

Leadership as a material-discursive phenomena: A diffractive analysis in organization

by

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B.A., University of Central Florida, 2010  
M.A., Florida Gulf Coast University, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Leadership Studies  
A.Q. Miller School of Media and Communication

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

This theoretical dissertation will be of interest for researchers concerned with developing robust theoretical and methodological approaches to better observe, capture, understand, and develop leadership as process(es). Researchers who study processual ontologies of leadership call for further theoretical and methodological approaches to capture leadership as an emergent, relational, and ongoing process (Alvehus et al., 2022; Raelin et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Robinson & Riddell, 2022). Addressing this call, the current dissertation brings feminist new materialism to a processual ontology of leadership, specifically Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism, and adopts a diffractive methodology to attend to how leadership is produced through ongoing relations, process, and material-discursive practices. The methodological orientation of the study builds on Simpson's (2024) work using diffractive methodology for collaborative leadership and furthers the contributions of Harding et al. (2022) and Harding (2024), who built a theoretical foundation which brings diffractive methodology to organization studies and calls for more research to be done in new contexts that leverage diffractive methodology. By closely associating and leveraging these fields of scholarship, this dissertation: (1) further builds theoretical foundations to study emerging leadership phenomena, (2) expands opportunities for leadership observation and analysis by accounting for the materiality of technologically produced spaces, and (3) further develops a diffractive methodology that enables opportunities for observation and analysis closer to the emergent phenomena of study. In laying this groundwork, the current study makes a case to consider extending an onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2007; Barad, 2014) of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

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*“It is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people...Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know...There is no division between me and them.”*

*Virginia Woolf, The Waves*

This dissertation is about the interconnectedness of the world and what—or who—comes into being when the intra-actions of everyday life, experiences, and matter are entangled. This journey of becoming has never been mine alone; it has unfolded through the relationships, encounters, and forces that have moved through and around me, continuously becoming.

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## **Dedication**

My dear nibblings – Olivia Ann, Eliana Everest, Haylee Jay, Hudson Perry, Sky Richard, Coleen Zelda, Vera June, and Sweet Rosa – who are on your own journeys of becoming. Being a small part of helping you grow may just be the biggest honor of my lifetime.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my cousin, Savannah, who is on her own doctoral journey. May you always be reminded of your capacity to do hard things, find strength in a community who believes in you, and look forward to a celebration of your learning.

# **Chapter 1 - Introduction: Toward an Agential Realist Onto-epistem-ology of Leadership**

This theoretical dissertation lays the groundwork and makes a case for an agential realist onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2014) of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices. The current research then briefly applies the theoretical framework to a case and subsequently advances a line of inquiry to address concerns for further theoretical and methodological approaches to processual ontologies of leadership as an emergent, relational, and ongoing process (Alvehus et al., 2022; Raelin et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Robinson & Riddell, 2022). To attend to these challenges and questions of power and agency, this dissertation brings feminist new materialism to processual ontologies of leadership, specifically Karen Barad's theory of agential realism. By closely associating and leveraging these fields of scholarship, the dissertation: (1) further builds theoretical foundations to study emerging leadership phenomena, (2) expands opportunities for leadership observation and analysis by accounting for the materiality of technologically produced spaces, and (3) further develops a diffractive methodology that enables opportunities for observation and analysis closer to the emergent phenomena of study. This study will be of interest for researchers concerned with developing robust theoretical and methodological approaches to better observe, capture, understand, and develop leadership as a process(es).

## **Problem Statement and Research Questions**

The current theoretical dissertation: (1) extends processual ontologies of leadership into an onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices, and (2) briefly applies this theoretical framework to an analytical and participatory process as a case. The presented problem statement identifies why

this theoretical exploration is needed; how it addresses specific calls, gaps, and questions in the literature; and how it builds upon specific lines of inquiry within the literature. Literature concerned with leadership as emerging in or encompassing process(es)/practice(s) (Alvehus & Crevani, 2022; By, 2021; Drath, 2008; Larson et al., 2025; Raelin, 2025; Robinson & Riddell, 2022; Simpson, 2024) are referred to as processual ontologies of leadership in this dissertation. Leadership literature is situated, explored, and complicated further in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2.

Located within processual ontologies of leadership, three general areas of concern emerge: (1) a call for more critical approaches to examine where agency resides and how power is conceptualized and attended to; (2) interrogating where leadership can be located and how it may be identified if it emerges through process; and (3) identifying new methodologies and tools to research, understand, and develop leadership as process.

### **What Is Leadership?**

One of the largest critiques to processual ontologies of leadership centers on “what” leadership is. Since the emergence of leadership as a particular and largely interdisciplinary field of study, a central aim has been to define leadership and delineate its object of study—though this has been a contentious journey. Some scholars call for the field to agree with one definition of leadership (International Leadership Association Annual Conference, 2020). Others have been concerned with identifying specific types, subfields, or turns, each unique with its own definition of leadership and concerned with justifying their definition through theory building or applying existing theory. Literature interested in identifying a “leader” as the object of study for leadership—one who is over or influences others/groups—have had an easier time defining and understanding their object of study. However, in moving from traits-based leadership, leader/follower dichotomies, and other inquiries concerned with the ‘leader’ or ‘leaders’,

scholars have started centering leaders and leadership as relational, collaborative, collective, distributed, and shared (Ospina, et al., 2020), aiming for more democratic, inclusive, and critical perspectives of leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009).

### **Power, Agency, and Objectivity: The Call for More Critical Perspectives**

As these areas of study advance, few researchers have tried to decenter the leader(s) like past literature within processual ontologies of leadership. By centering leadership as emergent in relations/ships, interactions, practices, processes, and flows, the object of study has moved from the individual(s) to “leadership as”, most often focusing on various activities performed and depicting a representationalist account. For example, Ford (2016) asserts that “leadership and power are inextricably intertwined” (p. 233). Similarly, Sergi (2016) specifically attends to power through the embodied nature of leadership: “We shift the locus of leadership from individuals to collective, material, and embodied practices enacted in context” (p. 111). Recently, literature has also called for agentic views of power to inform processual ontologies (Alvehus & Kiltmoller, 2024). When shifting the object of study, process ontologies have largely neglected to build a robust consideration of power, agency, and objectivity *together*.

Therefore, the first challenges to processual ontologies of leadership that this dissertation addresses surround identifying critical perspectives and subsequently addressing gaps in the literature. Specifically, in moving from individuals to relationships, process(es), and practice(s), processual ontologies need more critical perspectives to account for power, agency, and objectivity. I address the following question in this research:

1. What theoretical perspectives can be brought to processual ontologies of leadership that account for the agential interaction, emergence, and co-production of leadership?

## **Where Could Leadership Be?**

A second prevalent challenge for processual ontologies of leadership concerns where leadership can be found. Stemming from the practice turn, processual ontologies of leadership have often asserted that leadership is found in “everyday life” (Raelin, 2019). Researchers often look to work, organization, the arts, military, and similar sectors to find everyday life and leadership. Literature calls for attention to be directed to “where we may find people talking together, acting together, and thinking together, all toward making the reality of their condition what it is” (Harding, 2024, p. 531). This idea suggests finding “ordinary sites” (Carroll et al., 2008). Some have attempted to deliver on expanded notions of where leadership could be by bringing materiality to the study of leadership. For example, Ford (2016) asserts the possibilities of a materialist approach to leadership and pleas to keep materiality at the front of research: “Material worlds, language, and embodied experiences are also as meaningful as the artifacts, technologies, and physical arrangements, as well as the interpersonal and intercultural relationships” (p. 224). The contribution that materiality makes to the study of leadership is that it allows researchers to get closer to leadership as it emerges.

### **Expanding Possibilities: Temporalities, Locations, and Technologies**

As we consider the ways that technologies shape, re-shape, and produce our lives, we must also consider expanding the places where we look for leadership and where leadership might emerge. In an increasingly connected world, and as artificial intelligence continues to destabilize—unsettling what makes humans human, shaping what humans know and how they know it, and changing the nature of being human (e.g. digital twins)—better theoretical tools are needed to complicate and realize the expansive possibilities for leadership through, because of, and at/within emerging technologies. To live up to the promise of decentering leaders and

acknowledging diverse ways and spaces where leadership emerges, we must look to a digital sphere that emphasizes “women’s diverse but collective experiences and the creative, agentic, and critical ways they engage with digital spaces” (Haynes et al., 2025, p. 5). In other words, we must rethink “how feminist theory and praxis must evolve in concert with rapidly shifting technological landscapes” (Haynes et al., 2025, p. 5).

The second challenge to processual ontologies of leadership that the current dissertation addresses concerns finding new “everyday” sites and understanding how materialist accounts can explain these sites. I address the following questions in this research:

2. If we need to look for new everyday sites where leadership emerges, where are places/spaces/temporalities where technologies are agential in the production of reality, meaning, and therefore, leadership?
3. How can materialist accounts and theoretical frameworks extend an understanding of these places/spaces/temporalities?

### **How Do We Study Leadership?**

A third considerable challenge for processual ontologies of leadership is how this orientation to leadership is studied: how leadership is observed, understood, and produced. New methodologies and methods are needed that observe leadership activity when it occurs and account for the co-creation and emergence of leadership within interactions (Raelin 2016). When shifting what leadership is understood as, tools and methods also need to change. Scholars have sought to address this by adopting process-oriented ontologies, raising new questions, and proposing a range of methodological approaches. Simpson and Revsbaek (2022) trouble the stability of “entities”, citing that there is “neither a beginning nor an end to process; rather it is conceived as a perpetual becoming that makes and re-makes the knowings as we continuously

re-compose our world(s)” (p. 1). Knowing where to find leadership informs both how this phenomena is developed and how researchers study it. Raelin et al. (2025) suggests that “to find and change leadership, (we) must look to the practice within which it is occurring” (p. 3).

### **Methodologies: (Re)searching Leadership and Producing Leadership**

Within processual ontologies of leadership, scholars advocate for new methodologies and methods. Systemic methodological tools, including micro-ethnography (Alvehus & Crevani, 2022) and audio-visual analysis, pluralistic and ethnographic approaches that prioritize everyday practices (Raelin, 2020; Sutherland, 2018), and emergent group trajectories (Simpson, 2024) have all been used to investigate leadership as process. However, there are limits to qualitative methods that may prioritize language(s) and the discursive, as they are “much less assured in dealing with quasi-linguistic stuff...silence...tears, sneers, silences, sniffs, laughter...instances of bodily inclusions into language that pose a challenge” (Maclure, 2013, p. 664). Ultimately, the literature calls for innovative research designs, including those that build on some of these methodological considerations, like diffraction, which represents a “method par excellence for performative inquiries into flows, movements, and waves, and the interferences produced when differences between these movements trouble each other” (Simpson, 2024, p. 17).

Accordingly, this dissertation explores a third challenge to processual ontologies of leadership: how to research and develop leadership that emerges in process. I address the following questions in this research:

4. What methodologies and methods can get closer to the emergent phenomena of study and account for the entanglement of matter and meaning?
5. And additionally, what methodologies and methods help develop leadership?

## **Problem Statement Summary and Purpose Statement**

The above problem statement outlined challenges to processual ontologies of leadership. There exists a need for: (1) more extensive ways to account for power, agency, and objectivity; (2) new locations, temporalities, and technologies that can explore this emergent object of study; and (3) new methodologies and methods to effectively observe, understand, and produce leadership. The purpose of this dissertation is to bring feminist new materialisms, specifically a theory of agential realism, to processual ontologies of leadership to address issues of power, agency, and objectivity. Accordingly, this research conceptualizes an expansion and extension of processual ontologies of leadership into an onto-epistem-ology of leadership. Using an agential realist account of leadership further extends this onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

In this dissertation, I locate a new everyday site within the digital sphere and briefly applies the theoretical framework to a case through a post-qualitative diffractive analysis. In doing so, this theoretical dissertation builds theoretical foundations to study emerging leadership phenomena, expands available opportunities for leadership observation and analysis by accounting for the materiality of technologically produced spaces, and further develops a diffractive methodology that enables opportunities for observation and analysis closer to the emergent phenomena of study.

## **Background**

After informal observation and participation in a group on Marco Polo, a video messaging social media app, I observed the overlapping circles of private, public, and working selves/lives—those which seemed to blur and produce *something* in the technologically produced space. These material-discursive (Barad, 2007) practices, the catalysts for this study, seemed to

(re)configure ways of knowing and being/becoming that emerged in a process of intra-action with the material technology. What started as casual observation grew to a formalized exploration to understand the entangled inseparability of a material and discursive (material-discursive) practice.

This section discusses background concepts, theories, and orientations required to locate the current theoretical dissertation in the literature—processual ontologies of leadership—before building on, responding to, and extending from these ontologies. First, in this dissertation, I locate and (unstably) defines what leadership is—or rather, “leadership as”—and identifies what theories and frameworks help make sense of the interactions between human and non-human agents/technologies in production of meaning/leadership. At the intersection of critical perspectives and processual ontologies of leadership, leadership is understood as a phenomenon (Crevani & Lammi, 2023) that emerges in process and uses critical perspectives, specifically feminist theory, to interrogate identity, power, and systems. This research uses feminist new materialism, specifically Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, to achieve an understanding of leadership (Harding, 2024) which attends to challenges and questions of power, agency, and methodology within processual ontologies of leadership.

### **Situating Within Leadership Studies**

To situate processual ontologies of leadership is to understand a fundamental shift in the literature. The field of leadership studies is diverse in its theoretical commitments and methodological approaches, informing definitions of leadership as various concepts, practices, processes, or developed competencies. Leadership ontologies like Drath et al.’s (2008) direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC), as well as collective leadership ontologies that rely on constructionist, constructivist, and dialogic frameworks (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014;

Ospina, et al., 2020), all depart from entitative notions of leadership, such as the tripod ontology—leader-followers-shared purpose (Burns, 1978; Collinson, D., 2006; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Zaccaro, 2007). Entitative notions of leadership that focus on the leader or leaders have historically shaped leadership literature and continue to have broad impact in the field. Interdisciplinary in nature, leadership literature also has streams of thought that make sense of women/gender and leadership (Owen, 2020; Shea & Renn, 2017), gendered leadership (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013), embodied leadership (Boncori et al., 2019; Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Pullen & Vachhani, 2013; Ropo & Sauer, 2008; Sinclair, 2005), and the sociomaterial condition(s) and materiality of leadership (Ford et al., 2017; Harding, 2024; Ropo & Salovaara, 2019; Simpson et al., 2018; Sergi, 2016). These streams of thought pull from various theoretical traditions and various definitions of leadership. Scholars moving away from the study of trait-based leadership, individual cognitive models, and leader/follower dichotomies include those studying relational, collaborative, practice, and process ontologies of leadership (Ospina et al., 2020).

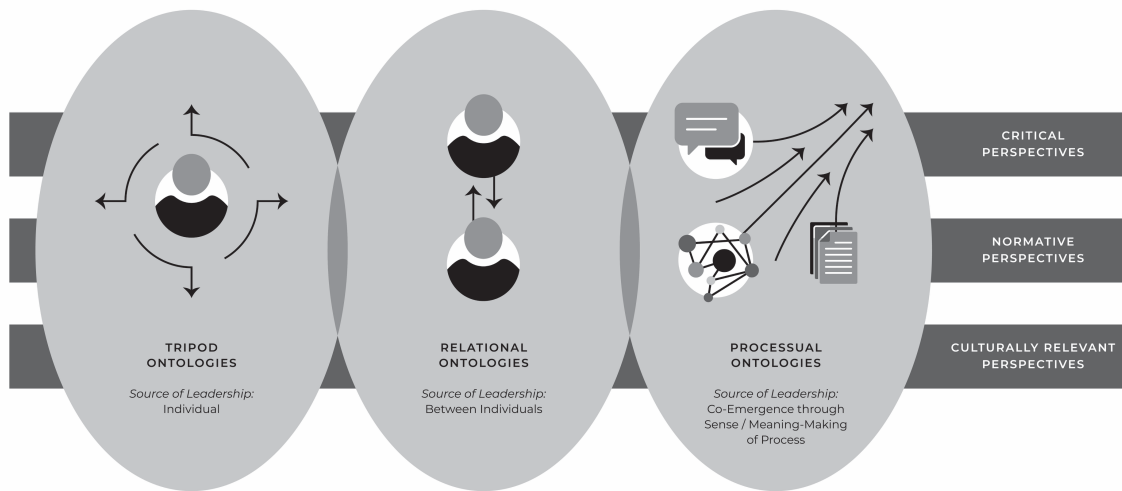
### **Processual Ontologies of Leadership**

Processual ontologies of leadership understand leadership as an interactive process and situate leadership as always in action, negotiating within contexts and becoming in process. Expanding from a proposed practice turn (Carroll et al., 2008) for leadership, Raelin (2019) advanced a Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) framework that transitions from leadership as traits and behaviors of individuals to leadership as emergent in the experience of everyday life. Raelin (2019) states that: “we see practice as continually unfolding in what appears to be a constantly shifting and evolving dynamic” (p. 482). Since the emergence of L-A-P (the predominate process ontology of leadership), many scholars have sought to define leadership as a turning point (Raelin et al., 2025); a collective pursuit (By, 2021); a socio-spatial process of

accomplishing direction (Alvehus & Crevani, 2022); a collaborative achievement (Robinson & Riddell, 2022); direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008); and an emergent process (Simpson, 2024). Crevani (2018) proposes a distinction between a process perspective that focuses “on ‘what individuals do in the process of leadership’” (p. 85) and a process ontology that focuses on “what the process of leadership does to organizing practices” (p. 85). As the lines within leadership literature are not so clearly drawn, for this dissertation, I consider leadership literature under an umbrella of processual ontologies of leadership if they (1) shifted the theoretical understanding from individual characteristics to “moments of leadership, where direction emerges, and actions are re-oriented and organized” (Larson et al., 2025, p. 1307) and (2) defined leadership as “process, practice and a relational phenomenon” (Larson et al., 2025).

The below image is included with permission from Kliewer, adapted from his past presentations and in a forthcoming publication. The image aims to visually organize three dominant perspectives in leadership literature across three (sometimes overlapping) dominant ontologies of leadership. As visually represented in Figure 1.1, this theoretical dissertation sits at the intersection of critical perspectives and processual ontologies of leadership within the leadership literature.

Figure 1.1. Visual Representation of Western Approaches to Contemporary Leadership Theory



*Note: This figure was included with permission from Kliewer (forthcoming).*

Specific literature that explores processual ontologies of leadership, including key frameworks, challenges, and research agendas is discussed in depth in Chapter 2.

## Situating Within Feminist Theory

Texts that introduce readers to feminist concepts and theory often highlight key ideas, debates, and approaches within feminist thought. Launius and Hassel's (2015) book, for example, introduces readers to four critical threshold concepts: the social construction of gender, privilege and oppression, intersectionality, and feminist praxis (p. VII). Launius and Hassel (2015) define *feminism* in part by adopting a definition from Crawley et al. (2008): Feminism is a social movement that attends to "power differences that create inequalities...feminism is also an epistemological shift...not just an 'area of study'...a way of orienting to academic work that attend[s] to power relations, both within the academic and within knowledge construction itself" (Crawley et al., p. 5). Additionally, Crawley et al. (2008) differentiates feminism from feminist

scholarship, which is “an epistemological stance” (p. 2) rather than encompassing a particular topic or method. Launius and Hassel (2015) also emphasize a feminist stance to their readers, “adopting a feminist perspective or way of looking at the world” (p. 4), providing tools and knowledge for applying ideas from feminism to practice.

Stemming from and growing alongside the feminism movement, *feminist theory* advances philosophies and conceptual frameworks. Feminist theory is a broad and dynamic field of thought concerned with how gendered power relations shape social, political, economic, and cultural life. McCann and Kim (2017) contextualize feminist theory within historical contexts. In their introduction, they define feminist theory as providing intellectual tools—explaining, analyzing, and interpreting—and answer questions through “ontology (theories of being and reality), epistemology (theories of how knowledge is produced), and politics (relations and practices of power)” (p. 1).

