Mythodology for Interpretive Leadership Scholarship

In the Modern era, social science research has dominated leadership scholarship; however, the idea of leadership has been part of the human conversation since before Antiquity and was studied by philosophers for the greater part of human history. This paper explores how Existential Phenomenology utilized as an interpretive approach, rather than a method, may open up understanding for leadership scholarship. Arnett (2007) describes interpretive engagement as questioning the unknown, reviewing the text in an in-depth manner, and revealing interest that propels inquiry and continues the conversation (p. 33). By first recognizing Sartre’s conception of engaged literature, Barnes, an American Existentialist, provides insight for a new horizon of doing interpretive research, posited here as mythodology, that emerges from her text *Hippolytus of Drama and Myth* (1960) and article “Myth and Human Experience” (1955). These works provide ground for an Existential Phenomenological approach to doing research with the aim of garnering understanding of the human condition that goes back to the Ancient Dramatists. Barnes observes the Greek Dramatists such as Euripides are relevant to the everydayness of contemporary life because the “characters move in a world of shifting values where even the central issues are not clear” (1960, p. 71). In a Postmodern moment of narrative and virtue contention (Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2008), her observation of shifting values and lack of centralization is particularly relevant in negotiating what it means to be-in-the-world. This approach provides significant implications for doing research in contemporary leadership studies.

Barnes argues that in these Classical works, tragedy emerges from Existential choices characters make rather than from some irrational force from “the meddling gods” (Barnes, 1974), which is in bad faith. Rather than the gods, social life comes into play, which does not determine,
but situates a person’s being-in-the-world. Moreover, her idea of ‘tragicomedy’ blends the tragic and comedic—a search for a different way of being combined with temporal understanding and reminder that real life often interrupts and changes preconceived plans. Myths have long been part of the human experience, passed on from generation to generation through language that conveys important lessons and a ‘community of memory’ (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) of a culture’s existence. While certainly far from scientific, myths offer salient means for understanding human experience that quantitative data cannot provide. In the spirit of interpretive research, Barnes posits that myths respond to questions that emerge in historical moments, which opens more questions rather than provides answers.

While a few scholars have proposed studying leadership from a philosophical perspective (Ciulla, 2006; 2008; Ladkin, 2010; Lawler, 2005), philosophy of leadership scholarship has yet to be explicitly identified or wholly accepted by the community. In the field communication, interpretive research in philosophy of communication has surged alongside the social science perspective, which offers balanced theoretical insight and informs the entire community of scholars. The discipline of leadership may learn from communication to move toward accepting a plurality of approaches for doing research and avoid the paradigm wars that occurred in the field of management.

This essay begins with an introduction to interpretive research as a mode of inquiry from the field of philosophy of communication (Arnett, 2007, 2010), which opens the discussion of the work of Barnes (1974) who extends interpretive to the realm of Existential Phenomenology with Sartre’s idea of engaged literature. The essay utilizes the work of Barnes (1955; 1959; 1960) to argue for a new understanding of mythodology that enlarges the horizon for interpretive scholarship with particular implications for leadership studies. Thus, what follows the
contribution by Barnes is a discussion of interpretive research in organizational and leadership scholarship with specific reference to phenomenological approaches in organizational research. The essay ends with the goal of moving this approach into the realm of leadership studies, which also responds to Ciulla’s (2006) call for a balanced research conducted in the social sciences and the humanities. This essay argues that mythodology provides a meeting of horizons between the past and present, which opens up understanding for the future.

**Engaged Literature as an Interpretive Approach**

Ethnographic and observation analysis are often considered as interpretive approaches to doing qualitative research; however, the hermeneutic approach, and specifically hermeneutic phenomenology also needs to be considered for opening understanding of the human condition. To begin, Arnett (2010) relies on the work of Ricoeur (1984) to demonstrate philosophy of communication in action as a scholarly story that contains elements of drama, emplotment, main characters, and attentiveness to historicity (p. 59). Rhetorical interruption takes place within drama that demands response to questions of existence—responses that offer meaning rather than information (p. 60). Additionally, Arnett proposes that philosophy of communication is not a methodology—a research approach that emerged in the work of Descartes (1637). Philosophy of communication aims at understanding rather than definitive truth. The ideas of Sartre and Barnes related to literature and myth take up aspects of Arnett’s engagement with Ricoeur’s idea of story to define Philosophy of communication that extends the horizon of interpretive scholarship with the idea of mythodology.

