Imagining Social Justice Ministerial Leadership Education

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The relationship between social justice leadership and Christian ministry are in dire need of rethinking in this time when communities, and the institutions that seek to serve them, are struggling. Revisiting the connection is of special importance to theological educators. How can we teach future ministers to further God's call to heal the nations and enact God's realm when Christian ministry and social justice leadership are not generally understood to be one and the same? In fact, many students come to seminary saying they want to become social justice leaders and *therefore do not want* to become ordained ministers. It is a sad day for the church when students most passionate about healing the world do not see the church as a place from which they can do so.

Background

Because of its mission to educate inspiring leaders for faith communities, Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School undertook a research project in the fall and winter of 2021-22 to understand more about theological education, social justice leadership, and Christian ministry. The Program and Life Committee of Andover Newton's Board of Trustees empowered Dean Sarah Drummond to carry out the research project. She partnered with student and social science researcher Omena McCoy. Participants included Andover Newton Fellows, who are flourishing ministers who have committed to assisting the seminary by mentoring students and consulting on curriculum questions.

Researchers carried into this project an assumption that social justice leadership is part of a minister's job. They also assumed that leading congregations to enact God's love and justice is hard work, and it must be accompanied by ministers also building trust with their congregations and carrying out their responsibilities in an ethic of love and respect. Finally, they assumed that social justice leadership and ministry are interdependent, each essential to the other: social justice leadership requires deep rootedness in faith that keeps the leader's well from running dry; and ministers must serve with compassion not just on the individual, but also communal, levels. Compassion

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on a communal, local, regional, and global level is another way of saying "social justice leadership."

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Despite numerous, pressing rationales for a study on what seminary students need to learn about social justice ministries to become effective religious leaders, few resources are available on the topic. Scholarly thought on adjacent topics, however, can help define what social justice ministry leadership education needs to include, as well as what it is up against.

In his book, *Joining God in the Great Unraveling*, a pioneer in new missional approaches to ministry writes about obstacles that cause Christian faith communities to fall short in thinking outside the box of their own congregations.[1] Alan J. Roxburgh writes about his attempts to help ordained and lay leaders to discern what God is doing in their neighborhoods, taking a new approach to mission whereby congregations do not "bring" God to the town square but rather seek and follow God there.

Roxburgh repeatedly commends exploring what God is "fermenting" in the community, rather than imposing a worldview, or even relying exclusively on what those in the neighborhood say they need. He expresses no small amount of disappointment in how quickly the movement he started, a new missional approach, became less than it was meant to be. He writes that churches that embraced the idea of seeking and following God into their communities fell back on anxious church growth tactics. "The language of 'missional' came to mean outreach or 'ministry.' Unexamined language came to be layered on top of unexamined language."[2]

Where did the attempt to get congregations to view themselves as missional servants of God in the community, rather than a self-serving club for one another and sometimes God, go wrong? Roxburgh writes that the forces of ecclesiocentrism, combined with overreliance on a modern way of making sense of the world, conspired to hold congregations captive to their long-held patterns. Ecclesiocentrism, according to Roxburgh, is the phenomenon whereby inward-facing congregations jealously guard the minister's attention, as well as other resources like time and money, rather than encouraging the export of those resources beyond their circle. They do this out of anxiety that their churches might not survive, and out of an assumption that God's resources are as finite as human ones.

A modern mindset serves to dig ecclesiocentric congregations' ruts even deeper, as it suggests an overreliance on human power, which is finite indeed. Roxburgh writes, "God as agent is transformed into spiritual notions of personal inner support for the moral and social lives of our modern selves... Christianity is transformed into a subset of modernity's own moral order, which is focused on the self-making individual."[3] He goes on to conclude that congregations must make their way back, through simple practices of worship and spiritual formation, to reliance on God.[4]

Roxburgh's ideas about the missional church help us to understand why social justice leadership and Christian ministries were ever uncoupled to begin with. Certainly, the Gospel is replete with attention to helping those who are suffering. Jesus spends as much or more time caring for the poor and admonishing others to do so than he does preaching on other topics. Roxburgh demonstrates, however, that ecclesiocentrism prevents faith community leaders from doing anything that takes time and attention away from caring for insiders. Modernity's suggestion that there is no force for good available other than (hu)manpower accentuates fears of scarcity and resultant doom.

