Special Interest Group

Organizational Theory

"Me and Caesar Got a Good Thing Going"
On Becoming the *Organizational Whisperer* I've Always Wanted to Be

Bob L. Johnson, Jr.

Department of Educational Leadership and Policy - University of Alabama

Abstract: Using the professional expertise exhibited by a well-known celebrity as a metaphor, and consistent with the larger purpose of this volume, this essay represents an exercise in retrospective sense-making. In it, I reflect on my prolonged interaction with the field of organizational theory *and* how this interaction has come to frame my thinking as a professor housed in a professional school. These reflections are intentionally structured around four defining participles, all of which are informed by inferences drawn from observing the celebrity at work: *knowing* about organizations, *reading* organizations, *theorizing* about organizations, and *synthesizing* these activities toward the realization of what I call the *normative organizational state.* Individually and collectively these capture much of my journey in the ongoing pursuit of professional expertise as an organizational theorist. The essay concludes with a description of the relationships shared between these participles and the identification of potential lines of inquiry that follow from them in the field of educational leadership and policy.

I found myself hooked after two episodes. *How* did he do it? *What* was his secret? *Where* did he learn those skills? How did he know *why* this dog did that, and then train it to do *exactly* what he wanted? More importantly, why does such knowledge remain so elusive to me and hundreds of other owners motivated to become better handlers of their pets?

It has been more than ten years since the TV serial *The Dog Whisperer* premiered on the National Geographic Channel.[1] While my initial fascination focused on the 'magic' Caesar Milan could work on the most challenging of canines, in an odd and humorous way it dawned on me that the knowledge and skills he exhibited were analogous to the kind of scholar I envisioned myself becoming. Caesar's work with dogs provided a useful metaphor for thinking about my own growth. It also provided a language and logic to retrospectively sense-make (*yes the redundance is intentional here*) where I *had been* in my intellectual journey with organizational theory and where I *needed to be going* in my pursuit of expertise in this important area.

With Caesar's help, I was able to name what I envisioned for myself and students. I wanted to be an *organizational whisperer*, and I wanted those who studied with me to become the same. Just as Caesar used his knowledge and skills to help dogs and their owners resolve various challenges, I wanted to develop the knowledge and skills to help organizational participants create effective organizations that promoted human flourishing.

In addition, Caesar's expertise helped me think more clearly about *how* I might go about developing this in myself and others. It took several episodes and more than a year to discern the pattern of these elusive activities. As I watched Caesar interact with various dogs, a set of common themes began to emerge.[2] Only after discussing and refining these with students over several semesters would they come into conceptual relief.

My observations led me to conclude that Caesar's expertise was a function of four primary factors. Given the ongoing nature of these activities, they emerged

as verb participles: (1) *knowing*, (2) *reading*, (3) *theorizing* and (4) *synthesizing* toward a solution.

From the beginning of the series, it was obvious that Caesar had a fundamental *knowledge* of dogs and their behavior. Regardless of size, breed, or age, he reflected on a vast array of canine knowledge in his work. Caesar also provided adept at *reading* dogs - not only in terms of their thinking and behavior, but within the larger context in which these occurred. To understand dogs, one most understand their place in the pack and relation to the pack leader.

Building on this *knowing* and *reading*, Caesar likewise exhibited skill in *theorizing*. Among other things, this theorizing focused on the essence, causes, and solutions to the specific animal problem before him. Finally, and of equal importance, Caesar was adroit at *synthesizing* these various activities (*knowing, reading,* and *theorizing*) to resolve various behavioral disorders. This synthesizing reflected a tacit, implicit know-how that belies the simplicity conveyed in each episode and eludes simple description.

Though this metaphor fails to fully capture that which it has been employed to represent, my intent in this endeavor is to use the expertise exhibited by Caesar Milan as *the dog whisperer* to both frame and reflect on my own development in the field of organizational theory. Consistent with the other contributions to this volume, it provides insight into how I have approached my work in this area as both scholar and teacher. Rather than provide an exhaustive view of the literature to support my thoughts, I will reference only a handful of works that remain influential to my career.

Toward this end, and consistent with inferences drawn from watching Caesar, the thoughts on organizational theory which follow are structured around the four participles noted above: *knowing, reading, theorizing,* and *synthesizing*. Individually and collectively these are metaphorical for my intellectual journey to date. I conclude this essay by offering brief examples of areas/lines of inquiry that follow from my dance with organizational theory through the years. These define much of my current interests. All are potentially fruitful for the field of educational leadership.

Before proceeding, a couple of observations are in order. First, and consistent with the request of the editors, what follows reflects a more personal tone than I normally assume. This creates some discomfort. My intent is not to parade how much I know about the subject matter at hand. At this point in my career, I realize that what I *don't know* in life far exceeds what I do know...*and the gap is widening*. As with the narrative approach in general, personal references are means of conveying a larger story.

Second, my reflections here are in no way intended to essentialize or define *the* way of approaching the vast and complex field that is organizational theory. It would be erroneous to conclude that I have somehow arrived at the desired level of expertise hinted at above *or* that I can produce an unequivocal map to help students realize the same. Our working theories and skills are ever in progress. Moreover, knowledge and skill development are in many ways collective endeavors. We build on the work of others. Further, the complexity of the social world exceeds the limitations of our collective theorizing. Our efforts to register it in *all* of its richness are limited by the conceptual tools at our disposal. My voice is but one in a larger conversation that pre- and will post-date my career.

On *Knowing* about Organizations

The development of expertise in any profession begins with knowledge and knowing - not just knowing a few things, but knowing *many* things and knowing them well. As noted elsewhere, the field of educational leadership is a composite, aggregate field informed by multiple knowledge domains (Johnson, 2004). It is also an *applied* field. Like other applied fields (music, engineering, theology, medicine, law, architecture), it is housed in one of many professional schools that dot the university landscape (Johnson, 2014b).

While there are many knowledge domains that inform our field, leadership and organizational theory are its *foundational* domains. This is because leadership is exercised in the context of the formal organization. To understand the subtleties of leadership, one must understand the organizational context in which it occurs, not only how the *leader* influences the organization, but how the *organization* influences the leader. The two domains go together like hand-in-glove; they are two sides of the same conceptual coin.

Just as Caesar's expertise in canine rehabilitation is a function of his working knowledge of dogs, so one's ability as leader is rooted in part in his/her

knowledge of organizations. An important source of this knowing is the organizational theory literature. Note my choice of the particle *an* in the preceding sentence. Organizational knowledge comes from many sources, not the least of which is personal experience, i.e., the learning that comes from working and being a part of multiple organizations. While the importance of this experiential learning should never be discounted, I would suggest that it is exponentially enhanced as these experiences are continually employed as points of departure to engage the organizational theory literature. By entering this ongoing conversation with others via the written word, one's understanding of the dynamics and nuances of organizations take on a deeper meaning and richer hue.

How well I remember early in my career expressing fascination with the field of organization theory to a professor who as a recent graduate from the University of Chicago shared a similar interest. Thinking I might move in this direction as a dissertation topic, I scheduled an appointment to discuss the possibilities. Though I was quite proud of the knowledge I had accrued, the probing questions he asked quickly exposed my sophomoric optimism (Indeed, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing!). Before leaving the meeting, he handed me three books. "Read these," he said, '*then* let's talk.'

