

Changing the World One Interaction at a Time

by

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Committee Approval

The members of Michelle Perren's Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled *Changing the world one interaction at a time* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Leadership:

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Abstract

This autoethnography examined how my daily interactions within societal systems shape my evolving positionality and inform my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis. Through self-discovery, I considered the symbiotic relationship between self as a woman and societal norms that construct and influence my values, experiences, and leadership philosophy. My research explored feminist movements and women's positionality across social, political, and organizational structures. By integrating systems thinking, I reflected on my position within these systems, examining how systemic dynamics influence lived experiences and how my agency interacts with, resists, and reshapes structural power. Inspired by arts-based methods of reflexivity and storytelling, I explored the roots of my perspectives, values, beliefs, and biases, uncovering and dispelling old narratives and releasing what no longer serves me. This allowed me to reshape my mindset, realize my power as a woman, and embrace my authentic self as a feminist leader.

Keywords: feminist leadership, feminist attributes, heroine's journey, transcendence, autoethnography, arts-based methods

Land Acknowledgements

I humbly acknowledge the lands of the Lekwungen-speaking people, known today as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, where I live, work, and study as an uninvited guest and settler. As a visitor, I would like to acknowledge the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples. As a settler of Scottish descent, I am committed to working toward reconciliation. As a student at Royal Roads University, I approach my continued learning journey of Indigenous histories and cultures with humility and openness. I commit to continued learning, reflection, and responsibility in my personal and academic journey.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my amazing family and friends who have encouraged me throughout this process.

First, to my mother, Rose: you are my matriarchal inspiration and have helped shape me into the woman I am today. You have always demonstrated that kindness, empathy, and compassion are foundational in creating a warm and loving family and a supportive community. Thank you for showing me the power of kindness and what it means to be empathetic and authentic. I also appreciate the countless hours you have spent listening to me as I navigated the world; you have always been my biggest cheerleader. You have overcome so much in your life—poverty, a stroke, losing Dad, challenging family dynamics—yet you remain strong as a tree, firmly rooted yet agile enough to weather life's storms. Through all of life's challenges, you epitomize femininity, a true feminist leader in the world.

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Third, I dedicate this work to my sister, Yvonne and her two amazing kids, Josh and Quiana. While my sister and I have had our challenges, her influence has deeply impacted the woman I am today, and I am ever grateful for her two amazing kids, Josh and Quiana who have always made me strive to do and be my best. Watching you two navigate life's ups and downs as leaders in the world has been inspiring, and I'm so deeply proud to be your Auntie.

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understands me to the core. I hope I have shown you that you can be resilient no matter what life throws at you. It is okay to ask for help, shed some tears, and feel frustrated, but remember, those moments are temporary, and with a positive mindset, you can and will come out of those moments stronger and wiser. You are my heart and soul. Thank you for being compassionate, kind, empathetic, and authentic. I am incredibly proud of all of you. No words could ever capture how deeply I love you. "Thanks for the wings" (*It's a wonderful life*, 1946, 2:06:30).

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List of Abbreviations

BC	British Columbia
FPAR	Feminist participatory action research
PSM	Personal systems-thinking model
REB	Research Ethics Board
RRU	Royal Roads University
TCPS	Tri-Council Policy Statement

Executive Summary

This autoethnographic thesis is based on my lived experience as a white, cisgender, woman, shaped by a Western worldview, working as a senior leader in a provincial government environment. The guiding research inquiry question for my study explored how my interactions within societal systems shape my evolving positionality and inform my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis. Additional reflective subquestions focus on feminism, identity as a woman, personal values and professional power which deepened my exploration of feminist leadership.

The following concepts provided the foundation for interpreting my study. This research is situated within feminist leadership theory (Batliwala, 2011; Maguire, 2006) which was examined through a literature review including feminism and feminist leadership (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Garcha 2020; Iannello, 2010; Johnson, 2020; Munro, 2013; Rampton, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2005), social interactions (Aksan et al., 2009; Berger, 2005; Luhmann, 1995; Snyder & Stukas, 1999), social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Parsons, 2010; Stets & Burke, 2000) and systems thinking (Dallenbach, 2001; Maturana & Varela, 2012; Senge, 2006; Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

I used an autoethnographic research methodology (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002; Tomkins, 2020) using reflexivity (Carstensen-Egwoum, 2014; Day, 2012; Eriksen 2009; May & Perry, 2014) and storytelling (Carstensen-Egwoum, 2014; Day, 2012; Eriksen 2009; May & Perry, 2014). My data emerged from critical moments in practice that revealed tensions in my leadership and leadership experience and these sources were captured using personal journals and free writing.

The implications of this study suggest that understanding my underlying values and past experiences contribute to the constructs of my leadership philosophy. Additionally, that being a feminist leader extends beyond formal leadership in a corporate professional environment supporting a global responsibility to sustain and uphold social justice. Within my role and space, I am responsible for ensuring that I conduct myself in alignment with my guiding principles and philosophy and use my voice and platforms to stand for and with the suppressed and oppressed.

This study has demonstrated that my leadership practice was strengthened by reflective practices, expanding my self-awareness, using critical reflection to deconstruct old thinking patterns and regenerate a new sense of self, self as woman and self as feminist leader.

This study contributes to leadership academia by demonstrating the value and power of reflexivity and storytelling within autoethnography in leadership as an essential stepping stone to self-realization and self-actualization.

In conclusion, this autoethnography underscores the importance of self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-love, self-confidence, and invites leaders to engage in their own reflective practices as a pathway toward ethical, relational, and responsive leadership.

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Chapter 1: Focus and Framing

Hi—remember me, the person that you thought you could place onto a glass cliff? Even after you pushed me, I still found the confidence to keep going. I looked into the deepest part of myself to unpack what really happened. What I found was sad, frustrating and infuriating. . . (see Appendix A for the full Open Letter)

As I began this study, I questioned, how well do I know myself? What motivates my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis? Why do I operate the way I do, and how does the worldview me? I hoped examining my positionality as a white, cisgender, woman leader working in a corporate environment would bring visibility to how my social identity interplays with social systems and its impact on my feminist leadership. I found using an autoethnographic methodology allowed me to explore the intersections self and systems through using a qualitative self-reflective practice method (Adams et al., 2021) and storytelling method (Simmons, 2019). I explored how my past and present positionality influences my current leadership philosophy and praxis. I considered the six conditions of system change framework (Kania et al., 2018) to examine my mental models, relationships, connections, and power dynamics to understand what might be holding me back from being an authentic, congruent feminist leader. Authentic leadership considers a person's self-awareness of their values and how those impact their emotions and behaviours (Bishop, 2013), and congruent leadership considers the alignment of one's actions based on their values (Stanley, 2008). Feminist leadership is "motivated by justice, fairness and equity related to gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation" (Batiwala, 2011, p. 10).

For this autoethnographic study, I examined the following research question: How do my interactions within societal systems shape my evolving positionality and inform my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis? I chose the word evolving intentionally, as it represents continuous improvement and acknowledges the past and present states without judgment while keeping an eye on future possibilities. Four subquestions helped me to navigate my inquiry:

1. What is feminist leadership and how does it underpin my current leadership philosophy and praxis?
2. What interactions and distinct moments are shaping my past and present?
3. What societal systems am I interacting with?

4. What is my positionality and how is it influencing my interactions with others?

Significance of the Inquiry

Be the change you want to see in the world. (Ghandi, as cited in Bligh & Robinson, 2010, p. 848)

To be the change I want to see, I had to begin by being vulnerable, exploring the corners of my mind, exposing hidden biases, entrenched views, and incongruent thinking patterns. Through deconstructing self, a new form of leadership emerged, further aligning my desire for deep self-awareness and personal mastery. Furthermore, evaluating my views through dialogue with others sparked new knowledge and thinking in myself and about others, positively inspiring a movement toward a more inclusive, compassionate, and relational worldview. A worldview, *weltanschauung* in German, is a way of sense-making by analyzing physical and sensory information, including past experiences that have shaped one's views or beliefs of the world (Vidal, 2008).

To support my autoethnographic research, I created a committee consisting of a Royal Roads University (RRU) academic supervisor, a committee member, and two feedback participants. I utilized the self-reflexive practice of journaling to capture daily interactions through left-column journaling and free writing journaling, supported by walking in nature and listening to music. My committee and feedback participants helped me examine my positionality by discussing my analyses of interactions, challenging my biases and assumptions (Gilbert, 2001), and reflecting on the impacts of these on my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis (Adams et al., 2021). The reciprocal nature of the inquiry aligned well with my aspirational values of relationality and my feminist leadership philosophy (Marshall, 2001).

In a post-postmodern (Bray et al., 2012), postpandemic world, in which inequality, political divisiveness and polarity reign (Zompetti, 2015) and white supremacy and capitalism are reinforced in societal structures and systems (Crenshaw, 1991), seeking to strengthen my authentic self as a leader has enabled me to challenge oppressive systems (Kezar & Lester, 2011). I recognize being born in British Columbia (BC) as a white, cisgender, female of Scottish descendants and settlers relieves me of oppressions such as gender and race that others experience more keenly. As a researcher, I am mindful of my privilege and acknowledge the past harms inflicted upon women, Indigenous People and the lands they live on, Black women and people of colour (Gökçen, 2021), and the LGBTQIA2S+ community

(Stone, 2016). Within my professional role, I have the authority to influence others' decision making regarding policies and resources. I am aware my access to social and education systems has enabled me to benefit from these professional opportunities.

My research enabled a journey of self-analysis toward a deepened sense of self-awareness. I conducted this study to embrace the power of feminist leadership (Murdock, 2020) while deconstructing my entrenched views and hidden biases. While this process was messy, uncomfortable, and a little chaotic, I found the autoethnographic methodology and self-reflective and storytelling methods best aligned with a first-person exploration and resulted in clarity and new knowledge.

When considering the impacts that my thesis can have on myself and others, I was drawn to Kania et al.'s (2018) work, *The Water of Systems Change*, which explored six conditions of system change and noted change in self as one of the most powerful conditions. I was also reminded of the story in *The Flight of the Hummingbird* (Yahgulanaas, 2009) about a little hummingbird who demonstrates courage through her attempts to put out a raging forest fire that threatens her community by adding one small drop of water at a time. Acts of selflessness were part of my journey and readers will see that I can model the way and be the change I wish to see in the world, inspiring the next generation of leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

Systems Analysis

Within my thesis, it is important to define the context of systems from social systems. While *systems* is a broad term used to describe the collective understanding between the arrangement of elements relative to its environment, a *social system* can generally be described as the society or social environments that an individual shares, influences, and interacts with, and the dynamics and interplay between and within the continuum of the social environment (B. D. Friedman & Allen, 2011).

I initially used Kania et al.'s (2018) six conditions of change, including mental models, relationships and connections, power dynamics, policies, practices, and resource flows, to explore myself within societal systems. These six change conditions can be individually examined; however, they are mutually reinforcing. Of the six conditions, mental models, relationships and connections, and power dynamics were most relevant to my autoethnography. Through the research it became clear that policies,

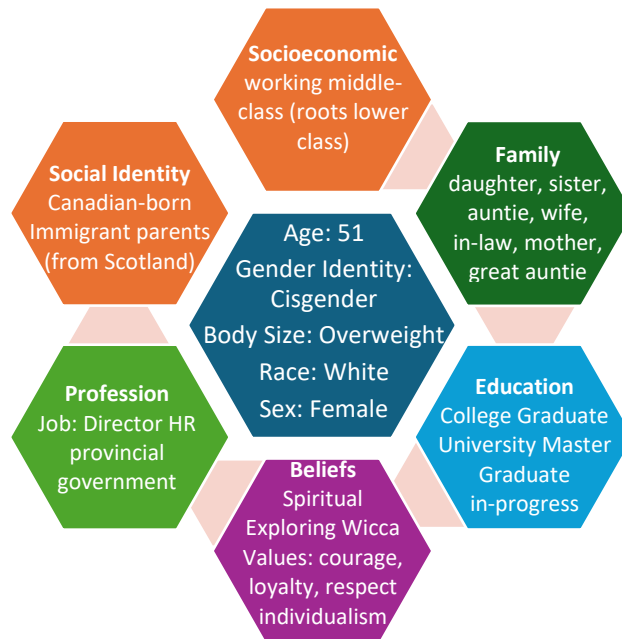
practices, and resources flows were more relevant for an organizational research study. However, this deep self-understanding allowed me to examine the structure and systems that I operate within as well as their mutual impact and influence. This concept became clearer as I conducted my literature review on systems thinking, which is a framework for understanding the interrelationships of a system that creates the behaviour of the whole (Senge, 2006).

I explored myself from within and as a part of the system because I recognized if I could not see the systems I am a part of, it would be difficult for me to understand my relationship to and within it, making it difficult, if not impossible, to shift my perspective. As Kania et al. (2018) noted, “It would be like one fish asking another fish, ‘How’s the water?’ and the other fish, unaware of their surroundings, asking, ‘What’s water?’” (p. 2).

To explore the societal systems that I am a part of, I want to acknowledge that I interpreted the “Power Flower exercise” (Arnold et al., 1991, p. 23). I used OpenAI (2025) ChatGPT as a creative and conceptual brainstorming tool in the early stages of developing an intersectionality identity wheel (Figure 1; see Appendix B). While no content from the tool was used directly, it helped to frame my approach. My intersectionality identity wheel depicts my race, sex, and gender at the centre, with a further layer presenting the societal environments I am a part of. These layers represent myself and the realities and social systems I interact with.

Figure 1

Intersectionality Identity Wheel



Note. Created using SmartArt, adapted from the “Power Flower Exercise” (Arnold et al., 1991, p. 23). HR = Human Resources.

I explored my past and present interactions within societal systems and how these have shaped my evolving leadership philosophy. Using self-reflection and storytelling methods, I captured my past and present moments and interactions and explored how these have shaped my values, beliefs, and biases. I deepened my awareness around the birthing of these moments, the reinforcing loops, and examined whether these constructs continue to be valid or no longer serve me. I deconstructed well-worn paths to make way for new neural pathways to emerge (Pittman & Hoffman, 2023). While identifying interactions that have shaped me was an integral part of my learning journey, growth came from implementing new ways of knowing and being in the world, reinforcing new behaviours, patterns, and actions.

Overview of the Thesis

I began my thesis with the focus and framing, discussing the significance of the inquiry, presenting the research question and subquestions, and providing a systems analysis. In Chapter 2, I provide a comprehensive literature review to establish the academic context and foundational concepts relevant to the study. The review explores key theories and frameworks that inform the investigation of social identity and identity theory, systems thinking and social interactions, positionality with a focus on

women as gender within feminist theory and feminist movements, and feminist leadership, providing a critical backdrop for the research.

In Chapter 3, I outline the methodology and methods used in this autoethnographic study. These sections detail the research design, data collection, and analysis process used to explore my research question, emphasizing the reflective and personal nature of autoethnography as a method that integrates lived and living experience within research-based inquiry.

Chapter 4 is the core of my thesis, presenting my findings, conclusions, and scope and limitations. I use storytelling as both a form of data capture and a way of knowing (Simmons, 2019). I have referred to my short stories as vignettes, snippets of my individual experiences and how these have intersected within social systems, shaping my evolving understanding of feminist leadership.

The thesis concludes with Chapter 5, in which I synthesize my study findings and conclusions into recommendations and discuss their implications for my feminist leadership practice. I also reflect on my journey as a researcher and share how engaging deeply within the research process has transformed my perspectives on feminist leadership, positionality, and agency.

Through this research, I have deepened my understanding of myself, my values, my motivations, and experiences, so that I can release what no longer serves me. Doing so has enabled me to fully embrace and clarify what it means to be a feminist leader and my role and responsibility to carry this forward within society. Additionally, through this thesis, I am contributing to academic conversations about the evolutionary nature of feminist leadership and encouraging critical reflection and dialogue on what is needed now in the world to heal from the past and present oppressive practices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

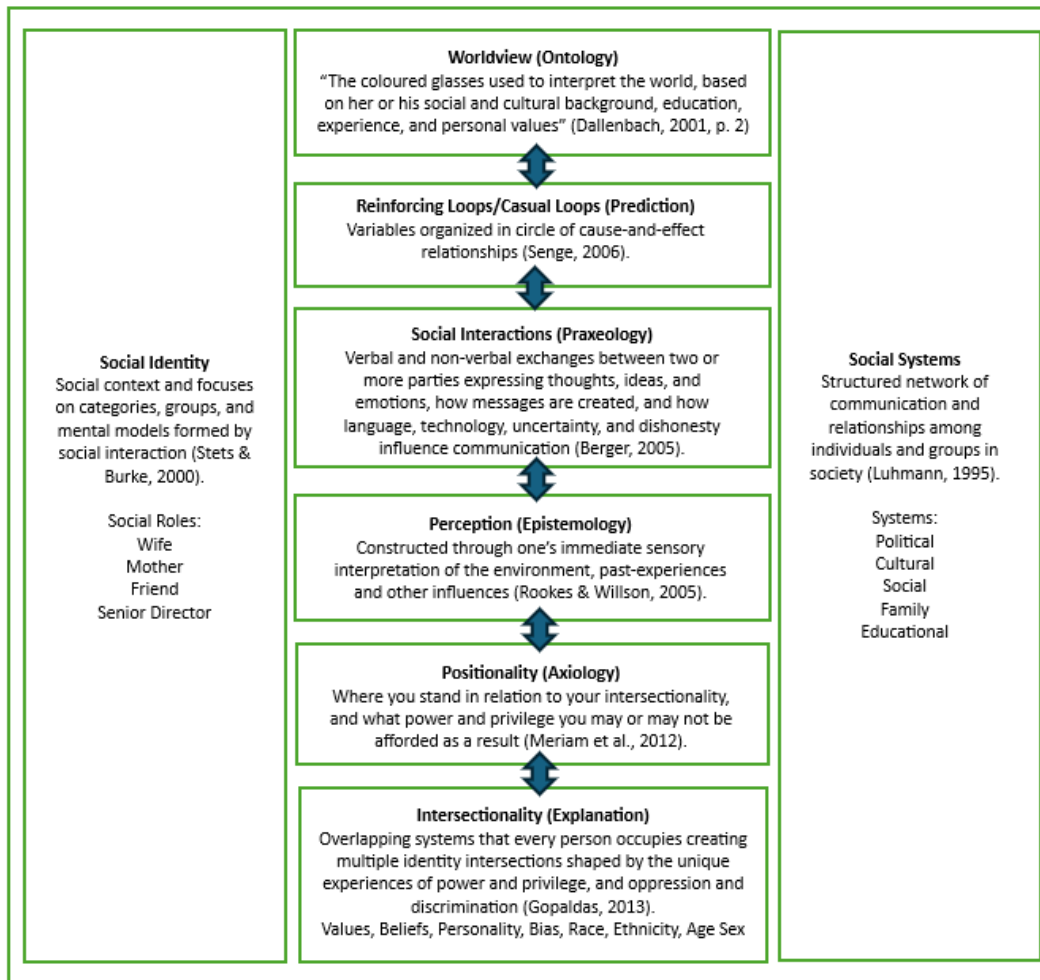
This literature review provides a critical analysis of some theories and frameworks relevant to this study. The theories and frameworks are carried throughout the document. The reader can use this chapter as a reference for concepts and definitions. The three categories within the literature review serve as pillars that support my definition of feminist leadership philosophy and practice: systems-thinking and worldview, women's positionality and feminism, feminist leadership. This critical analysis of literature coupled with a critical self-reflective study helped me wrestle with my social identity, woman's positionality, and perception within social systems. Self-reflection has helped me to understand how feminist leadership supports and promotes women's rights and equalities (Tilghman-Havens, 2020).

Systems-Thinking and Worldview

Systems thinking is a framework for understanding complex problems and is not exclusive to social or people interrelationships (Senge, 2006). As a concept, systems thinking is a way of understanding how components of a system interact to create the behaviour of the whole. Aristotle (as cited in Von Bertalanffy, 1972) proclaimed, "The whole is more than the sum of its parts" (p. 407); Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1972), the 1920s Austrian biologist who created the general systems theory, elaborated on this by identifying the interconnectedness of systems rather than as individual parts. Maturana and Varela (2012) extended this view through a model in which a system's components recursively produce the system itself, identifying these as autonomous living systems. This perspective suggests interconnectedness and unity across micro and macro levels (Daellenbach, 2001). Subsequently, systems thinking evolved over the years, advanced by academic researchers such as Daellenbach (2001), who argued that deeper influences act on human components and their relationships, suggesting people's worldviews and perceptions of problems can create polarizing tensions while simultaneously generating a desire to resolve them. Systems thinking has broad application across disciplines with techniques such as systems mapping and feedback loops. In sociology, systems mapping can describe an individual's space and place within a system, uncover multiple intersections, and explain how these simultaneously shape an individual and the social system (Senge, 2006).

Figure 2

Person Systems Thinking Model



Day (2012) shared that understanding self within social systems allows individuals to recognize the underlying, hidden or overt powers that are influencing the social experience. Consequently, for me to understand myself within social systems and demonstrate the complexity and interconnectivity or building blocks that create my worldview, or weltanschauung in German (Vidal, 2008), I developed a personal systems thinking model (PSM; Figure 2) based on systems thinking (Senge, 2006).

At the base of the PSM, I have placed Intersectionality, which is defined as the overlapping systems that every person occupies creating multiple identities of power and privilege, and oppression and discrimination (Gopaldas, 2013). Intersectionality is the foundation of self-view, including an

individual's values, beliefs, biases and personality, and their self-expression, which include sex, race, ethnicity, age, gender, appearance, and so on. Intersectionality allows for this quagmire of identities to be well understood within the construction of social systems. Gopaldas (2013) expressed the importance of intersectionality, as it acknowledges the overlapping systems that every person occupies, creating multiple identity intersections shaped by the unique experiences of power and privilege and oppression and discrimination.

The next section in the PSM is positionality, defined as where an individual stands in relation to their intersectionality and what power and privilege they may or may not be afforded as a result (Merriam et al., 2001). Kezar (2002) described positionality as "people have multiple overlapping identities . . . [and] make meaning from various aspects of their identity" (p. 96). Generalizing this to a more global view, Day (2012) described positionality as the way individuals interpret the world around them and how the world perceives people; however, this fails to outwardly articulate the interplay between positionality and intersectionality that shapes one's identity and experience within the world. Therefore, I have gravitated towards Merriam et al.'s (2001) definition, which articulated positionality as where an individual stands in relation to their intersectionality, such as race, gender, and class, and what power and privilege they may or may not be afforded as a result. Power can be described as having authority, access, or oversight, whereas privilege can be described as unearned rights and opportunities that are constructed within the historical, social, and political landscapes, which influence the values, beliefs, and power dynamics within those constructs (Garzón et al., 2013) and oppression is the unequal relationships of power (Mulvey, 2018). Expanding the concept of positionality, Bayeck (2022) outlined the additional lens that space and context play in defining one's positionality, denoting that space creates an invisible tension between social and physical interactions within the systems around individuals, and context refers to the underlying social, cultural, and political principles that guide behaviour.

The next section in the PSM is perception, which is how one perceives the world and how the world perceives that individual constructed through their immediate sensory interpretation of the environment, past experiences, and other influences (Rookes & Wilson, 2005). People's perceptions influence their social interactions with others, including expectations of those with whom they are

interacting, the other person's personality and motivations, and the setting, context, and circumstances (Snyder & Stukas, 1999). As Aksan et al. (2009) noted, "Meaning is created as a result of the interaction between people, and meaning allows people to produce some of the facts forming the sensory world. These facts are related to how people form meaning" (p. 903). Drawing on classic theorists of self and identity, Snyder and Stukas (1999) defined social interaction as "other people's responses to our actions providing some understanding of who we are" (p. 274). Therefore, social interactions both form a part of and help produce the constructs of self and society.

Next in the PSM is social interactions. Finding a definition for interaction specifically within the content of social systems proved challenging. Most academia supports interaction within natural science structures such as chemistry, computer science, or biology. However, interpersonal communication theory explores the "verbal and non-verbal exchanges between two or more parties expressing thoughts, ideas, and emotions, how messages are created, and how language, technology, uncertainty, and dishonesty influence communication" (Berger, 2005, p. 417). In this sense, social interactions have a two-way exchange, as people engage with and respond to the world around them. Building on Berger's (2005) concepts, interactions can exist only within social systems and systems thinking because the act of engagement within and between creates and influences the sum of its parts in relation to each other and oneself (Luhmann, 1995). Berger (2005) described social interactions as the space between two individual parts of a system interacting to produce energy. Snyder and Stukas (1999) expanded this definition, adding that the energy is fuelled by individuals' actions, words, attitudes, and beliefs, and of those with whom they are interacting.

On the left side of the PSM, rests social identity, which resides within the field of sociology, which is the study of society, how individuals interact, institutions and roles, and the systems that shape people's lives (Parsons, 2010). Social identity theory explores how a person self-categorizes by their self-perception and self-expression against others social groups (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). Abrams and Hogg (2006) further built upon social identity theory, noting social identity considers the interactions between an individual and groups and the psychological perspective of belonging. Stets and Burke (2000) explored social identity theory, deducing it focuses on understanding oneself within the social context and focuses

on categories, groups, and mental models formed by social interactions and the associated expectations of that position or role (e.g., mother, wife, executive, etc.). Therefore, how people categorize an individual and the social systems they are interacting with creates a dynamic complexity of cause and effect, which impacts that person's social interactions, perceptions, and positionality.