### **Power, Agency, and Questions of Objectivity**

Challenges to processual ontologies of leadership include critiques that they obscure power imbalances or systemic inequities, overly represent researcher interpretation, and question the role of individual agency in process. Also questioned are the methodologies and questions of definition—*what leadership is*—present in processual ontologies of leadership. In this dissertation, I suggest that feminist theories offer the theoretical and methodological tools needed to better address these questions. Pullen et al. (2019) highlight the possibilities for feminist theory, writing about “what kinds of feminisms, both as philosophical traditions and as a set of praxis/practices, [that] enable societal and organizational change... [and provide] different notions of agency arriving out of various feminist traditions...[underscoring] possibilities for engaging in such change” (p. 7). Though a broad and diverse field, some foundational concepts

in feminist theory that are most helpful in addressing challenges to processual ontologies of leadership include understanding how feminist theory attends to power, agency, and questions of objectivity. Limited and broadly general definitions are included in the Key Concepts and Terms Defined section to differentiate between how feminist thought attends to power, agency, and objectivity. Limited considerations of how these concepts are further understood in feminist new materialisms, in the context of the specific theories used in this theoretical dissertation, are also discussed.

### **Technologies, Digital Spheres, and Digital Feminisms**

When thinking through where new sites might be renegotiating ideas of leadership, the digital sphere offers an interesting “place” to explore. For leadership studies, apps like Marco Polo offer the opportunity to understand how technology and digital spaces create possibilities for remaking boundaries, identifying where leadership is, and building new ways of developing leadership. Haynes et al. (2025) discuss the increase in feminist thought and practice within the digital sphere, citing that critical engagement has positioned digital spaces as “instrumental for feminist storytelling, emphasizing the ways in which digital platforms enable the formation of counter-discourses and the amplification of women’s voices in both personal and political contexts” (p. 1). Technology and digital spaces, however, are not neutral (Benjamin, 2019; Galpin, 2022; Haynes, 2024; Haynes et al., 2025; Noble, 2018); like everything else, these spaces are “shaped by cultural contexts and unequal dynamics of power” (Haynes et al., 2025, p. 2). For example, Woods (2025) emphasizes the potential for surveillance in an increasingly connected world, not only in the public sphere but also increasingly within the domestic sphere. Woods (2025) also heralds how the use of digital technologies can expand our understanding of space and domestic sensibilities, specifically how they modify, reinforce, and challenge the

“social structures around the domestic space and the experiences of the people living in it” (p. 18). It is a fine line that requires intentionality and attention between replicating existing power structures and amplifying existing inequalities, and possibility, including within counterpublics/counterspaces, disruptions, and alternative futures. There is great potential in the digital sphere for leadership and feminist analysis (Benjamin, 2019; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Galpin, 2022; Haynes, 2024; Haynes et al., 2025; Noble, 2018). Said in another way, Haynes et al. (2025) contends: “Women’s identities, experiences, and everyday practices are constructed in tandem with digital technologies, forming entanglements that demand sustained feminist analysis” (p. 2). The purpose of this brief interlude into digital feminisms is to situate the importance of recognizing digital spaces and feminist analysis of digital spaces as essential focal points within the current research.

### **Feminist New Materialisms**

Briefly tracing feminist thought to the arrival at feminist new materialisms, this theoretical dissertation first introduces post-structuralist feminist theory. The post-structuralist intellectual project was essential in questioning fixed identities and universal truths, placing an emphasis on how gender, power, and knowledge are socially constructed through language and discourse, an essentially unstable foundation (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993). This discursive turn explores “interconnections between power, knowledge, subjectivity, and language” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). Famed for using poststructuralist tools to deconstruct identity, Judith Butler furthers the concept of performativity in the seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990)—suggesting that gender is an act and imitation of gender conventions, unpacking the social construction of gender, and uncovering power structures that reinforce binaries (Butler, 1993). Critically for feminist theory, to expand from the essentialist perspectives of gender, women, identity, and

power that preceded the discursive turn, and in moving from post-structuralist feminist theory, theorists called for ways to re-engage materiality, embodiment, and lived experience without reducing them to discursive or biologically essentialist accounts. Harding (2024) writes, “New materialities theories aim to reconcile the two through recognizing not that realities are *both* discursive and material, but that ‘the discursive’ and ‘the material’ are irredeemably interwoven, so drawing a binary distinction between them is mistaken” (p. 523). Feminist thought calls for ways to address perceived limitations of discursive accounts, particularly their difficulty in accounting for materiality, embodiment, and agency. The body of feminist new materialism/materialities, material feminisms, and posthuman literature represents a conceptual shift from the discursive turn.

A driving concept in feminist new materialism is the recognition of material agency. Alaimo (2008) offers a response to poststructuralist, postmodern, and cultural studies paradigms. This response both describes the construction of the world through the agency of discourse and culture and also neglects that same agency for matter:

None of these theorists deny the profound significance of culture, history, and discourse; yet, even as they take social construction seriously, by insisting that culture profoundly shapes what we experience, see, and know, they ask how nonhuman nature or the human body can ‘talk back’, resist, or otherwise affect its cultural construction. (Alaimo, 2008, p. 242)

Åsberg and Lykke (2010) suggest that there is a “a material realm in need of ...feminist accounts...around emerging new subjectivities and old identities that enact the aging human body” (p. 302). The body is an important material engagement in feminist new materialism: “Dealing with women’s bodies has thus always been a necessary aspect of feminist analysis but

also one of the most difficult” (Hekman, 2010, p. 72). Haraway (1991), whose theory of the cyborg aims to expand the feminist imagination, reconsiders boundaries and intersections of body and technology, offering “a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality ... as an imaginative resource” (p. 150). The cyborg disrupts a discourse/reality dichotomy of the body. Balsamo (1996) offers conception of the body through the lens of cultural technology “by focusing on the intertextual connections between cultural narratives and scientific and technological discourse”, considering both to be “preeminent technologies of culture as much as they are technologies that gender material bodies” (p. 162).

### ***Arriving to Agential Realism***

Karen Barad offers one of the most well cited theories of material agency through a theoretical conception of agential realism, developed by combining quantum mechanics with feminist thought (Harding, 2024). Responding to and in direct conversation with Butler, Barad builds on Butler’s theory of performativity, adding a materialist perspective (Ford et al., 2017; Heckman, 2010). Barad (2007) is interested in the relationship between the discursive and the material (allowing matter to matter) and advocates for “a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted” (p. 139). Barad proposes a theory of agential realism to account for materiality and entanglement. Agential realism is a robust theory that is discussed further in Chapter 2, including the definitions for the most cited concepts surrounding the intra-action, material-discursive, apparatus, agential-cuts, and phenomena.

### **Community-Engaged Scholarship**

One final piece to contextualize and situate this dissertation research is through the lens of community-engaged scholarship. Not only does this dissertation align with feminist praxis,

aiming to put the theoretical perspectives and orientations into practice, but this research also aims to center community-engagement as a core feature of the participatory diffractive process outlined in Chapter 3. In fact, I would argue that the community-engaged research outlined in this dissertation is a feminist praxis, as a central aim of the participatory process is to challenge traditional notions of power and agency. Priest and Kliewer (2017) suggest that for leadership development, “new ways of thinking and capacities required to intervene in established systems calls for a shift in focus... toward...approaches that are cocreated, participatory, and can account for degrees of social, political, economic, and moral agitation (p. 37). The participatory diffractive process used in the current research centers co-creation in the research design and analysis and participation and reciprocity in the knowledge creation and meaning-making processes.

## **Key Concepts and Terms Defined**

### **Defined Terms: Onto-epistem-ology**

Whereas ontology is used to describe the “what” of research or knowledge production—the underlying assumptions of the nature of what reality is and what exists, and epistemology to describe the “how” of what we know and how we come to know it, the following definition of onto-epistem-ology was used in the current research:

- **Onto-epistem-ology** rejects the separation between what we know, what exists (reality), and how we know it. Instead of an independent reality waiting to be observed or discovered by an observer, onto-epistem-ology suggests that reality is produced through material-discursive practices (Barad, 2007).

## **Defined Concept: Leadership**

To identify leadership as used in the Chapter 4 analysis, this theoretical dissertation uses and extends the concept of *in-flow-ence* (Simpson, 2024; Simson et al., 2018). Further complications and extensions of this concept and the specific way that this concept is used is discussed further in Chapter 4.

- **In-flow-ence** is a “movement constituted in, and emergent from, socially engaged talk” (Simpson et al., 2024, p. 6).

The current research also relies on secondary “definitions” of leadership included here. Crevani (2018) defines leadership as an “ongoing social process having to do with emerging structure...a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end...co-creating relationships, [it] is enacted in interactions among people, and may be found in process in which influential ‘acts of organizing’ contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments” (Crevani, 2018, p. 87). Harding (2024), who also aims to bring feminist new materialism to leadership, defines a leader and leadership as “a relational assemblage incorporating [a] sentient and non-sentient actor” (p. 522).

## **Defined Concept: Power**

Feminist thought broadens notions of power and recognizes that power is embedded in and produced through intersecting institutions and systems, including social structures, culture/norms, discourses, and the everyday (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993; Crawley et al., 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Launius & Hassel, 2015). Power is not just attuned to power relations, but also “within knowledge construction itself” (Crawley et al., 2008, p. 2).

Feminist new materialism additionally considers the “vitality of matter” (Bennett, 2010) and that reality/social phenomena, including power is emergent:

- **Power** is constituted through and emerges from material-discursive relations that include human and nonhuman actors (Barad, 2007).

### **Defined Concept: Agency**

Feminist approaches to agency are often seen as the capacity to respond to systems of power (Launius & Hassel, 2015), including the subversion of norms/systems (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993). Within feminist new materialism,

- **Agency** is not exclusive to humans; it emerges from relations and contends that the material world is agentive—bodies, environments, and technologies (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010).

### **Defined Concept: Objectivity**

Feminist theory critiques objectivity in knowledge production, aiming instead to view knowledge as situated and partial, emerging from specific social and embodied positions rather than as a “view from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988). Feminist thought resolves questions of objectivity through critical reflexivity, examining how power relations shape what is known (Harding, 1991). Reflexivity involves “turning one’s reflexive gaze on discourse” (Davies et al., 2004, p. 360).

Feminist new materialism, again, emphasizes entanglement of material and technologies, including the observer.

- **Objectivity** includes examining and accounting for apparatuses and the material conditions of knowledge production. Knowledge is something that emerges from material-discursive entanglements—producing the phenomena, rather than simply

being observed through reflection/reflexivity (Barad, 2007). Objectivity is based in an “intra-actively engaged agential separability, a relation of exteriority within phenomena” (Heckman, 2010, p. 78).

### **Defined Theory: Agential Realism**

Agential realism is a theory developed by Karen Barad (2007) that accounts for the entanglement and agency of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, nature and culture. For Barad (2007),

- **Agential realism** considers materiality as “an active factor in processes of materialization” (p. 2021). Matter is agential.

### **Defined Theoretical Traditions: Feminist New Materialism and Posthumanism**

Because this theoretical dissertation considers the human as central to processual ontologies of leadership and is concerned with bodies/embodiment, this work aligns more closely with the body of thought in feminist new materialism. The use of the term feminist new materialism is meant to signify the broadest possible look at feminist theories of materiality and to specify a lean towards new materialism over posthuman theories, rather than to suggest an alignment with a specific argument within one of these bodies of thought.

Arriving at a theoretical stake in the ground is not always easy when working at the intersections of leadership, technology, feminist theory, and organization. This section outlines some of the choice points and boundaries for the literature discussed in Chapter 2. As stated in the introduction, this research brings feminist new materialisms to processual ontologies of leadership, specifically Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism. In this dissertation, I use feminist new materialisms to speak to the varying ways that new materialism is described in the literature and the challenge of locating Barad’s theory of agential realism as solely associated in

one theoretical camp over another. Some argue that the very nature of new materialism is inherently feminist (Barad, 2014), meaning the concern of “new materialism” is the assumption of a “feminist” new materialism. The “new” of new materialism signifies a shift and distinction from Marxist theories of materialism, which emphasize how economic production and material conditions shape economic power (Ford et al., 2017).

Additionally, regardless of how heavily Barad’s work influences feminist new materialism, it is not solely a feminist new materialist theory. Barad’s theory and application of agential realism is seen as foundational work across posthumanism and new materialism/feminist new materialism, including having made significant contributions to science studies, philosophy, feminist theory, and physics (Haraway, 2007). While both feminist new materialisms and posthuman theory are dissatisfied with the discursive turn and attend to non-human agency and relations, they are also significantly different.

- **Feminist new materialism** focuses on material agency, including non-human actors, and embodiment
- **Posthuman theory** rethinks the human itself, decentering humans in the material world in place of networks (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2002; Bennett, 2010; Haraway, 1991).

## Chapter 1 Summary

In summary, this theoretical dissertation uses a feminist new materialism and posthuman theory, Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, and adopts a diffractive methodology to attend to how leadership is enacted through ongoing relations, practices, and material-discursive conditions. Feminist new materialisms provide the conceptual and methodological foundation for examining leadership as it is (re)configured and emerging in process, extending toward an onto-

epistem-ology (Barad, 2014) of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices. The approach outlined in this theoretical dissertation responds to literature within processual ontologies of leadership that calls for the development of theoretical and methodological approaches capable of capturing leadership as an emergent, relational, and ongoing process (Alvehus et al., 2022; Raelin et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Robinson & Riddell, 2022).

Chapter 1 introduced the theoretical and methodological challenges to processual ontologies of leadership as the background for this theoretical dissertation. Specific theoretical locations and key concepts were contextualized and defined in this chapter. Chapter 2 offers a literature review that arrives at the intersection of processual ontologies of leadership and feminist new materialisms, specifically focusing on Karen Barad's theory of agential realism. Chapter 2 also explores the implications of this arrival to methodologies and methods. Finally, Chapter 2 offers a theoretical framework that builds on Simpson (2024) by bringing agential realism to leadership as process.

## Chapter 2 - Existing Literature and Extending Theoretical Frameworks

*As human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed of matter. We experience its restlessness and intransigence even as we reconfigure and consume it. At every turn we encounter physical objects fashioned by human design and endure natural forces whose imperatives structure our daily routines for survival. Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives. **In light of this massive materiality, how could we be anything other than materialist?"***

*(Coole, et al. 2010, p. 1)*

This theoretical dissertation is concerned with extending agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership, resulting in a theoretical framework that is briefly applied to a case in Chapter 3. To begin this work, Chapter 2 includes a literature review of existing literature, arriving at the intersection between processual ontologies of leadership and feminist new materialisms, specifically focusing on Karen Barad's theory of agential realism. This specific arrival makes visible a theoretical foundation that can attend to questions of power, agency, and objectivity that have been insufficiently addressed within processual ontologies of leadership. Foregrounding entanglement theoretically aligns with diffractive methodology, enabling attention to both methodological and method-related concerns within processual ontologies of leadership. This literature review lays the groundwork for a theoretical framework that extends

processual ontologies of leadership into an *onto-epistem-ology* (Barad, 2014) of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

## **Existing Theories, Frameworks, and Methodologies**

This literature review first foregrounds theoretical perspectives across processual ontologies of leadership, feminist theory, and materiality. Then, methodological questions are traced to processual ontologies before existing methodologies and how they perform are addressed. This review briefly describes dominant leadership literature in order to clarify where processual ontologies of leadership fit and defines what is considered as processual ontologies of leadership, specifically in relation to the varying subfields and areas of overlap and departure. Because this dissertation relies on feminist theory, the current review marks trends within gender and leadership, women and leadership, and women's leadership.

In this literature review, I then identify the various ways that materiality has been explored in leadership literature both within research that includes processual ontologies of leadership and other subfields, including research that explores the relationship between leadership and socio-materiality, space, and bodies/embodiment. Additionally, the review provides an overview of feminist theories of materiality and material feminisms, including literature that highlights how these theories have been translated for interdisciplinary work within transgender studies (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013), critical race studies (Benjamin, 2019), disability studies (Nelson et al., 2019), indigenous studies (Rosiek et al., 2020), and feminist science/feminist technoscience studies (Åsberg & Lykke, 2010). Finally, agential realism is discussed in depth and in the greater theoretical context to provide a pathway for extending agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership.

## **Processual Ontologies of Leadership**

Processual ontologies of leadership, including leadership practice(s); Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) (Raelin, 2007; Raelin, 2016); and leadership that is dialogic, collaborative, relational, and concerned with the emergence of leadership. Scholars often rely and build on the tradition of practice theories (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990; Schatzki, 2019), which is a theoretical tradition that accounts “for the processual, relational and interactional character of leadership” (Crevani & Lammi, 2023, p. 33). To understand the research agendas that concern processual ontologies of leadership, this section first explores literature that transitions leadership research from traits and tripods by: (1) critiquing dominant themes in leadership literature and calling for more critical perspectives; (2) complicating the context and relationality for leadership, specifically how it relates to identity; and (3) approaching leadership research with an agentic view on power and interrogating the use of power to advance critical leadership studies.

Ospina and Foldy (2009) explored the intersection between race and leadership in four ways. First, they brought race and ethnicity to the forefront by connecting the fundamental role that race plays in society and arguing that if the role race and ethnicity play in society is significant, so must it also be for leadership. Second, they aimed to address larger concerns in the field regarding context and how context is conceptualized and incorporated into leadership. Third, they connected their subject of inquiry (race-ethnicity) to the phenomena of leadership without removing or lessening difference in order to demonstrate “less bureaucratic, more loosely associated organizational forms” (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p. 877). Finally, they summarized that their focus on race and ethnicity allowed them to surface “understandings of the role of power in leadership and the context of leadership” (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p. 877). Ospina and Foldy’s work represents a response to literature that was moving to center the

“dynamic relationships between both leaders and followers”; expanding this, they emphasized collective dimensions of leadership by exploring the “how” of leadership.

By analyzing 148 sources of literature across several related fields to race, ethnicity, and leadership, Ospina and Foldy (2009) proposed three questions that were implicit or explicit in the scholarship. These questions focused on race-ethnicity’s effect on perceptions of leadership, how race-ethnicity affected how leadership is enacted, and how leaders grapple with the social reality of race-ethnicity. Their discussion serves as a reminder that removing identity, whether race, gender, or otherwise, from the study of leadership makes the study of leadership incomplete. They call for a study of leadership that complicates context, moving from individual to collective dimension; power, from acknowledgement to analysis; agency, from dualistic to holistic; and more. In connection with the current dissertation, perhaps the most important implication from their work is the call for more critical perspectives and methodologies for leadership, including the need for “more cross fertilization among disciplines and among research perspectives” (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p. 892).

Collinson (2014) responded to a call for future agendas in leadership studies by discussing three themes in leadership literature—dichotomies, dialectics, and dilemmas—and arguing for a re-frame of leadership. Collinson first substantiates dichotomization in leadership studies, using transformational and transactional leadership literature, to demonstrate this trend. He suggests that though there are many examples in leadership studies of dichotomous thinking, trying to impose order in ambiguity and complexity is a fruitless task. This is because in reality, “leadership dynamics are complex and elusive” (Collinson, 2014, p. 39). He further argues that dichotomization which ignores complexity and important dilemmas has negative effects on the study of leadership, “over-simplifying the complex, inter-connected, and shifting relationships

that characterize leadership” (Collinson, 2009, p. 39). Collinson’s aim was to help leadership studies move from dichotomies to dialectics.

Citing influences on a “dialectical turn”, Collinson (2009) reinforces an interest in deconstructing distinctions in favor of “tension and/or mutually reinforcing inter-relationships” (p. 41). He continues by highlighting various dialectical turns, including within leadership, critical studies, and—importantly for this dissertation research—feminist studies, including embodied and gendered forms of leadership, and the materiality of leadership (both also explored further in this chapter). Collinson (2009) noted that “these emergent critiques of dichotomization suggest that dialectical interplay and tension within power asymmetries may be important for new directions for critical leadership studies” (p. 42), citing specifically that “less attention has focused on the multiple, inter-related, and simultaneous nature of leadership dialectics and the tensions and interplay between them” (p. 43). Collinson also suggests that the approach he outlined reframes leadership dynamics so that their “shifting, multiple, paradoxical, embodied, and situated dynamics” (p. 47) can be explored.