That short meeting, and the liminal space created by it, proved to be a turning point in my career. The three books would profoundly affect my thinking about organizations. I would never be the same after reading Barnard's (1938) *The Functions of the Executive*, Blau and Scott's (1962) *Formal Organizations*, and Simon's (1976) *Administrative Behavior*. I read the books in this order, and over a period of several months. Little did I know that these were the early voices of what would eventually become organizational theory, and that in his wisdom the professor had sent me back to explore the roots of the field.

Though initially challenging, once I discerned the language and rhythm of Barnard's logic, I was able to complete his landmark volume in a reasonable amount of time. I took copious notes and made sure that I could identify his main argument and describe the concepts used to support it.

An organization, he suggests, emerges out of the need for cooperation. We cooperate because the end state we seek to realize lies beyond the abilities/efforts of a single individual. Hence, there is a need to cooperate and coordinate our efforts. Whereas the need for cooperation leads to the creation of an *organization*, the need for coordinating the cooperative efforts of multiple individuals creates the need for the *executive*. It is the *function of the executive* to facilitate this coordination so that the efficient organization can emerge and persist. This is the essence of Barnard's argument.

Though well known to those who study organizations today, his ideas were on the cutting edge when published in 1938. The seminal nature of this book justifies its place on the list of required reading for those seeking expertise in organizational sociology.

I then proceeded to read the work of Blau and Scott. Though it too challenged my thinking and required re- reading, *Formal Organizations* was immensely helpful. It was the first text I read that surveyed the field of organizational theory. Pulling together multiple ideas in one place, it helped connect several theoretical dots acquired from previous readings that I up to the point I lacked the ability to relate.

With the intent of examining "the principles that govern organizational life," Blau and Scott (1962. p. 8) pushed my thinking on two fronts. First, their work helped me understand the role theory plays in our thinking and practice (more on this below). Knowledge is built/developed through our *practice-grounded* theorizing. If the field is to develop, then we must intentionally attend to the precision of our thinking. Their survey of the field underscored the importance of theories and theorizing for me.

With their comparative approach, Blau and Scott also challenged me to think in terms of how organizations are similar yet different. While generalizations have emerged that allow us to explain the structure and dynamics of organizations, the precise nature of these relations varies across organizational types. The importance of this realization would be emphasized again a couple of years later when introduced to Leavitt's model of defining organizational components. Though his model fails to consider the role played by the environment, Leavitt identified four fundamental organizational variables: *organizational goals*, *organizational participants*, *technology*, and *physical and social structure* (Leavitt, 1965).

In the aggregate, I've come to describe these to students as the *DNA of organizations*. If one understands the relations these variables share at an abstract level, one is in a position to discern the dynamics of any organization. Students have a tendency to overlook these important relationships. Further, in one way or another and with the addition of the environment variable, most introductory organizational theory texts are organized/structured around these five components.

I would eventually go on to read much more from Scott. This would include his *Organizations: Rational, Natural and Open Systems* (multiple editions, beginning with the 2nd published in 1987) and his compelling work on institutions (e.g., Scott, 1987, 1995, 2008; Meyer & Scott, 1992, etc.) The roots of many of his later ideas can be traced back to his work with Blau in *Formal Organizations*.

With these texts behind me, my confidence again began to grow. I was building a set of cognitive scaffolds around which to organize my newly acquired knowledge. In addition, I was learning the concepts, grammar and language of an exciting discourse community. However, little did I know that with Simon, I was about to hit a wall.

Administrative Behavior proved to be a source of personal frustration for several months. As I read it, I found myself struggling with Simon's language and writing style. It was difficult to follow the flow of his thought. The few examples he provided were abstract and thus beyond the realm of my experiences. After the first read, I could not state with the desired level of clarity the essence of his argument.

My inability to do this proved frustrating. I was determined to learn the field. But how could I without having a minimal understanding of one of its cardinal tomes? Though I attempted to set Simon aside and move on, I could not. The nagging thought of defeat combined with my drive to achieve led me to pick it up again. I would eventually read it two more times. As I had done with Barnard, I painstakingly outlined and summarized the argument of each chapter, built a working glossary of defining concepts, and made detailed notes in the margins of the book. I then consolidated these into a single document of 68 pages (I am reviewing this very document now as I write, more

than 20 years later, and have returned to many times since). By the end of the third reading, and symbolic of a conquered foe, the spine of my paperback edition had fallen apart. My persistence was rewarded and has since paid multiple dividends. Now that I'm older, the childhood game of *Simon Says* has richer connotations.

Simon's arguments complicated my thinking about organizations on multiple fronts. With the intent of moving away from the normative theoretical models dominant in his early career (circa, 1940-1950) and toward more descriptive theories of organizations, he reduced the essence of organizations to decision making. Organizations, he argued, exist to structure and thus channel the decision-making processes that define them. Along this line of thought, Simon speaks of the *anatomy* and *physiology* of organizations. The *anatomy* of the organization refers to the allocation of decision-making authority within the organization: *who has control over what decisions, and why*? The *physiology* of the organization is the process whereby organizational leaders influence the decisions that its members make: *how do executives define and control the decision parameters of members at the lower levels of the organization*?

Hence, for Simon, organizations are *controlled decision-making structures*. It is the job of *administrators* to define *and* control the parameters of decision making in the larger organization. Decision-making pervades the organization; decision-making defines the leadership role. Such is the primary argument of *Administrative Behavior*.

But this is not the sole contribution of Simon's text. Through his exploration of the decision-making process, Simon also emphasizes the uncertainty which surrounds this process and the *bounded rationality* with which decision makers approach most decisions. Because of their limited availability to collect and process *all* information, provide an exhaustive list of *all* alternatives, and predict with certainty *all* possible consequences, leaders and other organizational participants must *satisfice* rather than *optimize*.

I offer these texts and anecdote from graduate school days to illustrate the role *knowledge* and *knowing* play in the development of expertise.

There are other authors and books that can be used to develop this knowledge. The point to be made is this: for those motivated to pursue professional expertise in the field of organizational theory (analogous to expertise exhibited by Caesar in his work with dogs), an ongoing reading strategy must be developed that enables him/her to: (1) grasp the essence of the field of organizational theory; (2) identify that handful of questions that fuel its ongoing emergence; (3) understand its defining theories and concepts; (4) trace its conceptual roots and how these have evolved; (5) assess its theoretical maturity as a whole and across its sub-topics; (6) identify where more work is needed; and (7) translate how knowledge generated in this field informs those specific organizations of greatest interest to us, namely *educational organizations.*

Not to be overlooked in this endeavor are the cognitive demands it makes as we engage this literature. As with the mastery of most things in life, hard work is required. Beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge that accrues in working through this literature, one's mind is also strengthened and thinking honed. If undertaken with single determination, working through this literature will complicate one's thinking and enable him/her to discern with greater skill the complexities of the social world (Weick, 1978). The mind's eye will then be in a position to see those things which at one time were hidden.