While Arnett relies on Ricoeur for a philosophical frame of philosophy of communication, Barnes’s interpretation of Sartre’s engaged literature may also provide a fruitful contribution to doing interpretive scholarship within the framework of Existential
Phenomenology. Ricoeur, like Barnes, works within Existentialism to discuss the relationship of phenomenology and text (1991); however, Sartre and Barnes assert that liberating ideals of Existential Phenomenology need to be engaged in scholarship. Sartre’s own literature, which was awarded the Nobel Prize, is an excellent example of engaged literature; however, he ultimately concludes that literature does not do enough to promote liberation, which spurs his turn toward Marxism, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) and his more active political participation.

Barnes notes that Sartre presented the idea of engaged literature in the first issue of *Les Temps moderns* (1945) and developed the idea further in *What is Literature?* (1947). Engaged literature involves writing for a public by presenting opportunities for liberating change. However, Sartre makes a staunch caution that engaged literature is not propaganda, but a response to the demands of questions that emerge in historical moments. Sartre believed that writers ought to engage their work with an obligation to society. Barnes writes, “But while he insisted that the writer must be free as a writer, Sartre argued with literature, which derives from man’s freedom, must always be addressed to the cause of human freedom” (1974, p. 67). Sartre recognized the limitation of the ideas in philosophical works, including his own, to reach the masses, and posited that literature and plays have a much broader reach. As such, Sartre privileged literature, or philosophy in literature, for its opportunity to inspire society, which in turn, becomes engaged literature.

Barnes observes that since its beginnings, Existentialism “has tended to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the literary” noting the works of Kierkegaard who “was concerned with existential anguish and despair as they are felt in concrete situations and with the uniqueness of any lived situation” (1974, p. 68). Moreover, she exclaims, “all of this cried out for the necessity of presenting not one totalizing view of reality, but many partial experiences of
the real. What better suited for this purpose than imaginative literature?” (p. 68). Engaged literature does not serve to propagandize the way people ought to live, but explore possibilities for people to contemplate possibilities of their choice of being and relation with the world. Engaged literature presupposes that people have Existential freedom to choose and are in no way denigrated to a mindless herd.

In addition to the liberating possibilities of engaged literature, Barnes observes that Sartre also recognized the importance of imagination in human experience that may be fully expressed in engaged literature. Imagination for Sartre, is “a mode of consciousness and an essential structure of consciousness” (Barnes, 1974, p. 68). Perception concerns always and solely with the real—it is the consciousness of; whereas, imagination “introduces the unreal” (p. 69). Barnes makes an important conclusion that “without the possibility of imagining—i.e., creating the unreal—man would be wholly engulfed, swallowed up in the real” (p. 69). Thus, perception offers quantitative facticity and imagination qualitative possibility. However, Sartre cautions that imagination should not be equated to fanciful escape from or falsification of reality, which to him are practices of bad faith. For engaged literature, the opposite occurs where “a definite attitude toward the real world is postulated and the real world is affected” (p. 71). A fictional character becomes part of readers’ experience of the real world and therefore modifies their experience in the world.

Experienced uniquely by others who have their own point-of-view, engaged literature puts the familiar real into question by holding up an imaginary world for us to contemplate. Engaged literature goes beyond knowing into the realm of experiencing in light of situations experienced by characters in a story. Through engaged literature, a viewer or reader participates in these experiences that opens one’s experience, while paradoxically experiences a sense of distance with the realization of alterity, or a “multiplicity of countenances”. (Barnes, 1974, p. 72).
Thus, engaged literature provides both an opening up of an individual’s being-in-the-world and respect for another’s being-in-the-world, which is shared in literature and reality, in what Sartre calls a literature of situations. Primary for Sartre is to go beyond being to what people make of their situations in what they choose to do, which thereby gives signification and meaning to life. Engaged literature maintains an Existential hope that people will emerge from bad faith in avoiding their responsibilities in life and find the courage to engage their freedom.

