fleck identifies thought collectives through their shared orientation towards particular objects and problems. The thought styles examined here are similarly limited to one problem within one field: theory choice in educational administration and leadership. This article will distinguish between positivism, incommensurability and consistency because each organises theoretical options differently and provides different grounds for choosing between them.

However, thought styles are not mutually exclusive. Fleck argues that every thought style leaves ‘remnants,’ allowing earlier commitments to persist within later styles. The thought styles examined here similarly accrete over time. For example, contemporary

leadership research preserves remnants of positivism, although it gives much more weight to consistency, and less weight to disinterestedness. Consistency therefore preserves connections with earlier thought styles, rather than replacing them wholesale. Comparing these overlapping styles historically makes it possible to identify the thought constraints operative in contemporary theory choice, while also recovering alternatives that have remained available.

Method

The study proceeded in three stages: identifying sources, appraising sources, and analysing thought styles.

Identifying sources

Because the study involves changes in theory choice in educational administration and leadership at a field-level, it began with field-level literature. For consistency of terminology (e.g. 'educational administration,' 'educational leadership'), English-language sources were identified. Most sources proved to be from North America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. This reflects the history of the English-language field itself, although the field-level literature has begun to take on a more international character since the 2010s (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019).

Sources included tertiary review articles, histories in reference texts and book-length studies, and critiques in edited collections. It was found that such reviews, histories, and critiques of the field began to increase around 1954 (for reasons explored in Analysis 1), so this was taken as a starting point. Further texts were identified through iterative snowballing until saturation was reached.

These field-level sources were considered as representative of Fleck's (1979) concept of 'vademecum' (or, handbook) science. For him, vademecum science acts as a hinge between tentative, specialist journal research and popular understandings in the wider thought collective. It brings provisional and sometimes contradictory

research together into a comparatively stable account of a field's basic concepts, accepted methods, and directions for further inquiry. Its construction necessarily involves selection and arrangement. Fleck compares the process to making a mosaic, with individual contributions organised according to a plan. As the main body of systematised knowledge within a thought collective, the vademecum therefore provides both a surviving trace of thought styles. Comparing successive vademecums provides a means to track changes in these thought styles, indicating which commitments became established and which remained available as alternatives.

Appraising sources

Sources were sorted according to whether they provided evidence of 'thought constraints' on subsequent field-level sources. That is, whether a position conditioned subsequent thought. Analysis 1 traced these constraints through recurrence across field-level sources: where the same traditions were cited in subsequent literature, or, where no tradition was named, through recurrent references to the same authors.

Analysis 2 traced alternatives that recurred across field-level sources without becoming thought constraints. These were identified through the recurrence of the same epistemological concepts, even where field-level sources did not identify them as continuations of the same tradition or associate them with the same authors.

Analysing thought styles

Analysis 1 reconstructed changes in the thought styles that organised theory choice in educational administration and leadership. Positivism and incommensurability are established diagnoses in the field; the analysis adds consistency as a third thought style. Each was analysed through four common features: its historical context, grounds for theory choice, use of the term 'paradigm,' and configuration of choice.

Table 1. Analytic grid for Analysis 1 (Changes in thought styles)

Category	**Analytical question**
Thought style	What conception of theory choice is established?
Context	What problem or historical concern prompts a reconfiguration of the choices between theories?
Grounds	What criteria provide the grounds for judging theories and justifying choices between them?
Paradigms	How is paradigm defined and used to organise theoretical options?
Configuration of choice	How is the space of choice arranged?

Particular attention was paid to changes in the use of the term 'paradigm.' Its use in educational administration and leadership changes across the period examined here: from a model for a programmatic research agenda, to an epistemological worldview, and finally to a modelling of a common object of inquiry. All of these differ from Fleck's (1979) earlier usage of the term to mean an exemplar. These changes provide one indication of how theoretical options were reorganised.

