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Revisiting Applications of Social Science Theory to Research on the Superintendency

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We discuss here the extent to which science can contribute to our understanding of the superintendency, specifically with regard to research on the superintendency, its practice, and preparation for it. In our considerations, we draw on the National Research Council's (NRC) *Scientific Research in Education* (2002). SRE offers six criteria for scientific inquiry: (a) Pose significant questions that can be investigated empirically; (b) Link research to relevant theory; (c) Use methods that permit direct investigation of the question; (d) Provide a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning; (e) Replicate and generalize across studies, and (f) Disclose research to encourage professional scrutiny and critique (p. 52). We believe the second item in the list is the most troublesome and perhaps the least honored in research on the superintendency, so it will be the focus of this paper.

Definitions of Theory

A useful place to begin is with Kerlinger's oft-cited definition, "Theory is a set of interrelated concepts, assumptions, and generalizations that systematically describes and explains regularities in behavior in educational organizations. Moreover, hypotheses may be derived from the theory to predict additional relationships among concepts in the system" (cited in Evers & Lakomski, 1996, p. 51). This is a less structured definition than a strict logical positivist might prefer. Willower (1996) cited, for example, Feigl's definition of theory as, "a set of assumptions from which empirical laws are derivable by logico-mathematical deduction." Willower noted, "The definition fit physics, but not educational administration where, as in most social science writing, explanation is pursued through ordinary prose argument" (p. 350). Hoy (1996) likened theory to a map

in that a map is an incomplete picture of a given terrain, but that one needs the map to navigate the terrain. If theory is so broadly defined, it is apparent that everyone uses theories all the time, since we all proceed from assumptions and generalize even if our assumptions are wrong and our generalizations are unwarranted, just as we all get around via maps in our heads, even if they are badly drawn and inaccurate. The sense in which theory is used in our paper, however, is that of a formally derived, systematically considered, publicly promulgated theory. English (1994, p. 17) offered a more jaded view of theory, “Theories are special kinds of explanations or narratives which emanate from peculiar discourses. No theory ever comes from ‘thin air.’ It has precedents, antecedents, and traces from many other ideas—all within a discourse which enables it to be envisioned, expanded, checked, debated, verified, criticized, changed, and ultimately abandoned for another more promising narrative.” He noted that any theory is a kind of “privileged story or discourse” (p. 34). As such, we must be alert to the fact that the story may be privileged for parochial, or “arbitrary and unjustified” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 62) reasons.

Criteria for Good Theory

Since a critical issue in this discussion is precisely what, if anything, knowledge of theory can contribute to research and practice of the superintendency and to preparation for it, we need criteria for any theory’s validity. Hoy wrote “Theories are useful to the extent that they generate accurate predictions about events and help us more easily to understand and influence behavior . . . the form of the theory is less important . . . than the degree to which it generates useful understanding” (1996, pp. 367-368). Quine and Ullian (1978, pp. 64-82) de-emphasized empirical tests as the sole means of validating

hypotheses and established broader virtues with which any hypothesis should cohere: conservatism, modesty, simplicity, generality, and refutability. Analysis virtues could be prescribed for theory. Evers and Lakomski (1991, 1996, 2000) drew heavily on Quine and Ullian's coherentism for their considerations of educational administration. Griffiths (1995) proposed a different set of (extra-empirical) criteria for selecting criteria for theories for research problems:

Feasibility—Is there a good fit between the theory and the problem?

Excitement—Will the theory promote new insights or merely reinforce old ones?

Context—Is the theory appropriate in the context of the current problem?

Cost—Can the individual afford to use the theory, especially in terms of time and effort?

User-Friendly—Is the language of the theory understandable and enlightening?

Fruitful—Does the theory lead to problem solution?

NRC (2002, p. 3) stated, "It is the long-term goal of much of science to generate theories that can offer stable explanations for phenomena that generalize beyond the particular." This criterion of generalizing beyond the particular may be the sticking point. Much lay criticism of theory is that it doesn't work in the "real world," in other words, that the critic has found a particular (perhaps a pressing particular) to which it does not seem to apply. The conclusion that may follow is that preparation programs should not call on theory, that instead there should be much more dependence on practical knowledge, that courses should be taught by practitioners with recent experience, or that programs should be more field-based, so that aspirant leaders could learn what they "really" need to know. A fellow-traveler to this argument is one that claims that the business of superintending varies so much from one situation to another—

that it is so context bound—that any generalizations made about it face incredible odds of not applying in a particular situation. So, in considering the extent to which one can theorize successfully about the superintendency, one must consider its complexity and the uniqueness of each individual situation.