**Literature of Situations**

Barnes provides an extensive explication of Sartre’s literature of situations in her book *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* (1959). Here she demonstrates the stark contrast between Existentialist writers whose focus is human experience *within a situation* and psychological writers whose focus is human experience *within a character*. According to Sartre, the rise of the psychological approach occurred between the two world wars. Both Sartre and Camus are critical of this approach because it disregards the ability of characters to act as free individuals. For Sartre, this is a false view of the human being—people are not ready-made characters “formed by heredity and environmental pressures and developing in accordance with strict psychological laws” (Barnes, 1959, p. 11). Rather than by some external force, people determine their own attitudes with decisions of how to interpret the world around them. Moreover, Barnes asserts that people are free at any time to make new choices, to choose a fresh way of living out of existence, and to remake “so-called nature” (p. 11). The theater of character engages inevitable action, whereas the theater of situations engages free decision. Likewise, the theater of situations involves human possibilities rather than seeing how a present act was determined by the past (p. 11).
In addition to presenting a point of view of human situations, rather than human nature, engaged literature also works within myths and a literature of praxis. Myths engage imagination discussed earlier and praxis inspires liberating action. The nonrealistic drama of engaged literature deals with concrete problems of the historical moment to which it was written. By illuminating characters in the process of discovering or remaking basic choices for themselves by confronting their existential freedom, they demonstrate that possibilities to choose existence often occur in times of great circumstance (Barnes, 1959, p. 17), or defining moments (Badaracco, 1997). These moments emerge as big or trivial, either of which interrupts and puts being into question (Barnes, 1959, p. 32). Hence, myths convey the human condition as a theater of situations, which is unpredictable, rather than a human nature with a predictable internal essence possessed in character. This unpredictability in human experience is “why any attempt to find a definite self which one can know, understand, and use as a guide for future conduct is doomed to frustration” (p. 33). Myths are much more than mere stories—they are engaged literature that illuminate life in a theater of situations, which open up possibilities for liberating human freedom.

Interpretive scholarship recognizes the limitation of quantitative work and embraces the idea of temporal truths. Engaged literature communicates possibilities of the human condition rather than attempting to define what the human condition is. Since for the Existentialists human existence constantly becomes, defining who one is, is impossible. Engaged literature makes a contribution to interpretive scholarship by propelling inquiry toward new possibilities that uplifts human freedom. Barnes argues that engaged literature did not originate in Sartre and Camus, or even Kierkegaard, but in Ancient Greek myths, such as those of Sophocles and Euripides. The philosophical ideas of the Ancient writers, like the Existentialist writers, portrayed their
philosophy through myth. Even more important is Sartre’s assertion that these ideas may only be conveyed in the form of myth for us to understand them.

**Mythodology: Extending the Horizon of Interpretive Scholarship**

Barnes asserts that myths and reinterpreting myths offer a challenge to provide new understandings of the human condition. In *Hippolytus in Drama and Myth* (1960), following Donald Sutherland’s new translation of “The Hippolytus of Euripides” (original 428 B.C.E.), Barnes offers an interpretive account of this play in “The Hippolytus of Drama and Myth” that discusses specific elements of the play and of myth in general accounting for the manner in which Euripides developed the play. Barnes is interested in Euripides because he was the first to portray “the full drama of the mystery of the human person” (p. 71). At play in Euripides’ work is conflict within the individual human person and the symbolic cultural underpinnings in which the character is uniquely situated. By positioning the drama in this manner, Euripides employs satire to challenge, on moral ground, the cultural norm of worshiping the Olympians. Barnes observes that this is an Existentialist idea of bad faith found in Euripides and numerous other Classics where “among the many functions performed by the gods for the early Greeks, at least one was the serving as an object onto which humans might ‘project’ their own emotional motivations” (p. 79). As follows, in a form of bad faith,

> The Greeks attributed to external gods both overpowering impulses which seemed at times to force them to behave in ways which later reflection pronounced foreign to their basic attitudes, and, on the other hand, the inward voice which seemed to come from a distance and dictate counsel which was unwelcoming. The present tendency to make subconscious motivations wholly autonomous and in a sense external to the conscious ego is not after all so very different. (p. 79)