Analysis 2 followed the second historical trajectory. Rather than reconstructing another successive stage in the organisation of the field, it traced an alternative thought style that recurred across the vademecums without becoming a constraint on subsequent theory choice. The analysis asked: What criteria provide the grounds for judging theories and justifying choices between them? Recurring candidate criteria were compared across field-level accounts to reconstruct coherence across multiple criteria as an alternative way of approaching theory choice.

Analysis (1): How the field arrived at consistency

Table 2. Changes in thought styles and configurations of theory choice

Thought style	**Positivism (from 1954)**	**Incommensurability (from 1974)**	**Consistency (from 2003)**
Context	Interdisciplinary research, with a push to align the field with programmatic research in other fields.	Internationalisation and further interdisciplinarity bring other epistemological perspectives into the field.	Intensifying interest in leadership, and international research projects, create a need for consolidation around shared problems and concepts.
Grounds	**Positivism:** Separation between values and facts, preference for disinterested and tentative theories.	**Incommensurability:** Incompatibility between value systems, each with its own community standards.	**Consistency condition:** New explanations are judged according to their conformity with the established knowledge base.
Paradigms	Defined as research agenda, within a programmatic general science of administration.	Defined as the worldview held by an epistemic community	Defined as a modelling of a central, agreed-upon object
Configuration of choice	Division of labour (A vs B) • Scientific knowledge • Craft knowledge	Alternative worldviews (A or B or C) • Effective schools • Cognitive science • Interpretivist, • Social, • Cultural, • Critical, Feminist, Postmodern theory	Variations within leadership theory (A_1, A_2, A_3…) • Successful school, • Distributed, • Ethical, • Social justice, • Culturally-responsive, • Transformative, Advocacy leadership

Positivism (from 1954)

Context. The postwar United States saw the emergence of behavioural-functional research across the social sciences. Behavioural researchers from different disciplines began collaborating on interdisciplinary projects. One example was Ohio State University's 'organisational behaviour' programme, which brought together industrial psychologists, sociologists, economists, and education researchers (Morris & Seeman, 1950). Following his work in this organisational behaviour programme, A.W. Halpin collaborated in launching the Theory Movement in educational administration. The Theory Movement sought to ground educational administration research in a general science of administration. This was exemplified an edited collection on administrative behaviour (Halpin, 1958) that brought schooling into dialogue with organisational behaviour (Hemphill, 1958) and functionalist sociology (Parsons, 1958).

Grounds. The Theory Movement was committed to positivism: a separation between scientific theories that bear on facts and practical knowledge that bears on values. Despite this hard fact-value distinction, science was never framed as entirely value-free; it was committed to the epistemic criteria of disinterested and tentative inquiry (Halpin, 1970). It was also informally committed to fecundity (producing new ideas), empirical adequacy (producing testable hypotheses) and explanatory power (Halpin, 1957). Importantly, later commentators would also suggest that it was committed to the cumulation of consistent knowledge (English, 1997; Greenfield 1978, 1993). This science-practice distinction was reflected in a division of labour: scientists developed concepts and models, while practitioners were responsible for applying them to diagnose situations in schools (Halpin & Croft, 1963). Science was to inform school practice, not dictate it.

Paradigm. The Theory Movement's research programme was articulated in a 'paradigm' at the inaugural meeting of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) in 1954. The term 'paradigm' was used in the sense of a research agenda (Merton, 1945). The paradigm proposed that schools were

an instance of an ideal type: the organisation (Halpin, 1957). Administrative theorists were therefore in opposition to what they called the 'adjectival' study of administration, which would treat school administration separately from business, hospital, military, or public administration. Instead, the role of educational administration research was expected to contribute empirical findings towards the development of a general model of behaviour and functioning.