On the right side of the PSM are social systems, which, despite varied definitions within the literature, can be understood as a structured network of communication and relationships among individuals and groups in society (Luhmann, 1995). Parsons (2010) described sociology as the study of society, how people interact, institutions and roles, and the social systems that shape people's lives. He further explained that social systems are patterned relationships shaped by common values, principles, plights, and goals. The unique element of social systems is that the actors are considered to be part of both the micro and macro systems, symbiotically impacting and influencing one another (Parsons, 2010).

Social systems are constructed by the continuous collective voices of individuals and can be described as a network's guiding principles, values, or views (B. D. Friedman & Allen, 2011). Societal views are influenced through political, economic, social, environmental, and other macrofactors (McAdams et al., 2021) and are constructed by people, primarily with power, unfolding with little control and monitoring (Andersson et al., 2014). Power is often characterized as something that can be possessed, given, or taken (Day, 2012). Privilege reinforces those in power to maintain and sustain their positionality within defined social systems, such as family, cultural, spiritual, education, economic, political, justice, and religious institutions (Leavy, 2015).

The two sides of the PSM, social identity and social systems, together create containers of guiding principles that orchestrate social norms, power, privilege, and oppression.

Moving back to the centre column of the PSM, reinforcing loops and causal loops consider all these variables organized in a circle of cause-and-effect relationship that strengthens foundational beliefs (Senge, 2006). Depending on where people stand and the lens through which they are examining social interactions, two individuals can experience the same moment but view it differently based on their positionality (Daellenbach, 2001). In systems thinking, continuous feedback creates a never-ending loop of information that can be used to distill, recycle, and refresh people's perceptions, positionality, and

intersectionality, and by causation influence their social identities, social systems, and worldviews (Senge, 2006).

Finally, at the top of PSM is worldview, which is the confluence of all these building blocks to form one's perspective, or *weltanschauung* in German (Vidal, 2008). Consequently, I further aligned the social constructs of social identity, social systems, and social interactions with Vidal's (2008) philosophical disciplines that together formulate an individual's worldview (Table 1).

Table 1

Vidal Philosophical Disciplines

Question	Philosophical Discipline
1. What is?	<i>Ontology</i> (model of reality as a whole)
2. Where does it all come from?	<i>Explanation</i> (model of the past)
3. Where are we going?	<i>Prediction</i> (model of the future)
4. What is good and what is evil?	<i>Axiology</i> (theory of values)
5. How should we act?	<i>Praxeology</i> (theory of actions)
6. What is true and what is false?	<i>Epistemology</i> (theory of knowledge)

Note. From "What is Worldview?" by C. Vidal, in Van Belle & J. Van der Veken (Eds.), *Nieuwheid denken De wetenschappen en het creatieve aspect van de werkelijkheid* (p. 3), 2008, Acco (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28765232_What_is_a_worldview). Reprinted with permission.

While the PSM contemplates multiple theories and disciplines (Table 1), there may be other circumstances or influences that I have not captured. As such, I recommend a more thorough research study be conducted to depict a diagram that demonstrates the depth and complexity of human social systems.

The foundational theories captured within the PSM helped to deepen my understanding, broaden my knowledge and shape my research study question and subquestions. Only by examining all facets of self within systems am I able to create and sustain meaningful change in myself and the world around me.

Women's Positionality and Feminism

By comparing my own feminist leadership perspective against literature and conducting a critical analysis of women's positionality within feminist theory and feminist movements, I have been able to

wrestle with my positionality, social identity, and perspectives within social systems to validate or refresh my practices and beliefs (Tilghman-Havens, 2020). In this section, I discuss women's positionality and feminism.

Women's Positionality

To understand women's positionality, it is important to examine the evolution of women's power, privilege, and intersectionality within the spaces of social, political and cultural contexts. Being a woman has its own distinct perspectives, meaning, and oppressive experiences within societal systems (Mulvey, 2018). For the purposes of this thesis, it should be noted that the historical political, social, and cultural views within the literature described prior to the 19th century are heavily informed by women being defined as biologically female. That said, literature researched within the 20th century shifted toward the definition of women that is not defined by the female body alone, but rather biology, nature, behaviours, and attributes presented as feminine or feminine attributes (Nicholson, 2008).

As I examine women's positionality, I consider my own intersectionality starting with my Scottish heritage. With a fractured view of my roots, I confess my bias of dysfunction and distrust of the church came to the forefront of my mind. My mother shared that her parents had two different religions, Catholic and Protestant, and these warring religions drove a wedge between her parents and grandparents. My mother also held very strong views about the oppression of women in almost every religion. My family history led me to begin my research reflecting on the oppression of women's spirituality and healing practices connected to the witch hunts of the 14th century, carried out by the Christian patriarchy (Miesel, 2001).

The Christian patriarchy threatened by women's defiance to conform contorted fable as fact, remarking on every facet of women from their sexuality, beliefs, motivations, and views, depicting women as shape shifters, monsters, villains, and devil worshippers (Schüßler, 2024; Zwissler, 2018). Nonconforming women were often targets in marginalized and impoverished communities and females accounted for 80% of the those tried and killed (Miesel, 2001).

The matriarch archetype, identified as the Great Mother by Jung in 1938, relied on a view of history in which primitive societies evolve into those that are more distinctively infused with the binary,

divisiveness, and polarity, separating social worldviews by male and female (Davies, 2015). While the traditional constructs of the matriarch and patriarch divide are tied to the 1789 French Revolution, it was further refined in the late 18th century Romantic period, known as the universal theory, based on awareness of power (Davies, 2015).

By the late 19th century Johann Jakob Bachofen (as cited in Davies, 2015) examined and synthesized different disciplines and evidence plotting the history of the matriarchy dissolution through social, political, and religious constructs. The context within each construct revealed no single distinctive moment, but rather a combination of localized dismantling of matriarchy through invasion, migration, and displacement (Davis, 2015). Throughout history, as white colonizers continued to invade other countries, they attempted to suppress all other religious faiths, beliefs, traditions and languages including those of Indigenous Peoples. As the invaders captured and colonized each religion, they embedded Christian norms, beliefs, and values into political, educational, social, and cultural constructs (Merchant & Rich, 2004).

Feminism

Simultaneously, during the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft shared the concept of a female-first perspective, feminism, or feminist activism (Johnson, 2020). Mary's childhood experiences, witnessing the inequality between her alcoholic father and mother, fuelled her quest to have equal rights and power for women (Johnson, 2020). Over the years, the concept of feminism emerged as a "term for advocacy of social, political, and economic rights for women equal to those of men" (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 337). In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (as cited in Wellman, 1991), an unhappy housewife, resurrected Wollstonecraft's work and hosted the Seneca Fall Convention, stating it would be "the greatest rebellion the world has ever seen" (p. 9). Over a 3-day period, women discussed their rights, including social, civil, and religious conditions. This marked a significant turning point in the pursuit of women's suffrage, as they sought to gain equality in society. Stanton contributed to both the original and the revised New York Married Women's Property Act (1948), which granted women property rights and rights to their own wages; this work helped build the foundation for the 19th Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed women the right to vote in 1920.

Feminism, also known as the feminist movement, has been distinctively outlined in four waves of change (Rampton, 2014). The first wave due to the efforts of Stanton at the turn of the 20th century, creating equal opportunities for women in work, politics, and society, revoking the stereotypical view of women (Rampton, 2014). Women who did not align with the stereotypical housewife or caregivers were described by antifeminists as “monsters in bloomers” (Anderson, 2014, p. 52).

The second feminist movement wave was about activism for women’s rights, such as sexual reproduction, workplace equality, and sexual liberation and the beginning of Black women’s feminism (Iannello, 2010). During this movement, the patriarchy constructed an exaggerated depiction of feminists as angry, humorless, antimale, unattractive lesbians (Anderson, 2014).

The third wave of feminism focused on the inclusion and distinction of Black, Indigenous, and women of colour (Rampton, 2014). It also sought to address the exclusion of these groups from second-wave feminism while continuing efforts to reduce sexism and violence against women (Crenshaw, 1991)

Fourth-wave feminism emerged as an inclusive form that is not solely reserved for women but rather encompasses a more generalized view of gender oppression (Munro, 2013). Fourth wave feminism has been influenced by technological advancement and has embraced a digital activism that embodies a more human-centric equality vision that protests the oppression of all marginalized voices (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Additionally, fourth-wave feminism challenges the social constructs of sexual identity, minorities, and other marginalized groups, not initially or explicitly identified in previous feminist movements (Iannello, 2010). In some cases, this has been deemed the “call out culture” or “cancel culture,” as activist movements often relied on social media as a mechanism for expressing oppression and seeking global support (Munro, 2013). During the fourth wave of feminism, the pejorative term Karen emerged to describe a stereotype of a white, middle-aged, privileged woman seen as entitled and racist and as aggressively asserting her power over others (Patterson et al., 2025). While used to critique white privilege, this term can also undermine feminist values by demeaning and homogenizing women.

Currently there are new concepts surrounding fifth wave feminism that places more attention on intersectionality, inclusivity, and diversity (Mulvey, 2018) and a call-in culture that invites people into a safe space to seek and give forgiveness and grow (Ross, 2021). Building on the previous four feminist

movements, fifth-wave feminism not only advances these commitments but also extends feminist concerns to questions of sustainability and the protection of the world (Garcha, 2020; Figure 3).

Figure 3

The Fifth Wave of Feminism



Note. From COVID: The Fifth Wave of Feminism, by N. Garcha, 2020, *Medium* (<https://medium.com/@natashagarcha16/covid-the-fifth-wave-of-feminism-f2e3d2a2a123>). Reprinted with permission.

I once believed that feminism was attached and exclusive to women, that being feminine meant looking pretty, sexy, polite, agreeable and female. I attached a woman's body to the notion of feminism. I also believe that the definition, descriptors and images bestowed upon strong women who have not conformed to the patriarchal view of feminism has been distorted, painting women as devious, temptress, with a nasty attitude and temperament. Throughout the ages, women who have not conformed have been called angry butches, man-haters, and bitter. I had been indoctrinated into this worldview. When I look at the literature about the waves of feminist movement and the image I've chosen to use, I can see that I am still working to deconstruct the belief that feminism is attached to a female. "Liberation from internalized misogyny" (Weiss, 2017).

Masculine and feminine characteristics are a narrative, story, and construct imposed upon us by western society, specifically feminine characteristics being inferior to masculine. Next wave feminism needs to consider how we are deconstructing these narratives.

Rosi Braidotti proposed that the secondary wave of feminism adopted a patriarchal, phallogocentric or male-centric Western philosophy that perpetuates masculine privilege and constructs a false universal narrative (as cited in Zeina Al Azmeh, 2014). Braidotti argues that nomadic theory, described as being in a constant state of becoming as a means to explore the self within and in relation to dominant social systems, may provide an escape route for the tethered waves of feminism (as cited in Zeina Al Azmeh, 2014).

Considering these views, I believe that while the waves of feminism have created momentum for change towards women's equal rights, they have continued to draw from the soil tilled by inequity. The waves of feminism have only touched the surface but have failed to address the powerful currents lurking beneath the waves. That said, exploration outside of the dominant norms and narratives are imperative to further deconstruct the container in which we swim, rather we might consider journeying beyond the oceans towards the streams, rivers, and lakes that feed the source. Sometimes we must move backwards to move forwards, and considering using nomadic theory to examine feminist theory, we can disrupt old thinking patterns and narratives (Braidotti, as cited in Zeina Al Azmeh, 2014).

The waves of feminism is a common model used to describe the efforts of equality over the decades, and while the first four waves of feminism advanced imperative conversations, they have not consistently accounted for values systems of women outside the Western-centric priorities, experiences, and perspectives. Exploration and incorporation of all women's voices is paramount to truly support the oppressed voices and marginalized across the globe, otherwise this model itself can perpetuate the very thing it is trying to denounce - a myopic, one dimensional, reflection of women's suffrage.

As a Canadian, I am aware of the atrocities that have occurred, with the colonization of the Indigenous, First Nations, Metis and Inuit, particularly in relation to Indigenous women and children (Bombay et al., 2014). Colonial policies have systematically disrupted Indigenous social structures,

including the removal and suppression of traditional governance systems and family roles, through assimilation strategies to eradicate their culture, languages, and identities (Schultz et al., 2021).

In British Columbia, residential school stripped families of their children, aimed to “take the Indian out of the child,” (Bombay et al., 2014, p. 329) severing intergenerational culture, language, and heritage, replacing it with colonial views, beliefs, and values. This resulted in harms that extend far beyond the initial acts, creating intergenerational trauma and ongoing patterns of violence and marginalization (Bombay et al., 2014). These realities have been documented and brought to public attention including the findings of unmarked graves of hundreds of missing and undocumented Indigenous children (Schultz et al., 2021). Ongoing inquiries and reports are being shared, such as the National Inquiry of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which highlight the systems conditions that continue to place Indigenous women at higher risk than other women (Hansen & Dim, 2019).

Within this context, the waves of feminism requires a critical examination of whose voices have historically shaped feminist movements and whose have been excluded. As a feminist leader, senior leader in provincial government, I recognize a responsibility to help build bridges between worlds by creating space for all perspectives and advocating for the inclusion of marginalized, underrepresented, and oppressed voices to help challenge and shape future waves of feminism and feminist leadership. This does not involve me speaking on behalf of others’ experiences, but rather creating space, and supporting others’ stories be shared, heard, and embedded into policy and community leadership.

Moving forward my feminist leadership aims to ensure that these realities are not simply peripheral considerations but foundational to how feminist advocacy, governance, and community engagement is approached.

In my exploration, I know that I have merely scratched the surface of deconstructing my views of femininity associated with a female body, and that more research for myself and others is needed. Additionally, while the waves of feminism provide a framework for understanding women’s evolution towards equality, it is situated within Western culture and does not consider women outside of these constructs. Therefore, those voices and experiences are washed and drowned out beneath the waves of this framework.

Although the first four waves of feminism achieved significant gains, including eradicating women's suffrage, women's equality has not yet been realized across the globe. While fifth-wave feminism is poised to broaden its focus to support the wider struggles of human rights, my stance is that feminist leaders must first prioritize sustaining women's progress and advancing women's equality across all sectors of society. As a feminist leader and a woman in society, it is my responsibility to ardently nurture and sustain women's rights within this broader context.

Feminist Leadership

Feminism and the feminist movements have fundamentally shaped legislation and policies; however, the movements themselves have not been directly related to feminist leadership as a philosophy and practice with workplaces, though I argue feminist leadership has existed for time immemorial (Batliwala, 2011). For my thesis, I situated my exploration of women's role in the workforce beginning at the end of the 19th century to the present day, specifically as the term and definition of feminist leadership only entered academia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The evolution of women's rights and the role of women in society continues today, as women strive for equality for all humans within Western culture and society.

Early academic knowledge of feminist leadership was primarily conducted by individual women and findings were unpublished or held in independent women's study centres, making research on the topic restricted to the past century (Batliwala, 2011). While Burton (as cited in Batliwala, 2011) provided a good overview of common motivation traits of feminist leadership, such as fairness, justice, and equality, Hartman (as cited in Batliwala, 2011) framed the desired mission of feminist leadership influenced by second-wave feminist movement as "bringing women's talents to bear, along with men's, in addressing social, political, and economic concerns" (Batliwala, 2011, p. 10). However, Hartman's (as cited in Batliwala, 2011) description did not include intersectionality, still proposing a binary view.

Feminist leadership is a model or philosophy that promotes social justice and challenges traditional power structures through leadership practices such as collaboration, shared decision making, equality, and inclusivity (Maguire, 2006). In their insightful examination of culture, gender, ethics, and

authenticity, Jackson and Parry (2018) critically analyzed perspectives from positionality, process, and performance, which have been missing from previous considerations of feminist leadership.

Women have moved into the corporate workforce and into leadership roles and positions of power, yet organizations are still designed in models of hierarchy with male-centric values and colonial structures. A study by the Pew Research Center (2015) found women and men were equally qualified, but two thirds still perceived men as significantly more advantaged in holding senior-level positions (Hopkins et al., 2021). While women are closing the gap in terms of performance, they continue to earn disproportionately lower salaries than men and receive fewer promotions (Hopkins et al., 2021).

Women leaders continue to be negatively impacted by stereotypes embedded into corporate environments with the expectations that women are more caring and nurturing and men are more authoritative and confident, yet the attributes traditionally seen as dominant and promotion worthy are masculine or agentic behaviours (Hopkins et al., 2021). Women leaders must navigate a paradox, an incongruence, being feminine yet not too feminine, and masculine yet not too masculine (Catalyst, 2007). Women are more effective when they operate within their gender-congruent role, for if they do not, there is a cost (Eagly et al., 1995).

Much like zoomorphism which assigns animal traits to humans, Western culture has applied binary and biological values by attaching leadership characteristics as masculine or feminine. Leadership is not attached to a gender and by implying this, it may cause “other genders to deny these parts of themselves” (Weiss, 2017). As I explored other religions and cultures, there was a common theme that this approach is not exclusive to Western culture, however, the denoted difference appears to be that others have more of a balanced or relational view, rather than a hierarchical view.

In terms of feminist leadership and women in leadership roles, women now hold power and authority in senior leadership roles across corporate boardrooms, yet barriers such as glass ceilings and glass cliffs remain (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ryan & Haslam, 2005). It does not matter if women show masculine or feminine leadership characteristics; each result in some type of negative impact on their leadership assessment (Hopkins et al., 2021). Women and men who favour feminine attributes encounter the “glass ceiling” (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573); their ascent is clouded by whatever characteristics

leaders use to reject their authenticity. There is an awakening to these competitive strategies, and many scholars have developed alternative leadership theories, such as transactional or transformational leadership, which attempt to strip away gender (Bass, 1990). While these theories intend to empower all people, I find they whitewash the experiences of the oppressed. Each oppressed or marginalized group has its own unique experiences. It is essential to acknowledge the expectations of masculinity and its influence on self-image and perceptions of others. Expectations of masculinity have a real cost on women and anyone else who aspires to the attributes associated with the feminine. While women can start in a company and work their way up, they must work harder to gain credibility as trusted leaders (Hopkins et al., 2021).

There is still an imbalance of women's equality in the workplace, yet the dismantling and undermining is not exclusive to the patriarch. The system itself has been constructed by men for men, creating the glass ceiling, the invisible barrier preventing women from being provided the support necessary for success (Kanter, 1986). Therefore, women have had to maneuver into positions of power by conforming to the rules of engagement or by nuzzling up to those in power (Kanter, 1986). Even when women have found a way to break the glass, their performance is then placed under a microscope and a magnifying glass (Eagly et al., 1995).

Moreover, women are often unknowingly positioned onto the precarious glass cliff, elevated into high-stakes leadership positions during times of immense or precarious organizational times (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). The glass cliff falsely places women into positions of power and leadership with the intention of shielding and protecting organizational leaders (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Women leaders are unfairly positioned to walk a knife-edge between success and failure, placing the burden on their shoulders, and threatening their credibility and reputation (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). Conversely, some research suggests the glass cliff has less to do with being a scapegoat and more to do with the preferential treatment afforded to male leaders (Ryan et al., 2016). This conundrum can distort women's intrinsic behaviours, reshaping them into Machiavellian-type strategies, causing women to be distrustful, insecure, pessimistic, and cautious. As Ináncsi et al. (2018) noted,

Machiavellian individuals have negative attitudes towards people and in general towards the world's affairs. They are distrustful of the intentions of others, and they get cautiously involved into interpersonal interactions and take risks only if that may not have any severe negative consequence. (p. 806)

Therefore, feminist leaders need to examine the patriarchy structures and power dynamics in order to reshape “democratic, legitimate and accountable” (Batliwala, 2011, p. 18) organizations.

Feminist leadership has been and continues to be influenced by the social feminist movements, such as fifth-wave feminism, which focuses on inclusivity, equality, and diversity. I believe these attributes are being infused into feminist leadership, creating a transcendental feminist practice. Transcendental feminism, initiated by Margaret Fuller in the early-mid 17th century (Saito, 2022), suggests feminism goes beyond the differences of men and women in the quest for common humanity. Fuller (as cited in Saito, 2022) claimed, “Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (p. 770). This way of thinking eradicates the need for a paradox or a dichotomous view of gender, concentrating on humanity (Saito, 2022). For my thesis, I have employed a heroine's journey storytelling method, which aligns well with the concept of deconstructing the feminine self and reconstructing the masculine and feminine aspects of the self (Murdock, 2020).

Chapter Summary

This chapter critically examined how my feminist leadership philosophy and practice have been shaped by broader social realities of women's positionality and gendered expectations. Situated within the context of second-wave feminism, I reflect on the privileges this historical moment afforded me while acknowledging the persistent inequities facing women today. I believe my responsibility as a feminist leader is to advance gender equity through every interaction, from one-to-one dialogues to large-group discussions. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology, methods, data analysis, and ethical and other considerations that informed the conduct of this autoethnographic research study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology and methods that I used to conduct my study. I also outline the processes of data capture, protection, analysis, and validation that I undertook to ensure the validity of my study. Furthermore, I discuss the ethical and personal considerations explored alongside mitigation strategies to ensure the protection of privacy for myself and for my feedback participants.

Methodology

Qualitative research focuses on the human experience and aims to impact or make social changes to the person by exploring human behavior, emotions, values, and social contexts and how reality is shaped by individual experiences (Creswell et al., 2011). In this thesis, I employed an autoethnographic methodology, which is a qualitative self-reflective approach to examining self and social systems (Holman Jones et al., 2013). I chose this methodology to explore how my positionality has shaped my evolving feminist leadership philosophy and praxis.

Feminist Participatory Action Research

Feminist participatory action research (FPAR) combines feminist theories and participatory action research. Critical feminist theory shapes one's awareness of power distribution and enables a convergence of women's perspectives aimed at influencing or creating social change (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). FPAR is highly dependent upon those who are participating and where the subject of oppression is narrowly situated, making it more challenging to transfer knowledge into action (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). While I considered FPAR for my thesis, I decided to explore first-person action research, which I discuss in the next section.

First-Person Action Research

Initially, I began by exploring first-person action research, including action inquiry (V. J. Friedman, 2008; Reason & Torbert, 2001; Torbert, 2006), reflective practice (Palmira, 2022), and action science (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1996). Marshall (2001) and Brown (2018) cautioned against using first-person inquiry research as it can become confessions of self-indulgence and manipulation rather than vulnerability. In addition, while first-person action research examines the conscious act of living life as

inquiry, infusing qualitative and reflective practice (Marshall, 2001), it fails to consider self-in-system. For these reasons, I chose to explore autoethnography as an alternative research methodology.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is like first-person action research, which places the researcher at the centre of discovery to make sense of personal experiences through reflexivity; however, autoethnography differentiates by broadening self-analysis with social, political, and cultural contexts, critically examining power and identity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Adams et al. (2016) noted, “Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively” (p. 1994). Autoethnography requires researchers to peel away the layers of themselves, delve deeply into their psyche to understand their emotions, values, and motivations, and challenge themselves to examine why they think what they think and the relationship between the self and social systems (Adams et al., 2016). Autoethnography lends itself well to the art-based method of reflexivity for data capture and “storytelling as a way of knowing, sharing, and relating” (Adams et al., 2016, p. 2023).

While I did not choose first-person action research or FPAR as the methodology, they informed the selection of autoethnography as the appropriate choice for conducting my research inquiry. An autoethnography methodology placed me as the researcher and subject of the research and enabled self-analysis through reflexivity. Additionally, I have explored the barriers that may exist within myself, women’s positionality and feminism movement, and the subversive patriarchy structures impacting professional workplaces today. Feminist leadership philosophy promotes social justice and challenges traditional power structures through leadership practices such as collaboration, shared decision making, equality, and inclusivity (Maguire, 2006). Through examination of literature and self, this approach enabled me to better understand how my evolving positionality has shaped my feminist leadership.

Data Collection Methods

I used qualitative self-reflexivity and storytelling methods for data collection, self-exploration, and sense-making, which was supported by using the following techniques: journaling, listening to music, and walking in nature. These arts-based and arts-informed techniques enabled a deeper investigation of self,

aligning well with the autoethnographic methodology that investigates personal power, privilege, and emotion in sense-making (Leavy, 2015).

Self-Reflexivity Method

Reflectivity, developed from the ideas of Argyris and Schon (1976), is the process in which you are able to reflect upon the ways your own assumptions and actions influence a situation, and thus change your practice as a direct result of this reflective process. (Fook, 1999, p. 11)

Reflexivity aligns with ethnography (Marcus, 1994) and participatory or collaborative inquiry (Reason & Rowan, 1981). Although reflexivity is limited to the perspective of the individual whose experience is under examination, this first-person standpoint is the only position from which the experience can be explored from the inside out (Short, 1998). Further, reflexivity denotes that a person cannot separate themselves from the research, as the method embraces the emotions, beliefs, views, and experiences as inclusive data in sense-making (Fook, 1999). Further, a researcher's intersectionality influences the subjectivity of the research itself; this does not need to be considered a deficit but rather a richness of perspective positionality (Fook, 1999). That said, I realize there may be an illusion of solipsism, as self-criticism is confined to my perspective; however, using reflexivity within autoethnography allows me to explore self, and self through the reflection of others (Colón-Santos et al., 2024). Consequently, I balanced critical reflexivity with dialogue and feedback from my committee and feedback participants to help make meaning within societal systems. Subsequently, while I was able to make sense of self within social systems, I have focused on my own experience and have refrained from making claims on behalf of all women or feminist leaders (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, to maintain dependability of my research, I have used consistent data collection and data management practices, capturing and rationalizing any changes made (Shenton, 2004).