In *Becoming a Justice Seeking Congregation: Responding to God's Justice Initiative,* Methodist minister, and former seminary president William K. McElvaney provides some insight into how pastors feel when pressed between the rock and the hard place Roxburgh describes.[5] He writes that they are weighed down with the responsibilities that come with caring for an institution in such a way that their energy for outreach beyond the walls is scarce. He suggests that social justice leaders who do not need to worry, for instance, about taking care of a building must have more bandwidth to dedicate to serving others.[6] Of course, a social justice leader might not agree that there is anything easy about their work, but the point McElvaney is trying to make is that integrating social justice leadership into the minister's role requires congregation-wide discipleship formation. The minister who seeks to act alone will fail, burn out, or both.

McElvaney goes on to commend a layered and communal approach that blends nonviolent social action, like petitioning or protesting, with giving to those in need. He resists placing charity and justice in opposition to one another. He writes that, rather than privileging charity over justice, or vice-versa, ministers should guide their communities to think about the big picture – what is God trying to bring about? – and then look at both immediate needs and policy implications.[7] Finally, McElvaney writes that a good place to start thinking about social justice ministries is within one's own organizations, asking, for instance, How are we doing in treating our staff and volunteers?[8]

Roxburgh's recommendation that faith communities follow God out into their neighborhoods, and McElvaney's layered approach, might remind readers of what they know about community organizing. In an article entitled "Faith-Based Organizing – A Justice Ministry: A Strategy for Ministry,"[9] Gabriel Galuzzo writes about how community organizing heroes like Saul Alinsky (1909-1972) worked with communities in-need without telling them what they needed or how to achieve it.

Instead, Alinsky addressed three problems that communities at the margins of society tend to face: (1) those who had power over those communities did not listen to them; (2) they are different, one from another, and therefore need to come together around a common cause; and (3) oppressed citizens had been convinced that there was nothing they could do to change their situations. By helping neighbors understand their grass-roots power, Alinsky started and sustained movements.

Galuzzo commends to congregations a community-organizing approach to mission. He writes that churches must engage in strategies for building community within their walls and in their neighborhoods. Within their walls, this might mean empowering and training lay leaders. In the wider community, change begins by forming relationships. "The creation of community is the truest form of liberation,"[10] writes Galuzzo.

Building community is a leadership task and skill in need of greater attention in a politically polarized, pandemic-traumatized society. Galuzzo stresses that communal closeness is both the prerequisite for and product of community organizing. In his book, *Community: the Structure of Belonging*,[11] Peter Block writes that intentionality on the part of leaders is essential to their success in building community, whose requirements "call[s] for us to treat as important many things we thought were incidental."[12]

Block, a social scientist focusing on large-group dynamics, writes that today's leaders need to bring people together to talk about possibilities over problems, and opportunities over obstacles. He also warns against over-dependence on designated or elected leaders but rather advocates for community members to see themselves as citizens, rather than as clients, of their institutions of membership.[13] Like community organizers in Alinsky's model, Block defines the role of leader as that of convener of constituent stakeholders.[14]

Recruiting and developing other leaders as a key leadership responsibility in building community – which, again, is described by Galuzzo as essential to social justice ministry – has important implications for sharing leadership in churches. In more hierarchical churches and faith traditions, mandating that the leader give power away runs counter to the clergy-as-king paradigm. Yet giving people both hands-on opportunities to do the work of justice, and freeing them through a permission-granting culture, thickens the community's sense of togetherness with each other and investment in their contexts. In other words, ministerial leaders must build community in order to carry out social justice ministries, and, in turn, those ministries strengthen communities.