Configuration of choice. Despite positivism's sharp science-practice division, scientists and practitioners nonetheless were expected to collaborate. Practitioners were charged with attentive observation and communication; scientists with developing hypothetical models and feeding them back into school practice (Halpin, 1960). Positivism thus configured theory choice through the distinction between scientific theory and practical knowledge: theories bearing on facts were subject to scientific criteria, while questions of value remained the province of practice. The two remained firmly distinguished but were brought into productive dialogue through a corresponding division of labour between scientists and practitioners.

Incommensurability (from 1974)

Context. The 1970s saw several attacks on positivism for its hard distinction between facts and values. Erickson (1977) argued that a purely factual study of organisational functioning ignored the purpose of schooling. Instead, he called for research focused on principals' impacts on student achievement. Erickson (1979) heralded emerging school effects research as a promising line of inquiry. During the 1980s, this orientation would become associated with instructional management or instructional leadership, at a time when there was not yet a strong distinction between leading and managing (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985, 1986). School effectiveness research challenged value-neutrality because it was mission-focused and placed student achievement at the centre of inquiry.

More radical critiques came through increased internationalisation and interdisciplinarity. The 1960s and 1970s saw the formation of international journals (JEA, EAQ), councils (CCEA, BEAS), as well as the International Intervisitation Programme (IIP), which brought American administrative theorists into contact with scholars outside their established milieu. At the 1974 IIP conference in Bristol, Greenfield issued a thorough critique of administrative theory. Greenfield's (1975) interpretivist approach challenged the focus on observable behaviour and organisational functioning, arguing that schools were suffused with subjective perceptions and meanings. He challenged the positivist fact-value distinction, proposing that facts about schooling are only accessible through value-laden interpretations.

Pressure also came from broader social movements and the influx of approaches from other disciplines (Blackmore, 2006): humanist psychology, cognitive science, as well as social, cultural, critical, feminist, and postmodern perspectives. This was accompanied by greater methodological diversification (Allison, 1989; Riffel, 1986; Silver, 1982) and escalating disputes (Burlingame & Harris, 1998; Evers & Lakomski, 1991). The pressures from internationalisation and new interdisciplinary perspectives called for a reorganisation of school discourse.

Grounds. As epistemic communities proliferated, their relationships were increasingly perceived through Kuhn's (1962) concept of incommensurability: the notion that different community standards have no common measure. The collapse of the positivist fact-value distinction gave rise to multiple value-systems, each with its own facts and interpretive lenses. The criteria for judging theories were therefore no longer treated as common across the field, but as internal to epistemic communities.

Paradigms. This disputes between different research orientations were widely described as the 'paradigm wars,' where the various approaches differed on the very terms of debate (Donmoyer, 1999; Hoy, 1994; Willower, 1997). They not only disagreed;

they could not agree to disagree. The term ‘paradigm’ was redrawn in line with Kuhn’s (1962) usage, as the worldview of an epistemic community. This had two key implications. Firstly, the various approaches (humanist, cognitive, cultural, critical, feminist, postmodern) were understood as more than research techniques: they were total worldviews with their own values and community standards for what counts as knowledge (Willower, 1997). Second, Kuhn’s account of scientific development through ‘paradigm shifts’ lent support to calls for fundamental change. Erickson (1977, 1979) argued that educational administration required a paradigm shift towards researching the causes of student achievement. Gibson (1979) characterised Greenfield’s (1975) critique as initiating a shift towards critical consciousness and methodological pluralism.

Configuration of choice. Once researchers could no longer endorse the positivist fact-value distinction, educational administration reorganised around epistemic worldviews, each with its own value-system. The humanist approach was committed to moral principles and duty (Hodgkinson, 1978). Cognitive science advocated for openness, freedom of speech, tolerance of opinions, and respect for persons (Evers & Lakomski, 2000). Social theory sought to challenge the reproduction of injustice and reclaim human agency (Bates, 1980). Cultural theory emphasised community-building (Sergiovanni & Corbally, 1984). Critical theory interrogated ideology and domination in the pursuit of political emancipation (Foster, 1986). Feminist theory challenged abstract individualism, advocating for communitarian values and a relational morality (Blackmore, 1989). Postmodern approaches advanced social constructionism and giving voice to diverse perspectives (Maxcy, 1994). Insights from cultural theory were later absorbed into transformational school leadership, which sought to build commitment by building cohesive organisational cultures (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Transformational school leadership also selectively drew on critical theory but redirected it towards policy reforms. Theory choice was thus configured in terms of

distinct (and often incompatible) worldviews, each with its own criteria for preferring one theory over another.