The more knowledge I accumulate, the better I know. The better I know, the more I'm able to see. This sequence of activities and abilities are but two of the many fruits that come from working through the organizational theory literature. Yet, although knowledge and knowing are critical to becoming an organizational whisperer, in and of themselves they are not enough. One must be also become proficient at *reading* organizations. It is to this participle that I now turn.

On *Reading* Organizations

As my teaching of organizational theory has evolved, I've come to the conclusion that much like a book, an organization is a *text* to be read. To be sure multiple inferences can be drawn from this metaphor and the image of organizations it connotes. Chief among these are the epistemological assumptions on which it rests.

My working epistemology has become increasingly constructivist through the years. Influenced by the work of such theorists as Piaget (1950), Vygotsky (1978), Gadamer (1982), Rorty (1982), and Ricoeur (1976), I'm convinced that learning occurs as we seek to reconcile our accumulated working knowledge (Piaget's *cognitive schemata*) with our ongoing experiences in the world. The knowledge we bring to our experiences-in-the-moment provides both the means *and* the filter through which we interpret and learn from these new experiences. In a similar vein, the interpretation that comes from our reading of a text is a function of the prior knowledge we bring to that text as we interact with it in the moment.

For example, the knowledge and experiences that you, the reader, bring to this text as your reading now provide both the means and filter for interpreting what I've written. If you know little or nothing about organizational or constructivist theory, you may have difficulty in understanding what I'm attempting to convey (of course, this assumes that I have a modicum of skill in communicating my intent via text – a judgment the reader will have to make). This statement provides an example of how one's prior knowledge is the *means* for understanding what I am seeking to convey. If you are well-read in the area of epistemology and have serious doubts about the validity of constructivist theory as an explanation for learning, then chances are you have serious issues with my working assumptions. This statement provides an example of how one's prior knowledge provides a *filter* for interpreting what I have tried to convey.

There is more that could be said of this and other epistemologies – certainly more than I've conveyed here. Though mentioned in passing, these thoughts provide insight into my general epistemological orientation. Of greater importance to my immediate argument are the cognitive skills associated with the act of reading. Reading a book and reading an organization share multiple analogues. These parallels provide a means for highlighting the skills implied in the phrase *reading an organization.* Consider the follow-

ing.

Reading and understanding a text requires both knowledge and skill. Individuals vary both in their knowledge and ability to read. Several factors account for this. To accurately read a text one must have a knowledge of letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs. Among other things, this means understanding how these are combined to convey meaning through the use of grammar and syntax. One must also have the ability to follow the logic of the narrative, discriminate between the literal and symbolic, interpret the idiomatic, and even read between the proverbial lines. Implied in all of these abilities is a minimal understanding of the larger culture to which the language of the text gives expression.

The act of reading is in indeed a complex, multivariate activity. Yet rarely - if ever - do most think about this complexity while reading. Much like my initial difficulty with Simon's *Administrative Behavior*, the mechanics of reading and reading comprehension tend to capture our attention when we encounter a text that challenges us. Differences in reading ability arise from differences in the knowledge and abilities described above (and other factors I've not mentioned).

To illustrate, consider the differences between two students reading the same literary theory text. Katie is an English major. She has a large vocabulary and has read extensively across various genres. She has also experienced the richness of multiple cultures other than her own. The course for which the text is assigned is required as part of her program.
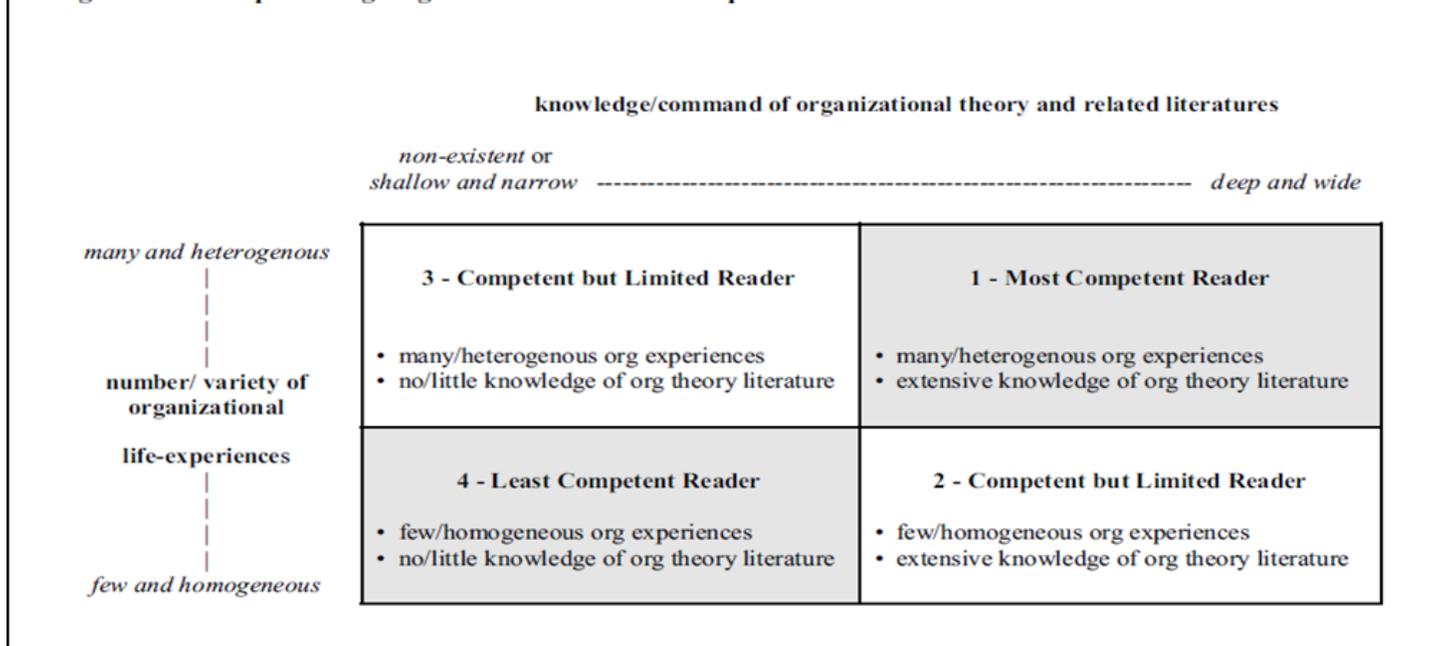
Ginny is studying engineering. Though she isn't as widely read as Katie, she too is a successful student. Her strengths are math and physics. Her life experiences are more limited and she hasn't ventured far from home. Beyond high school and college, she hasn't read much literature. As a result, her vocabulary and exposure to the great literary masterpieces are limited. She's taking the course with Katie as an elective.

It's not difficult to predict who will probably encounter the greater level of difficulty reading this literary theory text. Nor is it difficult to spec-

ulate why it will be more difficult for Ginny than Katie. The knowledge, life-experiences, and vocabulary that Katie brings to the text are not only richer than Ginny's, but closer to its subject-matter as well. Chances are the roles would be reversed if Katie chose to enroll in an advanced physics course as an elective. As an engineering major, Ginny's command of math and science and the logic and vocabulary of these areas would predictably give her an edge in reading a physics text.

