

Overt and Covert Maladministration, Passive Evil, and Insecurity in Educational Organizations:
A Habermasian Perspective

Précis of paper presented at the CASEA/CCEAM Conference, University of New Brunswick,
Fredericton, NB, Canada June 6-10, 2014.

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In terms of serious cases of maladministration, educational leaders, thankfully, are not in the same league as those in some other sectors (Pardini, 2004). But it is still shocking what can go on in educational organizations. Take, for example, the superintendent who defrauded a school district in New York State of two millions dollars (Vitello, 2006). Then there are the cases of leaders sexually assaulting members of their educational communities, such as a university football coach who abused at-risk youths, while senior administrators allegedly turned a blind eye (Chappell, 2012; O'Keefe, 2013). Studies have also revealed school administrators regularly mistreating educators (see Blase & Blase, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2010; de Wet, 2010). While, cyberbullying has arrived on the scene (Cassidy, Faucher & Jackson, 2013) and there is growing concern about academic bullying and mobbing (Twale & De Luca, 2008; Westhues, 2004).

In some of these cases, the perpetrators were, for a time, able to conceal their misdeeds. In others, organizational members (including administrators) who were aware of the problems remained passive. Regardless of who knew what and how they responded, all cases of maladministration jeopardize the security of organizational members. In most jurisdictions, protective and recourse mechanisms have been put in place to make workplaces safer. Yet, many environments can still be threatening (Blase & Blase, 2010; de Wet, 2010) and can have profound, negative effects on those who work in them.

This paper picks up these themes, framing them in light of Samier's (2008) article "The Problem of Passive Evil in Educational Administration: Moral Implications of Doing Nothing." Samier's contention was 'passive evil' serves as a supporting mechanism for maladministration. She called for conceptual frameworks to illuminate this problem and help educators reclaim their moral agency, indicating Critical Theory held promise (Samier, 2008). I respond to Samier's call, drawing on Habermas' (1970, 1984, 1989, 1990) respected models of social action and ethics and on the literature on toxic leadership and leader derailment. Based on these two bodies of literature, I frame maladministration and 'passive evil' in educational organizations as dysfunctional phenomena stemming from the "strategic action" (Habermas, 1984, p. 333) practiced by sad, mad or bad leaders (Furnham, 2010).

Such leaders rely on various forms of "discursive closure" (Deetz, 1992, p. 187) to 'manage' organizational members in light of their maladministration. These include disqualification, naturalization, neutralization, topic avoidance, subjectification of experience, meaning denial and plausible deniability, legitimation and pacification. The overt, covert and

subconscious tactics used to promote discursive closures systematically distort organizational members' sense-making and relationships and serve to conceal the maladministration or draw followers into it or promote moral passivity in the face of it.

In light of these tactics, organizational members who in other circumstances would take action find reasons for conforming or remaining passive. At conscious, semi-conscious and unconscious levels they find moral loopholes (Bandura, 1990), to rationalize away their responsibility (Samier, 2008). Some of these are defensive routines aimed at self-preservation and personal security, such as: avoidance (e.g., making oneself 'too busy'); parroting the euphemistic labeling that has given the bad behaviour a technical, less emotional, or more legitimate sounding name (e.g., 'disciplinary action'); couching a non- or partial response as a 'pragmatic' solution; framing the behaviour in a relative way (e.g., 'it could be worse'); displacing the responsibility for action onto other actors; and, making a 'full retreat' (e.g., leaving the organization). Leaders who become aware of maladministration in their organizations may also remain morally passive. This amplifies the uncertainty and insecurity for subordinates, contributing to a pathologically self-defensive sub-culture in which moral passivity represents "an acceptable way to see the world" (Furnham, 2010, p. 7).

To prevent or unmask maladministration and recuperate moral agency in workplaces the toxic leadership literature provides guidance on how organizational members can 'survive' their exposure to sad, mad and bad leaders. It also argues such leaders can be identified and 'managed' through more effective human resource practices (e.g., selection, performance management, etc.) and governance processes (e.g., oversight, accountability, recourse, etc.). A Habermasian perspective highlights the importance of targeting the tactics of discursive closure used by sad, mad and bad leaders and working to (re)establish in organizations a healthy balance of communicative and strategic action, including avenues for open and authentic 'discourse' (Moreno-Riaño, 2001). Both perspectives argue for the democratization of organizational processes to ward-off the corrupting influence of putting too much discretionary power in the hands of leaders and to induce in organizational members a sense of autonomy and solidarity. Finally, the Habermasian perspective encourages a (re)humanization of the culture of educational organizations. The goal here is to (re)generate the conditions where organizational members can experience the genuine sense of reciprocity, moral obligation and goodwill needed to sustain a positive and active ethical climate.

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