Journaling. Journaling is an arts-informed technique for data generation. This approach allowed me to explore my past and present memories, emotions, beliefs, and views to gain insights (Ward & Shortt, 2020). I have explored my positionality through the reflexive practice of journaling using left-column journaling for daily reflection, followed by evening free writing journaling, accompanied by listening to music (dos Santos, 2025). I also incorporated walking in nature as a part of my reflective practice to help clear my mind and increase creativity (Carter, 2023).

Left-Column Journaling. Left-column journaling is a qualitative reflective process (Creswell, 2013), similar to double-entry journal (Hughes et al., 1997), in which the researcher draws a line down the centre of a page; on the left, the researcher captures an interaction that evoked an unintended response, and on the right they capture what they thought, said, elected not to say, and felt. They then analyze the interaction and draw a circle in the middle between the two columns, reframing what they would do or say differently. This technique enables immediate reflection, the ability to reframe, and empowers the researcher with new insights to employ should a similar situation occur.

Free writing. Free writing journaling invites the researcher to openly write using cursive writing or typing (Borkin, 2014). It encourages the researcher to explore “how we construct the world, ourselves and others” (Castle, 2017, p. 129) and releases creativity of self-exploration in a nonjudgmental way, making sense of interactions that shape the researcher and their experiences.

Listening to music. Music can affect the human brain and cognition. Melodies and lyrics that resonate with an individual can awaken inner feelings and thoughts; being in touch with these feelings and expressing them allows the researcher to understand themselves better and increase self-awareness (Cai et al., 2023). Rooted in psychology and neuroscience, the benefits of listening to music range from self-reflection to self-regulation and self-awareness by impacting the frontal cortex of the brain responsible for cognition (Cai et al., 2023). In this research, I used music while free writing and while walking in nature as a means to simultaneously clear my mind and awaken it.

Walking in Nature. Walking in nature can positively impact a person’s overall health and wellbeing (Ivaldi, 2023). Not only are there physical benefits of body movement, increased oxygen to the brain, and increased blood circulation, but the change in the environment also helps to reduce stimuli and distractions (Ivaldi, 2023). While other forms of relaxation techniques or practices such as Zen meditation focus on clearing one’s mind by sitting still, which can bring about waves of relaxation, decrease heart rate, and calm the sympathetic nervous system (McCaffrey & Raddock, 2013), walking in nature creates a unique experience of reducing stress by appreciating the beauty of the natural environment (Ivaldi, 2023). Identified themes from Hinds’s (2011) wilderness study showed people experience “feeling alive, clarity of

thought, wellbeing, and authentic self" (Ivaldi, 2023, p. 5), which reduces feeling of self-doubt while increasing connection and acceptance of self.

Storytelling Method

Storytelling is powerful and is often associated with emotional connections, infused with cultural and societal beliefs and views, which evokes a response between the teller and the told, with the aim of inspiration or influence (Simmons, 2019). Storytelling has been used by First Nations Elders to create cultural learning for passing knowledge from one generation to another as it considers the interrelationships between an individual and the world around them (Archibald, 2008). Archibald (2008) outlined the unique energy that exists within storytelling, which includes who and how the story is told and by the understanding and experience of those receiving it. However, storytelling does have some limitations, including the recall of the person telling the story, the interpretation of the listener, and the positionality of both (Simmons, 2019).

Murdock (2020) believed stories are how people make meaning of themselves and the world around them, yet the masculine or hero was often the only vantage point. To address this, Murdock designed the heroine's journey, noting it begins with the "separation from the feminine and ends with the integration of the masculine and feminine" (p. 4). I have infused the heroine's journey approach throughout my thesis to capture the process of deconstruction and reinvention of my views on feminism and feminist leadership. Therefore, I have used storytelling as a method to generate and convey my research (Simmons, 2019).

Feedback Participants

Before beginning my research study, I needed to select and secure feedback participants. Marshall (2004) explored Bateson's (1973, as cited in Marshall, 2004) views that "the whole of the mind could not be reported in a part of the mind" (p. 408) and a person can only see an edited version of oneself rather than an unbiased view and, therefore, must accept the partial truths. Accordingly, feedback participants were a crucial factor in supporting the validity and credibility of my study by checking my biases.

I developed an assessment criteria for selection of feedback participants that outlined I was looking for a woman whom I have worked with before, either as a colleague or supervisor, but did not currently work within the same ministry as myself, someone who knew me as a leader, and who understood what it is like to work in a bureaucratic political environment. It was essential that, throughout the research, feedback participants were able to be honest, respectful, and vulnerable. I selected two feedback participants who met my criteria.

The first feedback participant is a colleague I met during a leadership program; our friendship emerged over the course of the program. Since then, we have continued to hold each other accountable for our professional leadership goals. She is a cisgender woman, in her 40s, of Persian and Indian descent, is married and has two children. She immigrated as a child to BC and now lives and works in an urban city in BC as an executive director working in a social sector ministry within government and oversees a large geographically dispersed team providing services across a region in the province. The second feedback participant is a previous supervisor and mentor. She is a white, cisgender, female and is married. She works and lives on Vancouver Island as a senior executive member in a social sector ministry within government, providing oversight on commitments related to Indigenous truth and reconciliation. She and I have a mentor–mentee relationship that developed through our shared appreciation for leadership development. These participants provided excellent insights, as both are familiar with my leadership style, values, and personality; however, an initial reintroduction was necessary to set the stage for a rich and engaging dialogue.

Power over occurs when one person has control or authority over another (Berger, 2005). The two feedback participants work within the same government organization, neither are positioned within my current workplace nor ministry, and neither have authority or power over my current employment arrangement. As the feedback participants may have worked together in the past, I engaged with each feedback participant individually. This ensured that there was no conflict of interest and protected the confidentiality of all parties.

I created enriching reciprocal relationships with feedback participants who challenged my view of social constructs, tested my assumptions and biases, and helped create a deeper understanding of my

positionality and its impact on my feminist leadership with social systems. The quality of the relationship between participants and researchers is the foundation for building and fostering trust, which tends to generate increased and shared ownership and can lead to new innovations, interventions, and findings (Coghlan et al., 2019). Trust can be built through holding participants' best interest at the centre of the work and by demonstrating authenticity, consistency, and transparency when it comes to knowledge, information, and insights (Baker et al., 1999).

Study Conduct

Prior to conducting the research, I submitted my proposal to the Research Ethics Board (REB) for final approval. After receiving ethical approval, my first step was to send feedback participants an invitation letter (Appendix C) via email followed by me hosting an initial 1-hour session to discuss the research inquiry, and their proposed role within it. After this meeting, I attached the information letter (Appendix D) outlining their role, the research question and subquestions, and the methodologies and methods I planned to use during our feedback participant sessions, along with a consent form (Appendix E).

Next, I captured a present-day social interaction in the left-column of my journaling template (Appendix F), outlining information about this interaction and why it stood out for me. While I had initially intended to capture an interaction per day, the process became more organic and sporadic, taking place when an interaction with a strong emotion response occurred. Throughout the study, I experienced many interactions each day that I could have selected; however, the ones I chose to capture through left-column journaling were consistently those steeped in strong emotional reactions. Through unpacking these interactions through free-writing journaling, listening to music, and walking in nature, I was able to self-reflect on both the present-day moment and the underlying patterns, beliefs, or views that originated in my past. While the interactions I captured primarily related to my role as a professional, a handful of interactions occurred in my personal life, including those with family and friends.

On the days that I captured an interaction, I would spend about an hour listening to music and reflecting through free-writing journaling, allowing for free-thought and expression. While I used left-column journaling to capture present-day interactions, I found free-writing journaling came more

naturally—pencil to paper, raw and real. In addition to self-reflective journaling, music became an integral part of self-discovery and self-expression. Sometimes I selected songs in the moment or during the journaling process, but I chose many in my postjournaling reflection. These became part of my data collection. Interestingly, I selected some songs randomly, perhaps because the lyrics spoke deeply about what I was thinking at the time, making it easier for my mind to subconsciously search for meaning. Other times, the song selection occurred by happenstance; I searched Google for a few key words from my journaling reflection, which then led me down a new path of discovery to that perfect song. In Chapter 4, I present my free-writing journals as vignettes accompanied by a song that reflected a mood, a moment, or a realization.

At the end of each week, I conducted an analysis of my reflective activities and identified common themes to discuss with feedback participants. I then reviewed each of my journal entries and initially categorized these by which social system they were a part of. I then reviewed the journal entries using the free writing journaling questions (Appendix F) and highlighted common words used or concepts that defined myself, defining moments when views of others were present, and patterns or themes of concepts that appear to be triggers or holding me back. I also looked at myself as a woman in leadership to identify if there were specific values, views or interactions that were specifically because of, or were my perceived view of, being a woman.

Feedback participants helped challenge or validate my emerging views, shared their own reflections, and offered stories of their own lived experiences (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). This method aligns well with a feminist leadership philosophy as it focuses on personal, experiential, and relational practices, built on vulnerability, trust, and mutual respect (Finlay, 2002). Throughout the study, I protected feedback participants' anonymity and participation by confirming their wish to participate or not in the discussions and sharing notes from the session to validate the data collected. In the findings, feedback participants are referred to as FP1 and FP2 to protect their anonymity.

Based on Etmanski et al.'s (2002) work, I used the following feedback questions to guide discussions with my feedback participants:

1. In listening to my description of my draft findings, what questions emerge for you that might help broaden my perspective?
2. Based on our discussion(s), what do you feel I may need to let go of in my leadership practice, and where might I need to place more attention or intention?
3. Have you encountered anything similar in your own leadership practice? If so, tell me a story about what worked well in those situations and/or what learnings might you be able to share with me?
4. Are there any other stories you would like to share?

I sent the participant session agenda (Appendix G) in advance of meetings with feedback participants to remind them of the questions we would discuss. At the onset of each meeting with feedback participants, I shared my progress since the previous session. I ensured all feedback participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time as well as when and how they could withdraw. No feedback participants chose to withdraw from this research.

Discussions consisted of me sharing my summaries of discoveries with and gaining insights from feedback participants who shared their reflections and offered stories of their own lived experiences. I captured notes within the participant session agenda (Appendix G) using Microsoft Word. At the end of each session, I tidied up the copy and sent it back to the feedback participants via email to review and validate. I then saved the document onto my personal network on my computer. Once I collated and finalized my research study and conclusions, I forwarded a copy along to the participants requesting they review the content and approve any of the sentiments or direct quotations I had incorporated. Their approvals have also been saved on my personal network on my computer.

Once the study had concluded, I set out to make sense of the findings. I reviewed each of my journal entries and initially categorized them by the social system. I then reviewed the journal entries using the free writing journaling questions (Appendix F) and highlighted common words or concepts I used to define myself, the view of others about me, and reoccurring triggers or repressive thoughts. I also reflected on my role as a woman in leadership to identify if I had an accurate or biased view of being a

woman in the workplace. The research helped me unpack my values and beliefs from my childhood and as a woman and a professional.

In alignment with storytelling as method and way of knowing, I turned my journal entries into vignettes that collectively and chronologically share the story of my life from childhood to womanhood and my experiences within society. Each vignette is accompanied by a song that reflects a mood, a moment, or a realization.

I conducted this research study from June 9, 2025, through to September 12, 2025. The 14-week study consisted of seven reflective cycles, 30 distinctive interactions captured by left-column journaling, 30 free-writing entries, and eight feedback participant sessions to discuss findings and emerging themes and to explore biases and opportunities. During the study conclusions analysis, I completed four additional free-writing entries that helped to further decipher the study findings in alignment with storytelling as a method and way of knowing (Hyvärinen, 2008).

Data Analysis and Validity

As both researcher and participant, engaging my committee and feedback participants enhanced the trustworthiness of my research by challenging my limitations and biases through data collection and triangulation (Shenton, 2004). While triangulation can support the credibility of research, antifoundational discourse theory rejects that knowledge is discovered through scientific exactness and an unchanging foundation; instead, it emphasizes the cyclical production of knowledge through power relations and language in society (Lather, 1993).

Often, data analysis segments, isolates, or themes component parts of a whole to identify patterns and draw conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When I considered which method to use to share my personal experiences, I found it challenging to categorize myself into discrete pieces. Consequently, I chose to capture individual interactions. As noted earlier, I have presented these as a collection of my life stories, a kaleidoscope of reflections of my lived and living story. Using storytelling and an axial coding method, I explored my interactions against my intersectionality identity wheel (Figure 1 in Chapter 1). Consequently, throughout this thesis, I challenged how my interactions with societal systems have shaped my evolving positionality and informed my leadership philosophy. In order to triangulate and

validate my qualitative research, I gathered rich data through reflexivity and storytelling and used feedback from participants to challenge my findings alongside a literature review to compare and contrast my results (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

I recognize my personal feminist leadership beliefs are grounded in a white, privileged viewpoint and acknowledge my experiences or observations of women's inequalities cannot be generalized across all genders, races, classes, and sociopolitical statuses. Nevertheless, it is my hope that these recommendations will help others walk a similar path.

Ethical Implications

Conducting an autoethnographic inquiry involved a unique set of considerations, requiring that I attend to personal biases and ethical obligations by developing mitigation strategies and self-care plans in advance of undertaking the research (Gilbert, 2001). I adhered to requirements set out in Canada's *Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS)*, which outlined research requiring an ethical review must go to a REB (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2020). Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with how people ought to act against in relation to what is considered right or wrong and good or bad (Aguinis & Henle, 2004). The TCPS asserted research must be done with "respect to human dignity" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2020, p. 5) and is outlined by three principles: "respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p. 5). I addressed all three principles in my research.

Additionally, as the nature of an autoethnography inquiry is a deeply personal journey, I introduced ethical strategies and data collection safeguards, discussed care strategies with feedback participants and developed a self-care plan for myself to help minimize any issues. Due to the deeply personal data collection involved in journaling, it was important for me to protect myself from possible harms should that content become exposed; therefore, I implemented safeguards to protect my dignity and confidentiality. In order to safeguard participants, I have used the terms Feedback Participant 1 and Feedback Participant 2; I have also password-protected online materials (Karcher et al., 2023). As such, my first strategy was to set up passwords for all electronic material and store them in my personal folder. In addition, I did not include my name on or within journals kept in my home office.

Hayman et al. (2012) suggested because participants might feel vulnerable when sharing personal experiences, they should consider incorporating boundaries, which might include setting time limits, using prompts, or implementing wellness checkpoints when sharing in dialogue. Considering this, I checked in at the beginning of each meeting to ensure feedback participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research. I also checked at the end of each session to understand if our conversation had left them feeling vulnerable or their emotions heightened. No such issue was raised by feedback participants with me during or after the study.

Finally, I have created recommendations that capture the proposed changes in myself with the hope of having a positive impact on others. These are presented in Chapter 5. I also developed a self-care plan that included personal physical and mental actions I could employ, such as morning meditation, nature-walks, connecting with trusted family and friends not connected to the thesis in any way to ensure there were no power-over situations (Gilbert, 2001).

Outputs and Knowledge Mobilization

I have developed a comprehensive thesis that includes a literature review on social identity theory and identity theory; systems thinking, social systems and social interactions; women's positionality; and feminist leadership, along with a fulsome reflexive research study using an arts-based method including journaling and storytelling (Leavy, 2020). The research study captured my present-day social interactions that triggered a positive or negative response in me through left-column journaling. While I intended to produce a solo podcast that relived these moments as they were, followed by a reflection, this did not come to fruition, not because the reflective learning loop did not occur, but because the overall process became so rich with data and experience that it felt impossible to select a handful of experiences to do justice to my transformation. Instead, I wove together the raw journal entries like a tapestry using storytelling as both a way of data capture and as a way of knowing to tell my heroine's journey (McKee, 2017). In addition, I have infused the arts-based method of music as a way of knowing. As a result, each of the vignettes has an accompanying song. A playlist is included in Appendix H and can be listened to alongside reading this thesis.

I have also produced the knowledge product: Helpful Tips for First-time Autoethnographic Researchers (Appendix I), which shares the lessons I learned throughout the process. This knowledge product can serve as a reference guide or learning tool for others before embarking on an autoethnographic research journey.

The journey inspired deep reflection, which in turn generated impatient action. Therefore, inspired by the study, but not directly related, I began writing short articles on [LinkedIn](#) as a starting point toward enhancing my social footprint and distribution of positive messaging. Reflecting on my overall health and wellness led me to consider my relationship with alcohol and the impact of wine culture on middle-aged women. My inquiry into this topic motivated me to found Fauxvember Society Woman's Health, a society to encourage women to make mindful, healthy choices around alcohol, whether it be abstaining or cutting back. I have legally registered the society and secured ownership of the website domain fauxvember.com (Appendix J).

While it is difficult to predict how the knowledge gained from this thesis might be mobilized, I anticipate I will share it in full or in part with team members across provincial government, with universities, and possibly with the public in the form of articles, journals, books, podcasts, videos, audio books and shared through social networks, conferences, and presentations.

Chapter Summary

I began my autoethnographic study by requesting ethical approval from the university. Gaining REB approval provided me with the confidence to undertake the research study. With approval in place, I examined the methodology, along with the methods that I planned to use for data collection, analysis, and secure storage. In addition, I took all appropriate measures to safeguard the data and participants.

In chapter 4, I provide curated data that I collected through reflective practice. I present the study data in story form referred to as vignettes. These have been organized to align with my lived experience throughout the stages of my life.

Chapter 4: Inquiry Project Findings and Conclusions

This chapter presents the study findings from left-column journaling, free writing, and self-reflections after dialogue with feedback participants to answer the following research question: How do my interactions within societal systems shape my evolving positionality and inform my feminist leadership philosophy and praxis?

As I chose to use a storytelling method, I have chronologically organized my journal entries as vignettes; I believe this depicts the natural progress of self-development through the ages and stages of my personal and professional life. Additionally, throughout my study findings and conclusions, I have shared titled vignettes, each paired with a song chosen to illuminate the corresponding theme. The three structured themes (Table 2) mirror my own developmental arc, from childhood values and identity through the different stages of my professional journey. Woven throughout are gender and societal expectations, which have shaped who I am, how I have come to lead, and my feminist leadership philosophy.

Table 2

Study Findings and Study Conclusions Correlation

Life Stage in Which Interactions Occurred	Study Findings Theme	Study Conclusions
Childhood	Values and Identity	Invisible Threads: How Values Shape Our Interactions
Womanhood	Gender and Leadership	Wearing the Mask: Between Expectation and Identity
Career	Evolving Positionality and Deconstructing Self	Evolving Positionality: The Quiet Revolution Within

Study Findings

In this section, I provide the findings of my reflective research, demonstrating how the findings support three themes by weaving in stories in each themed section that depict and honour my emotional truth, societal context, and relationships. To present the findings, I move through three themes that are organized across my life course: view of self, and self in relation to others, focusing on my childhood to early adulthood; reflect on self as a woman through the decades of adulthood; and self as a professional. The study findings are mirrored by conclusions, which I explore later in the chapter.

Finding 1: Values and Identity: Childhood Interactions

Many of my reflections about an interaction initially started when there was a psychologically emotional response. These often began with frustration, anger, embarrassment, pride, or joy, revealing my responses were deeply impacted by rooted values, well-worn pathways, stories, and narratives that I told myself. These beliefs originated from childhood: my parents and first friends, teachers, and adults, and were reinforced over time, creating subconscious super pathways in my mind.

While I acknowledge my positionality is constantly evolving, I have focused on my identity and considered this through the framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and for this section, I have focused on the formative years, early childhood to early adulthood, when many of my values and beliefs took root. The stories I captured and share throughout this section are past moments that were triggered during present-day interactions, as I considered the question, “What interactions and distinct moments are shaping my past and present?” My positionality within this section primarily focuses on being a young girl raised by immigrant parents in a middle-class, stable home, and my transition into adulthood.

The research revealed my core values are ever present throughout all 60 journal entries. The top 10 words I used to describe myself personally and professionally were empathetic, compassionate, equitable, inclusive, kind, daring, thoughtful, loyal, encouraging, and courageous. I also described my leadership strengths as a mediator, facilitator, visionary, and strategist.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the data revealed I feel the need to stand up for others and have a fierce desire to be perceived as competent. I do not like feeling judged by others, specifically people whose behaviours do not align with mine, yet judgement and assessments take place in every moment. This pattern reflects a subconscious operating system—a set of heuristics through which I make rapid decisions with minimal conscious thought.

The data additionally revealed harmful self-perceptions, a shadow self, which were reflected in negative thoughts of self and others, repeating patterns of risk, and self-sabotage. All these data points stemmed from my past, triggering self-awareness through present-day interactions and journaling reflections. The free writing journaling allowed deeper reflections for me to unabashedly and shamelessly examine these corners of myself. Some of these realizations included reoccurring negative patterns and

thoughts and self-sabotaging behaviours and habits. I realized intersectionality must acknowledge all sides of self, including those that are not typically focused on and perhaps are the root of my inability to progress or move forward.

The study revealed present-day interactions were always impacted by my *modus operandi* or values. These interactions that triggered me had less to do with the actual person or moment that I was confronting and more to do with me not responding how I wanted to or felt I had to, or when a specific value or boundary had been crossed.

I begin by sharing one of my first captured interactions. I hosted a few ladies at my house for a learn-to-play poker session and my mum decided to join us. We have lived intergenerationally since she had a stroke and my dad passed away. Being as close as we are, we tend to pick up each other's feelings through a glance, a shift in tone, not necessarily through words alone. I had popped out of the room for a moment, but when I returned, my mum seemed off. I experienced an immediate desire to defend her and resolve the issue. That interaction allowed me to delve deeper through reflective journaling to explore the origins of my response in the first two vignettes, *Scotland the Brave* and *Mouse Song*.

Scotland the Brave

Accompanying song: "Scotland the Brave" (Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, 1972)

As immigrants from Scotland, my parents knew the sting of poverty; being seen as low-class and poor. Based on a variety of their personal experiences, they believed in standing up for yourself, for others with smaller voices, and for something bigger than yourself. They were fierce about creating equality for all. My parents' experiences have influenced how I view the world, and how I have the courage to stand for the rights of myself and others, which have translated into my leadership beliefs.

Recalling my parents' struggle to leave an impoverished life, surrounded by religious discord, and wrought with violence, made me realize that I have adopted their story as a part of mine and the value of courage to carve a new path. I admire their determination to flip their powerlessness into power through courageousness, equity, and purpose. Throughout my life, my parents have always reinforced sentiments such as stand up and be counted, stand up for the little guy, and be kind to others. A bit of mixed messaging as a young person, yet these messages were imprinted into my psyche. My parents firmly left Scotland and never returned. They were clear that we were Canadians, not Scottish, and they did not openly discuss our heritage. It certainly feels as if there was a severing of where I come from, a lineage lost. While I know I cannot compare myself to the travesties, harms, and traumas that the Indigenous people experienced, I do see the parallels of the generational impacts of colonization on the Scottish people including poverty, violence, and addictions. My parents wanted to sever this trauma and start fresh. They did not want their

babies to know or feel this hurt or shame. My parents were innovators, starting a new path, and while they support standing with and for those that matter, they were less concerned about where you came from and more focused on where you could end up.

Mouse Song

Accompanying song: “Mouse Song” (The Lullabies, 2024)

My parents referred to me as “mouse.” I’m not really sure why that was? Perhaps it was because I was small as a baby? Maybe because I was quiet? I never really asked them. The term of endearment made me feel warm and special. It’s funny though, because as I grew the term meant different things to me. Early on though, I remember seeing the story of the mouse and the lion, where the lion gets a thorn in his paw and the mouse helps by pulling it out. I saw myself in that story. Helping others, no matter their size or position. These were those moments of reinforcement around empathy and serving others.

The next two vignettes were developed when my job was being threatened by workforce adjustment, also known as downsizing. I was put in a position where I was trying to explain my work role and why we were where we were to a new boss, because there had already been some casualties. The following vignettes *If I Only Had a Brain* and *Pretty Girl* were initiated through workplace interactions during this time. Through reflective journaling I was able to follow myself back to my childhood, to examine more about my self-perception through others, and identify self-limiting beliefs that emerged even now as a working professional.

If I Only Had a Brain

Accompanying song: “If I Only Had a Brain” (Arlen & Harburg, 1939)

I was great at spelling and grammar because my mom loved words and language. Being good at this felt like a strong connection to her—an acceptance. However, I struggled with the pressure of trying to read for two minutes and then answer questions on what I read. Focusing was almost impossible under that pressure and I would almost go blank, staring at the words on the page like they were suddenly French.

After these assessments we were placed into two groups, even our desks were moved to one side of the room. You could clearly tell which students were in the dumb group. At that age of trying to make friends, feeling accepted, feeling competent, and feeling like one of the crowd was imperative—for survival—social survival. This profoundly impacted my view and the view of others, describing me as, she’s pretty, but not that smart. God that hurt.

Whether the teachers or students meant for it to sting, it did. I have since carried that as a part of my identity. It has shaped the way I try to prove myself at every turn. I use humour to lessen the sting. I am always acutely aware of my surroundings, looking for and reading clues in the words and the pauses between words, the actions, and inactions of others. This translated into being analytical or “reading the room” to look for signs of safety, or not. This is also translated into empathy for others. Scanning situations to see if people are feeling “less than”—like I did, and

trying to find ways to connect and appreciate who they are. I suppose that's where my empathy was reinforced. This also profoundly shaped my need for inclusivity.