This same logic can be seen in one's ability to read an organization. Beyond exhibiting a minimal level of competence in reading abstract texts, one's ability to read an organization is of function of several factors. Two in particular to underscore here are: (1) the knowledge and skills gleaned from one's own personal experiences as a member of various organizations; and (2) the knowledge and skills developed from one's exploration of the organizational theory literature.

Figure 1 - *Conceptualizing Organizational-Reader Competence* offers a visual representation of the juxtaposition of these two variables. The *y axis* depicts the number and variety of organizations of which an individual has been part. The range of possible experiences can extend in one of two directions. At one end of the continuum is the individual who has been a member of very few organizations, and these organizations are relatively homogeneous (i.e., organizations that share a similar core task). For example, John has been a member of very few organizations in his career (few), the majority of these have been as a teacher in elementary schools (homogeneous). At the other end of the continuum is the individual who has been a member of many organizations and of which the core tasks have been quite different. Ben has been a member of numerous organizations throughout his 40-year career. Among other things, he has served in the military, played minor-league baseball, owned a restaurant, and worked for IBM. He now runs his own leadership consulting firm. In contrast to John, Ben has not only been a member of *more* organizations than John, but different *types* of organizations as well. As a result, he has a richer array of organizational experiences than John.

Figure 1 - Conceptualizing Organizational-Reader Competence

knowledge/command of organizational theory and related literatures

non-existent or
shallow and narrow -- *deep and wide*

many and heterogenous

number/ variety of organizational

life-experiences

few and homogeneous

3 - Competent but Limited Reader	**1 - Most Competent Reader**
• many/heterogenous org experiences • no/little knowledge of org theory literature	• many/heterogenous org experiences • extensive knowledge of org theory literature
4 - Least Competent Reader	**2 - Competent but Limited Reader**
• few/homogeneous org experiences • no/little knowledge of org theory literature	• few/homogeneous org experiences • extensive knowledge of org theory literature

The *x axis* of Figure 1 depicts one's knowledge of the organizational theory literature. The range of knowledge extends from *shallow and narrow* (I've read none or little and I've read only about organizational structure) to *deep and wide* (I've read extensively across the entire gamut of the field. Furthermore, I've taken time to process/reflect on what I've read). It is reasonable to suggest that individuals who have a command of the field of organizational theory are in a better position to *read* an organization than those who do not. Yet, I would argue that rich organizational life-experiences *or* command of the organizational theory alone do not produce the most proficient organizational reader.

Figure 1 juxtaposes these variables to produce four quadrants. While I realize this model is abstract and assumes much, it reflects a measure of validity. It is reasonable to suggest that the most capable readers are those who not only have the most and varied organizational life-experiences but who also have a firm grasp of the organizational theory literature. These individuals fall into Quadrant 1 of the model. Conversely, those who have few and homogeneous organizational life-experiences coupled with little or no knowledge of the organizational theory literature are the least capable organizational readers. These individuals fall into Quadrant 4 of the model. While I do not know how familiar Caesar Milan is with the dog-

training literature and the breadth of his reading in this area, it is obvious that he has rich life-experiences in working with different breeds in a variety of contexts.

This logic can also be used to describe the competent organizational reader. It also provides justification for the inclusion of the previous section on knowledge/knowing – more specifically knowing the organizational theory literature. Knowledge of the vocabulary, language, logic, syntax and grammar of this field enables one to be a more effective reader of organizations than she would otherwise be. When combined with the knowledge and skills generated by a rich set of organizational life-experiences, a most capable reader is the result. Though ignoring or making superficial use of this literature is ever a temptation to leaders who struggle with the tyranny of the immediate/urgent, those who seek to increase their competence as organizational readers must be proactive in reading this and related literatures. Toward this end, there are a number of journals across the administrative professions (e.g., school, business, health and public administration) that are effective at making even the most abstract areas of organizational theory assessable to leaders in the field. *Harvard Business Review* is a quintessential example of this. *Educational Leadership* and on occasion, *Phi Delta Kappan,* are examples in our field.

Frames and metaphors have been developed by multiple theorists to aid the development of reading expertise. Those familiar with the organizational theory literature are aware of these. While Bolman and Deal's frames are perhaps the most well known (first published in 1984), other approaches should not be overlooked. These include but are not limited to Scott's rational, natural and open systems (Scott, 1981, from whom Bolman & Deal take their cues), Morgan's nine organizational metaphors (Morgan, 1986) and more recently Hatch's modern, symbolic-interpretive and post-modern lenses (Hatch, 2006).

These systems, frames, metaphors and lenses – and others like them – serve at last three important functions for the aspiring organizational whisperer. First, they provide useful taxonomies for organizing the literature. Having worked through multiple editions of Scott's *Organizations*, it finally dawned on me that his systems – *rational*, *natural*, and *open* – represent a means (note, not *the* means) of making sense of the organizational theory literature. In essence, they are poles around which patterns/clusters of ideas gravitate. The same can be said of Bolman and Deal's four frames, Morgan's nine metaphors, and Hatch's three lenses. By doing this, these meta-frameworks provide the reader with an initial orientation or gestalt view of the lay of organizational land.

Second, as meta-narratives for organizing the field, frameworks and metaphors such as these are conceptual tools for reading the specifics of a given organization. They do this by providing a vocabulary, grammar and logic for reading what has, is and might occur. Good sense-making lies at the heart of effective leadership, and such leadership is characterized by the capacity to make sense of the ambiguities and challenges in organizational life.

Yet, using these frames and metaphors as conceptual tools involve more than just knowing what these and other tools in conceptual warehouse might be. As I constantly remind students, it also means knowing *when* and *how* to use these tools in skillful ways to achieve desired ends. This observation highlights the distinction between recognizing *what* a tool is and knowing *when* and *how* to use

it. I may know what a tool is, but that doesn't mean I know how to use it *skillfully* or *when* it is *appropriate* to use.

And it's precisely here that I have concerns with how students approach Bolman and Deal. I use *Reframing Organizations* as a baseline text in one of my courses. I ask students to read it before the semester begins (not always popular). This is followed by a written assignment that requires them to summarize and critique the text. Knowing that Bolman and Deal's work is easy for most graduate students to summarize, I ask them to devote 3/4 of the assignment to critique. As an aid, I provide a detailed description of the difference between summary and critique. I also list questions around which a critique might emerge. What are the implicit working assumptions of the authors' argument(s)? Are they valid? Based on your organizational experiences and reading of the literature, do these four frames fully capture the complexities and nuances of organizational life? Are there additional analytic frames beyond these four that one might add? If so, what are these?, etc.

Most of my students have a difficult time critiquing Bolman and Deal – even when presented with the question-prompts above. This is due in part to the fact that it requires a higher level of thinking than summarizing. Yet part of the problems lies also in how students approach this text and other such texts. Overcome by the engaging nature and excitement generated by Bolman and Deal's arguments, and much like Moses on Sinai, many receive *Reframing Organizations* as law-and-gospel. Beyond memorizing, they tend to reify the frames – to accept them as immutable givens in their thinking. For me this falls short of what frames, lenses and metaphors enable us to do, namely, to become competent readers of organizations.

