

**EMBODIED LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE MAT: INTEGRATING THE BODY  
WITH LEADERSHIP PRACTICE**

A Thesis

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Embodiment is not a commonly studied topic in the communication discipline as most scholarship has rather focused on discursivity. Despite multiple calls to take up this area of research, still very little exists; even studies of materialism often overlook the body. This project is premised on the belief that all communicative processes are embodied and particularly focuses on the practice and process of leadership. With the goal of furthering conceptualizations of a embodied leadership, this project uses the inherently embodied practice of modern postural yoga as its site for study. Operating from an interpretive paradigm, this project seeks to answer two research questions: (a) How is leadership practiced in yoga studios, investigated through complete participant observation, and (b) How does the embodied practice of modern postural yoga transfer to leadership experiences outside of the yogic practice, investigated through semi-structured interviews with yoga practitioners who hold leadership positions in professional contexts. Thematic analyses of each data set paint a picture of yoga instructors and interview participants as learning leaders who are dedicated to self-empowerment and the empowerment of their followers. Through the comparison of data sets and drawing from current communication literature, five key discussion points were drawn from this study. This study furthers conceptualizations of embodied leadership as a learning process that involves empowerment of the self and others as the two parties co-create value and meaning in their practices, offering powerful insights into future theory and practice.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Eyes closed, palms up, beads of sweat glistened on my forehead, nose, and chest. The instructor recommended meditating on a mantra to maintain focus on our breath. Nostrils and chest expanding, I wracked my brain for a “mantra”—what does that mean anyway? Chest falling, air leaving my body, I needed to think of one quickly. After a few confused breaths, it came to me—a quote I had come across long ago as it floated in the abyss of the internet, probably placed there, on Facebook, by an angsty teenager at my high school.

It was a quote by C.S. Lewis. Nostrils and chest expanding, I recited in my head “You do not have a soul,” chest falling, air leaving, “you are a soul.” Nostrils and chest expanding, “You have a body.” As I repeated these three lines in my head, I began to feel a bit angsty myself—if this body is merely something that I have, then who am I? How do I know my soul? When you walk up to someone, you shake their hand, and speak using your mouth, tongue, lungs; others recognize you because of your face, hair, the clothes you wear. If we are not bodies but souls, why do we identify ourselves in terms of our bodies? I lay there, in corpse pose, but how much of this corpse defined who I was? After all, my body was an axis of experience—allowing me to feel the hug of my Lululemon pants, to hear the gentle hammering of my heart as blood pulsed through my shoulders, around my elbows, and into my fingertips.

Who was I? Was I the external body that could feel, hear, taste, touch, and see? Was I the internal body that processed food and oxygen, produced blood? How were these bodily experiences tied to my mind—the brain is a bodily organ too after all. And then what about what Lewis said, what about my soul? Who was I? And if I did not know who I was, then who was that organic heat emanating mass laying five feet away from me? How could I interact with that person truly, with their body, mind, and soul? After these contemplations, I left yoga practice in a bit of an existential panic. Who are we?

As a communication student, I was not only interested in privately philosophizing about humanity's being but I also wondered just how my perception of myself as a body had come into being, and why the conception of myself as a soul had sent me into such a tailspin. Inspired by this, and many other, embodied experiences "on the mat," I have come to wonder just how yogic practice changes the way people think, speak, act, and lead.

Current communication scholarship regarding the body is scant; bodies have been largely ignored in communication accounts (for exceptions see: D'Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2010; LeBesco, 2006; Shugart, 2010; Sloop, 2012). Those studies that do explore embodiment tend to reduce the body to independent variables, singling out as the focus of study particular bodily characteristics that influence other dependent variables. This new turn in the discipline warrants further attention because issues of discourse (what is typically investigated in communication scholarship) and embodiment



mutually define one another. Therefore, studies of the body are the second, and vital half to understanding interaction and experience in the social world—a half that until this point has been largely under-studied. Embodiment is particularly important to consider in regards to leadership because many of the mechanisms through which we lead are learned through embodied experience and practice. Therefore, a site of embodied practice was chosen as the starting point for this study: modern postural yoga. With the number of yoga practitioners in the United States on the rise, this seems to be fertile ground for investigating the implications of embodied practices on the social world.

Specifically, this thesis explores how the embodied practice of modern postural yoga is being translated or applied to practices of leadership outside of yogic practice in order to further develop conceptualizations of embodied leadership. Through the exploration of issues of embodiment and embodied leadership from a communication perspective, I hope to further scholarship of the body in the communication discipline as well as add to a growing literature regarding modern postural yoga, its effects on individuals, and its effects on the social world in which it is embedded and undoubtedly reflects.

### **Embodied Leadership in Communities of Practice**

This review is based on the assumption that both leadership and modern postural yoga can be viewed as practices. From a practice perspective, both of these phenomena are viewed as using doings and sayings to create understandings, rules, and structures, unfolding over time and space (Schatzki, 1996) to achieve a sense of being (Bjørkeng,

Clegg, and Pitsis, 2009). Furthermore, our embodiedness in such practices is inevitable yet rarely acknowledged in the communication discipline. Therefore, this combination of viewing leadership and modern postural yoga from both practice and embodied perspectives provide a relatively unexplored viewpoint, further developing communication literature in each area. It is likely that issues of spirituality are to surface throughout this investigation because of the practice's links to Buddhism and emphasis on connecting to the divine. Rooted in transformational and charismatic leadership, spiritual leadership and "leading beautifully" merit exploration.

### *Leadership as practice*

Leadership, while a prolific topic of communication scholarship, is an elusive concept, with as many definitions as there are scholars (Fairhurst, 2007). However, Fairhurst (2007) asserts that the skills of leadership are the skills of organizing; organizations are in a constant state of becoming and leadership is all about making that process happen. In addition to this discursive approach to leadership practice, another promising concept is developing in communication scholarship known as the embodied approach to leadership. Here, leaders are viewed as learners—gaining the skills for leadership through embodied experiences and practices (Hamill, 2011). The conceptualization that most wholly encapsulates what leadership means for the purposes of this project comes from Barge and Fairhurst (2008). Rooted in a discursive approach and beginning to acknowledge the embodied approach, their definition stems from what they call a systemic constructionist viewpoint. Leadership is conceptualized as "a co-created, performative, attributional, and contextual process where the ideas articulated in

talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 227). The two primary approaches to leadership practice, discursive and embodied, are further explicated below.

### **Discursive Practice**

Fairhurst (2007) explains that communication scholars are increasingly using a discursive approach to engage with the connections between communication and leadership. This view of leadership is outside of mainstream leadership psychology, focusing on how leadership is brought about in discourse—both the talk and text that occurs in everyday life as well as the larger worldviews or perspectives that are informed by talk and text (Putnam, Grant, Michelson, & Cutcher, 2005). Language use and its performing role are seen as central to organizing. Another facet of the emphasis on discourse is the attention paid to interactional processes where relational patterns are co-defined. Discursive leadership approaches reject the idea that there is one superior way to lead based on the essence of the leader or context (Fairhurst, 2007), instead viewing leadership as a process involving many intertwined components. According to Barge, in Fairhurst’s (2007) book

A discursive approach recognizes that a variety of Discourses circulate within societies, organizations, and groups—each with a particular moral logic that creates opportunities and constraints for action—and that these different Discourses intersect in unique ways at particular moments, creating a distinctive discursive constellation that constitutes the context for leadership. (Fairhurst, 2007, p. 184)

Leadership, as Barge explains, is a reflexive activity involving communication, action, meaning, and context (Fairhurst, 2007). Operating within this discursive framework of leadership, there are a multitude of approaches to begin to study this phenomenon.

### *Approaches & views on leadership*

Grint (2010) gives a basic overview of the various approaches to leadership studies. As he notes, typically leaders have been studied based on one of four assumptions. The first assumption is that leadership is defined based on the person—who they are. Another common assumption is that leadership is based on process, or how a leader constructs everyday practices. The third assumption is that leaders are defined by their position, or where they operate within their organizational hierarchy. Lastly, leadership can be assumed to be determined by the results and achievements of those holding leadership positions, for without results, there is no need for leadership. Within these assumptions, the variations of leadership further diversify when considering whether approaches to leadership are behaviorally based, employee-centered, or contingent upon context.

One thing that pervades all types, approaches, and contexts of leadership is that leaders always have followers. Grint (2010) therefore suggests that the simplest definition of leadership is having followers. This is consistent with Barge and Fairhurst's (2008) conceptualization of leadership which explains that when one finds themselves in a leadership position, it is their responsibility to develop ways for others, their followers, to connect meaningfully and “move forward with purpose” (p. 235). It is important to

emphasize that from this conceptualization, leadership is “a social activity in which persons-in-conversation, action, meaning, and context are dynamically interrelated” (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 228). In this sense then, all actors are leaders *and* followers depending on the context—we are all always seeking to make connections and move forward. That process is usually facilitated by someone that, according to this conceptualization, could be labeled a leader. After all, “what counts as leadership is highly contextualized and dynamic” (Barge & Fairhurst, p. 232). Some approaches tend to emphasize followers more than others. Employee-oriented approaches, for example, emphasize followers by viewing employees as valuable resources (Grint, 2010). From this perspective it is imperative to think of followers as independent and impressionable people; Fairhurst (2007) notes that human identities are tied to discursive representations and thus, identities of subjects, followers, can be contingent upon the identity regulation of those in leadership roles.

### **Embodied Practice**

Regardless of who we are and what we do, one thing that unites people as human beings is the fact that all of our experiences take place within and through our living, moving, acting, bodies. In this way, we are all embodied subjects who know and experience our everyday lives and socially constructed world through bodily perception (Haynes, 2012, p. 493). Embodiment, however, is rarely an emphasized topic of discussion for communication’s leadership scholars. Fairhurst (2007), in her book on discursive leadership, mentions materiality and hints at the importance of considering the body, but does not fully develop such ideas. This inchoate topic of discussion in

communication scholarship challenges our dominant perspectives, which tends to focus on language and symbolism (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007) and perhaps even begins to address Cheney's (2000) claim that organizational communication research does not contain as multidimensional of viewpoints as we would like to assume. Through the investigation of issues of embodiment, we can begin to cure what Wittgenstein called the sickness of our time by fully embracing wonder about the everyday experience (Shotter, 2010b) by asking questions about being an embodied being.

Scholars in social sciences have begun to note that research has largely neglected studies of the body. Shotter (2010b) finds this especially troubling since our expressive-responsive bodies' chiasmic nature is the glue that holds together all relationships. In particular, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) explicate the deficiencies of communication scholarship pertaining to the body and embodiment by proposing our typical anti-materialistic bent as a form of self-preservation. Communication scholarship dedicated itself to the symbolic through "discoursism," which had been largely undervalued in social and philosophical sciences (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). The discursive turn not only facilitated the communication discipline adopting this focus but was also a time of shifting definitions regarding the "material" (Cloud, 1994). During this time, the term materialist transformed from its original meaning in the Marxist sense, referring to socio-economic production and distribution, to a poststructural or postmodern view that discourse *is* material reality, reflecting a broader shift in thought regarding power and truth (Cloud, 1994). Due to this emphasis on discourse, the body of communication scholarship is now facing deficits in research focused on materialism (Cheney &

Ashcraft, 2007). Even those communication scholars who have taken up materialist endeavors tend to focus on technical, economic, institutional, and physical factors behind organizational identities and goals, without mention of the body (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Ashcraft et al. (2009) explain that bodies are not only material, but they actually “reject the say of symbolism with their susceptibility to injury, illness, hunger, reproduction, aging, and death” (p. 32).

Traditionally, in the social sciences studies of the body have been the domain of sociologists. In her book, *Bodies at Work*, Wolkowitz (2006) provides a solid starting point from which organizational communication scholars can begin to further their studies of the body. Ashcraft et al. (2009) point out that currently, when discussed in communication literature, bodies have become independent variables, reduced to characteristics such as race and sex, while the main focus of the study is on other, dependent variables. The majority of these studies have investigated feminine, gendered bodies.

Some examples related to organizational communication include Allen’s (1998) autoethnography which discusses her unique experiences as a black woman in academia; Martin’s (1990) deconstruction and reconstruction of an employee’s experience with her employer after having a Caesarean section; issues regarding the pregnant or post-pregnancy body as a point of interest as it invades environments, organizations, and roles fundamentally ascribed as masculine (D’ebau & Buzzanell, 2010); and Muhr’s (2011) depiction of Lisa, a “cyborg leader” who embodies excessive femininity while

simultaneously exuding an excessively masculine work ethic. This study seeks to change this trend, focusing on bodies and embodiment not as a spectacle but as phenomenon to which all are subject.

### *Embodied leaders*

Until recently, leaders have typically been theorized as disembodied beings (Ladkin, 2008). However, Hamill (2011) and others have begun to discuss leaders as embodied beings. Hamill (2011) begins his explication of embodied leadership by introducing the discovery of the existence of two distinct types of memory. The first type of memory is that associated with episodes and facts. The second type of memory involves motor skills, which are remembered through practice. While typical views of leadership involve a leader's character, skills, and capacity to inspire, what is often overlooked is the fact that all of these qualities are learned through embodiment (Hamill, 2011). Therefore, in order to teach leaders the qualities necessary for leadership, the body must be engaged (Hamill, 2011). Studies of practices such as yoga, focusing on the body and bodily awareness, have potential to explain much about how the body engages and how humans learn through that engagement.

Since the processes of conceptualizing embodied leadership have only just begun, there currently exists little theory or definition regarding the concept. So far, embodied leadership can best be conceived of as it addresses two types of communication tools. Firstly, this concept can be applied to explain how people use their bodies to make sense out of leadership, or as a sense-making tool. As a sense-making tool, the body and the



body's senses give leaders contextual information which influences how they approach their leadership role or task. For example, the body can be used as a tool to gauge followers' comfort level when considering things like the amount of light and the temperature of a room; a leader might observe, using their eyes, that followers are looking particularly perky or exhausted. Shotter (2010b) develops this argument, explaining the power of "the way in which spontaneous, *living, bodily, expressive* and *responsive activities* arouse *anticipations* in both the doer and those who witness a living being's activities" (p. 3). Using the body to make these sorts of observations can help the leader assess situations, tasks, and limits of each context they find themselves in and adjust their approach to leadership accordingly. Along these lines, Ladkin (2008) introduces the idea of leading beautifully, which results from the congruence of a leader's purpose and how that purpose is actually embodied. Ladkin (2008) uses a case example of Bobby McFerrin, a conductor/performer who leads beautifully, to discuss this concept. McFerrin used the present moment as a space for creativity, demonstrating mastery, coherence, and purpose. Through embodying a soft charisma, McFerrin led the audience and orchestra through gestures, vocals, and body language in order to foster an inclusive, participatory environment that was congruent with his purpose.

Secondly, embodied leadership can be applied to explain how people use their bodies to perform leadership, or as a performance tool. As a performance tool, the body becomes the physical expression of what a leader intends to impart on their followers. Applying the concept of embodied leadership steers communication scholarship away from viewing sense-making and performative phenomena as taking place in the

conscious realm. Instead, this concept allows communication scholars to examine how the body and its pre-linguistic, pre-conscious expressions relate to sense-making and performance. Leaders have a responsibility to acknowledge their own and their followers' embodiedness. Schatzki (1996) points out that "A human body becomes a manifest, signifier, and constituter of life conditions largely through social modeling" (p. 52). For example, in pre-industrial apprenticist training, the apprentice would learn from observing the master's bodily performance. From this perspective, leaders are encouraged to learn embodied skills to lead embodied followers in embodied practice. Any time followers are expected to learn, leaders must tap into members' embodied experience, their behavior, in order for the change or knowledge to be sustained, as Herquail and Wilcox King (2010) illuminate in the case of changing organizational identities.

#### *Potential for studies of embodiment*

Schatzki (1996) argues that the body demands extended discussion as our bodily doings, sayings, sensations, and feelings are "the medium in which life and mind/action are present in the world" (p. 41). Similarly, Shotter (2010b) offers a perspective that attends to the "*spontaneous, bodily, expressive-responsive activities*" that construct our participation in the social world, calling scholars to overcome the trend of bodily neglect in Western scholarship (p. 133). The intersections of body and work are then crucial to the construction of organizational experiences, which are socially based. Furthermore, in turn, our experience of embodiment is inextricably embedded within that organizational experience (Wolkowitz, 2006). Through the present study, we can explore how these

intersections play out for yoga practitioners, who presumably have a greater bodily awareness than others, when they are in professional contexts. With this newfound prominence of the body in the construction of social life, Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) caution against further dividing the dualism of the symbolic and the material, rather advocating a multidimensional interest in their interplay.

### *Communication & embodiment*

Our bodies take shape and are materialized through communication and are thus sites of the interpenetration of material and ideational worlds (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Our knowledge of the body's meaning is only achieved through interaction, which gives the body meaning in social life. From this perspective, Ashcraft et al. (2009) define communication as “the ongoing, situated, and embodied process whereby human and non-human agencies interpenetrate ideation and materiality toward meanings that are tangible and axial to organizational existence and organizing phenomena” (p. 34). Shotter (2010b) explains that words only have meaning in interaction, which occurs through bodily responses to utterances and by relating each person to one another and their surroundings. Through interaction, embodiment allows us to “call out” spontaneous responses from others, producing utterly unique experiences (Shotter, 2010b). It is through interaction and the creation of these once occurrent events that “individuals ultimately exist by virtue of the incorporation of human bodies into social practices wherein they become expressive bodies” (Schatzki, 1996, p. 47). Embodiment is a contextualized practice in the sense that at every moment, our physical embodiedness, and therefore our communication, is uniquely affected by time and space.

In this way, the development of an expressive body relies on other people who react to it as being an expressive body (Schatzki, 1996). The production of expressive bodies, and Wittgenstein would include minds, is inherently social (Schatzki, 1996). Bodies are speech acts (Schatzki, 1996)—acts of communication with others and with the world. Not only do we communicate through the mere presence of being embodied but communication itself is an embodied act (Ashcraft et al., 2009) and our bodies communicate spontaneously by showing precursors to our conscious experience (Shotter, 2010b).

Schatzki (1996) continues by referencing a term introduced by Medard Boss known as “Body Forth.” This term captures the notion of “life as a stream,” with the body pressing us forward through behavior and speech that express our life conditions (p. 42). In this way, the body is one of manifestation, presenting and communicating the constantly emerging ebbs and flows of human life (Schatzki, 1996). Therefore, to understand embodiment, we must approach it as a locus of experience (Singleton & Byrne, 2008) in which values are given a body, and culture is made into a body (Haynes, 2012).

#### *Discourse, embodiment, & organizing*

If culture is embodied, how then do we begin to organize ourselves accordingly? Barge and Little (2008) explain that discursive approaches to the study of communication view language as constitutive, “constructing the ideas, objects, subjectivities, and meanings that populate our social worlds” (p. 507). From this

perspective then, what stops language from constituting bodies? And furthermore, if viewing organizations as constituted in communication and bodies *as* communication, then one can begin to see how bodies play a role in the constitution of organizations. Communication in discourse allows bodies and organizations to mutually construct one another, echoing Ashcraft et al.'s (2009) claim that communication is responsible for the materiality of organizations. The constitution of the work-body relation, then, is indeterminate and negotiated in communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009)

Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) call scholars to “acknowledge that material circumstances to a significant degree grant us access to the very spheres of interaction and channels of communication that we call professional” (p. 154). Those material circumstances include bodies and our embodiment as organizational members. Because of the mutual influence that bodies and organizations hold, professional discourses can actually be seen written on bodies of organizational members (Trethewey, 1999). Trethewey (1999) found that discourse surrounding professional bodies required them to be fit in order to show control, efficiency, and endurance.

Gergen and Gergen (1993) explain the significance of such discourses and their impact on the body, stating that bodies are “invested with meanings as a function of cultural teachings overlaying individual experiences,” allowing individuals to define the importance, meanings, and significance of their bodies (p. 247). Bodies are not passive canvases painted upon by discourse, but are rather the medium through which an individual's interpellated symbolic identity is preformed (Holmer Nadesan &

Trethewey, 2000). This study offers a window to gain insight into how yogic and professional discourses align and/or compete when it comes to shaping people's bodies and identities. Professional discourses engage organizational members in the dialectical relationship between the body and its context, "such that the rules, hierarchies and metaphysical commitments of professional culture are inscribed on the body, and the body reflects this back" (Haynes, 2012, p. 343). The sequences of our bodily expression are not always something we determine but rather reflect what is required by "something out there" (Shotter, 2010b, p. 6): discourse.

Evidenced by its impact on the body, discourse plays a large role in shaping our identities. Through this process, our bodies communicate nonverbally as our appearance and demeanor come to be perceived as expressions of the self (Featherstone, 1982). Furthermore, Singleton and Byrne (2008) state that how we move our bodies impacts how we feel about ourselves and our relationship to our environment. In the West, this environment is wrought with consumerist discourses, which tell us that the body reflects the inner self and vice versa (Featherstone, 1982). More specifically, Smythe (1995) explains the concept of corporeal reality, which is the sense of identity exclusively associated with physical sensation. "Together, studies of the management of sexuality and bodies, 'body work,' and aesthetics of labor show how communication generates real corporeal affects and how the body becomes both resource for and resistance to organizational identities" (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 34).

## Leadership & Communities of Practice

When one thinks of a practice, the similar things people do or say that identify them as members of a group might come to mind. While these doings and sayings are certainly part of practices, it is only when members take them and use them to create an array of understandings, rules, and structures that a practice is truly constituted (Schatzki, 1996). In this sense, a practice's organization is normative (Schatzki, 1996); participants act according to an understanding of how to do things, guiding principles, and prescribed objectives (Blackler & Regen, 2009). "A practice, in turn, is a nexus of doings and sayings that unfolds in time and is dispersed in space and dependent on material arrangements" (Schatzki, 1996, p. 31). The practice of yoga certainly reflects these stipulations: members act according to a set of implicit rules and guiding principles in order to achieve objectives involving the union of mind and body, and individual and divine.