I found emotional connections and profound experiences were hardwired into the growing garden of values. This also showed me that some positive experiences turned negative, and those negative experiences equally began to take seed like weeds infiltrating freshly tilled soil.

The data exposed that those early moments were reinforced through other childhood moments. One journal entry reminded me that, when I was a young teenager, a friend's mom had referred to me as the "Do-you-like-me girl." I didn't know what she meant at the time, but the insinuation was the catalyst for resisting conformity for many of my teen years, when I worked hard to detach myself from caring what others thought. The data revealed a common theme of seeking acceptance and a need to win others over. Once I had a warm and special view of being a mouse, but it had changed over time, shifting from compliment to criticism.

Pretty Girl

Accompanying song: "Pretty Girl" (Lindemann, 2016)

In my adolescence, I wanted to break free from this view of being a mouse or the do-you-like-me girl to the lion that doesn't give a shit. I wanted to move away from quiet compliance to loud rebellion—from mouse to lion so to speak. My sister was fierce and feared, and to me she seems respected—and that's what I wanted. I wasn't a terrible teen, though there was defiance, and mischievousness, I never tried to harm others. Perhaps intimidate, puff out my chest, be loud and vocal. I found that people responded to that and saw me as fierce. I didn't realize that it was actually more about fear. Whatever it was, it made me feel more powerful, not some fragile mouse. Not just a pretty girl.

Though the interactions occurred within my professional setting, I was able to trace the pathway back to my childhood and early adolescence. I discovered my early social identity had been shaped more by those around me than actually by myself.

The data captured many entries in which I felt less than, not competent, not good enough, and not smart enough. Through these moments, a new value emerged—a fence placed around my garden to protect me: courage. At first, I thought that the value was resilience, but resilience describes a commitment to bouncing back from failure and not being defined by early feelings of incompetence. I had clearly held onto this belief of inadequacy. Courage, on the other hand, is not the absence of fear or doubt; it's acting despite it (Rate et al., 2007).

The data also showed a maturing from adolescence to young adult, as the mask of toughness starts to fade and a renewed gentler self begins to take shape. This revealed that as I fight to find myself the mask of bravado allows me to sink beneath the hurt. I am an all-bark, no-bite person, and by using this mask, I have been able to provide myself with safety and only let people in if I want to. During that time, if I felt unsure, I would don the mask of the lion. However, as I left the school setting, I could shed the sting of labels and curate my own next chapter. With a protected sense of self, I journeyed out into the world, in which key experiences of support, belief, and trust served as catalysts that renewed my sense of connection and kindness.

The last vignette in this section is *Fire and Ice*, and was written during the summer months, when I was away from my professional workplace and the stress of my job. I had been spending more time with my family, exploring hiking trails, paddle-boarding, and the beaches. I felt warm, safe, and happy.

Fire and Ice

Accompanying song: "Fire and Ice" (Alexandria, 2025)

I met a nice boy, who loved me even before he really knew me. We'd dated in Grade 8 for 2 weeks, broke up and dated for another week. We then flirted on and off for years, connecting at dances and the ski trips. He took me to the Grade 10 grad, and I left that poor boy, staring out the window, as I left with my older boyfriend. He somehow never gave up. I'm not sure what he saw in me?

We reconnected right after Grade 12 graduation. He followed me home one night, so forever, I call him my stalker (in the best possible way of course). He was calm, logical, smart, cute, funny, and all the things I didn't see in myself perhaps. Somewhere between our two polar opposite spaces, we found each other. This boy became my boyfriend, my fiancé, my husband, and the father of my two kids.

He knows me better than anyone, and he sees me, and he loves me. He was able to calm the beast inside, though he never tried to stifle it. He loves the mouse and the lion in me. His warm heart and gentle eyes touch my soul like no one else can. He pushes me to be my best self. He supports me through all the iterations of me, and I am truly, deeply blessed to have found such a love.

As I exit childhood, I have a carefully constructed sense of self, a duality to my worldview (mouse and lion), a continuum that allows me to shift from one to the other depending on what an interaction is being called for. The feelings of self-doubt and confidence teeter back and forth, depending on the moment. This feeling is not unlike what I have been experiencing in my workplace, which leaves me wondering where I will land and which mask I will grab to stay sane and safe.

Finding 2: Gender and Leadership: Interactions During Womanhood

This study includes reflection over the ages and stages of womanhood and how merely being a woman has impacted my professional experience. My professional heroine's arc starts with my early career self being open-minded, keen to learn from others, trusting, and unaware of office politics and public politics. Throughout my professional career, I have encountered mountains and valleys, including a false start, followed by a rise and fall, and my journey through it. My female identity has played a significant role throughout my evolving career, from being a professional woman in my 20s, 30s, 40s, and into my 50s.

As I entered my 20s and the professional world, I felt excitement about becoming "an adult" with responsibilities, a car, an apartment, and a job. I also repeated narratives or mantras ingrained in me, such as my father saying, "Never say, 'I know,' because people won't want to help you," my mother saying, "Let them underestimate you. Ha, that'll be right," to female mentors saying, "Under promise and over deliver." These mantras became beliefs, and these beliefs became tactics for managing myself in the professional world. Naivety and a desire to fit in shaped those early moments.

My professional interactions during the study were strained as I attempted to rationalize my own fate while maintaining a positive demeanor to keep the staff reporting to me calm. As I stood before my team, those who supported me and those who did not, I was sure to show up as a class act. After all, I felt I would be remembered for how I managed myself during this challenge, rather than for all my accomplishments. That, and my parents' voices inside my head saying, "Never let them see you sweat." This interaction and reflective journaling took me back to my 20s, when I was fresh-faced, young, pretty, sexy, likable, and malleable. My initial professional experiences are captured in the vignettes *We're Going to Be Friends*, in which I made my first female friend and colleague, *Get Up, Stand Up*, when I was fired from my first job, and *The Man*, when I was hit on and propositioned by male leaders.

We're Going to Be Friends

Accompanying song: "We're Going to Be Friends" (The White Stripes, 2001)

I was so nervous to be interviewed for my very first government job. It was a cooperative education term, and I had applied at about four places. I'd initially interviewed at one place, and it was horrible. I had five people sitting across from a rectangular boardroom table, and me on the

other side. Needless to say, I did not get that job. Thankfully, I was going to be interviewed at a different ministry, and I was excited and still very nervous. My boyfriend at the time (husband now), drove me to the interview. Music cranked, “F you. I won’t do what you tell me.” There was this raging hint of defiance in me—how could I work for “the man”? I told myself—it’s great money, Monday to Friday, no weekends, and no stat holidays to work—and, hey, if it worked out—maybe I’d get the job permanently?

When I got to the interview, I was taken into the room by a beautiful blond girl who was in a floral dress. She greeted me with a giant smile. I instantly felt welcomed. I was interviewed by three women, sitting around a circular table. It’s funny, back then, I didn’t recognize that the difference between even physical things, like the shape of a table, can make you feel a type of way, but I do now. I’ve often used a circular table for interviews because it made me feel like I was having a chat and an equal in the room. At any rate, I ended up getting the job and was thrilled.

I was so grateful to have been hired by and work for this lovely beautiful blond girl, who was warm, kind, funny, empathetic, and smart. She took me under her wing to show me the ropes. Not only did we work well together during my coop, but we also became lifelong friends. We spent time together, with our boyfriends, and now husbands, playing games, hiking, camping, celebrating holidays, birthdays, crying at funerals, and partying at weddings.

She has been instrumental in my life, and through her, my husband was also introduced to a person that was an advocate for his professional career. I sit here wondering, what was it about her that just fit? I think it was her authenticity. Her quiet and gentle kindness, her fierce love for furry friends, her love for gardening, and her natural way to make people—me—feel seen and heard. I owe her a great deal, even if she’s not aware of how deeply she impacted me.

When I think about it, the seeds of feminist leadership were being watered by her and how she approached the professional world. It made me feel like I had permission to do the same.

This cooperative education experience later turned into a permanent job but was temporarily disrupted by me finishing school and going to work for the private sector. It was not until 2 years later when I was fired from that job that I found my way back to government, hired as an auxiliary with the same beautiful blond girl. It is important to share the challenges I had in the private sector, because it demonstrates how my value of courage is not only reinforced, but starts to shift from vibrato to bravery.

Get Up, Stand Up

Accompanying song: “Get Up, Stand Up” (Marley & Tosh, 1973)

This moment brought me back to my very first professional job—my false-start. My boss had called me up the evening I returned from vacation and fired me. After calling my dad, sobbing, he told me to “pull myself together” and that I needed to “go down there and make him fire me to my face.” He told me that if I “didn’t go down there and say what I needed to, it would haunt me.” I was shaking and nervous that next morning, but I went in and did just that. The rush I got from that moment. The feeling of pride I had for standing up for myself. Maybe even more so was the giant smile on my dad’s face as I walked back towards the car. Thankfully, I had dusted myself off and found a job the very next day at a grocery store, knowing that it was a temporary job until I got back into government, which I did.

As a young professional woman, I accepted and conformed to the cultural or organizational norms that defined how to fit in. I was a blonde, young, fit, cheerful woman, and I personified, by design and by default, the archetypal cultural image of the “sexy secretary,” an invented symbol shaped by the male imagination and preserved within corporate mythology (Berebitsky, 2012). My appearance, energy and femininity often aligned with what dominant Eurocentric, male-centric workplaces defined as appealing, nonthreatening, and supportive. I was both visible and underestimated—smart enough, pretty enough, and friendly enough to be overlooked, and given proximity to power, but rarely the power itself. On the surface, my positionality was not complicated, but rather a common understanding of the cards I had been dealt. Throughout my career, I admit that I was complicit at times, but I also used this to my advantage.

The Man

Accompanying song: “The Man” (Swift, 2020)

As I sat there in a room full of white male leaders, it occurred to me—one of these things is not like the others. I was immediately brought back to my young 20-something self, trying to fit in a room full of men—only then, I was young, attractive, and naïve, and now, I was not. I recall moments when I was younger, and perhaps it was the culture back then, but men would gawk at me. There were times when I had men sit on my desk, peering down on me, men ask me to take down my bun and shake it, and I even went out for lunch with a man who then propositioned me. Yuck. How did I manage those situations? I smiled and laughed, feeling completely uncomfortable in my own skin, not wanting to provoke them, and still a desire to be seen as likeable. Yuck! So disgusting. I was complicit. Being such a professed courageous lion, how was it that I was shrinking into a mouse again? Yuck.

Fast forward back to present day, I found myself doing the exact same thing—smiling and nodding. God, I hate myself right now.

As I turn to my 30s, my life expanded from being a wife to becoming a mother. Motherhood is one of the most miraculous experiences I have been able to have as a female. I was not one of those women who knew they wanted to be a mom or felt that somehow it was the missing piece in my life, though I knew I wanted to expand my family of two one day. Motherhood came to me in my late 20s and early 30s. I had done things in traditional order, according to society: got a car, got a job, got engaged, got married, got pets, and bought a house—all before having children.

Going into motherhood, I was a little nervous. I did not know what to expect and in fact, did not have a lot of expectations of what it would be, but I did have a wonderful example of what motherhood and parenthood looked like from my parents, and I had a loving, loyal, caring husband by my side.

My daughter and son have been the biggest joys in my life, expanding my heart and soul, reshaping my worldview, and enriching my life beyond words. I have watched them grow, cry, laugh, stumble, fall, triumph, struggle, love, and persevere. I have helped shape their minds, their values, and their view of the world, instilling in them both the tremendous gifts I've been given, and the hidden past traumas living within me. Raising my children has not been a solitary journey; I have been supported with the love and lessons from family, friends, teachers, and community.

I found a unique beauty in child rearing, a gift that helps nurture the next generation of people to be better than we were. This generation of young minds have challenged the stigmas of mental health, pushed the boundaries of gender normativism, deconstructed colonial thinking, disrupted traditional workplace norms, challenged political agendas, reshaped environmental awareness, advanced digital and technological experiences, and transformed social justice. They have been watching and learning from the generations before, who have empowered and uplifted their minds and spirits to know better and do better, and in doing so they are challenging those around them to know better and do better.

As a mother of the next generation, for my children and those of others in my community, my role is to mentor, guide, and empower them to find their unique voice, to harness their inner strength, and to shine brightly in the world as their authentic self. Motherhood is a joy and honour. My children have taught me more about myself than any classroom or book ever has. I am a firm believer in lived and living experiences because of social interactions that shape and challenge people to understand their positionality and purpose in the world. Being a wife and mother shifted my professional world. Interestingly, it is filled with a supportive female entourage, giving advice, sharing stories, and building each other up. I am more congruent in my words, actions, and mindset, and I experience pride because I believe I got it all—the husband, the house, the kids, the great job. Not only am I doing well in life, but I am being promoted at work, surrounded by strong female leaders. Though, as I achieve more success, I see a shift in how I am perceived by my male colleagues and older women who once supported me. They

see me as the corporate climber, only getting the job because I am friends with someone at the top or because my boss is a man. There is tension, a feeling of discourse and slight disdain from others. I note this as the era of jealousy.

In my 40s, my worldview and those around me shifted again, as my knowledge turned to wisdom, my waist size expanded, my patience waned, and I shared my opinions with more directness. I was perceived as challenging. During the decade of my 40s, I let the world harden my views, sharpen my tongue, and darken my heart. Discontented, disengaged, and detached: “So many of us go through the stages of feeling helpless or believing there is nothing to be done” (Blackie & Blackie, 2016, p. 11). I experienced a shift toward protectionism, distrust, and an acute awareness of power and politics. It felt easier to believe the worst, brace for the inevitable disappointments, and try to be 10 steps ahead. Everything became more calculated, and I became more of a chameleon, trusting less.

This study showed that in my 40s I experienced a distinctive shift from a positive, empowered professional to a negative, powerless, worker. While the data did not distinctly call out the rationale, the shadows hint at a combination of my father’s death coupled with my desire for people to see me as intelligent and not pretty; these forces pushed me into a spin of self-sabotage. As I travelled the province for my job, I drank more, ate out at restaurants more, exercised less, and fell out of a routine of self-care while I primarily focused on being a professional, leaving my husband to lean in more to the caregiver role. I was pushing hard to establish myself as credible, accountable, voraciously driven. The increased travel and the longer hours began to take a toll. I had a low tolerance for others and a strong sense of shame and guilt for shirking my motherly duties, yet I donned another mask, drinking more wine to numb that nagging feeling. I felt weathered and worn, yet wired and willful. A tension between worlds, an island in a sea of societal pressures. An underlying resentment began to grow inside of me. As I noted in my journal, “I had sworn I wouldn’t end up like those old, jaded, battle-axes, but here I was, her staring me right in the mirror.” Aligning with this, Blackie (2018) stated,

We long to see it as we once saw it when we were children: a world that’s full of mystery, bursting with possibility; a world that will challenge us to become all that we could ever hope to be. And just like the protagonists in all the finest old stories, even though we know that the journey through this world might not always be easy, we know that it will nevertheless be vital, vivid and rich. (p. 9)

During my summer vacation, my husband and I were driving up to Rath Trevor, Parksville, my happy place, and were discussing my workplace fate and what it would mean for our family. While it was a very moderate setback financially, the reputation I had worked so hard for throughout my career felt damaged. I felt like history was repeating itself—I had most definitely been in this position before.

Everybody Supports Women outlines my experience being let down by another female leader and my role within it.

Everybody Supports Women

Accompanying song: “Everybody Supports Women” (Isella, 2023)

In my 40s, I had proverbially “made it.” I was an executive director with a team of professionals. I felt supported and unstoppable. I was in an area that was not my primary subject matter expertise, but I was learning a lot. I was able to transform an entire way of working and introduce a new technology system. I was so proud of where I was.

I was most proud because I had to work hard to create a positive and safe work environment. It was abysmal when I started. Through gaining a first follower and being unrelenting in my desire to hold people accountable to our agreed-upon guiding principles. I saw some people go, and others join. It took about 18 months to create a true dream team. I then saw an opportunity opening up back in my trained profession and rushed to find out how I could be the successor to a person leaving. Not only was I supported, but a desired candidate. I came into that role feeling like a million dollars, that I would finally have the chance to create a workplace like no other, not just for a team, but for the entire organization.

Sadly, the female leader I had looked up to with such adoration and respect turned from mentor to tormentor and left me lying in a ditch. Only by the grace of the divine did I secure another position, only to find myself in a hard repeat mode. It felt like it didn’t matter what I would do, there was no space and no support. My desire for risk wasn’t paying off in reward but rather face down in the mud.

Reflecting on this profound moment in my career, I can earnestly look back and realize I had a role to play in this situation and I was not entirely a victim of circumstance. I was seeking power of my own and in the process lost the plot. It reminded me of Benazir Bhutto (as cited in Lagarde, 2008), who was asked if she liked power. Her response captured the mixed feelings many in leadership harbour, “Power has made me suffer too much. In reality, I’m ambivalent about it. It interests me because it makes it possible to change things. But it’s left me with a bitter taste” (p. 13).

My lesson in this situation was to seek to understand people’s motivations and from which frame—political, structural, symbolic, or human resource (Bolman & Deal, 2008)—they may be looking through; and for that matter, which frame am I looking through. In this case, the political frame was front

of mind. Bolman and Deal (2008) noted, "The political frame does not blame politics on individual characteristics such as selfishness, myopia, or incompetence. Instead, it proposes that interdependence, divergent interests, scarcity, and power relations inevitably spawn political activity" (p. 194). My initial desire to seek power was supported by my mentor, until I began to embrace it. As my power grew and I gained followers, a tension emerged and what had been packaged as woman empowerment suddenly became a battle of egos. Sadly, I was ill-equipped and lacked both senior backing and meaningful support to establish an alternative organizational model, and I was eventually phased out. I had been outmaneuvered and outplayed. I had been playing Uno, not poker. Aligning with this, Bolman and Deal (2008) stated,

It is naïve and romantic to hope organizational politics can be eliminated regardless of the players. Managers can, however, learn to acknowledge, understand, and manage political dynamics, rather than shy away from them. In government, politics is a way of life rather than dirty pool. (p. 194)

Rather than digging my heels in, I could have been curious and attempted to better understand and align mutual interests. Instead, I lay wounded on the side of the road, waiting for my people to rescue me.

Thankfully, I had landed in a new role but went on to have two similar experiences. I felt labelled, my reputation tarnished. I had been shuffled around from project to project, while new leadership tried to find a fit that matched my skills and their needs. I successfully completed some significant, high-level projects, and with my success came even more tension. Unfortunately, as I began to implement systemic change, the political powers that be dug their heels in and created false narratives that the leaders who I had put my faith in did not refute. Regardless of how this impacted me, those leaders also received harsh fates. At that point, significant changes were being made in my workplace, and without a stable role, I was vulnerable.

I met with my new boss a few times over a 3-week period. There were many questions about what I was working on, what I wanted to be working on, and why things were working or were not. I was cautious about sharing too much. I had felt the sting of honesty before; however, by the time our third meeting had come, I was ready for a more real conversation. A little daunting, of course, because my job

was on the line. Those haunting voices of old trickled into my mind: Am I likable enough? Competent enough? Am I enough? As I awaited this meeting, I captured the vignette *Hunter's Moon*, which shared how I felt like history kept repeating itself and the realization that my internal narratives may be perpetuating the storyline, making me feel inferior, paranoid, and defensive.

Hunter's Moon

Accompanying song: "Hunter's Moon" (Ghost, 2021)

It's like history is repeating itself. I was waiting for a workplace decision on the organizational structure and wondering if I would have a job. I knew they were making difficult decisions, and I knew that the project I was working on was coming to a close. I contemplated going on leave or finding a new job. But when the going gets tough, it may be easy to run and hide—but for me, I tend to take things head on, leaning into the discomfort. I think this act provides me with some sense of control. I want to control the narrative. I want to be seen as a class act. I want to show that I am the leader I know I am, but suddenly I was that stupid 8-year-old girl, pretty but not that smart. That crushing feeling—I'm not good enough. Here comes the underdog!

I knew that people were coming for me. That I had been placed aside because I knew too much, saw too much, and demonstrated too much integrity. My desire to serve the public and do the right thing did not meet personal agendas. I knew I was being set up. I didn't feel like I had any power. I stayed and took the abuse—yes abuse. Alienated, no support, no staff, no ability to engage or consult with colleagues and given the most impossible tasks. I knew I was in trouble. I had been set up as the "fall guy," and once you've found your way into that spot it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get out of it alive.

Now, I'm not perfect, and there are many things I still needed to learn as an executive director, but I was never set up for success. So, whose fault is that? This feels very much like a witch hunt.

I hadn't understood at the time, but I had been placed on the glass cliff without a parachute. A false narrative about me had been twisted to service the motivations and agendas of others, and my 30-year reputation as a credible and successful leader was erased. This had left me with a sickening, helpless feeling. I had nowhere to turn. I had one foot dangling over the precipice of my demise.

I captured the next vignette, *Queen of Ice*, on the day I was demoted. I had nervously logged onto my computer and brought up the Microsoft Teams link to meet with my new boss and find out my fate. Would I still be employed? Would I be fired? Would I be moved? There were hundreds of things running through my brain, yet it felt blank. My husband stood nearby, waiting to support me, whatever the news was.

Queen of Ice

Accompanying song: "Queen of Ice" (Claptone, 2021)

After hearing that I was being given the option to be severed or demoted, I was both tearful and relieved. Anger set in later. While I felt slightly prepared for the conversation, I was also a bit of a deer in headlights. After a 30-year career, I was essentially being dismissed or demoted. Neither are what someone wants to hear. The feelings of, you're not good enough, you don't fit in, you're not smart enough, did go through my mind.

While I won't dismiss my part in the situation, I know that this had been in the making for years. I had got on the wrong side of power. Somewhere along the path, I took a slight left, when I should have gone right. Instead of jumping on board and flying to the top, I stumbled and fell from grace. Where was my happy ending? The one where I get to be the strong female leader and help support and shape the next generation of women leaders? I'm sure they thought that I would roll over, or perhaps leave, but it's not in my blood. I'm a "fall seven, rise eight" kind of gal! A "tell me no, and I'll show you" kind of gall!

After my demotion and supporting the team transition, I took a much-needed vacation. As my husband and I drove up to Rathtrevor, Parksville, one of my happy places, I captured the vignette, *Take Me Away*, which denotes my mindset shifting, seeking positivity, and a path forward. A contemplation of what is getting in my way and what no longer services me.

Take Me Away

Accompanying song: "Take Me Away" (Sam Roberts Band, 2021)

I'm leaving behind what no longer serves me any longer. I need happiness and light in my life. My days should be spent on positivity, moving forward towards the new me. Kindness and compassion keep my soul and spirit intact. Through this process, I am discovering my strengths, challenging myself to build a better version of myself. To be a better, more aligned version of myself. By doing so, this will align with my leadership values. Congruency of myself, my actions, my words, and my mindset.

The world is full of possibilities with a positive mindset and intention. Personal mastery is about the ongoing evolution and growth of self, to love yourself. Continually learning, redefining, and refining self. Things change and it's ok for me to.

Honestly, I'm so tired of all of this, trying to prove myself. Can't people see my worth? At this point, I'd rather sell lemonade on the street than beg for my dinner. As Mary Engelbreit says, "Don't look back; you're not going that way."

I finally reached the Rathtrevor, Parksville, campground. I sat at a picnic table in the sun surrounded by trees with the smell of the ocean on the breeze. A sense of gratitude washed over me as I captured the vignette *Push Me*.

I was reminded of the incredible women leaders with whom I have developed deep, meaningful relationships. These are my professional sisters. The people who see the real sides of you. They are there to lift your spirits when you're done, encourage you to do your best, and will also call you in when

you might be spiraling out of control. The *Push* vignette is a homage to those mentors, both new and old, who have supported me throughout the years and considers how. I am grateful to have two such wonderful mentors who are currently supporting me with this thesis, cited as FP1 and FP2.

Push

Accompanying song: “Push” (Madonna, 2005)

I’ve had some great mentors along the way, and when I boil it down, what specifically they did to help me grow and flourish, it always came down to their belief in me. They believed in my ability, even when I didn’t. They helped support me through encouragement and empowerment. There were times I succeeded quickly, and other times when it took a few kicks at the can but through each step there were words of affirmation, or opportunities for discussion and exploration.

What motivated me even more than my own abilities or will was that they believed in me and I didn’t want them to be wrong. I didn’t want to let them down. Their support and mentorship have been more than guidance and kindness, it’s been a profound motivation to live up to the woman I want to be—encouraged through their eyes, and people who see the real me. It’s that gentle hand of manifestation through mentorship. A nudge, a hand, a push.

I had returned from vacation, started my new demoted job, and began to grapple with this new reality. I was going through the motions, trying to remind myself that a job doesn’t define me, that I care more about being respected and valued for what I’m contributing. I’ve earned my stripes, and my lived experience matters—I matter.

As I sat through, yet another Microsoft Teams call, surrounded by all my colleagues, I started telling myself stories. Perhaps these stories are true, or maybe they are lies I tell myself to feel better. It’s hard to say in the moment. I am feeling that overwhelming feeling that I’m being looked down upon. This led me to capture the vignette, *Underdog*.