Consistency (from 2003)

Context. In the 1990s, leadership theory proliferated across educational administration and leadership research, initially clustering around two competing models: instructional and transformational leadership. Instructional leadership research had pivoted from studying direct principal effects on student outcomes, to indirect influence over the staff perceptions which secondarily impacted achievement (Hallinger et al., 1990). Leithwood (1993) contended that this move towards indirect influence showed that the instructional model had become transformational leadership in all but name. Moreover, by the early 2000s, there was a proliferation of leadership models, including democratic, strategic, and breakthrough leadership. These developments were later registered in the literature as 'adjectival' models, or 'leadership by adjective' (Leithwood et al., 2004; Riley & Mulford, 2007), which echoed earlier dismissal of adjectival approaches to administration. The divide between transformational and instructional models, as well as the expansion of leadership labels, called for a broader leadership framework that could integrate them.

Increased internationalisation added further pressure. The late 1990s had seen the emergence of three major school leadership research projects in the UK, Canada, and Australia. These projects included research into Effective Leadership and Pupil Outcomes (UK), Organisational Conditions and School Leadership (Canada), and Leadership for Organisational Learning and Student Outcomes (Australia). The three programmes involved triangulating the work of school leaders, their impact on school and staff, and student achievement. International exchanges between these programmes led to the formation of the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP) in 2001, which by 2005 spanned eight countries and has since expanded to over 25 (Gunnulfsen et al., 2022). This heightened the need for a shared set of research problems, methodologies and concepts.

Paradigms. The ascent of leadership theory in the early 2000s (Gronn, 2003a; Bush, 2004) coincided with the winding down of the 'paradigm wars' (English, 2002; Waite, 2004). In the emerging discourse, 'paradigm' came to refer to leadership models rather than epistemic worldviews. This can be seen in Leithwood's (1993) critique of the instructional leadership model as a 'dying paradigm.' Similarly, the 'paradigm wars' were reclassified to describe the contest between instructional and transformational models (Hallinger et al., 2015). In the new narrative, the wars had always been about the best way to model school leadership, and not a deadlock of incommensurable worldviews.

Grounds. Leadership theory promised a framework that could integrate research across national contexts and streamline competing models. Integrative work in the early 2000s (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003) drew together findings on shared, instructional, and transformational leadership. This work established leadership as a constraint on subsequent educational administration and leadership research, organising inquiry around four functions: setting directions, building relationships, developing the organisation, and improving the instructional programme.

This reorganisation of school discourse can be described in terms of what philosophers call the 'consistency condition:' the expectation that new knowledge claims cohere with an established knowledge base. In the philosophy of science, consistency is one epistemic criterion that can ground inquiry. It states that one explanation is preferable to another if it squares better with what you already have reason to believe (Lycan in Evers & Lakomski, 1991, p. 38). While consistency is generally accepted as an epistemic criterion, it has also been subject to critique. Feyerabend (1993, p. 24-5) argued that weighting consistency prefers 'older' explanations over 'better' ones. Incumbent theories receive the benefit of the doubt simply because they were published first. Newer options bear a higher burden of proof: they need to earn their place as a better explanation of the facts, when the facts

are already coded in the terms of the established model. In this view, even undertested areas of the incumbent theory are considered preferable to alternative explanations.