Bjørkeng et al. (2009) explain that humans achieve active "being-in-the-world" through practice (p. 146). As active beings, we do not exist alone, but rather coexist with other active, living beings. Schatzki (1996) uses the German term *Zusammenhang* to explain this coexistence as a "state of held-togetherness" (p. 14). This hanging together of human lives is established by and transpires within practices by means of cooperation, conformity to norms, and through understanding and intelligibility (Schatzki, 1996). Inherently tied to traditions, customs, and language, such understandings and intelligibilities are the basic components of social existence (Schatzki, 1996). From emphasizing the inherent sociality of practice, practice can then be viewed as "a process

by which we can experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful,” giving meaning to the motions of our bodies and the processes of our brains (Wenger, 1998, p. 51), closely reflecting the objectives of practicing yoga. In fact, Wenger (1998) contends, “Whoever we are, understanding in practice is the art of choosing what to know and what to ignore in order to proceed with our lives” (p. 41). This is a profound statement, essentially stating that the understandings gained as one participates in a practice dictates how that person lives their life. This can be applied to practices of modern postural yoga; engagement in this practice can influence on how one engages with their self and, in turn, how that self engages with the social world.

#### *Communication, practice, & organization*

Practices do not exist in isolation but are rather linked to other practices (Wenger, 1998), composing a complex web of embedded, organized practices. Therefore, practices and organizations are interdependent, each one producing the other through communication—in this case, the interdependency of yogic and professional leadership practices will be highlighted. Through learning and communicating in practice, an organization comes to “know what it knows”, becoming more effective and valuable in the process (Wenger, 1998, p. 8).

According to Schatzki (1996) “a practice has no structure of meaning independent of the language with which its participants interpret situations and people within it” (p. 127). Similarly, Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren (2009) explain that communication generates organizations and organizational realities, making communication a site of



organizational negotiation. This claim that communication is responsible for the materiality of organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009) can be supplemented by practice theory. While there are many approaches to practice theory, one common thread is the belief that practices are sites where understanding is structured and intelligibility is articulated (Schatzki, 1996). Just how those understandings and intelligibilities are negotiated is explicated further in this review's discussion of Communities of Practice. Since understanding and intelligibility are the basic components of social life, then the organization, one side of this reciprocal process of producing practices, can be viewed as materializing the very social world within which we live and interact.

Through this ongoing construction of reality, organizations can be viewed as culture, a process that takes place in communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009). Supplemented by Alter (2004) who argues that culture is a way to think about being human, our human identity can then be viewed as intrinsically constructed through communication, in organization and practice. Wenger (1998) explains that identities are a "layering of events of participation and reification [in practice] by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other" (p. 151); engagement in a yoga practice may be one layer of our identity but it can alter, influence, and permeate to other layers and vice versa. Our perception of who we are is influenced by our networks, our relationships and our identification with a group and that group's sense of self (Cheney, 2000). Therefore, organizations and practice not only produce the social realities resulting from interaction, but affect individuals at their very core sense of identity.

### *Practice & embodiment*

In all forms of interaction, we are spontaneously aware of the fact that we are exchanging with “more than just a dead body in motion,” but rather a person who has a soul and their own “inner life” (Shotter, 2010b, p. 16). Interaction allows us to negotiate the body’s meaning in social life; this process of knowing engenders the (trans)formation of our individual understandings of the body (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 33). Therefore, Schatzki (1996) argues, “individuals ultimately exist by virtue of the incorporation of human bodies into social practices wherein they become expressive bodies” (p. 47). In this sense then, all practices are embodied practices. We are able to interact with others, engage in practice, and create social realities due to our very being-in-bodies. Eisenberg (1990) explains that it is possible to not only interact but also even to engage in transcendent experiences with very little personal disclosure or verbal communication. In this sense our bodies are vessels to be interpreted and to be used to interpret. Participation in practices involves our whole person—our bodies, minds, emotions, and social realities (Wenger, 1998) and the practice of modern postural yoga is certainly no exception.

Furthermore, aside from the fact that interaction takes place through our embodied experiences, practices and their larger contexts actually have direct effects on bodies. This nascent area of scholarship has thus far focused on the relationship between professional practice and the body. Haynes (2012) describes the dialectical relationship in which the body and its context mutually inform one another so that “the rules, hierarchies and metaphysical commitments of professional culture are inscribed on the

body, and the body reflects this back” (p. 343). Similarly, Trethewey (1999) analyzed the professional bodily displays of women, discovering a standard of professional women’s bodies to be fit, attractive, and demure. There is also evidence that our subjective experience of connections with others in the workplace has a long-lasting impact on worker’s bodies and physiological resourcefulness (Heaphy, 2008). Aside from inquiries into professionalism, Smythe (1995) found that embodiment can also serve to legitimize practices. Specifically, during her ethnography at a women’s fitness facility, Smythe (1995) noticed that members of this practice invested much time and money into their practice and that sharing embodied experiences gave validity to an otherwise peculiar pastime.

### *Communities of practice*

So far, practice has been explained as the inherently social doings and sayings that span spatiotemporal boundaries and which are reliant on material sites. Practices, then, are produced through communication, giving meaning to our world and our interactions within that world. As components of social life, practices cannot be viewed in isolation but must be viewed in relation to their larger context because they exist within organized environments and therefore co-mingle with and overlap other existing practices (Wenger, 1998). Notions of embodiment aside, what then do the communities of each practice actually look like? What are they?

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) describe Communities of Practice (CoPs) as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or are passion about a topic,

and who deepened their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). From this definition, one can see that these communities have concerns for knowledge about a common topic but also exist for the sake of interaction—for “being together, living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human” (Wenger, 1998, p. 134), a description that can be directly applied to practices of modern postural yoga. When existing purposively, these CoPs have the potential to be truly transformative for both participants, as individuals, and for the social world in which they exist (Wenger, 1998).

So what differentiates a CoP as a distinct category of social organization? Iverson and McPhee (2008) reiterate Wenger’s (1998) description of three processes that determine the existence of a CoP. First, CoPs exhibit *mutual engagement*: a level of communication and interaction that creates boundaries of a practice, allowing for the development of a shared repertoire and joint enterprise (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). Through mutual engagement, CoPs form in the negotiation of actions that in turn create meaning amongst members (Wenger, 1998). Second, CoPs can be identified by a *shared repertoire*. In this process, knowledge, capabilities, and shared reifications result in a shared repertoire of vocabulary and symbols of membership (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). These repertoires are a CoP’s resource for negotiating meaning (Wenger, 1998). Lastly, the existence of a *joint enterprise* is listed as a process of creating mutual accountability in CoPs (Wenger, 1998). Although not always reified or even explicitly stated as such, joint enterprises are negotiated through mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) and result in a common set of tasks that members can influence (Iverson & McPhee, 2008).

A key linkage between these three processes is the space for negotiation. Wenger (1998) emphasizes the fact that we live in, and practices exist within, a constant process of negotiating meaning—negotiating understandings and intelligibilities. As opposed to knowledge, CoP theory investigates *knowing* that is made possible through the negotiation of meaning (Iverson, & McPhee, 2008). Eisenberg (1990), too, emphasizes the importance leaving space for negotiation, explaining how enacting rules and structures that govern practice can encourage improvisation and creativity to flourish. This process occurs over time through the interplay of participation and reification, creating meaning in a “dynamic relation of living in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). Such negotiation is evidence that CoPs are created communicatively, revealing the complexities involved with a) sharing and creating knowledge, b) sharing objects and situations, and c) the transferring knowledge to others (Iverson & McPhee, 2008).

### **Leading CoPs**

Throughout this inquiry into practice, there has been little, if any, mention of leadership. However, there is an implied sense of leadership in Wenger’s (1998) explication of CoPs. By focusing on learning and knowledge as key components in the development of CoPs, it is logical to assume that some form of leadership imparts this learning and knowledge. Leadership is not necessarily carried out by a designated or specific individual. In practice, all actors are constantly being led and/or following as they learn and gain knowledge of the practice, whether or not a designated or appointed leader is the one doing the “leading.” Therefore, leadership is fundamental in the (re)creation of practice. Shotter (2010b) explains that when learning a new practice, we

require “living examples to which we can relate”—people that embody the practice and bring focus to the peripheries of our moment-to-moment circumstances, using their words to be “re-minded” (p. 94). In this way, what leaders call out from us, we can later call out from ourselves on our own terms, to use in our own way (Shotter, 2010b).

In CoPs, leaders and leadership are defined at the intersection of nature and the collective (Grint, 2010). Here, Grint (2010) explains, leaders are not omnipotent and leadership is often distributed. This means that as opposed to having one appointed leader, leadership can shift, or be distributed, amongst many members (Fairhurst, 2007). Situational leadership is a type of distributed leadership in which differing contexts demand particular leaders who are apt to be more successful (Fairhurst, 2007). Such processes require great reflexivity (Grint, 2010), so that the followers are actually the ones to teach leadership to the leader (Fairhurst, 2007).

Iverson and McPhee (2002) explain this process of collaboration in which the manager, or leader, becomes situated in the community’s repertoire, allowing that leader to contribute to the community of practice in appropriate ways. Practitioners, then, work together in order to build the working definitions of their situation (Barge & Little, 2008). After all, it is this engagement in interaction that allows us to learn (Grint, 2010). Managing CoPs and the knowledge they produce requires an understanding that these communities engage participants, negotiate meanings, and share knowledge. One cannot approach leadership from a stance of control but rather need to invoke nurture and support (Iverson & McPhee, 2002).

Barge and Little (2008) explain the notion of sensibility as “the living unity between a set of moral-aesthetic commitments toward human agency and conversational abilities within a tradition or community of practice” (p. 513). Invoking sensibility helps to explain how members are able to maintain stability in situations while still allowing for flexibility in their practice (Barge & Little, 2008). The challenge for practitioners, and especially leaders, then is integrating their own tools, methods, and techniques with those belonging to the CoP; resources must be deconstructed and rewoven in order to meet the needs of the specific community (Barge & Little, 2008).

Building from Wenger (1998), inquiries into leadership in practice might address issues of community building, providing access to resources for members to learn and take action, decision making, and engaging members’ knowledgeability. Further issues might address the use and incorporation of shared repertoires into practice; looking at how things such as routines, words, gestures, and actions become part of practices with regard to participation and reification (Wenger, 1998). Other areas of implicit leadership might address Wenger’s (1998) discussion of control as reproduced, reasserted, and renegotiated in order to sustain social coherence in practices (Wenger, 1998, p. 93).

In Shotter’s (2010b) work, emphasis is placed on the “*spontaneous, living, expressive responsiveness of our bodies,*” arguing that through interaction, we are capable of directly “moving” those whom with which we interact, and we, in turn, are susceptible to the same “moving” powers of others (p. 9). Leadership is laden in this perspective for, generally, the ultimate goal of leadership is to have an affect on others.

Therefore, this idea of “moving” others can be applied directly to contexts of leadership. Such conceptions of and questions regarding leadership in CoPs will be analyzed through this study, as they relate to instructors of modern postural yoga and within yogic communities.

### **Leadership, Spirituality, & Organizing**

Within the past decade, there has been an increased amount of discussion of the link between the soul and corporate success (Calas & Smircich, 2013). Ramasubramanian (forthcoming) notes the organizational emphasis in spirituality literature in communication, especially in regards to corporate wellness programs. From their call for submissions regarding spirituality and organizing, Calas and Smircich (2013) noticed trends of using spirituality as a means to cure a lack of meaning in the workplace, as an alternative to science (which is a limited mode of understanding), and as an interest in connecting work to love and social justice. Similar goals exist in what Atkinson (2010) describes as post-sport practices, such as yoga, that emphasize cooperation, holism, and reflexivity. This sort of spirituality, argue Kernochan, McCormick, and White (2007), is an important area of study for managers, researchers, and teachers.

Holmer Nadesan (1999) discusses the discourses of New Age Corporate Spiritualism that at one point pervaded many Western organizations. This approach promoted self-actualization with the organization as its medium. In this standpoint, leaders and members alike can enhance intuition, innovation, commitment, and energy in the workplace through therapeutic self-reflection and authentic self-expression, both of



which are emphasized in practices of modern postural yoga. This discourse emphasizes going “above and beyond” and is thus often associated with transformational and charismatic leadership.

With transformational leadership, followers are enabled to achieve due to the transformational processes initiated by the leader (Ladkin, 2008). Transformational leaders are visionaries—making people see things afresh, through large-scale perspectives that differ from dominant ones (Schatzki, 1996) and transforming those followers through empowerment (Grint, 2010). Without naming it as such, Schatzki (1996) describes transformational leaders as those who “extend the boundaries of intelligibility [and] are beyond technique. They do not simply go on using language as we do and behaving intelligibly to us, but transcend these in ways that eventually draw us along, expanding the horizon of what we understand, transforming how we speak and act” (p. 68).

Charismatic leadership is closely tied to transformational leadership (Grint, 2010; Fairhurst, 2007) as charisma is sometimes equated with having organizational vision (Fairhurst, 2007). Weber’s charismatics were “extraordinary mobilizers of followers,” often acting with both a revolutionary and reactionary vision, attempting to recreate the past by moving forward (Grint, 2010, p. 94). Definitions of charismatic leaders are just as elusive as definitions of leadership itself. Grint (2010) states that a charismatic leader is “someone extraordinary with a quality or authority that influences or inspires large numbers of people” (p. 93). Such leaders often view themselves as “bearers of a destiny

designed by others” (Grint, 2010, p. 95). Charisma is, ultimately, a personality characteristic that is judged by the leader’s effects on their followers that can accompany almost any effective form of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007).

One of the buzzwords often associated with spirituality, and which is also used in practices of modern postural yoga, is the concept of mindfulness. In the West, mindfulness requires one to pay attention to external events and the contents of the mind in order to be actively engaged in the present (Weick & Putnam, 2006). In the East, however, mindfulness takes on a different meaning. In Eastern contexts, mindfulness requires one to pay close attention to the internal processes, as opposed to the contents, of the mind (Weick & Putnam, 2006), responding to the world in an open, accepting, and non-judgmental manner (Ramasubramanian, forthcoming). In this way, one is able to hang on to objects, not losing focus of them despite the existence of distractions (Weick & Putnam, 2006).

This Eastern approach to mindfulness is grounded in Buddhism in its emphases on building stable and clear attention (Weick & Putnam, 2006). While Buddhism is a religion, it is also a philosophy that can be adopted without attachment to religion (Kernochan, McCormick, & White, 2007). Buddhism’s central tenant is that happiness comes from the relief of suffering; therefore, the purpose of the Buddhist is to eliminate suffering in the self and in others (Kernochan et al., 2007). In such Dharmic approaches to spirituality, concepts such as mindfulness as well as the combination of concentration, contemplation, and equanimity aid in one’s quest to connect the self and divine and

honor the intimacy of their individual spirit with a universal consciousness (Ramasubramanian, forthcoming).

To Buddhists, mindfulness involves “diminished dependence on concepts, increased focus on sources of distraction, and greater reliance on acts with meditative properties” (Weick & Putnam, 2006, p. 275). These views help management and leaders by making things like the self, other, us, and them, impermanent—taking them to be points of departure instead of points to combat (Brummans, Hwayng, & Cheong, 2013). Awareness is brought to one’s desire to self-produce and their tendency to make sense by relying on their own sense of self in relation to others (Brummans et al., 2013). The well-being of self and others is improved by alleviating the negative emotions associated with clinging to reality (Brummans et al., 2013). In addition, the undisciplined mind is counteracted by training it, through mindfulness, to regain focus when it is lost (Weick & Putnam, 2006).

In their study of a Buddhist organization in Taiwan, Brummans et al. (2013) found this mindfulness concept present in terms of the relationship between individual organizational leaders, Master, and the collective. Being mindful meant that leaders should lead by example, emulating Master’s content of speech, style, movements, and overall demeanor. In this way, organizational leaders were mindful of Master, applying her teachings as a sign of gratitude, respect, and love, and to the collective, “only assert[ing] themselves if the situation requires it and try[ing] to make space for others by looking past individuals’ qualities rather than foibles” (Brummans et al., 2013, p. 363).

Mindfulness was also highlighted in Kernochan et al.'s (2007) investigation into how management teachers who identify as Buddhists integrate spirituality into their teaching practice through their actions and identity. The participant's narrative regarding mindfulness focused on concentrating on present moments of experience, not the future. This participant explained that mindful teaching is just one aspect of living a mindful life, stating, "nonjudgmental observation of one's perceptions, thoughts, and emotions leads to an acceptance of these and results in greater calm, equanimity, and relaxation" (Kernochan et al., 2007, p. 65). Mindful practices while teaching allowed the instructor to increase empathy, emphasize the student instead of the self, sustain a nonjudgmental stance about himself in relation to their students, and enter into a learner's frame of reference. Other, related, topics discussed in participant narratives were compassion and the concept of no-self (Kernochan et al., 2007). This study offered one example of how notions of spirituality can begin to be integrated into practices of leadership.

### **Articulating the Study's Focus**

This study pays attention to embodied leadership in a way that has not yet been explored. Currently, literature regarding leadership has emphasized discourse and when relating to embodiment, ties discourse to constitution. Hamill (2011), for example, explicates how leaders need to be trained in embodiment, learning embodied skills through engaged repetition rather than being expected to internalize verbal or written directions. He suggests that one can learn to embody the skills of leadership through *rehearsing embodied habits*, rather than *embodying leadership practices*. The proposed study is attempting to explore the latter: natural, not specifically rehearsed, embodied

experiences of leaders and the spillover, or translation, of those experiences into their leadership practice. As Ladkin (2008) suggests, leading beautifully involves a congruence of embodiment and purpose. Yet, aside from the McFerrin case study used in his article (Ladkin, 2008), no literature examining the relation of those two constructs exists. The current study could potentially shed light on how embodied practices are identified as congruent, or not congruent, to a leader's purpose, and then applied.

A key site of embodied practice is modern postural yoga, which has become a major part of many people's lives in the United States. While many scholars and yoga practitioners have explored how Western ideas have affected the practice and conception of yoga, few have accepted these East/West fusions and then followed up, asking how the prevalence of modern postural yoga practice in the West has, in turn, affected the very social world in which we live. With its widespread popularity and practitioners' claims of the practice's life altering effects, I cannot help but assume that yoga is something more than a sideshow—it is an integral part of people's lives, therefore its practice must be changing people's values, thoughts, and their interactions with their surroundings.

With many communication scholars calling for more research with a focus on bodies, it is crucial that we understand activities that organize around the production of bodies. For this reason, I have selected a second, undergirding question regarding yogic practice:

*RQ 1: How is leadership practiced in yoga studios?*

This question aims to focus on the leadership of the *yogashala* and *kula*, focusing on the designated instructors but keeping in mind that other forms of leadership might be present or emergent within in the community.

Essentially, this study asks how people understand being in their bodies. More specifically, exploring the translation of embodied experiences in one practice, the practice of modern postural yoga, to another embodied practice, the practice of leadership. These ponderings have inspired the following guiding question for this study:

*RQ 2: How does the embodied practice of modern postural yoga influence leadership experiences outside of the yogic practice?*

With modern postural yoga's widespread popularity in the West, I want to know if and how this embodied practice is adopted in other contexts—how people work with their bodies in practices not typically ascribed as embodied.

These research questions offer a unique perspective on leadership, which has only just begun to be considered an embodied practice. By exploring how the embodied practice of modern postural yoga influences the embodied practice of leadership, this study has the potential to revolutionize the way communication scholars think about leadership, embodiment, and practice.

## **Yoga as a Site of Embodied Leadership**

Through this exploration of literature in leadership, embodiment, and practice, it is clear that these areas of communication scholarship are interwoven and mutually dependent. Initially, it might seem a bit of a challenge to find a site in which these three concepts are prominent. However, looking beyond typical means of organization, a clear solution to this challenge is research involving modern postural yoga—in terms of leadership, embodiment, and practice.

I am not alone in my interest in yoga as a site for study. As Horton (2012) explains, “Yoga is in a precarious place where it could go a number of directions right now, and as practitioners, as a community, we have the opportunity to co-create the future of yoga” (p. xvii). The study I am proposing has not only the potential to further communication scholarship but shape and direct the practice of leadership and the practice of modern postural yoga. Singleton and Byrne (2008) echo this call to research, explaining that dialogue spurred amongst the academy and practice would be mutually beneficial.

### *What is yoga?*

Throughout about the past century, Americans’ understanding of yoga has changed: “from bewilderment and hostility to a foreign—even heathen—practice to widespread admiration and acceptance” (Syman, 2010, p. 8). Within the past fifteen years, the practice of modern postural yoga in the United States has shifted from that of a cultural oddity to, now, a booming, \$27 billion industry (Horton, 2012). While its origins

lie in centuries-old Indic tradition, modern postural yoga, what we in the United States commonly call simply “yoga,” dates no further back than the 1930s (White, 2009). This post-sport provides a more holistic alternative for those who may have felt alienated from or disenchanted by traditional sports (Atkinson, 2010). Today, reports indicate that 7-10% of people in the United States take yoga classes (Walker, 2012). This comes as no surprise, as in a world dominated by an organizational imperative (Conrad, 2011), yoga classes provide a structured, organized, time for relaxation and can reduce the stress incurred from hectic work lives (Alter, 2004).