Thus, Barnes asserts that what may at first appear as a play reflecting the dictates over human behavior by the gods, is really, according to Euripides, conflict among people believing in different principles.
To negotiate this being-in-the-world-with-others, Barnes believes that Euripides calls for responsibility in one’s choices by becoming conscious of the background of emotional and cultural influences. Submitting to these forces brings about madness and destruction in Euripides’ play, but cutting oneself off “at the roots, so to speak, results in sterility, emotional starvation, the neurotic lack of any real contact with humanity” (p. 80). Consequently, the greatest aspect of the drama, she argues, is granting careful analysis of the situation and point of view for each of the protagonists, which makes passing judgment on them of right or wrong impossible (p. 82). In analysis of this myth, Barnes shows the uniqueness of each character’s human history and existence, which calls for understanding in their point of view that can never be objectively determined and whose future behavior cannot be predicted.

Barnes comments on Euripides’ keen ability to show that no one person is to blame for the tragedy that occurs in the play because responsibility is interwoven among the characters; “any one of the participants might have prevented the tragedy if he had chosen to act differently” (p. 89). Hence, succumbing to bad faith in determinism rather than taking responsibility leads to tragedy. Sartre makes a parallel Existential claim for meaninglessness in human life when lived in bad faith. Barnes observes that Nietzsche made a similar assertion regarding the creation of moral systems to justify one’s beliefs and behaviors (p. 81). Moreover, Barnes argues that this sort of bad faith is narcissistic because it prevents characters from understanding or sympathizing with one another—the characters’ behavior may be read as unhappily neurotic due to their preoccupation with their own maladjustments and therefore incapable of forming normal human relationships. Arnett (1997) makes a comparable observation for contemporary times with his idea of ‘therapeutic communication’ where focus on the self blinds awareness of one’s place within a social fabric. Barnes observes in the play that when the characters lack wisdom
stemming from introspection and relationships with others, they can only find recourse in predestination or curse.

**Myths and Historical Moments**

In addition to her commentary on the drama of “The Hippolytus of Euripides,” Barnes remarks on a larger context of the story’s place within the myth to which Euripides based his ideas in the play. She observes that fragments of themes from an earlier epic poem can be identified in Euripides’ work. Also, his characters have been portrayed in other plays in varying roles and contexts. Euripides carefully assessed these accounts and choose to adopt or discard certain conclusions to reflect the beliefs of his historical moment—particularly criticism of the Olympians. Euripides tacitly takes such action knowing his audience may have affinity to the sacred hero and gods (Barnes, 1960, p. 105). Furthermore, he incorporates changing cultural phenomenon, such as an account of the Amazons, who one of the main characters, Hippolyta is claimed to be. Barnes observes that themes, symbolism, and characters blend through the interaction of different cultures, which is evident in Euripides’ play. While names of characters may be found in plays throughout history, their meaning varies according to the values of a particular historical moment. Euripides thus recognizes the importance of history while at the same time looks for new horizons to which future writers will engage his work in a similar fashion. Seeking authorial intent of Euripides is impossible because the contemporary reader misses the enthymematic meaning of his Ancient audience; in myths, however, traces of common human existence can be found that open understanding of the human condition. Hence, history is not linear, but, in Barnes’s words, “the wheel has come full circle” (p. 123).

**Myth and Human Experience**
While Barnes’s essay, “Myth and Human Experience” (1955) was written prior to her analysis of “The Hippolytus” (1960), it is more fitting to review it following the earlier discussion because she elaborates on the role of myth in human experience. She begins the essay with the following statement:

Myth, so long as it is known by anyone remains a living thing. This is because myths in one way or another comprise all of the most fundamental of man’s experience and so stand as a constant challenge to us—suggesting human meanings but never fully. (1955, p. 121)

Specifically, Barnes investigates underlying meaning found in Greek myth and the role of myth in general in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915). She identifies the function of myth for human experience, which she differentiates from the Platonist universal ideal; however, she recognizes that the universal plays a role as a matter of comparison to actual experience in spite of how Sartre may despise it.

Barnes finds Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theory quite helpful in understanding the relationship of the universal and particular. She writes,

According to Schopenhauer the Platonic Ideas are the forms and types and laws, the skeletal structure, so to speak, through which the Will manifests itself. Art is the objective embodiment of these Ideas, a capturing of the eternal forms, a concretization of them in such a way that we can hold them up for observation and see them in action. (1955, p. 121).