In a chapter entitled "Mobilizing and Motivating the Congregation for Effectiveness" in the anthology, *African American Church Leadership: Principles for Effective Ministry and Community Leadership*,[15] parish minister Lloyd Blue writes that he is personal, intentional, and specific about those he recruits and trains into leadership roles in the congregation, and that recruitment is not just for the church's sake, but for that of the leader who will grow in faith through discipleship. [16] He writes it is crucial to blend leadership development with spiritual formation, for "[s]elf-righteous service comes through human effort. True service come[s] from a relationship with the Divine Other deep inside."[17]

Just as social justice leaders reading this article might have been reminded of organizing by Roxburgh and Block, theologians might see the fingerprints of liberation theology in notions about building community. Of course, Latin American liberation

theologians influenced Alinsky and other community organizers in the 20th Century, and the crossover between their ideologies is clear. Liberation theologians believe that God comes among us not from the heavens downward, but from the ground up. By working with people, asking them about and then helping them to articulate their hopes and dreams, and empowering them to challenge those who would oppress them, liberation theologians create new meaning in partnership with communities rather than imposing ideas upon them.

Despite the ways in which members of communities can inspire each other to set themselves free, creator of the liberationist methodology "Theater of the Oppressed" Augusto Boal cautions against universalizing the experiences of suffering.[18] He writes that the experience of oppression is not transferable; context is everything. Therefore, communities may find inspiration broadly in theologies and movements, but to enter solidarity with those who are suffering, they must get specific and local.

Getting to know a community and its needs. Developing leaders through both empowerment and discipleship. Making love and justice real. All of these functions related to social justice ministries sound exactly like what a minister in a congregation should be doing. Yet clergy experience disorientation and confusion when their attempts at drawing attention to social justice issues in their communities receive a chilly reception, and when congregants express resentment when the minister's time is used in the wider community. This disorientation runs deeper than today's divisions over mask mandates and electoral politics. It also results from wider cultural confusion over what ministers' societal role is and should be.

In an article entitled, "Reclaiming Professional Jurisdiction: The Re-Emergence of the Theological Task of Ministry," Gilbert Rendle writes about how the 19th century local pastor's role has given way to a growing matrix of professions sharing some of the same objectives.[19] Whereas ministers were at one time teachers, therapists, scholars, and civic orators in their communities, new fields have emerged that have encroached – in many cases helpfully – on the role of clergy. That said, loss of terrain has resulted in pastors having less power in society than they once did. Members of congregations are more likely to challenge their minister's expertise than their predecessors could have even imagined.

Rendle sees a future, where ministers must reclaim their jurisdiction over *theological* tasks, as a good-news possibility: "[P]rofessional ministry is now challenged to reassert itself in an immense new-but-ancient jurisdiction – a place where people are asking questions and facing problems of meaning."[20] A prior step, however, must be framing social justice ministry as a deeply theological undertaking in ways that neither "charity," nor even "mission," fully capture.

So far, this article has presented five different theoretical frameworks for understanding the connection between social justice leadership and Christian ministry:

- Joining God in the neighborhood
- Layering together charitable acts and demands for social change
- Privileging possibilities over problems
- Empowering and preparing a wide array of community members to lead in social justice, and
- Fomenting God's liberating love in specific contexts based on those setting's needs

A theme underlying all five is the importance – necessity – of approaching ministry with an attitude of partnership: humans partnering with Jesus, people partnering with each other across divisions, and people with different worldviews partnering in creating new theology together. In her book, *The Future of Partnership*,[21] former Yale Divinity School faculty member Letty Russell (1929-2007) writes that partnerships are dynamic, living entities that are never static and always evolving. She defines that which constitutes a partnership as (paraphrased):

- Commitment that involves responsibility, vulnerability, and trust.
- Common struggle involving risk and growth in pursuit of a goal.
- Contextuality that takes into consideration a wider array of relationships and makes room for corrective feedback when values do not overlap.[22]

Russell cofounded an organization during her years of service at Yale Divinity School called "Partners in Mission." In her book, she calls on seminaries to model teamwork to students and to teach them to be good partners. She writes that learning is at the heart of partnership, as are questions. For example, writes Russell, whereas Brazilian farm owners sought to oppress workers in part by causing them to doubt their own wisdom and power, education-for-liberation icon Paulo Freire (1921-1997) asked them question after question. He did not engage in "banking" information into learners, but rather he helped them claim what they already knew through conversational inquiry.