Underdog

Accompanying song: “Underdog” (Imagine Dragons, 2012)

Society shits on middle-aged overweight women deeming us bitter. Maybe we are because society has squashed our attempts to ascend in our career, while being a good wife, mother, daughter, friend, maintaining all the balance at home and work . . . and because of that we haven’t had time to spend on ourselves, our body, our mind, our overall health. I have felt walked on, pushed around, and bullied in my career. Nice girls finish last. And this has been reinforced by recent events. I’m not oblivious that I contributed in some way—I threatened people. Maybe it’s because I’m hyper observant, I speak confidently, I read body language and the pauses, and that I can read through people’s bullshit.

I threaten other women. While I am overweight, the playing field has been flattened slightly because you can't really tell a person height or weight when they are on those Hollywood squares. But I still feel like an underdog.

I love a good underdog story. I like it when people don't expect great things and are pleasantly surprised, even in games, like poker. In poker, I may get ahead and then, as I fall to the bottom, it seems as though I have a better strategy. Perhaps it's where I'm most comfortable? There is a lowered expectation. If I succeed people are pleasantly surprised, and if not, well, the odds were stacked against me.

I feel like I keep putting myself into these spaces, like I'm trying to prove myself over and over again. How do I take a lead and stay there (consistently). I wonder if I find myself failing because of lazy practice, complacency, or if I'm just really not being set up for success? And if not, what can I do to make sure I am?

The study revealed a natural progression in my professional leadership experience, characterized by a gradual start, a supportive rise, and a challenging mid-career journey. It is difficult to determine whether this is a typical evolutionary experience for women or one exclusive to me. I checked my biases with my feedback participants, sharing that I felt like I keep putting myself into these spaces, trying to prove myself repeatedly. I also confessed that if I am in a tricky situation, I can profess that I was not set up for success. I dislike that other people always want to tear down the leader. I suggested perhaps it is human nature.

Through conversations with my feedback participants, they shared that they, too, as women, experienced similar treatments as they ascended and aged. FP1 challenged my view of being a chameleon as something negative. FP1 shared,

In listening to you, I understand. I'm a woman of colour, a minority. I'm always trying to fit in. That's my whole life. Don't mistake wisdom. Where can you lean in more in seeking clarity from your leadership about their expectations? Ask them, "How do they want you to handle the situation?" It helps build strong relationships and doesn't leave you vulnerable. Don't walk in there overconfident. There is a hierarchy and you're not going to have that respect. You need strategies—getting permission, being cautious and having organization awareness. You need to know your audience. How can you work with different egos? Know your audience. For example, socially, I need to carry myself in a certain way because if not there is blowback and a reputational risk for me and my family. You need to find a balance to represent yourself and their interests.

Additionally, FP2 shared her professional story:

I feel dismissed. I don't feel like I'm not clear. Female leaders need to overcompensate. It's important to have a firmness and to play to your audience. Do not apologize. Do not dismiss. Do not say sorry. Women have a natural ability to see the details and the strategy, diving between them; they are agile. I think because I'm a woman sometimes I'm not heard.

FP2 further shared a separate recollection in which she received feedback from another senior female leader who said,

“You weren’t loud enough. You didn’t have urgency in your words.” Though it was the right words, she needed to hear different ones, perhaps a different call to action. That said, be firm and be clear. Use your full range of emotions that are available to you. Of course, you need to know when to use that tool in your toolkit. But you need to lean in sometimes where it feels uncomfortable. Carefully managed, share and show the other females your emotions. It’s important that we show this with other women—it’s powerful. Feminist leadership—express the full range of emotions. It shouldn’t be masked. Kindness isn’t clear in leadership—setting expectations and hold people accountable is. You are sitting on the edges of growth—examine your habits.

I explained that I feel my desire to be empathetic is more about being likable and perhaps in some ways I felt that this was manipulative. FP2 shared,

You can be likable, but you will also disappoint people. It can be a superpower and a blind spot. Find a way to set boundaries. Here is what I can offer. I can’t fix their problems. Ask questions to help empower them. Boundaries need to be made.

This stirred up additional conversation regarding the expectations placed on senior leaders in the corporate environment to be immediately available and responsive, and I found my preferred approach is to be present with whoever is in front of me, especially in Indigenous relationships. FP2 offered, “It’s a clash of worldviews in the workplace, discord, and tension. When I’m in community, I’m present. Also, if someone needs you, offer what you can, but don’t let that squeeze you.”

FP2 further provided some advice,

Clarity, transparency, find the small wins and celebrate the shit out of it. Be loud about it. Then back to clarity and transparency. You are a change agent. You like change, learning and growth. What is the reason—superpower! There is a cost. If it’s draining your energy, ask—what do I need? Ask your leadership what you need.

The study highlighted that gender identity is and will always be a part of my positionality in the world and will shape how others see me. While I can develop strategies for navigating the world, societal, political, and cultural views of women will shape my experience. This does not mean that I need to accept their views and conform, but rather create a coven, finding like-minded people to continue challenging and reshaping the narrative of women in the corporate world (Smyth et al., 2020).

Finding 3: Evolving Positionality and Deconstructing Self: Interactions at Work

The study helped me to realize that while the environment had changed, the seasons changed, and I continued to pluck the leaves of value that have served me most and kept me safe. Reflecting on one of my journal entries, I contemplated “Am I inadvertently sabotaging myself? Have I lost a view of who I am and now am I allowing others to see me a certain way. Am I now the jaded, battle-axe, or is this just unfair?”

Stop Thinking So Much

Accompanying song: “Stop Thinking So Much” (Lenka, 2021)

I’ve also always felt like I have to prove my worth and that may have been true in these past years as I was under immense pressure and with mass scrutiny, with no real support. So where is the balance in all of this? How can I maintain a feminist leadership philosophy and strengthen my leadership reputation using my positionality? Is there something I need to let go of? Is there something I need more of? I feel like perhaps I lost the plot, and it was fueled by ego and winning rather than by being clear and kind, being brave and taking my power, and knowing when to walk away. My brain won’t turn off. I need to stop trying to prove myself and know I am enough. I need to stop making myself small for others. I need to say what I think. I need to stop thinking so much—and just be.

Throughout this time in my career, I have learned a great deal of things, like how to adapt myself to conform to the current patriarchal culture, operate from a place of inferiority, and use strategies to camouflage any threat, yet the transition to lead from a place of authenticity, feminism, strength, and wisdom had left me bruised, tired, unsure, and apathetic. My lived experiences had a skewed view of self and the world around me. I had morphed from mouse to lion then on to chameleon. Being a chameleon had served me well, but as I moved into more senior roles, I had been told by several male leaders that I was too kind and I needed to show my teeth from time to time. I translated this as “be more like a man.” Though I donned this mask, it failed me too. I had begun to dive deeper into reflection and an increased consciousness ignited as I unpacked myself, shifting from destruction to deconstruction. A new self-view was beginning to emerge.

Slow Burn

Accompanying song: “Slow Burn (Sugar Jesus Remix)” (Mayhem, 2021)

I feel like I’ve been running from the perception of being a mouse. Through all the iterations of me, somewhere I’ve tried to revolt against this view. The best thing I ever did was go quiet,

listening to myself through journaling and reflection. Reconnecting to those parts of me that were lost in the shuffle, dampened, muffled.

What I've learned throughout my journaling journey, of self-reflection, is that being a mouse can be powerful. Sitting back observing others, taking my time, not quick to jump, listening, maneuvering in tight places. It reminds me that small can be powerful, small can be mighty. It's not the size of the woman, it's the size of her stature. How I carry myself in the world is based on how I see me. How I carry myself in the world is how others see me. I am the creator, through mind, and breath, and being. It's important to let go of the things that no longer serve me, and to remember who I am.

Army of Me

Accompanying song: "Army of Me" (Björk, 1995)

The more I unpacked myself the less I knew me. Who am I really? What brings me joy? Am I a victim, villain, or victor? What drives me? When do I feel congruent with my actions, words, and mindset? How can I translate this into everyday actions?

This is what giving up feels like: exhaustion, frustration, apathy.

- "Let go of your ideals" F&#@ OFF
- "Let go of your dreams" F&#@ OFF
- "Just Be" F&#@ OFF . . . Bullshit
- I don't care what people think of me—but I do.
- I don't care if I get demoted—but I do.
- I don't care if I'm fat—but I do.
- I don't know how the f&#@ to get out of this shit—but I do.

I'll call on resilience. I'll call on the lion. I'll pretend. I'll fake it until I make it. I'll suppress my true feelings—because they don't really matter anyway. Nothing changes—try as I might.

I can't stay here long. I'm only visiting. The beast inside won't let those shit feelings and thoughts win. But I see you. I see me. Sadness, frustration, and suffering. Silently. I believe in you. I know you can. I know you will. Smile not because you're faking it, but because you're still fighting to find your truth and that is bravery.

As I developed in my career and moved from compliance to curiosity, from flirtatiousness to fierceness, and from insecurity to confidence, the more those around me tried to tear me down. My transformation and maturity appeared to be a direct hit to societal norms, an abomination to women.

While many of the interactions have focused on my professional world, my personal world has also been impacted by the ravages of age. With the increased stress at work, I had neglected my health and wellness, replacing it with coping mechanisms like wine. This affected how I felt and how I looked. I experienced increased levels of frustration as I started desperately trying to regain control of my

expanding waistline, but try as I might, nothing seemed to work. The once desirable looks from men were replaced by pity and contempt.

Man's World

Accompanying song: "Man's World" (Marina, 2020)

It seems that other people are threatened by me, something I've been told before. I think that success comes down to more about how you make others feel rather than what you're saying. I also think society loves beauty, promoting those with the typical slender build, beautiful faces, with silky voices. I think that the world scorns the aging of women. We become washed-up old hags, while men become sophisticated and distinguished. Do I no longer fit the mold of what society is comfortable with?

Have I been put out to pasture like an old milking maid. This thought makes me recoil in my own skin. A deep sense of anger pulses through my body. I don't think the world knows what I'm made of, but they are about to find out. Born in the year of the tiger, I can feel that fierce feline grumbling from within, the intensity of determination and that desire to prove them all wrong. I keep reminding myself, don't let others define you, you know who you are, don't get bitter—get better.

The study highlighted a distinctive and gut reaction to my shifting positionality. A profound reflection and a deep remembering of myself. A realization of the things that were holding me back. An understanding of both the light and shadow sides of self. That my values are both a gift and a curse. They may be the very things that are holding me hostage, unable to reach evolution, empowerment, and enlightenment.

Fight Song

Accompanying song: "Fight Song" (Platten, 2015)

I was speaking with my husband about the deconstruction and reinvention of self, and he shared the story of the ship of Theseus. It's a mythical hero who sails from Athens to Crete and back. Over time, as the planks of the ship start to rot, he replaces them one at a time. By the end of his journey, he had entirely replaced the boat. The question then becomes, is it still the same boat? When I look at myself, I see the memories or stories being passed down from version of me to version of me; organically, subconsciously. As new memories are created, the old one's infiltrate, ensuring to imprint and not leave behind what insights have been gained, whether they are positive or not. The common thread, weaving together my shared story. I admit that over the years I've confused positivity and kindness with passivity and pushover. I think that I give people too many chances, and over the years when they haven't shown up as I'd hoped, it's made me more callous and careful. Though even these disappointments, or haters have taught me lessons. What I'm taking away is that I don't need to put on my battle gear and rather seek out spaces that don't require it.

- Be brave! Live your values and focus on what work needs done and do it.
- Be bold! Speak your mind softly and with intention. No one will hear loud voices with malintent; those will ricochet.

- Be careful! Be careful with yourself, your colleagues, your words, your mind, your heart. Careful does not mean caution, it means full of care.

Once again, the lion was being channelled, with an emerging curiosity about whether, in fact, a hybrid could exist. A nonbinary view emerged—not mouse or lion, nor chameleon either. Could multiple identities exist simultaneously?

I took to nature for a think. Walking my dog through my neighbourhood, observing the late summer, the changing of the leaves, the sun a little lower, leaving longer shadows on the pavement. I arrived at Florence Lake. It's beautiful here. A lake just large enough not to be considered a pond. I threw an orange ball into the water for my dog to swim out and fetch. He loves it there. I do too. Calm and peaceful. Nature is such a glorious thing—ever-changing with the seasons. I am strong. I am wise. I am confident. I am a woman. It is when I returned from the walk that I wrote the following vignette, *Everything at Once*.

Everything at Once

Accompanying song: "Everything at Once" (Lenka, 2011)

Everything is cyclical. Things must die to be reborn! Plants shed their leaves which fall into the soil and protect the roots over the winter; until the spring when new buds and leaves sprout, creating a newer, stronger one that can weather the storms and the hot sun. So too must I use interactions like leaves, dropping them onto the soil and taking those that will make me stronger and wiser.

It shouldn't be called a heroine's arc. It should be called a heroine's cycle. A protagonist doesn't just stop when they've reached a realization but rather, they continue to transform, over and over again, like the rise and fall of the ocean, like the rise and fall of a heartbeat's rhythm.

I don't have to be tied to being a mouse, a lion, a chameleon, or a fox. I don't need to be tied to a view of self that doesn't fit. I don't need to pretend to be anything other than me. I can be any and all of those things, simultaneously. It's not binary, it's fluid. After all, I am a "fish" (Pisces). I love all things. I love inclusivity, so why on earth would I try and segregate myself? Even by virtue of this thesis, I had such a hard time finding my grain of sand. I had a hard time imagining separating self. So I found a way to showcase myself through storytelling. Identity is difficult to pinpoint. It's not a this or that answer—it's all of me. Light and darkness. Everything all at once.

After I finished composing this vignette, I began to do some research about Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2025) and how I might be stuck, when I stumbled upon the video *Richard Barrett Excerpt from New Leadership Paradigm presentation* (Barrett, 2014), which explained the levels of consciousness

and offered that to gain “internal cohesion” (16:20), the individual must first master personal growth and let go of what no longer serves them.

Over the course of my life and career, I have continued to evolve, but perhaps not as consciously as I am right now. This internal reflection has allowed me to explore the whispers of my past, the heaviness of my present and the promise of tomorrow. This study revealed a distinct shift from fear, anger, and sorrow to resolve, compassion, and hope.

The following vignette, *It's Amazing*, was inspired by Barrett's (2014) presentation, leaving me with a refreshed view and a resurgence of internal power. I experienced a renewed sense of positivity and an understanding that true congruence between my words and actions is only possible when my mindset is aligned with them. That positivity inevitably draws things, concepts, and ideas to fruition when I align my thinking.

It's Amazing

Accompanying song: “It's Amazing” (Jem, 2008)

They don't call it a circle of life for no reason. Everything is cyclical, even us. Our cells have a cycle, the seasons have a cycle, and we (I) have a cycle. As I reflect on my heroine arc, I now realize that it is never really finished. There will be upswings and downturns, a rise and fall, just like the ocean, or gravity holding us humble, accountable, grounded. It's ok to dream, chase dreams, achieve dreams, but I think it's important to always remember where we (I) came from along my journey, because it makes us (me) stronger. Values don't just come from our childhood, but they are a culmination of moments and interactions that provide a lesson. The value of a moment may not be realized until it's gone.

As I go forward in my leadership, I will use each moment to create my future self, like muscle memory, I need to practice until it becomes natural. I will go forth and make my dreams reality. I won't let my past bring me down. I will learn from the lessons I've been given and keep going. It's up to me to harness the lessons learned and be my best self. Ever learning, ever evolving.

I thought I was done journaling, at least for the purpose of my thesis, but as I sat in my midway RRU thesis check-in meeting, new realizations emerged that were worth capturing. The vignette *Black to Gold* captured my realization that I was getting stuck back into old ways of thinking and my true self was buried in the ocean of my mind, covered in rust. It also represents my never-ending search for personal mastery through reflection.

Black to Gold

Accompanying song: "Black to Gold" (Dear Rouge, 2015)

I observed my cohort, eloquently checking in and being thoughtful about the journey. Some hints of vulnerability, and whispers of comparison rang throughout, but a gentle and warm shared space allowed each of us to share where we truly were. I watched as the proverbial torch was passed from one person to another waiting for my turn. I consciously chose to listen to each person without thinking of what I might say. I was the last person to go. My inclination and instinct are to shoot from the hip, but it's usually carefully curated and guarded.

Something different happened at that moment. As I spoke, I could feel the emotion welling in my eyes, a tightness in my chest. It was hard for me to lean into that space, and I could see kind eyes wincing and hands being held over hearts, reassuring me that I was seen and safe. I admit I did not like this feeling. I felt exposed. Not the polished version of myself. I managed to pull myself together enough to finish and pass the floor back. I was not expecting the beautiful outpour of support. In addition to heart emojis, I received a few private messages thanking me for my honesty and authenticity. What I felt would have been a moment perceived as weakness, actually demonstrated authenticity, and what felt like isolation became connection.

I stayed on the call and listened to the professors tell us about the upcoming steps, giving words of encouragement and sharing resources. At the end, a few of us stayed on, to ask questions, and chat. There was some discussion on external reviewers and feelings of apprehension in wondering who would want to read our work. I shared that I felt I hadn't made some impressive discovery or a massive breakthrough. Smiling, the professor shared, "Don't count yourself out." Those words ricochet around my brain creating quite the racket. I knew I was holding back. That I was on the precipice of pushing through. I just needed to trust myself. What had all my journal entries really been telling me. I was about to spend that evening digging in to find out.

This interaction helped me realize all my emotions should be examined as a part of my intersectionality. These emotions are my internal signals trying to communicate something to me about my needs, values, or boundaries. Now, when I experience strong emotions, I realize it is a cue for me to slow down, breathe, and lean into those feelings, rather than suppress them.

As I looked back on my research study experience, I was flooded with a range of emotions: gratitude, happiness, sadness, anger, frustration, and anxiety. I had begun to sink beneath the surface, diving more deeply into my psyche, even though the waters were still murky. Over the next few days, these emotions surfaced, almost out of nowhere, and rather than quelling those feelings, I let them seep out as tears or words. I found the experience exhausting, yet oddly freeing. From that moment forward, I began practising a small breath and pause when something bubbled up, acknowledging it, and then deciding if this was something worth addressing in the moment or assessing later. I felt ready to dive in to examine the research and see what other new discoveries awaited me.

Study Conclusions

This autoethnographic research study has taken an anthropological stance, connecting critical concepts and social theories of intersectionality including personality and gender, which challenge hidden power and oppression of self and self in societal systems (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). Through critical reflection, I unpacked how my lived experiences throughout the ages and stages of childhood, womanhood, and work have informed my self-perception and my feminist leadership philosophy. Consequently, through storytelling, I explored human interactions influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). As a reminder, before beginning this section, Table 2 (see Chapter 4) depicts how the study conclusions sections mirror my study findings.

Conclusion 1: Invisible Threads: Intersectionality and Positionality Shape My Feminist Leadership

The vignettes captured within the theme of values and identity examined my early childhood and adolescent development as well as the impact of interactions within family, education, and social systems that constructed and shaped my views and beliefs about self and identity. Personal identity is often considered to be too idiosyncratic to accurately analyze, yet “values are a cohesive force within personal identity” (Hitlin, 2003, p. 118), which by virtue influences the very nature of one’s experience among various social groups. As Goffman (1963, as cited in Fasulo & Piazza, 2014) noted, “The general identity-values of society may be fully entrenched nowhere, and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered in daily living” (p. 3).

Values are conceptualized as mental models that act as a person’s code of conduct or guiding principles that guide one’s behaviour across situations (Hitlin, 2003). Identity theory proposes the commonalities among people create a societal or social normative sense as conditions of acceptability (Hitlin, 2003).

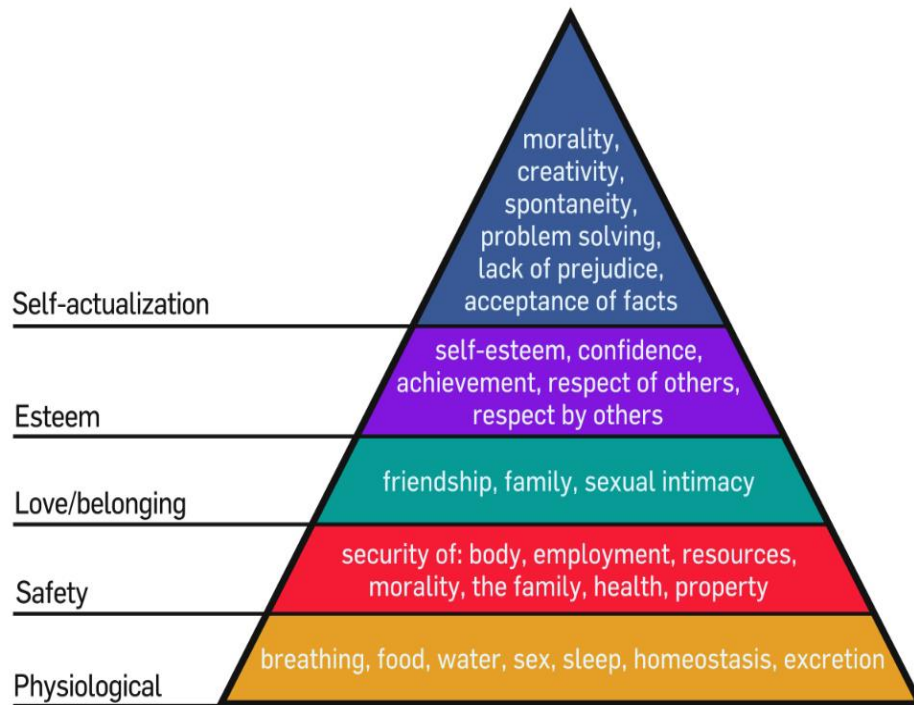
At different phases throughout my life, the societal systems I interacted with influenced which values I drew from and what I believed to be the appropriate response or reaction. My personal values were shaped by defining moments, often emotionally charged from positive or negative interactions, which were reinforced through subsequent experiences. Throughout my lifetime, I have drawn upon certain values for both pride and protection, depending on the interaction.

Having had a stable upbringing with married and loving parents, living in the same middle-class family home until my early 20s, and attending school with the same peers provided me with stability, safety, security, love, belonging, and elements of self-esteem. However, as I began to interact outside of my family social system, I experienced emotions such as embarrassment and shame, which created negative feelings relating to safety, security, belonging, and self-esteem.

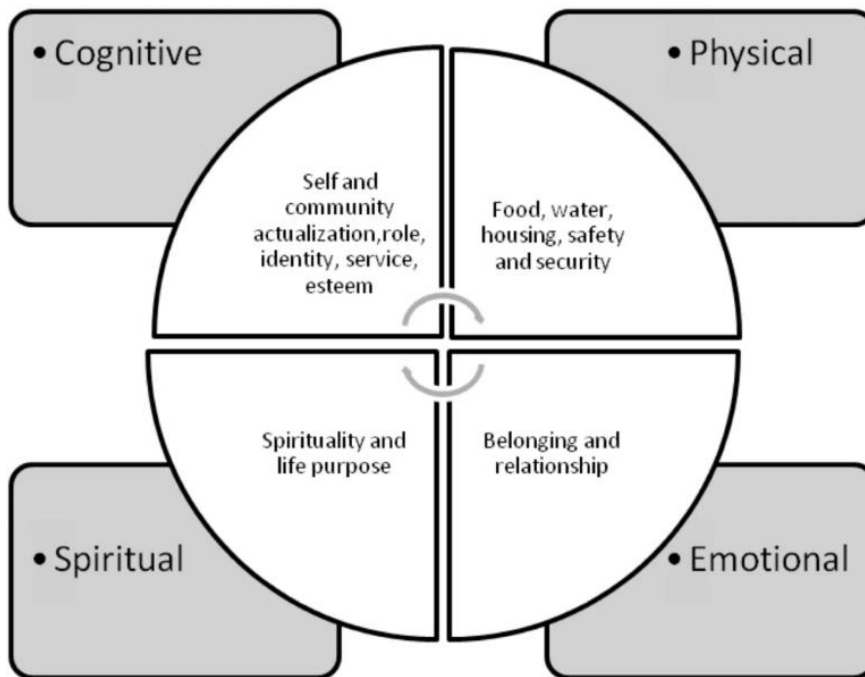
In my reflections, I thought back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (as cited in McLeod, 2025) and wondered where I sat on the journey of self-actualization and why I may have been stuck. Interestingly, a deeper dive of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (as cited in Ravilochan, 2021) suggested he "may have been inspired by the Siksika (Blackfoot) way of life" (para. 2). Ravilochan (2021) shared that Maslow lived with the Blackfoot and was able to test his hypothesis of what success and wealth looked like compared to their cultural framework. What he discovered was the Blackfoot defined wealth as prosperous community rather than monetized, and success was based on people becoming their authentic selves, rather than holding power over others (Ravilochan, 2021). Finally, while Maslow's hierarchy is depicted as a triangle (Figure 4), the Blackfoot people believed more in a circular model (Figure 5), as it demonstrates interconnectedness rather than the perception of dependency (Ravilochan, 2021).

Figure 4

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Note. From *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, by Balageru, 2006, Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maslow%27s_Hierarchy_of_Needs.svg). Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Figure 5*Cross's Ideas in the Circular Model*

Note. From *The Blackfoot Wisdom That Inspired Maslow's Hierarchy*, by T. Ravilochan, 2021, Resilience (<https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-06-18/the-blackfoot-wisdom-that-inspired-maslows-hierarchy/>). Reprinted with permission.

Ravilochan (2021) stated, “The circular model reveals thinking in line with many First Nations: depending on the situation, the order in which our needs must be met is subject to change” (Circles, Not Triangles section, para. 5). The circularity of this model further aligned with my thinking of a heroine’s journey, sharing that growth is not linear; rather, it ebbs and flows like water.