The consolidation of leadership research around the consistency condition had the effect of displacing prior epistemological debates. Questions about the role of values and the cumulation of knowledge were reorganised as discussions about leadership models. Administrative theory had long grappled with value-guided research, as though admitting different values would reorganise school discourse into an area of competing and irreconcilable interpretations. Leadership theory sidestepped the recasting values as visions. It treated 'purpose' as an empirical object of inquiry. In this view, an activist researcher could select a school with equity and inclusion issues and explain it through social justice leadership. By the same token, a reformist researcher could select a school enacting policy reform and explain it with the transformational school leadership model. Transformational school leadership research was well-suited to this goal because of its stated aim to support school restructuring and reform (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

Moreover, administrative theory had been threatened by the notion that science moved in punctuated 'shifts,' raising questions about producing cumulative knowledge about schools. Leadership theory displaced these concerns through the consistency condition. While school leadership research investigated different purposes, its results were cumulative, because new research was consistent with the accepted knowledge base on using interpersonal influence, to inspire and motivate staff, toward a vision for change. Consolidation did not require resolving epistemological disputes; it rendered them secondary or irrelevant.

Configuration of choice. By the mid-2000s, leadership theory had begun reorganising research programmes in terms of leadership models. The earlier configuration of alternative worldviews (A or B or C) was thereby reorganised as

variations within leadership theory (A_1, A_2, A_3…). What were once mutually exclusive positions were reframed as modellings of a common object of inquiry:

- Effective school research → Successful school leadership (Leithwood, et al., 2008)
- Cognitive science → Distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003b; Spillane, et al. 2004)
- Humanist psychology → Ethical leadership (Starratt, 1991)
- Social theory → Social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007)
- Cultural theory → Culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016)
- Critical theory, Feminist theory → Transformative leadership (Shields, 2004)

Postmodern discourse began to wane along with talk of paradigms. Moreover, leadership theory had absorbed several postmodern commitments, including an eschewal of epistemological foundations and an embrace of social constructionism (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999, 2000). There was also an embrace of a kind of eclecticism: different values (activist, reformist) and different methods (quantitative, qualitative) were all permissible if they conformed to the leadership template. Models were treated as complementary rather than competing, reducing choice to variations on the leadership theme.

Analysis (2): Moving forward towards coherence

Alongside the three thought styles that successively placed constraints on theory choice, coherence recurred as an alternative without acquiring the same constraining force. Rather than grounding theory choice in a single principle, coherence proposed a set of epistemic criteria for choosing between theories.

This conception has an early formulation in Margenau's (1950) philosophy of science. Margenau proposed six criteria for scientific constructs, including logical fertility; multiple connections; permanence and stability; extensibility; causality; as well as simplicity and elegance. Importantly, he did not regard these criteria as

immutable. The trajectory of modern physics had already shown that established criteria could themselves be revised, as the causality criterion shifted from strict determinism towards a probabilistic conception. Theory choice criteria, like theories themselves, were fallible and therefore historically subject to revision.

By the time of the Theory Movement, this approach had begun to take form in educational administration. Willower (1962), rather than accepting that scientific inquiry required abstention from values, argued that it should be explicitly guided by epistemic virtues, including testability in empirical studies, consistency with established knowledge, scope across cases, predictiveness of outcomes, and parsimony regarding assumptions. Science, on this account, was not a matter of avoiding values, but of making explicit the epistemic commitments through which knowledge claims were judged.

Coherence continued to take form, even as incommensurability was becoming established as a thought constraint. Silver (1983) identified criteria including comprehensiveness, parsimony, precision, novelty, and explanatory or predictive power. Explanations could therefore be preferred if they accounted for more phenomena with fewer assumptions, offered more precise or novel insights, or generated stronger predictions. Griffiths (1997) proposed a different repertoire, including relevance to context, feasibility, cost, user-friendliness, excitement, and fruitfulness. Explanations could accordingly be judged by their pertinence to problems, economy, accessibility, and capacity to generate further inquiry or practical solutions. Although the particular candidates differed, both accounts retained criteria through which theories could be judged across epistemic worldviews rather than treating the standards of each worldview as self-contained.