Russell connects Freire's style of engagement with the very work of making meaning when she writes, "Christian theology itself is a way of questioning God and being questioned. We use our mind (*logos*) to understand how God (*theos*) is known to us through the Word in the world."[23] Where Rendle writes that the minister's jurisdiction is theological meaning-making, Russell writes that the beginning of theological meaning-making is partnering with God.

METHODOLOGY

The coresearchers who carried out this study sought to answer the question, "What do ministers need to know/be/do to be effective in social justice leadership?" They began their work in September 2021 and established a sampling strategy. They chose to engage Andover Newton "Fellows," as those seasoned ministers serving in the field had already committed, when accepting their appointments as Fellows, to provide Andover

Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School with guidance in offering a relevant curriculum for future ministers.

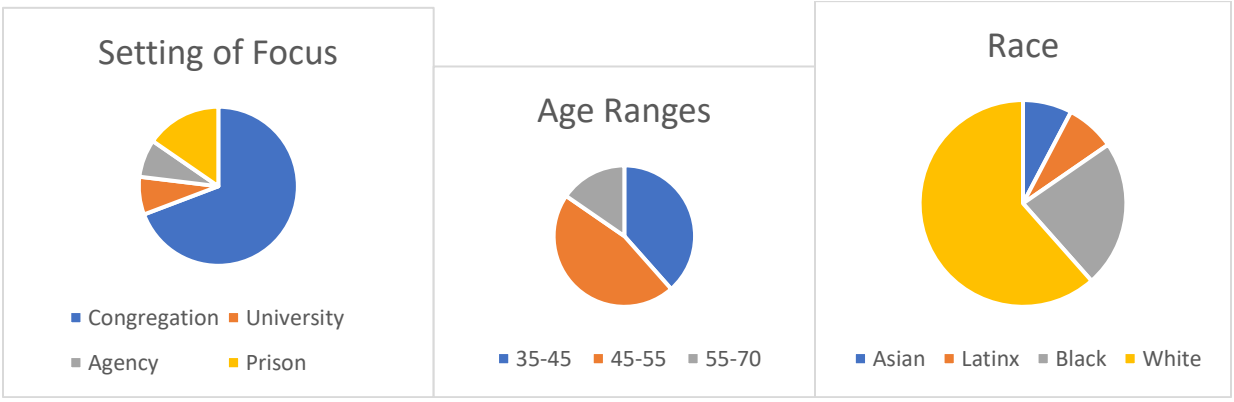
Ms. McCoy reached out to 18 Fellows of the approximately 40 now serving. Dean Drummond selected those 18 in order to ensure a cross-section of participants in different settings, from different backgrounds. Ms. McCoy invited Fellows over email to be interviewed one-on-one via Zoom. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then destroyed to protect participants' confidentiality. Other steps taken to ensure their privacy included not using their names in findings, removing any identifiable details from their comments, and refraining from publishing their names.

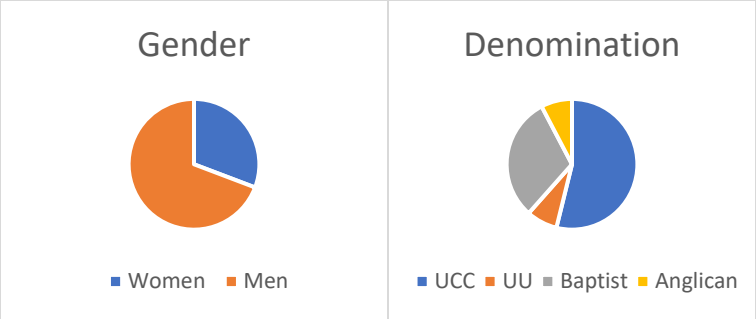
Original questions the coresearchers framed before interviews began were as follows:

- What kinds of work do you do now as relates to social justice ministries in your congregation and/or community?
- How has that work, and your role, changed in the past couple of years?
- What skills and knowledge do you lean on most when engaging in social justice leadership?
- When you think about what you learned in seminary, what – if any – were the relevant lessons about social justice you gathered there?
- If you were to magically go back to seminary, what learning about social justice might you seek out now?