On *Theorizing* about Organizations

Closely related to *reading* is the third function served by frames, lenses, and metaphors. Together, these provide tools that can be used to inform one's *theorizing* about organizations; they aid and abet further theorizing.

For the sake of simplicity, I use the word *theory*

in this context to refer to *an explanation of something.* Theories are those working explanations we develop in our efforts to understand the phenomena we experience, however unrefined these explanations may be. Theories come in all shapes and sizes, ranging from the personal, tacit mental schemas we develop over time to the formally-articulated models substantiated by years of research.

Whether aware of it or not, we are constantly theorizing. Theorizing is about thinking. It is thinking rooted and informed by knowledge. Why did Stephen react as he did? What rationale led the Stones to purchase that house instead of this one? Why is that soccer team better than ours? What are the components of effective teaching? How does one become a competent leader? What is required to become a skilled reader of organizations? Questions such as these – as well as those raised about Caesar in the opening paragraph of this essay – require explanations. To answer them one must *theorize.*

The sound theorist is one whose thinking is characterized by complex-simplicity (*yet another oxymoron*) and precision. Not only can she use her working knowledge to discern patterns in the midst of complexity, she can connect and, if asked, explain the meaning of these patterns at a reasonable level of precision.

While all humans (and even animals) theorize, individuals vary in the sophistication and precision of this theorizing. I remind students of the importance of developing this critical skill-set. Toward this end, I work diligently to provide learning experiences that force them to exercise this cognitive muscle group. As will be argued below, we spend too much time teaching students theoretical knowledge and too little time teaching them theoretical skills.

Most of our working theories are implicit. They are not assessed as good or bad, but rather as *valid* or *invalid.* To the extent that it explains with a reasonable level of precision that which is its subject, a theory is *valid*. In the marketplace of ideas, those organizational theories currently in play vary in validity. The reflective praxisioner[3] is called upon to discriminate between these theories and assess why this variability exists.

In his knowing, reading, and responding to vari-

ous canines, Caesar reflects skill in theorizing. This theorizing has multiple foci. In his initial assessment of a given dog, Caesar uses his knowledge to identify cues and patterns from which inferences can be made. These inferences are then used to develop a working understanding or *read* of the challenge before him. Together these inform his search for explanations as to the cause of the dog's behavior. Why is it behaving in this way? This in turn leads to the development of interventions that will resolve the behavioral issue.

In sum, theorizing permeates the entire process engaged by Caesar in his work with dogs *and* their owners - from reading these situations, to diagnosing problems, and eventually providing corrective responses. He is developing, testing and refining explanations all along the way. Organizational whisperers do the same. Instead of working with dogs, they work with human collectives. They use the knowledge they've gleaned from formal and informal learning experiences to read, diagnose, and identify interventions to address various organizational pathologies. Throughout this quest, they are constantly theorizing.

The emphasis I place on this participle and the primary, yet overlooked role it plays in the development of professional competence among educational leaders is the result of my experience reading a handful of key theorists in the area of organizational learning. Although the cumulative work of Weick, March, Thompson, and Simon are at the top of the list, that of Perrow (2011, 1999, 1986, 1971), Argyris (1999, 1995, 1992), Schon (1990, 1984), Argyris and Schon (1982, 1974), Aldrich (2008), Lawrence and Lorsch (1986), and Senge (1990) must also be included. While one might include the work of theorists examining the nature and development of professional learning communities in schools, as I have argued elsewhere this literature is a derivative of the larger organizational learning literature (Johnson, 2009).

With his focus on the acts of *organizing* (as opposed to organizations) and *sense-making,* Weick (2012, 2011, 2000, 1996, 1995a, 1979, 1978, 1976) in particular exemplifies a level of precision that deserves close attention from those seeking to improve their theorizing skills. The same can be said of Selznick (1957), March (2010, 2008, 2005, 1999, 1994,

1988, 1981, 1974, 1993 (with Simon), etc.), Mintzberg (1983, 1979), Pfeffer (1981, 1978 (with Salincik)), and Thompson (1969). When combined with the creativity reflected in their thinking, there is much to be learned from them.

Thompson's *Organizations in Action* was published approximately 50 years ago. Its influence far exceeds its length 160 pages. This is a function of its generative quality – it's ability to generate ideas for readers. The seeds of Thompson's ideas are seen in the work of the generations of organizational theorists who have followed him. Aside from this quality and the theory articulated by Thompson in it, *Organizations in Action* likewise exemplifies a high-level of theorizing skill. For this reason, his thought and approach are worthy of emulation. Reading it for the first time in 1991, I was profoundly influenced by these qualities. As a result, I have sense returned to it multiple times for clarification, strategies and research ideas.

Yes, aspiring organizational whisperers should be well-versed in the theories that define the field as these are the fundamental tools of their craft. However, they should also realize that theories represent *abstractions*. Theories are the cognitive fruit of inferences made from particular settings, intentionally pitched at higher levels abstraction so as to maximize explanatory scope. As such, they fall short of capturing the particulars that characterize a given organization.

For those fledgling whisperers who succumb to the temptation of theory reification, it is easy to understand the frustration that sets in when they realize the particulars of their school fail to match those of a theory. This is why students who have been taught theory using a *plug-and-play* approach or view theory in this manner consistently find themselves at cognitive dead-ends.

For those who have been taught how to systematically theorize, these theories become aids to further theorizing. With this ability they are able to discern the possibilities and limitations of a theory for their immediate context. They are also able to use this and other theories to inform their own theorizing about this context. Regardless of origin, theories guide behavior. Leaders who can embrace and construct valid theories have a com-

petitive advantage.

Sharon Kruse and I have argued elsewhere that theories and theoretical knowledge constitute the curricular focal-point for many leadership preparation programs (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). This centering we have argued is problematic in professional fields such as ours. It has created a distorted paradigm that equates *knowing about* (theories) with *knowing how* (theorizing). Using organizations as an example, mastery of the organizational theory literature is seen by many as a proxy for skill in theorizing about organizations. Professors often assume that students who master this knowledge in the classroom are on their way to becoming become skilled organizational theorists.

This assumption is highly problematic. Two examples can be used to undermine its validity. Knowledge of golf and the ability to articulate the rules that define the game do not a golfer make. While this knowledge and ability are prerequisites to becoming a skilled athlete on the links, the two are not the same. The accomplished golfer combines and transforms these and other inputs in creative ways to become a skilled golfer. She knows exactly when to use each club, and has mastered the swing of each in her game. Likewise, a working knowledge of carpentry tools and the array of saws and woods available do not a master craftsman make. It is in the skillful synthesizing of these inputs that artistry is expressed. Though related, *knowing about* cannot be equated with *knowing how*.

The distortions inherent in this training paradigm call for a re-thinking of how leadership preparation programs are structured and the assumptions on which they rest. One strategy for doing this is to reflect on the focus or center of such programs. What is the focal point of these programs? Around what are they centered? Consistent with the ideas articulated above, I would suggest that there is a need to *de-center theory* in our preparation programs and to *re-center theorizing*. Stated differently, there is a need to de-center knowledge acquisition in our programs and to re-center skill development in decision making and students' theorizing about this development. This means distinguishing yet relating anew the relationship shared between *knowing about* and *knowing*

how. It requires a subtle yet profound shift in the way we think. Instead of discarding the theory movement and its fruits as irrelevant, this shift leads us to embrace it as a means to a greater end, namely skill development.

