THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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By

FENWICK W. ENGLISH

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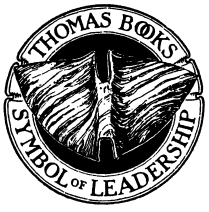

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In most cases, the chapters in the book have been double blind reviewed, first in symposium papers and then for subsequent publication review in professional referred journals. Without exception the original papers were presented at AERA Division A (American Education Research Association); or UCEA (University Council for Educational Administration); and /or NCPEA (National Council of Professors of Educational Administration). In the notes that follow, I have indicated where the chapter first appeared and the subsequent journal in which it was published. In many cases, the articles which followed the symposium papers were significantly changed and shortened for publication. I am pleased to include them here in their original form and content as papers.

Chapter 1: What Is Postmodernism? Much of the content for this chapter was extrapolated from an invited session at the 1999 NCPEA Annual Conference at Jackson Hole, Wyoming; also my 1997 AERA Division A symposium paper for Session 14.54 given at Chicago entitled *The Recentering of Leadership from the Jaws of Management Science* and a subsequent article entitled *The Cupboard is Bare: The Postmodern Critique of Educational Administration* which was published in *The Journal of School Leadership* in January of 1997 (Volume 7, No. 1, pp. 4-

26). I am grateful to *JSL* editor Paula Short and to her principal reviewer for this piece, Charol Shakeshaft formerly of Hofstra University.

Chapter 2: Turnings in Educational Administration: Apostrophic or Catasrophic Development? The content for this chapter was largely but not exclusively derived from an article entitled, *The Postmodern Turn in Educational Administration: Apostrophic or Catastrophic Development?* which was published in *The Journal of School Leadership* in September of 1998 (Volume 8, No. 5, pp. 426-447), and some from a feature column in the AERA T*eaching in Educational Administration SIG* entitled "The Problem with PBL (Problem Based Learning)" of March 1997 edited by J. Claudet of Texas Tech University. The late Don Willower of Penn State wrote a rebuttal to the *JSL* article to which I replied in *Musings on Willower's Fog: A Response* which appeared in the same *JSL* September 1998 issue. Willower was one of the very few modernists who recognized the rise of postmodernism. We subsequently "debated" postmodernism in Session 16.5 at the 1998 UCEA Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. My paper for that session was entitled *Postmodernism: Spur to Excellence or Sower of Confusion?* The third symposium paper which is partly included in this chapter was given at the 1999 AERA Division A meeting in Montreal, Canada, entitled *Looking Behind the Veil: Addressing the Enigma of Leadership.* That symposium paper was subsequently published in Ted Creighton's journal at Sam Houston State University, *Education Leadership Review* (Volume 1, No. 3, pp. 1-7). There was a response later published in *ELR* (Volume 2, No. 1, pp. 16-21) by Charles Achilles and Charles Mitchell entitled *But the Emperor Has On No Clothes!* in the Fall of 2001 to which I responded in an article entitled *You Say You Saw What? Which Veil Did You Lift?* (pp. 22-27).

Chapter 3: What Paradigm Shift? Could Kuhn Have Been Wrong? The content for this chapter mainly comes from a symposium paper for Session 16.1 entitled *What Paradigm Shift? Same Old, Same Old* presented at the 1999 UCEA Annual Convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was later published in Duncan Waite's *The International Journal of Leadership in Education* in 2001 entitled *What Paradigm Shift? An Interrogation of Kuhn's Idea of Normalcy in the Research Practice of Educational Administration.* It is based on earlier work on typologies which was presented as a symposium paper at the AERA Division A meeting in Atlanta, Georgia in 1993 entitled *A Typology of Metanarratives in Educational Leadership.* The notion of typologies as metanarratives in

educational administration was also published in the AERA-SIG newsletter *Organization Theory Dialogues* in the Spring of 1993 entitled, *A Post-Structural View of the Grand Narratives in Educational Administration* edited by Bill Foster of Indiana University. There was also a subsequent publication in Bill Kritsonis' *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal* entitled *A Typology of Metanarratives in Educational Leadership* (Volume 11, No. 2, pp. 20-30). The typology was also cited in William Cunningham and Paula Corderio's (2000) text *Educational Administration: A Problem-Based* Approach published by Allyn and Bacon (pp. 6-7).