After the first round of conversations, Ms. McCoy added a question whereby she asked participants to define what they mean when they say, "social justice ministries." The addition of that question helped demonstrate that ministers work from different theological and theoretical understandings and assumptions when they think about the role social justice plays in their respective ministries.

The confirmed participant pool consisted of a total of 13 fellows (nine serving in congregational ministry, two in prison ministry, one in university leadership, and one in an agency position). 62% percent of participants identified as white, and 69% percent identified as male.[24]





Dean Drummond reviewed the transcripts of Ms. McCoy's interviewees and compiled a list of key themes using a grounded theory approach.[25] She then sent a summary of themes back to Ms. McCoy for a review for validity. Analysis resulted in set of findings that were later assessed for implications for practice in educating future ministers about social justice and Christian ministry. Dr. Drummond shared a preliminary set of findings with a wider cross-section of Fellows, and with Andover Newton's affiliated faculty at Yale Divinity School, testing their reliability with those who have a relevant knowledge but different perspectives.

FINDINGS

Interview participants' contexts varied. Those in settings serving historically marginalized populations expressed little divide between the concept of "ministry" and "social justice." Those in affluent settings described more friction around the use of their time outside the congregation or ministry setting for any reason, including what Roxburgh called "journeying with God into the neighborhood" (see Review of Literature above). Overall, however, the similarities among respondents' views far outnumbered differences. Bearing in mind that Andover Newton Fellows are chosen based on their exemplariness, one can take away from these themes that their recommendations could be called "best practice" without too great a stretch of the imagination.

Theme 1: Classroom Learning for Effective Social Justice Ministerial Leadership

Participants named a wide range of useful theological concepts on which students can focus during seminary for social justice ministerial leadership effectiveness, including Hebrew Bible, theological anthropology, Liberation Theology, hermeneutics, and Christian spirituality. Participants also suggested drawing from adjacent fields, such as community organizing, antiracism, self-care, power dynamic awareness, trauma, and the intersecting nature of social justice concerns.

One participant pointed out that liberation theology is particularly important in that it has implications for everyone: "[…] I think it's important that people of different races recognize that [just] because you might have a little more privileged does not mean that you're not also oppressed also."

Theme 2: Limitations Affecting Social Justice Ministerial Leadership

Participants named outdated paradigms of "charity" for the "needy," tensions between prophetic and pastoral approaches to ministry, and burnout to be obstacles they encounter in carrying out social justice ministries.

As for charity and justice, one participant said that teaching communities about the roots and intransigence of social ills is important to social justice ministry, as not all are aware of the systemic nature of injustice. The participant used as an example teaching a congregation about predatory lending, where the interviewee could "almost see the scales falling from people's eyes."

Related to the difference between pastoral and prophetic approaches, another participant said that being a prophet is good and important, but prophets did not earn paychecks from those to whom they prophesied, and, furthermore, "people need also the pastor." Still another participant described resistance to prophetic ministries in starker terms, quoting a parishioner as saying, "[Y]ou better stop talking about all this political stuff, or I'm leaving and taking my $5,000 pledge with me."

Many participants used expressions like "bringing people along" to describe the education, relationship-forming, and trust-building prerequisite to prophetic witness. Two served in congregational settings where they were empowered by their congregations to engage in social justice in the wider communities. Their relative ease in engaging in social justice ministries as compared with others suggests that one way through the ecclesiocentric tendencies of congregations might involve revisiting covenants between pastors and their congregations.

Burnout does not result, after all, from hard work, but rather from unrealistic or divergent expectations. Nurses and doctors who burned out during the Covid-19 pandemic did so because they were asked to do the same for hundreds that they did previously for dozens. Similarly, when employers of ministers have one set of expectations, and the Gospel has another, exhaustion results.

Theme 3: Limitations to Effective Social Justice Education for Seminarians

Several participants attested that much of what they know now about social justice ministries simply could not have been learned in seminary, as the learning required a specific context and long-term relationships. When they were in the proverbial "seminary bubble," they were – for better or for worse – set apart from local communities, rendering forming real partnerships, as defined by Russell (see Review of Literature), an unrealistic goal. Because the seminary curriculum relies on engagement between teachers and learners, text and skills, ideas an issues, little time remains for students to form deep partnerships in their contexts.