Perhaps the reason Americans have been flocking to yoga practices is the opportunity for transcendence, the first characteristic of what Eisenberg (1990) terms jamming. “Jamming experiences are highly rule-governed, structured activities in which little or no personal information is exchanged, yet important goals may be accomplished, and a strong, ecstatic bond is formed among participants” (Eisenberg, 1990, p. 146). Examples of jamming experiences include athletes being “in the zone,” jazz musicians’ jam sessions, and urgent actions such as working with others to keep a ship from capsizing in a storm (Eisenberg, 1990). Practitioners are able to attend classes as they please, disclose little personal information, and possibly engage in a transcendent experience, only made possible through the practice’s social nature. Furthermore, Syman (2010) explains that modern postural yoga is not a unified system nor even a tree with branches but rather a city with contrasting neighborhoods—that you can get lost within—and that changes whoever stays but never for the same reasons. This statement relates to the second characteristic of jamming: yoga embraces diversity, bonding



disparate people together through performance (Eisenberg, 1990). Yogic practice aligns with jamming's third characteristic, fragility, in that while jamming is a possibility, it is not a certainty within the clearly structured practice (Eisenberg, 1990). Lastly, jamming experiences are characterized as inherently risky (Eisenberg, 1990). This is certainly the case in practicing modern postural yoga. Participation in this addictive practice leaves participants at risk of embarrassment, possibly due to their skill level, as well as risks involved with exposing emotional issues. The practice of yoga is a bit different than other practices where jamming is known to occur, such as with sports teams and musicians, because there is generally a clearly defined leader in yoga classes. Even so, this jamming framework most certainly pertains to and can be used to explain yoga's allure.

### *Yoga & the body*

With its infiltration into Western society and focus on *asana*, modern postural yoga can be considered a major player in the cultivation of bodies in the West (Singleton & Byrne, 2008). Since it concentrates on the body, Singleton and Byrne (2008) point out that modern postural yoga practice typically under-exploits the senses. But while many yogis have criticized this practice's turn toward focus on the body, others embrace it as an improvement from a past of asceticism (Horton, 2012).

Most modern yoga practices, and certainly traditional forms of yoga, recognize the existence of two bodies within humans: 1) a gross, or physical, body that services the nescient, embodied soul (Alter, 2004) and is generally the focus of modern postural yoga

practice; and 2) a subtle body that is comprised of channels (*nadis*) and wheel-like-vortices (*chakras*) that are distinct but intertwined with the gross body (Syman, 2010), giving the body strength of mind and intellect (Alter, 2004). This acknowledgement of the subtle body indicates that despite the practice's seeming emphasis on the physical body, that there is something that exists beyond the physical body that makes yogic practice so special. This may be attributable to the process that Atkinson (2010) describes as yogic practitioners' minds and bodies are "aligned with higher energies and forces" (p. 1256). Klein (2012) shares her yogic journey, explaining that through yogic practice, she came to understand her body not as a vessel to be controlled but as an axis of experience, a vessel to cherish. For the body is not the self; it is only when the body is fixated upon as such, that we take it to be so (Jude Boccio, 2012). Instead, yoga is defined by the quality of the practitioner's mind, not their bodily capabilities (Klein, 2012).

### *Yogic practice*

Modern postural yogic practice, although it can be individual, generally takes place within a community of practitioners. In this sense, yogic practice resembles and yet diverges from notions of coordinated action. While practicing in a community is indeed a coordinated effort, on their own, members could just as easily, if not more conveniently, complete the same practice. As alluded to in the discussion on jamming, part of the intrigue to participating in and thus studying yoga practice is this tendency of members to so emphatically engage in what psychologists refer to as parallel play, perhaps in search of a transcendent, social experience.

Singleton and Byrne (2008) use the term *yogashala* to describe a place where yoga classes take place. Within these sites of practice, communities, or *kulas*, form in which practitioners meet regularly to practice under the guidance of a leader or instructor. White (2009) explains that "... all living beings are not only connected to the sun through its rays but also have the potential for being linked to all that exists—including one another—through the rays emanating from their incandescent inner selves or persons and outward via their sense organ in every act of perception" (p. 123). Practicing yoga in *kulas* helps create that sense of connection and respect amongst members. The instructors of classes or *kulas* engage in body work, which Wolkowitz (2006) defines as "paid work that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body" (p. 9). One might say that a goal of these instructors is to facilitate rehabilitation processes, which change practitioners' experiences as they "learn new ways of making sense of and using their bodies" (Singleton & Byrne, 2008, p. 120).

Studying embodiment and its relationship to leadership is a particularly fascinating area of communication research that until this point remains largely unexplored. One clear entry-point for such studies to take place is by investigating yoga instructors and practitioners who presumably have a greater awareness of embodiment and the role that embodiment plays in identity formation. In this study, instructors of modern postural yoga will be observed and practitioners of modern postural yoga will be interviewed to further inquire into embodiment, embodied communication, and embodied leadership.

## CHAPTER II

### POSITIONALITY & METHODOLOGY

Operating within an interpretive paradigm, my ontological viewpoint as a researcher is one of social construction (Tracy, 2013). This ontology fits well with Wenger's (1998) thoughts on knowledge; both perspectives view knowledge as created through interaction. Furthermore, using an interpretive paradigm implies that this study will also seek to understand the phenomena of leadership and the practice of yoga through the participants' standpoint in order to gain empathetic and holistic understanding (Tracy, 2013). The project's two guiding questions are:

*RQ 1: How is leadership practiced in yoga studios?*

*RQ 2: How does the embodied practice of modern postural yoga transfer to leadership experiences outside of the yogic practice?*

My research approach suits the guiding questions, as it draws from hermeneutics and requires simultaneous consideration of the historical context and current investigation of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2013). With all of this in mind, I deliberately entered into this study with few preconceived notions about which direction it would take. It was my responsibility to engage with the participants and represent their experiences ethically and in the light intended.

## **Methodology**

With this paradigm in mind, I used two types of methods in this study: (1) complete participation and (2) semi-structured interviews (Tracy, 2013). These methods allowed me to gain the perspective of the participants and helped generate the insight to represent their experiences as richly as possible.

### *Complete observation*

In order to support and provide a greater understanding of the data collected in interviews, I gained a base of knowledge through 40 hours of participant observation as a complete observer (Tracy, 2013) of yoga classes. Observation took place at three studios with eleven different instructors. I purposefully attended various class styles with different instructors in order to generate a rich set of data. Furthermore, the studios where observation took place were also diverse. The first studio was a privately owned business that only offered yoga classes with styles ranging from Anusara, Vinyasa, and prenatal and was located in a large metropolitan city in the western United States. The second studio was a privately owned wellness center in a southern college town that offered services such as thai massage and reiki energy therapy in addition to various yoga classes. Yoga classes at this studio included Hatha, Kundalini, Freedom, and Forrest styles. In the same southern college town, a third site was observed. This studio was housed in a gym, one of about 10 franchised facilities that existed across the region. This gym offered fitness training in areas such as crossfit, zumba, and yoga in addition to private training. The yoga classes at this site all took place in a heated room and were either in Hatha flow or Vinyasa flow styles.

I was able to observe and reflect on my own embodied experiences as well as the practices of yogic leaders including their discourse, the setting they create, and their use of embodied leadership, *in situ* (Tracy, 2013). Studying leadership *in situ* was important, for as Barge and Fairhurst (2008) explain, conceptualizations of leadership are oriented to what is important for the actors in their moment-to-moment context. As a complete observer, I was able to engage in informal interviews, or conversation, with yogic leaders and practitioners alike, learning more about their perceptions of leadership, embodiment, and practice. This perspective also helped me build rapport with some participants so that they felt more comfortable agreeing to and during interviews. This observation also helped me understand how leadership affects the practice of yoga, which may shed insight into how yoga-inspired leadership outside of the practice takes shape. As an observer, I had more insight into the culture of the grand organization of yoga and as a member of each studio, I was more easily able to empathize and create a holistic understanding of the participants.

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants. These participants were yoga practitioners who held leadership positions in their work context. For example, in addition to being yoga practitioners, participants were in leadership positions such as being professors, business owners, and managers. Since the concept of leadership has many meanings, it was each participant's self-identification as a leader that defined them as such for this project. I recruited participants, first, through a convenience sample (Tracy, 2013), contacting people within my network who met the inclusion criteria for

participation: (a) they considered themselves yoga practitioners, and (b) they considered themselves leaders in a work context outside of their yoga practice. Through this convenience sample, I gained more participants through snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013), asking participants for the names and contact information for other potential participants they may know. Table 1 lists participant pseudonyms, occupations, sex, and number of years with a dedicated yoga practice.

**Table 1**

*Participant Information*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Dedicated Yoga Practice</b>
<b>1</b>	Jess§	Executive Coach; Former VP of HR of high end resort	F	10 years
<b>2</b>	Laurie§	Gemologist; Business Owner/Innovator	F	20 years
<b>3</b>	Annie B.§	Psychology Professor	F	15 years
<b>4</b>	Margot§	Medical School Course Director	F	8 years
<b>5</b>	Jake§	College Instructor	M	4 years
<b>6</b>	Esmeralda	Elementary School Vice Principal	F	30 years
<b>7</b>	Kip*§	Professor; Laboratory Principle Investigator	M	42 years
<b>8</b>	Mallory	Maternal Fetal Medicine Fellow	F	11 years
<b>9</b>	Tomi	School Psychologist	F	4 months
<b>10</b>	Alicia§	Horticulture Operations Manger	F	4 years
<b>11</b>	Luke*§	Mathematics Professor; Post-Doc Director	M	18 years

**Table 1 Continued**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Dedicated Yoga Practice</b>
<b>12</b>	Becca*§	Wellness Center Owner; Assistant Director of Study Abroad Programs	F	17 years
<b>13</b>	Jill	Special Education Specialist	F	4 years
<b>14</b>	Rhoda*	Communication Professor; Research Innovator	F	30+ years
<b>15</b>	Shane*	Principal Research Scientist; Wellness Workshop Leader	M	30+ years
<b>16</b>	Lynnette	Law Partner; Associate Development Director	F	4 months

*Notes:* \*Denotes that the participant currently leads a yoga practice in some capacity.  
§ Denotes that the participant practices yoga at one of the studios at which participant observation took place.

Interviews took place in person or by phone at a time and/or location convenient for the participant and lasted up to one hour. The interview guide was designed to build rapport between the researcher and participant, and elicit conversation regarding three topics: (a) participants' yoga practice, (b) participants' leadership practice, and (c) the overlap participants saw between yoga and leadership, if they saw any overlap at all. While discussion of embodiment was only explicitly probed for once during each interview, questions were designed to allow participants to respond freely and reference embodiment when it was natural for them to do so. Interviews were based on the following Interview Guide:



1. When did you begin practicing yoga? What moved you to practice yoga?
2. What does your yoga instructor do when s/he leads a class that resonates with you?
  - a. Examples?
  - b. Are there things you wish your instructor didn't do?
3. Besides the yoga instructor, are there other members in your kula that take a leadership role?
  - a. If they do, what do they do?
4. What kinds of leadership positions at work do you currently hold?
5. How would you describe your approach to leadership?
6. Do people at work know you practice yoga? Who do you talk to about your yoga practice?
  - a. What has prompted you to choose to (not) discuss your yoga practice with those at work?
  - b. If you do talk about yoga at work, what do those conversations usually look like?
7. What connections, if any do you see between yoga and leadership?
  - a. Yoga encourages awareness of the body. Has awareness of your body transferred to your leadership approach?
  - b. How have/can these lessons be used in your leadership practice?
8. If you wanted to fully integrate yoga and your leadership, what would that look like?

- a. How do you think those who you lead would react to that type of leadership?
9. How has your leadership approach changed because of your yoga practice, if at all?

### *Analysis*

I engaged in two iterative analyses of the data I collected (Tracy, 2013), one involving the data collected from participant observation and the second involving the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. In both cases, this process involved alternating between data collection, analysis, and application of current literature and theory (Tracy, 2013). This process involved two rounds of coding, initial coding and secondary coding, for both my field notes and interviews. After initial coding, I used thematic analysis to engage with the codes and uncover emergent themes from both the observation and interview data.

Themes were extracted based on Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition and forcefulness. Specifically, repeated words, phrases, and sentences heavily influenced the detection of salient themes within each data set. For example, because of each interview participants' emphasis of the topic of "stress," this code was made note of to incorporate as a major topic of discussion in the analysis. I also made note of commonly used codes and *in vivo* codes, like "me time" and the repeated idea of "know thyself" and finding one's "authentic self," using Tracy's (2013) explanation of constant comparison to guide my arrangement of these prominent codes into themes before

incorporating other related codes into each theme. For example, while the “stress” code originally stood alone as a prominent topic discussed in interviews, after secondary coding, this code was paired with other codes such as “boundaries,” “limits,” and “expectations” in order to develop a theme of “overcoming hurdles.” In this way, my analysis was deepened as a singular, repeated code was matched with other related codes, allowing me to synthesize the similar or related experiences shared by multiple participants. This process occurred for each emergent theme so that themes developed and are portrayed as authentic representations of participants’ stories.

While a multitude of themes emerged from each data set, I was reminded to constantly reference not only current literature but also to reference my own research questions. Ultimately, themes were selected for discussion based on their prominence and the priority of answering my research questions. From there, emergent themes from both data sets were compared in order to draw overall conclusions in relation to the reviewed communication.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **OBSERVATION ANALYSIS**

This chapter is designed to respond to RQ 1, “How is leadership practiced in yoga studios?” In order to answer this question, I engaged in a total of more than 40 hours of complete participant observation in three yoga studios of varying organizational design with various class offerings. After observation took place, five salient themes pertaining to this question emerged through thematic analysis of the notes taken in my reflexive journal. Specifically, instructors were observed: (a) giving clear instruction, (b) creating an interactive experience with students, (c) portraying interconnected messages, (d) facilitating a light-hearted practice, and (e) creating a personalized practice for their students.

These themes paint a picture of yogic leadership as a co-constructive process in which the instructor and students view one another as equals, negotiating the meaning of the practice together, as leadership is expected to occur within a Community of Practice. This chapter delves into each theme, offering examples of and interpreting yoga instructors’ leadership practices.

#### **Clear Instruction**

Instructors offered clear instruction in a variety of ways. In addition to using verbal directions and descriptions, instructors used their and others’ physical bodies as

visual aids and even physically adjusted students' bodies so that they could more fully express each pose.

### *Using words & description*

In general, the instructors gave clear instruction, telling students what pose to move into and exactly how to get there. For example, an instructor directed students to “carefully move from a neutral position, shifting your right hand back underneath your right shoulder.” Not only did the instructors state the upcoming position but also explained the process of how move into that position. Especially for approaching more advanced poses, the instructors offered very specific directions. For instance, when considering handstand position, the instructor directed us to bend our bellows “half an inch to an inch” and really “feel your shoulder blades on your back.”

Many times, instructors would offer these specific instructions before we were directed to try them. Again, when practicing inversions, the instructor gave directions prior to allowing us to attempt the poses. She insisted that we “push the shoulder into the arm socket” and only hold each pose for a specified number of breath cycles, depending on the exact expression each student was practicing. Before beginning a chant, another instructor directed us to close our eyes and focus on the “brow point,” explaining that we should close our eyes and gently look toward the place where our brows would meet.

Even while we were moving into or attempting poses, instructors offered vivid instruction, using terms such as “door side” and “mirror side” to help us differentiate between the right and left sides of our bodies and keep all of our movements

synchronized. They also offered direction by asking us to “flatten your belly and tailbone,” move into the pose “using the hips and bending from the hip crease,” and informing us that we should be feeling an “external rotation” of the thighs so that our feet become pigeon-toed. In one class, the instructor repeatedly asked us to open or relax our jaws; while we were in forward fold, he further specified by asking us to think about “the flesh hanging off of your face and eyes, letting the jaw relax.” When coming out of poses, instructors gave specific instructions such as asking us to move “vertebrae by vertebrae.”

In the event that instructions were unclear or did not come out as planned, instructors offered clarification. For example, after we began attempting a pose that “we haven’t done in a while” on one side, the instructor announced that “it’s clear that I need to do a better job explaining,” continuing by demonstrating the pose herself while walking us through each individual step to achieving the pose. Another instructor admitted that her verbal instructions and her demonstration were conflicting and that some students were doing things backwards, “doing as I was doing, not as I was saying.” In general, when instructions were unclear, the instructors seemed comfortable admitting that they could have done a better job and then proceeded to offer further explanation.

Sometimes instructors would bring extended examples into their classes to help give their directions a more well rounded feeling and also to help us maintain our focus throughout the practice. In the beginning of one class, we were instructed to dedicate our practice to someone else in our lives. Throughout the practice, the instructor would

remind us of that dedication, telling us to hold each pose so that “if your person was right here, they would be able to see how much you love them just from seeing you in the pose.” This extended example helped to motivate and refresh us through a vigorous physical practice. Another instructor used an example to open and then again to close class. The first song that played on her playlist was about an innocent man who went to prison and the only thing that kept him from taking his life while incarcerated was the fact that he had to care for a rosebush. She brought his idea back into the class toward the end, asking us to go to our own level in our stretches, explaining that finding our own edge was our “rosebush” for the day. This idea of repetition, repeating themes and ideas in class, helped us gain clarity on what the goals for each practice were. For instance, one instructor commented at the beginning of class that many of us seemed to be in need of a certain amount of surrender. Repeatedly throughout the class, the instructor explained that she too needed to engage in more surrender regarding her own son, his final exams, and grades.

The instructors also offered metaphors pertaining to the mind, body, and relaxation in order for us to fully understand their instructions. One instructor used the term “vertical pillars of strength” to refer to our arms, implying that our arms should be strong with the muscles fully engaged in each pose. Another instructor directed us to hold onto our shins and “stir our hips, like you’re stirring a big pot of soup.” These metaphors helped us begin to mentally visualize what we should be trying to achieve with each posture or movement. In addition to using specific verbal instruction,

instructors also helped us feel and visualize their instruction beyond the use of metaphors.

### *Using physical directives*

The instructors' clear verbal instructions were coupled with clear physical instruction, allowing us to observe their and other students' physical movements and demonstrations as well as by physically engaging with us as we attempted poses.

The instructors would often demonstrate as they spoke their verbal directions, using their own mats or the space in between students to engage in each pose. We were often instructed to “come out of the [previous] pose and watch.” One instructor even seemed more comfortable demonstrating than giving verbal directions, which she seemed to struggle to express orally. Most instructors coupled their physical demonstrations with verbal instructions, leading us through both the natural but incorrect positioning and then on to the correct positioning. For example, for a pose called “wild thing,” an instructor acted as a role model, demonstrating the proper “internal” shoulder rotation, then simultaneously explained and demonstrated the improper “external” shoulder rotation. After viewing the demonstration in conjunction with the verbal instructions, I was better able to understand not only the positioning of my shoulder and arms, but also get a sense of what it should feel like prior to me attempting the pose. In addition to demonstrating poses with her body, one instructor even used her body as a model to discuss anatomy, lifting her shirt and pointing to where the rib cages meet as a point for us to be aware of in a particular pose.



When giving demonstrations or expressing poses along with us, many of the instructors adjusted their physical positioning in the room so that all of the students could see their bodies fully. Instructors would even demonstrate the movements from a seated position so that we would not have to strain our necks to watch them when we were laying on our stomachs. While some instructors positioned themselves on their mats parallel to us students, most instructors set up their mats perpendicular to ours so that we could view their physical postures and movements in their entirety. One instructor even preferred for us to position ourselves in a circle so that she could place her mat in that circle amongst us, demonstrating from there or moving into the center of the circle to demonstrate. Other instructors preferred to move around the room so that we were all still facing them straight on when we were in poses that faced the sides of the room, as opposed to forward, like “wide-leg forward fold”. In general, instructors seemed aware of their physical position within the room and attempted to adjust their proximity and positioning in relation to the students so that we could all get the best visual of their bodies as possible.

However, occasionally, the instructor was not the most clearly visible person in the room for me. I noticed that I would sometimes identify exemplars in the room, talented students who I could look toward to make sure I was doing the pose correctly or see the full expression of a pose. Although I would regularly look to exemplar students in the room, in one particularly full class, it was almost necessary that students looked to one another across the circle because certain edges of the students could not see the instructor at all.

More often, however, the instructors would identify exemplars and direct our attention to that person. One particular instructor would identify exemplars directly, calling out one, two, and sometimes even three students' names and instructing the rest of us to look at them. In almost all cases in which she did this, the instructor would explain that each person had a different expression of the pose but that they were all "correct," emphasizing that all bodies will express the poses differently. Other instructors more subtly directed students' attention to exemplars by complimenting them, making comments like "[their name], that's beautiful!" Still other instructors asked for exemplars to demonstrate poses such as "dancer" and "downward facing dog." In each instance, the instructors would point out what the person was doing correctly in the pose and was very complimentary of the volunteer.

In addition to providing visual examples of physical bodies, instructors also engaged with student's bodies, touching us, correcting us, and pushing us deeper into poses. For example, an instructor directed us to "tuck the tailbone" and proceeded to come around the room, placing one hand on each person's abdomens and the other their back in order to make our bodies contort into the desired position. This practice was so regular for one instructor in particular that I would automatically try to better adjust myself when I saw her heading over to my mat, attempting to better embody the pose before she had to fix me.

Generally, when instructors would physically adjust students, the adjustments were made in accordance with the directions they had just given. For example, one

instructor placed her hand between my shoulder blades, directly correlating my posture with her directions to have external rotation of the arms. After adjusting my posture, the instructor let out an affirming “there!” One instructor even asked for permission before adjusting students, “Can I touch you?” and then afterward following up with, “Does that feel different?” In this way, the instructor made sure each student was comfortable and felt attended to during her class, inviting, not requiring, them to participate fully in the practice. In this way, instructors were not only generally welcoming to students in the practice, but also welcoming and inviting them toward whatever physical experience each member desired.

Through the use of physical demonstrations, examples, and instruction, we were able to better visualize and then embody the verbal instruction provided by instructors. This use of clear instruction allowed the practice to be interactive, with instructors constantly engaging with their students.

### **Interactive Experience**

Yoga instructors cultivated a practice in which their students’ opinions, thoughts, and values were taken into consideration. By bringing focus to the connections involved with practicing yoga as well as by being open to feedback and questions, instructors created an environment in which they and their students were constantly interacting and negotiating the meaning of their practice.