Myth is not merely a fictitious story or an account of the past, but refers to a larger presence that is alive in lived actuality and significant to people even when they no longer *believe* in the myth literally. This is so because myths depict “fundamental emotional situations possible for human beings,” which are intrinsically human and offer insight to which people may learn about their human condition “by way of suggestion only and never with clearly delineated solution” (p. 122). Thus, myths point to universal ideals that transcend historicality; however, myths are interpreted by uniquely situated individuals.
Barnes posits that there is no correct interpretation of myths, for if so, the mysteries of human existence would be solved. Even when certain belief systems are not longer held by their audiences, myths continue to become reinterpreted to respond to questions in unique historical moments. Barnes observes a multitude of those who reinterpret myths from Romantic poets to contemporary psychologists (e.g. Oedipus stories) and existentialists. Barnes references Being and Nothingness (1943) where Sartre identifies how myths are also referenced by scientists who describe the pursuit of knowledge as a ‘hunt’. A longer portion of Sartre’s original quote is provided here for additional explication.

Every investigation implies the idea of nudity which one brings out into the open by clearing away the obstacles which cover it, just as Actaeon clears away the branches so that he can have a better view of Diana at her bath. More than this, knowledge is a hunt. Bacon called it the hunt of Pan. The scientist is the hunter who surprises a while nudity and who violates by looking at it. Thus the totality of these images reveals something which we shall call the Actaeon complex. By taking the idea of the hunt as a guiding thread, we shall discover another symbol of appropriation, perhaps still more primitive: a person hunts for the sake of eating. To know is to devour with the eyes. (pp. 738–739)

Sartre contrasts this consumption, digestion, or assimilation of knowledge with art, which is an act of creating. Wordsworth shares a similar observation in his poem “The Tables Turned” where he states, “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Our meddling intellect Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—We murder to dissect.” (Line 25, 1798). Moreover, for Sartre, as well as other Existentialists, particularly Merleau-Ponty, the body cannot be severed in the pursuit of knowledge; one’s being-in-the-world changes when knowledge is digested. The Existentialist is not averse to the pursuit of knowledge, but to espousal of the Cartesian mind body split.

Barnes (1955) points to Kafka’s The Metamorphosis (1915), which epitomizes the transformation of one’s being-in-the-world while also taking up a common theme in Greek mythology of a human turned into an animal. She observes that Kafka embraces elements of
myth by communicating on multiple levels qualities and complexities of human experience—
“something that would be lost if abstracted into a flat statement” (1955, p. 123). While many
different meanings may be derived from this work, relevant to this discussion is the inability for
the main character, Gregor, to act anything other than what a cockroach, which he was
transformed into, could do. This is a reflection of how “he had been smugly content with
conventional human morality” (Barnes, p. 125). He was not a bad person; on the contrary, he
may be aptly described as a do-gooder. However, he is guilty, Barnes observes, of being Self-
centered because he acts in this manner unreflectively—not realizing that in actuality he is
stifling those around him along with himself.

Barnes illuminates the difficulties in human communication that emerge in The
Metamorphosis (1915). Gregor’s self-centeredness is reflected in his lack of communication with
others, even his family. In his state as a cockroach, he wants to express himself, but is always
misunderstood. Barnes recognizes Kafka’s symbolism, taken to the extreme, of the feeling that
all people experience—communication is not perfect. Transforming into a cockroach is certainly
a horrible thing, but perhaps most horrifying is the removal of his ability to communicate—the
ability that makes us most human. Without communication, Barnes observes, is the experience of
“hope deferred”—of frustration and meaninglessness in one’s existence, which in Greek myths is
illustrated in the torments of Hades (p. 126). The Existential calls us to embrace our human
condition to choose—to go beyond living a passive bug’s life and consciously realize or be
awakened to (p. 126), our ability to be present to ourselves and others. As such, research
regarding the human experience cannot be simply likened to entomology, or other nonhuman
study. A sole focus on human nature, in both living life and doing research in both regards is,
from an Existentialist perceptive, in bad faith—either living a meaningless life, or digesting the
subject of study. However, Barnes does not fall into the general negativity of other Existentialists and concludes her essay in a more positive light.