Evers and Lakomski (1991, 2000) provided the most explicit formulation of coherence across multiple criteria. Consistency was not abandoned, but treated as one epistemic criterion among several and placed in tension with comprehensiveness,

fecundity, simplicity, and explanatory unity. An explanation could therefore gain coherence by covering a wider range of phenomena, generating new hypotheses, requiring fewer assumptions or special amendments, and integrating otherwise disparate explanations. These criteria could themselves pull in different directions (for example, comprehensiveness could come at the expense of simplicity), so theory choice required judgement across multiple candidates rather than conformity to a single criterion.

Taken together, these formulations show coherence taking shape as a thought style through a changing repertoire of theory choice criteria.

Table 3. Theory choice criteria in educational administration and leadership

Epistemic criterion	Willower (1962)	Silver (1983)	Griffiths (1997)	Evers & Lakomski (2000)
Consistency	✓			✓
Testability	✓			
Scope / Comprehensiveness	✓	✓		✓
Predictiveness / Predictive power	✓	✓		
Parsimony / Simplicity	✓	✓		✓
Precision		✓		
Novelty		✓		
Explanatory power		✓		
Relevance to context			✓	
Feasibility			✓	
Cost			✓	
User-friendliness			✓	
Excitement			✓	
Fruitfulness / fecundity			✓	✓
Explanatory unity				✓

In each iteration, the particular candidates changed, but the configuration of theory choice became increasingly recognisable: theories were judged across a set of criteria rather than against a single principle. In Willower's (1962) and Evers & Lakomski's (2000) frameworks, consistency was one candidate within this repertoire, alongside other grounds for judging between theories.

Discussion

The two analyses provide a basis for restoring theory choice in contemporary educational administration and leadership. Analysis 1 shows that consistency has

been narrowed to compatibility with the incumbent leadership literature, while Analysis 2 recovers a coherence framework in which consistency stands alongside other theory choice criteria.

Restoring choice therefore requires broadening consistency in two directions. Firstly, the relevant knowledge base should extend beyond the incumbent leadership literature. Second, consistency should be held alongside other candidate criteria for judging between theories. Neither move presupposes that leadership must be displaced by an administrative alternative. Rather, together they provide grounds for reopening competition between theories without favouring one in advance.

Broadening consistency

Consistency should first be broadened beyond the incumbent leadership literature. Contemporary educational leadership research is grounded in 'internal' consistency: new knowledge is expected to cohere with foundational instructional and transformational leadership studies. However, as the analysis has shown, educational administration and leadership research has historically borrowed from, and responded to, intellectual traditions from other disciplines. Internal consistency is therefore not enough. Consistency can also be external, requiring claims about schooling to cohere with relevant knowledge beyond the leadership literature.

One relevant body of knowledge is the natural sciences. The naturalistic alternative holds that educational administration and leadership research should cohere with claims in the natural sciences (Evers & Lakomski, 2000). From this vantage point, explaining school activity in terms of leader influence is questionable: just as the flock behaviour of birds does not need a 'leader' bird to explain it, schools may not either (Lakomski, 2005). Research on schooling could instead be brought into relation with knowledge about distributed cognition, examining its distribution across staff and students, educational artefacts and tools, as well as school environments, records, and routines. This would track more closely with findings in the natural sciences that

information-processing is decentralised, decision-making is collaborative, and agency is collective.

Another relevant body of knowledge is the social sciences. The relational sociology alternative suggests that school discourse should be consistent with social scientific knowledge concerning the positionality of the researcher, social networks, and history (Eacott, 2018). Eacott (2018) argues that these characteristics are obscured by accounts premised on leader influence. Replacing 'influence' with 'relations,' his account frames schooling as a dynamic and continual reorganising of organisers, spatiality, and temporality. Organisers include embodied human participants, tools, records, and embedded observers. Spatiality involves the continual reenactment of relative distance: of near and far. Temporality refers to the dynamic unfolding of trajectories: of the so-far and the forthcoming. External consistency may also provide grounds for connecting different bodies of knowledge: naturalistic and sociological accounts have been suggested to be compatible with one another (Evers & Lakomski, 2022, p. 68).