### *Encouraging connections*

Instructors encouraged us to connect with our bodies in each pose. Specifically in regards to the body, instructors often emphasized the breath and it's connection to our bodies and poses. One instructor specifically directed us to “allow your exhalation to carry you down” so that we felt further grounded and connected with our mats.

Aside from encouraging us to connect with our bodies, the instructors sought connection with us as people. After taking a “Level 2” class for the first time, the instructor followed up with me, asking me how I felt after the practice. Many of the instructors built rapport with their students, knowing most of their names and even knowing personal details about their lives.

In this interactive atmosphere, students connected with one another as well. During the practice, I made connections with other students, making eye contact with them and smiling while we moved through postures. Based on the small talk that would take place before, during, and after class, I often got the impression that many of the students in these studios were friends outside of yoga, their connection to one another was clear. One time, a student burst into tears in the middle of a practice and hurried out of the room. Many students called her name and tried to console her. Eventually, the instructor was the one who was able to connect with her and bring her back into the studio. That same instructor often reminded us that we should be grateful for the connection we have in the “kula,” explaining that “connection is what we come here for, above all else” and then instructed us to “bow to that.”

Sometimes, we were even prompted to connect with people that weren't present in the class. Specifically, one instructor discussed a dream that she had in which she felt a tremendous amount of love for a friend from her past, whom she was no longer in contact with. The instructor explained that those connections, that love, is always with us whether we realize it or not—those connections never leave and are always in our hearts. The instructor began class with this story, encouraging us to tap into and really listen to those deeper connections that we have within us.

### **Listening as a means of connecting**

In order to connect to the practice, to our bodies, and to ourselves, instructors encouraged us to engage in a various forms of listening. Firstly, I noticed the importance of listening in the practice when a class was so crowded that I had to really listen closely to the instructor. In this case, I could not rely on many of my other senses; since I was crammed into a tiny space next to a wall, I could not rely on my sense of sight to observe the instructors or other students. I had to just focus on the instructor's words, internalize their instruction, and embody their directions as best I as I could.

This brings about the point of listening to one's body. In order to engage in the practice, we had to feel connected to our physical bodies and "give it what it needs." Instructors explained that we should constantly "listen to the body" and only take the practice to the level our bodies were comfortable with that day, whether it be resting more or intensifying the practice more than directed. Some instructors even directed us

to not “wait for my body cues,” instead directing us to “listen deeply to what your body is asking for” and do that.

Another facet to listening is just listening to and connecting to our selves. One instructor often spoke of “overcoming expectations,” encouraging us to “get out of our heads and into our hearts.” If we did that, she explained that we would better be able to see through the expectations others and we have set for us and truly connect to our inner selves, our inner desires. In order to practice this, one instructor had us do an exercise in which we were to focus on our senses, specifically our sense of hearing. She wanted us to listen but not to judge or think about the sounds we were hearing—just listen to them. In this way, I was able to interact with my own thoughts and mind, better connecting to my senses and recognize and overcome the expectations I had when listening. Instructors also engaged in a lot of listening, making connections and interacting with their students through seeking our feedback.

### *Seeking feedback*

Some of the feedback that instructors sought was in regards to practical topics. One instructor encouraged our feedback regarding class scheduling. After receiving feedback about adding an extra workshop, the instructor said she was fine with it but it would have to be on Thursdays, during a certain timeframe, and a certain number of people would have to commit to it before putting it on the schedule. She sought further feedback by asking students to pass along some potential dates that would work for them. The same instructor sought feedback regarding changing her Monday “Level 1”

class to a “Level 2” class, explaining that if people have a problem with that, they can text her—“you know how to get ahold of me!” And it was true, the instructor’s personal email and phone numbers were displayed on the studio’s website, making it easy to pass along feedback to this instructor. Other practical topics instructors sought feedback on included the temperature of the classroom. In classes that took place in a hot studio, instructors would seek feedback on whether the room was too hot or not hot enough. In another studio, an instructor opened the doors to let fresh air in and asked if that would bother any of us. Even more interactive, one instructor asked us to text her a band that we would like to hear in next week’s class so that she can incorporate it into her “immaculately timed” playlist.

Instructors attempted to make the class interactive in order to make sure our specific needs were met. By interacting with their students, instructors were able to tailor the experience to the unique values and goals of each of their students, a topic further explored in the discussion of the theme of Personalized Practice. One instructor explained that it’s “your class” and she was there to assist us in creating the experience that we wanted, acting more as an assister than a leader. Many other instructors asked for our input at the beginning of class, asking for our opinion on poses we would like to practice and/or areas of the body we would like to target. Sometimes they even asked for our input regarding the order of poses. Specifically, one instructor gave us the option of continuing in seated poses and then moving on to inversions, or taking a break from seated poses to do inversions and then returning to the seated postures later. I noticed

that overall, the instructors seemed genuinely interested in what we wanted to gain from that day's practice.

Generally, instructors prompted feedback. However, occasionally, students would initiate the interaction and offer feedback without it being asked for. More than once, students spoke up during a flow or set of postures to inform the instructor that we had forgotten to do one or more poses on the second side. Any time this happened, the instructor thanked them for pointing this out and would back track so that the same poses were incorporated on both sides of the body. One instance in which instructors did not welcome feedback was hearing from students that "I'm done with yoga." Although I never witnessed this sort of feedback, more than one instructor expressed their frustration with it. Instructors explained that the people who claim that they are done with yoga, have achieved all that they can, are often the people that need the most help. Occasionally, instructors would defer to their students without explicitly asking for feedback. During one class, the instructor was comparing the meaning of the word "Namaste" to the greeting used in the movie Avatar. She could not recall the exact phrase from the movie but a student offered it up, explaining that the phrase used in the movie was "I see you."

### **Being open to questions**

Instructors were clearly interested in creating an interactive experience with their students through gathering feedback. One main source of feedback for instructors were



questions; responding to questions made the classes more interactive and asking questions allowed instructors to gather information from and about their students.

After dedicating an entire class to focusing on minutia, one instructor explained that if we ever wanted to hear more about it, “just come in with a question” and she will be more than happy to spend time discussing it and working on it in class. In many cases, especially when new members or beginning practitioners were in classes, instructors would start off class by explaining that at any point if we had any questions, to please stop her/him and ask. For instructors that used the Sanskrit names for poses, this sometimes meant that students would ask for the meaning of the words so that they could understand what pose they were being asked to move into. These instructors were also often asked for the translation of English pose names into their Sanskrit names.

Instructors’ responses to these questions were sometimes entertaining. When asked questions regarding alignment in “wild thing,” one instructor proceeded to answer the questions while fully expressing the pose, upside down, adjusting her body to demonstrate her responses to the students’ questions. In another instructor’s class, the instructor involved all of the students in her response to one person’s question, asking us to seek this “nebulous line of the body” always spoken about in yoga. In this way, the instructor was interacting not only with the student who asked the question but with the entire class; she also used this response as a time to encourage us to interact with our own bodies.

But instructors did not only respond to our questions, they also interacted with us by asking questions of us. One instructor tested our knowledge regarding poses, asking “how long is a beginning handstand?” and after hearing the collective correct response, “two minutes,” followed up by asking “how long is an intermediate handstand?” with the class, again, collectively responding correctly, “four minutes.” The instructor quizzed us not only to gauge our knowledge but also to interact with us in an otherwise individual pose. Other instructors sought our feedback, interacting with us by posing questions regarding concepts we were focusing on in the practice. One instructor asked what we thought about how to better live “in the moment,” calling out students by name to elicit their responses.

Instructors not only asked questions of us but also told stories of when they had asked questions of others. In one particular case, an instructor recalled a conference at which he asked a famous guru, B. K. S. Iyengar, “how do you know when you’ve found the right teacher?” The instructor continued by also offering Iyengar’s response that “everyone is your teacher.” This message was used as inspiration for our practice that day and the general story-telling was used by our instructor as a means to interact with us and offer a personal example of when he was inspired by a response to a question.

Instructors created an entirely interactive practice by facilitating students’ connections with themselves and each other and by being open to feedback and questions. Through these interactive experiences, instructors were able to point out the

interconnectedness of yogic concepts as well as their transference to their students' lives off their mats.

### **Interconnectedness of the Practice**

Instructors emphasized the holistic appeal of yoga as a practice, bringing attention to the interconnectedness of our practice and our physical well-being, and also how the practice can transfer to our lives outside of our yoga practices. The instructors obviously believed in practicing all together, as a community, as they led interactive classes as opposed to internal practices. After discussing the bond we had all formed throughout one particularly grueling class, one instructor specifically commented on this phenomenon, explaining that “that’s the beauty of practicing in a community, it generates this sort of communal and holist energy that brings people together.”

In addition to encouraging a holistic energy amongst the students, instructors encouraged us to gain a holistic understanding of our bodies. In one instance, an instructor directed us to spend some time on the smaller movements and muscles of the body, like rolling our eyes around. He explained that by paying attention to our often overlooked physical abilities, we would be better able to spread our intentions, both within and outside of the practice, throughout our whole bodies. This was not the only incident of a minutia-focused practice. Other instructors dedicated entire 90-minute classes to focusing on these taken for granted physical capabilities in order to help us gain a more holistic understanding of our bodies and of our practice.

Along with this discussion of the whole body arose topics regarding injuries—specifically how to avoid them. Instructors emphasized that what we do to and with our bodies in the practice is carried with us outside of the studio. Therefore, to the best of our abilities, we should avoid injury. Many discussions of injury seemed to center around our shoulders, which are particularly difficult to heal once injured. Instructors directed us to externally rotate the arms, otherwise the “shoulders do all the work” and could be easily injured. Instead, instructors offered specific instruction to help us “protect” our shoulders and our bodies in general. One instructor who was particularly versed in alignment and how best to avoid injury talked about her own experience with a rotator cuff injury. She explained how this one injury affected other aspects of her life and fitness, informing us that her arm with a healthy rotator cuff can lift 10 pounds more than the injured arm. However, she ended the story positively, encouraging us to work on, not ignore, our weaknesses so that we can continue to improve and grow. This message of recovery and growth is holistic in the sense that it can be applied both on and off the mat.

The body was not viewed as its own entity to be considered, however. Instructors emphasized the holistic relationship between the body, mind, and spirit. One instructor led us through a symbolic movement which linked our thoughts, words, and actions, asking us to hold our hands in “prayer position” over our foreheads and then moving them down to our mouths, and lastly to our hearts. This exercise not only illuminated the connection between our minds, mouths, and hearts but also highlighted the connection between our thoughts, words, and actions. All of these elements are interconnected.

Yoga as a practice encourages an awareness of our own interconnectedness, within and amongst ourselves. However, yoga is also holistic in the sense that it interconnects with our lives off of our mats. One instructor explained that the practice should be opening us up to happiness so that we are able to find it all the time, not just in the practice or in a posture. That same instructor offered us an example of a personal goal of hers to be a yogi both “on and off the mat.” Specifically, she explained that she normally feels happy, energetic, and positive on her mat and in class but that as soon as she steps out of class, she turns into a different person. The difference occurred somewhere between the studio and her car, where she admitted to feeling “some serious road rage.” Other instructors emphasized this same concept, explaining that “yoga is the art of living,” not just something that we do in class two or three times a week.

Just as we were encouraged to cross-appropriate the skills we learned in yoga to our lives off the mat, so too in the class did we practice cross-appropriation. For example, one instructor had us practice our arm positioning, “cactus arms,” and alignment while seated before moving to the wall to practice inversions. While sitting, we were encouraged to energetically engage our arms, as if we were a restaurant server, just throwing plates behind us. The ability to cross-appropriate could come in handy as we learned to counterbalance the physical postures of the tasks we do all day—like sitting at a computer. After explaining this idea, one instructor explained that she sits at a computer all day and that the pose we were currently practicing really helps her relieve tension from her shoulders. In this way, we could more fully recognize and give gratitude to the body for all that it does for us.

This idea of transference occurs in both directions; not only should yogic ideas penetrate other areas of our lives but so too should ideas from our lives be incorporated into our yoga. In particular, one instructor brought in quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. in celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. She explained that she was excited to find “yoga quotes” from him. Although they were probably not intended to be used in that way, she was happy to see that they applied to our class and to our practice in general. One quote in particular stood out to me: “Life at its best is a creative synthesis of opposites in fruitful harmony,” it read. The instructor explained that we can think about opposite sides of our bodies working together to complete a given task. While this is one interpretation, I see the quote relating more to the holistic interconnections between seemingly disparate parts: between our yoga practice and our experience in the world outside of yoga, between our minds and bodies, between our thoughts and our actions.

As a holistic practice, yoga appeals to the interconnections between mind, body, and spirit. Furthermore, it encourages holistic thinking about all aspects of our lives and encourages us to seek out the interconnections between yoga and other aspects of our identities. Instructors tended to convey all of this information in a light-hearted manner.

### **Light-Hearted Practice**

Instructors were generally extremely encouraging of their students, using humor and messages of “letting go” to keep the practice upbeat, positive, and light-hearted.

### *Encouraging students*

Instructors constantly offered affirmation to their students, giving small compliments like “that’s beautiful,” “you have a lovely thoracic twist,” and “that’s right.” Instructors never directed any critical or negative talk toward us. In a particular instance, an instructor was extremely encouraging of a student who had volunteered to be used as an exemplar to demonstrate “downward facing dog” pose. The instructor commented that the student’s pose was so great that it was difficult for the student to even demonstrate the incorrect positioning that the instructor was trying to explain. In this way, we were encouraged to appreciate our bodies and our bodies’ capabilities. We were also encouraged to take advantage of, to “soak in,” the feeling of being in a room surrounded by people with this type of appreciation; we were to internalize that appreciation and radiate it back outward to encourage others to have a “spirit of being limitless.”

In addition to encouraging us within the poses, “feeling the energy as opposed to the effort,” and within the practice, the instructors encouraged us regarding other aspects of our lives. When discussing how “stress” and our “diet” can affect how we feel, one instructor encouraged us to not blame ourselves for indulging in things, like food, but just to accept it and enjoy ourselves. Many of the instructors seemed to take up this teaching philosophy of encouragement. One instructor in particular even explained his philosophy of coaching his students based on what they doing well, encouraging them to develop those skills, as opposed to focusing on their weaknesses.

Instructors praised our efforts by telling us that they could tell that we had really put forth effort into following their directions, demonstrating this mentality of positive reinforcement. Instructors sometimes offered personal examples as a means of encouragement. When explaining that shifting our weight while moving into handstand can be scary, one instructor encouraged us by saying “it’s Okay if you don’t get up,” revealing “it only took me 10 years!” In this way, she was able to praise our efforts and encourage us to persevere. Not only did the instructors celebrate our effort, so too did we, as students, celebrate our efforts together, bonding through particularly intense or demanding practices. The instructors also expressed gratitude toward us as students; one in particular expressed how our effort to show up to her classes and dedication within her classes was an inspiration to her in times when she might not be able to find other sources of encouragement. Through instructors’ encouragement, the practice remained focused on the positive and a light-hearted feeling was developed in the practice.

### **Encouraging students to let go**

As students, we were really encouraged to let go of the heaviness that we might be “carrying around” with us. Foremost, we were encouraged to let go of control and just “surrender,” go “with the flow.” One particular instructor explained that we just had to ride that flow; showing up was half the work and the other half was just letting go and accepting what the practice brought to us. Part of letting go of control in the practice involved us occasionally physically tipping or falling over. Instructors encouraged this, explaining that “falling is great” because it means that you are pushing yourself, letting go of control and just exploring the pose.



Part of letting go of control involved letting go of our expectations of others and ourselves. We were encouraged to not feel preoccupied with doing a pose correctly but rather to do it in a way that made the most sense for us, forgetting about any expectations we might have about what that pose might look like or the level we should be aiming for. Letting go of expectations translated off the mat to situations in which we are sometimes “bound to be disappointed” due simply to the expectations we have created for it. Instead, we were encouraged to be more open to the experiences that life brings us. In an Anusara style class, an instructor explained that this actually the meaning of “Anusara,” “step[ping] into the flow” and opening ourselves and our hearts to where life is taking us.

Being able to let go and open up meant that we also had to let go of the stress and baggage that we have been “carrying.” Instructors encouraged us to just “let it all out,” many times through deep breathing. One instructor directed us to “inhale new opportunities and possibilities,” and then to “exhale what you’ve been carrying with you.” During relaxation, one instructor directed us to imagine a “soft rain” falling over our heads, taking with it “anything that isn’t serving you.” She explained that these could be negative thoughts or maybe even patterns that used to work for us but no longer do. Through letting go, the practice was able to bring a lightness to our bodies, minds and spirits. Along with that light-heartedness came a lot of laughter as instructors used humor as a means of encouragement.

## **Encouragement through humor**

Instructors' use of humor in the practice was often evident right from the beginning of practice. Inevitably, almost always there would be one or two students who arrived to class late. At the beginning of one class, the instructor saw a few late-comers rushing from their cars to the studio. The instructor opened the side door and started counting down "5... 4... 3..." as the students bustled about, gathering their mats and bags. The instructor stopped her countdown at "3," called out "Just kidding!" and held the door open as the students entered the room. One time, I was even late to class. After apologizing for my tardiness, I explained to the instructor that I thought practice started at 9:30 and the instructor proclaimed, "well I guess you're actually early then," since it was only 9:15. Their use of humor regarding students' tardiness encouraged the late-comers to still attend class, demonstrating forgiveness and compassion.

Instructors also used humor as a way to encourage the building of rapport with and amongst their students. One time, a student brought a friend to a particularly rigorous class; the instructor joked as class started that after bringing a friend to such an intense practice, the two "might not be friends anymore!" This joke spurred discussion amongst the group about how the friends met and how long they had been exercising together. The same instructor once incorporated a running joke into our practice. I had a friend coming that day to try the class, so I set up a mat and props for him next to my own mat. My friend did not end up making it to class but throughout, the instructor joked, asking where he was. As a group, we developed a few humorous scenarios,

concluding that he may have ended up next door in another instructor's class or possibly ditched the class, instead deciding to grab a burger at the restaurant down the street.

Humor was also infused when talking about poses. Occasionally, instructors joked about the names of poses. When explaining that when in chair position, we should feel like we are about to sit down, one instructor joked that the pose should be called “I-need-to-go-to-the-bathroom-sana,” a play on words since in Sanskrit, pose names end in the syllables “asana.” Yet another instructor joked about the naming of poses, explaining that although pigeon pose is labeled as a “hip opener,” it is really not our hips but rather that “your butt should be screaming at you.” She proceeded to comment on how yoga teachers tend to use euphemisms, and have “nice ways of saying things.” She continued by joking about how a “hip opener” should really be called a “butt opener” but that if we called them that, students would just run out of the room when they heard it. In this way, instructors infused humor into the practice, encouraging us to do challenging or uncomfortable postures by making them silly and fun.

This approach of pairing challenging postures with humor continued as instructors incorporated funny metaphors into the practice. One particularly silly yet encouraging metaphor came from an instructor just before we began an intense three-hour practice called Eye of the Tiger practice. The instructor made everyone laugh right from the beginning by explaining that through the practice, we were to “ride the tiger... don't let it devour you—even in times of rest, rest on your tiger but don't ever let it devour you.” In this way, we were all encouraged to begin the practice with a playful

attitude. Another instructor also used the metaphor of hitting your face to explain how vigorously one movement should be performed. As if this was not humorous enough, we all laughed even harder when the instructor referred to her manual and told us that it even said that the movement should be “forceful enough to bruise the face if one was to actually hit themselves.” These humorous ways of connecting to and discussing poses encouraged students by creating a sense of playfulness within the practice. Instructors created environments in which students could thrive and feel empowered through their own personalized practice.

### **Personalized Practice**

Instructors created a personalized experience for each student in the practice by opening themselves up personally and then by providing personalized instruction and attention to each student.

When explaining yogic principles, instructors would often draw on their own personal experience to help us better understand what they were talking about. One instructor, talking about how we often tend to dedicate ourselves more fully to a task when it is for someone else’s benefit as opposed to just our own, told us a story from her personal life. She explained that her husband was grateful that she stood in line at the post office to mail a package to his parents. She continued by saying that she would not have stood in the 30-minute line for herself, or even for his parents, but that she did it for him because she loves him and wants to show him love. Other instructors drew from examples in their personal lives in order to give a personal feel to their teaching. One

instructor drew examples from her family life, revealing that her husband now had to leave for work at 4 a.m. and even disclosed details about her son's grades and the concern she had for him. She explained that she was fine with him "exploring" in school but "not at \$5,000 per class." In this way, I felt like I better knew her son and furthermore better knew her as a person.

One instructor who was particularly real and candid in class talked about "psycho women" and explained that she had some of "those tendencies" in her, learned from her mother, and that she was learning how to "work on it" and overcome those tendencies. Aside from disclosing information about her upbringing, she also disclosed information about her body. For example, when transitioning to inversions, she explained that for women if you "go up," invert yourself such as in a handstand, while menstruating, it can make your period stop. She continued by explaining that while this may "sounds nice," you then might get it four times in one month, "that's what happened to me last month!" While the amount of instructors' personal disclosure varied from class to class and from instructor to instructor, in general, instructors engaged in some personal disclosure, creating an environment in which we could be open and honest about our personal needs and experiences as students.

Instructors further personalized the practice by offering a lot of personalized instruction to members. For example, one member had recently returned to the practice after having knee surgery and was undergoing rehabilitation therapy. When giving us instructions, the instructor would often qualify them by tagging "unless you've had

recent knee surgery” to the end of her directions. The instructor would then proceed to provide alternative sets of directions for that particular member of the class.

In addition to offering specific instructions for particular individuals in the class, instructors also built in options into their instructions for the whole class. Many instructors prided themselves on “giving you options,” especially when classes were labeled “All Level,” assuming that each student would have different needs and limitations, giving options for “binds” to help us move deeper into poses and suggesting the use of “props” to lessen the intensity of each pose.

