

THEMATIC ARTICLE

To the things themselves: contributions of phenomenological epistemology to leadership studies

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Abstract

Leadership theories developed since the beginning of the last century primarily represent positivist premises, strongly marked by the separation between subject and object, dichotomization, objectivism, quantification, reproduction, and validation. Based on this, we argue that the field needs epistemological approaches that challenge the mainstream of leadership studies. To this end, phenomenology can ground the possibility of understanding leadership as a world phenomenon. In theoretical terms, phenomenology is a return to the acts through which we gain knowledge of objects, thus the proposal to return to the things themselves. This article analyzes the contributions of phenomenology to leadership studies. In order to interact with such identified gaps in leadership studies, we explore the rescue of the lifeworld in the face of objectivism, the reconciliation between subject and object, the attribution of meanings, the *epoché*, and the change of positioning.

Keywords: Leadership. Phenomenology. Epistemology. *Epoché*.

Às coisas mesmas: contribuições da epistemologia fenomenológica para os estudos de liderança

Resumo

As teorias de liderança que vêm sendo desenvolvidas desde o início do século passado representam, em sua maioria, premissas positivistas, fortemente marcadas pela separação entre sujeito e objeto, dicotomização, objetivismo, quantificação, reprodução, validação. Com base nisso, argumentamos que o campo carece de abordagens epistemológicas que desafiem o *mainstream* dos estudos de liderança. Nesse intuito, a fenomenologia pode fundamentar a possibilidade para o entendimento da liderança enquanto um fenômeno no mundo. Em termos teóricos, a fenomenologia é um retorno aos atos por meio dos quais se tem conhecimento dos objetos: por isso a proposta de se voltar às coisas mesmas. Desse modo, o objetivo deste artigo é analisar as contribuições da fenomenologia para os estudos em liderança. Para tanto, de modo a interagir com tais lacunas identificadas no campo de estudos de liderança, exploramos o resgate do mundo-da-vida frente ao objetivismo; à reconciliação entre sujeito e objeto; à atribuição de sentidos; à *epoché* e à mudança de posicionamento.

Palavras-chave: Liderança. Fenomenologia. Epistemologia. *Epoché*.

A las cosas mismas: aportes de la epistemología fenomenológica a los estudios de liderazgo

Resumen

Las teorías del liderazgo que se han desarrollado desde principios del siglo pasado representan, en su mayoría, premisas positivistas, fuertemente marcadas por la separación entre sujeto y objeto, dicotomización, objetivismo, cuantificación, reproducción y validación. A partir de esto, argumentamos que el campo carece de enfoques epistemológicos que desafíen la corriente principal de los estudios de liderazgo. Para ello, la fenomenología puede sustentar la posibilidad de entender el liderazgo como un fenómeno en el mundo. En términos teóricos, la fenomenología es una vuelta a los actos a través de los cuales se conocen los objetos, de ahí la propuesta de volver a las cosas mismas. Así, el objetivo de este artículo es analizar las contribuciones de la fenomenología a los estudios de liderazgo. Por tanto, para interactuar con tales vacíos identificados en el campo de los estudios de liderazgo, exploramos el rescate del mundo de la vida frente al objetivismo; la reconciliación entre sujeto y objeto, atribución de significados; la *epoché* y el cambio de posición.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo. Fenomenología. Epistemología. *Epoché*.

Article submitted to the Call for Papers "Leadership: revisiting and reframing the big questions on theory and practice" on June 26, 2022 and accepted for publication on June 16, 2023.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article's translator.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120220154x>

INTRODUCTION

Positivist and functionalist premises heavily dominate research in the field of leadership (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Case, French, & Simpson, 2011; Ford, 2010; Tal & Gordon, 2016), which tend to privilege measurement and quantification, objectivism, and instrumental thinking, rather than attention to contexts and meaning attributed to experience. In this path, we identify dichotomizing impulses (leader/follower), search for the validation of a single generalizing reality, and the predominance of positive language that determines the interests of positions of power, obedience, and admiration. Hence, our starting point is that phenomenological premises can significantly contribute to leadership studies as we understand leadership as a world phenomenon to the extent that we relativize the dogmatic positioning about a reality taken as effective. How? What is the contribution of phenomenology to the understanding of the leadership phenomenon?