Broadening consistency therefore expands the knowledge against which claims about schooling can be judged. The leadership literature remains one relevant body of knowledge, but no longer supplies the sole reference point. Natural and social scientific knowledge can provide others. However, external consistency can take theory choice only so far, however. Expanding the relevant knowledge does not itself tell us which theory best accounts for it. For that, consistency must be considered alongside other criteria for choosing between theories.

Broadening coherence across multiple criteria

The second recommendation is to broaden coherence beyond consistency. The analysis has shown how consistency alone can favour an incumbent theory, while a coherence framework provides a basis for comparing alternative theories across

multiple criteria. These criteria may have changed historically, and can continue to change, but what matters is that consistency does not determine theory choice alone.

This changes the question from whether leadership is consistent with existing knowledge to whether it provides a better explanation than the alternatives. If consistency is one criterion of coherence, leadership's promise lies in whether it can provide the 'best explanation' for empirical findings (Haig & Evers, 2016). Being the best explanation is necessarily comparative. Coherence supplies a range of candidate criteria that can be deployed in making this comparison.

This represents a meaningful step forward, even if coherence does not make theory choice algorithmic. Judgement is still required, because leadership and administrative theories can diagnose anxieties in different ways. In some cases, these anxieties may be better understood in terms of school purpose, staff morale, commitment, or motivation, and thereby diagnosed as a problem of leadership. In others, they may be better understood in terms of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Evers, 2014), or the coordination of information flow and processing within complex environments (Lakomski, 2005), and thereby diagnosed as a problem of administration. Yet this judgement need not be arbitrary, as a common repertoire of criteria provides grounds for choosing between these diagnoses.

The implications of restoring theory choice may also extend beyond research. To the degree that academics, policymakers, and practitioners participate in the same thought collective, alternative theories make available alternative ways of diagnosing anxieties and responding to problems. Leadership problems invite leadership responses; administrative problems invite different responses. Broadening consistency and coherence may therefore restore choice not only between theories, but between the ways of seeing and acting they make available.

Conclusion

This article has made two arguments about theory choice in contemporary educational administration and leadership. First, consistency has become an implicit criterion for theory choice, favouring inquiry that aligns with the incumbent leadership knowledge base. This helps explain how leadership became the field's default theory and how theory choice became increasingly constrained. Second, amidst these changes, coherence across multiple criteria has remained available as an alternative thought style. Placed within this broader framework, consistency represents not only a constraint on theory choice, but also a starting point for restoring it.

These arguments point to two ways of restoring theory choice. First, broadening consistency beyond the incumbent leadership literature widens the bodies of knowledge against which theories of schooling can be judged, including the natural and social sciences. Second, broadening coherence beyond consistency supplies a range of candidate criteria for comparing theoretical options. Neither move determines which theory should prevail.

This article began by claiming that educational administration and leadership has largely lost sight of theory choice. This means that field has not merely lost sight of what theories there are to choose from, or how to use criteria to make choices. It has lost sight of the fact that there are choices left to be made. Restoring choice involves more than putting alternatives back on the table. It involves judgement. It involves judging the bodies of knowledge to measure theories against. It involves judging whether a theory's diagnosis captures the anxieties that a school experiences. It involves judging which criteria will be used for making choices. There may be no formula for making these judgements, but avoiding them has consequences. If two decades of leadership theory is any indication, theory changes what is perceived as a problem, what is accepted as a response, and ultimately how researchers, policymakers, and practitioners take action.

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Tables

Table 1. Analytic grid for Analysis 1 (Changes in thought styles)

Table 2. Changes in thought styles and configurations of theory choice

Table 3. Comparison of theory choice criteria in educational administration and leadership