Chapter 4: The End of the Field of Educational Administration. The contents of this chapter were initially derived from my 1999 invited keynote address to the annual conference of NCPEA at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, entitled *The Fields of Educational Administration: Deconstructing Modernism's Minotaur in the Labyrinth of the Last Century's Knowledge Base.* Later, it became the backbone of an expanded and revised submission and acceptance to a special issue on educational administration which appeared in the March 2002 *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (Volume 21, No. 2, pp. 109-136) edited by Gert Biesta of the Exeter University in England and Louis Miron of the University of Illinois. I view this chapter as the capstone to a long line of thought, papers, and articles about the field and its knowledge base.

Chapter 5: The ISLLC Standards: The De-Skilling and De-Professionalization of Educational Administrators. The principal content of this chapter came from a Division A symposium paper for Session 10.67 given at AERA in New Orleans in 2000 entitled *Does the Ghost of Frederick Taylor Haunt the ISLLC Standards?* Also, a section of Betty Steffy's Division A symposium paper given at the same session is included with permission which was entitled *The ISLLC Standards as the Rational-Technical Apparatus of State/University/Professional Control of Educational Leadeship.* A portion of Division A, AERA Round Table Paper Session 35.30 the following year in Seattle, Washington entitled *The Epistemological Foundations of Professional Practice: Do They Matter? The Case of the ISLLC Standards and the National Exam for Administrative Licensure* is also included. Some themes in this chapter are also resonant with a published article *Psst! What Does One Call a Set of Non-Empirical Beliefs Required to be Accepted on Faith and Enforced by Authority? [Answer: a religion, aka the ISLLC Standards]* which appeared in the *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, (Volume 3, No. 2, pp.

159-167). Joe Murphy subsequently responded in a rebuttal entitled *A Response to English* in *IJLE* in the October-December 2000 issue (Volume 3, No. 4, pp. 399-410).

Chapter 6: Deconstructing Research Methods: The Case of Portraiture. The original content of this article was given as a symposium paper at the 1999 Annual Conference of UCEA in Session # 7.1 at Minneapolis, Minnesota entitled *Accountability in Leadership Research Methodology: A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's Portraiture.* It was later revised and accepted for publication in the October 2000 issue of AERA's *Educational Researcher*, (Volume 29, No. 7, pp. 21-26). I subsequently expanded on some of the points in the *ER* piece the following year in a Division A, SIG-Teaching in Educational Administration Round Table 4.07 at AERA entitled *Portraiture as a Methodological Approach in Doctoral Studies.* A rebuttal by Donald Hackmann of Iowa State University was subsequently published in the *International Journal of Educational Leadership* in the January-March 2002 issue (Volume 5, No. 1, pp. 51-60) entitled *Using Portraiture in Educational Leadership Research.* Portraiture has been used to present glimpses of school principals as they practice leadership so it is an important research methodology in educational administration.

Chapter 7: The Denouement of a Management Guru. The material for this chapter is derived from a 2000 UCEA symposium paper, Session # 3.4 which was given in Albuquerque, New Mexico, entitled *The Eighth Habit of Highly Effective People: A Critical De-Construction of Stephen R. Covey's Best Seller.* It was subsequently published by Rick Reitzug in *The Journal of School Leadership* under the title *The Penetration of Educational Leadership Texts by Revelation and Prophecy: The Case of Stephen R. Covey* (Volume 12, No. 1, pp. 4-22). A modified version was also published with permission from *JSL* in Ted Creighton's *Educational Leadership Review* in the Fall of 2002 under the title *Caveat Emptor: A De-Construction Reading of the Stealth Metaphysics of Stephen R. Covey* (Volume 3, No. 3, pp. 13-22). My criticism of professors who refer to Covey's work as "research" was the topic of a rebuttal by Paula Corderio in *ELR* entitled *Much Ado About Nothing: Not Research, But We Can't Ignore It* (Volume 3, No.3, pp. 23-25).