Alvehus and Kiltmoller (2024) proposed complementing how power is dominantly understood in critical leadership studies by discussing leadership politics, shifting to an agentic view on power and taking reflexive actors into account. They explored an episodic power that centers individual agency, suggesting that “leadership encompasses interactional tactics on different organizational levels, and [that] actors engaged in leadership reflect on episodes of power use” (p. 71). Alvehus and Kiltmoller suggest reintroducing a political understanding of power to leadership that centers agency in leadership process and moves toward more relational approaches. They additionally emphasize that, to study leadership this way, methodological considerations need to prioritize multi-sited and multimodal ethnography.

These three representative examples (Alvehus & Kitmoller, 2024; Collinson, 2009; Ospina & Foldy, 2009) demonstrate the context in which scholars have called for further explorations and research agendas within leadership studies. The following need further exploration: First, critical approaches are needed to explore leadership; second, there is a need for further advancing and re-framing leadership as situated and emergent; and third, there should be further recognition of an agentic view on power in leadership process, moving methodologies to observe people in organizations, including non-human actors. Scholars moving toward a processual ontology of leadership strive to pick up these questions and calls for further research agendas while centering an ontology of leadership as process.

As a reminder, Figure 1.1 visually organizes three dominate perspectives in leadership literature—normative, critical, and culturally relevant—across three dominant ontologies of leadership (tripod, relational, and processual). The following articles can be considered as overlapping with processual ontologies of leadership literature, though they may not always intersect with critical perspectives. The following reviews represent the most recognized beginning of a “practice turn” (Raelin, 2007) in leadership studies literature and highlight some of the major theoretical and methodological developments since its inception.

Raelin (2007) is perhaps best seen as a first entry point and catalyst for theorizing Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P), a central, guiding concept within processual ontologies of leadership. Raelin argues that in moving away from practice, learning has suffered. As a result, Raelin suggests a reintegration of theory and practice to have better theory, better practice, and better learning. He theoretically traces within the literature how theory and practice split, reviewed the practice turn in epistemology, and offered building blocks “to create mutuality between theorists and practitioners” (Raelin, 2007, p. 499) because “the two need to become

partners in both the production and dissemination of knowledge” (p. 499). The most referred to building block in subsequent literature is the call for critical reflection. Raelin predominantly contextualizes his argument for a practice turn within work-based learning, offering a bridge between work-based learning and what would become L-A-P in leadership literature.

Carroll et al. (2008) addressed Raelin’s (2007) call to emphasize the practice turn and offered an alternative to the competency paradigm in leadership and leadership development. The main discussion that Carroll et al. (2008) expands surrounds the promise of practice theory for leadership literature, suggesting that “a practice ontology, epistemology, and methodology offers different and multiple units of analysis...considerably broader definitional scope, a new vocabulary and a re-theorization of both agency and action” (p. 366). Tracing practice theory, Carroll et al. discussed practice theory’s assumptions of relationality and a “logic of practice”. Most importantly, Carroll et al. traces this theoretical tradition to bring the observation and consideration of “the everyday” to leadership studies. In analyzing data from post-program interviews, Carroll et al. (2008) claimed: “There also appears to be a link between practice and process where participants become aware of the multitude of actions, reactions, and interactions that make up ‘the everyday’ of leadership” (p. 371), suggesting that attention can be drawn to the ordinary. In the implications of their research, Carroll et al. (2008) discussed that turning to practice illuminates a pathway to recognize “‘unheroic work’... [that a] broadening and re-definition of who is engaged in leadership work is well overdue and promises the potential for research to be more focused and specific on the constitution of leadership in different sites and from different organizational positions (or ‘non-positions’)” (p. 374). This is an important distinction and what defines leadership as practice: that leadership is ordinary, everyday, can be observed in mundane interactions and experiences, and “desires leadership to be an embodied,

embedded way of being and approaching organizations, contexts and the world” (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 371). By shifting the unit of analysis, Carroll et al. appeals for a leadership as practice agenda to “develop a body of work...that can offer an alternative ‘ontology, epistemology and methodology’ (p. 363). Carroll et al. propose six questions to consider, including questions around where and how is the work of leadership done, who does the work, common tools and techniques, and “How is the work of leadership organized, communicated and consumed?” (2008, p. 372). Carroll et al. connects leadership as practice to also having impact on the development of leadership.

Building a more complete L-A-P body of work, Raelin (2016) describes L-A-P as “a new paradigm in the field of leadership studies” (n.p.), suggesting that L-A-P is “a new movement in leadership research and practice destined to shake the foundations of the very meaning of leadership in the worlds of both theory and application” (p.1). Raelin's (2016) edited volume advances L-A-P across critical themes, including essays on (1) the background of the movement that maps L-A-P’s existing research and the theoretical basis for L-A-P; (2) the exploration of the embodied nature of L-A-P, including the claim that “leadership occurs from an interaction with the environment through both individual and collective sensorimotor processing (p. 11); (3) an address of the social interactions that underlie the practices of leadership; and (4) the critical application of L-A-P. Noted essays from this edited volume are as follows.

Carroll (2016) claimed that researchers must change how they research identity and leadership with particular focus on identity. Her essay recounts a workplace scenario in which Carroll (2016) observed a team meeting, exploring the occurrence through the lenses of practice, identity, physical space, routines, artifacts, and leadership and concluding that “a practice-embedded look at how identity shapes leadership in the intersection of individuals, their context,

and their relationships” (p. 105). For L-A-P research, a practice orientation allows for observation of the ways that identity is co-created in and with environment.

Simpson (2016) reminds readers that if de-centering individual leaders moves theory to “more contextualized, participatory, engaged, and relational understandings of leadership” (p.159), then analysis of associated constructs are required. Her essay offers a re-examination of power and agency in the context of practice. Simpson outlined three modes of action and their implications for agency: leadership as self-action, leadership as inter-action, and leadership as trans-action. In doing so, Simpson offers “The Leader Practitioner,” “Leadership as a set of practices,” and “Leadership in the flow of practice” (p. 171). Figure 2.1 shows expressions of agency across these practice perspectives. This chart is revisited in the Theoretical Framework section, building on an additional column to show how a proposed agential realist theoretical framework can extend Simpson’s work.

Figure 2.1. Comparison of Three Different Practice Perspectives of Leadership

|                               | <i>The Leader-Practitioner</i>      | <i>Leadership as a Set of Practices</i>                        | <i>Leadership in the Flow of Practice</i>                          |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Category of action</b>     | Self-action                         | Inter-action                                                   | Trans-action                                                       |
| <b>Agency</b>                 | Exercise of free will               | Influencing others                                             | Ongoing coordinated accomplishment of work                         |
| <b>Power</b>                  | Power to ...                        | Power over ...                                                 | Power with ...                                                     |
| <b>Context</b>                | Irrelevant                          | Structure as a fixed container within which action takes place | Context and trans-actors are mutually engaged in an emergent whole |
| <b>Relationality</b>          | Irrelevant                          | Dyadic and network inter-linkages                              | Mutually constituting temporally unfolding relationships           |
| <b>Temporality</b>            | Irrelevant                          | Time as an independent variable                                | Temporal experience is enfolded in and emergent with trans-actions |
| <b>Ontological assumption</b> | Substantialist, Representationalist | Substantialist, Representationalist                            | Processual, Performative                                           |

*Note: This figure was derived from Simpson (2016), p. 173.*

Sergi (2016) proposed that researchers should investigate leadership differently and understand leadership in action, in order to answer questions of “where” to find leadership and of “what” leadership is made of (p. 110). Similarly, Ford (2016) used a post-structuralist feminist theoretical perspective to show “how depictions of leadership are thoroughly embedded in relationships and experiences” (p. 237), calling for more critical, relational, and inter-subjective approaches to leadership. These essays are explored further in this literature review in the Feminist Theory and Leadership Literature and the Leadership, Organization, and Materiality sections.

The reception of L-A-P within the field of leadership studies is varied. A noted intellectual debate between Raelin et al. (2018) and Collinson (2017; 2018) as published in *Leadership* includes several articles in which challenges and questions to L-A-P are posed, answered, and rehashed. The most significant critique centers L-A-P's critical-ness, especially in relation to power (Collinson, 2018). Collinson (2018) asserts that, on behalf of critical leadership studies, "critical perspectives view practice and power, and structure and agency, as inextricably linked" (p. 386) and that the main point of contention with L-A-P is that there is "no analytical space for practice outside power relations" (Collinson, 2018, p. 8). Carroll (as cited in Raelin et al., 2018) specified in her response to Collinson's (2018) questions to L-A-P is that "L-A-P looks for power at the point it emerges, becomes visible, or is accomplished by both human and material agents", continuing that "critical leadership theory favors a direct confrontation with 'hard' power whilst L-A-P likes to get intimate with ambiguous spaces containing 'soft' power" (p. 8). Carroll summarized that L-A-P asks for researchers to better see a multitude of layers and categories of power relations and encourages that both critical and practice scholars need to engage across multiple understandings of power. After this longstanding debate, more recent scholarship has been published at the intersection of critical leadership studies and processual ontologies of leadership (Alvehus & Kiltmoller, 2024 as discussed earlier in Chapter 2), which encourages future scholarship to look to agentive power and interrogate the dynamic and emergent elements of power without assigning soft/hard categories or good/bad uses of power.

Recent discussions focus less on aligning with L-A-P (or not) and more on reiterating, reproducing, and extending slightly differencing definitions of leadership—practice, process, movement, direction, etc. —and surfacing methodology and method concerns when an idea such as leadership relies on slippery definitions. This begs the question: How, then, do we know what

leadership is and how to research it (Larsson et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Simpson, 2024; Sutherland, 2018)? More articles that advance the study of processual ontologies of leadership are included in the Methodology Questions for Processual Ontologies of Leadership section of Chapter 2 due to their focus on methodology and method. Table 1 outlines key contribution to processual ontologies of leadership alongside their theoretical foundations/traditions and methodology/methods.

### Contributions to Processual Ontologies of Leadership

The below chart represents some of the key contributions to processual ontologies of leadership to provide some clarification on what these ontologies may be calling themselves, what subfield of leadership studies they engage, what theoretical traditions they rely on, and what methodologies or methods they use or suggest.

**Table 2.1** Key Contributions to Processual Ontologies of Leadership

| Key Contributions to Processual Ontologies of Leadership |                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                               |                                                                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Subfield                                                 | Exemplar             | Leadership as...                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Theoretical Foundation                                                        | Methodology and/or Method Used or Proposed                                                                                       |
| Relational/ Collective Leadership                        | Drath et al. (2008)  | Leadership as... three outcomes: (1) direction: widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims, and mission; (2) alignment: the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective; and (3) commitment: the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit (p. 636) | Functionalism                                                                 |                                                                                                                                  |
| Purpose-Driven Leadership                                | By (2021)            | Leadership as... the collective pursuit of delivering on purpose (p. 40) Shifting DAC to PAC.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Telos Leadership Lens; Applied to existing leadership theory, including L-A-P |                                                                                                                                  |
| Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P)                           | Raelin et al. (2025) | Leadership as... Practice. L-A-P is about change and can be distinguished from other as-practice movements...because it defines leadership as turning points leading to a change in trajectories within the                                                                                                                                                                     | Practice Theory                                                               | <b>Methodologies:</b> Interpretative forms of inquiry applying ethnographic as well as narrative and aesthetic methodologies are |

|                                      |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                      |                           | flow of practice (p. 3). To find and change leadership, must look to the practice within which it is occurring (p. 3).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                         | needed to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process.                                                                                                       |
| Multimodal Leadership Studies (MMLS) | Alvehus & Crevani (2022)  | Leadership as... a socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction (p. 232).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Leadership-as-Practice<br><br>Practice Theory tradition | <b>Method:</b> Micro-ethnography. Short, intensive fieldwork attending to situations and interactions.                                                                                |
| Collaborative Leadership             | Robinson & Riddell (2022) | Leadership as... a collaborative achievement—leadership that emerges from interactions across members of a group, where that interaction causes a change in the trajectory of activity, decisions, or strategy (p. 2).                                                                                                                                               | Leadership-as-Practice<br><br>Practice Theory tradition | <b>Method:</b> Vectors and videos. Six step process to uncover and develop collaborative leadership. Group was recorded during a meeting and analyzed replays.                        |
| Collaborative Leadership             | Simpson (2024)            | Leadership as... movement constituted in, and emergent from, socially engaged talk. Leadership emerges within the flow of ongoing social practice, happening within the dynamic flow of interactions, conversations, and actions among people. A divergent process that explores opportunities for making new futures in worlds that are constantly changing (p. 5). | American Pragmatism                                     | <b>Method:</b> Recording and observation of senior management team meetings at an arts-based company. Diffraction that complements the <i>thinkindooing</i> of Pragmatist philosophy. |
| Leadership Moments                   | Larson et al. (2025)      | Leadership as... process, practice and a relational phenomenon (p. 1307).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Pragmatism/Functionalism (implicit)                     | <b>Method:</b> Four step procedure that combines an interpretive stance, guided by a sensitizing concept, with an ethnomethodologically inspired inductive analysis                   |

Because this dissertation is concerned with materiality and brings a feminist new materialism to processual ontologies of leadership, this review would be incomplete without understanding how feminist theory is represented in leadership literature and how materiality is considered across leadership literature, including within overlapping fields like organization studies, especially if they leverage similar theoretical traditions. In the following two sections, some of the major contributions or a representative selection of poignant ideas that cut across these areas and fields of study are reviewed.

## **Feminist Theory in Leadership Literature**

Dominant narratives within leadership studies that explore and engage feminist theory most often circle around feminism/feminist stances/feminist perspectives (Owen, 2020), gender/women and leadership (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013), and gendered leadership (Ford, 2016). Some early leadership literature shifts focus to embodied leaders, focusing the body as a site of construction and subversion and offering a focus on gender (Sinclair, 2005) in the reading of leaders' bodies. The below articles are meant to offer an overview of the types of ways that leadership literature has explored women and leadership, gendered leadership, women as leaders, and more, regardless of if they recognized a processual ontology of leadership.

Owen (2020) centers a feminist perspective within college student leadership development. Owen's book offers a more critical approach to both leadership development and women and leadership by spending time parsing out notions of gendered leadership—feminine leadership—from gender and leadership, an approach that accounts for power, hegemony, and ideology. This approach also proposes an intersectional feminist theoretical lens to understand leader identity. Owen's book clearly defines leadership as a “relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change” (p. 18), which relies heavily on the social change model of leadership for students. Leadership is “positive” social change. This framing positions the book as a tool to develop student leaders to better accomplish social change, citing that the ability to accomplish positive social change is what characterizes the leadership/leader. The book explores historical overviews of leadership theory, feminist theoretical waves, student voices, gender issues, and impact on campus/world/leadership.

Muhr and Sullivan (2013) offer a case study of a transgender leader's experience within an organization to consider the relationship between the body and leadership (p. 416). The article

uses queer leadership theory and blurs leadership images through a series of research interviews with Claire, a trans leader, and her colleagues. Muhr and Sullivan aimed to create a case to explore Claire's gendered experience and colleague perceptions and to postulate how the case might push notions of leadership beyond a gender binary. Using a theory of gender performativity, Muhr and Sullivan (2013) define gender as "shaped by and through discursive practices, which construct certain expectations for the way people—both affectively and through their material bodies—ought to perform" (p. 417). Muhr and Sullivan connect their definition to how leaders perform in leadership spaces, and for their particular case, in the context of an organization. The central analysis from their interviews demonstrates that a leader's body serves as a site for interaction, in which gendered assumptions play out within a leader-follower dynamic and are continually "read, interpreted, interacted with" (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013, p. 429). The findings recommend tolerance in the workplace and echo how bodies matter in organizations because "appearance produces and controls leadership identity in gendered ways" (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013, p. 429), even if more explicitly noticed in this case. By situating a trans leader's experience as one that captures how colleagues experience Claire when moving from more masculine clothes and representation to more feminine clothes and representation, their research adheres closely to normative gender categories, associating specific leadership performances with certain gender performances.

Ford (2016) engages the idea that if L-A-P is within the context of organization, meaning teams of people, there is a risk that L-A-P may reinforce traditional assumptions and assume gender neutrality with other social identities. Driven by her experiences in organizational research, Ford argues for more critical and reflexive accounts by first surfacing dominant themes in literature that center leaders and heroic leaders as saviors able to transform organizations just

by their appointment. Shaped by the—at the time—emerging trend in leadership studies calling for critical leadership studies or critical approaches to leadership, Ford (2016) echoes that a critical approach requires “the researcher to move from a positivist stance of the objective pursuit of truth, and towards a more active and reflexive role” (p. 226). Ford proposes that a post-structural feminist approach operating as a theoretical basis can shed light on leadership, pushing to look at leadership from a gendered perspective. Ford interviewed 18 managers within a major local authority in England and analyzed discourses of leadership. One example of these analyzed discourses included an account in which a manager performed a masculine position and acquired skills to “think like a man” (Ford, 2016, p. 230). With her post-structuralist perspectives, Ford calls into question the categories of social phenomena that were observed. Ford (2016) discusses implications for L-A-P from her study, notably, developing subjective approaches to leadership to open up “the possibility for reflection, for questioning assumptions and for surfacing different meanings...creating through the acts of dialogue, new meanings and understandings” (p. 237).

### **Leadership, Organization, and Materiality**

When thinking about materiality as an important aspect of the current research, this literature review identifies a narrow scope of literature at the intersection of leadership, organization, and materiality. Literature in organization studies and/or management and organization studies, as well as literature at the intersection of gender, work, and organization, offer robust engagement with materiality, feminist theories, feminist theories of materiality, and practice-based approaches, more so than general leadership literature. However, the context of these various explorations often center on work versus leadership, manager versus leader, working selves/bodies, gender and work, gender and organization/gendered organization, and embodiment at work (Acker, 1990; Acker, 1998; Brewis & Sinclair, 2000; Boncori et al., 2019;

Fotaki et al., 2014; Harding et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2022; Harris & Ashcraft, 2023; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015; Pullen et al., 2019). For this literature review, articles which significantly overlap with leadership literature by either speaking directly to leadership research(ers) or using leadership or the leader as a unit of analysis are discussed further.

Pullen and Vachhani (2013) provide an introduction and overview to a materiality by centering ways to understand the body and embodiment in leadership. Pullen and Vachhani specify the need for both theoretical and empirical perspectives regarding the “embodied inter-relations between leaders and followers” (p. 316) and argue that “bodies lie at the heart of theorizing leadership” (p. 316). Their framing speaks to the material body in leadership as felt experiences and embodied responses between leaders and followers. Pullen and Vachhani rely heavily on normative notions of leadership (i.e., there are leaders in positions of power and those who follow them) to theorize an embodied relationship to leadership.

Ropo and Salovaara (2019) utilize Henri Lefebvre’s consideration of the production of social space to identify an emotional relationship to space and sense-based ways of knowing as leadership activity. For Ropo and Salovaara, space is produced and continually constructed in a performative process. They conceptualize leadership as “produced in an embodied and performative process between people and space” (p. 461) and note that “knowledge about the self is embedded in the materiality of the environment and physical space” (p. 462).

Sergi (2016) questions “‘Where’ could leadership be?” (p. 110) and suggests that materiality allows researchers to get closer to the understanding of leadership as it is enacted. She specifically references the embodied nature of leadership: “We shift the locus of leadership from individuals to collective, material, and embodied practices enacted in context” (Sergi, 2016, p. 111). For Sergi (2016), the notion of material and embodied practices is a way to think about

the relationship between the human and nonhuman and the collective nature of leadership—that leadership is the product of collective action (p. 123). Sergi interjects considerations of materiality that shift from the leader to leadership and account for the nonhuman (i.e., documents) in limited scope.

Ford et al. (2017) discuss leaders as a material process and conducted 60-to-90-minute interviews in three stages to better understand the manifestation of leadership, including if and how that happens through physical appearance (p. 1,557). Using Karen Barad’s new materialist theory and Christopher Bollas’s object relations theory, the authors analyze three themes that emerged in the interviews: reading appearance, work on the self, and the self as an ideal leader. Their study led them to offer an endogenous theory of the materiality of leadership, focusing on agentive actors that performatively materialize leaders: “... by looking like a leader... I become more that kind of leader” (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1,565). In their call for future research at the intersection of materiality and leadership, Ford et al. critique the notion of disembodied leaders and call for exploring intra-actions between leader-selves, organizational space, and explicit exploration of power, suggesting the need for “further studies of how leaders articulate and understand leadership in the everyday of organizational life” (p. 1,568).