They can, however, as Russel argued, learn the art of forming relationships and developing partnerships. One participant posed the question, "How can we get it out of the discussion room and out of the sermon into an embodied practice?" Students can practice engaging communities around them and elsewhere in the world and learn how to ask good questions with an open mind. Seminary students stand in a context of

learning, and among the most important dimensions of their formation is learning how to learn. In other words, the disconnection from context necessitated by rigorous study is an obstacle, but not a dead-end. "How you do theology is determined by where you stand and with whom," said one interviewee. Students can stand with communities perhaps not as leaders or members, but as learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In light of findings from this study, Andover Newton's faculty is pursuing specific changes to its diploma program, which runs alongside the Yale Divinity School MDiv. Andover Newton will add a social justice ministries colloquium where students will learn about different perspectives on social justice ministries while also participating in community organizing training with a regional faith-based network.

Andover Newton will name building community as the key learning goal of its historic yet newly redeveloped travel seminars. Andover Newton will weave antiracism education and practices into its required, year-long curriculum for first year students. More broadly, Andover Newton will resist false dichotomies between social justice leadership and Christian ministry. When prospective or current students say, "I want to work in social justice, not for a congregation," we will challenge them. Social justice leadership is part of ministry, so integral that decoupling them could cause both to disintegrate.

When asked to define social justice ministerial leadership, one participant in our study said to engage it requires the minister "[t]o attempt to address systemic inequalities across a range of social issues, social and cultural issues, including racism, trans- and homophobia, income inequality, poverty, environmental degradation, misogyny and more… To address [these] through activism and building human relationships across difference, enacting changes to public policy."

Another said ministers "envision world where peace and love and justice prevails… all striving for that holy mountain… advocating for those who are less powerful. Challenging those who feel that they are entitled to certain kinds of privileges and rights and programs that deny others." If these are the words that effective ministers say about what social justice ministry is, we can with confidence commend ministry to a person called to serve in social justice leadership.

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[1] Alan J. Roxburgh, Joining God in the Great Unraveling: Where We Are & What I've Learned (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

[2] Ibid. P. 4.

[3] Ibid. P. 64.

[4] Author's note (Drummond): Roxburgh relies on women theologians studying marginalized communities throughout the book. His doing so might suggest that women and persons of color never bought into "modernity's wager," in that they had no illusion of control over their circumstances that needed to be wrested from them.

[5] William K. McElvaney, Becoming a Justice Seeking Congregation: Responding to God's Justice Initiative (Indianapolis, Indiana: iUniverse, Inc., 2009).

[6] Ibid. P. xv.

[7] Ibid. P. 52

[8] Ibid. P. 57.

[9] Gregory Galluzzo, "Faith-Based Organizing -- a Justice Ministry: A Strategy for Ministry," International Journal of Public Theology 3 (2009).

[10] Ibid. P. 111.

[11] Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008).

[12] Ibid. P. 9.

[13] Ibid. P. 63.

[14] Ibid. P. 68.

[15] Lloyd Blue, "Mobilizing and Motivating the Congregation for Effectiveness," in African American Church Leadership: Principles for Effective Ministry and Community Leadership, ed. Lee N. June and Christopher C. Mathis (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013).
[16] Ibid. P. 111.
[17] Ibid. P. 109.
[18] Agusto Boal, The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy, trans. Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
[19] Gilbert Rendle, "Reclaiming Professional Jurisdiction: The Re-Emergence of the Theological Task of Ministry," Theology Today 59, no. 3 (2002).
[20] Ibid. P. 418.
[21] Letty M. Russell, The Future of Partnership (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1979).
[22] Ibid. P. 18.
[23] Ibid. 142.
[24] Author's note (Drummond): Interestingly, Ms. McCoy and I had to make a second round of requests to increase participation among women, who were more likely to say that they were too busy with ministry tasks to be interviewed. One wonders, going back to the kinds of resentment pointed out by Roxburgh that result from ecclesiocentrism, if women are more reluctant to take heat for time spent outside their official ministries?
[25] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin. Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc, 1998.