Effective leadership is defined by the capacity to both sense-make and navigate the ambiguities and challenges of organizational life. These inter-related activities are a function of the *knowing, reading,* and *theorizing* I've described above. Effective educational leadership is also characterized by the ability to translate this sense-making into appropriate organizational choices and actions. This calls for synthesis and artistry. And it is to synthesizing that I now turn.

On *Synthesizing* Knowledge in Addressing Organizational Challenges

Though an end to some, the field of organizational theory is a means to larger normative ends for most: *the development and improvement of organizational life.* Along with other bodies of knowledge, it is used to inform strategies to address a variety of challenges that would impede organizational viability and productivity. At the heart of this endeavor is problem solving - bringing knowledge, cognitive skills, and resources to bear on various organizational challenges.

As with the three other participles above, there is much involved in this set of activities. The complexity embedded in it can overwhelm and paralyze. Space and lack of expertise prevent me from fully addressing them here. What must be noted, if only minimally, are the synthesizing skill and artistry that surround this problem-solving process. My recent work in the emerging field known as *educating in the professions* has renewed my appreciation for these factors and the role they play in professional practice (Johnson, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). Like theorizing, it has also made me painfully aware of how inadequately this synthesizing skill is addressed in many professional schools. Before describing this skill and artistry which surround it, however, thought must be given to the *end* toward which both are directed. What larger *normative end* do organizations and their leaders pursue? Toward what are they directed? Further, what animates this pursuit?

My choice of the adjective *normative* as a modifier here is intentional. It underscores the distinction between normative and descriptive theorizing - theorizing about what *should be* rather than what *is*. A cursory read of the literature reveals that much of it reflects attempts to explain what actually occurs in organizations. Yet implied in this same literature are assumptions of what organizations and leaders should be doing. The interest of theorists in describing *what is*, is animated by a desire to move the organization toward *what it should be*.

It is in this sense that normative theory gives rise to descriptive theory. Our collective desire to create the organizations we envision motivates our efforts to understand and describe what organizations actually are. This is because we seek to reduce the discrepancy between the two. Stated differently and in the context of a single organization, to become the kind of organization we desire, we must first understand the kind of organization we are, identify the challenges that prevent us becoming what we want to be, and develop strategies that enable us to surmount the uncertainties presented by these challenges.

More often than not, this is easier said than done. Similar to Caesar's work with dogs, it requires that one know organizations. Likewise, it demands that one have the ability to *read* and *theorize* about organizations. As important, it calls for *skilled and creative synthesis* in combining these multiple activities so as to develop strategies that enable the organization to get from point A to point B – from its current to desired state.

Found below is *the* animating question which I've concluded drives the field of organizational theory (and perhaps leadership as well). It embodies the logic and implications of the normative-descriptive dilemma described above. It also includes defining concepts distilled from my reading and interpretation of the organizational theory literature. Though it is a composite and rather extended question, it is one that I present to students early in my course. It helps them understand why the field exists and sensitizes them to its fundamental concepts and the relationships these share. It also provides students with a conceptual macro-map to contextualize their synthe-

sizing efforts.

To capture its full import, I suggest that the sentence be read – and even reread – *slowly*. Seek first to identify the individual concepts that make up the question. Then reflect on how these components combine to create the larger question.

To assist, I've numbered and provided clarifying remarks for each organizational concept. Whereas these concepts appear in a **bold font**, remarks regarding each follow in an *italic font* within parentheses (*like this*). I've also underlined the primary verbs in the question to help maintain the storyline.

<u>Given</u>... (1) the **organizational goals** we envision, and **values** we embrace (*both are negotiated and subject to change/drift*), (2) the **core task and technology** that define our work (*these vary in clarity/ambiguity across organizations*), (3) **human motivation and behavior** (*humans vary in what motivates them, hence their behavior in organizations can be unpredictable, inordinately self-interested and **political***); and (4) the **environmental** (4a) **resources** (*How can we secure and sustain the flow of resources? What can we do with the resources we have?*), (4b) **constraints** (*What are our limitations? What prevents us from doing what we want/need to do?*), (4c) **demands** (*what is being asked of us?*) and (4d) **institutional expectations** (*how are we 'suppose' to be doing things?*) <u>we face</u>, <u>how can we</u> <u>restructure</u> our organization (*in the face of uncertainty, the 'how' question implies both **change** and a **culture of organizational inquiry and learning** to address this uncertainty – however weak/strong or unified/fragmented this culture may be*) <u>in ways</u> <u>that are</u> **healthy** (*i.e., promote human flourishing*), **productive** (*i.e., effective and efficient – regardless of how one chooses to define these*), and **adaptable** to change (*note, people, technology and environments change, hence the organization must also*)?

This is certainly a conceptually dense sentence. One must *slow-dance* with it. There are also multiple theorists and expansive sub-literatures associated with each concept. Nevertheless, the question has proven helpful to my students, particularly as a means of understanding why the abstract field of organizational theory defines the graduate program in educational leadership and what it is important. I offer it here as the fruit of my own theorizing, and as a preface to the description of the synthesizing process which follows.

Competence is both a reflection and function of ability. It is the capacity *to do* something effectively. In the context of leadership, *professional competence* may be defined as the ability of a leader to synthesize knowledge and skills from multiple domains so as to accurately read (analyze), interpret and successfully complete a given task. This is an abstract working definition. There are multiple ideas/concepts embedded in it. With the intent of clarifying, the observations which follow elaborate further on its meaning.

Broadly speaking, *synthesis* describes a cognitive process whereby an individual *combines* and *brings to bear* his/her knowledge, wisdom and skill to read, frame and address a practical task (Dewey, 1910, 1923). By necessity, it builds on the knowledge and experiences s/he brings to this task–however incomplete these may be. Synthesis is what craftsman does when he builds a set of ornate, wooden book cases. Synthesis is what an artisan does when she creates a decorative, colorful vase out of clay. It is what I'm doing now as I put these thoughts to paper. One may think of it as a cognitive and action-oriented bricolage, exemplified most notably in the 'flow' an expert exhibits as s/he is fully engaged in performing his/her craft (Cskiszentmihalyi, 1990: Weick, 2011). In the professions, skill in synthesizing distinguishes the novice from the expert (Groopman, 2007; Benner, 2001; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980).

In the context of the professions, *synthesis* describes the mental process whereby a professional combines his/her array of knowledge, experience and skill to address a given problem or task. As an example, consider the task of building a culture of learning in an organization. What specific knowledge domains and skills does the leader draw from *and* in what combination to address this task? *What* will he do? *How* will it be done? *When* will he do it?