**Tragicomedy in Human Experience**

She recognizes that without a meta-narrative to dictate, the human condition may be left in a state of anxiety, absurdity, nausea, and guilt—common Existentialist themes. These feelings along with suffering are elements of the human condition to which Barnes takes seriously rather than trying to disassociate herself. She realizes, akin to Frankl (1946) that these feelings are necessary to find meaning in life, which she articulates in the introduction to Schopenhauer’s *The Pessimist’s Handbook* (1964). Barnes moves Existentialism into a more positive light without adopting the optimism of inevitable progress from the Enlightenment; rather, “suffering and anguish are essential facts of human existence” (p. ix)—an evasion of this is in bad faith of one’s existence. Conversely, good faith is having the courage to embrace suffering in varying ways to find meaning and purpose in life. Existential hope is not looking at the bright side of life. Existential hope is meeting life’s existential moments rather than falling into bad faith despair allowing the serious world to determine existence. In the translator’s preface, Saunders writes that in Schopenhauer’s view of life as tragedy people “can at least be heroes and face life with courage” (p. xlvii–xlviii). Additionally, the person who complains of misfortune needs to realize that sorrow is akin to all.

Whereas Schopenhauer views life as an oscillation between pain and boredom, Barnes (1964) offers an alternative view in tragicomedy where these states pass into one another. The irony in these extremes come together when the goal a person attains is never quite the same as the one projected (p. 125). She writes:

> By his acts he inscribes himself in a world which he can never fully control, which distorts and disappoints his projects, which he cannot comprehend any more than he can
understand himself. Each person is a self-creation, but chance furnishes most of the material out of which he must make himself. In short, man is absurd, but he does not always find his situation laughable. (p. 125)

For Barnes, tragedy is a revolt, action in pursuit or aspiration of making things different and as a consequence makes life significant and purposeful. Tragedy affirms life. Comedy returns life to a comfortable norm and open up temporal clarity of life. Comedy reminds us that our aspirations are not entirely in our control. Barnes argues that Euripides’ work is true tragicomedy. In his works she finds the very essence of tragicomedy where, “we are left with ambivalent feelings, aware that we cannot quite sum it all up, either intellectually or emotionally, in any clear statement or attitude” (p. 131). This essay argues that the same is true for interpretive research.

This essay seeks to illuminate the idea of Existential hope in Barnes’s works that grounds human experience thereby reorienting one’s being-in-the-world to respond to existence. So too is the intention of interpretive scholarship in constructive hermeneutics. The idea of mythodology seeks to illuminate the intimate Existential relationship between being and understanding the human condition in living and learning. Unlike other forms of research that seek final answers, interpretive scholarship, like myths of tragicomedy, reveals “that when all has been said on all sides, the question remains…” (Barnes, 1964, p. 131). Likewise, interpretive scholarship recognizes the importance of historicity, where perennial questions emerge seeking clarity in the midst of historical moments and offering temporal understanding without affirmative answers (Arnett, Arneson, and Holba, 2008). The idea of mythodology embraces hope and possibility in myths to propel public consciousness toward community for others (Arnett, 2010b). Arnett observes that a call from the 1960s counterculture for community in response to an imbalance of laden individualism (Bellah, 1975/1992) was ignored. Perhaps this wisdom was not ignored, but delayed for this historical moment. Barnes, who wrote during that
time of disruption, provides guidance and responsiveness for emergent questions in leadership studies.

**Mythodology in Organizational, Communication, and Leadership Studies**

This essay began with the broad approach of interpretive inquiry in philosophy of communication and then presented Sartre’s engaged literature followed by Barnes’s idea of myth to extend the horizon of the interaction between text and being. The following brings to light emerging discussion and debate in doing interpretive research in organizational and communication studies, and proposes mythodology as an appropriate approach for leadership scholarship.