Research in the Social Sciences vs. Research in the Natural Sciences

At this point in the discussion, we must confront proposed differences between theory in the natural sciences and theory in the social sciences. Eisenhart and DeHaan (2005, p. 4) describe the differences in terms of social science never being able to do “normal science” as per Kuhn, because it was “‘preparadigmatic’ (i.e., immature) because model problems and solutions were rarely accepted as such by a majority in the field. Because social science was characterized primarily by controversies over fundamentals, it did not display the more orderly progress of natural science, never achieving a period that could be defined as normal science.” This suggests that anyone searching in the social sciences for law-like generalizations is likely to conclude that the search is fruitless.

Eisenhart and DeHaan (2005, p. 4), however, noted a blurring between natural and social sciences. For one thing, as critics have long noted, the natural sciences are human endeavors; not purely objective logical emotionless efforts by Dr. Spock-like investigators to understand what is really going on. They are, like all human endeavors, “influenced by social relationships and other human experiences.” In this way, they are somewhat like the social sciences. Furthermore, social science no longer has a monopoly on studying those characteristics that most make us human, intention and volition. They are now open “to study with biochemical and biophysical methods,” so that “distinctions

between the natural and social sciences are crumbling.” (Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2005, p. 5). This is consistent with the work of Evers and Lakomski (1996, 2000).

So, the real questions about applying science to the study of the superintendency are less about presumed distinctions between natural and social sciences and more about whether there are regularities in the superintendency; whether theorizing about the regularities will increase understanding, prediction, and control; and whether the regularities are observable. We now review a number of studies about the superintendency, some that we consider explicitly related to theory, and some that we consider not explicitly theoretical. We will conclude then with our arguments for the place of theory in research on, the practice of, and preparation for the superintendency.

Recent Studies Explicitly Related to Theories

Bjork (2001) produced a case study of one district in terms of new institutionalism. He reported how, in response to complexity, organization members fall back on the security of “established social norms and practices. Thus, as educational reforms [increase] the complexity of schools, they are not naturally moved by “rationally adopting features that promise to enhance effectiveness or increase efficiency.” Rather, “educators . . . find comfort in familiar ‘ways of doing things’ rather than adopting unknown innovative practices” (p. 223).

Peterson and Short (2001) drew on social influence (social attractiveness, expertness, trustworthiness) and social style (assertiveness, and emotiveness) to survey 131 board presidents’ perceptions of superintendents. A regression analysis showed that these five variables neither individually nor in combination predicted board decision making. This counterintuitive finding may be due to the fact that in the study, 88% of the

superintendents' recommendations were passed. Thus, there was little variance to predict. Petersen and Short maintained that this study still supported the notion that superintendents must consider the perceptions of board members and members of the community. They also reported that their findings raised questions about the exact nature of both superintendent and board member in "addressing, presenting, and deciding on issues for board consideration" (p. 562). Finally, Petersen and Short suggested that attribution theory might provide more fruitful insights into the influence of board and superintendent.

Skrla, Scott, and Benestante (2001) drew on constructions of power and gender and studied, specifically (p. 121) "how constructions of power and gender were operationalized in the workplace" (p. 121) to examine the perceptions of former and current women superintendents. They noted that women superintendents must simultaneously be seen as enough like men to be credible leaders and enough like women not to antagonize everyone. They found that that women who remained in the superintendency talked differently about power, politics, and gender from those who remained in it.

Alsbury (2003) drew on dissatisfaction theory (opting for it over continuous participation theory and decision output theory) to research events leading to superintendents' dismissals. He noted that quantitative evidence did not consistently support the dissatisfaction theory. That is, when comparing politically motivated school board member turnover to all school board member turnover, there is no clear associated of politically-motivated board member turnover to subsequent superintendent turnover. But Alsbury did a case study of 20 years of board elections and superintendent turnover

in one district that appeared to violate dissatisfaction theory. He showed that examining events in more detail revealed that events in the district were not inconsistent with dissatisfaction theory. He argued that if dissatisfaction theory is valid, it may enable superintendents to predict pressure for them to be removed and then to act to counter that pressure.