A final article that helps build a clear picture of the landscape of materiality and leadership, and which is most instrumental to this dissertation, is Harding’s (2025) essay, where she brings feminist new materialities theories to an understanding of leadership. After situating critical leadership studies as long prioritizing constructionist/constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives, Harding covers the feminist new materialities landscape and explains Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism. After doing so, Harding (2025) applies these ideas to exemplar papers within transformational leadership and Leadership-As-Practice and conducts an

in-depth analysis to “show how a new materialist approach could lead to their being conceived of differently” (p. 531). Harding (2025) leads readers to a “disappointed and disappointing conclusion” (p. 531) after extensive analysis, suggesting that this endeavor is in its infancy, and that “the necessary intellectual resources [are] not yet developed, and the potential of using new materialities approaches to intervene in ‘the world’ [is] not yet clear. That is the task of another paper” (p. 532).

So far, this literature review has identified how researchers are shifting to a processual ontology of leadership, including what this means for continuing this line of inquiry and how materiality and feminist theories are currently engaged, regardless of how they ontologically define leadership. These moves have surfaced a gap and substantiated need for more theoretical engagement with critical theories, as well as alignment between theoretical foundations, to inform a definition of leadership, including as an object of study, and how to study it. The current theoretical dissertation aims to address this gap by looking to critical perspectives, specifically feminist theory, and using a theory of agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership. The following section engages feminist theories of materiality and feminist new materialisms.

### **The Material in Feminist Theory**

Van der Tuin (2011) suggests that “feminist theory is at the cutting edge of material turn” (p. 271). Alaimo, Hekman, and other contributors (2008) suggest that the linguistic turn in feminist theory—though vital and productive work for feminist theory—presents a critical gap that a re-entry of materiality can address. Theorists who advocate for the material in feminist theory do so not at the expense of rejecting discursively created realities but rather to insist that scholars can no longer separate the “existence of material reality...as a realm entirely separate

from that of language, discourse, and culture” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 3). Alaimo and Hekman additionally make a distinction regarding terms between materialist feminism and material feminisms. Where materialist feminisms draw from Marxism to contextualize the oppression of women within capitalism and the patriarchy, material feminisms work to redefine “our understanding of the relationships among the natural, the human, and the nonhuman” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 7), insisting that “nature must be considered a noteworthy actor.” (p. 9). Material feminisms work to create a new paradigm for feminist thought that considers the material world—nature, human, and nonhuman—alongside the linguistic and discursive and identifies the ways they overlap and intersect in their production of the “real”.

One of the main projects in engaging materiality in feminist thought encompasses expanding conceptions of the body by extending discursive considerations. Alaimo and Hekman (2008) suggest that “nearly all of the work in this area has been confined to the analysis of discourses about the body.... [that] the discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices” (p. 3). Scholars who engage in the areas of feminist science studies and material feminisms tend to echo Alaimo et al.’s (2008) critiques, especially as they begin to identify gaps in the theoretical underpinnings and advocate for and position new approaches and theorizations. For example, Barad (2007) suggests that neither Butler nor Foucault “addresses the nature of technoscientific practices and their profoundly productive effects on human bodies, as well as the ways in which these practices are deeply implicated in what constitutes the human, and more generally the workings of power” (p. 145). In response to challenges that they’ve constructed realities that forget the material world, specifically bodies, Butler (1993) offers a conception of materiality that is the effect of “a dynamic power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the

regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects” (p. xii). Butler’s argument refuses to leave the real/material as a product of language/materiality dichotomy; it instead remains grounded in an iterative process through which the material body is continually reformulated through discursive constitutions of reality. Barad (2007) contends that Butler’s theory (1993), even if Butler suggests that it considers materiality, “ultimately reinscribes matter as a passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 151). Alamo and Hekman (2008) further position that “we need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world—ways that account for myriad ‘intra-actions’ (in Karen Barad’s terms) between phenomena that are material, discursive, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 5). As such, the aim of material feminisms/feminist new materialisms is to make sense of the world through both discursive and material considerations and entanglements.

A foundational work that explores materiality in feminist thought is the edited volume *Material Feminisms* (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). In their introduction, Alaimo and Hekman frame the need for a re-integration of the materiality of the human body and the natural world to feminist theory and practice. Alaimo and Hekman (2008) sketch out a brief history of feminist thought that linguistically and discursively transitions from the body as an “extraordinarily volatile site” (p. 1) to one that aligns with social constructionist models and stems from postmodern and poststructuralist thought. While they specify that the linguistic and discursive turn in feminist thought has significantly shaped how feminist theory analyzes the “interconnections between power, knowledge, subjectivity, and language” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1), they point out a critical gap in postmodern feminist approaches. For Alaimo and

Hekman, postmodernism in its embrace of the language/reality dichotomy suggests that the real/material is a product of language. To re-introduce the material to feminist thought, they argue, will “attempt to move beyond discursive construction and grapple with materiality” and will “build on rather than abandon the lessons learned in the linguistic turn” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6). In doing this, they deconstruct the material/discursive dichotomy and shepherd a feminist theory that “is taking matter seriously” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6).

Alaimo (2008), in their chapter “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature”, and Hekman (2008), in their chapter “Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism”, both position their arguments as a need for material feminisms, offering considerations for new paradigms, settlements, and a ballast. Alaimo (2008) outlines a “flight from nature” (p. 237) in feminist theory as a result of adherence to strict social constructionism and further suggests that current paradigms of feminist theory “tend to focus exclusively on how various bodies have been discursively produced...which casts the body as passive” (p. 137), offering “trans-corporeality” as an inhabitable space in which the body is inseparable from nature (p. 238). Trans-corporeality is a theoretical site, or “a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo, 2008, p. 238). Alaimo’s suggestion of trans-corporeality offers a pathway to connect “embodied existence” and the “non-human”.

Hekman (2008) argues for a shift from epistemology to ontology in contemporary feminist thought, noting that doing so will bring materiality back into feminism. In constructing this argument, Hekman outlines a theoretical and practical crisis in feminist thought. Hekman builds an argument of crisis through relying on Haraway’s (1991) early attempts to deconstruct the discourse/reality dichotomy and the claim of a fundamental flaw in critical theory to

automatically resorting to power, discourse, and society. As Hekman (2008) works to define a new paradigm for feminist thought, a key commitment to the success of this feminist paradigm is that it expands notions of materiality and accounts for its interconnected nature. This commitment considers nonhuman agency even though the “notion of nonhuman agency is a difficult to conceptualize” (p. 95), and the ways that “science, technology, and society, all of which possess agency, interact [is] in complex ways to give us an understanding of the world” (Hekman, 2008, p. 95). To build new settlements, as Hekman (2008) suggests, theorists need “a conception that does not presuppose a gap between language and reality that must be bridged, [nor one] that does not define as two opposites” (p. 92).

Hekman (2008) offers four settlements in emerging theory to define a new paradigm rooted in (1) the philosophy of science that considers the role of nonhuman agency in science, (2) a contemporary epistemology that attempts to navigate the discursive turn of postmodernism with the traditionalist modernist concern with realism, and (4) a feminist thought that raises flags regarding the linguistic turn’s tendency to ignore the lived realities of women’s bodies. To move from epistemology to ontology, Hekman proposes a social ontology as useful for constructing a new settlement. Central to her argument is the concept of disclosure, arguing that social construction and material and can be balanced by refocusing language as disclosing reality instead of constructing reality. For Hekman (2008), “embracing a feminist social ontology...allows us to talk about something that has been lost in the linguistic turn: identity” (p. 115). Finding a way to theorize identity that incorporates both “bodies and social scripts” (Hekman, 2008, p. 115) will allow for a closer realization of a feminist social ontology.

While Hekman (2008) claims that both bodies and social scripts are needed to imagine a new settlement in feminist thought, Alaimo (2008) pushes the concept of the body further, suggesting that:

Radical reconsideration of matter is the question of agency. If we are to understand nature as something other than as a passive resource for the exploits of Man, and if we are to understand the human body as something other than a blank slate awaiting the inscription of culture, we must reconceptualize bodies and natures in ways that recognize their actions. (p.95)

Alaimo (2008) situates “the body” as discursively produced through “social, cultural, experiential or psychical construction” (p. 237); it needs to be brought back to nature. Alaimo (2008) proposes instead that “we inhabit... ‘trans-corporeality’—the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from ‘nature’ or ‘environment’” (p. 238). To demonstrate the extent to which humans are inseparable from the environment, Alaimo utilizes an example of trans-corporeal space-time in toxic bodies and identifies, in Baradian terms, the intra-activity that emerges from environmental, social, political, and biological spheres. Trans-corporeality offers a “connection from one’s own embodied existence to the survival of nonhuman creatures” (Alaimo, 2008, p. 258). The material world is theorized by Alaimo as actions and man-made substances that interact with the environment and bodies.

The next three articles demonstrate how feminist conceptions of materiality have influenced interdisciplinary work across disability studies, transgender studies, indigenous studies, and Feminist Science Studies/feminist technoscience.

Disability studies and transgender studies often consider the specific relationships between the body, technology, biology, identity, and the ways that nonhuman agents and

scientific “progress” intersect discursive, socially and culturally produced bodies on the margins. For example, Nelson et al. (2019) used art and storytelling to speak to the “constitution of disability with technologies, as well as the modes of mobility available to disabled bodies” (p. 1). They explored the human and nonhuman relationships that, for bodies with disabilities, “are understood and changed with different technological choices and perform ‘cripness’ in ways that emphasize different built environmental circumstances, social representations, and stigmas” (Nelson et al., 2019, p. 4). The article attends to how material technologies can be thought of as both an imposition on, or as an extension of, bodyminds. Irni (2017) explored similar connections between human and nonhuman agents and the “materiality of risk” in hormone treatments. Beginning by examining narratives from trans experiences, Irni (2017) rethinks materialization of hormone treatments and, in doing so, claims that “bodily phenomena need to be seen as constituted within relations of power, including the intertwining of economic relations, race, class, sexuality, and gender” (p. 110).

Rosiek et al. (2020) highlight that Karen Barad’s concept of agential realism captures non-human agency as a way that non-Indigenous scholars can make sense of the material world. Indigenous thought, often excluded from Eurocentric philosophical traditions, has been concerned with the material world in knowledge production. Rosiek et al. (2020) reminds scholars that the assumption that “Indigenous studies is primitive, less rigorous, less theoretically refined, simplistically concerned with identity politics, and so on” (p. 333) misses an opportunity for engagement with Indigenous ontologies of agency. This interdisciplinary, Indigenous studies article helps to situate material feminisms within both Indigenous and western notions of materiality.

Since the outset of the reintroduction of materiality to feminist thought, Feminist Science Studies/feminist technoscience (used interchangeably in this dissertation) is an overlapping interdisciplinary field and academic approach concerned with knowledge production and technology development; it is interested in finding new ways to do science. Feminist Science Studies/feminist technoscience have high levels of engagement with theories that aim to connect diverse ways of being, knowledge creation, subjectivity, and understanding with the material world—ways that accounts for interconnected realities of body/human, non-human, technological, discursive, and environmental actors. Åsberg and Lykke (2010) provide an overview of the commitments in Feminist Science Studies that outlines how “in different ways...[commitment] to the technoscientifically mediated processes of materialization and intra-action...take place between discursivity and materiality, culture and biology, subjectivity and embodiment” (p. 99). Feminist technoscience draws “attention to the ways in which the discursive and material aspects of sociotechnical relations and processes of materialization are inextricably intertwined” (Åsberg & Lykke, 2010, p. 299). For feminist technoscience, scientific theories and technological/practical applications have limited commitment to strictly positivist orientations. They acknowledge the added layers of globalization and global capitalism that offer “new ways of conceptualizing what it means to be an embodied human subject in a globalized world” (p. 300).

Benjamin (2019) demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary work that intersects feminist science studies and critical race studies, as well as how these two theoretical foundations provide a critical lens to unpack what is built into our technologies. In her introduction, Benjamin (2019) states that her book decodes “the powerful assumptions and values embedded into the material and digital architecture of our world” (p. 2). Technologies under the veil of objectivity have

biases and racist ideology embedded in them and reinscribe the lived experience of bodies within social and cultural systems in digital spaces.

These examples from disability studies, transgender studies, Indigenous studies, and Feminist Science Studies/feminist technoscience demonstrate the spectrum of how feminist thought considers, reintroduces, complicates, and centers materiality. Feminist thought has shaped materiality and the relationships bodies have to the nonhuman, material world and the ways that the world, identities, and bodies are produced through material and social/cultural conditions.

### **Agential Realism**

This dissertation relies on feminist new materialism, specifically Karen Barad's agential realism theoretical framework. Bringing a theory of agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership offers a robust way to account for the entanglement and emergence of meaning, reality, knowledge, and material agency in the co-production of material-discursive practice(s).

Often seen as the new materialist "movement's figurehead" (Telios, 2023), Hekman (2010) defines Barad's work as being about entanglements, noting that "to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, but to 'lack independent, self-contained existence...individuals emerge through and as a part of their entangled intra-relating'" (p. 72). In her seminal work, Barad (2007) takes up the challenge of elaborating on the implications of Bohr's philosophy-physics to "understand the epistemological and ontological issues that quantum physics forces us to confront, such as the conditions for the possibility of objectivity, the nature of measurement, the nature of nature and meaning making, and the relationship between discursive practices and the material world" (p. 24). Barad (2007) challenges physical, social, and political theories, noting that alone, these cannot help us understand the world;

instead, we need an “analysis that enables us to theorize the social and the natural together” (p. 25). An analysis that enables theorization of the social spheres and nature understands the integral ways that human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and nature and culture are vital factors within our practices, scientific or otherwise. Barad (2007) assures that this effort is not about losing separate categories but instead is a way to clarify relationships: “Considering them together does not mean forcing them together, collapsing important differences between them, or treating them in the same way, rather it means allowing any integral aspects to emerge by not writing them out before we get started” (p. 25). As such, Barad (2007) constructs a materialist theory of performativity, or an “‘onto-epistem-ology’—the study of practices of knowing” (Hekman, 2008, p. 103). The onto-epistem-ological framework, agential realism, is one of the most developed theories of material agency. As Barad (2007) notes, agential realism as:

an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human *and* nonhuman, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices...The new philosophical framework...entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts...including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time. (p. 26)

Starting with the idea that matter is agentive and not fixed, mattering becomes about “differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences” (Barad, 2007, p. 137). Interestingly, Barad (2007) articulates a conceptual shift from interaction, which presumes that all boundaries are inherent, to intra-action, the idea that boundaries don’t presuppose interactions or meaning but are created through intra-action.

This section of the literature review discusses Barad's theory of agential realism, using corresponding concepts as a guidepost.

***Defined Concept: Intra-action***

- **Intra-action:** Barad (2007) articulates a conceptual shift from interaction, which presumes that all boundaries are inherent, to intra-action, the idea that boundaries do not presuppose interactions but are created through intra-action. Meaning comes through "specific agential intra-actions...the boundaries and properties of the components of the phenomena become determinate" (Barad, 2007, p. 139). Iterative intra-activity is performativity.

***Defined Concept: Material-discursive***

- **Material-discursive:** Agential realism's conceptualization of materiality, material-discursive refers to the belief that "discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other" but are "mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 152). Material-discursive practices are understood as apparatuses; bodies as material-discursive phenomena; boundary-drawing; and causal, ongoing agential intra-actions. Phenomena are material-discursive. Material-discursive practices are understood through diffractive methodology.

***Defined Concept: Apparatus***

- **Agential realism:** Complicates the idea of apparatuses as structures (rigid, deterministically producing subjects), instead claiming that structures are material-discursive phenomena. Apparatuses: (1) represent specific material-discursive practices; (2) produce differences (and also boundary-making

practices)—“productive of , and part of, the phenomena produced” (Barad, 2007, p. 146); (3) are material configurations/dynamic reconfigurations that produce objects and subjects; (4) encompass phenomena (apparatuses are themselves phenomena); (5) represent open-ended practices—not intrinsic boundaries; and (6) unfold or evolve in space and time— (re)configuring spatiality and temporality.

- Apparatuses enact and specify agential cuts in which resolutions within and boundaries of phenomena “become determinate and...meaningful” (Barad, 2007, p. 148). Apparatuses are a boundary-making practice. For Barad (2007), the apparatus is both significant in “providing the conditions for enacting a local causal structure *and* the condition for the possibility of the objective description of material phenomena” (p. 175).

***Defined Concept: Agential Cut***

- **Agential cut:** A material-discursive process that creates boundaries, “cutting together-apart” (Barad, 2014). Different agential cuts produce difference phenomena. Apparatuses enact agential cuts “that produce determinate boundaries and properties of ‘entities’ within phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 148).

***Defined Concept: Phenomena***

- **Phenomena:** Barad’s (2007) primary ontological unit (see also Harding, 2024): the effect of boundary-drawing practices, or “the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies” (p. 206). Reality is composed of “things-in-phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 140). Phenomena are material-discursive and come to matter through a process of “ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 151) between the

observer (observer as apparatus and with the apparatus of observation) and the object (Heckman, 2010). Phenomena are produced through intra-action and “differential patterns of mattering (diffraction patterns) [that are] produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p. 206). Phenomena cannot be separated from “their apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p. 208). Different intra-actions produce different phenomena, and these phenomena are made visible through agential cuts.

### ***Defined Concept: Diffraction and Diffractive Methodology***

Diffraction and diffractive methodology are discussed further in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

- **Diffraction:** Barad (2007) introduces the idea of diffraction as a counterpoint to reflection concerned with attending to “specific material entanglements” (p. 88), making the effects of differences evident and emerging through intra-action. This idea entails a shift in thinking from questions of reflection to diffraction.
- **Diffractive methodology:** Counterpoint to reflexivity, and it “is a commitment to understanding which differences matter and for whom” (Barad, 2007, p. 90).

### ***Agential Realism Summary***

Barad (2007) is interested in entanglement and in the relationship between the discursive and the material world. Barad (2007) advocates for “a relationality between specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted” (p. 139). Agential realism considers materiality as “an active factor in processes of materialization” (Barad, 2007, p. 221). For Barad, the advantages of agential

realism are that (1) knowledge claims are grounded in local experience, and “thus objectivity is literally embodied...production is material/cultural”; (2) that agential realism interrogates “boundaries and cultural reflexivity”; and (3) that agential realism “underlines the necessity of an ethic of knowing” (Hekman, 2010, p. 73).

### **Methodology and Method Questions for Processual Ontologies of Leadership**

This literature review first discussed the various theoretical contributions across seemingly disparate bodies of literature to identify gaps in the literature and locate where this dissertation sits within the literature. Now, the review will surface specific methodology and methods questions for processual ontologies of leadership that exist within the literature and identify methodologies and methods for studying emerging phenomena. As a result of this review, the following section offers a way to expand on Simpson’s (2024) work to bring diffraction and diffractive methodology to processual ontologies of leadership.

Methodologies to study leadership activity closer to the moment it happens and which account for the co-creation and emergence of leadership activity (Raelin, 2016) within interactions are needed. Simpson and Revsbaek (2022) sought to trouble the stability of “entities”, moving the study of organization and organizing to a process ontology and citing that there is “neither a beginning nor an end to process; rather it is conceived as a perpetual becoming that makes and re-makes the knowings as we continuously re-compose our world(s)” (p. 1). Simpson and Revsbaek argue that process research requires researchers to notice differently. Earlier in Chapter 2, more comprehensive key contributions to processual ontologies of leadership were identified, specifically regarding ontologies that largely focus the defining philosophical framework for leadership on processes, whether relational, material, discursive,

collective, collaborative, etc. This section discusses new and previously reviewed literature through engagement with their methodologies and methods.