Chapter 8: Old Wine in New Bottles: Murphy's Call for a New Center of Gravity in Educational Administration. This chapter is a deconstructive rebuttal to Joe Murphy's invited 1999 Division A, AERA paper in Montreal, Canada, which was subsequently published

by UCEA entitled *The Quest for a Center: Notes on the State of the Profession of Educational Leadership.* The rebuttal took the form of a Division A, AERA symposium paper given in Session 43.64 the following year in New Orleans entitled, *Whose New Leadership Center for the New Millennium? The Parameters, Paradoxes, and Problems of Conceptual Centers in a Field of Inquiry.* It was subsequently published by Rick Reitzug in the *Journal of School Leadership* in September of 2000 entitled, *A Critical Interrogation of Murphy's Call for a New Center of Gravity in Educational Administration* (Volume 10, No. 5, pp. 445-463). Murphy wrote a rebuttal entitled *Notes from the Cell: A Response to English's "Interrogation"* which was published in the same issue (pp. 464-469.

Chapter 9: Dumbing Schools Down with Data Driven Decision Making. The contents of this chapter are derived largely from a 1999 UCEA symposium paper entitled *Accountability Deconstructed: Exposing the "Double Logic" in Data Driven Decision Making* for Session # 3.3 at the Annual Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It was subsequently published in Bill Kritsonis' *National Forum of Administration and Supervision Journal (NFEASJ)* in 2001-2002 under the title *Dumbing Schools Down with Data Driven Decision Making: A Deconstructive Reading of a Popular Educational Leitmotif* (Volume 19, No. 2 (pp. 3-11).

Chapter 10: Hegemony or Harmony? Ending the Theory-Practice Gap. The contents of this chapter were largely extrapolated from a Division A, AERA symposium paper for Session # 9.07 in Seattle, Washington in 2001. It was titled *Hegemony or Harmony? A Conceptual and Methodological Quest to End the Paradigm Wars in Educational Administration.* Another section of this chapter was published in the *UCEA Review* of Winter 2002 entitled *Cutting the Gordian Knot of Educational Administration: The Theory-Practice Gap* (Volume 44, No. 1, pp. 1-2) edited by Alan Shoho of UT San Antonio and Catherine Lugg of Rutgers.

CODA: The Many Meanings of Postmodernism for the Theory and Practice of Educational Administration. This section is a compilation and condensation of so many of my papers and articles that it would be nearly impossible to identify them, though the discerning reader will surely see resonant themes from the chapters before.

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THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

PART I

THE POSTMODERN CHALLENGE TO THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

There can be no claim to support a knowledge base for a profession without a bona fide theoretical framework to define and support the derivative professional practice. The challenge of postmodernism to the prevailing theories in educational administration is that it is *atheoretical*, that is, it proffers no theory to center any specific practice, but rather is open to consider all claims and the theories which may define and support them.

As the reader will come to see in the initial chapters of this book, postmodernism is about understanding that a posture of exclusivity is rejected, that is, the idea of their being one right way or one right science or one right method of inquiry to pursue truth as it is constructed (not discovered). So postmodernism isn't about replacing one version of truth or science with another. It is about challenging and opening up the central premise that only one set of borders are possible to define and support professional practice.

Postmodernism is about constructing a way of looking at the world of ideas, concepts and systems of thought through the historicity of context and the shifting nature of linguistic meaning and symbols as they are manifested in discursive practices which run through educational administration and related fields. Discursive practices represent all forms of human communication, verbal and non-verbal, and the context and culture in which they are embedded.