Mayo and White (2003) based a study on Goal Perspective Theory (GPT), which posits that individuals “desire to demonstrate high levels of ability and avoid” (p. 5) situations where they are likely to demonstrate low levels. GPT further assumes different orientations between people whose goal orientation is to tasks and those whose goal orientation is to ego. They related 385 superintendents’ goal orientations to employment conditions and enjoyment of their jobs.

Recent Studies not Explicitly Related to Theories

Iselt, Brown, and Irby (2001) noted criticisms that superintendency preparation programs were in fact too dependent on theory, were weak in relating theory to practice, or offered only narrow perspectives on theories, e.g., that males’ experiences could be generalized to “the concerns, needs, or realities of women” (p. 56). They surveyed equal numbers of male and female superintendents in Texas for their views of the emphasis their preparation programs placed on 30 selected knowledge and skills topics and for their views of the relevance of these same topics to their job performance. They based selection of the 30 topics on reviews of the literature and findings from a field test. Though in reporting their findings, they alluded to the concepts “perpetuation of hegemonic educational systems” (p. 61), “white gendered nature of educational

administration” (p. 61), and “power definition” (p. 64), they did not describe having explicitly called on theory in their study’s design.

Bjork, Keedy, & Gurley (2003) reviewed definitions of careers and career patterns and then reviewed changes over time in career patterns in educational administration. Then they analyzed American Association of School Administrators (AASA) survey data from 2,262 superintendents for insights into career patterns as a reality check against the notion that there is a crisis in the superintendency. They analyzed the AASA data for evidence of career paths. Bjork et al. did not offer hypotheses based on career paths, nor is it clear that the original AASA data collection was based on career paths. Their concluding discussion does not draw on the concept. SRE noted of theory that it, “drives the research question, the use of methods, and the interpretation of results” (2002, p. 62). This seems not to be the case with Bjork et al, so we have classified this study as not explicitly based on theory.

Levine’s (2005) critique of educational leadership preparation calls on no explicit or implicit theory to frame his critique, which may account for the contradictory (in his word, “paradoxical,” (p. 35) arguments he makes.

Concluding Discussion: The Place of Theory

Theory to Guide Research

NRC (2002) emphasized that one salient feature of science is that it is a community. They de-emphasize the image of purely objective detached investigation and replace it with the notion of community norms. True, the norms do include valuing logic and evidence and the willingness to be “hopeful but open-minded” (Quine, 1995, p. 45). But achieving these norms comes less from an individual’s commitment to methodology than

from participation in a community that scrutinizes and critiques one another's efforts. This is an essential ingredient of the post-positivist approach. Another essential ingredient is that members of the community builds on one another's efforts, not so much to extend knowledge in an ever increasing, ever more precise process of growth, but because it is essential to a community to converse over the same topics in the hope that our conversations will become "more incisive" (Geertz, as cited in Eisenhart & DeHaan, 2005, p. 4). The question, then, is whether using systematic, rationally-derived, publicly promulgated theories enhances the conversation in any essential or meaningful way. Certainly the studies we classified as not-explicitly-related-to-theories contributed to the scholarly conversation about the superintendency. And just as certainly, they addressed topics that interested other scholars. If we define theories broadly enough, as we did above in this paper, they are obviously dependent on some theory. But they did not seem to be guided explicitly by a formally-stated theory. Did their lack of explicit reliance on theory weaken them in any way?

We believe that the merits of theory in the social science, and particularly in fields of practice such as educational administration, is that it systematizes and rationalizes and thus cultivates consistency in the ongoing conversation among scholars of the field. Theory leads us to "identify and frame meaningful problems . . .major education issues . . . [and] differing perspectives on these issues" (Eisenhart & DeHaan, p. 8). In this view, they are meaningful and major precisely because other thinkers and researchers are writing about them. But, this is the point: to participate in a community, one must converse about what others in the community are conversing about. We further note, drawing on NRC (2002, p. 24) that the merit of scientific findings depend not just on

empirical adequacy, but on conceptual adequacy as well. Again, to participate in a community, but must make at least some obeisance to that community's definition of conceptual adequacy. Why should one want to participate in the community? We agree with Evers and Lakomski's answer, "The natural sciences go from strength to strength and, certainly over the last four hundred years, have been delivering knowledge hand over fist" (1991, p. vii). We believe the scientific approach can contribute to understanding of the superintendency and that there is great benefit in participating in scientific conversations.