First, we can consider that the world around us is not a world of physical laws, causalities, and natural objects in which we live and act and a set of significantly experienced contexts that are irreducible to purely natural objects. In the ballast of change in how we live in society, for example, the facilitations arising from large-scale technology insertion can be analyzed from different perspectives. On the one hand, it facilitates processes of daily life, such as communication and economic globalization; on the other hand, it makes us increasingly hyper-available for work. Through engagement and high performance, we relativize our autonomy and subjectivity, and we meekly surrender our bodies and minds in the project of the entrepreneurial self (Han, 2015). The space of criticism and reflection of our authentic human experience (Arendt, 2020) has been captured and occupied by quick solutions, checklists, and Cartesian methodologies that somehow oppress and undermine our ability to interact with/and transform our surroundings. These changes have agency over how we experience contemporaneity and how we establish relationships, and the phenomenon of leadership, likewise, is reached by these influences. To what extent do theories of leadership catch up with these new conditions of possibility for such experience?

To lead is to deal with change (Kotter, 2001), which is generally an uncomfortable process, frightening at times in that the future remains veiled. However, contemporaneity demands that organizations transform themselves, and in this sense, leadership can be seen as a process relevant to greater adaptive capacity (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). As Kellerman (2012, p. 10) writes, “Everything is vulnerable to the vicissitudes of change – a general rule to which leadership is no exception”¹. The pandemic was a prelude in this regard, as unprecedented market transformation is expected from the promise of new actors, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and big data, with lasting implications for leadership (Puaschunder, 2023). Amidst this continuous unfolding of challenges, in what ways do leadership studies seek to address answers and build clarifications?

Leadership is a plural and complex phenomenon. It can be perceived as a dynamic process of social influence (Banks, Dionne, Mast, & Sayama, 2022) or as what a group of subjects makes of it within the symbolic fabric (Grint, Jones, & Holt, 2016). One can also research the person (who), outcome (what), position (where), purpose (why), and process (how) (Grint et al., 2016). Sometimes leadership is linked to a person, often to a relationship; sometimes, it is a group phenomenon (shared leadership); sometimes, to any role that exerts some influence; and sometimes, it is even the absence of a leader (self-leadership) (Alvesson, 2019).

The context in which leadership is practiced continues to change as our understanding of the concept expands (Allen et al., 2022), and leadership studies keep pace with this ongoing transformation. Indeed, the search for a formal concept of leadership can be genuinely “maddening” (Alvesson, 2019, p. 28). Whether because of the dimension with which the field reaches or the relevance and timeliness of its phenomenon, many criticisms are addressed to leadership studies, much of them of epistemological order. For some scholars, the field is overloaded with conventional quantitative and positivist analyses that dominate research in the field (Avolio et al., 2009; Case et al., 2011; Ford, 2010; Tal & Gordon, 2016); also, much research is fundamentally seen as tautological (Alvesson, 2020) and fails to represent organizational reality (Pfeffer, 2015).

¹Direct quotations in English have been either taken from sources – when available – or translated.

In this sense, we present phenomenology as an epistemology to illuminate new avenues for leadership research and extrapolate the field's mainstream. As a philosophy concerned with the lifeworld, phenomenology can ground the possibility of understanding leadership as a world phenomenon. Some research has already supported the contribution of phenomenology to studies within organizations. For example, Boava and Macedo (2011) discusses elements of phenomenology that enable another possibility of understanding administrative phenomena. Painter, Pérezts, and Deslandes (2021) use phenomenology to revisit the Stakeholder Theory and highlight critical pedagogical implications of how it is taught in management learning and education programs. Finally, Gill (2014), in methodological scope, presents a typology with five phenomenological methodologies and their possibilities for organizational studies. However, we realize that much can be done in leadership studies, as accounting for the leading and following experiences² remains seriously underexamined (Ladkin, 2010).