Determining answers to these questions requires the leader to engage in the iterative act of synthesis. To be effective, he must not only draw from a wide array of knowledge (e.g., organizational theory, leadership theory, psychology and human development, communication, etc) but he must *strategically synthesize* bits and pieces of this knowledge to address the task at hand. This synthesis is predicated on his/her ability to accurately read, interpret and define both the task and its context. The effectiveness of his efforts to complete the task is a function of his ability to

skillfully and creatively synthesize the knowledge and skills to do this. In *crafting* a response, the leader synthesizes multiple knowledge and skill elements.

This synthesizing process, and the skill set associated with it, are common elements across the professions. Be it a school superintendent or principal, pastor, engineer, plumber, doctor, electrician, teacher, architect or master chef, the quality of response offered by a professional is a function of his ability to synthesize and configure multiple elements to address a specific problem of practice. Developing proficiency in this area defines to a great extent what it means to *be* an expert (Schon, 1987, 1983; Fredison, 1986).

This act of synthesis *and* its development likewise provides a useful conceptualization of the competent organizational whisperer. Because it provides an integrating point for the work of organizational leaders, I would suggest that it constitutes the *primary focus* of leadership training in organizational theory. Given this, the perennial questions before educators are indeed complex. How do we help aspiring leaders develop this competence? What might we do to help seasoned leaders refine this competence?

In addition to the central role it occupies in professional work, there is also a measure of artistry associated with this analyzing and synthesizing process(es) (Johnson, 2014a, 2014b). This artistry is rooted in judgments about what is needed, when, and in what degree. As such, it is at times elusive. It's not enough to have a sound theoretical or experiential knowledge of leadership and organizations. The art lies in crafting this strategy – knowing *how* to configure an appropriate and informed organizational strategy for culture building, knowing *what* elements of this knowledge are needed in *this* context, and *how* this is to be combined with other factors to enact thoughtful change. This artistry I would suggest is a function of the skill and creativity. As reflected in the work of Caesar, both synthesis and artistry define our efforts to address the challenges and uncertainties that prevent the organizations from becoming what its participants envision.

As with the *theorizing* participle described above,

the act of synthesis defines and informs these other participles (Dewey, 1923, 1910). Knowledge development requires synthesis. Reading an organization requires synthesis. Theorizing about organizations likewise requires synthesis. At the same time, synthesizing itself is informed by these same participles. Hence, it is difficult if not impossible to delineate with precision in our thinking where these four participles end and where they begin in our thought and actions. All, I suggest, can be inferred from Caesar's work with dogs. Further, all appear to be critical to becoming an accomplished organizational whisperer.
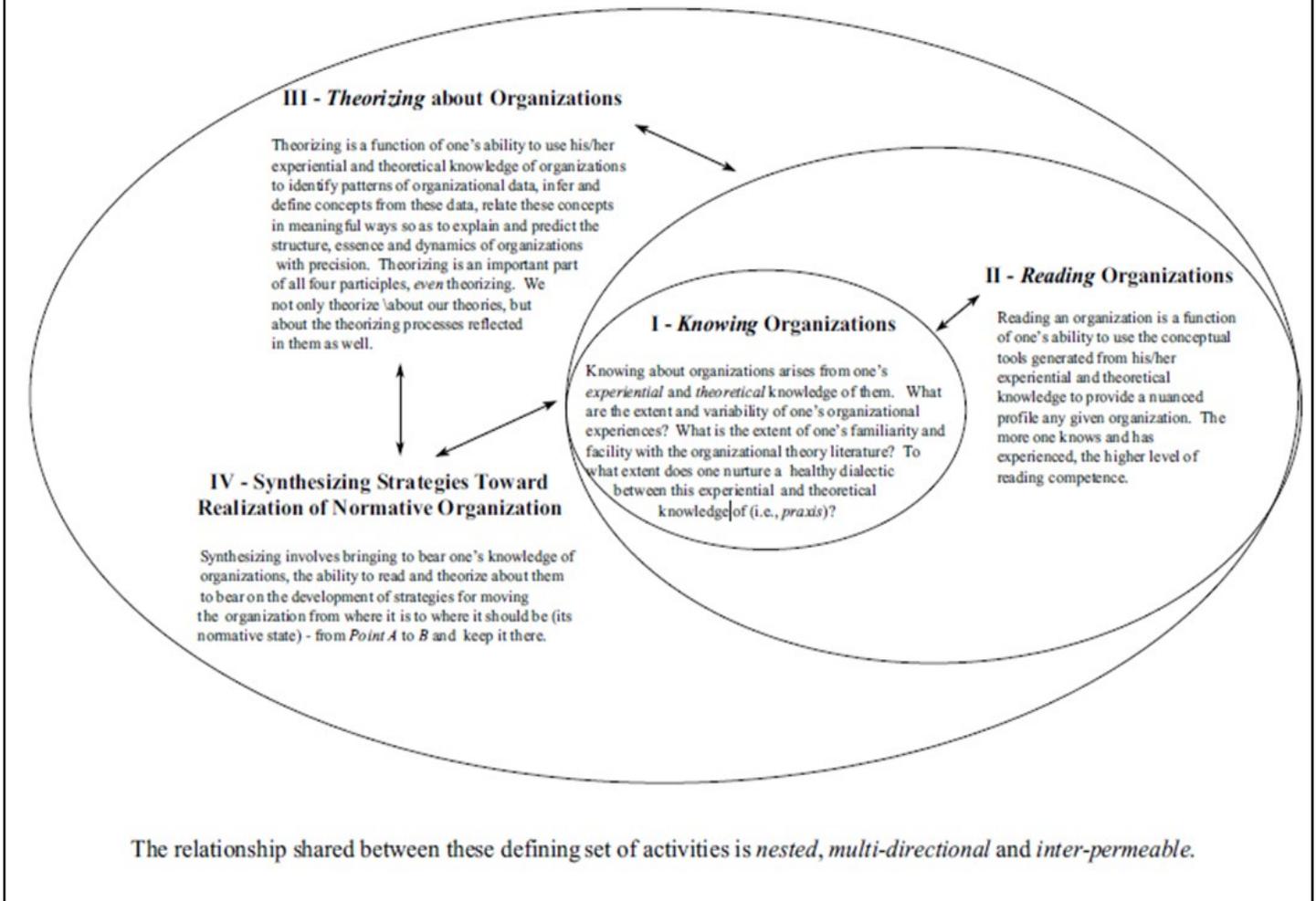
Concluding Thoughts

Though frequently pitched at a high level of abstraction and open to accusations of rambling, these reflections capture in part the evolution of my development as a scholar and teacher in the field of organizational theory. I've used the professional expertise exhibited by Caesar Milan as an analogue for this evolution. My thoughts have been structured around four defining activities inferred from his expertise. These have been presented as participles: *knowing* about organizations, *reading* organizations, *theorizing* about organizations and *synthesizing* these activities in pursuit of the normative organization.

While there is a discernable sequence to these four activities, their progression should not be construed as linear. I've presented them sequentially with the intent of conveying my thoughts more efficiently. To embrace a rigid linearity would mask the complexity of the relationship they share. It would also tempt theoretical neophytes to rush past the non-linear, iterative nature of the larger process captured by them.

Figure 2 - offers a descriptive summary of each of the four participles discussed above. It also depicts – if only in a general way – the relationships I see them sharing. Together they capture the nested, multi- directional yet inter-permeable nature of these relationships.