Theory to Guide Practice

Recently, a female superintendent of a rural school district was asked what she had learned in her graduate educational administration program that prepared her to deal with being superintendent. She said, among other things, "Uh, theory...I don't have much use for that. At least I haven't applied too much of it...or, if I did an internal sort of thing that I didn't even notice. I really don't feel like I was ever prepared for the day-to-day, 'This is what you are going to do when you get to the office.' I didn't have a clue" (1000 Voices From the Firing Line). Her words highlight the sticking point that we alluded to above, that theory may not seem to provide much guidance to practitioners. This is because theory's strong point is also its weak point. It generalizes beyond the particular, but the practitioner, especially the superintendent is most often troubled by a particular, in fact by a myriad of particulars needing to be dealt with simultaneously. Amidst the "vexing problems of practice" (Pounder, 1999, p. 5), practitioners need guidance that will help them in specific situations, and theory does not often provide guidance with such a pinpoint focus. Practitioners frequently make unflattering comparisons of theory to that

which they term “common sense,” “flying by the seat of one’s pants,” or advice from a seasoned veteran of practice. But Kowalski (2006, pp. 96-97) warned that this can mean becoming “wed to a single view of organizational life” with the result that one cannot “gain a full understanding of the motivation and dynamics of individual and group behavior.” So, can theory be of help to the superintendent? We recall Hoy’s (1996) claim that we all rely on theory all the time; but it may not be explicit, just as we all navigate by maps in our heads, even if they do not correspond exactly to the terrain. Following on Hoy’s claim, we must consider not whether theory will help the superintendent (since whatever theory, s/he has is helping to a greater or lesser degree) but whether explicit theory will help. We favor Marion’s argument, “Theory will expand your unconscious (or semi-conscious) repertoire of administrative behaviors and solutions. It will provide you with lots of ways to approach a given situation. It will organize your thoughts” (2002, p. 6). We add to them the NRC claim cited above that conceptual adequacy is important. Hoy (1996, p. 372) suggested, “In the complex world of administration, the best we may be able to do with our theories, both formal and informal, is to improve on chance.” We add to his suggestion that even when totally immersed in thorny particulars, perhaps *especially* when immersed in thorny problems, there is value in stepping back and taking a broader view of situations, and we believe that formal social science theory is more likely to be conceptually adequate and to provide a sounder broader view than “common sense,” “flying by the seat of one’s pants,” or advice from seasoned veterans.

Theory to Guide Preparation

But we do value the three contributions to understanding listed in the last sentence. So, how do we see their place in a preparation program at academic institutions? Just as there is no theory that makes up a recipe box of solutions to problems facing superintendents, there is no prescription for precisely how much theory and how much practice should be emphasized in preparation. We merely reiterate here approaches other scholars have suggested for blending theory and practice. The most obvious to us is teaching from cases. More cases are available in the literature than one could possibly use in a single program (e.g., Nee-Benham, 1999; *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, no date). Well-prepared cases offer no recipes for success, but they provide solid food for thought, and serve well to lead students to discuss how theories might apply or not to these situations. The stout-hearted professor can even progress to having students write their own cases (Ivory & González, 1999) for use in similar discussions. Guest appearances by practitioners and panels of practitioners provide similar opportunities, with the added benefit (or onus, depending on one's perspective) that the guests can talk back to the professor, to the students, and to the theories. Even "war stories" from practitioners can be valuable as they "so that students who have not worked in administration can acquire a flavor of what it felt like to those who have worked in it" (Ivory & Gonzalez, 1999). Since there is no universally valid formula for how much theory and how much practice to include in preparation, it is worthwhile to make sure students have a variety of experiences and a variety of emphases on both. We urge, however, that two ingredients should probably be avoided: the pure academician, so infatuated with conceptual insights as to show no interest in, and make no connection to, the world of practice; and the teller of war stories, so infatuated with his/her own insights,

that students come away with no understanding of other ways of viewing and doing administration. We continue to believe that a trustworthy source of other ways of viewing and doing is formally derived, systematically considered, publicly promulgated social science theory.

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