Instructors sometimes offered us options regarding the order of poses or the number of repetitions of a movement or posse. For example, one instructor gave us the option of leading us through a sequence for a third time, otherwise we could just relax into a resting position. Instructors offered all students various options of how to express each pose as well. One instructor offered a few options for a wall pose which might look different depending on how claustrophobic we were. Instructors would offer specific instruction, explaining for example in “chaturanga” that we have the option of putting “one or both knees down” if we have a “tweaky shoulder” or “shoulder problem.” Other instructors more vaguely gave us permission to personalized each pose, instructing us for example to utilize the “arm position of your choice.” Also, more generally, we were instructed to move at our own personal pace. One instructor explained that if her count was too fast or too slow, we should go at our own pace because synchronizing our

movements with our breath was more important than making sure we completed the right number of repetitions.

Part of offering such modifications included instructors' recommendation that we use props. Instructors often encouraged us to "place a blanket under our knee" in certain positions, "use blocks" as "extensions of our arms" and to gain stability, and to "use the strap" so that we could focus more on feeling each stretch as opposed to trying to achieve some sort of ultimate position with the body. In this way, we were able to modify our individual practices, personalizing our experience with each instructor and with each yoga practice based on any injuries we might have and furthermore, how intense we would like to make our practice.

Even when addressing the whole class, instructors emphasized that each person's expression of a pose would be personalized, depending on their body and how they were feeling on that particular day. For example, when drawing our attention to student exemplars, one instructor would use multiple students as visuals for the rest of us, allowing us to see the various individual expressions of the same pose.

Instructors also provided time in class to offer personalized attention to individual students. One instructor, after giving directions, encouraged us to try the pose on our own, walking around the room giving advice and offering to be a spotter if we needed one. I received personalized instruction from multiple instructors. In one particular case, the instructor prompted us to "wave your hand at me" if "you don't feel it." After summoning the instructor to assist me, she helped me adjust my posture,

explaining that my feet needed to be a bit wider and that I needed to lead with the hip as opposed to “the thoracic” in order to feel the subtle stretch she was aiming for.

Following her directions, I tried the pose again with her there, asking me “do you feel the difference?” When I nodded and pointed to the new place where I could feel the pose, she nodded “yes” and proceeded to assist other students.

Throughout the practice, instructors personalized class by opening themselves up and offering personal examples, offering students individualized and personalized instruction, and giving us many options regarding modifying poses. Generally, I got the sense that instructors emphasized personalizing our practice so much because at the end of the day, as one instructor put it, we’re not doing yoga for the instructor, we’re doing it for ourselves. Therefore, we should be focusing on getting out of it what we need as individuals.

### **Summary**

This analysis revealed that the leadership approaches utilized by yoga instructors put them in a learner’s position, constantly seeking to negotiate and co-create meaning with their students. Instructors used clear instruction to develop interactive experiences with their students. These practices generally focused on illuminating interconnections and instruction was conveyed in a light-hearted manner. This allowed students to engage in a personalized practice with their instructors and other members of the kula. Some of these leadership practices, such as being encouraging and offering clear verbal directions translate easily into contexts of leadership beyond the mat. However, other practices,



such as physically touching students, cannot be seen mirrored in professional leadership. This analysis depicts a picture of leadership in which leading is embodied in unique and otherwise peculiar fashions in order to cultivate a welcoming, empowering, and positive experience for students.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **INTERVIEW ANALYSIS**

This chapter is designed to respond to RQ 2, “How does the embodied practice of modern postural yoga influence leadership experiences outside of the yogic practice?” In order to answer this question, I interviewed people who consider themselves to be yoga practitioners and also hold a leadership position in a professional context. I engaged in semi-structured interviews with 16 participants who had varying leadership experiences with varying years of dedicated yoga practices.

After the interviews took place, five salient themes pertaining to this question emerged through thematic analysis of the interviews. Specifically, the participants spoke about: (a) their practice of constantly learning, (b) the need to “know thyself” (c) overcoming life’s hurdles, (d) striving to be open to discovery, and (e) the integration of yoga, leadership, and life. These themes tell a story of how yogic principles can be seen paralleled in interview participants’ leadership practices. In this chapter, each theme will be further expanded upon, offering examples and interpretations of how the practice of yoga may influence leadership practices before concluding with a brief summary of the analysis.

## **Always Learning**

Learning was a crucial point of discussion for the participants. Their responses created a story in which constantly being willing to learn, allows one to gain a greater awareness of themselves and others because they are better able to listen.

### *Being a learner in yoga & leadership*

Participants expressed how practicing yoga was something they could envision “doing for the rest of my life and not getting bored.” After initially being attracted to yoga because of the practice’s physical benefits, over time practitioners find that that there’s even more rich meaning to be learned, “there’s so much more you can get out of it” and everyone who is willing to try and learn can be successful. Jess described yoga as an inherently learning practice:

I think that the ability to be a beginner, to let yourself learn, and the humility of like “Shit, I still haven’t figured it out...” It’s a place to learn, to be a learner, to be a beginner, and be in this safe space... It’s a humbling practice and you can practice so hard and still there’s so much more to learn.

Luke explained his practice of curiosity, entering every yoga class asking “what can I gain from this practice?,” knowing that in every routine put together by every instructor, “I will learn something.” Luke further developed this idea, detailing his experiences learning with, not from, his teacher, stating that “it was kind of fun learning with someone... we helped each other learn.” He now tries to learn something from everyone he interacts with in his role as a professor. Maintaining the same attitude in leadership, he explained that even though people may say things that “drive me up the

wall,” that they may very well also say things that are “valid, and I can learn something from.”

Participants even expressed a direct connection between their yoga practice and their learning abilities. Shane explained that in order to lead, “in order to teach, the knowledge should be lodged very clearly in my own mind. I had to become a better student.” He explained that “thanks to yoga,” he knew “how it feels to excel at something, to be effortless at something” which gave him a “vision” as he developed a new area of expertise. That vision guided him as he was learning by “literally reading some big textbook.” For Margot, learning in leadership did not only pertain to gaining textbook knowledge, but also relational knowledge. Throughout her leadership experiences, she learned that sometimes deferring to others in “hostile” meetings was a more useful practice than “to get angry and jump to my own defense.” Jess explained how yoga practice made her a better learner in general, assuming that it had to do with the constant “connection of the right and left sphere” of the brain.

Learning also facilitated innovation for participants. In her research innovation, Rhoda viewed herself as a leader,” having to seek out resources on her own and “look beyond existing literature” to learn and create space to develop her ideas. Just as Rhoda learned as she innovated ideas, Laurie explained that she “learned so much” as she designed her product and is “still learning” from reading and taking webinars in order to continue to “create” and “innovate.” In this way, learning is a means for her to “get

ahead.” She directly attributes the “calmness” she’s developed in yoga as giving her the ability to develop new ways to “think differently.”

Alicia also discussed her experiences as a learning leader. When prompted about how she got started in leadership positions at her company she explained that she started off as a gardener. She took such a position because “I believe in getting dirty, I believe in doing the work that you’re managing.” In this way, she used her body as a tool to experience and make sense of the messy, “dirty,” job of those that she would one day be managing. Now, she is able to consider that “experience” as she makes leadership decisions. In this case, Shane’s words can be used to explain how Alicia’s willingness to “learn more” and “be a better student” now factor into her leadership. Jess even incorporates yogic knowledge as she facilitates training and coaching sessions for employees, bringing in “anecdotes” from texts such as the “Bhagavad Gita” or “Autobiography of a Yogi” to impart what she has learned from the practice onto others.

Participants expressed appreciation for the constant learning that occurs throughout their yoga practice; some participants even directly correlated their yoga practice to their learning abilities. Learning was also a major topic of discussion as participants explained how learning and sharing what they’ve learned plays out in their individual leadership practices. Entering situations with a learner’s mentality also allowed participants to develop greater awareness.

*Developing awareness of the body, the mind, & of others*

Practicing yoga seemed to help participants gain a greater awareness of their body. Particularly, Luke explained that most people are “unaware that they’re carrying tension all over the body.” This unawareness has become so routine that people “just wake up that way” and “feel like they’re falling apart.” Other participants noted how their yoga practice helps them to bring awareness to their bodies, so that when they do experience stress, pain, and stiffness, they “know what I need to do for my body,” including bringing attention to the breath. Jill explained that awareness of her body has “made a big difference” in terms of relief from physical ailments. These experiences of relief can be explained in Luke’s terms: “our bodies emit and receive energy in all sorts of ways. And most of these ways we’re not conscious of. But one can gain conscious awareness of a lot of these processes” through practices such as yoga. In this way, embodied awareness of ailments, tension, and negative emotions served as a signpost to alert a person that something in their mind/body needed attention or exploration. Based on this sort of embodied inquiry, one subsequently took action to correct any misalignments.

Esmeralda noted that in times of her life when she had practiced less yoga, she now recognizes that she was “not conscious of my body.” While regularly practicing aerobics, “there was more of a denial built in versus an embracing and being conscientious and aware of what’s going on” like there is when she practices yoga. When practicing yoga, she is more aware of her body and whether in or out of the practice, is able to notice “if my heart’s going faster or if it’s getting stressful [at work]

and I need to take a breath.” Tomi specifically commented on being aware of her body at work because “you get so stiff.” Now that she’s adopted a yoga practice, she is “always paying attention to where my shoulders are, putting my shoulders down, and not putting too much pressure on whatever part of my body.”

For leaders, awareness is especially important—not only awareness of the body but awareness of others. Luke stressed the importance of recognizing our own and others’ assumptions as something “you always want to do” when leading others. He recommends staying “present” and recognizing “veils, those assumptions, those givens that you have and how they’re influencing what you decide to do.” In this way, awareness becomes a key strategy in diffusing conflict before it “escalates.” Becca also stressed the importance of leaders’ awareness of others.

I think the best teachers are usually the ones who know their students or clients, where they’re at and meet them where they’re at. And they try to find what that maybe core desire or core essence is coming through of that person so they can tap in and meet them where they’re at and then get them on the next step.

By being aware of others’ goals and desires, leaders are better equipped to connect with those they are leading and help them make their success a reality.

Rhoda echoed this sentiment when explaining that her holistic health seminar was designed specifically for freshman, a group that is “undergoing transition, a difficult time in college” and would be most likely to benefit from the course. After the seminar series was cancelled, Rhoda found ways to integrate yogic principles such as “compassion” and “authenticity” into her graduate level seminar. Students ultimately gained from such an “enriching experience,” gleaning more awareness of the concepts

and creating a “very close” relationship between themselves and their instructor. In this way, Rhoda was able to use her awareness of her students’ needs to bring them the classroom content that would most benefit them and give them greater awareness of “taboo” topics.

Jess and Shane also used their awareness of others’ to give those people a greater awareness themselves. Jess would often bring in yogic “anecdotes” into her trainings, integrating yoga and her teachings to give her trainees the insight and awareness that they needed. When advising friends and students who are beginning to practice yoga, Shane probes them, asking “Are you connecting to your body in a more powerful way? In a deeper way?” This type of questioning, he explained, brings their awareness to the connection between a physical yoga practice and deeper, more meaningful connections.

Margot continued with this notion, explaining that practicing yoga “makes you more aware of your emotions and thoughts and your place in the world” in addition to being aware of others. Tomi explained that once you have that awareness, that knowledge, “that truth, is power.” Once you gain that awareness, you have more agency to make changes in your life and more agency to help others as well. Due to that heightened awareness, participants explained that they were able to feel more empowered, seeing their work and leadership as connected to a greater, more holistic, purpose that would someday in turn affect someone else’s life in a positive way.

To sum it up, Kip shared his mission statement, paraphrased from a book by Allan Watson; he said “we’re the vessels through which the universe is aware of itself.”



Therefore, what we embody, what we reflect, the actions and words that we put into the universe are actually the building blocks of that universe. Participants' reflections paint a story in which leaders' awareness, the awareness they inspire, and the awareness they give the universe essentially create the world we live in. Through that awareness, participants found themselves more willing and able to listen.

*Listening to your body, others, & fate*

Becca explained that yoga is a practice that's meant to grow with you, and is therefore largely dependent on one listening to themselves and "meeting yourself where you're at." Luke explained the difficulty of this process,

There are several ways in which the centers of the body offer indications or signals and so forth and many times our mind is distracted. It does not listen to those things, the mind is scattered or it is distracted. We don't listen to the body. Furthermore, Kip notes that many people are out of touch with their bodies to the point that they cannot do something as basic as a somersault. He pondered the futility of trying to teach one to listen to their body when it may be something so utterly out of the realm of their understanding. How can one engage with their bodies, really listen to it, if they do not even truly know their bodies?

Aside from listening to ourselves and our bodies, listening was a common theme as pertaining to others. Jill explained that in her experience, when she is "open" and allows others to "speak their mind," that person always feels better leaving a meeting. Jess explained that listening is the "secret weapon," the reason why "my people always felt cared for." She wants to know how best to help people to be successful, and

similarly to Becca's thoughts on awareness as a leader, Jess wants to know "what's their will or their skill?" Other participants emphasized the need to "really listen" and "make others feel heard" when in a leadership position.

Becca emphasized not only listening to the students who come into her study abroad office, but also challenging them to think for themselves. After listening to their questions, she defers the question back to them, asking "well what do you want?... what do you want to get out of your experience?" In this way, she shows that she is listening but also gives them agency in the decision-making process. Shane also provided avenues for students of workshops to gain agency. He listens to his students by collecting "feedback forms" after each workshop and reviews them to make sure students are satisfied with the experience.

Becca and Jess both shared stories expressing the importance of listening to fate. Entering yoga teacher training, Becca never expected to teach, yet just felt guided to it." Listening to that guidance eventually led Becca to open her own wellness center, truly transforming her life. Similarly, Jess discussed her experience learning to listen to fate using an example from the Bhagavad Gita. She explained how Arjuna, the hesitant warrior, listening to god, disguised as Krishna, learned to stop resisting fate. This story relates to Jess' own experiences resisting a promotion to become the Vice President of Human Resources with her former employer. Krishna encouraged Arjuna, "you're gonna do it, you have to do it, it's what you're supposed to do" and after studying this story, Jess realized that she too needed to stop resisting fate and instead listen and be open to it.

Through listening to their own bodies, listening to others, and listening to a higher power, participants found meaningful ways to incorporate their yoga practices into their leadership practices. If a leader is truly a learner, willing to develop awareness and listen, they will inevitably come to better know themselves throughout the process.

### **Know Thyself**

Through the “me time” participants sought in yoga, they were better able to reflect, consider their identities, and get in touch with their true selves. Once this connection was made, participants found that they were better able to be truly present.

#### *Yoga as “me time”*

Participants expressed that for them, their yoga practice was “my time,” a “haven” or from their busy lives, full time jobs, and the work that tends to follow them home from those jobs. Tomi explained that her job involves helping “everybody else” and that “I forget to help myself;” practicing yoga give she that time for self care. Similarly, Mallory explained that her yoga practice allows her to work out and give herself “me time” simultaneously, making her feel like she’s “getting two things” at once. It’s her one chance to “close my eyes... stretch and zone out.” Luke explained that this type of practice is good for developing “self acceptance” because “you have to spend time with yourself... concentrating, meditating,” getting to know yourself better. He explained that as a student, he viewed yoga practice as “time for myself” out of his busy work schedule. This disposition toward practice inspired him to have “never missed a practice” even if it was “late at night” or if he was “exhausted,” because it was a time

for him to take care of himself. Lynnette justified her taking time for yoga practice, sometimes leaving the office before working hours ended to make it to class on time, explaining that instead of feeling the “need to explain all our conduct,” she simply viewed that “me time” as something “that you need to do.” That “escape,” that “me time” created by yoga allows participants to be more reflective.

### *Reflection in/of yoga*

Yoga was viewed by participants as an opportunity for reflection. Margot said “the movements become so routine that you don’t have to focus on them, you’re able to focus on your thoughts... let your mind wander.” Reflecting on her yoga practice, Alicia explained that she “internally knew yoga” before she even began her practice and “just needed to get into the class and do it.” In that way, practicing yoga allowed her to reflect on its teachings as something she “already kind of knew” but that was “brought so much more light” through the practice.

This emphasis on reflection was also evident in the participants’ discussion of their work and leadership practices. Margot encouraged students to reflect on “what’s best for you” by posing questions, similar to Becca’s strategy of deference, by asking them “what do you think?” and really trying to get them to do some thinking before providing them with options to move forward. She emphasized the importance of reflecting on “people’s strengths” and “individuality” to ensure that “they’re getting to do what they want to do and what they’re best at.” Kip explained his leadership inspiration, describing yogis who challenge their students to “look within yourself and

find what is true and great within you” and his will to embody that same reflective philosophy when guiding his own students.

For participants, it was not only important to encourage their students to be reflective, Luke explained that “leaders need to constantly self-examine” and question their own motives, stating that “we learn the skills for how to do that in yoga.” Margot echoed this sentiment, claiming that practicing yoga “influenced my reflexivity,” teaching her to be reflective as “good teachers always do.” Directly incorporating “deep breathing” from yoga into conflict management with students, Annie B. explained how since she began practicing yoga, she’s better able to reflect upon her emotions, “I feel myself being reactive or feeling reactive to what a student’s saying” and deal with that by “breathing deep” and “talking slower and softer than they do.” When treating a hemorrhaging patient, Mallory also used reflective practices to “take a few deep breaths” and consider “what do I need to do? What can I and can I not do?”

Participants also discussed their reflections of their own work and leadership. Before practicing yoga, Jess “looked at my current circumstances and thought ‘most people would be happy, why am I not happier—what’s my problem?’” She attributed her yoga practice as something that really helped her reflect on her goals in life, go back to school, and start a career that she was more passionate about. Esmeralda discussed her leadership practice, explaining that she is “conscientious of my own health,” knowing that being reflective about her own needs will allow her to remain free of the “toxicity” that she doesn’t want to “carry around.”

Participant's responses describe yoga as a time where reflective practices can be developed. Those practices are then translated into their relationships with others, their own decision making, and their general attitudes toward work and leadership. Through that reflection, participants were better able to contemplate their and others' identities.

### *Identities at work & in leadership*

As the owner of a wellness center, Becca explained the identity of some of the yoga instructors at her studio. They sometimes "aren't very leadership-driven" in the traditional sense and although they "lead a class," do not see that leadership identity transferring into the "real world." The disconnect between leading a yoga class and being a leader is so deep rooted for some that "they don't care... about making money" and "feel guilty about charging people." Clearly, these instructors integrate their work with their identity. Esmeralda suggests a similar incorporation of leadership and identity when describing people who "genuinely get angry... that's how they lead," countering by saying that I don't like that and I don't want that to be a part of who I am." In a creative profession, like Margot's, she explains that "it's about people's ideas, their own research, it's about knowledge... this is your identity plus it's your job. It's all tied together." Therefore, criticism of one's work may be translated as a criticism of their identity. Esmeralda has learned to cope with such criticisms by reminding herself "don't take things personally" even though that's hard. She explains that she is grateful for her yoga practice because "it reminds me of who I am. And what's important." By constantly reaffirming her identity in yoga practice, she is better able to reaffirm her identity as a leader despite what critics may have to say about her.

Similarly, Luke recounted that his approach to leadership changed because of yoga when it came to maintaining his “self image—how we see ones self, how we see ourselves, how we define ourselves.” Once they gain this sense of identity, Shane explains that leaders are better equipped to “align their intention with action.” Rhoda echoed this sentiment, describing a yogi friend of hers. She said that for him “instruction doesn’t happen only within that one hour—any time you speak to him... His words, actions and thoughts are aligned.” For Esmeralda, part of this identity alignment involves honoring others’ identities too, explaining the concept of “Namaste” as “the light in me honors the light in you.” She stated that “I really feel that way toward people... sometimes it’s hard but I try—I definitely feel that it’s part of my leadership.”

Yoga is explained by participants as a practice that constantly reminds you of your own identity which cannot, or according to some should not, be separated from one’s work or leadership practice. Once that identity came to light, participants were better able to tap into and connect with their true selves.

#### *Finding one’s true self through yoga*

Because yoga “forces you to spend time with yourself,” one really comes to “know thyself” through the practice. Laurie described good yoga instructors as “somebody who firstly knows themselves.” Margot continued by praising yoga instructors who “accept” and “celebrate” others’ as their true selves as well, who “have this level of acceptance that you just don’t get from people walking around on the streets.” This makes sense because Namaste, the word used to end each yoga practice, as

Luke explained, is about “mutual respect that you honor the other person’s true self.” He continued by discussing yoga’s emphasis on “where individuals fit into the cosmos” and creating space for “one to come around to [the notion of self]: learning what self is... and feeling good about that.”

Rhoda discussed how this concept of self has been translated into an “important quality” of her leadership, explaining that through “transparency” and “courage,” she is able to show others her “authentic feelings, my fears...” and “that means that others feel comfortable to do that with me as well.” Particularly, she discussed that in the midst of tragedy, such “authenticity” created a “sense of belongingness and connectedness” amongst herself, her peers, and her students. Similarly, Luke noted, “you always want to be your true self, whatever you’re doing,” especially as a leader because “If you put on a false façade, it’s gonna fall flat.” A leader must be able to “look in the mirror,” Alicia explains, “and you’re who you think you are inside and outside and it’s bringing that together, aligning your soul with your body” that allows one to connect with your true self and with others’ true selves.

In addition to transferring from yoga to leadership, this notion of being your true self spills over into all aspects of life. Alicia explained

I’m who I am regardless of where I’m at because yoga really gave me the confidence to be... that sense of self and know who I was and be that person. Cause before I started doing [yoga], I could have been anybody... and just sort of molded myself to whatever role I had to play. But [now] I bring a certain sense of self behind my leadership that a lot of people recognize.



Luke also explained that since he's been learning more about yoga, he no longer defines himself by what he does, "we aren't what we do." Instead, he recognizes that "we have a deeper, more intrinsic self that's connected to every other self."