**Organizational Studies**

While social science has been a dominate research approach in organizational studies, several scholars have argued for a more balanced approach by valuing interpretive inquiry. Ian Mitroff has been publishing within the field of organizational studies since the 1960s. His early works question the objectivity in doing empirical research (1972; 1974; 1975; 1976; 1980; Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980). In a recent article, Alpaslan, Babb, Green, and Mitroff (2006) present an “inquiry on inquiry”. They observe that

The field of organizational science constantly operates under the influence of a positivistic point of view, in which only what can be observed, measured, and quantified is considered real. This perspective assumes that the purpose of language is to accurately reflect reality. In contrast, Sandy, Murat, and Ian argued that ‘organizational science is an inherently rhetorical process,’ and theories and methods are continuously created and developed through the use of the four master tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Most simply, our own constructed language provides the basis for research. The language we use to describe an organizational situation affects how we understand that situation. These professors do not believe we can ever assume that language is an accurate reflection of reality. (p. 8)

The authors recognize that interpretive inquiry has not achieved equal acclamation of empirical study, and perhaps engaging in interpretive inquiry is somewhat of a risk. However, Alpaslan, in
this essay, argues that doing unconventional, and perhaps controversial, research is strengthened when orchestrated in a constructive fashion that builds upon established theory. In other words, unconventional ideas need to be grounded.

More recently, scholars have engaged in paradigm wars pitting quantitative (Pfeffer, 1993) against qualitative (Van Maanen, 1995). While for the vast majority of human history qualitative was the primary method for study, in modern times, quantitative usurped as the dominant paradigm. Back in 1979, Van Maanen wrote an introduction to *Administrative Science Quarterly* cautioning the limitations and possible negative implications for the lack of plurality in research. While the essays in that special issue promoted multiplicity and mutuality in doing qualitative and quantitative research, qualitative research and mixed methods remain stigmatized. However, this has not stopped qualitative researchers from promoting alternative approaches to inquiry.

Phenomenology’s association to organizational studies arose in Brown’s 1978 article “Bureaucracy as Praxis: Toward a Political Phenomenology of Formal Organizations” in *Administrative Science Quarterly* and received attention again in Sander’s 1982 article “Phenomenology: A New Way of Viewing Organizational Research” in the *Academy of Management Review*. More recently, scholars have made additional contributions in presenting this approach to organizational studies (Conklin, 2007; Khan & Lund-Thomsen, 2011; Küpers, Mantere, & Statler, 2013; Letiche, 2006; Ogula, Rose, & Abii, 2012; Sandberg & Dall’Alba, 2009). Moreover, the Academy of Management recognized the essay, “Imaginative theorizing in interpretive organizational research” (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2004) with a best paper award and publication in the *Academy of Management Proceedings*. Other

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1 Important to note is banker and philosopher Alfred Schutz, who recognized a link between phenomenology and the social world in his work published in 1967.
scholars are calling for research beyond positivist frameworks (Brand, 2009) and acknowledging opportunities for joint research (Hosmer & Feng, 2001).

**Communication Studies**

Scholars within the field of organizational communication have been more open to interpretive research. Putnam’s book chapter, “The Interpretive Perspective: An alternative to Functionalism” in *Communication and organizations: An interpretive approach* (Putnam, Putnam, & Pacanowsky, 1983) presents an alternative research model centering study on meanings; “the way individuals make sense of their world through their communicative behaviors” (p. 31). Furthermore, she recognizes stories, myths, rituals, and language as ongoing interactive processes in which members make sense of organizational life (p. 40). Through interpretive inquiry, researchers allow for multiplicity and dynamism of meanings, and are open to a richly textured and evolving understanding between researchers and subjects being observed (Cheney, 2000; 2005).

In agreement with Arnett (2007), this essay also advocates for interpretive research, extending its horizon by positing the idea of *mythodology* that engages meaning about human existence from Antiquity with contemporary issues to which it may still inform. Additionally, Arnett observes that scholars continue to expand the scope of qualitative research, an approach not set in stone (p. 30). The idea of *mythodology* is proposed accordingly in order to be responsive to the “qualitative emphasis on human subjects, human situations, and human consequences” (p. 30) that shapes this approach and continues the conversation. Also important to this sort of investigation is its communicative connections. Myths, whether spoken by a sage or performed on a stage originally utilized the art of verbal communication. Even in written form, the rhetorical nature of myths communicates validation or challenge of culturally held
Mythodology for Interpretive Leadership Scholarship

beliefs, whose fidelity (Fisher, 1984; 1985) is determined by an audience. As such, the idea of mythodology responds to the necessity of a public domain (Arendt, 1998) to keep the conversation going in order for others to follow, question, and accept/and or reject ideas proposed in qualitative study (Arnett, 2007, p. 31).