**Figure 2 - Knowing, Reading, Theorizing and Synthesizing Organizations:
The Larger Process and Relations Between the Participles**

III - *Theorizing* about Organizations

Theorizing is a function of one's ability to use his/her experiential and theoretical knowledge of organizations to identify patterns of organizational data, infer and define concepts from these data, relate these concepts in meaningful ways so as to explain and predict the structure, essence and dynamics of organizations with precision. Theorizing is an important part of all four participles, *even* theorizing. We not only theorize \about our theories, but about the theorizing processes reflected in them as well.

I - *Knowing* Organizations

Knowing about organizations arises from one's *experiential* and *theoretical* knowledge of them. What are the extent and variability of one's organizational experiences? What is the extent of one's familiarity and facility with the organizational theory literature? To what extent does one nurture a healthy dialectic between this experiential and theoretical knowledge of (i.e., *praxis*)?

II - *Reading* Organizations

Reading an organization is a function of one's ability to use the conceptual tools generated from his/her experiential and theoretical knowledge to provide a nuanced profile any given organization. The more one knows and has experienced, the higher level of reading competence.

IV - Synthesizing Strategies Toward Realization of Normative Organization

Synthesizing involves bringing to bear one's knowledge of organizations, the ability to read and theorize about them to bear on the development of strategies for moving the organization from where it is to where it should be (its normative state) - from *Point A* to *B* and keep it there.

The relationship shared between these defining set of activities is *nested, multi-directional* and *inter-permeable*.

Thinking is indeed a complex process. Many have sought to describe it, some more validly than others. Yet a full understanding of it remains elusive. The theories of cognition currently in play fall short of describing what it actually is in all of its requisite richness and precision. Hence there is slippage, and thus a discrepancy between the subject of our description and our actual descriptions of it. So it is with Figure 2. It represents an initial effort to theorize about the activities associated with one's competence as an organizational whisperer and the relations these activities share.

My thoughts here are also intended to convey the relation between one's thinking, thoughts and actions. Given that a leader's actions spring from the quality of his thoughts, the *quality* of our thinking is *as important* as the quality of our thoughts. Much of our thinking involves theorizing. Ques-

tionable actions spring from questionable thinking. Sound thinking and theorizing increase the probability that the actions which follow will be of equal quality. Theorizing involves both analysis (*pulling apart or separating data*) and synthesis (*bringing data that has been culled from the whole together data culled from the* context) in the move toward the resolution of a perceived problem or challenge (Dewey, 1910, 1923; Weick, 1995b, 1989).

As for potential lines of inquiry that follow from my dance with the organizational theory through the years, there are too many to list here. Only a few are identified, and these with minimal description. Consistent with the larger structure of my thoughts, one set of ideas for each of the four participles above will be provided. Together these define much of my past and current research interests.

There is a need for *knowledge development* in regards to educational organizations, and our knowing about them. Much like different breeds of dogs, these types of organizations share many common features. At the same time, however, they have a defining set of distinguishing features. Little has been written in this general area and much is erroneously assumed in our field as a result (Johnson, 2007, 2009).

There is likewise a need to examine in greater detail and articulate with greater precision the skills and know-how of *reading* an organization. Bolman & Deal and others have been helpful in this regard, and many have yielded to them as the final word on the topic (e.g., Fairhurst & Star,1996). But we still don't understand this set of skills sufficiently, particularly in the field of educational leadership. What knowledge and what skills are needed to become an effective reader of organizations? How can this be taught? There remains more to be learned about this complex topic.

In the area of *theorizing*, there is a need to further explore the conceptual link between the core task of schools and the requisite structures that follow from this. How might we better align the organizational structure of schools in ways that are more consistent with the certainties and ambiguities of the core task and its technology? Coupled with this is the relationship these share with the institutional environment of schools and the extent to which this environment dictates – often in excess – the structures that exist and are proposed. The increased move of the entire education sector toward market forces also creates demands on this critical relationship that should also be explored.

While I have done some initial explorations of the topic in the field of educational leadership (Johnson, 2014a, 2014b), more work is needed understanding and explicating the *synthesizing* process that lies at the heart of professional competence. In context of educating in the professions and leadership preparation, how can we in educational leadership make greater use our collective knowledge of organizations to inform the synthesizing process so integral to decision making and problem solving? How might we increase the curricular validity of graduate programs in ways that better mirror the cognitive demands of synthesis and the artistry associated with it?

Perhaps the most compelling example of Caesar Milan's expertise is personified in the rehabilitated American Pit Bull Terrier affectionately known as Daddy. His work with this particular dog embodies much of what I've attempted to convey here. Defined by his laid-back temperament, love of people, compatibility with other canines, and empathetic capacity, Daddy appeared in numerous episodes. By the end of the show's run, he was an integral part of the series. Caesar used his calm demeanor to rehabilitate other dogs and their owners, frequently describing Daddy as his *right-hand man*. Caesar claimed that Daddy never displayed aggressiveness nor any other negative behavior. Until his death in 2010, this 16 year- old dog served as role model for a breed often associated with aggressive behavior.

And so, with Caesar Milan as an example, my quest to become an ever proficient organizational whisperer continues. This quest is a journey that has taken me on a long and winding path punctuated by occasional roadblocks. My progression has been both formative and enabling. Though the final destination remains elusive, I have learned much. Yet there is still more to learn. I commit to helping students do the same.

As for you, the reader, it is my hope that the reflections offered here in some way provide a thought, angle or way of seeing that proves generative in your trek through this powerful body of knowledge and quest for expertise. Learning and knowledge development are intensely personal. But as noted above, in the end, they are also community endeavors. It is in this spirit of community that I offer these thoughts.

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[1]**For those unfamiliar with the series and its star, *The Dog Whisperer* is a reality show that ran in the United States from 2004-2012. It revolves around Caesar Milan and his remarkable dog training/rehabilitation abilities. Throughout the series, Caesar works with a variety of breeds and their owners to address the most challenging of issues. Individual episodes feature canines who have developed habits or patterns of behavior that make them difficult to train (e.g., ignoring commands, jumping, rough play, etc.), dangerous (e.g., biting, anti-social or aggressive behavior with humans and other dogs, etc.) or destructive (e.g., destruction of property, threats to human life and other dogs). It also features his rehabilitative work with dogs that have been abused and abandoned. The typical show is 50 minutes in length and documents Caesar interaction with 2-3 dogs and their owners. The reader is encouraged to view a single episode or segment of an episode to capture the conceptual flavor of the show's metaphorical use here. Many episodes can be found online and are easily accessible for viewing. Search: *Caesar Milan* or *The Dog Whisperer.***

[2]**In research design and methods terms, this would be an example of a non participant-observation design, complete with inductively coded data and thematic inference.**

[3]**The word praxisioner here is intentional. I use it to describe that individual who deliberately places his experiential and theoretical learning in conversation so as to improve both thinking and doing. I emphasize the need for students to develop the habit of consciously attending to this dialectic. This conceptualization reflects my desire to move beyond what I see as the debilitating distinction between theory and practice found in much of our collective discourse .**