Postmodernism's greatest enemy is *certitude*. By this is meant a claim, posture, or practice that rests upon one method, one model, or one idea of a singular, universal truth. Since the beginning of the enlightenment in the Renaissance, Western science has come to be the *be all and end all* of the establishment of theory. Theory has come to be

a positional practice of pursuing truth and basing claims of certainty on that pursuit. I posit that from the writing of Descartes through positivism and the Vienna Circle, including critical theory (Marxism and Neo-Marxism), that the term *modernism* embraces the full panoply of theories at work in educational administration today. Each of these frames or "turns," to borrow a concept from linguistics, debunks the ones that came before and positions itself as "the answer" supported by a new certitude. Postmodernism calls all of these claims into question. It poses a new criticism, exposes the hegemonic nature of where any and all such claims come to rest, and seeks to erase or at least open the foundations upon which certitude is defined. Postmodernism is not so much interested in the answers as the questions. The postmodernist seeks to show that there are always a plurality of options, approaches, and possibilities in a multiplicity of probabilities.

The denial of certitude does not constitute an affirmation of anything. The postmodernist's denial of certitude is open to many expressions of thought and theory as long as none of them seek to suppress, silence, marginalize, humiliate, denigrate or erase other possibilities. Everything can be considered, *except* any claim for exclusivity which would subordinate everything else.

The postmodernist approaches theory with the idea that metanarratives (theories) are essential for the establishment of professional practice, but that many theories can contain practices which will prove beneficial to educating children in a variety of settings. To reduce such claims to standardized lists ("effective schools") or "school improvement models" based on decontextualized behaviors on a "research base" which itself has been standardized in "right truth-seeking methods," is to resort to hegemonic practices which can only be supported via political enforcement. Inevitably, the politics of consensus lists as one of its victims a complex truth(s) that is lost in its simplistic pursuit. What we seek to know and understand is obliterated by the premises and methods we use to pursue it.

To this end, postmodernism is a kind of open-bordered approach to inquiry. While a postmodernist may accept forms of reductionism in the name of "Occam's Razor," he/she does so skeptically and only temporarily in order to decide on a course of action within a specific context. A person who refuses to form a theoretical base for professional practice forfeits the possibility of systematic improvement over time. Purposive action in educational administration is defined by a

limited range of options defined by constrained intellectual/conceptual boundaries. Without the latter, administrative action is aimless because context contains and defines purpose. As long as such actions are not based on theories premised on certitude or result in certitude, remaining open to question and criticism throughout, a postmodernist can function in a world of overwhelming choice and perhaps be called *decisive*, even as the administrative action is connected to a very temporary truth within a passing nano-second in the infinite. Clearly, some administrative decisions are better than others, within context, boundaries, culture, resources, desired outcomes, and time. *It all depends*–not on some stable or enduring theoretical position or valued framework, but on the contextually situated moment.

The chief difference of the doubt of the postmodernist compared to the modernist is that it is doubt about the boundaries which define the context first, and then the nature of the administrative action determined within that context second. The problem with the modernists is that the doubt they have is never about their boundaries, premises and/or assumptions by which they have come into being, it's always about whether the decision within that context was *the right one*. The postmodernist understands that "right" is contextually determined all the time. The modernist is only concerned about being "right" no matter what the context may be over time.

Arguments about theory and theoretical frames are therefore crucial to problems of practice. Practice rarely changes unless it can be grounded in a theory which supports it. So there is nothing so practical than an exposition of a theory from which practice will be defined and improved.

Postmodernism's ideas about theory have been the butt of great academic spoofing, and it isn't uncommon to see eyebrows raised when the topic is introduced in some professional circles. That's because the modernist perspective believes itself to be neutral and appropriate for all discourse regarding professional matters. Modernists superimpose this frame on the discussions regarding postmodernism. They assume that an alternative to modernism should be clearly defined (in their terms), linear, containing borders which are unambiguous, linguistic phrases which are open to only one grand interpretation, and which can be reduced to quantitative expressions, although much of qualitative research is based on the same premises. When they find that postmodernism doesn't conform to their preconceptions, they resort to