This message of seeking and celebrating one's true self is evidenced in yoga and was also described by participants as transferring into not only their leadership, but all aspects of their lives. Once that sense of true self is tapped into, participants sought to bring that authentic self to every moment by being present.

*Striving to always be present*

Being present, being fully committed to being "in the moment" is a concept emphasized in yoga. Kip described how when he's "in it," he can truly be present in his practice and "actually practice as opposed to worrying about what's for dinner." Tomi continued to explain how when she's present, "I'm just in the moment, it feels so good... It's just like 'Ok, I'm here now' ... I'm focusing on what my body's doing." Becca further described this concept of being present and grounded in one's body describing the "so many people" who "are not in their physical body and are bumping up against life and they don't even realize it." Being present in our bodies is only one half of the story, however.

Luke described the ideal integration of yoga and leadership by explaining that "everything is done consciously, with the mind fully engaged in the present." He went on to explain that always being present was "maybe the most important word of all" to utilize as a leader. To him,

That means you have your consciousness engaged in what you're doing. You're not beating yourself up over things in the past and you're not worrying about things in the future but you're just fully engaged in the present. And that's all aspects of your life, in particular in leadership.

Tomi explained that for her, yoga "helps to collect yourself, to be in tune with yourself" in each and every moment. This is important when one is in a leadership position because, as Jake described in his teaching role, "I can't let my mind wander about what I'm doing that weekend or about the basketball game I want to watch... It's like just being present and there's a time for everything else after that class is dismissed."

But for these participants, being present was not only important in leadership. Rhoda described her practice of being "a hundred percent there in that moment, whatever I'm doing." And offered more detail by explaining that "there are hundreds of things that need to be done and in that given moment, I can only do that one thing that I'm doing." Margot summarized this nicely by stating that yoga has taught her about "taking your place and space in the world for that day and being okay with that. And being cognizant of your thoughts and body and your mind." Even in unpleasant situations, being present can be useful. Becca explained that "I can sit there and be in traffic... and I'm thinking like two hours ahead and all the stuff I have to do... or I can be taking care of me in this moment and listening to the breath and breathing consciously and deeply."

For these participants, learning to be present through yoga practice also translated into their leadership practices and general life practices as well. Through the processes of getting to "know thyself," participants were able to translate lessons from

yoga into contexts beyond their mats. This process of getting to know one's self is not easy, however, and participants expressed the difficulties not only associated with finding themselves but also with leading.

### **Overcoming Hurdles**

Leadership can be challenging and requires that leaders learn their limitations and learn lessons about control. Working through such challenges can create yet another challenge, stress, all of which can be overcome through dedicated yoga practice.

#### *Challenges of both yoga & leadership*

While Lynnette discussed how she loves a specific yoga class because “it pushes me and it challenges me,” most participants did not reflect on challenges so enthusiastically. Tomi discussed the challenge of being “in the moment,” explaining that it's hard to not think “about what they have to do for dinner, who they have to pick up, and what they have to get done around the house” when they get home. While being present was challenging, Tomi recognized the value of its practice. For Alicia, it was a challenge to really even discuss yoga with those at her workplace because “most people don't really understand it” or have an understanding of “what it can do for people.” She hesitates to even try to open up the deeper aspects of her yoga practice, fearing that she may give someone false expectations and if “they don't get it right away,” then they might dismiss the practice all together. Luke explained that even for those who do try yoga, it is sometimes difficult to get over “what are perceived as hurdles,” like self-consciousness.

Participants also discussed the potential challenges involved with being a yoga instructor, including not being critical of their students and addressing classes full of students with varying levels of experience. Shane described his personal experience with integrating “the wisdom of yoga, the deeper aspect of yoga” while fearing that using Sanskrit terms would scare away students. Even Becca noted that many of the instructors at her wellness center “sometimes feel uncomfortable” trying to embody “their perception of what a leadership is,” being commanding or “telling people what to do.”

Some participants discussed their yoga practice as a time for healing following a challenging time of life. Specifically, Annie B. described how her powerful connection to the instructors’ words “helped me get through a difficult time in my life.” For Alicia, yoga has been healing in the sense that she is no longer affected by challenges in the way that others are.

When I see people around me with certain challenges, I’ll go “wow, you shouldn’t feel like that” and I’ll question myself like “why don’t I?” And the only thing I can come up with is that it’s been my yoga practice, that experience...

Both of Annie B. and Alicia identified yoga as a means to cope with life’s challenges. Jess similarly explained how yoga has really inspired her to try to “slow down” because for her, it’s easy to “do, do, do, instead of be.” Yoga provides her with a chance to “shut all the busyness down,” meditate, and become better equipped to handle challenges when they arise.

Participants further discussed challenges associated with leadership and how yogic principles aided them during those times. Jake described a specific conflict in his

classroom when students were panicking because a shooter was on campus. In that challenging moment, he summoned his “focus” and had to be “present” in order to address the class and maintain a sense of calm. Margot discussed how she utilizes the patience she’s gained in yoga during challenging times including coordinating activities with a simulation center.

For Laurie and Rhoda, being perceived as being different proved a challenge in their leadership roles. Laurie described the “struggle” of marketing her product to a “technophobic” industry. While Rhoda explained, “as a foreign-born woman faculty of color, there are many things which are difficult—it’s challenging.” Again, participants expressed challenges associated with breaking through their and others’ perceptions. Luke further describes perceptions by using the metaphor of a veil: “all the experiences you’ve had create impressions, images, assumptions, perspectives... they’re veils that color how you interpret the things that happen in your life.” Becca explained her process of challenging those assumptions by asking questions of her employees. Her goal is to get them “to think about what’s important here,” especially when it comes to discussing necessary improvements during evaluations.

While practicing and teaching yoga presents its own sets of challenges, it provides leaders with the necessary tools to handle life’s challenges when they present themselves off the mat and a space for relief. Specifically, yoga taught participants how to learn their limits, a lesson which they incorporated into their work and leadership practices.

## **Learning one's limitations through yoga**

Kip discussed his brief fascination with shooting pistols, which he described as too limiting, “there was no creativity.” When it comes to practicing yoga, on the other hand, creativity is not only encouraged but rather required. Inherent within such a creative practice is a process of discovering one's limits. Mallory explained that throughout her practice, she realized that she must remind herself, “Don't set the bar too high or too low for today's practice.” Jake seemed to recognize his own limits, explaining that he dislikes certain poses that he simply cannot do, describing the frustration involved with not being able to do something not due to a lack of effort, but due to his limitations with flexibility.

Such limitations are not only physical. Kip was open about his “personal deficiencies” in knowledge and “understanding the mechanics of the human body.” Therefore, when offering advice to others in the practice, he explained that “I simply don't answer those kinds of questions,” as “I am superbly unqualified to provide an answer.” He also explained that others might put up barriers that limit them from reaping the benefits of yoga. For example, he explained that “for some people, deep breathing would bring up things” like emotions and memories they are trying to suppress.

Mallory explained that some instructors' discussion of limitations can be translated into other aspects of life:

I've had instructors that'll say “go as far as you can, go where you feel it's right for you” “not everyone's the same.” And I think if you take that and put it into different things you do on a daily basis, you can decide “Okay, how far can I

push myself today?” versus the next day. And you know, “what areas do I want to work on?”

She continued to explain that “knowing my limitations... and knowing that they’re not gonna be the same every day” is the most significant thing that has “spilled over into my professional life” from yoga. Not all aspects of yoga translate as easily into the professional setting. Luke described the boundaries associated with discussing spirituality in the workplace, claiming that “it’s delicate territory” that most people perceive as only being appropriate to discuss in “some other realm.” Similarly, although Alicia admitted to contemplating doing a handstand in the office, she stops herself, perceiving a similar boundary—that the office was not an appropriate space for yoga. Other limitations include the boundaries set by the organizations in which these leaders operate. Rhoda discussed the “existing disciplinary boundaries” at her university that “don’t often match up with how we do our work.” Similarly, Rhoda’s work and leadership are bound by other organizational obligations such as departmental duties and travel.

While yoga brings awareness to our limitations, both in the practice and in leadership, Kip reminded me that for those of us who do have fewer physical limitations, “the ability to move our bodies consciously without pain,” it is “crucial to being fully human” to use that body to be “engaged with the world.” Similarly, yoga taught participants transferable lessons pertaining to control.

## **Learning lessons about control through yoga**

Becca's yoga practice "helped me to feel like I could control something" when she was applying for jobs and "not getting any calls." Her yoga practice gave her something to cling to, a sense of grounding, during this transition time. In her yoga practice, she learned the value of "setting aside your brain" to focus on the present moment, "not try[ing] to control it or force something to happen if it's not working." She explained the value of "decreasing resistance" in the situations where you crave control the most.

For Luke, the lesson he gained from yoga regarding control was not about being more accepting of circumstances but rather seeking to gain agency over things that are perceived as uncontrollable. "This idea of having agency or influence is absolutely crucial in all aspects of yoga," he said. He explained that yogis learned early on that "you can have agency over potentially everything the body does and the mind does." Learning how to gain agency over these the mind and body can spill over into all aspects of life. Even in leadership positions, this idea that we are able to gain agency over processes once thought uncontrollable can have a significant impact on one's attitude and actions.

However, there is a limit to how much control one person should have or be perceived to have. After all, we can ultimately only control ourselves. Annie B. discussed her frustration with a controlling yoga instructor who made them "sit on their mats" after class and listen to the instructor's "yoga commercials" in which she sought



donations for various causes, not allowing the students to leave, move, or start putting things away. Ultimately, Annie B. dealt with that challenge by taking control back into her own hands and quit attending that instructor's classes. After all, as Becca explained, "you can only control yourself, you can only control your perception and your emotions and really how you react to things."

Through their discussions of control, participants explained how yoga gives them a better awareness of what they're actually in control of and what they should just let be. Aside from providing participants with tools to deal with such challenges, yoga became a space for relief from these and other stresses.

#### *Coping with the stresses caused by these challenges*

In addition to the stress-causing challenges already discussed, Esmeralda emphasized that negativity is often brought into the workplace, and "it's easy to get caught up in the flow of negativity which brings on the stress." Many participants explained that yoga is a stress reliever for them. Margot described a specific instructor that helps her relieve her "TMJ" problem, which she explained is a "physical manifestation of stress." Rhoda also offered a particular example of a time in which "things became very stressful" and she could not figure out how to "get out of this challenging situation." Her mother reminded her "you have all the tools that you need [to get through], you're just not using them regularly." From there, Rhoda returned to her yoga practice, taking a course that deepened her practice and "get rid of a lot of stress that had built up over time." Yoga was also discussed as a reliever of stress specifically

associated with work. Yoga helped Mallory “focus on something other than all the little stresses” at work; Shane explained that his yoga practice helped him remain stress-free when he had to “race against deadlines” as a PhD student.

The stress-relieving quality associated with practicing yoga is so prominent that Annie B. incorporated this topic into her lectures. She confessed that “I push the yoga” when discussing stress and stress-relief in her psychology class.

Yoga is always a good example of a really positive form of fitness and if you’re feeling angry, better to go take a yoga class than punch a hole in the wall—or a person!

Shane shared his experience relieving stress as a process that takes place constantly, not only on his mat. He explained that “in yoga, you do your duty to your maximum capacity. You do your best.” And if you are constantly putting forth your best, working to your “maximum capacity,” then you have nothing to worry about, even when those around you are experiencing stress.

Participants widely discussed yoga as a stress relieving practice, whether it be something that takes place on the mat or is a philosophy by which you live your life. While life presents everyone with challenges, for these participants, yoga seemed to be a valuable practice in helping them overcome such hurdles. After overcoming such obstacles, participants were better capable of making positive transformation.

### **Positive Transformation**

For participants, yoga is an extremely positive practice that provided them with the skills to transform their and others’ lives.

### *Being positive in yoga & leadership*

Although yoga proved to be a welcomed challenge in some regards, participants described their experiences in yoga as being overwhelmingly positive. Participants were drawn to instructors who had a “light-hearted,” “positive,” and “upbeat” personalities or “energy.” Esmeralda enjoys instructors that are “positive and funny” and that “say silly things, happy kind of funny things as opposed to being all serious.” She explained that she really got hooked on yoga not only because of the instructors’ positivity, but because “I just felt good... it was very positive” for her to have that time to be playful.

Participants also discussed their positive approaches to practicing yoga. Kip explained that “that sense of playfulness is important to me” and sought to embody an approach of “playful rigor,” not only in yoga, but in all that he does. Any practice, for him, could be taken seriously while still maintaining a sense of lightness. For Laurie, even during challenging arm balances, classes were always a positive experience and she would be “laughing a lot” as she was falling over. Similarly, Alicia discussed her ability to bring “that positive energy” to class and “leave everything at the door... just have a good time.” She has no qualms “mak[ing] fun of myself” or just making the practice “light hearted,” even explaining that others often thank her for “bringing them out of their funk.”

For some, practicing yoga proved to be not only a positive experience but has made a lasting positive impact in their lives. Tomi explained that after undergoing Reiki energy therapy, she was inspired to try yoga and was “making new changes and making

decisions I never thought I'd make before." She explained that the combination of Reiki therapy and practicing yoga "builds a positive field around you," "it's like you're walking on air." Similarly, Jess explained that she began practicing yoga during a "rebirth time" when she was making positive changes in her life. The positive changes Lynnette has experienced from yoga have impacted her life so much that "I just wanna live in the yoga studio;" her husband even joked that he would make her a shirt that said "I love yoga more than my family." That sort of positivity, that lightness imbued from the yoga practice is something that "we all need to have," explained Becca, not only in yoga but "it goes for everything!"

Where Kip feels that yoga contributed to him as a leader "is this notion of enabling and positively reinforcing the good things in what people are achieving." He consciously takes the "positive reinforcement approach" to leading, as opposed to the "bad dog approach." This notion of being positive toward others was evident with other participants as well. Esmeralda similarly explained the importance of being positive in leadership, "even [in] dealing with discipline issues... I try to be positive." She described a situation in which she had to follow "progressive discipline" with a teacher whose drinking problem was "was affecting his classroom." Aside from formally disciplining him, she "tried to counsel him too" and reinforced that "you're a good teacher, you need to get some help," highlighting his value as opposed to his flaws. Becca and Laurie both mentioned times when they've had to focus on the positive as opposed to the negative, as well. They echoed one another, explaining that "you can't keep wasting your energy on people who aren't gonna be helping you or helping this

effort,” and that you “can’t keep hitting my head against the wall, [you] can’t get them to get it.” Instead, “focus on what is working” and the people who are “helping out.”

As a leader, maintaining a positive attitude toward work aids in the creation of success for others. For Jess, one thing she tries to accomplish as a leader is “communicating about how [her subordinates] will be successful... setting them up to be successful.” She stays positive, helping them to “make the connection between what [they] are trying to accomplish and the awareness of what’s possible in their bodies.” Lynnette similarly strives, “constantly challenging [her]self” to reach a positive, successful outcome that “favors in [her clients’] best interest.” Not only is it important to leaders to strive for the success of others but Rhoda explained that as a leader, it is crucial to be positive and actually “happy for everyone’s successes.” As a leader, she prides herself on the fact that others are “more willing to share their perspective with [her]” because they know that she will not “be jealous of their successes.” Being a leader, to her, means creating that “sense of belongingness” that, as it grows, allows everyone to celebrate each others’ successes. Kip offered an example of the positive feeling he had when his former advisee “realized he could stay [in a faculty position] at Harvard but actually it’s better for him not to.” For Kip, it was rewarding to see a former student have such success and be able to pursue opportunities based on what was best for them, not out of necessity.

However, even when participants have others’ best interest at heart, occasionally things do not go as planned. Alicia explained that in those situations, she still maintains a

positive attitude, admitting “Okay, that didn’t work” and “just laugh at yourself so [others] know you’re human too.” Constantly being positive is important because as Becca informed me, “everything is energetic... so we’re constantly interacting with everything in our daily life that we encounter.” Our minds and bodies are “taken with us in these experiences that we’re encountering on an energetic level.” It is the responsibility of the leader then, to create a positive environment and maintain a positive attitude so that as others absorb their energy, they are infected with positivity as well. In that way, leaders are capable of inciting transformation.

#### *Yoga as a transformative practice*

The story of yoga as a transformative practice starts with participants’ discovery of the practice. Jess recalled that when she first started, she was a “yoga-pusher,” inviting all of her friends to come experience the same transformation she had. Even after practicing for two decades, Laurie explained that she still undergoes transformation when instructors offer her something “I hadn’t thought of before.” Aside from yoga as a practice being transformative, Kip described the journey into and between poses as transformative, explaining that the “experience of posing” is more important than actually “achieving a pose.” For Jess, practicing transformed her perception of working out. Attending yoga “was a way for me to transition from work to home... something I allowed myself to do” as opposed to feeling forced or “disciplined” to go to the gym.

As leaders, participants emphasized their ability to not only transform their own lives but transform the lives of others as well. As the leader of yoga workshops, Shane

has firsthand experience seeing the transformative effects of yoga on his students. Specifically, he recalled an incident in which a student filled out a feedback card, explaining how the lessons she learned in Shane's yoga workshop kept her from taking her own life. That was one example of when he realized "woah, yoga really is really powerful." Seeing those sorts of transformations in student's lives is what "gives [him] great satisfaction."

Kip explained his philosophy of helping others "find their way," and also the joy he takes in "watching people develop on their own." Kip was not alone in expressing a desire to empower others. Rhoda explained

A leader is anybody who is able to bring about positive change in that field or in that organization, in that structure. To raise the consciousness of the group or the field, of the team, to take it to a different, higher level. And also have a vision for the blossoming of the full potential of all members of the team to their best capacity in that role, in that organization, in that classroom.

The positive transformations imbued by leaders may be small. Becca recognized that "if I'm one person along that [student's] journey, that's great." She takes satisfaction in being someone to "help people find their next step" in their well-being or professional development.

She continued by explaining that her guiding philosophy was inspired by another organization's mission to "create teachers, not gather students." In this way, she hopes to assist others in their transformation as they "find their own path... what works for them... what resonates with them" and really to "empower people to feel like they are trusted and knowledgeable" and allowing them to "rise to the occasion." Margot seeks

to empower others by “giv[ing] people the right tools and marrying that with their talent.” Luke similarly explained his efforts to empower those around him at work: “my goal is to help people achieve their own goals.” He has found that the best way to do that is “to help people feel good about what they’re doing. So they gain confidence in themselves and then they have confidence in their work.” Even on the mat, Alicia finds ways to be a leader by encouraging and empowering those around her by letting them know that “you did a good job!”

In the workplace, Becca was really inspired by the “new employees” who are “all fresh” and eager to “make a difference... feeling like anything’s possible.” That attitude of “there’s always something to be discovered” is what she says makes the world transform. Laurie explained how refreshing that type of perspective might be, saying “we need to look at new ways of doing things, we need to look at ways we can challenge ourselves and try something different,” relating this to her yoga practice, “try standing on your head!” In this way, yoga inspires transformation not only for the participants but also through them, residually, to inspire transformation for those with whom they interact. Throughout the processes of learning, knowing thyself, overcoming hurdles, and positive transformation, leaders experience the direct integration of yogic principles into their leading and their lives.

### **Integrating Yoga, Leadership, & Life**

Being involved in a holistic practice like yoga has led participants to transfer concepts such as balance and connection into their work and leadership practices.



### *Holistic practice, holistic leading*

Participants touched on themes of holism starting with their explanations of their motivation to practice yoga. Lynnette described her practice as one in which she saw “quick results, love[ed] the environment, and then the instructors were really really good.” For her, the combination of physical results and a fun environment gave yoga a holistic appeal. Jake discussed yoga practice as one that affects the whole body—“flexibility... movement... balance... core...[and] strength.” Contemplating the practice’s relationship to the self, other participants more deeply questioned their motivations for practicing yoga. Both Esmeralda and Kip expressed the same idea: “did I change and that’s why I went to yoga, or did yoga change me?” Such questions delve into the holistic nature of yoga as Kip explained that it could be that “yoga is just a manifestation of a skill that I already had.”

Becca clarified that in addition to “working on [practitioners] physically,” practicing yoga also involves getting “emotionally balanced, mentally balanced, and feeling a sense of empowerment.” Because of this, yoga as a practice is “hard to categorize” as “religion or spiritual... physical or health... because it’s a very holistic practice,” explained Rhoda. Tomi explained that yoga “just deals with everything, being grounded, being centered, and getting in touch with yourself.” A “holistic combination” of “postures... breath work... meditation... [and] wisdom from yoga texts,” Shane explained that the practice’s features are inherently interconnected.

Due to these interconnections, Rhoda described a “good yoga instructor” as one who teaches a “holistic practice that is not a mechanical performance but connects to the emotional well-being, spiritual well-being, and physical well-being” of their students. Jake even commented on the circularity of yoga class sessions, praising an instructor who would play the same song “when you’re sitting on the ground centering” at the beginning of a practice and then “ended with that [same song]” at the end of the practice as well.

Rhoda explained that the terms “leader, teacher, yogi, yoga people, [are] kind of interchangeable” and overlap. Each role does not stand individually but rather these roles can be viewed holistically as utilizing the same shared qualities as one another, such as being “inclusive” and having a “service mentality.” Another way in which holism relates to being a leader is making sure that others are aware of such interconnections. Becca wants to “make sure that [students coming into her office] are understanding the big picture and understanding what they need to do.” By encouraging students to consider the “big picture” and their own role in making that come to fruition, Becca subtly alerts others to holistic thinking. Part of imbuing that mentality on others is being able to recognize the holism associated with your own position. Tomi acknowledged her role in a holistic process in which she is “shaping [each child’s] life,” recognizing the social repercussions of a “special education” label for a child.

Participants discussed yoga as a holistic practice and explained how holistic thinking also influenced their identities as leaders. Specifically, the concept of balance seemed to transfer from participants' yoga practice into their lives off the mat.