Scholars have tried to attend to processual ontologies, highlighting questions and offering various methodological solutions. Larsson et al. (2025) claim that researchers should expand investigation beyond moments of interaction, suggesting that “a more systematic methodological and analytical approach” (p. 1312) is needed. Larsson et al. relies on an “ethnomethodological attitude” to identify sequences from video and audio recordings for a four-step process that analyses moments of leadership as they happen. Crevani (2018) questions if the phenomena are “more acute when the phenomenon is not ‘anchored’ in some individuals” (p. 87) and suggests the need for further studies that “could expand on the material character that leadership work ... has by focusing on ... [including] sociomaterial processes rather than conversations” (p. 104). Ethnographic methods, Sutherland (2016) argues, can both address the problem of dominant positivist approaches and refine the phenomena of leadership. Sutherland (2016) positions a definition of leadership as “constituted by meaning-making and reality definition, which is performed through discourse...as well as being influenced by Discourse” (p. 262) and urges researchers to explore ethnography as a potential method for studying both little d and big D discourse, reminding researchers that investigating leadership from new angles “remains underrepresented” (p. 264). Similarly, Raelin (2020) suggests that there is not one method to study everyday life, but rather a pluralistic set of methods guided by theoretical guidelines. These include discursive narrative, ethnographic, and multimodal methods, all encouraging an examination “from within” (p. 480). Along these lines, Alvehus and Crevani (2022) offer a definition of leadership within the practice paradigm as a “socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction” (p. 232) and proposes micro-ethnography to study interactions.

Simpson (2024) uses the name collaborative leadership to describe an “emergent process that produces previously unimagined futures” (p. 2). Simpson suggests that her reading of a collaborative leadership is ontologically grounded in process philosophy and that the introduction of American Pragmatism helps to confront existing theories of leadership and to introduce diffraction as a method for capturing flows of movement. Robinson and Riddell (2022) focus on leadership development, offering a six-step process to develop collaborative leadership, which they describe as a “collaborative achievement—leadership that emerges from interactions across members of a group, where that interaction causes a change in the trajectory of activity, decisions, or strategy” (p. 2), and that collaboration within a group is “spontaneous, it is not discussed, and it is not planned, thus when it occurs from the group in this way it is a form of collective leadership” (p. 2). Robinson and Riddell (2022) suggest that “collaborative leadership requires a paradigmatic shift in both measurement and leadership development” (p. 2). They surface that for specifically leadership development, the tools and methods available and that have the most use, especially in educational and executive programs, focus on “enhancing individuals’ skills, knowledge, or experience” (Robinson & Riddell, 2022, p. 1) which is misaligned with ontological perspectives that view leadership as a phenomena that emerges from dynamics of groups and interactions that change trajectory. Robinson and Riddell (2022) argue that their work is about designing tools and methods because there is a “need to change when we change the assumptions that underpin the construct of leadership” (p. 11).

### **Ethnography and Ethnographic Methods**

Because past researchers (Alvehus & Crevani, 2022; Raelin, 2020; Sutherland, 2018) have emphasized ethnography as a primary methodology and ethnographic methods as primary methodological tools for studying processual ontologies of leadership, this section describes

ethnography and ethnographic methods. Then, in leveraging feminist theory, I realign ethnography with feminist ethnography in the following section.

Ethnography is grounded in “an emergent process of discovery” (Boellstorff, et. al., 2012, p. 5) and accordingly offers an iterative approach to understanding culture in context. It is a methodology that “demands commitment” (Boellstorff, et al., 2012, p. 77). As ethnography has long traditions in sociology and cultural anthropology, traditional ethnographers engage in communities and cultures to better understand the complexities of cultural phenomena in context and in the ways that participants describe them. Ethnography can be characterized by the following key aspects:

- **Fieldwork:** Ethnography utilizes fieldwork and largely participant observation. Traditional ethnography (as opposed to the use of ethnographic methods) requires a dedicated length of time—usually 6 months or more—in which the researcher is a participant observer working to understand culture in context (Fetterman, 2019).
- **Participant Observation:** Participant observation “is immersion in a culture” (Fetterman, 2019, p. 48). Ethnographers utilize participant observation so that they develop robust understanding of culture to get at “indigenous meaning” (Gertz, 2005) and complete extended fieldwork “to study cultures through participation that is authentic in that culture’s own terms” (Boellstorff et al., p. 68). While conducting fieldwork and participating in activities as a participant observer, researchers are encouraged to embrace the newness and unfamiliar aspects of the experience, fully immerse themselves, develop relationships and rapport, and embrace a willingness to be embarrassed and continually surprised.

This allows a researcher to develop understanding over time of culture in context (Boellstorff et al., 2012).

- **Fieldsite:** Ethnographers often select a “strategic site” that is strategic in the way that it emphasizes the phenomena the researcher aims to study, allowing for refinement of their analysis in light of hostile evidence and negative cases. A fieldsite can be “an assemblage of actors, places, practices, and artifacts that can be physical, virtual, or a combination of both” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 60) or be multiple sites to capture holistic view.
- **Fieldnotes:** Ethnographers record extensive fieldnotes, documenting everything, as it is not always clear what is important at the moment (Fetterman, 2019) of first observation.
- **Interviews:** Ethnographers can conduct extensive formal or informal interviews, and/or rely on “key informants” (Fetterman, 2019) who enhance knowledge and provide valuable context and socialization to the culture the researcher is participating in. Informants can also help a researcher gain entree into the community/culture of study.
- **Scholarship and Reflexivity:** Ethnographers aim to situate and contextualize their research questions and ethnography within scholarship of the field(s) and find information that can offer historical perspectives to “bolster claims” (Boellstorff, et al., 2012). Many ethnographers also take reflexive stances or work to recognize their subjectivity, or their “view from somewhere”, in embodied observation (Boellstorff, et al., 2012).

Depending on the disciplinary connection, some traditions of ethnography—like in sociology—are highly concerned with defending their work against charges that it is not representative, replicable, reliable, adequately grounded in theory, or capable of demonstrating causal relationships. Those interested in conducting ethnography that attends to these issues explicitly might rely on Katz (2001), who offers a way of searching for negative cases through using analytic induction to address these concerns. For work with feminist ethnography, challenges to questions that ethnography is not objective are better solved by walking alongside the theoretical challenges to objectivity found in feminist theory and feminist ethnography.

### ***Feminist Ethnography Considerations***

Narayan (2012) aptly writes that “going about daily life in the company of others, as both participant and observer, grants insights at many levels, from the ‘materials’ to be written down to less tangible bodily knowledge; in the process, a person is transformed” (p. 102). Feminist ethnography looks similarly to the more broadly described ethnography, especially in terms of the tools and processes. For example, participant observation “relies upon detailed, recorded observations and reflection upon one’s own participation in ways that allow for the collection of a large body of data for ethnographic analysis” (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 85). When articulating the difference between ethnography and feminist ethnography, Davis and Craven (2016) offer that “feminist ethnography attends to the dynamics of power in social interaction that starts from a gender analysis” (p. 9). Davis and Craven highlight the complexities of arriving at a single defining feature of feminist ethnography, as questions of feminist methodology, as well as methods and the ways in which they are deployed, are diverse. Davis and Craven recognize the varied perspectives and commitments of feminist ethnographers and offer a working definition

that recognizes the complexity of approaches that researchers and practitioners of feminist ethnography identify. They note that feminist ethnography:

1. Involves a feminist sensibility, and commitment to paying attention to marginality and power differentials....;
2. Draws inspiration from feminist scholarship....;
3. Challenges marginalization and injustice;
4. Acknowledges and reflects upon power relations within the research context;
5. Aims to produce scholarship—in both traditional and experimental forms—that may contribute to movement building and/or be in the service of organizations, people, communities, and issues we study. (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 11)

Feminist ethnography considers the insider/outside dilemma and concerns between the researcher and those researched. This dilemma suggests that “outsiders might lack strategic knowledge...and presumes that the ‘insider’ knows the perspectives of the group under study” (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 60). There are discussions at length between feminist ethnographers who debate the varying perspectives of the insider/outsider, considering those who straddle being both insiders and outsiders, and critiquing the dichotomy. For some, insiders might have an advantage to understand contexts and know the history of communities. Fetterman (2019) also acknowledges the importance of considering “the impact of asymmetric relationships” (p. 39). While feminists have considered the challenges and benefits of this dilemma and made sense of them in various ways in relationship to feminist ethnography, one practical consideration includes a strategy of analysis, allowing research participants to be in direct conversation with the research project. For example, Davis and Craven (2016) claim: “When researcher participants are involved in analysis, they assist in shaping the ethnographic project by identifying themes that are salient and meaningful” (p. 94).

Feminist ethnography as part of the feminist project also aims to attend to questions of power, agency, and objectivity. These are defined below.

- **Power:** Davis and Craven (2016) posit that in exploring “the production of knowledge through the lens of feminist ethnography...Feminists often produce knowledge by reconsidering how power operates differentially, prioritizing women’s experiences and those of others who have been historically sidelined” (p. 13). Feminist ethnography attends to power by first recognizing research subject(s) that have historically been marginalized and bringing those subjects to the forefront, in which “the feminist ethnographic project takes into account all people in a fieldsite/community/organization, and pays particular attention to gender by honing in on peoples’ statuses, the different ways in which (multiple) forms of privilege allow them to wield power or benefit from it, and the forces and processes that emerge from all of the above” (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 14). Second, feminist ethnography attends to power by seeking to dismantle and make visible the power operations embedded in experiences and perspectives; and third, feminist ethnography constructs new knowledge production that expands ways of being and knowing.
- **Objectivity:** Feminist ethnography highlights debate between positivist approaches which contend that ethnography must be objective and the cultural relativism that subjectivity “succumbs” to (Davis & Craven, 2016). Some feminist scholars attempt to solve problems/questions of objectivity/subjectivity through mixed methods, a “best of both worlds” (Davis & Craven, 2016) approach to account for bias in their research. Others, especially feminist ethnographers who

take an activist, advocate, or publicly engaged stance in their feminist ethnography project “call into question the idea that positivist neutrality that is so often expected in knowledge production” (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 71).

- **Reflexivity:** Feminist ethnographers respond to questions of objectivity through a commitment to reflexivity. Davis and Craven (2016) suggest that reflexivity can extend to the “relationship an ethnographer has with particular participants” (p. 83). They define reflexivity as a way and process of being: “self-referential, looking back on one’s actions” (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 174). Reflexive processes can include carefully articulating positionality and the intersections of positionality, identifying the perspectives one elevates, how one navigates research and communities, and more. Reflexivity also helps to articulate consciously about subjectivity/objectivity and relationship to research. Similarly, Fetterman (2019) suggests that reflexivity “propels us into a state of continual analysis throughout the ethnographic journey. Reflexivity reminds us to reflect on our roles, preconceptions, and influence at every step of the way” (p. 39). Davis and Craven (2016) remind feminist ethnographers that “considering the ethics of fieldwork encounters in relation to an ethnographer’s positionality has been important for feminist ethnographers with their attention to power and privilege” (p. 83). Feminist research must commit to interrogating our positionality and how we are situated in relationship to the communities and participants we work with (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 65).

### **What Methodologies Are Left?**

When designing methodological approaches for processual ontologies of leadership, the literature elevates ethnography as an avenue to pursue. However, for leadership, ethnography has some limitations which might explain the lack of ethnographic investigations in leadership. These limitations include that it is a resource and time intensive approach, that there is lag in the acceptance of qualitative methods, and that there is a lack of clarity over the object of study (Sutherland, 2018). Micro-ethnography is proposed by Alvehus and Crevani (2022) as a way to resolve these limitations, “comprising [of] shorter, intensive engagements in fieldwork combined with tight dialogue with theory” (p. 238). However, a key commitment is that the approach is directly linked to how leadership is conceptualized.

When thinking back to one of the main challenges for processual ontologies of leadership to attend to power, ethnography, specifically feminist ethnography, offers ways to attend to power, objectivity, and reflexivity. However, reflexivity on its own is not enough in unstable environments with dynamic objects of study. Simpson (2024) argues that though reflexivity “may be relevant in stable contexts that admit representational ways of rendering knowledge...they are of limited value in performative inquiries where the objects of research are themselves fluid and ever-changing” (p. 16). To bring an agential realist perspective, and in regard to reflexivity, Barad (2007) notes: “Turning the mirror back on oneself is not the issue and reflexivity cannot serve as a corrective...the point is that these entangled practices are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter” (p. 58). As such, ethnography, including feminist ethnography, needs diffraction.

### **Diffraction: Methodology, Method, Approach, or Analytical Tool?**

If leadership is a phenomena that emerges, but the best methodological tools (ethnography) send researchers out to “make observations” at specific sites that “accomplish

direction” rather than be part of the ongoing, entangled production, what methodologies are left? Post-qualitative methodologies and approaches, including diffraction, may be able to attend to this question. Processual ontologies of leadership move us closer to the emerging phenomena, and a “more detailed understanding of these phenomena requires moving closer to action” (Sergi, 2016, p. 106). Carroll (2016) suggests that if “leadership is spatially configured, relationally distributed, artifact-mediated and embedded in multi-processual routines...then it is the co-existence, rather than the separating out, of leadership with other social processes that practitioners most need insight into and assistance with” (p. 106). Diffraction allows for reading through one another and can illuminate what emerges as “how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter” (Carroll, 2016, p. 30).

### ***What is Diffraction and Diffractive Methodology?***

Barad (2007) proposes diffractive methodology as able to account for “entanglement of ideas and materials” (p. 29). A diffractive methodology is a post-qualitative research approach based on Barad’s theory of agential realism and is an orientation to research and a way of reading through one another to trace differences. Haraway (1992, as cited in Simpson, 2024) provides a description of diffraction:

Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do.

Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of difference appear. (p. 300)

In challenging known methodologies to fully recognize the entanglement of the material-discursive, Barad (2007; 2014) positions diffractive methodology as an approach that can do more than the reflexive methodologies, which are common within feminist frameworks, by

accounting for entanglement. Barad (2007) conceptualizes a diffractive methodology that is “attuned to the entanglement of the apparatuses of production, one that enables genealogical analysis of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance” (p. 29). A diffractive methodology is:

An accounting attentive to detail, an inquiry of differences and relationalities, a study of the phenomenon of how subject and object emerge as a result of intra-activity, and provides theoretical tools that examine how these factors work together, and how conceptions of materiality, social practice, nature, and discourse must change to accommodate their mutual involvement. (Barad, 2007, p. 25)

In diffractive methodology, Simpson (2024) shifts focus from leaders to “the patterns of associations that constitute and are constituted by differencings” (p.17). A diffractive approach “opens an onto-epistemological space of *encounter* where a researcher’s task is not to tell of something that exists independent of the encounter (producing the appearance of truth), but to open up an immanent subjective truth—that which becomes true...the moment of the encounter” (Davies, 2014, p. 734). Diffractive methods can vary, and include ethnography, textual or discourse analysis, and more, but these methods are applied diffractively, focusing on how ideas, materials, and practices produce difference through their relations.

### ***Diffraction for Leadership and Organization***

What follows in this section is a brief overview of how diffraction—as an inquiry, methodology, method, or analysis—shows up in leadership and organization literature. Reviewing this literature is important to not only support an argument that processual ontologies need diffractive methodology, but to also show how diffraction and diffractive methodology have been deployed in leadership literature. This positions how the current theoretical

dissertation builds upon and extends a diffractive methodology for leadership, specifically processual ontologies of leadership.

Harding et al. (2022) set out to make sense of bodies at work by adapting feminist posthuman approaches and research methods—diffraction—to understand the materialization of working, embodied selves. Diffraction is deployed by reading theoretical work from Karen Barad and Judith Butler through each other to position “flesh” as agentic actor. The authors coin the term body/flesh, expanding bodies beyond “vehicles that enable work” (Harding et al., 2022, p. 649).

Simpson (2024) brings a Pragmatist philosophy to collaborative leadership in order to diffract the experiences of a management team in an arts-based company. By grounding collaborative leadership in Pragmatist philosophy, Simpson identifies and diffracts five movements: associating, experimenting, making, feeling, and caring. To do this, Simpson (2024) first outlines ontological challenges to leadership research within organizational literature, noting that it is still “quite rare for leadership scholars to engage in philosophical questioning of their assumptions” (p. 12), and constructing a position that aligns and ontologically grounds collaborative leadership with Pragmatist philosophy. Simpson (2024) spends time challenging conventional notions of leadership as fixed within “leaders”, as well as notions that center individuals, qualities, and positions of power all wrapped in exceptionalism and removed from “the cut-and-thrust of day-to-day happenings” (p. 3). Simpson also unpacks how the lines between leadership and management within organizational literature are blurred. After outlining limitations, Simpson calls for more complex understanding of leadership and then positions the work of critical leadership scholars who aim to de-center individual leaders as a pathway forward. Tracing efforts within critical leadership research from interest in plural leadership

studies to L-A-P, Simpson (2024) further challenges the limitations of these approaches and highlights that these approaches “rarely engage meaningfully with the social and relational dynamics that produce outcomes” (p. 4). To this effort, Simpson (2024) sets forth collaborative leadership as a way to attend to these challenges, defining leadership as “a non-teleological, emergent process that produces previously unimagined futures...ontologically grounded in the assumptions of process philosophy, which prioritizes movement and innovation ahead of stability and secure knowledge” (p. 2). Simpson’s (2024) intention is to pull away from dominant assumptions and research on leadership, “severing, or at least disrupting, the fixation on individuals...which continues to dominate the leadership literature, despite several decades of critical leadership scholarship” (p. 2) in order to craft an understanding of leadership that “recognizes our dependence upon each other to make futures in which we all flourish” (p. 2).

Continuing, Simpson (2024) tries to resolve the ontological challenge to leadership by pursuing American Pragmatism as the “comprehensive and thoroughly coherent articulation of process philosophy” (p. 11). Simpson tracks three threads within Pragmatism that are used to rethink leadership: (1) understanding self as “continuously reforming in social transactions” (p. 14), (2) experience as a “process that unfolds along with our emerging selves” (p. 14), and (3) that the collaborative abilities of humans will support and create capacity for “mutual flourishing” (p. 15). By using Pragmatism to rethink leadership, Simpson (2024) identifies diffraction as a methodological approach because it “more readily engages with these emergent dynamics” (p. 17). Citing both Donna Haraway and Karen Barad’s definitions and contributions to evolving the concept of diffraction, Simpson (2024) echoes that “diffraction is, in fact, the method par excellence for performative inquiries into flows, movements, and waves, and [that] these interferences [are] produced when differences between these movements trouble each

other” (p. 17). Simpson (2024) argues that diffraction as a performative method is complement to Pragmatist philosophy (p. 19). By demonstrating alignment in the processual orientation of both diffraction and Pragmatism, Simpson (2024) offers a “competent philosophy, theory, and practice” (p. 20) and uses this orientation to offer a diffractive reading of Pragmatism and a diffractive analysis of leadership movements (*in-flow-ence*) to “trouble the collaborative practising of leadership” (p. 21) with a senior management team at an arts-based company.

This is perhaps the most robust engagement with diffraction in leadership literature (Simpson, 2024), so extensive space is spent discussing this contribution to the literature. In addition to adopting a diffractive methodology, Simpson (2024) urges researchers to identify new methods of inquiry for processual ontologies of leadership and argues that if scholars seriously consider leadership as a collaborative process, then it “invites new methods of researching capable of attending to the barely noticed subtleties and nuances of leadership as it unfolds” (p. 6). Again, Simpson (2024) reiterates that there is an “urgent need for new forms of inquiry that take an ontologically processual approach to leadership” (p. 6). Because the movements of leadership (*in-flow-ence*) are identified within a management team’s meetings and focus specifically on talk, there is room to build from Simpson’s contributions by extending Simpson’s concept of *in-flow-ence* and extending a diffractive analysis for leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

### **Extending Theoretical Frameworks**

Now that relevant literature has been explored, this section extends the theory of agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership, taking up Harding’s (2024) work that is in its infancy to bring feminist new materialisms to an understanding of leadership. To arrive at this

theoretical framework, the current review: (1) traced how processual ontologies of leadership grew from a practice turn in the literature and fundamentally reconceptualized what leadership is; (2) identified the questions that processual ontologies of leadership take up in the field, complicating where leadership is and needing to leverage critical perspectives to attend to power and who/what has agency; (3) defined how feminist theory is applied and how materiality is explored in leadership literature, regardless of the ontological assumptions or theoretical commitments; and (4) surfaced the opportunity to build on Simpson's (2024) work of bringing diffractive methodologies to leadership process. This theoretical framework is applied to a participatory process as a case in Chapter 3.