Reflecting on my childhood, I found I created a new version of myself, donning a mask of anger and defiance, shielding my bruised and battered ego. However, entering early adulthood, I experienced a shift, a settling of sorts, a calming of calamity as I embraced myself, which led to self-assurance and self-confidence.

Conclusion 2: Wearing the Mask: Between Expectation and Identity

Positionality entails bringing forth one’s full self, including their views, beliefs, and biases, into a moment or interaction with another person, people, or even nature (Merriam et al., 2001). What

distinguishes positionality is the layering of what power or privilege a person may have access to because of their intersectionality, whether it be race, sex, gender, education, beliefs, profession, social identity, socioeconomic status, or family and clan (Merriam et al., 2001).

Prior to the study, my understanding of positionality was limited to my own perspective in relation to others; however, through self-reflection and the analysis of each interaction, I can now articulate that intersectionality is who I am, and where I stand in relation to the world. Reflecting on the values and identity finding, my environment has impacted both my worldview and perception as well as the perceptions and worldviews of others. This is further impacted by the societal constructs, guiding principles, or societal values that denote what is acceptable within communities, what is right and wrong, what is valid or invalid. Values and beliefs guide the behaviours, acts, and views of people, providing them with a rule book on how people can belong, outlining what is acceptable and what happens when someone acts out of alignment with these societal views or norms (Hitlin, 2003). Positionality is an invisible yet palpable reality that wraps around community, dictating the rules of engagement and the place and space of people. Consequently, when analyzing my findings against the literature I reviewed, I concluded my personal values and societal views equally created the foundation for self-identity and self-expression of my feminist leadership philosophy including empathy, courage, inclusivity, collaboration, and equity.

Society has constructed the guiding behaviours and attributes appropriate for men and women leaders (Eklund et al., 2017). This stereotypical perspective is that “leadership has traditionally been construed as a masculine enterprise with special challenges and pitfalls for women” (Carli & Eagly, 2001, p. 633). As I reflect upon my earlier career success, I recall fitting the mold of attractive, malleable, collaborative, and naïve leader, which at the time aligned with the socially expected behaviours for women in the workforce.

As I gained tenure in my role, I began to use my positionality and power as a human resource professional, which enabled me to understand and align myself against the traditional rubric deemed “suitable” for leadership roles “promotion worthy” or those with masculine characteristics. Males are stereotypically perceived as confident, assertive, independent, rational, and decisive, as well as cold,

competitive, and authoritarian (Eklund et al., 2017). That said, I was able to skew my results when taking personality tests such as Myers-Briggs, which was built on Carl Jung's idea about psychological preferences (Carlyn, 1977). This is not to say that I acted out of alignment with my core self, but rather, on paper, my leadership traits appeared to align with the masculine model, making me a good candidate for leadership. Understanding the rules of engagement and who is shaping the culture allowed me to align myself with society's dominant views of success.

Davis (2017) shared, "The performance of womanhood is a social and economic necessity, a performance that never ends, which leads me to wonder what effects this has on women's sense of self" (p. 1). I found performance to be a requirement for survival in the corporate environment I worked in; this translated into me becoming sly like a fox or becoming a chameleon. While this approach worked for me personally, the disadvantages to an organization include a lack of alignment between who supervisors or leaders think they are hiring and who they are actually getting.

In addition, I found believing inaccurate narratives about others poisoned my own view of myself, inadvertently seeping into my existence, strangling my values, and pushing my true self further from view. The truth was, I had not acted authentically. I was like the woman David (2017) described: "She pretends to reveal a part of her true identity but is actually revealing a mask behind a mask in order to manipulate their perception of her while simultaneously giving the impression of vulnerability and authenticity" (p. 8). To survive in corporate culture, I devised a specific tactic—a way of being, a distortion of feminist leadership that was congruent with societal expectations but did not reveal my authentic self. The tactic proved to be successful for survival and even advancement, which made it difficult to challenge myself and act differently, as I feared it would pose a threat to my very existence and position. This way of being, forged in response to subtle and overt societal messages, shaped my career choices, my leadership behaviours, and my sense of worth.

I observed and believed in a male-dominated corporate environment the appropriate mask to don was youthful, playful, and flirty, a damsel in distress, whereas, as an aging woman, I needed to shift to nurturing, motherly, empathetic, and collaborative. However, as a white, middle-aged, blonde woman with an opinion, I found myself against the fence with the eyes of others locked upon me, a firing squad

waiting to fling the derogatory word “Karen” in my direction. Smith (2024) described a *Karen* as a woman with a “can I speak to the manager’ haircut and a controlling, superior attitude to go along with it” (p. 239). Smith argued the label carries an underlying message of “traditional guidance on how to be ladylike, selfless, feminine and take up less space” (p. 240).

My mask of authenticity was hidden beneath my mask of masculinity and a false version of femininity. What damage to the real and authentic me occurs when I wear a mask over a mask? Through my inward contemplation I searched for the truth and found that shame exists in this pursuit. Shame in how I manipulated the presentation of myself and my femininity, allowing it to be cast in a victim role. I reshaped my positionality as a woman to align with socially accepted views of women and leadership, distorting myself. Today, I feel I straddle the space between manipulation and wisdom, understanding the rules of the game and contorting myself to survive.

Societal and personal beliefs of aging women have a perverse reinforcing loop. As I aged, I began to make up stories of being the underdog, under attack by others, whether it be the patriarch, fellow female colleagues, or the corporate world writ large. While there are inherent truths to my experiences, the compounding negative narratives shifted my mindset from that of a confident, happy, young woman leader to a self-doubting, angry, aging woman leader, lacking trust in myself and others. I observed people within the corporate environment did not always appreciate the feminist leadership attributes of empathy, collaboration, and kindness but rather supported the attributes of apathy, competitiveness, and callousness. I sought to make sense of the situation, often blaming others, falling victim to the circumstance, and spiraling into suspicions of conspiracy, anger, and protectionism. This aligned with Davis’s (2017) statement: “By pretending to not know she is being watched, she can flirt without being a coquette, be beautiful without being vain, and be pitied without seeming pathetic” (p. 10). I began to wear another mask, unbecoming of my true self, adapting like a chameleon, hiding my truth, and observing in the shadows of discontent.

I had an internal desire to prove myself and show that feminist leadership could be a mix of characteristics associated with the masculine and feminine. I demonstrated feminine characteristics, such as compassion, empathy, and kindness, as well as masculine characteristics, including assertiveness,

results orientation, and confidence. However, as I began to move away from feminine behaviours, blending these with the accepted agentic or masculine behaviours, an incongruity emerged; not for myself, but for the societal and organizational corporate cultures that I occupy. There is a paradox emerging that women should be seen as collaborative, empathetic, and relational leaders; however, people appear to respect decisive and direct behaviours. Consequently, just as Irby and Brown (1995) noted, when I have acted out of alignment with my leaders' expectations of feminist leadership, I experienced backlash, but when I acted within those expectations, I was seen as soft and overlooked for promotions. This is a double-edged sword, or a never-escaped labyrinth (Carli & Eagly, 2018).

I then adopted a more authentic version of feminist leadership, and this was also met with resistance, reinforcing the societal view that a middle-aged woman who is forthright and direct is an old, ugly hag, a witch of nonconformity (Smith, 2024). Feminist leadership is not witchcraft in a literal sense, but both represent countercultural forms of power that centre around care, intuition, and community, rather than dominance (Davis, 2017). Feminist leadership and the perception of witchcraft both challenge how power could look in patriarchal societies; hence, they are demonized as dangerous and unacceptable (Smith, 2024).

There is a resistance to a strong female actor, a desire for women to conform to patriarchal expectations. As I begin to lean into my power as a feminist leader, releasing past views of feminist leadership defined by scholars, blending leadership characteristics that are authentic to me, I am seen as a threat, and am swiftly reminded by the men that I am out of alignment with male corporate culture. Even more disappointing are my female colleagues' reactions that I am too ambitious, overly confident, and contentious.

I am becoming more profoundly aware of my evolving positionality and its discourse with societal norms, as a white, middle-aged woman with an expanding waistline and a sharper wit and tongue. I can see the efforts to uphold dominant narratives by "how other groups exploit, scapegoat, and demonise middle-aged women" (Smith, 2024, p. 12). This revelation resonates within quiet corners of my heart and burns like I am a witch at the stake. It was not until later in my career that I began to understand the

impact on my own agency and authenticity. Over time, the discord between how I was perceived and who I truly was grew from a rumble to a roar.

My values, ever present, shifted from sun to shadow, from light to dark, clouding my self-view and impacting my leadership presentation. It is difficult to conclude just one shift in oneself. The evolution felt like a kaleidoscope of shifts that build upon each other, creating a multifaceted view.

I have examined my life over decades to better understand how I have changed across the stages of life. Each decade was marked by a deepening awareness of systemic influences and a growing confidence in embracing nonconformity. Being a female has afforded me some of the greatest privileges. As a woman leader, I transitioned from quiet confidence to a state of raging survivalism, becoming detached from myself, and then empowered to undertake intentional acts of resistance and redefine myself.

By reflecting on my past experiences, identity, and values, as well as my gender within societal systems, I have refined my feminist leadership philosophy. I see how my workplace is deeply impacted by the patriarchal societal view. The government and its structures, such as governance, acts, legislation, and policies, were primarily designed by white men for white men. While these structures have shaped me, they do not define me. Reality is created and curated by me. I am the creator, and I have the power and privilege to create, deconstruct, and rebuild the best version of myself from within and share that with those around me.

Conclusion 3: Evolving Positionality: The Quiet Revolution Within

My leadership is not only shaped by the values of my past, but also by my evolving positionality as an educated, white, middle-aged woman in society. The world will treat me differently, see me differently, and judge me differently, by my appearance, by my words, and by my actions. However, I am not defined by others. True power lies in understanding who I am, what I stand for, what motivates me, and how this impacts my interactions with the world around me. Nevertheless, how the world views me remains an influential factor, especially if my true self defies social or constructed norms.

The biggest gift I can give myself and others is to be unwavering in who I am as a woman, wife, daughter, sister, friend, colleague, and more. My beliefs and my voice are as valid as anyone else's. I do

not need to shrink myself to make space for others. I do not need to shout from the rooftops for people to hear me. I need to be confident in the skin that I am in and navigate the world without the limitations of others defining and shaping my own path. As my mother says, “Maybe you’re not everyone’s cup of tea.” She’s right—and why would I want to be? Being liked in the world feels like work. It feels like a mask I pull on to fit in rather than stand out. There is a balance between who I believe I am and how the world sees me.

As the study concludes, I believe self-reflection is an important tool for change but can only be realized when action is taken. To move forward and release what no longer serves me means acknowledging my past and not being defined by it.

Society has shaped women to wear a cloak of invisibility, holding women down by the weight of societal beliefs and pressures, shielding them from their true power in the world. I choose to flip that cloak of invisibility into my cape of prominence, supporting women leaders to find their inner strength and authentic selves. I choose to flip that cloak into my own red carpet, walking with confidence and class. I choose to flip that cloak into my magic carpet and unleash the power from within.

Whether it be an astounding coincidence or divine timing, a significant moment in my professional career occurred during the journaling cycle of this study. In this moment, I channeled the lion inside—after all, anger is an active emotion. I took those emotions and really looked inwards. This allowed me to delve deeply into self-reflection and self-discovery, revealing an exploration of self-values and beliefs as well as my identity as a woman and a professional.

I came to realize that behind all my courage and pride lay performative apathy. I discovered the sadness, frustration, and disappointment that I felt in myself and others—a sense of victimhood, perhaps akin to being a mouse. This was completely the opposite view I had of myself. It made me wonder if, in my polished approach to professionalism and the male-centric leadership approach I took, I had stifled the real me. I had put on a mask, a layer of lacquer, shiny and protected, like a polished pearl—but it wasn’t really me. These realizations emerged as I looked back on past values that had held me to a belief, a standard, a view, which was only partially my own.

Throughout the study, I challenged myself to let go of the cultural view of self, recalling moments in my life that opened old wounds. While the research shows self-awareness, what appears to be touted as courageousness turns out to be self-preservation and protectionism. My perception of courage is biased, and upon further examination, its root is fear. Fear is present in me, lying under the surface of interactions and moments. While I discovered that knowledge could translate into appropriate action and become wisdom, wisdom too could be beautifully wrapped, a silky ribbon covering the true gift laying further beneath the surface, one of self-sufficiency and releasing self-control, enough to be truly authentic.

Fear does not make me weak; it makes me human. There is a stigma surrounding fear that has held me back from acknowledging this emotion. Fear is seen as a weakness and a flaw, however, it has also been the window into insight and empathy. While courage has been a wonderful companion, she often operates from a place of anger, without acknowledging her sisters: hurt, sadness, rejection, and fear.

A desire for acceptance, control, and recognition was ever present during my interactions and self-reflections, restraining me from achieving self-actualization, keeping me stuck between personal belonging and self-esteem (McLeod, 2025). Realizing my sticking point allowed me to lean into self-acceptance, let go of the things I could not control, and reject feelings of inadequacy.

As the heroine of my story, I realize and accept that life is a cycle, that I myself am a cycle, and there will be a rebirth of self throughout my life. I came to realize, even though change can bring fear, I have already evolved many times before. The practice of personal growth does not end but continues to evolve, just as I do. The deconstruction of parts of me that failed to serve my feminist leadership required me to take a hard look at myself through gentle eyes, enabled me to find the lost parts of myself and to hold and release the parts that no longer served me, and helped me to embrace and replace them with new tenets of self-love, self-care, and self-respect.

Moods are dependent on mindset, and without critical reflection the mindset will remain unexamined and tethered to dominant societal norms. Humans are not comfortable with paradoxes, searching for an answer, a binary view, yet a paradox must exist within me to create congruency (Corwin,

2025). This did not necessarily require an insider view, or an outsider view, but a relationality, an interconnectedness within and between spaces, a reciprocity, and a mutual understanding without power and privilege of either status (Short, 1998). It is not to remove or whitewash the unique intersectionality, but to embrace and hold space for a shared community, harnessing the beauty of individuals in a collective.

Through the reflective process, I have been able to abandon some beliefs that no longer serve me, reshape others with new knowledge, and adopt a few new ones. As I continue to tend to the garden of me, I will remind myself that I am who I am, right now, and I am always evolving and reshaping as I deepen my relationship with self and the self in social systems. Each of these rebirths will shape who I am and how I am in the world. Not without shame, guilt, or fear, but with self-acceptance, self-forgiveness, and self-trust.

Through this process, I have reclaimed the validity of my voice, my values, and my way of leading, not as imitations of patriarchal models, but as authentic expressions of feminist leadership. Positionality is always evolving, and these conclusions are not fixed endpoints; rather, they are evolving understandings continually shaped by the interplay of self and system. As my positionality shifts, so too may my interpretations. I offer this narrative as both testimony and invitation to fellow researchers: reflect honestly and deeply, and embrace the self, all versions, quietly and boldly—as mouse and lion. There is a reawakening, resurgence, renewal, and reinvention of me in all my social systems, and with each interaction comes an opportunity to practise, reinforce, and recalibrate my continually evolving self. May I not be defined by the constructs of others but instead recognize their perceptions and find a space between these worlds. May the person I project to the world align with the authentic person I see reflected in the mirror.

Scope and Limitations

Through this thesis, I have explored self through autoethnography rather than first-person action research. I selected autoethnography because first-person inquiry alone can be narrow, biased, confessional, and difficult to generalize to others (Brown, 2008; Marshall, 2001), whereas autoethnography blends critical inquiry and self-reflection; challenges self against social, political, and

cultural constructs; and infuses self-empowerment and social change (Tuck & Yang, 2021). The advantages of autoethnography included the ability to access my own data sources and selectively share my personal views, which may enlighten others to a different perspective. This approach, however, also has limitations, such as expressing a singular voice, potential for bias and distortion of the narratives, and the inability to predict others' responses to my personal stories. Researchers have criticized the limits of autoethnography, claiming it is self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualized (Atkinson, 2006). Richardson (2000) asserted autoethnography should be evaluated as a science and an art.

The arts-based method of storytelling used in this thesis also has advantages and limitations. Storytelling of self is a complex matter involving introspection, honesty, and objectivity, yet this can be difficult to accomplish as one may embellish or remember the past differently from how events actually occurred, which leads to concern about the reliability of the data captured (Tversky & Marsh, 2000). Ellis and Bochner (2000) shared similar concerns about storytelling in autoethnography, noting that remembering the past and retelling the past can distort the truth. Nevertheless, storytelling is also a tool for sensemaking, and organizing thoughts into stories can enable the writer to analyze the information with greater objectivity (Colville et al., 2016). Additionally, while the stories within autoethnography are personal and not transferable, once critically reflected upon and packaged as a story, the content may then become accessible and comprehensible to others (Wilde, 2022).

The nature of the data captured throughout the study was sporadic; however, to present the stories in a sequential manner, I selected stories or vignettes that helped to portray digestible content. To protect myself, this thesis does not share all raw data, but rather "what you need to know and what I refuse to write in" (Simpson, 2007, as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223).

While the study timelines complied with the requirements under reflective practice for the purpose of the thesis, I found these time constraints limited the number of journal entries. Additionally, as I captured most of the information during a challenging moment in my career, followed by a longer-than-usual break over the summer, the timing impacted which interactions occurred. Had the study been longer, different themes may have surfaced, and other parts of self and my intersectionality may have been explored. Due to the nature of autoethnographic research, it was imperative that I gathered rich

data, conducted reflexivity, and checked my findings with feedback from participants to validate and challenge my findings and potential biases (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Another limitation was that my ability to challenge my potential biases was restricted to two feedback participants who were both women working in a similar corporate environment. However, the advantage of these feedback participants was their awareness of working as women in the corporate culture. An additional advantage was that their positionalities, intersectionalities, power, and privilege varied based on their own life experiences. This enabled me to also consider different perspectives, which helped to validate, shift, and change my own perspective.

Considering the limitations and advantages of autoethnography, storytelling, and the study, it is important to note that this research had limitations, as I was the subject and the researcher of the study. Therefore, the data gathered were examined through my lens as a white, middle-aged woman of European immigrant heritage, shaped by a Western worldview and lived experiences as a mother, wife, daughter, friend, auntie, and professional colleague working within a provincial government environment.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings of my study using a storytelling method and outlined key themes and patterns that emerged from the data analysis. The study findings provided deep insights into myself, allowing me to examine areas that have been holding me back from my true potential as an authentic feminist leader. In addition, this study should be considered through the context outlined in the scope and limitations. The next chapter provides my recommendations and implications for future practice and research.

Chapter 5: Inquiry Implications

Through this research, I explored the following question: How do my interactions within societal systems shape my evolving positionality and inform my feminist leadership philosophy and practice? My subquestions provided a framework to break down the component parts of the inquiry for a deeper dive:

1. What is feminist leadership and how does it underpin my current leadership philosophy and praxis?
2. What interactions and distinct moments are shaping my past and present?
3. What societal systems am I interacting with?
4. What is my positionality and how is it influencing my interactions with others?

While these subquestions provided a general guideline, the study itself and the research took me on an unexpected journey of self-discovery, wandering into the shadows of my past, exploring myself as a woman in society and as a professional working in a corporate government environment. The research was rich around my research inquiry and subquestions, and I let the process organically unfold, following new paths of knowledge that emerged throughout my inquiry. I found examining the subquestions first created a solid foundation for answering the main question.

Recommendations

In this section, I present my responses to the subquestions. My primary research study focused on analysis of present-day interactions, unpacking if my reactions to interactions were specifically based on the situation at hand, or if they were in fact influenced by my past. What I discovered was that my values and identity were shaped through external influences and impacts and reinforced through experiences. That my gender, as a woman, additionally shaped my lived and living experiences and my professional experience through overt and hidden gender stereotypes, expectations, and double standards. Finally, the structures of my professional environment are rooted in colonial foundations, and these dynamics present unique challenges and barriers for me as a woman. These combined external factors have shaped my self-view and view of others. I further realize my view of feminist leadership has been clouded by the ghosts of my past and shaped by society, yet they no longer reflect the woman I am

today. This realization took me deeper into self-reflection, deconstructing my values, beliefs and views, and reinventing myself from the inside out.

As I reflected upon my research, I developed three major recommendations. I offer these recommendations first as descriptions followed by the concrete steps I will implement in my practice to become the leader I wish to see in the world:

1. Cultivate a continual renewal of self.
2. Examine positionality as a woman with fluid characteristics.
3. Build leadership perspective through self-love.

Recommendation 1: Cultivate a Continual Renewal of Self

Accompanying song: "I'm Not Scared" (Tennant & Lowe, 1988)

I discovered my mind is not bound by time and space; rather, it exists simultaneously in the past, present, and future (Bayeck, 2022). Reality is not made of straight lines but circles, reinforcing loops, and cycles (Senge, 2006). Reality is also not defined solely by cause and effect; its richness expands to include impact and influence (Senge, 2006).

I am always learning new things, generating new ideas, discovering new perspectives about myself and the world around me; however, too often I am distracted by the business of the world and forget to pause and reflect. If reflexivity is embedded into regular practice, it enables sense-making of interactions and opportunities for self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-awareness (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2014). Self-awareness is a critical component of authentic leadership, which is guided by the congruency of demonstrating core values through both actions and words (Eriksen, 2009).

While reality may not be entirely constructed by me, I am the designer of my own life. I am not bound by the shroud society casts over me, nor tethered to the values instilled upon me. I am not a static fixture placed in a space created by society, nor is my mind fixed to known patterns. I am free to be and create the life I choose to have, without apology, without hesitation.

As I begin to shift my mindset, a fire lights within me, and internal power, like the force of the ocean, or the gusts of the wind. I feel the unstoppable nature of myself. The question now becomes, how do I keep my fire burning in my belly, in my heart, in my eyes and in my mind? Internal change is not

something done to me, but rather that I choose it to be. Internal change does not happen because someone else wants it to or what society pressures me to be. Who I am, my identity, my self-view—just like the colour of my skin, my race, my sex, my gender—is unique to me and untouchable by others.

Through reflection, I was able to make meaning of my core values that I had developed during childhood and reconstruct new definitions as I am today. Through my values reflection I was also able to recognize the projection or misplaced values onto the world around me, creating a renewed perspective on the importance of healthy boundaries.

Values are the foundation of how people operate in the world and are deeply rooted in an individual's upbringing, culture, and personal experiences (Bishop, 2013). While values guide and shape decisions, they can also create biases and blind spots, preventing people from truly seeing a situation or interaction for what it is. Therefore, I believe it is essential to regularly examine my values to determine if they continue to serve me, particularly when interacting with others. Only then can I truly identify what is being called for in that moment.

It is important for me to be authentic and vulnerable with myself and others by acknowledging my own uncertainties during interactions, especially when I am unsure of others' motivations. Using curiosity to avoid making assumptions will support productive conversations. This does not require confessing or unloading my deepest personal truths but rather pausing to think before responding or taking stock after a situation to explore hidden truths (Brown, 2018). That said, I have discovered that my values do not need to remain constant and that these are shaped by external and internal influences. My values can shift and change over time as my positionality and worldview evolve.

Additionally, I discovered my genetic family heritage has had an impact on my identity as a leader. There is undoubtedly an impact because my parents relinquished their Scottish heritage, severed themselves from their roots and replanted themselves on Canadian soil. As such, I have a fractured view of what it means to be Scottish, hearing only musings from my parents about poverty, addictions, and sadness, yet an oppositional stance that we are fierce warriors, loyal, courageous, and defiant. Even with this distance, there is a kinship and connection to how these characteristics are ever present in my personality, and hence my inclination to try and create family-like structures around me.

Without firm roots, I misdirected my desires for family into my leadership practice—a desire for connection and belonging. I inappropriately projected this family view onto my colleagues, blurring the lines and creating tension due to unrealistic expectations. My personal attachment has often led to misinterpreting the intentions of others, which I then translate into feelings of disloyalty, betrayal, and personal attack.

Moving forward, I will not seek external validation from others to feel a sense of belonging, especially in the workplace. I will build safe and respectful working relationships with boundaries that create appropriate expectations for myself and others. I will seek to understand the needs of the team and cocreate guiding principles that will shape workplace culture and expectations.

Recommendation 2: Examine Positionality as a Woman with Fluid Characteristics

Accompanying song: “Brave” (Bareilles, 2013)

My positionality is rooted in my intersectionality, encompassing my personal identity and social identities as well as the societal views, beliefs, and constructs that shape them (Batliwala, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2000). My positionality is, therefore, neither static nor fixed, shifting as my intersecting identities evolve and as my positions and roles within society change. Consequently, I now understand the duality of reality as the interplay between internal power, the ability to construct, accept or reject perspectives, and the external power through which collective perceptions shape societal views (Batliwala, 2011).

Being born a female immediately placed me into a specific category within a colonialized, male-dominated society. The expectations placed upon me as a little girl were to align with the conventional norms; I was expected to like pink, play with Barbies, avoid getting dirty, and be quiet and obedient. These beliefs are embedded into women’s psyches, infiltrating values and defining women’s worth in society.

As in my childhood, my professional experiences mirrored my earlier interactions within male-dominated systems. This structure, designed by men for men, reinforces barriers to women’s success. Women must work harder, play harder, think smarter, act strategically, and outmaneuver, all while staying beautiful, calm, thin, polished, and perfect. The game is fixed.

Understanding my position, power, and privilege in society provided a mirror of self-reflection. It allowed a deeper understanding of the limitations and barriers imposed on me by others, yet it did not define me. This information gave me the rules of the game, helping me to develop strategies of engagement, techniques, tactics, and approaches to push the boundaries toward an equitable workplace for all.