### **Seeking balance in & out of practice**

In practicing yoga, balance becomes a crucial concept to master. Laurie explained that although she “used to fall down a lot,” she is now “much better on my feet.” She continued by emphasizing that since having a dedicated yoga practice, she is not only more physically balanced but her “mental balance” has improved as well. Shane described a time when yoga helped him to learn about balance; he learned to “honor and respect the limitations of my body” while balancing his desire to “expand upward” and improve his practice of physical postures. Similarly, Kip explained his fascination with the balance between “joy” and “rigor” in his own practice.

Becca explained that something she continually tries to “take off the mat and put into the real world” is a sense of “ethics” when it comes to being in a leadership position. She discussed the need to balance being “commanding” and “respectful... to yourself and to others,” hopefully being able to achieve an “ideal balance” between the two. She explained that leaders need to balance “listening to people” while still “meeting the needs of the organization and ... the larger picture.” Shane also discussed balance in relation to leadership, explaining that it is “essential” for leaders to balance “creativity,... execution,... and the ability to work in a group.” Other participants described their experiences balancing work and personal lives, structure and flexibility

in leadership, supervising and mentoring, being sensitive yet direct, stilling the mind and allowing it to wander, and probing yet being trusting of others. Based on her experience as the owner of a wellness center, Becca explained the need to balance the organization's mission with business demands, concluding that "until you get out of balance, you don't know what balance is."

Rhoda's yoga practice inspires her to have "inner peace" balanced with "a lot of outer dynamism," a balance of "silence and speech." She explained that this approach to work and life is part of the reason she has been successful as a leader, "I'm able to balance things well... and my yoga is the reason that I am." Becca discussed a similar balance she seeks in her own life, explaining that many people try to do things "through action" while forgetting "how powerful the id is." Finding the balance between action, the reason for our "physical incarnat[ion]," and mental "perspective" is crucial to being an effective leader.

Yoga may help these participants with the balancing they discussed as being part of their leadership and work lives may, whether balance is an actual skill learned through yoga practice or whether having a yoga practice merely provides the participants with the tools to better achieve balance. Similarly, participants discussed the transference of yoga's concept of connectedness from the practice into life.

### **Connecting in yoga & to others**

Yoga is a practice revolving around connection—connection the mind, the body, the self, and to others. Annie B. described the connection she felt with her instructor's

words, “it was like she was talking to me, specifically, about what I was going through.” Rhoda hoped to inspire those sorts of connections, explaining that “through connections to others with similar interests, “we can strengthen each others’ practice.” Laurie continued, explaining that those with stronger practices tended to be more “senior” and that even though they may be “quieter people... what makes them leaders is... that sense of their body and their mind and their heart are one... they’re connected.”

When it comes to connecting with the body, Shane explained that “we usually think of the body as a stranger” and that for many, a yoga practice is “the first time they are being friendly with the body, they’re connecting to the body.” Alicia explained that “your soul is in this vessel,” that “the body [is] meant for life experience” and in yoga classes, you go through “these motions and these movement and you exhaust yourself to the point where you can just sit in your own skin.” Connecting to the body also involves connecting to the mind; Becca explained that although in general, people prioritize taking action in their body and expect their mind to simply follow along, that actually “the mind is a very powerful thing, and the body will follow the mind” as well. Luke further explained that “it’s possible for people to gain a sensitivity to mental energy that the brain is sending out all the time” and can “detect a lot of information coming from one person to the other... through forms of energy.” He described this as a process of “being able to consciously make a connection” with our and others’ minds. It seems that the yogic notion that the mind and body are interconnected holds true for these interview participants, although they note the tendency of people to focus on the body and its actions as a driving force more so than the mind. For them, it is important to

acknowledge the power of both the body and the mind, neither overlooking nor aggrandizing either one.

These sorts of connections developed in yoga transfer beyond the mat and into daily life. Jess described how yoga changed her leadership, saying “you’re smarter, you’re more in your body as opposed to just completely disconnected and up in your head.” Jess continued to describe the “thrill” of “being able to make those connections,” cross-appropriating skills that she sees in her yoga practice to her leadership practice.

As leaders, the participants also expressed their desire to connect to others. Becca rationalized this, explaining that in the “structure of a business,” the boss or CEO often connects to others as they “radiate out into the organization as a whole.” This idea that it’s important for leaders to “be connected to everybody” can be applied to instructors in educational settings. For example, Jake and Esmeralda both sought connection with their students. Jake described how he would “learn about my students” and find ways to connect their interests to his lessons and “bring that into conversation.” Esmeralda connected with her students, “they would give me hugs in the morning and I would talk to them,” and was complimented by parents who “appreciated how I was with their kids—most assistant principals aren’t like that.” Lastly, Rhoda also explained how she sometimes found herself seeking connection to other leaders that had experienced similar circumstances:

I did not have any role models. None of my senior mentors had been in my situation. And I wrote to people from different universities in some other field, “I heard you also had a baby... and you’re a professor of Marketing... can you tell me something?” And they were kind enough to say “do this, negotiate this.”

In these ways, participants described their experiences with connection in and out of yoga practice, whether it be with the mind, body, or other people. Aside from these specific concepts of balance and connection, yoga seemed to enter into participants' lives off the mat more directly.

*Transferring yoga to life beyond the mat*

Participants described yoga's transference to their leadership practices and to their lives in general. For Laurie, "there is some sort of parallel between my yoga practice and the fact that I put this [business product] together that just makes sense." Luke described the peculiarity of having students from his classroom attend his yoga classes, eventually concluding that "those two roles kind of blended together nicely" since "I certainly bring a lot of the yogic perspective into my day job" anyway. Similarly, Shane described how he sought to "replicate" the "combination of effortlessness and excellence" that he had as a yogi in his work practice. Lynnette also noticed how yoga "reflects how I work in the law firm." She explained that "just because I'm a litigator doesn't mean I can't be gentle in how I approach my cases, how I approach my opponent, [and] the opposing council."

Jess explained that "if you're actively learning in your body, integrating your body and your mind [in yoga], that becomes more available to you in the work setting" as well. For Alicia, integrating her yoga practice into her work practice meant letting go of "anxiety," anger, and frustration. Before practicing yoga, "I sat in my problem more so than in my solution." Now, however, she might go through the exact same struggle

and won't feel it "physically and emotionally like I did" before yoga. Becca attributes similar relief to her ability to "incorporate my long deep breathing" in stressful work situations. These participants expressed their ability to utilize yoga and the awareness it creates in their leadership practices.

Beyond bringing the yogic mentality to their work, some participants even gave examples of how they were able to further incorporate yoga into their work. Mallory, for example, took hot yoga classes to prepare her body for the high temperatures of the operating room. She also discussed the deep, ujai breathing, "like you're gonna hyperventilate," of yoga into her lectures to help students better understand that "women that are pregnant are in a constant state of relative hyperventilation," just "like what you do in yoga." Jill explained that she actually closes her door on her lunch hour and "I'll just start stretching;" Tomi expressed a desire to do the same, explaining that a friend had recently sent her an article containing "yoga stretches you can do at work." While Lynnette recalled her employer actually bringing a yoga instructor into the office to lead yoga for employees, Shane and Becca have incorporated yoga into their workplaces by each leading yoga sessions themselves. Shane even delivers formal presentations on "different areas of yoga: postures, breath work, [and] stretches" at his workplace.

As Luke explained, and Rhoda expressed as well, that "yoga is not about doing just the yoga practice on the mat, it really is an approach to life." Specifically, Luke emphasized the transferability of yoga's message of "learning how to gain agency over things you didn't think you had agency over." Learning how to "detect where there's



tension” and to “breathe it out,” showing compassion to yourself and others, and developing appreciation for your efforts were also discussed as ways that yoga has transferred off the mat for participants. Becca discussed yoga’s intrinsic incorporation into her identity:

I think of it less in terms of “I do this on the mat, that translates to my life,” It’s more like, “it’s made me who I am and thus because of who I am, that’s how I lead.” And it’s almost like, where do you say what started this and where it stops.

Participants identified ways in which the principles and messages of yoga transfer to, or engage in a reciprocal relationship with, their leadership and with their lives.

### **Summary**

Through the themes of adopting a learning leader’ mentality, getting to “know thyself,” overcoming hurdles, making positive transformations, and directly integrating their practices, yoga and yogic principles were seen mirrored in participants’ lives beyond their mats. Their leadership approaches tended to focus on aligning their actions with their thoughts and intentions, ultimately, in order to empower and positively affect others. Curiously, most of the yogic tools employed by interview participants in leadership contexts were utilized to counteract negative emotions and side effects that they carried home from work. This analysis provides an entry point to consider the transferability of negative emotions across practices and also for further investigating how embodied leadership manifests itself in practices that are not typically labeled as body work.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

This inquiry into the intersection of embodiment, leadership, and practice was guided by two research questions: (1) How is leadership practiced in yoga studios? And (2) How does the embodied practice of modern postural yoga transfer to leadership experiences outside of the yogic practice? This chapter compares the data sets generated for the research questions, compares each analysis to the literature, and highlights the study's implications for embodied leadership theory and practice. This study furthers conceptualizations of embodied leadership by providing examples of what that type of leadership might look like in different contexts. Following these sections are discussions pertaining to future directions of research and limitations of this study before ending in a brief conclusion.

#### **Comparing Data Sets**

The content of themes extracted from both data sets overlap greatly; although worded differently, many of the ideas conveyed by or portrayed from yoga instructors were also expressed or discussed by interview participants. Table 2 displays corresponding topics between the data sets.

**Table 2***Analyses Comparison*

	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
<b>1</b>	Encouraging students	Empowering others
<b>2</b>	Light-heartedness	Being positive
<b>3</b>	Encouraging connections	Connection to others
<b>4</b>	Questioning	Learning
<b>5</b>	Feedback	Listening
<b>6</b>	Letting go	Overcoming hurdles
<b>7</b>	Expectations	Perceptions
<b>8</b>	Listening & connecting to self & body	Know thyself & true self

Instructors and interview participants seem to embody similar leadership approaches and techniques though they are adapted to their particular context. For example, though a yoga instructor and organizational practitioner might adopt an empowering approach, they perform it differently. While a yoga instructor might have encouraged a student by complimenting their “lovely thoracic twist” and personalized their practice based on that ability, an interview participant might have empowered their subordinate by similarly noticing that person’s strengths and then helping them to hone and develop those abilities in the workplace. Another example is that while instructors facilitated interactive experiences by seeking feedback from their students, so too did interview participants seek to make others felt heard and listened to, creating a similar open, interactive environment with their subordinates. As this makes clear, the two groups not only took similar actions and spoke similar messages but also embodied

similar leadership philosophies. Instructors and interview participants alike valued connection, knowledge, and positivity in their approaches to leading. While it is not possible to conclude that engaging in one practice, yoga or leadership, directly causes the other, what is clear is that yoga is a holistic practice which participants viewed as holistically intertwined to their leadership practices and lives off their mats in general.

However, not all of the themes from the analyses paralleled each other. One theme that emerged from observational data that did not emerge from the interviews was the subject of using physical directives to lead. While instructors engaged in physical demonstration, referred to physical exemplars of poses, and used physical touch to direct their students, only one interview participant discussed similar leadership strategies. When asked if yoga had transferred into their leadership practice, many interview participants explained how the practice's principles, such as patience and compassion, could be seen in their work leading others. When further prompted to think about whether embodied awareness had integrated into their leadership, many responded by explaining that they were more aware of when their body was experiencing stress or anxiety; practicing yoga gave them the tools to get in touch with their bodies and calm themselves down, occasionally explaining that they would encourage others to use similar strategies. In this way, the body was used to bring awareness to and make sense of negative emotions with yoga providing the tools for their management. Another less common response involved interview participants discussing how they were more aware of their own "presence" when walking down the hall or walking into a meeting. In this way, interview participants can be viewed as using themselves as exemplars of having

embodied awareness, demonstrating that awareness through their presence. However, interview participants never discussed this as an explicit leadership strategy or approach.

One interview participant discussed the direct integration of body awareness as an important topic of discussion with others through her leadership. Jess, an executive coach, explained how she incorporated lessons regarding the body into her sessions primarily by making her trainees aware of body language. In general, however, interview participants did not seem nearly as interested in offering physical directives or messages regarding physicality into their leadership as did the observed instructors. This may be due to the fact that each role, leading yoga classes and leading in a professional environment, is inherently associated with different permissions and obligations associated with each specific task and context in which the leadership is taking place. For interview participants, clear instruction involved making expectations known and coaching students, not using physical directives.

### **Comparing Analyses & Literature**

Emergent themes from both data sets connect to themes in current communication scholarship. Specifically, connections can be drawn between discursive and embodied approaches to leadership to participants' leadership approaches; themes from observation reveal connections between Communities of Practice (CoPs) and the environment cultivated by yoga instructors; and themes of incorporating spirituality in the workplace do emerge but not always in the ways suggested by the literature.

### *Leadership as practice*

The observational analysis of instructors' leadership in the yoga studio closely aligns with Barge and Fairhurst's (2008) conceptualization of leadership as "a co-created, performative, attributional, and contextual process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them" (p. 227). Yoga instructors articulated ideas, both in talk and action through using clear verbal direction as well as physical directives. This clear instruction allowed members to engage in personalized practices in which instructors facilitated the attainment of the specific goals of each student.

Both observation and interview analyses were consistent with discursive approaches to leadership, which focus on interactional processes where relational patterns are co-defined. Specifically based on observation, yoga practice can be viewed as an interactive experience in which students and instructors co-define their relationship by means of instructors' listening, seeking feedback, and being open to asking and responding to questions. Interview participants' responses revealed their similar tendencies to ask questions of, listen to, and focus on empowering others. These emphases on leadership's social nature reveal a process through which people become dynamically interrelated through interactivity and connection. Further connections can be drawn between Barge's explanation of leadership as a reflexive activity and the reflective attitude that practicing yoga inspired for interview participants (Fairhurst, 2007). As such reflection takes place in and through interaction, the body becomes a

reflexive tool which allows people to connect, interact, and co-construct meaning with one another.

The theme of leaders and instructors valuing their followers resembles employee-oriented leadership approaches in which followers are viewed as valuable resources. As instructors sought feedback from their students and interview participants emphasized listening to others, it became clear that the opinions, feelings, and values of their followers played a role in their leadership. This, then, relates back to Barge and Fairhurst's (2008) explanation that it is a leader's responsibility to develop ways for others to connect meaningfully and "move forward with purpose" (p. 235). Not only did interview participants' responses engender similar feelings, one participant, Rhoda, explicitly expressed Barge and Fairhurst's ideas by explaining that "a leader is anybody who is able to bring about positive change... to raise the consciousness of the group... and also have a vision for the blossoming of the full potential of all members of the team." This statement corroborated with similar implications from other participants' interviews and instructors' emphases on creating contexts and practices that meet students' needs.

Looking at the analyses and an embodied approach to leadership, further connections can be made. In the embodied approach to leadership, leaders are viewed as learners, gaining the skills of leadership through embodied experiences and practices. Similarly, interview participants viewed themselves as constantly learning—developing greater awareness and listening skills in and out of the practice. Furthermore, instructors

even positioned themselves as learners in relationship to their students, often asking for feedback regarding scheduling and the specific needs, goals, and desires of their students. This approach to leadership is extremely collaborative; co-creation is part of being an embodied leader, which involves a leader taking up a learner's perspective to be open to others' ideas and perspectives to synthesize meaning and value within a given context. Considering leadership as an embodied activity is important since leaders have typically been theorized as disembodied beings. This observation relates to interview participants' explanation that practicing yoga is oftentimes the first time one stops interacting with their body as a stranger and is instead friendly with their body. In this way, not only have leaders been conceptualized as disembodied, but also participants noticed that people in general often conceptualize themselves as being disembodied.

Hammill's (2011) discussion of two types of memory, the first pertaining to episodes and facts with the second pertaining to motor skills gained through practice, was mirrored in the instruction offered by yoga instructors. Instructors offered clear directions to students using both clear verbal instruction and by demonstrating, referring to exemplars, and physically adjusting students. These practices reflect Hammill's (2011) explanation regarding memory; instructors reinforced students' learning by appealing to both types of memory. In this way, instructors' words gained meaning through embodied interaction, transforming human bodies into expressive bodies, resembling much of Schatzki's (1996) discussion of the relationship between mind, body, and action. Instructors and participants, through their themes of connection, emphasized such interactions of expressive bodies.



Analyses also revealed connections of each data set to the idea that bodies are invested with meanings, inscribed upon them by the contexts of their social worlds. Interview participants noted that bodies absorb the energy that surrounds them, particularly the negative energy and stress that consumes them at work. Those stressors, in addition to the perceived limitations that participants had for themselves, often stood in the way of their connecting to others and sometimes, even to their own identities. Instructors encouraged students to let go of all of the weight and garbage their minds and bodies carry with them each and every day, instead encouraging them to absorb the positive energy from their kulas. In this way, instructors emphasized letting go of expectations and being grateful for the connections within their communities, encouraging students to resist the identities imposed upon them by the stress and control associated with their organizational positions. Focusing on the kula, many connections can be drawn to Communities of Practice.

### *Leadership & communities of practice*

One basic assumption regarding social interaction in the practice is that the subjective experience of connecting with others has a long-lasting impact on people's bodies and physiological resourcefulness (Heaphy, 2008). As previously mentioned, participants noticed that the stress and negativity their bodies absorbed at work impacted their physical and mental capabilities within and outside of the workplace. However, participants and instructors alike also seemed to understand the concept of *Zusammenhang*, that regardless of the context, whether at the workplace or at the yoga studio, they coexisted with others as active beings and therefore must cooperate,

conform to a certain extent, and develop intelligibilities and understandings with those around them (Schatzki, 1996). Parallels can be drawn from the concept's definition to themes of connection and balance from the interviews and themes of interconnections and holism that emerged from observation.

Furthermore, those understandings need to be structured and intelligibility articulated within the practice. Instructors involved students in these processes by creating an interactive experience and encouraging connections to and amongst their students and then offering clear instruction. Likewise, interview participants mentioned the importance of listening to and being aware of others' abilities, needs, and desires. Once such understandings were developed, participants were able to reflect, recognize their limits, and let go of the appropriate amount of control. Instructors who encouraged students to learn to let go and surrender to life's flow perpetuated similar ideas. Participants seemed to recognize the transformative potential of interactions between our "*spontaneous, living, expressive responsiveness of our bodies*" (Shotter, 2010a, p. 9). In this way, Shotter (2010a) claimed that people are able to move one another and be moved in return, an idea also perpetuated by instructors' emphases on the interconnectedness of yoga practice and students' lives.

This recognition that one's practice inevitably affects other practices and areas within people's lives reflects the claim that human identities are constructed through communication, in organization and interaction. Interview participants seemed to agree with Wenger's (1998) discussion of layers of identity, in which networks and

relationships influence one's perception of themselves. Participants expressed the desire to be who they are, their true selves, at all times—not just on the mat, that core identity remaining constant as other layers, of stress, negativity, and anger absorbed from interactions, were peeled away. In this way, participants sought to bring their whole selves, their bodies, minds, emotions, and social realities, to their leadership and yoga practices to be truly present in each moment. Similarly, instructors emphasized the value of students bringing that true self, discovered in yoga, to their lives off the mat.

Observation revealed connections between the environment that yoga instructors cultivate and Wenger et. al.'s (2002) definition of a CoP: “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or are passionate about a topic, and who depended their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). Specifically, instructors encouraged students to give gratitude for the connections felt within the kula and the holistic energy that they were able to generate as members of that community. Furthermore, participants emphasized the transformative potential of their work as leaders. Such efforts reflect CoP cultivation in the workplace through which, when existing purposefully, individuals and their social worlds can be truly transformed (Wenger, 1998).

Both analyses also reflected Iverson and McPhee's (2008) three requirements of CoPs. Firstly, both instructors and participants emphasized topics relating to mutual *engagement*. Whether it be through creating an interactive experience or constantly listening, instructors and participants alike communicated with others to develop a

shared repertoire and joint enterprise for their practice. That *shared repertoire* was evidenced in instructors' use of Sanskrit terminology to name poses, the use of props such as mats, bolsters, and blocks, and the use of specific symbols such as "Namaste," both the verbally communicated word and symbolically represented character which was often displayed in studios. Such shared repertoire of vocabulary and symbols identified members of the yoga community. Lastly, by constantly emphasizing their focus on and/or awareness of others, both instructors and interview participants discussed the existence of a *joint enterprise* in their practices. In both cases, practices of mutual accountability were developed in which all members were listened to, encouraged, and viewed as valuable and responsible.

The key linkage between these three components is the space provided for negotiation. Analyses revealed the creation of such space through instructors' practices of seeking feedback and answering and responding to questions as well as interview participants' emphasis on constantly learning and listening. Such space for negotiation allows for (a) sharing and creating knowledge, emphasized by interview participants' theme of always learning, (b) sharing objects and situations, illuminated by both instructors and interview participants when discussing connections, and (c) transferring knowledge to others, which instructors emphasized by using clear instruction and interview participants took up by empowering others (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). In this way, both instructors and interview participants became living, leading, examples to which others can relate.

Neither instructors nor interview participants were viewed as, or viewed themselves, as omnipotent, further defining their approach to leadership as that expected within a CoP (Grint, 2010). By constantly listening and learning, instructors and interview participants were able to show their humanity while further exemplifying what it means to be one's true self, all the time. In this way, all of the leaders involved in this study were able to situate themselves in their practice's repertoire, working with others to build definitions of their situation, supporting and providing resources for others as opposed to controlling them. Instructors literally inserted themselves into students' experiences by practicing next to them on their mats, sometimes demonstrating themselves but also highlighting others' abilities, supporting and facilitating each students' personalized experience. Similarly, interview participants based decisions based off of their awareness of others' work and/or talents, providing them with the necessary tools to be successful and empowering them to fulfill their potentials. This desire to help and honor others taps into the undeniably spiritual element of practicing yoga and also shows how elements of spirituality can be carried into one's leadership practice off the mat.