### **An Agential Realist Onto-epistem-ology of Leadership**

Engaging feminist new materialisms, specifically agential realism (Barad, 2007), extends processual ontologies of leadership by foregrounding material-discursive entanglements through which leadership emerges. Processual ontologies are then reworked as an onto-epistem-ological account in which leadership emerges through material-discursive intra-actions. Leadership is therefore not just a process or something that emerges within processes, but a material-discursive phenomena in which being and knowing are co-constituted in practice. From this orientation, leadership is not a fixed entity that researchers "find" or "observe" but rather a material-discursive phenomena that is continuously constituted and comes into being through relational intra-actions and the practices through which it becomes knowable. Consequently, (re)searching leadership shifts towards an examination of the material-discursive practices and entanglements through which leadership phenomena are enacted and become intelligible.

Table 2.1 is a revision and expansion of Simpson's (2016) table to visually represent where an agential realist onto-epistem-ology of leadership fits, how it extends, and how it departs

among other common practice/process perspectives. This theoretical dissertation contributes an agential realist onto-epistemology of leadership, as seen shaded in grey in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.2** Comparison of Four Different Practice Perspectives of Leadership

|                                  | <i>The Leader-Practitioner</i>      | <i>Leadership as a Set of Practices</i>                                         | <i>Leadership in the Flow of Practice</i>                                          | <i>Leadership as a material-discursive phenomena</i>                                                     |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Category of Action</b>        | Self-action                         | Inter-action                                                                    | Trans-action                                                                       | Intra-action                                                                                             |
| <b>Agency</b>                    | Exercise of free will               | Influencing other                                                               | Ongoing coordinated accomplishment of work                                         | Emerging through intra-actions of human, nonhuman, discourse, technologies, and material arrangements    |
| <b>Power Context</b>             | Power to...<br>Irrelevant           | Power over...<br>Structure as a fixed container within which action takes place | Power with...<br>Context and transactors are mutually engaged in an emergent whole | Power through...<br>Context is produced through apparatuses of process and practice; Is not pre-existing |
| <b>Relationality</b>             | Irrelevant                          | Dyadic and network inter-linkages                                               | Mutually constituting temporally unfolding relationships                           | Entanglement                                                                                             |
| <b>Temporality</b>               | Irrelevant                          | Time as an independent variable                                                 | Temporal experience is enfolded in and emergent with trans-actions                 | Spacetime-mattering                                                                                      |
| <b>Ontological Assumption(s)</b> | Substantialist, Representationalist | Substantialist, Representationalist                                             | Processual, Performative                                                           | Material-discursive, onto-epistemological; performative                                                  |

*Note: Table 2.2 is a revised table of the comparison of three different practice perspectives of leadership in Simpson, 2016 (originally Figure 2.1).*

In this table (2.2), leadership in the flow of practice is a processual and performative account. However, an agential realist account extends an onto-epistemology of leadership where matter, discourse, and knowing practices are entangled. It moves the category of action to intra-action, where phenomena emerge through entanglements—human and nonhuman, material and discursive, nature and culture. Agency emerges through intra-actions of people, technologies, discourses, and material arrangements. Power is *through* material-discursive configurations – that is, produced through the configurations that structure action and meaning (Barad’s [2007] apparatuses). The context (also understood as a site of leadership and as a research site) is not a

fixed, a permanent place where action occurs but rather is generated through material-discursive arrangements and practices, (re)configuring boundaries through intra-action. Entities/phenomena do not precede relations but emerge through material-discursive intra-actions, and past, present, and future are all dynamically (re)configured through ongoing practices (see Barad's [2007] concept of spacetime-mattering).

To further situate this theoretical framework, refer to Table 5.1 in Chapter 5. Table 5.1 co-locates this theoretical framework with predominant processual ontologies of leadership literature to delineate how bringing an agential realist account to processual ontologies can align with theoretical and methodological commitments. In doing so, it extends diffractive methodologies for processual ontologies of leadership to observe, understand, and analyze leadership as it emerges and is produced.

## **Chapter 2 Summary**

This theoretical dissertation is concerned with bringing an agential realist account to leadership. In bringing agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership, processual ontologies of leadership are reworked as an onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in processes and through material-discursive practices. This approach brings a theorization of materiality to processual ontologies of leadership to better recognize the “social and material-discursive contingencies impacting the leadership constellation ... [that] do not reside outside of leadership but are very much embedded in it” (Raelin, 2016, p. 3).

To make the case for extending theoretical and methodological frameworks, Chapter 2 offered a theoretical literature review that arrived at the intersection between processual ontologies of leadership and feminist new materialisms, specifically focusing on Barad's (2007)

theory of agential realism. The review surfaced three areas within the leadership literature that processual ontologies strive to attend to and advance in the research. First, critical approaches are needed to explore leadership. Second, further advancements are needed to re-frame leadership as situated and emergent. Third, literature needs to take an agentic view of power in leadership process. Scholars strive to pick up these questions and make calls for further research agendas, while centering an ontology of leadership as process.

The literature review also recounted recent discussions that advance varying definitions under the processual ontologies of leadership umbrella, including leadership as a practice, process, movement, and direction, as well as surfacing methodology and method concerns. Because the current research is concerned with materiality and brings a feminist new materialism to processual ontologies of leadership, the review then explored how feminist theory is represented in leadership literature and how materiality is considered across leadership literature. I then explored feminist new materialisms at length, including agential realism (Barad, 2007), as the main theoretical contribution from feminist new materialisms to the current dissertation. Barad's (2007) materialist theory of performativity is an "‘onto-epistem-ology’ the study of practices of knowing" (Hekman, 2008, p. 103). The onto-epistem-ological framework, agential realism, is one of the most developed theories of material agency. After the literature review considered the various theoretical contributions across seemingly disparate bodies of literature, specific methodology and method questions for processual ontologies of leadership were discussed, and proposed methodology and method contributions were examined.

These moves surfaced a gap and substantiated need for more theoretical engagement with critical theories, as well as for alignment between theoretical foundations to inform a definition of leadership, what leadership is as an object of study, and how to study it. In this theoretical

dissertation, I aim to address this gap by looking to critical perspectives, specifically feminist theory, in order to bring a theory of agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership. As such, an extended theoretical framework was proposed—an agential realist onto-epistem-ology of leadership.

Chapter 3 explores diffractive methodology as an orientation, a participatory diffractive process to generate research materials (discussed in Chapter 3 as a case), and defines a diffractive analysis for the case that is conducted in Chapter 4.

### Chapter 3 - Methodology and Theoretical Apparatus

*“Diffraction as a concept for thinking about analytic processes, does not try to fix the analytic process so that it can be turned into a methodic set of steps to be followed. Rather, it opens up the possibility of seeing how something different comes to matter, not only in the world that we observe but also in our research practice” (Davies, 2014).*

In this theoretical dissertation, I posit that processual ontologies of leadership need post-qualitative methodologies and approaches, including diffraction. Within processual ontologies of leadership, leadership emerges in process, practices, and as a process/practice; however, common methodological orientations, approaches, and tools send researchers out to “make observations” at specific sites that “accomplish direction” rather than be part of the ongoing, entangled production. Diffraction allows for reading through one another and can illuminate what emerges as “how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 30). There is a substantiated need for new methodologies and methods to study leadership closer to the moment of production and that account for the co-creation and emergence of leadership activity (Alvehus et al., 2022; Raelin et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Robinson & Riddell, 2022). Chapter 3 substantiates that diffractive methodology can support the study of leadership closer to the moment of production and account for the co-creation and emergence of leadership activity. Harding (2022) calls for ways to identify the “mattering of matter in performative, iterative, moments, when flesh moves, feels, thinks, discourses, occupies space, experiences time, senses, [and] is afflicted and affected” (p. 654). Diffraction can guide the application of existing methods and the development of methods that are engaged, attend to power and agency, and create leadership development and the conditions

for leadership. Simpson (2024) identifies diffraction as a methodological approach that “more readily engages with these emergent dynamics” (p. 17).

Chapter 3 demonstrates how this theoretical dissertation adopts a diffractive methodological approach informed by agential realism. By centering community-engaged research as a feminist praxis, I facilitated a participatory process (a diffractive process). After facilitating a participatory diffractive process in which meaning emerged through the intra-actions of participants, technological systems, and research practices, I used feminist ethnographic methods to generate research materials, and those materials became a case. A diffractive analysis of the case traces intra-actions in Chapter 4.

### **Diffractive Methodology**

A diffractive methodology is a post-qualitative research approach. It is developed from Barad’s (2007; 2014) theory of agential realism and is an orientation to research and a way of reading through one another to trace differences. Summarizing from Chapter 2, diffractive methodology is a challenge to methodologies to fully recognize the entanglement of the material-discursive. Where reflexive methodologies common within feminist frameworks are limited, diffractive methodology is an approach that can account for entanglement. Barad (2007; 2014) conceptualizes a diffractive methodology that is “attuned to the entanglement of the apparatuses of production, one that enables genealogical analysis of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance” (p. 29). A diffractive methodology is “an accounting attentive to detail, an inquiry of differences and relationalities, [and] a study of the phenomenon of how subject and object emerge as a result of intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 14).

More simply put, diffraction makes the effects of differences evident and is a way of understanding how differences emerge, interact, and produce effects. For Barad (2007),

differences emerge through intra-actions. Diffraction guides diffractive methodology. A *diffractive methodology* is about conducting research according to the principles of diffraction, rather than a step-by-step method or technique. A diffractive methodology is a philosophical orientation to research, grounded in agential realism, and a way of reading theories, concepts, and data through one another.

### **Research Design: Analytical and Participatory Process as a Case**

This theoretical dissertation briefly examined a participatory process and used it as a case through which to generate research materials and explore and apply the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, an agential realist onto-epistem-ology of leadership. Consistent with a diffractive methodological approach, this case is not treated as a fixed or bounded object of study, but rather, it is understood as analytically constructed through the research apparatus. With this apparatus, the phenomena under investigation emerge through the intra-action among participants, research practices, and technologies that shape the participatory process.

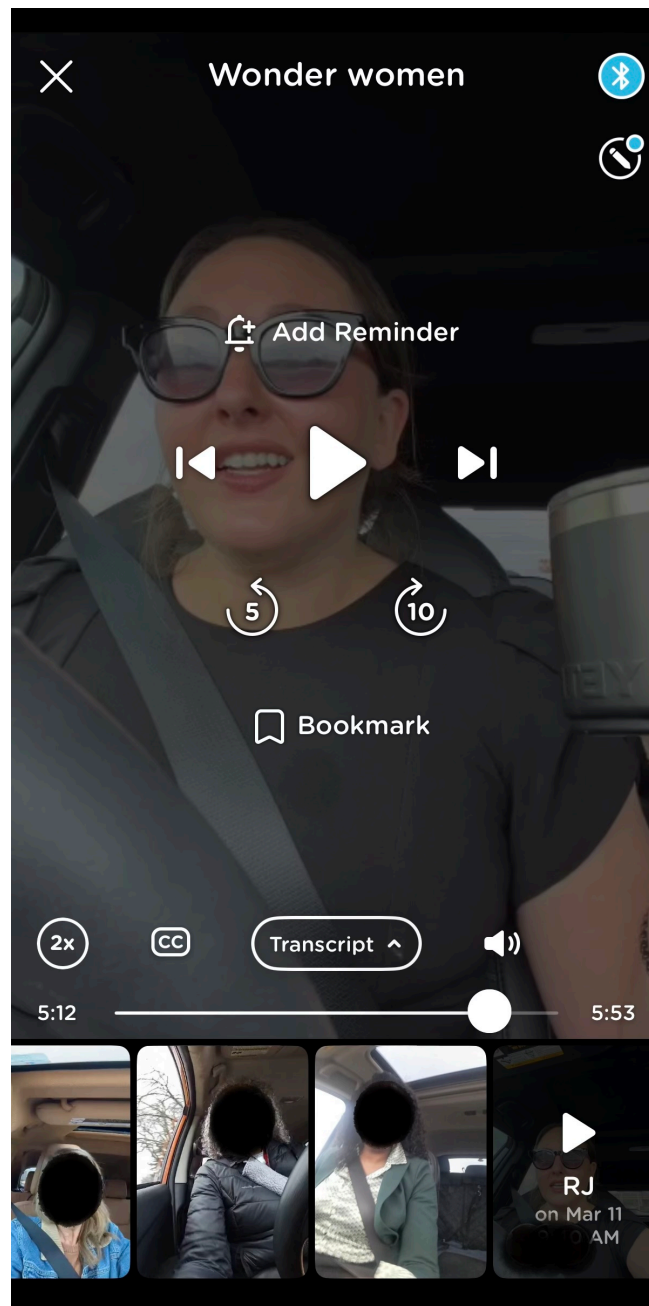
### **Research Context**

This research study centers a small group on Marco Polo called Wonder Women. Created in 2014 and driven by the purpose to “help people feel close” ([Marco Polo website](#)). Marco Polo is a social media, video messaging mobile app that allows for asynchronous video conversations, also known as Polos. They do not require the recipient(s) to be live. The Marco Polo website calculates that over 4 billion Polos have been sent using the app.

The Wonder Women group consists of four participants in total, including myself, who was a participant observer. Participants all identified as women; however, the group was diverse in their racial identities, sexual orientations, and ages. The group was multi-generational, ranging from ~37 to ~57 years of age. The participants all shared a similar level of socio-economic status

at the time of this study, with high levels of education and careers in highly professionalized environments that included higher education, community foundations, and non-profits sectors. All participants self-disclosed this information. For the purposes of this study, the participants have been assigned pseudonyms. In line with practices from feminist ethnography, participants chose their own pseudonyms as one way to participate in the research process. These pseudonyms are: JayleAnne, Frances, Knives Jones, and Jay (see Figure 3.1 for a screenshot of the Wonder Women group).

Figure 3.1. Marco Polo Group Wonder Women



### **Participatory Process: A Participatory Diffractive Process**

The Wonder Women group participated in a participatory diffractive process, a “reading” of their experiences being in a virtual community through various perspectives and concepts. I generated perspectives and concepts both organically with the participants and through my role

as a researcher/participant observer. Harding et al. (2022) offers a method for exploring materialization of the body/flesh in work. The authors were their own research subjects, conducting repeated rounds of intense discussion. The authors first wrote remembered moments of being aware of their bodies at work in the form of a story. Rounds two through six included the group interrogating each moment, turning their writing into plays, asking how Barad and Butler explain their experiences, and responding to reviewers (Harding, et al., 2022). This diffractive method was adapted for the current dissertation as a participatory diffractive process, altering the specific questions, modes of engagement, and audience.

### **Description of the Participatory Diffractive Process**

The Wonder Woman group first engaged with a question that asked them to consider or give an example of how their participation in the group shaped how they see themselves. After this starting point, participants, including myself as a participant-observer, engaged in multiple rounds of conversation. At various points in the conversation, I proposed a new way of reading the experience that they just discussed, facilitating five rounds of reading the experience through various lenses, perspectives, theories, etc. Harding et al. (2022) says that diffractive readings “permit the use of seemingly incommensurate philosophical perspectives—ideas can be productively bounced off each other” (p. 654). When reading the experience through concepts and through each other, meaning emerged. This participatory diffractive process is the case for the diffractive analysis in Chapter 4.

Over a period of 7 days, participants engaged in conversation, responding with brief interactions to more extended discussions. As a participant observer, I observed, participated, and took notes during the conversation, focusing on patterns and themes, rather than individuals. Below is a step-by-step recounting of the diffractive process:

1. **Step 1.** The participant observer posted an audio/visual message to the Wonder Women group on the Marco Polo platform with an invitation to participate in the study.
2. **Step 2.** The Wonder Women group was invited to complete the informed consent and ask any questions. Participants recorded a Marco Polo with their affirmation to participate in the study and completed the informed consent document.
3. **Step 3.** The participant observer created the conditions for open-ended discussion. The participant observer guided the group of participants through a participatory diffractive process that aimed to support sense-making and meaning-making of the experience of engaging in the virtual Marco Polo group since 2018.
  - a. **Round 1.** The participant observer shared this prompt with participants: *Think back about your participation in this group. Can you tell us about a time in which this community shaped the way you saw yourself?* Participants were invited to share the experience as a story or a specific memory.
  - b. **Round 2.** Participants were invited to respond to Polos to discuss and ask questions as they were interested.
  - c. **Round 3.** Participants were invited to open-ended conversation to make observations, surface questions, and make comments about the discussion from a feminist lens as it related to themes and questions of power, agency, objectivity, and embodiment, etc.
  - d. **Round 4.** Participants were invited to an open-ended conversation to make observations, surface questions, and make comments about the discussion as it

related to themes and questions leadership identity, leadership efficacy, and leadership capacity, etc.

- e. **Round 5.** Participants were invited to open-ended conversation to make observations, surface questions, and make comments about the discussion as it related to themes and questions of spaces, locations, technologies, etc.
  - f. **Round 6.** Participants were invited to respond to interpretations and/or preliminary analysis from the participatory diffractive process shared by the participant observer.
- 4. **Step 4.** Participants were thanked for their participation. Participants were offered an optional opportunity to share their reflections or thoughts about the experience in a debrief.
  - 5. **Step 5.** The participant observer reviewed the audio/visual recordings and discussion. The participant observer took extensive fieldnotes as the discussions occurred.

### **Participatory Diffractive Process Summary**

Over the course of 7 days, participants recorded 58 Marco Polos, totaling 3 hours, 1 minute and 43 seconds of audio/visual recordings. Recording length of Marco Polo videos spanned anywhere from the longest Marco Polo at 8:11 minutes to the shortest at 17 seconds. Of the 58 Marco Polos recorded, 41 were recorded while a participant was in a vehicle, either in operation or parked; 6 were recorded while participants were traveling and in a hotel or other travel space that was not their home; and 11 Marco Polos were recorded in a home. Of the 11 Marco Polos recorded in homes, 7 were recorded by the researcher/participant observer, 2 were recorded while taking care of a child and cooking dinner, and 2 were recorded with no visual, instead using a picture with voiceover.

## **Feminist Ethnographic Methods for Generating Research Materials**

This section explains how feminist ethnographic methods were used to generate research materials for the study. Participant observation was a central method. The researcher participated in the Marco Polo group as a fully participating member of the process. Through this position, the participant observer was able to observe interactions among the participants as the participatory diffractive process was facilitated and unfolded. As part of this observation, the researcher/participant observer reviewed videos shared by the participants within the Marco Polo group and produced extensive fieldnotes documenting interactions and emerging dynamics within the process.

Additionally, in line with feminist ethnographic methods, participants were in direct conversation with the research project as seen in Round 6, in which participants were invited to respond to interpretations and/or preliminary analysis from the participatory diffractive process shared by the participant observer. Also in line with feminist ethnographic practices, participants chose their own pseudonyms as another way to participate in the research process. The case examined in this study emerged through the assembly of these research materials (generated through ethnographic methods) together with relevant artifacts and technological apparatus.

## **Diffractive Analysis: A Diffractive Reading of Research Materials**

This section describes how the diffractive analysis is conducted in Chapter 4. First, movements of *in-flow-ence* (leadership) (Simpson, 2024) were identified—movements within the participatory process where relations shift and the configuration of actors, practices, and/or technologies change. These movements of *in-flow-ence* (leadership) provide analytical entry points for examining how leadership is (re)configured within process. Next, the research materials were examined through a diffractive reading, an application of the theoretical

framework in Chapter 2. The materials were interpreted through the theoretical concepts defined in Chapter 2 and were copied later in this section. In this approach, theory and research materials are read through one another to trace patterns of relational emergence and transformation. Key analytical concepts guiding the diffractive reading included intra-action, material-discursive, apparatus, agential cut, and phenomena. These concepts enabled the analysis to examine how process is configured, how roles and relations are enacted, and how distinctions (including leadership) emerge within the participatory process. Through this diffractive analysis, the theoretical dissertation explored how leadership emerges as a material-discursive phenomena in process and through material-discursive practices.

### **Questions that Guide the Diffractive Analysis**

The following questions guided the diffractive analysis:

1. How does leadership emerge in technologically produced organization and process?
2. In what ways do material-discursive conditions shape the emergence of leadership?
3. How can diffractive methods and approaches make sense of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena and illuminate the entanglement of human and non-human in the ongoing production of leadership?

### **Theoretical Apparatus**

The following concepts central to agential realism guided how the research materials were interpreted.