That said, context plays a vital role in power dynamics. While it is true that my societal systems shift depending on who I am interacting with, the underlying structure of the society that I interact with is predominately, if not exclusively, rooted in male-centricity, masculinity, and male domination. These societal norms are often hidden, rendered invisible, unless those who are oppressed or those who are allies of the oppressed use their power, privilege, positions, and voices to disrupt these normative behaviours (Batliwala, 2011).

The androcentric corporate environment continues to perpetuate inequality, leaving women like me feeling stifled, dismissed, and incongruent, staring at the glass ceiling, knowing the way to slide around it may be at the cost of donning a false mask of masculinity. I have been one of those women, who lost my voice as a woman, who accepted complacent apathy to be liked and to preserve my leadership position, and, in doing so, I allowed a slow erosion of self until I felt powerless. As my perspective on equality strengthened and I demanded respect, I was strategically redirected onto the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005), placed into high-risk roles with empty promises and positioned as a scapegoat. Concerns were framed as “personality” and “inability,” rather than as issues rooted in senior leadership, organizational context, or situational factors.

Moving forward, I will not be jaded by my experiences but embrace these as lessons learned. I will be cautious about high-risk and high-reward opportunities and contemplate the motivations of others. I will not enter leadership roles with good-faith smiles and empty promises. I will seek clarity and confirm what success looks like and how I will be supported to be successful. I will appropriately document the agreement of success and refer to this often to ensure that both parties are held accountable.

As I make sense of feminism and feminist movements' influence on feminist leaders and my role in society, I am struck by the synergy of self-actualization and transcendence of me as an individual and

the waves of feminism. I plotted the waves of feminism against Maslow’s hierarchy (as cited in McLeod, 2025) to better understand the potential correlation and found a similar but not identical pathway between feminist-actualization of human equality and self-actualization of pursuit of a cause (Table 2). While this concept has not fully been explored, future research may provide insights into these parallels and the actualization toward human rights.

Table 3

Cross-Comparison of Waves of Feminism Against Maslow’s Hierarchy

Waves of Feminism	Maslow’s Hierarchy
Basic legal rights: land ownership	Basic needs
Access to education and employment	Safety needs
Right to vote	Sense of belonging
Sexual and reproductive rights	Self-Esteem
Women Equality	Self-actualization
Equality for all	Transcendence

Note. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is summarized from McLeod (2025).

By aligning an understanding the historical evolution feminism and the aim for equality for all with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (as cited in McLeod, 2025), I found it is more imperative than ever for me to harness my power of voice, power of choice, and power of freedom to continue breaking barriers, highlighting injustice, and disrupting old narratives. It will take clarity of mind, courageousness of heart, and congruency in actions to demonstrate the essence of feminist leadership.

Through the process, I realized I was confined by my own belief that leadership was associated with a particular role I was playing within an organization. As a woman in the world, I am taking my power back through mindset, voice, and actions. Like a tree lying dormant in the winter, I am coming back stronger, wiser, and more whole; not a process of conquest, but an integration and self-reclamation (Murdock, 1990). I am reconciling the mouse, the lion, the chameleon, and the fox, this split between the masculine and feminine energies within myself. I am reclaiming my authentic self and inner power, integrating my lessons to support my ever-evolving self and positionality in the world. I have always known who I am—confident, smart, empathetic, creative, courageous, caring, and strong. My efforts are

to be the woman I want to be by acting as such. This does not mean being performative; it means I must align my actions and words with my mindset. It is about putting in the work, identifying my vision, clarifying my goals, and then bringing those to life through congruency and effort.

Recommendation 3 Build Leadership Perspective Through Self Love

Accompanying song: “Unwritten” (Bedingfield, 2004)

I once heard that to love others, I must first love myself (Buscaglia, n.d.). I believe that leadership begins with me, leading myself and loving myself. How can I lead others effectively if I cannot lead myself? This means developing a deep sense of self-awareness of my values, motivations, desires, dreams, strengths, and weaknesses. Leadership begins with believing in myself. Knowing that I have all I need within me. I am not an island, but a destination of who I am becoming. I believe the only person I can truly lead is me.

In considering the myriads of leadership frameworks and models, the one that most aligns most with how I see the world of leadership is Kouzes and Posner’s (2017) five practices of exemplary leadership. This framework begins with modelling the way, a deep reflection of understanding values, and then moves into walking the talk by consistently and congruently living those values in mindset, action, and words (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

I will be patient and kind to myself, while pushing myself to be self-aware, to self-reflect, to self-respect, to self-nurture and to self-love. I will hold myself accountable by incorporating reflexivity into my practice approaching this without blame, shame, guilt, or fear, but with honesty, courage, and love. To continue evolving and building my own personal mastery, I will challenge myself, push my limits, and learn from my mistakes.

Personal Implications

I cannot unsee, unlearn, or unknow. This research journey has allowed me to examine myself in social systems such as profession, education, and politics. These warped views were holding me back from self-actualizing the feminist leader that I want to be in the world. In this section, I discuss the implications for me in education, my profession, and political spheres. I also discuss future implications regarding a society I am creating.

Gender

Intersectionality is the unique multiple intersecting characteristics, values, beliefs, ethnicity, race, age, sex, experiences, and gender which is one of the core, overlapping social identities (Gopaldas, 2013). The complexity is that gender is subject to scrutiny, influence, and impact of social identity mental models (Stets & Burke, 2000) and social systems which curate the social values including the conditions for who is deserving of power, access, authority and respect (Luhmann, 1995).

Gender, like other identities is subject to a binary view of masculine and feminine and yet the use of this word is still mischaracterized as sex in academia (Hetty van Emmerik et al., 2010). While there have been positive strides made over the past century to disrupt and deconstruct this view, patriarchy and colonialism are not only embedded into our cultural, political and societal mental models, they are the bedrock of these models (Davis, 2015). The impacts of a binary view, closely held by the scientific view of biologically male and female and the expected expressions that men are strong, powerful, leaders and women are weak, submissive followers, must be challenged (Smith, 2024). Through my own lived experience, however, it is difficult to resist and disrupt these mental models on my own. That said, there are a number of ways to protect me from the inevitability of judgement and value of self based on my gender.

I believe that being able to identify when my gender is being questioned is an important first step. By using left-column journaling (Creswell, 2013), I was able to understand and unpack my experience of a particular interaction, which was deepened through free writing (Borkin, 2014) to explore compounding interactions and experiences that may have influenced that moment. The beauty of this practice is that I can examine the situation free from judgement of others. It enabled me to experience my full range of emotions in a safe space. I was able to unpack my own views, experiences and values' impact on the interaction, identify which social identity (Stets & Burke, 2000) and social system (Luhmann, 1995) I was interacting within, and begin to deconstruct what I understand to be the crux of the issue. Using feedback participants further allowed me to check my biases and validate my views (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). That said, using reflective practice will be an imperative part of my practice moving forward to protect myself.

My gender is always present and will be a consideration for how people see me; therefore, if I find that a part of me is being questioned, I can pause, breath, and reflect. Whether its in the moment or after the fact, taking a moment to consider what other factors might be influencing the interaction will help me understand where I sit in relation to an interaction, as well as consider the other person or persons perspective, and the conditions placed upon the interaction through social expectations and systems.

When contemplating or studying gender and leadership, much of the exploration is based on Western society and within a few countries, therefore, more exploration is required in order to understand feminist leadership from a global perspective (Hetty van Emmerick et al., 2010). Upon reflection, suggesting that there is a global definition of feminist leadership would require the stripping of organizational, cultural, societal, political, and academic constructs, towards a humanist view. While this may be possible from a theoretic perspective, it may be more dangerous to presume a singular truth. Therefore, I believe that feminist leadership must be examined as it is experienced; within and through the social identities and social systems that impact and influence its definition.

Considering this, my positionality and perspective in a Western culture, working in a corporate setting sets the context. Gender will always shape my positionality in the world and how others see me. I believe as a feminist leader it is important that I invite people into conversation rather than calling them out, that I lean in with curiosity and kindness, rather than judgement and anger.

If I am to be the change I wish to see in the world, I must use each interaction as an opportunity to show up as the person I wish to be, using them as moments for personal growth and by extension societal growth.

Education

I have never been a proponent of acquiring knowledge in a classroom setting. Thirty years ago, I protested the structure and conformity of school; sitting in rows, listening to lectures, memorizing content, and regurgitating it left me feeling uninspired and irritated. When I think about acquiring knowledge, most of my education has come through knowledge sharing from others, storytelling, and lived experience. I have always pushed up against the paper-ceiling (Andrich & Domahidi, 2024) and academic achievements because they are constructed in a manner that continues to promote androcentrism and

colonial learning structures. My lived experiences reinforced my resistance to formalized education and my drive to demonstrate that a person can ascend the corporate ladder without having a degree. While I know that RRU recognizes lived and living experiences as equal to formalized academic achievement, it is still not broadly adopted by scholars and academics whose lives are built around the integrity of academia (Van den Brink, 2015).

Through this process, I have an increased sense of responsibility to academia in understanding that in order to disrupt and change patterns, I must understand how they came to be in the first place. I experienced this first-hand through the autoethnographic journey by tracing patterned behaviours back to their source; this enabled me to observe without judgement, reflect without shame, and heal without hurt.

Profession

As an employee with over 30 years of experience working in municipal and provincial government, I have cultivated a lifetime of personal and professional growth. My experience as a woman in these environments, while unique to me, does have some commonality with other women when I traced the feminist movement back over the past century. Long before women worked in factories and offices, they had endured and overcome a myriad of oppressions, yet women have persevered. I feel a renewed sense of pride for being a woman in the workplace, bringing positivity, kindness, and empathy into an often productivity- and results-driven environment.

These realizations have led me to deconstruct my previous belief that being a feminist leader was only about being a woman and fighting for equality; however, through this research, I have extended my view. I no longer believe leadership should be defined by traditional views of feminine or masculine defined characteristics, but by integrating the values called-upon for a leadership role. That said, I do not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. Leadership is as unique as a person's fingerprints. Everything about a leader's experience cannot be replicated.

Feminist leadership to me is defined by its principles and not by gender. Feminist leadership is about understanding the oppressive cultures and norms that were developed and upheld by those in power. It is about understanding my positionality within cultural, social, and political spaces and exercising agency through self-advocacy and allyship for marginalized voices. Oppression is not always

overt; power can be insidious when it is embedded in everyday life, shaping structures, systems, and people.

As a feminist leader it is my role to stand firm in myself, use my power and voice to call out oppressive behaviours and structures and call in those who can help collectively drive change. I alone cannot shift the tides, but I can inspire others to participate in making systemic and long-term changes. These conclusions have shaped my renewed self-view, generated an increased awareness of my positionality as a woman in the world, and revitalized my leadership perspective.

Political

In Canada, I live in one of the richest countries in the world, not only because of the country's natural resources and gross domestic product, but Canadian's access to healthcare, mental health, education, and the freedom of choice and voice. It is difficult to dissect the country's prosperity from its disturbing, haunting, traumatic impact of the colonization of Indigenous Peoples, yet there is hope that old regimes and ways of being in Canada are being dismantled. Over the past half a century, many reports and recommendations have been developed to eradicate Indigenous racism and colonial harms, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (2015) *Calls to Action*, the Government of BC's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (2019), United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), *Reclaiming Power and Place* (National Inquiry Into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019), and the Anti-Racism Data Act (2022). These reports bring light to the atrocities and crimes that impact Indigenous Peoples and communities, perpetuating harms that limit self-determination.

With the advancement of technology, I now consider myself a global citizen and leader. My views and opinions can extend beyond the immediate social systems in which I operate. I believe self-reflection is the key to self-awareness, and that self-awareness is the antidote to the erosion of democracy and social justice. I realize that change can only happen if leaders can reflect upon themselves, understanding what shapes them and their environment. It is not enough to be sitting on the water's edge peering into the surface to see my reflection. I can be a guiding light in the storm, a calming presence during tumultuous waters, or a disrupter when water is still and stagnant. Like society, a disrupted pond

will seek to calm the surface, bringing conformity to the environment, maintaining homeostasis. However, I will not be lulled back into complacency and conformity. I realize there will be a resistance to this change, both in myself and from others. People do not like when a piece of a puzzle that they have designed suddenly takes on a new form.

The change in me will not happen flawlessly or linearly, and it will take effort—conscious, deliberate effort. I may be small as a mouse, but I have the heart of a lion, and these changes in myself have already begun to take shape.

Actions With Future Implications – Fauxvember

Over the course of my research study, a fire began to ignite, and bursting with excitement, I couldn't wait to get started taking back my power and making waves. I embraced the unique qualities in myself, tapped into my hidden powers, and leveraged my social networks and platforms to take back my autonomy and agency.

In late August 2025, during my research study, I signed on to LinkedIn (n.d.), a professional networking platform, and began curating my social media footprint, updating my profile to showcase my personal and professional accomplishments. But that was just the beginning. In early September, I decided to develop mini-articles or vignettes to share my experiences, how my work experiences had impacted me and share what I was doing about it. All the posts were inspired by my lived experiences, but what brought them to the surface was the reflective practice I was undertaking during my studies. The journal writing, nature walks, and listening to music all inspired my internal dialogue, as I navigated through challenges, turmoil, sadness, frustration, and anger. I was motivated to share my challenges with others in the hope of inspiring my readers and followers to realize they are not alone. I also shared my positionality to ensure others understood the lens through which these articles or vignettes were written. My first post, "Witching Hour" (Perren, 2025), received over 500 impressions, skyrocketing to 967% over the previous day's view of my profile. Over the remainder of the study, I wrote six articles that received between 300 to 500 impressions. I felt inspired and powerful.

One of the articles I wrote, "Faux-vember," focused on my enjoyment of libations over the summer months, which transitioned into the fall and snowballed from light to moderate drinking.

Reflecting on the high-highs and low-lows I have experienced when it comes to mental, social, and physical health, I talked with my close coven of women who mirrored my sentiments. This inspired me to publicly share my own struggles of balancing joy with masking sadness. I wrote that article in early October knowing that I had a number of events throughout the month and so scheduled November as the month of sobriety. I have previously completed three, 3- to 4-month cleanses over the past 3 years, and, during those times, I turned to alternatives like bubbly, fake beers, or other nonalcoholic beverages. I wanted a name that was catchy and fun, so I played around with a few concepts, and I landed on *Fauxvember*, a combination of the word “faux,” borrowed from the French term for imitation, and the month that I began my own wellness journey. I removed the hyphen as it is a recommended naming convention to improve searchability. I sent invitations to women everywhere to join me in a sober month. My intention was to start a conversation about women’s health.

As this idea percolated, I realized that women’s wellness is not one-dimensional, so I began to evolve the concept to include an intersectionality wellness wheel for women, including their emotional/mental, physical, spiritual, intellectual, occupational, financial, environmental, and social health. I was bursting with excitement to organize this concept and get it out to the world, but I knew from years of experience that it is better to start small and grow steadily. I also considered how I would evolve myself and my career into the future. This was an opportunity to combine my own lived experiences and passions into a movement. I am proud to share that I have registered the organization and am now the CEO and Founder of Fauxvember Society Women’s Health. Additionally, I purchased the domain name fauxvember.com and have developed an initial website (Appendix J). My intention is to start with raising awareness of the dangers of alcohol and its impact on women’s overall health. It is intended to provide a safe, judgement-free space to encourage women to make healthier choices over the month of November, whether that be drinking a cup of tea, reaching for a faux beverage, or even minimizing alcohol consumption. Fauxvember membership is open to those who identify as a woman. This does not mean that the society will not expand its allyship; however, I want to acknowledge the unique social constructs that influence women’s alcohol use and consumption.

Fauxvember is a movement in reclaiming women's overall health and wellness in society. Understanding my evolving positionality as a woman and feminist leader in the world has empowered me to reclaim my agency and inner strength and share it with the world. My purpose is to connect with others through storytelling, helping to lift the veil of oppression and fostering empowerment through self-awareness, self-enlightenment, and self-actualization.

As I conclude my research, I realize that I am not defined by society, yet I am shaped by it and it by me. Growing in self-awareness informs me of my strengths and biases and how they influence my perspective. This understanding transforms my positionality and nurtures the evolution of my spirit as a woman in society, prompting a redefinition of my positionality, reshaping my intersectionality and a reinvention of myself from the inside out.

As a feminist leader and global citizen of the world, I have a responsibility to foster a world that is inclusive, diverse, equitable, empathetic, compassionate, and free from oppression and judgement. I want to help shape a society in which people are treated with respect, diversity is rejoiced, oppression is abolished and compassion and empathy ground our actions. How will I do this? One interaction at a time.

Collective Implications

At a time when women's human rights are being eroded, taking society back a half a century, and when gender rights are also under threat, there has never been a more imperative moment for feminist leadership (Mitchell, 2023). Feminist leadership principles offer the foundation for what I see as the fifth wave of feminism that focuses on the alignment of collective courage, healing, thinking, and action toward protecting and advancing human rights for all.

Western influence on fifth-wave feminism is shaped less by what makes each woman unique and more by shared experiences and solidarity (Mulvey, 2018). Indigenous cultures seek to reconnect people with nature and humanity, acknowledge and reconcile histories, heal and make peace in people's hearts, and build a future grounded in human dignity and social justice for future generations to come. It will be important to consider both decolonial futures and fifth-wave feminism as they both have much to offer (Nassiri-Ansari et al., 2025).

As I conducted research regarding women's positionality and the feminist movement, I was struck by how the common pursuit of women's rights transcended race, ethnicity, and language. Women's collective efforts have supported a steady social change over the past century. This led me to examine the role of collective action in accelerating these advancements. Within the past decade, the coronavirus pandemic provided a compelling case example as the entire world population was impacted, creating a significant and immediate change in social behaviour and collective efforts to find a cure. I believe there is incredible power when people unite across the world to work harmoniously against the unknown; given that women represent about half of the global population, it is also important to advocate for supports needed to advance women's equality.

Over the past half century, workplaces have experienced a significant developmental curve with increased diversity in workplaces, including gender and generation, mental health awareness, and social justice movements. I believe the underpinning of these advancements can be attributed to the principles of feminism (Batliwala, 2011; Crenshaw, 2015; hooks, 2000). As women, marginalized, and the oppressed begin to unite and their collective numbers grow, so too do their voices and their power. As supportive community grows, those in power, entrenched in old worldviews, cling desperately to their authority; therefore, being steadfast in the pursuit for equality requires collective dedication and commitment from women and allies alike around the world.

Countries previously part of the British Empire are now referred to as Commonwealth nations, those who align with a democratic society and have their own sovereignty, government, and political independence (Merchant & Rich, 2004). Global power should not be tied to one person or leader, as it is a concept, a set of principles, and a worldview. That said, while democratic values have been significantly upheld and respected in North America, recently the integrity of democracy is being challenged, as those in power manipulate elections, intimidate minorities, and take control of government, politics, and justice (Merchant & Rich, 2004). The collective implication is clear: sustaining progress requires coordinated, values-based leadership, supported by women and allies, across communities and institutions.

Future Inquiry

At the very beginning of my research, when meeting with my thesis supervisor I struggled with selecting a topic. She said, “You need to pick your grain of sand” (T. Southam, personal communication, April 10, 2025), to which my inclusive nature screamed, “What about the other grains of sand?”

I had no idea when I began my research journey that there would be such a vastness of literature and an endless dissection of concepts. With each book and article I read, each podcast I heard, and the music I listened to, a new concept or idea formed. I struggled to remain focused on my research topic, becoming inspired by the plethora of possible research studies. The intellectual and emotional challenges that emerged from research have ignited the researcher in me. I longed for more time to explore all of the interesting topics that emerged, but there simply was not enough.

I believe in order to help others one must first help themselves. This autoethnographic research improved my knowledge of self through literature and study, enhancing my ability to be a better leader and a citizen in the world. This has inspired me to create Fauxvember, thinking beyond formal leadership roles to create new pathways and partnerships to improve my life and the lives of those around me. As a woman leader in a human resource field within a government environment, I cannot help but think about the lack of awareness and impact around women’s overall health and how it impacts women as workers and leaders. Women have only been working in corporate environments with increased rights over the past century, and the impacts of colonization and patriarchy have only been acknowledged—not sufficiently changed. I would like to understand the impacts of corporate work on women’s physical and mental health through the stages of their lives, such as menstrual years, reproductive years and menopause.

As a middle-aged, white, cisgender female, I am personally in the midst of perimenopause. While Canadians have made progress regarding women’s health in workplaces by supporting maternity leave and special family leave for children’s or parents’ illnesses, women’s aging health needs remain unacknowledged. There has been some research conducted on perimenopause in the workplace, specifically focused on productivity loss (Angco, 2025). However, little research has been conducted on the implications of perimenopause or menopause symptoms on leadership practices and how this

impacts power dynamics and organizational or societal views. That said, I have observed a movement amongst women experiencing menopause through emerging books and online platforms, such as *Hags: The Demonization of Middle-Aged Women* (Smith, 2024), the *We Do Not Care Club* (Saunders, n.d.) supporting women in perimenopause, menopause, or post menopause, and *MenoRise* (McDonald, n.d.) focused on educating people about the impacts of menopause on leadership, life, and work. It is surprising that in the age of modern medicine the science of menopause remains grossly misunderstood. While I believe more research is needed on menopause and its impact on leaders, more research is also needed to understand women's experiences of hormonal change throughout their lives.

In academia, even the research on feminist leadership seems to have focused on the last century (Battiwala, 2011). Therefore, while these contributions continue to build, a more comprehensive study including a cross-section of women, spanning ages and cultures, needs to be conducted, including topics such as women's hormonal health as professionals and women's power in nature and natural healing.

Women have continued to build a mighty momentum, a wave of change, a tsunami of hope, love, empathy, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, and power, and through continued efforts in research, in social media, in literature, and in interactions, women can help shape the world to honour and respect all those who share it.

Considering community and global health, I believe people need to shift their minds to upstream education and health promotion to reduce the impact and need for acute care. I am a firm believer in alternative medical practices, known today as naturopathy, a multidimensional wellness practice that focuses on the healing power of nature by treating the whole person, identifying the cause of illness. Christian thinking bastardized the pureness of and access to the mind, body, spirit, and the land, by degrading those whose practices did not align with their plights to power and control (Zwissler, 2018). The movement from self-regulation was supplanted by colonial regulations. I believe undertaking more research on the role of alternative medicine in self-care plans might align with my feminist leadership practice. In an age when information lives in the palm of each person's hands, how can people improve communications to empower society to shift to healthier ways of being and a culture of self-care. That

said, I believe there needs to be additional research conducted on the impact of technology itself is impacting the overall health and well-being of humanity.

The coronavirus pandemic stopped the world in its tracks and gave people an opportunity to consider what is important to them collectively. Sadly, I feel that there was a profound lost opportunity, as the world did not reset; it simply reacted. As a human resource professional, I see the immediate and looming workforce dilemma presenting itself and how the colonial structures that have developed are no longer serving society. With the increases in economic global impacts of threatening tariffs and strained federal and provincial governments being asked to do more with less, workers are seeing efforts like streamlining or cutting programs and services, including reducing the workforce, yet people continue to scream that they do not have enough resources. Taken together, these dynamics reveal an increasing misalignment between resource constraints and public expectations.

I believe academia has a significant role to play in bringing together brilliant, diverse minds across fields and disciplines to examine these complex dynamic problems together, rather than each individual tackling an issue. With the privilege afforded to academics, scholars owe it to their communities to use their access to help solve global problems and invent new ways of working.

Thesis Summary and Conclusion

My thesis began with an inquiry into how social interactions shape my evolving positionality and feminist leadership philosophy and praxis. What I learned is that my personal reality and perceptions have been shaped by social, political, and historical structures. These societal systems were constructed and curated by historical views and perspectives. Taking a self-reflective journey has been a bit like looking up at the sky and seeing all the beautiful stars that have created magnificent patterns, yet the view is that of the past. Looking into my identity, I was able to trace the origins of my values, belonging, and agency within these systems marred by colonization, gender bias, persecution campaigns, and repressive social control.

As I deconstructed myself from childhood to womanhood, my reflection revealed patterns not visible to my naked eye; they could not be discovered by any one method alone. By using an autoethnographic research methodology, I was able to blend the analysis of self against social systems,

which illuminated a tension that I both contribute to and am shaped by the social systems that I engage with.

This work contributes to the academic conversation by demonstrating how autoethnography (Adams et al., 2021; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Sparkes, 2002; Tomkins, 2020) examines one's pursuit of personal mastery (Senge, 2006) and expands the methodological landscape by showing how reflexive inquiry (Carstensen-Egwoum, 2014; Day, 2012; Eriksen 2009; May & Perry, 2014) can expose the impacts of colonization, gender bias, and social norms embedded into social systems (Andersson et al., 2014; Checkland & Scholes, 1999; Daellenbach, 2001; B. D. Friedman & Allen, 2011; Kania et al., 2018; Luhmann, 1995; Stroh, 2015).

The arts-based methods of reflexivity coupled with storytelling (Au-Yong-Oliveria, 2020; Leavy, 2015, 2020; Simmons, 2019; Tversky & Marsh, 2000; Ward & Shortt, 2020) was the perfect blend that allowed for private self-discovery, self-analysis, and self-representation. These methods were not only a means to capture data and information but also a way to express my thoughts and experiences, challenge myself, and earnestly evaluate myself as though I were an outsider looking back through someone else's story.