### *Leadership, spirituality, & organizing*

Calas and Smircich (2013) partially attribute the increasing reference to spirituality in the workplace to people's growing interest in connecting their work to love and social justice. Interview participants' emphases on helping others, empowering others, and being present represent how for them, this might be the case. Unlike discourses of New Age Corporate Spiritualism, which promoted self-actualization with

the organization as its medium (Holmer Nadesan, 1999), instructors and interview participants stressed the importance of finding one's true self and being that person all the time rather than splitting off parts of one's identity to conform to each particular context. In this way, the analyses express that the lessons learned and identities discovered through practicing yoga can and should be transferred to all aspects of one's life. Through therapeutic self-reflection, then, students were encouraged to get in touch with their authentic selves in order to enhance their wellness, not to enhance organizational objectives.

Practices of both instructors and interview participants reflected tendencies of systemic and transformational leadership, a concept often associated with New Age Spiritualism (Holmer Nadesan, 1999). Both analyses revealed themes related to holism and interconnectedness, learning, encouragement/empowerment, and innovation. As leaders, instructors and interview participants enabled their followers to achieve, were visionaries, and were able to view situations through fresh, large-scale perspectives, transforming others through empowerment. In order to be truly transformational, leaders must be mindful, in the Eastern sense, paying close attention to the internal processes of the mind. Interview participants' leadership approaches were rooted in self-reflection and awareness, with instructors encouraging those types of internal connections as part of their leadership.

Many of the concepts discussed in current communication literature overlap with the words and actions of the observed instructors as well as the topics covered by participants in interviews. But what does this all mean?

But why does this have to be the case? Why are issues of spirituality and/or embodiment considered taboo in professional discourse and practice? Future research should consider this question and also consider the possible benefits of reversing that notion. What if topics such as spirituality and embodiment could be discussed, demonstrated, and practiced freely within traditional work spaces—what would that mean for leaders’ and employees’ satisfaction and organizational identification? Future research can also consider yoga studios as organizations, assessing the differences and similarities between studios with different organizational missions and philosophies. For example, observation data collected for the current study could be reevaluated to investigate the differing leadership styles of instructors at a (a) privately owned yoga studio, (b) a wellness center, and (c) a hot studio housed within a gym. It would be interesting to compare the themes pertaining to each studio’s instructorship. Such an investigation could also consider students, following up with students from each studio to compare and contrast each studio’s constituents.

### **Implications for Theory & Practice**

This study highlights five important implications regarding embodied leadership theory and practice.

1. This study's analyses come into tension with Trethewey's (1999) claim that bodies, particularly female bodies, are constrained and disciplined by their work. She explains that "professional women, in their everyday lives, use a variety of strategies to navigate the minefield of choices about how to dress, display, reveal, perform, in short to discipline, their own and other women's bodies at work" and continues to discuss these claims emphasizing that professional female bodies are prescribed as being fit yet docile (Trethewey, 1999, p. 428). In this study, however, interview participants explained how they were able to use their bodies as a source of empowerment, a means to overcome stress and negativity, and as a vessel to express their presence and true selves. Participants never intimated that a greater awareness of embodiment led to their realization that their body was being controlled or disciplined by their work. Rather, participants expressed the general stress associated with work and leadership as being inherent in professional contexts and viewed yoga as a way to relieve and learn to manage the inevitable damage that work caused their bodies.

Although this study's analyses initially seem to challenge Trethewey's (1999) claims, it is possible that practicing yoga may actually act in tandem to further the professional discourses that control and discipline bodies which she discusses. After all, yoga generally produces the fit yet docile bodies amenable to the dominant discourses that discipline professional bodies. If professional discourses do indeed promulgate the production of fit, enduring bodies in the workplace, how might the proliferation of, specifically female, yoga practitioners in the United States, negate or facilitate the materialization of such bodies? While viewing yoga practice as an escape from the



professional world, “me time,” it is quite possible that through their yoga practice, yoga practitioners are actually submitting to and disciplining their bodies to better align with professional discourses that teach them to have fit, enduring, yet docile bodies. Future research might explore the way that bodies simultaneously reflect constraint and empowerment and in what contexts.

2. Regardless of the shape of their body, leaders are embodied beings, communicating in and through their bodies as well as using that body to make sense of others and their surroundings. Shotter (2009) explains the relationship between listening and ethics, claiming that we not only use our bodies to make sense of others and our surroundings but that it is our very ability to do so, as embodied beings, that actually gives “worth” and meanings to others (p. 21). Shotter (2009) promotes a form of listening that moves beyond typical transmission models of communication, which depict listeners as “decoders” of speakers’ language (p. 39). His concept of dialogically responsive listening conceptualizes listening as a process in which both the listener and speaker get to share in the creation of their own context for understanding (Shotter, 2009). While this study provides examples of both yoga instructors and interview participants engaging in such dialogical responsive listening in their leadership practices, it also responds to Shotter’s (2009) concerns regarding listening to the self and in so doing, extends his concept of listening.

Shotter (2009) explains that while developing this sense of “collective-we” (p. 40) with others is only ethical, we often do not apply such ethical listening when it

comes to ourselves and our development of “sustained, self-directed, purposeful action” (p. 41). However, interview participants expressed how they were able to channel awareness of their embodiment to listen to, interpret, and make sense of their own bodily needs. Shotter (2009) explains that oftentimes, people become outsiders, merely observing their own bodies and needs, something also noticed by participants who explained that many people treat their bodies as “strangers.” For interview participants however, listening to themselves was not only ethical but necessary, as it helped put them in touch with their true, authentic selves.

Interview participants continued, explaining that after caring for such needs in their selves, they were able to think more clearly, act more compassionately, and better empower others. In this way, leaders were able to not only make sense of their surroundings using their bodies, but also gained an inner awareness that enabled them to carry out their leadership. For these participants, using embodiment, both as a performance and sense-making tool, facilitated leadership approaches resembling the systemic constructionist approach discussed by Barge and Fairhurst (2008), which emphasizes listening and giving attention simultaneously to the self and others. In this way, this study’s participants exemplified Shotter’s (2009) approach to listening as dialogically responsive and extended such a concept to demonstrate something more adequately termed embodied listening. Through the process of embodied listening, participants were able to listen to themselves, embrace their authentic selves, and in turn, authentically and dialogically orient themselves to listening and responding to others. Practicing embodied listening facilitated the sense of “collective-we” not only between

participants and others but also created a similar sense of *collective-I* within the participant, allowing them to get in touch with and align all aspects of their identity in order to embody a true representation of their inner self.

Future research should continue to explore this concept of embodied listening to examine the process of listening to one's self, seeking to uncover what messages prompt such listening and how people are able to hear, interpret, and then actually put those messages into practice. Furthermore, future research should investigate the relationship between one's ability to listen to himself or herself and how that embodied ability affects their embodied interactions with others.

3. Shotter (2010b) agrees that the body can be used as a tool for sense making. His notion of embodiment is expanded by this study's analyses, which revealed that for interview participants, negative emotions, as opposed to surprises or new experiences, are what typically stimulated embodied awareness. Again, participants generally offered reasons such as experiencing "negativity" and work-related stress as the stimuli for bodily awareness.

Aside from expanding Shotter's (2010b) argument that new experiences trigger embodied awareness and sense making, these findings actually negate the messages portrayed by yoga instructors in studios. As observed, yoga instructors tend to emphasize the practice as celebrating the body and encourage students to give gratitude to their body and its capabilities. Therefore, in professional contexts, it would be assumed that practitioners would celebrate and show gratitude to their bodies. However,

for interview participants, the body served as a tool to work with and work through negative emotions associated with work. In this way then, having an embodied awareness highlighted negativity or misalignment, as opposed to capability and freedom. Therefore, having an embodied awareness in leadership may actually highlight some of the negative aspects associated with being a leader.

Where yoga becomes vital in this picture of embodied leadership is by creating a space for people to positively interact with their bodies, counteracting all of the stress and negativity that they were exposed to in their work. In this sense, negative emotions acted as an enabling constraint by both constraining participants and enabling them, when coupled with their practice of yoga, to engage in new forms of meaning making and action (Shotter, 1985). Negative work emotions constrained participants by physically manifesting as stress, stiffness, anxiety, and even temporomandibular joint disorder (commonly known as T.M.J.), restricting and inflicting discomfort on participants not only in the context of work, but outside of the office as well. Participants' yoga practice, then, enabled participants not only to overcome those negative emotions but also exposed participants to concepts and principles which were seen mirrored in their leadership practice. Without experiencing such negative emotions, participants may not have made sense out of their leadership and yoga in the same way; many participants may have never even tried yoga had these negative emotions not called for redress. In this way, this study highlights the importance of the role of intermediaries in facilitating the balance between enabling and constraining. In this case practicing yoga acted as an intermediary, catalyzing participants' constraints'

transformation to become enabling, illuminating the need to further investigate the process of just how constraints become enabling.

In turn, however, even the positive space created in yoga practice can be infected by negative emotions. Although the spoken words of yoga instructors encourage practitioners to “meet your body where it’s at” and treat it kindly, practitioners’ thoughts can contradict such messages. Based on my limited experience in yoga studios and in casual conversation with practitioners, it is apparent that sometimes negative and/or competitive thoughts intrude upon this seemingly peaceful and accepting practice.

For example, when instructors offered direction and then qualified it by instructing us to use a block or other prop if necessary, many times I caught myself comparing my abilities to other students in the room. I took a certain amount of pride in the fact that while other students might need one, I most certainly did not need a block. Furthermore, I experienced similar competitive emotions when as she passed out straps to each student, an instructor passed me by, telling me that I would not be needing a strap, as my physical abilities allowed me to express the pose without the extra help. Although the messages of yoga tell practitioners not to compare themselves to one another and to love and celebrate their body as it is, negative and competitive thoughts still enter one’s mind. In this way, a normally enabling practice becomes constraining as negative emotions from outside of the practice permeate the boundaries of this “haven.” This realization further demonstrates how practices and the discourses promoted within practices cannot be separated from one another. Just as yogic ideas were paralleled in

interview participants' leadership practices, so too can the ideas promoted by discourses of leadership practices be evident in their yoga practices.

Such findings highlight the necessity for future research to further explore how such intermediary practices not only facilitate constraint transforming to enablement but also act as conduits, transferring the emotions from one practice to another. In this way, future research should investigate the affects of such intermediary practices; is one "better off" participating or not participating in such a practice? While yoga's practice arguably positively influenced participants' leadership practices, it is worth it to participate knowing that this practice creates yet another space for negative emotion to infiltrate the mind? Future research also needs to examine those who do not participate in such intermediary practices, seeking out just how negative emotions are managed without that person being involved in a counteracting, intermediary practice that facilitates the remediation of negativity. This study expands Shotter's (1985) concept of enabling constraints by identifying intermediary practices that facilitate the balance between enablement and constraint. This notion requires further development by future research to explain exactly how the process of enablement is aroused from otherwise constraining circumstances or emotions.

4. This study demonstrates that as body work, both practicing yoga and practicing leadership can be truly transformational for the individual practitioner/leader and for those with whom they come into contact. Specifically in this study, body work evolved into a transformational practice as leaders became better in touch with their own

embodiment, authentic selves, and their spirituality. These findings highlight transformative practices as embodied, extending current understandings of transformational leadership are linguistically based. Bass (1985) conceptualizes transformational leadership as composed of charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. All three of these characteristics are operationalized through linguistic acts that motivate, support, and stimulate their followers (Bass, 1985). This study offers a deeper explanation of transformational leadership as an embodied, not solely linguistic, process in which leaders transform others not only through discursive means but also by embodying and demonstrating the very principles of transformation through their identity.

However well acquainted participants were with the deeper facets of their identity, such as their embodiment and spirituality, they also expressed hesitancy or even outright rejected the idea of incorporating or discussing these notions in leadership or professional contexts. In this way, leaders embodied the transformation they desired to see in others instead of expressing it linguistically. Regarding the spirituality of their yoga practice, interview participants expressed difficulty in even being able to put into words how yoga has affected them. Alicia explained that when she discusses yoga, and even other topics at work, she tends to keep the conversation on a superficial level. When probed as to why she does not discuss the deeper, more spiritual affects that yoga has had on her life and identity, she explained that because the connections and changes one makes because of yoga are so unique and individual, they are difficult to express in words and furthermore, shouldn't be. She expounded by explaining that since sharing

such intimate detail of the practice will give others expectations about how their practice should look and feel, it is best to simply encourage them to try yoga and experience its affects for themselves. In this way, although spirituality could be openly expressed and embraced within her yoga practice, Alicia and other participants expressed that such topics are inappropriate or too “touchy” to introduce discursively into their professional contexts. Instead, participants communicated these aspects of their identity through embodiment—through acting as living representations of the transformations they would like to see in others. In this way, transformative leadership can be conceptualized beyond its operationalization in linguistic acts to now include the embodied actions and presence of leaders as well.

In this way, this study opens a unique space to consider how context can affect the degree to which embodied awareness is necessary or appropriate. While instructors and interview participants’ reflections offered consistent transformational themes, such as listening and empowering others, their manifestation in each practice differed greatly. Specifically when it came to physicality, instructors were able to discuss, demonstrate, and even touch students to emphasize embodied awareness. However, leadership beyond the mat involved a different type of embodiment, one in which the body was used as a resource to inform leaders of their bodily presence and their bodies’ needs; embodiment for these leaders pertained to themselves, not to others. Imagine if in the workplace, a manager or teacher gave physical directives or even touched their subordinates; it would simply be inappropriate. In this way, the nature or purpose of each leaders’ task influences the type and degree of embodied awareness to be used. Fry (2003) explains



that it is commonly recognized in scholarship that in order to be effective, leaders must be able to act differently in different contexts. In fact, contingency leadership theory even explains that effective leadership is dependent on the alignment of a leader's behavior and the context in which they are operating (Fry, 2003).

The question then becomes why such discrepancies regarding acceptable leadership approaches and actions between contexts come into being. Because the professional context is inlaid with boundaries and rules regarding physicality, it is possible that the embodied awareness generally cultivated in groups, through a "holistic energy," is stifled or silenced in professional settings. Similarly, Kip noted that even the practice of taking a few moments of meditation before department meetings might cause him to "get reported." While taking a moment to engage in deep breathing prior to starting an intense meeting might be very beneficial for members of the meeting and ultimately for the accomplishments within and as a result of that meeting, this "spiritual" act would be deemed a waste of time, money, and space by the powers at be. In that way, spirituality in the workplace is controlled and regulated in the same way as is physicality, limiting the work interaction that leaders have with their subordinates and more generally, the interactions that occur between all organizational members.

This study extends traditional notions of linguistically based transformational leadership to exemplify how transformational leadership is also an embodied, processual approach to leadership which calls for varying applications of embodiment depending on the context of leadership.

5. However regulated such body work may be, this study demonstrates that embodied awareness enters into professional contexts, though not necessarily through discussion of spirituality or by means of physicality. This is because body work is spontaneous and emergent; it cannot be planned. Shotter (2010a) describes such emergent phenomena as being “produced in interactions between two or more agencies in such a way that we cannot discover, from an examination of their outcomes, the part or parts played by each separate agency in their production” (p. 149). Shotter (2010a) continues by explaining that since we are unable to plan emergent, embodied experiences, we must rather focus on preparing ourselves by maintaining openness, a readiness. Through our senses, feelings regarding events not yet realized can be tapped into, allowing us to become familiar with the expectations regarding a certain context or event (Shotter, 2010a). From this study, practicing yoga can be viewed as a means to prepare the body for such emergent, spontaneous events and actions, allowing practitioners to engender a sort of poised resourcefulness: “a capacity to enter each new and unique situation we encounter in our professional practice with a range of relevant responses ‘at the ready’” (Storch & Shotter, 2013, p. 16).

Hamill (2011) suggests that embodied leadership skills need to be rehearsed and repeated in contexts such as workshops and seminars in order to ever be implemented into practice. Similarly then, practicing yoga can be viewed as a space to allow for embodied awareness to develop and to be rehearsed. This argument, however, does not consider body work that is emergent and spontaneous, in which rehearsed habits would be difficult to apply. The notion of rehearsing habits intimates that one will be able to

plan and dictate the exact time, space, and context of those habits' application. What this study highlights, however, is that the need for applying embodied habits will emerge unexpectedly and one will rely on the poised resourcefulness they have developed through preparation in order to make sense of a particular situation. Such preparation of the body can then lead to embodied awareness being a more readily available tool for practitioners to use outside of their practice, in contexts including work and leadership. These notions of preparation, poise, and transformative practice mesh well with yogic concepts and beliefs, which are not formulaic, as is planning, but are holistic, and process oriented, as is preparation.

This study exemplifies how embodiment can be considered in relationship to leadership, specifically demonstrating how leaders can embody yogic messages within their leadership practices. In this way, not only the physical awareness of embodiment but the general lessons learned while engaged in the embodied practice of yoga were reinforced to create a holistic life practice that involves yoga and leadership. Again, while it cannot be said for certain that yogic concepts or messages directly influence practitioners' leadership approaches, this study can be used as an example of how the two practices mirrored one another for these participants, offering an example of how practices are interrelated and reflect one another.

### **Future Research**

This study takes one step further in articulating exactly what embodied leadership is and what it can look like. Based on this project, embodied leadership can be

conceptualized as a holistic process in which one's thoughts, actions, and spirit become aligned and which is then demonstrated in ways that help others to feel empowered and successful. Future research should continue to develop conceptualization and definitions of embodied leadership; by identifying and examining these research driven concepts in practice, the communication field will be introduced to a more holistic picture of communication that not only involves the discursive but the embodied as well.

Research on embodied leadership should continue to explore the relationship of mind/body practices with dominant societal discourses of professionalism, especially in regards to the body, stress, and negativity in the workplace. It is clear that for these interview participants, practicing yoga was a means of work-related stress relief and as a place to develop resources to deal with such negative consequences of work. The question then becomes whether this is a good or bad thing. For participants, yoga became a structured space for relaxation, yet another "organization" of which people can become a member. Especially in the United States, where yoga's popularity is growing, one might consider the reasons why people are seeking this form of structured relaxation. Would yoga have proliferated as much here in the United States had people been more satisfied with and experienced fewer negative emotions through their work? This idea can also be related to topics regarding the commercialization of yoga. Is yoga being "sold" as a holistic, mind/body experience and/or is it being "sold" as a means to detoxify one's mind and body after a stressful day at work?

Further investigation into the negativity associated with professionalism and in leadership might consider inquiring more in depth as to how and why negative embodied emotions associated with one practice can be seen paralleled in other practices. For example, I noticed that the competitive and comparing discourses promulgated by professional discourses seeped into my yoga practice as well. The opposite was also true: the stress and toxicity associated with professionalism was the reason that many people sought to practice yoga in the first place. One might further investigate why the transference or parallelism of negative emotion amongst practices tends to be, at least in this study, more heavily emphasized than the transference or parallelism of positive emotions amongst practices.

Lastly, future embodied leadership scholarship should further investigate contexts' relationship to the degree and type of embodied awareness that is perceived as appropriate for particular situations. This study revealed that while notions of embodiment and embodied leadership were comparably applied by instructors and by leaders in professional settings, the form and style of application differed greatly depending on the context of leadership. Because of this, embodied leadership is difficult to define as it looks very different depending on its unique space and place in the social world. This concept could be further identified and conceptualized through inquiries that documented its differing applications and explained why embodied leadership takes on its particular form in each context.

## **Limitations**

As with all interpretive scholarship, some limitations are inherent within this study. Foremost, no direct conclusions can be drawn regarding the degree of transference of embodied awareness or yogic principles from practicing yoga to practicing leadership. Although for most interview participants, their yogic and leadership practices were consistent with one another, there are many other variables and aspects of their identities that were not taken into account in this inquiry. In addition, demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity were not taken into consideration during this study. It is likely that interview participants' experiences with and in yoga and with and in leadership vary greatly depending on these and other variable that were outside of this project's scope.

Furthermore, while this study offers a broad picture of the messages and practices portrayed by yoga instructors in yoga studios and a broad picture of practitioners' experiences with leadership outside of their yoga practice, this study is limited in that the exact instruction each participant received was not necessarily observed. While some interview participants practiced yoga regularly at the observed sites, others practiced at sites largely unknown to me. Though interview participants described their yoga practice during their interviews, it is impossible to draw direct connections between the instruction they received and the topics they discussed during their interviews.

Lastly, as an interpretive study, this project is a representation of the experiences and perspectives of a select group of people. Therefore, it is important to point out that the data collected was highly subjective in the sense that I, as the researcher, chose which classes to attend and which instructors to observe. Although I attempted to draw from as rich of a pool of potential classes as possible, my own biases and schedule surely came into play when deciding which classes to attend and observe. Interview responses were also subjective in the sense that I, the researcher, sought out participants that I likely knew or to whom I had connections, I chose the question to be asked, and made decisions to probe and follow-up on different questions in each interview based on my own interests, creating interviews that were rich and varied, but not necessarily consistent. Analyses of this study's results were also subjective in the sense that although all data was coded and synthesized through thematic analyses, themes were selected based on their relevance to this project's research questions. Therefore, salient themes may have been detected yet not reported here for discussion.

### **Conclusion**

Now as I lay on my mat, my instructor encouraging me to reflect on a mantra, instead of wracking my brain searching for a quote, some prescribed or expected verse on which to focus, I simply listen. I listen to the thoughts in my head, listen to what my body and heart is telling me; I listen to the air ventilation, to the gentle breath of the person laying next to me; occasionally I listen to the birds or the breeze wafting by. Instead of being so consumed, wondering "who am I?", I instead rest assured that I am who my mind, body, and soul lead me to be.

This study reinforces the importance and relevance of studying embodied leadership in a time when many people are out of touch with their minds, bodies, and souls. For instructors and leaders alike, this study emphasizes the importance of being a learner, each day seeking to align your actions with your authentic self and in so doing honor the authentic self of those around you.



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