The idea of mythodology, which embraces ancient ideals of the myth, is, at the heart, about communication. As such, mythodology may be situated within the field of philosophy of communication with a commitment to questions of meaning in human existence and communication with others. Mythodology recognizes fragmentation of meta-narrative with a goal of revealing human conditions in a multiplicity of guiding myths that both ground and transform as new horizons emerge from responsiveness to the demands of changing historical moments. Philosophy of communication “engages particulars contingent on a particular situation, a particular moment, and a particular public contribution to public opinion” (Arnett, 2010, p. 58) and mythodology reminds us that these particulars are embedded in narratives that guide responsive action. Mythodology provides a bridge between discerning “whether theory (word) matches the outcome (deed) in Philosophy of Communication” (p. 58). This discernment is contingent on myth fidelity, which presents temporal and petit (Lyotard, 1984) understanding rather than universal truth. Thus, mythodology responds to “multiple voices in the diversity of public opinion” (Arnett, 2010, p. 58). Public opinion does not exist in a vacuum, but in historical and cultural contexts represented as myth.

Leadership Studies

Through the lens of Existentialism, Ashman and Lawler (2008) make an important observation that rather than viewing communication as a skill within leadership, the opposite may be true—“leadership might be considered as an aspect of communication” or that leadership
“is communication” (p. 253). Ashman and Lawler note the absence of communication in this field, or when mentioned, the transmission and reception of information is referenced as merely a transactional exchange. They argue “that the narrow view of communication presented or assumed in the majority of the literature on leadership is very narrow and potentially misleading” and propose an Existentialist view of communication that goes beyond instrumental exchange to encounters and relationships with others (p. 254). Thus, the field of communication may not only inform leadership studies regarding inviting interpretive research, but also invite leadership studies to forge mutually beneficial and insightful research on the relationship between communication and leadership.

The idea of mythodology is an unconventional approach to doing interpretive inquiry; however, it is the hope of this essay to demonstrate that it is grounded in ideas that go back to ancient times and complements more recent interest in interpretive inquiry to reveal meaningfulness in human experience. While organizational studies have been plagued with paradigm wars, leadership studies may prove to be more collegial to plurality in research. Ciulla (2008) opens the conversation for scholarly contributions from the humanities and the social sciences in her essay, “Leadership studies and the ‘fusion of horizons’”. She questions, “Why is the research and literature on leadership studies mostly from the social sciences?” (p. 393). She responds to this question with the following:

The simple explanation is because the field grew out of work in psychology and management. The more complicated explanation has to do with how the views from the humanities differ from the views from the social sciences and the value that society places on scientific knowledge. The is not a question of whether the humanities or the social sciences are better for leadership studies—both have their strengths and weaknesses—but rather how the two are necessary to develop our understanding of leadership. (p. 393)
She concludes that scientific research helps to break leadership down, or dissect it, in order to produce data; on the other hand, humanities research helps to present more holistic understanding of the human condition. Ciulla writes, “when we read a novel, a religious text, or history, we sometimes learn something that stands over and above what is written in the text yet does not have the same kind of truth functionality as a fact” (393). Ciulla notes that during the Enlightenment, Vico (1725) wrote contrary to his contemporary Newton about the importance of poetry and history for the interpretation of the human condition. Since then, others such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Habermas, and Foucault, each in their own respect, have identified alternatives to scientific method for studying the human condition. Ciulla argues though, that these perspectives have not received adequate attention in leadership study where their insight has much to offer. As such, the work of Barnes may also make a salient contribution. In a similar regard to the argument presented in this essay about the value of literature and myth, Ciulla writes,

When we read what authors such as Xenophon, Plato, Machiavelli, or Tolstoy have to say about leadership, it is familiar, even though the cultural context of the authors is quite different from our own. Leadership scholars have always acknowledged the importance of context in leadership, but empirical studies of some aspect of leadership are rarely placed in the context of relevant literature from the humanities. (p. 394)

Ciulla and others who value perspectives from the Humanities have initiated a new publication Leadership and the Humanities, which had its inaugural issue in 2013, to provide a place for the type of research described in this essay. Combined with emerging ideas in leadership such as consciousness, ontology, and authenticity, it is an appropriate time to present a corresponding methodology, or mythodology perhaps more fitting for researching these subjects.
References


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