Storytelling allowed me to organize my thoughts and using the heroine's journey (Murdock 1990, 2020; Nicholson, 2008), examine my feminist leadership perspectives by unpacking the leadership attributes associated with this philosophy, better understand the plight of women's suffrage and equality, and contemplate the expectations aligned with this leadership philosophy. As with the heroine's journey, I was able to understand the masculine and feminine characteristics of myself and reconstruct a practice that feels more authentic.

Further still, conducting a literature review helped to demystify old rhetoric and dusty truths. I found the deep dive into women's positionality and the feminist movement throughout history to be disturbing yet empowering. The blend of the research methodology and methods provided for a rich examination of self and exposed how personal mastery is ever evolving and inseparable from collective responsibility all people have toward each other and the systems in which they live. Through reciprocity, people mutually cocreate their internal world and the social world through words and actions.

By contextualizing my lived experiences within the broader societal systems, my thesis highlights how personal transformation cannot occur without understanding the systems all people are a part of. In order to understand self, researchers must examine the historical constructs that have shaped and built the social identity of today.

My exploration using Maslow's hierarchy (as cited in McLeod, 2025) against the waves of feminism (Delmar, 2018; Gökçen, 2021; Iannello, 2010; Mulvey, 2018; Munro, 2013; Rampton, 2015) may provide a framework for how these collectively influence feminist leadership (Batiwala, 2011; Gupta, 2016) in the 21st century. As I examine the global context of the degradation of women and gender rights to the south, I believe there is a need for a shared and collective activism in which people boldly and persistently stand unified against those who would oppress their identities. There is an awakening that the power within me as a feminist leader extends across all of the social systems that I interact with, and that my words, my actions, and my mindset that shape me, and the world around me.

The pursuit of personal mastery (Senge, 2006) through autoethnography has taken me on the journey of deep self-reflection, deconstruction, and renewal. I am no longer bound by the past, yet I am grateful for the precious gifts they have provided me.

I caution anyone entering into an autoethnography research inquiry against assuming the process will not change them. The journey is as deep and as meaningful as you wish it to be. Researchers who give themselves permission to take an earnest at their place in society, exploring inwards with love, honesty and hope, will find the transformation immeasurable, and the positive impact will ripple outward—a quiet magic that reshapes the world in powerful ways. I invite those who do not like the reflection in the mirror, take a look at where they stand, examine their position; change their views and they will change the world. Change begins within, and leadership begins with self-leadership.

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Appendix A: An Open Letter to My Bully

Accompanying song: "Defying Gravity" (Erivo featuring Grande, 2024)

Hi – remember me, the person that you thought you could place onto a glass cliff? Even after you pushed me, I still found the confidence within myself to keep going. I looked into the deepest part of myself to unpack what really happened. What I found was sad, frustrating and infuriating.

Over the course of my professional life, I have had the joy and exhilaration of being the 'it girl' – supported by powerful and important people who knew a thing or two about the corporate world. However, as I ascended and my knowledge grew, so did my confidence, and my voice. An interesting thing occurred. I began to 'threaten' other people. Not because I was aggressive or even assertive, but my curiosity unnerved people. My ability to ask deep questions, cut through corporate and bureaucratic broo-hah-hah, left some leaders feeling underprepared and exposed. It was not my intention, and yet my actions had consequences.

Those with power over, will and do use it to protect their positionality in the world. I understand why, and yet it does not mean I agree. Many leaders wear the mask of vulnerability, yet it is a veiled truth, revealing what appears to be authentic vulnerability but is actually calculated manipulation.

I also learned that over the years, my desire to please 'the leaders' left me incongruent, turning me into a vapid shell of myself. The once-confident, curious public servant became a fearful, insecure troglodyte. My once cheerful demeanour was replaced with anger . . . and then apathy.

I'm angry at the bully inside of me, the voice that allowed people to treat me poorly, make up stories and destroy my reputation. I allowed myself to be silenced. I allowed myself to be cornered. I allowed myself to be disrespected. Why? Because I thought that it would keep me safe. I thought it would keep me likable. I thought it would make me fit in. What it did was erode my self-esteem, my self-respect, and my self-worth. And where did it land me? A glass cliff – peering over the edge, knowing that any wrong move and the ceiling beneath my feet would crack and I would once again be dangling from the side of a cliff peering up through the glass ceiling.

While I won't pretend that I'm totally fine, I will say that moments like these expose the truth about ourselves and the truth about others. There is no blame here. There can't be. I am the one who allowed myself to fall for the false promises of a prosperous tomorrow if I just held on. I was the one who stood for nothing and fell for everything.

The haunting story of *Wicked*, recently recreated for the big screen, gives me a new perspective on my positionality and gives me hope that the message will plant the seeds of wisdom in a new generation coming into our workforce.

I've tried to "fit in" and now it's time to try defying gravity (Schwartz, 2024).

"Thanks for the wings" (*It's a wonderful life*, 1946, 2:06:30).

Signed,
Flying

Source

Capra, F. (Director). (1946). *It's a wonderful life* [Film] RKO Radio Pictures.

Schwartz, S. (Composer & Lyricist). (2024). *Defying gravity* [Radio edit; performed by C. Erivo & A. Grande]. On *Wicked: The soundtrack* [Album]. Republic Records & Verve Records.

Appendix B: Artificial Intelligence Transparency Statement**Declaration**

I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) to help brainstorm topics for the development of the intersectionality identity wheel (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1). I entered the following prompt: "What are the intersections to consider when developing an identity wheel." I then used the output as a starting point for generating ideas before creating the intersectional identity wheel topics.

I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Word spelling and grammar function to assist with language editing and clarity. I reviewed, revised, and take full responsibility for the content, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Appendix C: Invitation Letter

Dear Participant,

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project I am conducting as a part of my Master of Arts Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University.

The purpose of my research is to understand how, through a cyclical and self-reflective practice, my own leadership approach might best support how I challenge my perceptions of feminist leadership to strengthen my leadership philosophy and praxis.

I have identified you as a prospective feedback participant because we have developed a baseline reciprocal relationship, grounded in trust and mutual respect for each other, and a practice of enriching conversations regarding our own leadership practices. This phase of my research project will consist of three one-hour virtual discussions every two weeks for a period of nine weeks via MS Teams, followed by a one-time one-hour virtual discussion to review the initial data analysis and draft recommendations, for a total of four meetings over a two-month period.

Additionally, I would like to construct a podcast that captures a reenactment of my interactions, demonstrating how these have shaped my evolving positionality. It is my intention to provide a script to have these recorded. Your participation in one or more of these would be welcomed, however, if you do not wish to participate, please let me know and I can create a solo podcast capturing the same content.

The attached document (Information Letter) contains further information about the research and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please be aware that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary.

If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw without prejudice at any time up to the start of the first feedback participant meeting, after which the withdrawal of your contributions may not be possible as your ideas will have influenced me and the themes emerging from the research process. However, I will endeavour to remove any direct quotes from you in my own writing. If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to this request. Your decision not to participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect our relationship in any way.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

Should you accept this invitation to serve as a feedback participant, it is important that you will be able to give me forthright and clear feedback.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please email me or contact me at [telephone number].

Sincerely,
Michelle Perren

Appendix D: Information Letter

Calling in a feminist leadership approach to deconstruct and rethink power dynamics.

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Michelle Perren, and this research project is part of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership degree at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting Tammy Pozzobon. MAladership, School of Leadership Studies: [email address].

Through this study, I am endeavouring to first-person methodology a qualitative self-reflective practice (Marshall, 2001), autoethnography, a qualitative self-reflective practice of self and systems (Holman Jones et al., 2013), and feminist participatory action-oriented, a qualitative feminist reflective practice to impact social change (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Using this mixed methodology I will explore “How might I challenge my perceptions of feminist leadership to strengthen my leadership philosophy and praxis.”

Using first-person action research as my methodology, I plan to engage a feedback participant(s) so as to mitigate my unconscious biases and broaden my perspectives and understandings of my own experiences and actions. I plan to meet virtually with my feedback participant for three, one-hour virtual

discussions using MS Teams over a period of nine weeks, where I will bring forward my preliminary analyses of my personal data (e.g., my journaling). I may also share any complex issues I have faced in my leadership practice for their consideration and their suggestions for future actions I might take via feedforward. At the end of the nine-week period, I will schedule one final one-hour virtual discussion for

feedback on my draft findings, for a total of four one-hour virtual group discussions over a period of two months.

This research will benefit me in enhancing my leadership practice and achieving a requirement for my Master of Arts in Leadership program. You may also benefit from this research whereby insights into your own leadership practice might be achieved through dialogue with me.

I anticipate there will be minimal risk to the participants in this study. Participants will not be pressured to share specifics that they do not wish or feel comfortable to share. Data will be collective in nature and will not represent one person’s specific thoughts or contributions.

If you feel that there are any risks to you in participating in the research, you are welcome to withdraw from the study. Please simply let me know of your decision. I will work to protect your privacy throughout this study. All information collected will be maintained in confidence, identified in my final reply only by Feedback Participant #1 (#2).

Recordings will be kept on my password protected computer. Hard copies of the interview notes and transcripts will be stored in my home office, locked in my filing cabinet that only I have access to; electronic copies of files will be kept on a secure network that is password protected. Information will be recorded in handwritten format or audio recorded and, where appropriate, summarized, in anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless a specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Raw data gathered from feedback participants will be kept until September 2026, at which time hard copies will be shredded, and electronic and audio files will be deleted.

In addition to submitting a final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Master of Arts in Leadership degree, I may also share these research findings with my employer, or reference this publication in future articles, books, podcasts or produced reference documents, guidelines or reports.

Should you choose to withdraw from the study, I will delete transcripts of our previous conversations. Data collected in our bi-weekly discussions is more difficult to delete, especially as your ideas may have already influenced my thinking and action. However, I will endeavour not to quote your specific ideas and feedback in my final report.

You are not required to participate in this research project. Your decision not to participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect our relationship in any way.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

By replying directly to the e-mail request for participation you indicate that you have read and understand the information above and give your free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Please keep a copy of this information letter for your records.

Sincerely,
Michelle Perren

Appendix E: Consent Form

By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study.

Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project, that you agree the feedback participant virtual discussions may be audio-video recorded, and that the data you contribute will be used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, etc.).

- I consent to the use of material gained through the feedback participant virtual conversations being used in this study
- I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the feedback participant virtual conversations be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed.
- I commit to respect the confidential nature of the feedback participant virtual conversations by not sharing identifying information about the researcher.
- I commit to respect the confidential nature of the feedback participant virtual conversations by not sharing identifying information about the other feedback participants.
- I consent to the use of material I have contributed being used in any scholarly article, community or conference presentations, and/or other knowledge products resulting from this study.

First & Last Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: Left Column & Free Writing Template

REFLECTION:

What is coming up for me right now?
What assumptions have I made?
What bias may have come into play during this interaction?
What would I like to do differently?
What is a take/away or something I learned about myself or others in this interaction?

INTERACTION:

Describe the interaction.



FREE WRITING

What part of my intersectionality is this aligned most with?
What social system did this experience occur in?
How might my positionality have impacted or influenced the situation?
What other situations have I experienced like this previously?
 How did I respond in those interactions?
 Do I have unresolved issues?
 What might I need to let go of?

PRACTICE

Knowing what I know now through my reflections, what might that interaction look like now? How would it feel? How could that dialogue have gone differently?

Appendix G: Participant Session Agenda

Date:

Feedback Participant#:

Discussion	Time
Territorial Acknowledgement & Connection	5 mins
Journaling reflections	20 mins
<p>Feedback Questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In listening to my description of my draft findings, what questions emerge for you that might help broaden my perspective? 2. Based on our discussion(s) what do you feel I may need to let go of in my leadership practice, and where might I need to place more attention/intention? 3. Have you encountered anything similar in your own leadership practice? If so, what worked well in those situations and/or what learnings might you be able to share with me? 4. Is there anything else you would like to share? 	
Summary and Next Steps	5 mins

Appendix H: Playlist to Listen to Alongside Reading This Thesis

Full Accompanying Playlist, Spotify: [Thesis](#)

Chapter 4: Accompanying Playlist

1. Scotland the Brave
2. The Mouse
3. If I Only Had a Brain
4. Pretty Girl
5. Fire and Ice
6. We're Going to Be Friends
7. Get Up, Stand Up
8. The Man
9. Everybody Supports Women
10. Hunter's Moon
11. Queen of Ice
12. Take Me Away
13. Push
14. Underdog
15. Stop Thinking So Much
16. Slow Burn
17. Army of Me
18. Man's World
19. Fight Song
20. Everything at Once
21. It's Amazing
22. Black to Gold

Chapter 5: Accompanying Playlist

1. I'm Not Scared
2. Brave
3. Unwritten

Appendix A: Accompanying Playlist

1. Defying Gravity

Appendix I: Helpful Tips for First Time Autoethnographic Researcher

The immersive depth of self-exploration can become indeed daunting and unwieldy and in selecting an autoethnographic research methodology, I was able to explore my lived experiences focusing on social interactions within societal systems from an “insider’s perspective” (Short, 1998). An insider perspective, in this study, can be defined as my “internal experiences” including the “motivations, intentions, feelings, judgments, and attributions that drive” me (Short, 1998, p. 38).

If you are interested in examining who you are, why you do the things you do, how the world sees you, how the world has shaped you, and how all of these construct your leadership philosophy and practice, then I would invite you to conduct your own autoethnographic research study. The six recommendations I would offer:

1. Understand your worldview
2. Create a self-care plan
3. Let the process unfold organically
4. Get real
5. Have a well-structured plan for self-analysis
6. Tell your story

Understand your worldview

The complex nature of an autoethnographic research study requires an imperative look at your foundational views of ontology and epistemology, as they set the stage for the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Therefore, I recommend that you begin by examining what your belief structures are about reality. What has constructed your worldview and how you know what you know. This will foundationally shape how you conduct your research.

In reflecting on systems-thinking and the dynamic interplay of self and others, I do not believe that I am only a condition of my environment or a subject of others, rather that I influence and impact the world around me. My constructivist ontological view is subjective and a construct of self and society, and my epistemological perspective can be defined as how I know what I know (Coleman, 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 2015).

While there is significant literature to suggest that autoethnography is self-indulgent, subjective, and non-transferrable to other researchers, these claims fail to recognize the dynamic complexity of the human condition (Andersson et al., 2014). Rooted in general systems theory, systems-thinking is a discipline that examines the dynamic interplay between the system itself, its component parts, and the interaction between them (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems-thinking is an axiom defining that every interaction within the system influences and is influenced by the system (Senge, 2006). Systems-thinking has distinctive techniques for examination which include feedback, or cause and effect, and feedback loops or symbiosis, which explores the interconnectedness or relationships, and reinforcing loops which explore repeating patterns (Senge, 2006).

Create a self-care plan

I recommend that before engaging in the study, that you build a self-care plan that outlines how you will care for yourself during the process (Tomkins, 2020). It can be emotional, stressful, and difficult to look inwards confronting the past and it may unearth past traumas, old wounds, shame, blame, guilt, and hurt. It is important to approach yourself with self-compassion; the same kindness and patience that you would with someone else understanding a self-reflective journey (Hägglund et al., 2024). It will take courage to look at a situation, without judgement, shame, or blame. It will take honesty to examine the raw data and facts without adding your biases or previous patterns of self-protection. Yet, I believe the process of self-reflection can lead to the biggest moments of growth, setting us free from what holds us back.

My self-care plan included nature walks, small breaks away from the computer to grab tea, talking with my feedback participants, my husband, or trusted friends. I also gave myself permission to ask for the time needed away from work to really immerse myself in this experience and care for myself. I would recommend that if you can, take time away to process your study, because it can become overwhelming and stressful.

Let the process unfold organically

Don't try and force the concepts or even align your reflections with the inquiry question and sub questions as they may stifle your exploration. Understand that the process will absolutely be messy and perhaps unclear at first, and that's ok. In fact, it's exactly how it should be. The most valuable moments of growth are often found in the places you least expected.

Once I had chosen an autoethnographic research methodology, I selected a qualitative research method of reflexivity and an arts-based approach for self-exploration. Reflexivity is the practice of exploring your own thoughts, feelings, beliefs and social positioning and understanding how these influences show up in the world (May & Perry, 2014).

Consequently, I used a reflective practice method of journaling to capture present-day interactions and deepen my experience through left-column journaling and free writing journaling. I needed to self-scrutinize, taking stock and disrupting my psyche. This self-expression allowed me to interrupt my way of operating, revisiting those well-worn pathways of thinking and knowing (Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2020). This practice aligns with Kolb's (2014) learning cycle, beginning with what I believe to be true about myself, taking a step back and reflecting on my view of self through journaling, reaching self-awareness generating new concepts of self, and then enacting or embedding my learnings into my new self-view.

This study stripped me down to the deepest sense of self and had me questioning the essence of life itself, who I am, what I believe, and how influenced my view of self has been because of others, societal structures, and cultural norms.

Get real

Once you've laid out your thoughts through the study, you will need to examine the information through an insider and outside lens (Bayeck, 2022). As an insider, dive deeply into examining the hidden corners of yourself without shame, guilt, or judgement (Short, 1998). Really, get real. Then, take yourself outside of the experiences and look at the experience as if you were a trusted friend providing someone else with advice or input (Short, 1998).

What I was not expecting throughout this process is that while I had started with a specific research question and sub-questions, that the organic nature of the reflective process allowed for a deeper more personal exploration and dive into myself. I had expected that the focus would be concentrated around social interactions as a feminist leader in my current workplace, however, with each journal entry, the concepts revealed the findings were more about me as a person in the world. How I behave and act, how I think and view situations, have all been developed through social interactions with the world around me rather (Stets & Burke, 2000). This realization was a bit jarring, after all, I had been a self-proclaimed authentic woman, and while my sentiments were true, I was not sure if I could define who and what the authentic me was. This generated an examination of my values that emerged through the study, seeking to understand their inception, reinforcement, and lingering presence on present day social interactions.

From there, I explored myself as a woman, unpacking the historical, cultural and oppressive norms that I've experienced throughout my life, highlighting where I may have been complacent, contributing or conforming to these narratives and where I found myself defying or rebelling against oppressive constructs. Looking at these two areas, I was able to understand that the building blocks of my feminist leadership philosophy and practice had been built through my values and my lived experiences.

Check yourself.

It is easy to get caught up in our personal views when sense-making (Colville et al., 2016). The process of self-discovery and self-reflection can have us tripping on past beliefs and stumbling upon new discoveries of self, and yet these are only being examined through our own lens. While these views and ideas are valid to us, we may not be aware of the biases we hold, or the perspectives we have yet to consider when creating our new realities (Shenton, 2004). To bring credibility to your findings, I recommend testing your ideas with trusted feedback participants to validate or invalidate your findings by infusing others' views and perspectives (Day, 2012).

Etmanski et al. (2002) shared that selecting the appropriate feedback participants is crucial if you are to feel comfortable revealing and sharing deeply personal findings, as they will hold space for you to share your ideas without judgement yet with honesty, and are imperative in providing a balanced view. Etmanski et al. (2022) continued that feedback participants can be a mirror that encourages us to engage in deeper reflection, asking for us to explore if we are still hiding behind old constructs, reliving old stories and narratives, or spouting entrenched ways of thinking. Otherwise, we may inadvertently categorize ourselves with a warped view and in doing so starve ourselves from reconstructing the story allowing for a more accurate self-reflection, leading to increased self-awareness (Day, 2012).

I would also recommend that you include feedback participants throughout the life cycle of your research to provide a more robust view of the whole experience.

Have a well-structured plan for self-analysis

While you want the process to be organic, allowing you to get real, it's important to recognize that in the end, you will need to examine and analyze all of your findings in a methodical way. Therefore, I recommend that you have a solid plan for how you collect and analyze your data.

I used an arts-based method to capture and present my findings which I found organic and easy to complete; however, I found the analysis to be the most difficult component of the study. I found it challenging to conceptually dissect or separate myself into component parts. While I had identified I would collect and depict my social interactions through stories or vignettes, I also claimed that I would use an axial coding method against my Intersectionality Identity Wheel (Figure 1), and that my reflective journaling findings would be triangulated by the use of feedback participants.

I found that using axial coding, which is a qualitative method in research used to organize and connect categories emerging without a set framework, should not be restricted against a framework. That said, while I used my Intersectionality Identity Wheel to identify which lens a particular journal entry represented, I leaned into the true intention of axial coding.

I began by organizing my entries chronologically by a timeline: childhood, adolescence, young adult, maturing adult. I was then able to search for common words or concepts that I had used to define myself or others' view of me, and trace those to a specific moment in time where that was first introduced and where it has been reinforced. Identifying patterns, themes and concepts became more apparent, and I was able to then validate and challenge these views.

Tell your story

I chose to make sense of my data and to present it to others through a storytelling method (Hyvärinen, 2008). I began to organize journal entries or vignettes into a chronology of my life and found that there was a natural progression of self-development through the ages and stages of my personal and professional life. As such, I structured my themes of my thesis to mirror my heroine's developmental arc, from childhood values and identity through the different stages of my professional journey within societal systems. Woven throughout are the influences of gender and societal expectations, which have shaped who I am, how I have come to lead, and its influence on my feminist leadership philosophy.

My stories are mine and are told through my lens. In reliving those stories, I was able to analyze or experience these from both an insider and outsider perspective and this really allowed me to be more subjective about how I experienced certain interactions. I was able to identify habits or patterns that were initiated through a different lived experience and projected on to another. When stripping away the past traumas, beliefs, or views, I was able to more objectively analyze the specific situation, understanding my deepest motivations and views and reconstructing these interactions with a new perspective.

It interesting that in forth wave feminism, or the “call out” culture, we are quick to reflect on past social narratives, placing our existing societal views onto them, and denouncing the inappropriateness, injustices, and inequalities, yet it is an injustice and unfair application to project our evolutionary views to our historical ones (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). The reason they are no longer valid is because we have grown as a society. We have discovered the wrongs of our past and a new way of being. That said, I recommend that you allow yourself to challenge your stories by understanding that your new views do not invalidate your past experiences, but rather you can acknowledge them, learn from them, and reshape them, to align with your new understanding of self (Marsh & Tversky, 2004).

I recommend that you embrace your story as you cannot get it wrong. Your lived and living experiences are uniquely yours. You may have similar ideas, views, and beliefs of others, yet your intersectionality, positionality and worldview are entirely unique. The way that you capture your experience, how you make sense of it and how you share your story are irreplicable. Your genetic experience cannot be replicated, and yet, your experiences, views and beliefs help shape our societal constructs and contribute to our academic literature. We are a mirror and reflection of self and the world within and around us.

#TrusttheProcess#TrustYourself

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Appendix J: Fauxvember Society Women’s Health Website

Fauxvember.com
Email: msperrren@fauxvember.com

[Home](#)
[Events](#)
[Blog](#)

Fauxvember Society

Prioritizing women's health.
Designed by women for women.

Welcome

As a wife, a mother to two grown children, and a proud auntie, great auntie, sister, and friend, I understand deeply the pressures women carry—how family, career, community, and expectation can quietly outweigh our own care.

These experiences have shaped my passion for reclaiming my own health, one day at a time. There are moments when I'm aligned with myself and there are days when I'm not - and that's ok. Health and wellness is a journey - progress not perfection right?

That said, my aim is to bring together my 52 years of lived experience and my belief in the power of community to create a space where women can reconnect with themselves, restore balance, and feel supported in every chapter of life.

Fauxvember 2026 is right around the corner and I NEED YOUR HELP in making the inaugural kick-off the memorable and accessible to women everywhere. If you are interested in helping launch this important initiative, please email msperrren@fauxvember.com to participate in an upcoming workshop session.



Founder & CEO

Our Purpose

Fauxvember is a women-led community created by women to support women's health and wellness. It offers a safe, supportive space where women can explore what wellbeing means to them—at their own pace and on their own terms.

Each November, **Fauxvember** invites participants to raise awareness about the potential health risks of alcohol by choosing to abstain or reduce their alcohol consumption for the month. This initiative encourages reflection on personal habits while promoting informed and healthier lifestyle choices.

While November serves as a focal point for awareness and participation, **Fauxvember** supports women's wellness throughout the entire year. The community provides accessible resources—including blogs, podcasts, events, and conversations—designed to support women's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.

By fostering connection, sharing experiences, and providing trusted information, **Fauxvember** empowers women to make informed decisions about alcohol, health, and overall wellness.

How it Started

The Fauxvember Society Women's Health concept emerged during my pursuit of my Master of Arts in Leadership. During the self-reflection process I realized that I was not managing stress well - turning to that liquid gold (wine) to distract myself.

I've experienced the high-high and low-lows of my own health and wellness, and I have always wanted to create a safe space for women, like me, who want to find balance. Women like me, who are struggling, or who have struggled with regulating alcohol consumption.

Fauxvember is about reflecting on the beauties and realities of being a woman, and supporting each other to make mindful, healthy choices.




FOR WOMEN, by Katherine Hanlon via UNSPLASH

"Women carry the world forward – in love, in community, and in every place where purpose meets possibility"
— ChatGPT (originally written for user prompt, 2025).

Coming 2026 Events

UNDER CONSTRUCTION



Acknowledgement
I humbly acknowledge the I work and live on the lands of the Lekwungen-speaking people, known today as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, as an uninvited guest and settler. In addition, I respectfully acknowledge my positionality as a white, cisgender, female, and that my posts reflect my own world view and are not intended to speak on behalf of others.

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