#### **Intra-action**

A conceptual shift from interaction, which presumes that all boundaries are inherent, is intra-action, the idea that boundaries do not presuppose interactions but are created through intra-action. Meaning comes through “specific agential intra-actions...the boundaries and properties

of the components of the phenomena become determinate” (Barad, 2007, p. 139). Iterative intra-activity is performativity.

### **Material-discursive**

Agential realism’s conceptualization of materiality, material-discursive refers to the belief that “discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other ... [but are] mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 152). Material-discursive practices are understood as: apparatuses; bodies as material-discursive phenomena; boundary-drawing; and causal, ongoing agential intra-actions. Phenomena are material-discursive. Material-discursive practices are understood through diffractive methodology.

### **Apparatus**

Agential realism complicates the idea of apparatuses as structures (rigid, deterministically producing subjects); rather, structures are material-discursive phenomena. Apparatuses: (1) are specific material-discursive practices; (2) produce differences (and also boundary-making practices), “productive of , and part of, the phenomena produced” (Barad, 2007, p. 146); (3) are material configurations/dynamic reconfigurations that produce objects and subjects; (4) are phenomena (apparatuses are themselves phenomena); (5) represent open-ended practices—not intrinsic boundaries; and (6) unfold or evolve in space and time—(re)configuring spatiality and temporality.

Apparatuses enact and specify agential cuts in which resolutions within and boundaries of phenomena “become determinate and...meaningful” (Barad, 2007, p. 148). Apparatuses are a boundary-making practice. For Barad (2007), the apparatus is both significant in “providing the

conditions for enacting a local causal structure *and* the condition for the possibility of the objective description of material phenomena” (p. 175).

### **Agential Cut**

An agential cut is a material-discursive process that creates boundaries, “cutting together-apart” (Barad, 2014). Different agential cuts produce different phenomena (Barad, 2007).

Apparatuses enact agential cuts “that produce determinate boundaries and properties of ‘entities’ within phenomena” (Barad, 2007, p. 148).

### **Phenomena**

Reality is composed of “things-in-phenomena” (p. 140). Phenomena is Barad’s (2007) primary ontological unit (see also Harding, 2024), representing the effect of boundary-drawing practices, or “the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies” (Barad, 2007, p. 206).

Phenomena are material-discursive and come to matter through a process of “ongoing intra-activity” (Barad, 2007, p. 151) between the observer (observer as apparatus and with the apparatus of observation) and the object (Heckman, 2010). Phenomena are produced through intra-action and “*differential patterns of mattering* (diffraction patterns) produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices or apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p. 206). Phenomena cannot be separated from “their apparatuses of bodily production” (Barad, 2007, p. 208). Different intra-actions produce different phenomena, and these phenomena are made visible through agential cuts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This section outlines ethical considerations for this research.

## **Informed Consent**

Participants were invited to join the study through a message posted in the Wonder Women group in which the researcher shared about the purpose of the study, any anticipated negative or positive impacts that could be experienced during the study, and information on where to direct any questions or withdraw from the study. Participants understood that they could delete their Polos at any time and that any quotes or excerpts used in the research were going to be de-identified using a pseudonym. Participants were reminded that they could choose their level of participation and engage with the process as determined by their capacity and interest in the conversation. The researcher was available for further conversation and to answer any questions; there were none. Participants were also sent an informed consent document to review. All participants in the group consented to participate.

## **Reflexivity, Rather, Diffraction**

Chapter 2 provided discussion on an agential realist perspective reflexivity becoming diffraction to attend to entangled practices. Researchers are not excluded from this entanglement. The researcher, as an apparatus, is agential in the boundary-making process of research to produce (research) meaning. Barad (2007) claims that the “who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter” (p. 58). Diffraction, as contrasted with reflexivity, is not a singular event, but a “dynamism that is integral to spacetime mattering...Each moment is infinite multiplicity” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). Therefore, though the analysis in Chapter 4 is separated into varying parts to offer an academic structure to the reader, the reality is that none of the boundaries are easily made, nor is it the only way to make such agential cuts. The researcher acts as but (one) apparatus for enacting the agential cuts, doing so to temporarily stabilize the phenomena so that it can be studied, and meaning can emerge as part of the dissertation research

process. It is important to note that the phenomena discussed in Chapter 4 do not pre-exist but become identifiable through the researcher as (but one) apparatus enacting agential cuts.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited in time and scope. Researchers wanting to use a participatory diffractive process as a method for leadership development can consider both the length of time and how many participants/groups are engaged as part of a diffractive process. Additionally, researchers can consider adjusting the rounds, exploring further what gets read through one another. For example, with more extended timelines, participants can offer how they want to read the experience before starting rounds, more closely in line with Harding et al.'s (2022) process. For this study, as the researcher, I brought specific considerations and themes for participants to diffract their experience. This is because this work was performed within the bounds of dissertation research, and some boundaries needed to be enacted to align with academic conventions (which further research can and should problematize). Diffraction as a concept is about not fixing and not being turned into a set of steps (Davies, 2014). Diffraction is about seeing how something “comes to matter, not only in the world that we observe but also in our research practice” (Davies, 2014, p. 734). So then, applying this method for future research should be done with intentionality and consideration.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

This theoretical dissertation makes a case for an agential realist onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices. In this dissertation, I then briefly apply the theoretical framework to a case. This move aims to address concerns that processual ontologies of leadership need further theoretical and methodological approaches for leadership as an emergent, relational, and ongoing

process (Alvehus et al., 2022; Raelin et al., 2025; Raelin, 2020; Robinson & Riddell, 2022). The methodological orientation of this study builds on Simpson's (2024) work by using diffractive methodology for collaborative leadership and adapts the method contributions of Harding et al. (2022) for the participatory diffractive process.

Chapter 3 builds from literature explored in Chapter 2 that surfaces methodology and method questions for processual ontologies of leadership. Chapter 3 discussed diffractive methodology, how a case was constructed from a participatory diffractive process, the ethnographic methods used for generating research materials from the participatory process, and an outline of a diffractive analysis of those research materials. Chapter 4 conducts the diffractive analysis, offering a diffractive reading of the phenomena.

## Chapter 4 - Diffractive Analysis

*“‘Becoming’ is about repetition, but also about memories of the non-dominant kind. It is about affinities and the capacity both to sustain and generate inter-connectedness. Flows of connection need not be appropriative, though they are intense and at times can be violent. They nonetheless mark processes of communication and mutual contamination of states of experience. As such, the steps of ‘becoming’ are neither reproduction nor imitation, but rather empathic proximity and intensive interconnectedness.” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 8)*

So far, this theoretical dissertation has extended a theoretical framework in Chapter 2, an agential realist onto-epistem-ology of leadership. Chapter 3 outlined the feminist ethnographic methods that were deployed alongside of a participatory diffractive process in order to generate research materials. In Chapter 4, I briefly apply the theoretical framework to a case, offering a diffractive analysis, or diffractive reading, of research materials. Simpson (2024) suggests that “learning to read and respond to difference is the starting point of diffractive inquiry” (p. 158). With the focus on “the effects of difference”, a diffractive reading provides “a means of engaging with the often barely perceptible movements of change that arise from differencing” (Simpson, 2024, p. 158). Chapter 4 presents the diffractive analysis, or diffractive reading, and relies heavily on the defined concepts in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3: intra-action, material-discursive, apparatus, agential cut, and phenomena.

### **Leadership, Movements of *In-Flow-Ence*, as Material-Discursive Phenomena**

As a first step in this analysis, movements of *in-flow-ence* (Simpson, 2024; Simpson et al., 2018) were identified in the research materials. *In-flow-ence*, understood as the leadership for Simpson et al. (2018), is a “movement constituted in, and emergent from, socially engaged talk” (p. 656). For Simpson (2024), leadership emerges “within the flow of ongoing social practice,

happening within the dynamic flow of interactions, conversations, and actions among people” (p. 6). In identifying movements of *in-flow-ence*, the rest of Chapter 4 presents an analysis and (re)configuration of these movements as phenomena, performing a diffractive reading.

### **First Movement of *In-flow-ence***

The movement below represents a moment in the participatory process where the direction of the discussion changed, making visible how others built on it throughout the rounds of “reading” the experience. This movement of *in-flow-ence* is aligned with Simpson’s (2024) reading of leadership. The “R” with the participant pseudonym represents the round of conversation that the quote came from. Verbatim representation of this is provided below.

- **JayleAnne R1 & 2:** “Gosh, I hadn’t thought about that. I think I’ve told you all, I am not a good friend...I think it’s really easy in a work relationship for me to be clear that my role is to be a good person and a thoughtful collaborator and to show up like: ‘What is it you need from me?’ ‘What resources can I provide?’ ‘What are you struggling with?’ ‘How can I be an advocate and a champion?’... No, well I think I struggle with that probably in multiple parts of self.”
- **Frances R1 & 2:** “Instead of qualifying your friendship—maybe say I want to show up a different way in my friendships, maybe, but I don’t, and that’s just how it is.”
- **JayleAnne R1 & 2:** “Frances just did the thing that I find and have found so valuable about this community ... she ... challenged me to reframe how I presented information.”
- **JayleAnne R1 & 2:** “That was really transformative for me, and I think it is what allowed me to continue to take risks with bringing things—not just work related, or thinking about what if this thing in class or this thing happened in a meeting and I’m not sure—but to bring other things, and eventually I would bring, like these are how my kids

are showing up, and I don't understand, and again I have a clear memory of Jay saying that maybe I should consider it a high complement that my children can show up as they are, and Frances therapized me, she was just like, well, what is it that you think about yourself as a mother or a partner, when I would share vulnerable things about a relationship or children, that has you feeling that way ... it's just ... yeah ... What a gift to have people in your life who value your humanness to say hard things to you and know that you will receive it with nothing but deep appreciation because they care about your growth ... Those things might not have felt hard or risky to you, but I hadn't been in these kinds of intimate relationships where I was bringing my whole self and it was being met with such understanding and that's really transformational.”

This first movement of *in in-flow-ence* captures how the movement emerged from socially engaged talk. This movement of *in-flow-ence* both shifted the conversation to produce movement and, at a meta level, presented how past moments of reframe were a foundational approach to the meaning making process.

### **Second Movement of *In-flow-ence***

The first movement of *in-flow-ence* represents how processual ontologies of leadership (Simpson, 2024) might identify and make sense of leadership that emerges. However, in bringing an agential realist account to processual ontologies of leadership, there is opportunity to expand how meaning is produced through the intra-action of material-discursive practices. The “R” with the participant pseudonym represents the round of conversation that the quote came from.

Verbatim representation of this is provided below.

- **Frances R1 & 2:** “That’s another thing about Marco Polo, just showing up and putting your shit out there, haha. Jay, you can use that quote ... just showing up and putting your

shit out there because that's what we do in this space ... I don't know, give me your thoughts ... Let me know if any of that made sense and if not I can get back on here and try and explain it a little bit better, but it's 8:06, I got to go."

- **JayleAnne R1 & 2:** "What [I] so valued and appreciated about this app and why it's powerful is it is an invitation to come as you are ... Oh shoot, I'm talking and forgetting where I'm going ... at a timing that works for you, in a place you're comfortable, if you don't want to record your face, you don't have to, you just put up a picture and talk, you can even use a funny voiceover or put yourself into a cartoon feature, and in so many ways it felt more inviting than a phone call or a text message. Because sometimes I felt like those things were intrusive, whereas I felt like when I leave you a video, you'll get to it when you get to it ... and you'll watch it in a place and space and you'll take it in and respond to it when you want to ... and because it's video I feel like I can be ... it's easier for me to express myself and not have it be misinterpreted, which is what I think leads to the intimacy place for me."
- **Frances R1 & 2:** "The fact that it could be on your own time, on your own terms ... This lady doesn't have a stop sign; she just stopped in the middle of the street."
- **Knives Jones R3:** "This virtual space. We are not—uh—what's the right word? We are not organizing, designing, cleaning, it's just wherever you pull up the camera ... or—like right now—I just got out of the shower, I listened to your Polos in the shower, that's why you don't see me. I'm not worried about putting energy into making my space comfortable for you and that takes a lot of pressure off me when I am trying to listen or engage in what is being discussed ... and ... I think—maybe this is ... Where we are ...

We might be coming from the gym, and then we get on polo, and we're seeing ourselves, or me seeing myself—um—I'm not used to that."

- **Knives Jones R3:** "Maybe it's a thing for myself where I feel like I need to comment on something to let people know yes, I recognize that I am not meeting society's expectations of my appearance, I know this ... Now I'm going to spend some time thinking about that."

In this second movement of *in-flow-ence*, similar movement in the conversation is represented; however, the grey shading identifies moments where the conversation bumps up against the materialities of meaning production and invites a reconceptualization of the space. The comedic interjection of "putting your shit out there" shifted conversation across rounds and moved the conversation to the ways the app, as a tool and a way of seeing selves, enhanced opportunities for flexibility of engagement, less hesitations about expression, and opportunity to bring more complete versions of themselves. Because of this, the app, acting as a material-discursive apparatus, **(re)configures identify** and produces new meanings through the intra-actions of body, selves, app/technology, reflection, and spacetime. Rather than analyzing the second movement of *in-flow-ence* as a representation of participants' experiences or a movement to a new direction, a diffractive analysis traces how meaning emerges through the intra-actions mentioned previously, highlighting Barad's (2007) concept of the "the ontological inseparability of entanglement of intra-acting agencies" (p. 139).

The second movement of *in-flow-ence* represents a larger opportunity for analysis through material engagements and with a specific focus on the technology/app as an apparatus that enacts agential cuts, meaning making boundaries. Agential realism highlights that technologies are agential in the production of meaning. Participants talked openly about the

transformative power of the Marco Polo space to hear others reframe their thoughts or experiences in ways that altered their perception of self. This marks an important opportunity for a diffractive reading.

As a guidepost, so far, this diffractive analysis has read Simpson's (2024) concept of *in-flow-ence* through a theory of agential realism. This produced and extended the concept of *in-flow-ence*. *In-flow-ence* is now conceptualized as a material-discursive leadership phenomena that emerged in process and through material-discursive practices. Next, I enact an agential cut as a researcher by identifying and naming the material-discursive phenomena as **“(re)configuring identity”**.

The next step of this diffractive analysis is to diffractively read the phenomena, **“(re)configuring identity,”** and conduct an analysis that looks for how differences, relationships, and interactions produce meaning and knowledge. The rest of this analysis offers examples of how a diffractive reading might continually produce new meanings about the phenomena, **“(re)configuring identity.”**

### **Diffractive Reading 1: Embodied Technologies**

The first diffractive reading reads the Marco Polo app, the physical phones that the participants used, and the cars/vehicles as apparatuses that were involved in (re)configuring spatiality and temporality. Barad (2007) posits that “apparatuses are specific material reconfigurings of the world that do not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigure spacetime as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming” (p. 142). Knives Jones commented about the discomfort of speaking into a device that did not allow for interruptions, time limits, or immediate feedback from another human's face:

- **Knives Jones R1 & 2:** “In the beginning, I’m not used to talking about myself ... um ... and I’m not used to talking without rearranging what I’m saying based on the discomfort of comfort that people in the room—uh—in this space, and I don’t have to do that here. And I love that.”
- **Frances R3:** “When people get on, they initially start talking, and then there’s this moment of seeing themselves, and then they’re like oh, oh and then they’ll fix hair, adjust, or be like oh, you know, just like make a comment about like, oh I worked out today and my hair’s all messy, and it’s this really interesting moment—I think—when it’s like you get in and start talking and then [have] an instant realization of like actually seeing yourself and not only seeing yourself, [but also] recognizing how others are going to see you, um, yeah, and I just find it really fascinating when it happens ... [it’s a] dual reality of I’m talking to you—this other person that’s on the other side of the screen—but also, I’m talking to myself, and I can see myself and perceive myself and what I’m perceiving is not what I want or even ... There’s something here that I feel like I need to acknowledge or address.”

Through the intra-action between the phone as an apparatus and app as an apparatus, ways of understanding self through the technology are enacted in the material-discursive practice of engaging with a material technology that creates opportunities to discursively engage other humans. These intra-actions produce specific boundaries, reinscribing identity, both within the app through representation of an image on the phone, and within the app log as new negotiations of space and identity occur by seeing oneself through the phone and within the transitory physical space where recording takes place.

## **Diffraction Reading 2: Negotiating Space and Perception With/Through Apparatus**

Participants commented about the amount of time they engaged with the platform, recording the videos to each other while driving in the car or sitting in their car. In R5, JayleAnne said:

In my car, I can say things that I wouldn't say, sitting in the living room with [spouse name] 15 feet away, even—sometimes polo walking ... but would sensor myself ... This became a space to really—I think—bare my soul, and I felt it was very freeing, I felt mentally free, emotionally, physically, all the things ...

The phone and the Marco Polo app produce a picture/video of the physical space of the car through the app and phone. This entanglement of space and time (re)configures the material car by creating an extension of app, to the car, to the meaning that the participants inscribe to the car through the intra-action with the technologies. The car becomes one of the few privatized spaces where these women are alone and able to speak without being overheard or having to explain what they are doing. Reading the extension of the phone apparatus as through the technology of the app to include the visible space of the car creates the opportunity for the researcher to enact an agential cut, making meaning for how these intra-actions change the types of conversation that are produced through this material-discursive practice. In contrast to other areas that women record, the videos recorded in the car both establish an opportunity for a space connection—even without being present physically together in a space—through recognition and reproduction of that space across every participant's phone. We exist together, altering spacetime mattering.

### **Diffraction Reading 3: Removing Burdens of Performance**

This section of analysis is concerned with reading how the app, phone, car, and the affordances allowed by technologies create opportunities for participants to practice removing the burdens of performance, effectively experimenting with how they understand themselves as women who should be listened to and who can take up space with their words, and how they are understood.

Knives Jones, throughout the participatory process, brought up instances where she felt like in her day-to-day life, she performed space—holding space for others, creating space for others, and being cautious of the space that she occupied—specifically in conversations. She shared:

If it's in a really larger group I feel like I spend more time performing and listening, and I end up being in a position where I hear everybody's life story, and they walk away feeling better and I have this weight ... and I don't feel that way with this group, and it doesn't really matter what the subject matter is. (R1 & 2)

Not talking about it to tell you ... to convince you of anything, and I think in one way it's really freeing that I can just tell you what is going on from my own perspective. That doesn't always happen. I feel like in a lot of situations, even though I don't want to, I am still crafting my narrative for the audience, and I have to train myself over and over and over to just be ... and maybe in a lot of situations I won't be who I want to be because those people have not earned that privilege to know that part of me ... but I feel here ... I can just say things from my perspective, and I trust that you'll ask me questions if it sounds like I'm a little off. (R3)

Knives Jones talked about the burden of performing as a barrier to bringing her complete, unmoderated self to spaces. Performativity is (re)negotiated when entangled with a technological apparatus, where no immediate feedback or feelings are experienced from her listener. Braidotti (2002) discusses identity as taking “place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition ... and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation” (p. 2). Here, the technological allowances intra-act with social processes and social burdens. The material-discursive practice of negotiating the idea of space—how much space is taken up and how much is created—is a process of spatial (re)configuration and constitutes a process of (re)configuring identity.

## Chapter 4 Summary

*There is a noticeable gap between how we live – in emancipated or post-feminist, multi-ethnic societies, with high technologies and telecommunication, allegedly free borders and increased controls, to name a few – and how we represent to ourselves this lived familiarity...Do we live in the same world?...How do you account for the kind of world you are living in?”*  
(Braidotti, 2002, p, 6).

Agential realist accounts suggest that “scientific practices do not reveal what is already there; rather, what is ‘disclosed’ is the effect of the intra-active engagements of our participation within and as part of the world’s differential becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 361). Simpson (2024) reminds researchers that the analytical focus “must reach beyond simply narrating the experience ... to identify turning points, moments of change, and creative emergences” (p. 158). Chapter 4 presented a diffractive analysis, a diffractive reading, of the research materials generated from the case. The material-discursive phenomena were diffractively analyzed to enact agential cuts

and produce meaning. Chapter 5 presents a discussion implications for this theoretical dissertation.

## **Chapter 5 - Becomings**

*“We are responsible for the word of which we are a part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped” (Barad, 2007, p. 361)*

This theoretical dissertation contributes to processual ontologies of leadership by identifying and extending more robust theories and methodologies to study emergent phenomena closer to the moment it is produced and in ways that account for material entanglements. This dissertation set out to bring feminist new materialism to a processual ontology of leadership, specifically Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, and adopted a diffractive methodology to attend to how leadership emerges as a phenomena through ongoing relations, process, and material-discursive practices. In doing so, the current research: (1) further built theoretical foundations to study emerging leadership phenomena, (2) expanded opportunities for leadership observation and analysis by accounting for the materiality of technologically produced spaces, and (3) developed a diffractive methodology that enabled opportunities for observation and analysis closer to the emergent phenomena of study. In laying this groundwork, this study makes a theoretical contribution to adopt an onto-epistem-ology (Barad, 2014) of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

### **Tracing Where We Have Been**

Chapter 1 introduced the problem, gaps, and challenges that this research hoped to address. The problem statement for this research outlined known challenges to processual ontologies of leadership, including existing need for: (1) more extensive ways to account for power, agency, and objectivity; (2) new locations, temporalities, and technologies to explore an

emergent object of study; and (3) new methodologies and methods to observe, understand, and produce leadership. Background concepts on leadership as a process(es), materiality, and feminist thought were provided in order to locate this work in the literature and to identify what theories and frameworks can make sense of the interactions between human and non-human agents/technologies in production of meaning/leadership. This dissertation sits at the intersection of critical perspectives and processual ontologies of leadership, meaning that the current dissertation understands leadership as a phenomena (Crevani & Lammi, 2023) that emerge in process and uses critical perspectives, specifically feminist theory, to interrogate identity, power, and systems.

Chapter 2 introduced, located, and discussed literature relevant to the construction of a theoretical framework. This move surfaced a gap and substantiated the need for more theoretical engagement with critical theories, as well as an alignment between theoretical foundations foundation to inform a definition of leadership, including what leadership is as the object of study and how to study it. This dissertation addressed the identified gap by looking to critical perspectives, specifically feminist theory, to bring a theory of agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership. One final accomplishment of Chapter 2 includes responding to calls for “new methods of researching capable of attending to the barely noticed subtleties and nuances of leadership as it unfolds” (Simpson, 2024, p. 8). In this dissertation, I suggested that there is room to build from already existing contributions in the field by extending (Harding, et al., 2022 & Simpson, 2024) a diffractive analysis for leadership as material-discursive phenomena that emerge in process and through material-discursive practices. Finally, after locating the dissertation within processual ontologies of leadership, this work built on, responded to, and extended from processual ontologies of leadership. Chapter 2 introduced a theoretical framework

that brought feminist new materialisms, specifically a theory of agential realism, to processual ontologies to address issues of power, agency, and methodology within processual ontologies of leadership. Agential realism expanded and extended processual ontologies of leadership into an onto-epistem-ology of leadership. An agential realist account of leadership extends an onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices.

Chapter 3 located a new “everyday” site within the digital sphere, a Wonder Women group on Marco Polo, and facilitated a participatory diffractive process. In bringing processual ontologies to the digital sphere, specifically Marco Polo, an ordinary site (Carroll et al., 2008), this dissertation identified new places where people are “talking together, acting together, and thinking together, all toward making the reality of their condition what it is” (Harding, 2024, p. 531). Chapter 3 also outlined the methodological orientation, informed by theoretical commitments, for this study, and explained how research materials were generated and the diffractive analysis, or diffractive reading, which was conducted in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 briefly applied the theoretical framework to a case through a post-qualitative diffractive analysis. In doing so, this theoretical dissertation achieved the aim of: (1) building theoretical foundations to study emerging leadership phenomena, (2) expanding opportunities for leadership observation and analysis by accounting for the materiality of technologically produced spaces, and (3) further developing a diffractive methodology that enables opportunities for observation and analysis closer to the emergent phenomena of study. Table 5.1 is a revision of Table 2.1 introduced in Chapter 2. This revision includes where the current theoretical dissertation sits within major processual ontologies of leadership and what it contributes.

**Table 5.1** Revised Table, Key Contributions to Processual Ontologies of Leadership

| Key Contributions to Processual Ontologies of Leadership |
|----------------------------------------------------------|
|----------------------------------------------------------|

| Subfield                             | Exemplar                  | Leadership as...                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Theoretical Foundation                                                            | Methodology and/or Method Used or Proposed                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Relational/ Collective Leadership    | Drath et al. (2008)       | Three outcomes: (1) direction: widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims, and mission; (2) alignment: the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective; and (3) commitment: the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefit within the collective interest and benefit (p. 636) | Functionalism                                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Purpose-Driven Leadership            | By (2021)                 | The collective pursuit of delivering on purpose (p. 40) Shifting DAC to PAC.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Telos Leadership Lens<br><br>Applied to existing leadership theory, including LAP |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P)       | Raelin et al. (2025)      | Practice. L-A-P is about change and can be distinguished from other as-practice movements...because it defines leadership as turning points leading to a change in trajectories within the flow of practice (p. 3).<br><br>To find and change leadership, must look to the practice within which it is occurring (p. 3).                                       | Practice Theory                                                                   | <b>Methodologies:</b> Interpretative forms of inquiry applying ethnographic as well as narrative and aesthetic methodologies are needed to capture the dialogical and practice activity concurrently in process. |
| Multimodal Leadership Studies (MMLS) | Alvehus & Crevani (2022)  | A socio-spatial process of accomplishing direction (p. 232).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Leadership-as-Practice<br><br>Practice Theory tradition                           | <b>Method:</b> Micro-ethnography. Short, intensive fieldwork attending to situations and interactions.                                                                                                           |
| Collaborative Leadership             | Robinson & Riddell (2022) | A collaborative achievement – leadership that emerges from interactions across members of a group, where that interaction causes a change in the trajectory of activity, decisions, or strategy (p. 2).                                                                                                                                                        | Leadership-as-Practice<br><br>Practice Theory tradition                           | <b>Method:</b> Vectors and videos. Six step process to uncover and develop collaborative leadership. Group was recorded during a meeting and analyzed replays.                                                   |
| Collaborative Leadership             | Simpson (2024)            | Movement constituted in, and emergent from, socially engaged talk. Leadership emerges within the flow of ongoing social practice, happening within the dynamic flow of interactions, conversations, and actions among people. A divergent process that explores opportunities for making new futures in worlds that are constantly changing (p. 5).            | American Pragmatism                                                               | <b>Method:</b> Recording and observation of senior management team meetings at an arts-based company. Diffraction that complements the <i>thinkindooing</i> of Pragmatist philosophy.                            |

|                                                  |                                            |                                                                                                    |                                     |                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Leadership Moments                               | Larson et al. (2025)                       | Process, practice and a relational phenomenon (p. 1,307).                                          | Pragmatism/Functionalism (implicit) | <b>Method:</b> Four step procedure that combines an interpretive stance, guided by a sensitizing concept, with an ethnomethodologically inspired inductive analysis |
| Agential Realist Onto-epistemology of leadership | Youngblood (2026), this dissertation study | A material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices. | Agential Realism                    | <b>Methodology:</b> Diffractive methodology<br><b>Method:</b> Participatory Diffractive Process<br><b>Analysis:</b> Diffractive analysis                            |

## Looking to Where We Could Go

In tracing where we have been, Chapter 5 now looks to where we could go. This section provides implications of this research across leadership theory, practice, methodology, and development.

### Diffracting Further

The central project of this dissertation was to bring agential realism to processual ontologies of leadership. The diffractive analysis of research materials in Chapter 4 is concerned with demonstrating the potential of analysis and application of the theoretical framework. A central question for readers may be – to what extent does this theory building create opportunities to perform feminist praxis or how is this a feminist dissertation? While the current analysis is limited in this scope, there is potential to diffract the same research materials differently to see what potentialities emerge for a feminist leadership, which would be an interesting potential project, and feminist praxis. We could further diffract these reading materials to make meaning from the intersections of Marco Polo, domesticity, and feminist spaces; make more prominent the feminist praxis, including how diffraction makes visible the researcher in production of meaning and how the participatory diffractive process engages knowledges beyond just the researcher; and how the diffractive participatory process

renegotiates power and agency for more power and more agency because of the way it is produced. In line with an agential realist account, the entanglements can continuously be (re)configured in our meaning-making practices, opening opportunity for multiplicitous readings, interpretations, and meaning.

## **Leadership Practice and Development**

Further exploration is needed to explicitly connect the current research study to leadership development. Barad's claim that "diffraction serves as a counterpoint to reflection" (p. 29) can help critique the use of reflection as the primary mechanism for leadership development. This dissertation discusses diffraction for leadership. Existing leadership practice and development over-emphasize individual reflection to make meaning. This can be disconnected from meaningful critical analysis. Put another way, Simpson (2024) suggests that "if leadership is developed in a collaborative process, this must influence not only how we go about researching its practising but also how we develop it through learning and teaching" (p. 161). Diffraction provides a methodological orientation for leadership development and leadership research that can be applied to a range of leadership practice, learning, and development contexts.

### **Engaged Methods for Emergent Strategy**

There is potential that this dissertation study can also serve as a participatory method that can support organizations, organizational strategy, and how people in organization navigate invisible structures in order to produce outcomes. Potential exploration is needed for how diffractive processes can be leadership development experiences for individuals and groups to then navigate differently.

### **Impact Analysis and Evidence-Based Leadership Development**

This is a theoretical dissertation; however, there is a direct practical application of this work. Most accepted methods of impact analysis rely on individual cognitive models that have representationalist or positivist epistemological commitments. Individual self-report surveys have become the most accepted method to collect empirical data for impact analysis. This represents a very narrow understanding of leadership phenomena but is overrepresented in leadership learning, development, and practice. Diffractive analysis provides an empirical approach that captures other dimensions of leadership learning, including development and practice that are equally important but are not effectively captured by traditional social science methods.

### **(Re)searching Differently**

This theoretical dissertation has implications for how research is produced. Further exploration is needed in line with an agential realist account, as it can open possibility for more creative and expanded considerations of what research is. Pullen and Rhodes (2015) suggest that “embodied writing practices ... question dominant structures and practices that seek to limit what ... researchers are allowed to write and how they are allowed to write it” (p. 88). This dissertation adhered to traditional expectations for academic research and writing, often drawing boundaries or falling back to standard research conventions. In fact, we can consider academia and graduate school as a type of performativity, with the writing conventions, languages, and engagements serving to legitimize research within clearly draw academic culture and disciplinary boundaries. Agential realist accounts of the world—and writing—consider how knowledge is produced, and as a result, expand potentialities for what we consider research to be. Agential realism is at its core is a materialist theory of performativity (see Chapter 2). As such, agential realist expansions of research can look to piecing apart academic performativity, trouble

it, and exploring new pathways. For example, by looking to the arts, community-engagement, technologies, posthumanist and post-qualitative accounts, and feminist praxis, we may find ways of researching closer to the material experiences that shape our lives and therefore meanings, realities, and leadership. Looking specifically to writing practices, Gilmore et al. (2019) suggest that writing differently is “concerned with broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human (p. 4). Feminist new materialist expansions of research and writing can consider not just what helps us become human but trouble the very notion of humanness, both through meaning-making practices and examination of material conditions, bodies, and power structures that produce and reinscribe humans and humanness. Writing and other research performativity can move from abstract ideas and representations of reality to embodied, material, and lived.

### **Working Lives and Selves/Bodies**

When we think about working lives and looking to the context of work, the application of an agential realist leadership extends beyond just applications in Marco Polo. Rather, the Marco Polo application serves as an example for the kinds of contexts which benefit from frameworks that can account for the entangled inseparability of humans, culture, technologies, work, and more. For example, with the rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence and AI tools in work and organization contexts, researchers concerned with working lives, and in particular gender and feminist orientations to working lives, will be called to make meaning of and complicate the assumptions of these new working realities. For example, AI already has the potential to expand humanness under the guise of productivity – working life no longer exists directly within human capabilities or even human presence. I have seen examples in a professional organization

webinar in which a digital twin was set up to engage with university students so that the individual could go about with more important work, effectively increasing the capacity for production of work beyond human capabilities and blurring the boundaries of existence across space and time. In addition to what Baudrillard (1994) might say about the hyperreality and more-than-realness of digital twins, the agential realist theories, frameworks, and methodologies included in this dissertation may be able to help us make visible and complicate the idea of productivity as these technologies emerge. Without critical examination or a way to critically examine, there is potential for moving further to the inseparability of productivity and value, layered with gender-coded ideas such a care [for students, for example], seen as an unnecessary human task and marked as unimportant work. What Woods (2024) might call the domestication of technologies, actively reshaping everyday life, identity, power, and agency. Without a way to make meaning of new working realities, we risk recklessly chasing productivity [for whose benefit?] and never seeing the potentialities for the creation of new worlds and realities that technologies often promise.

### **The Promise of Process**

*“If the only constant...is change, then the challenge lies in thinking about processes, rather than concepts” (Braidotti, 2002, p.1).*

### **How Is This Leadership?**

The inability to define leadership has “led others to question the very existence of leadership as a concept and practice”, suggesting that leadership “has a tendency to disappear among the milieu of everyday life ... a vacuous term that incorporates everything and nothing” (Sutherland, 2018, p. 267). Similarly, Crevani (2018) argues that “such a conceptualization of leadership waters down the concept too much, making it almost unrecognizable” (p. 103). This

has always been a challenge for leadership as a field of study, but these challenges increase and become more visible when moving from leader-centric perspectives to leadership as process. Is leadership a theory, relation, and/or phenomena? Does theory explain leadership or ground leadership theoretically? Is it an epistemology? Ontology? To begin to answer this question, I rely on Simpson (2024), when she pushes for leadership to shift in analytical focus to “turning points, moments of change, and creative emergences” (p. 158). Simpson (2024) argues that “it is these moments that make new futures, and as such, they are vital” (p. 158). There is a need for this enterprise “in order to not only challenge traditional individualistic understandings, but also to contribute to changing leadership practice by reformulating what leadership is about” (Crevani, 2018, p. 103).

In an unstable, emergent world, where meaning is constantly done and undone, technologies run wild, identities are discoured to inexistence, environments are revolting, and institutions previously thought to be unmovable are crumbling, maybe what is needed is more leadership, and more leadership everywhere—not just at work, not just in learning, not just in specific contexts moving specific directions, but leadership that is slippery, undefinable, at the margins, agential, always (re)configuring and capable of possibilities, transformations, and becomings.

## **Conclusion**

*“The point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations” (Braidotti, 2002, p. 2).*

Understanding leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices has the potential for “a wholly new way to address questions of truth and knowledge...for all theorists concerned with the future direction of

knowledge” (Heckman, 2010, p. 72). Researchers have the potential to do “more than simply observing ... [but to set] about visibly making new worlds conceived as dynamic wholes in which all parts, human, non-human, and more-than-human, shape both situations and each other through their actions” (Simpson, 2024, p. 156). This dissertation brought the onto-epistem-ology of agential realism to leadership and to the everyday, technologically produced emergences. Agential realism can be applied to cultural practices and their construction (Hekman, 2010). Arguably, if “agency is not a possession but a relation ... then the conditions of possibility for the phenomena called leadership exist” (Harding, 2025, p. 529). If this is the case, maybe then researchers take up the challenge to consider an onto-epistem-ology of leadership. An onto-epistem-ology of leadership as a material-discursive phenomena that emerges in process and through material-discursive practices to attend to the entangled inseparability of knowing and being and allows for (re)configuring the production of the world we observe and become.

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## **Appendix A - Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

TO: Heather Woods AQ Miller School of Media and Communication

Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-13497

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair

Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 01/23/2026

RE: Proposal Entitled, “Leadership as Emergent Organization.”

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written – and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category: Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research

Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 01/23/2026 3:14 PM ET

## Appendix B - Informed Consent Form

**KANSAS STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

University Research  
Compliance Office

### Institutional Review Board (IRB) Informed Consent Template Form

comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

**PROJECT TITLE:**

Leadership as Emergent Organization - IRB-13497

**PROJECT APPROVAL  
DATE:**

1/23/26

**PROJECT EXPIRATION  
DATE:**

Exempt

**LENGTH OF  
STUDY:**

Up to  
seven  
days

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Heather Woods hwoods@ksu.edu

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** RJ Youngblood youngblood@ksu.edu

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** Heather Woods hwoods@ksu.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects,  
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506,  
(785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu

**PROJECT SPONSOR:**

None

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

This study explores how leadership shows up in everyday experiences. The study will look at leadership as something that emerges through relationships, conversations, and shared experiences over time. The project will center on a small group called Wonder Women, a voluntary group in a public social media platform where participants share audio/visual recordings. Over a period of up to five days, participants will respond to prompts, shared stories, and engage in conversation about leadership and work at a level that feels comfortable to them. Participation is flexible, ranging from brief interactions to more extended discussions. The goal of this study was to better understand how leadership naturally develops in real, technology supported spaces, and to highlight lived experiences of leadership.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:**

After participants consent, the researcher will ask questions and facilitate a discussion related to leadership and work life. Participants can expect to participate for a duration of no more than five days for a timeframe of as little as 1 minute or up to a max of around 2 hours. The potential for up to two hours is the potential total time over the days the participants choose to engage, not all at one time. Participants make audio/visual recordings as long or short as they prefer. Participants will choose their level of participation and engage with the process as they determine their level of interest in the voluntary conversation.

**RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:**

Participants might experience:

- Emotional discomfort when reflecting on personal or work experiences
- Time or participation burden over multiple days
- Changes in interest or availability
- Preference to delete recordings or disengage from the platform

Participants can always choose to delete any of their audio/visual recordings. Deleting audio/visual recordings from the group will not remove you from the study.

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:**

The reflective process might offer insight and learning about individual leadership, leadership challenges, or facilitate leadership development.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Participants will voluntarily engage with the platform and have control over whether or not to delete their data during or at the completion of the study. Participants can edit, revise, or delete any post they make in the platform at any point during the study. Any quotes or excerpts used in the research will be de-identified. The audio/visual recordings are not stored by the researcher. Any notes taken by the researcher as part of the analysis will be stored in password protected, dual authenticated cloud document storage. Participants can withdraw at any time from the project without penalty or loss of benefit.

**The information or biospecimens that will be collected as part of this research could be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigators for future research studies without additional informed consent.**

**Terms of participation:** I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant).

**PARTICIPANT NAME:**

**PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:**

**WITNESS TO SIGNATURE:  
(PROJECT STAFF)**

**DATE:**

**DATE:**

# Appendix C - Debriefing Statement

## Debriefing Statement for Participation in a Research Study Kansas State University

Thank you for taking part in this research study and for generously sharing your time, insights, and experiences. We sincerely appreciate your willingness to contribute to this research. Your participation was entirely voluntary, and you were free to share as much or as little information as you felt comfortable providing. You may also choose whether to keep your responses on the platform or delete them at any time. Your contribution is valued and helps support a deeper understanding of the topic being studied.

### Contact Information:

- **PI:** Heather Woods [hwoods@kstate.edu](mailto:hwoods@kstate.edu)
- **Graduate Student:** Rebecca J (RJ) Youngblood [youngblood@ksu.edu](mailto:youngblood@ksu.edu)
- **Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB):**
  - Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, [rubin@ksu.edu](mailto:rubin@ksu.edu)
  - Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, [comply@ksu.edu](mailto:comply@ksu.edu)

**Title of the Study:** Leadership as Emergent Organization

### Summary and Purpose of the Study:

This study explored how leadership shows up in everyday experiences. The study looked at leadership as something that emerges through relationships, conversations, and shared experiences over time. The project centered on a small group called Wonder Women, a voluntary group in a public social media platform where participants shared audio/visual recordings. Over a period of up to seven days, participants responded to prompts, shared stories, and engaged in conversation about leadership and work at a level that felt comfortable to them. Participation was flexible, ranging from brief interactions to more extended discussions. The goal of this study was to better understand how leadership naturally develops in real, technology supported spaces and to highlight lived experiences of leadership.

### Withdraw from the Study:

If you have questions, concerns, or later wish to withdraw your data, please contact the PI or graduate student using the information provided.

### Study Results:

If you wish to be informed of the final study results, you may contact the PI or graduate student using the information provided. Participants who request results will receive a brief summary of the overall findings and/or the dissertation once the study has concluded.