In theory, phenomenology is a return to the acts through which we gain knowledge of objects, hence the proposition of returning to the things themselves. A contrast of attitudes initially propitiates this return. Unlike the natural attitude, in which theoretical and practical interests are directed to the beings of the world, in the phenomenological attitude, it is a matter of suspending this interest to occupy oneself with how the phenomena occur in consciousness. Phenomenological epistemology breaks the natural attitude and changes the focus of attention: Not on the experienced object or the subject that experiences, but on the act of experiencing (Faria, 2022). It embraces the importance of meaning in human meaning-making processes. It recognizes the impact of missing or invisible aspects of an entity, alerting us to the possibility that in exploring a phenomenon such as leadership, what is unseen may be as important as what is seen (Ladkin, 2010). By doing so, one attempts to understand a way of life as lived (Pietersma, 2000). Practically, leadership studies guided by the phenomenological approach allow us to access experience (the world of experience), the reality and meaning of things, and everyday knowledge.

Among its epistemological merits, phenomenology can contribute to freeing the positive sciences from widespread pseudoscientific theorizing through its sharp critique of trends such as objectivism and scientism, as well as offering concrete analyses that are relevant to a range of empirical sciences (Zahavi, 2019). For leadership studies, phenomenology allows access to emerging and unknown territories ignored mainly by social scientists who aim to define, assess, and manipulate leadership, such as the qualitative, experienced, and absent aspects of phenomena, as it provides a unique language and approach. It also offers concepts that allow one to reflect on the leadership experience more complex and multi-dimensional. It also brings the experience of those who lead or are being led directly to the center of what constitutes leadership (Ladkin, 2010).

That said, this study analyzes the contributions of phenomenology to leadership studies given the developmental pathway of the field, the gaps identified, and the potential of the phenomenology premises to contribute as a complementary approach. To this end, the following section presents the context of leadership studies, the historical path, and schools of thought; then, it identifies 'problems', 'gaps', and "cartesianisms" in leadership studies that prevent us from understanding leadership as a phenomenon in the lifeworld. It also introduces and discusses phenomenology's main concepts and contributions to leadership research and an agenda proposal for leadership studies seen from phenomenological premises.

THE CONTEXT OF LEADERSHIP: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

The genesis of leadership research takes us back to the 1930s (House & Aditya, 1997), but some authors point to the passage from the 19th to the 20th century (Day & Antonakis, 2012). In the early years, research was virtually atheoretical and purely inductive, with literature based on a limited set of assumptions that primarily reflected the industrialized culture of the West. Moreover, most theories and empirical evidence reflected North American characteristics, such as individualism, hedonism, work centrality, and emphasis on rationality (House & Aditya, 1997).

²According to Ales Bello (2006), no word in English or Italian corresponds to the German noun *Erlebnis*, which means acts such as seeing and touching. For this reason, we use the term lived experience. However, in Portuguese, as in Spanish- according to the author, the term *vivência* accounts for the meaning more thoroughly and is adopted in this article.

Amid the plurality of perspectives that make up the field, Day and Antonakis (2012) highlights nine schools of thought. The first school, named *the trait-based perspective*, was elaborated in the interwar period, and returned in the 1980s, revisited as transformational leadership (Tal & Gordon, 2020). In this perspective, some dispositional characteristics (stable personality attributes or traits) differentiated leaders from non-leaders, including their intelligence and relationship with effectiveness. The behavioral perspective, which started in the 1950s, focuses on leaders' behaviors and how they treat followers. In addition, two overarching leadership factors referred to *consideration* (supportive, person-oriented) and *initial structure* (directive, task-oriented) were identified.

In the 1960s, studies from the *contingency perspective* predominated, in which leadership style would be circumstantial and primarily conditioned by the situation. Then, the *relational perspective* emerged – based on the Vertical Dyad Connection Theory – that focused on the exchanges between leaders and followers (that is, LMX, *Leader-Member Exchange*). In the 1970s and 80s, the study of leadership underwent further changes due to criticism regarding questionnaires' validation and relevance in producing practical results. Thus, the *skeptical perspective* emerged, considering that what leaders did would be largely irrelevant and leadership itself would be non-existent or unnecessary. The *information processing school*, in turn, sought to understand how and why a leader was legitimized by matching personal characteristics (personality traits) with followers' prototypical expectations of a leader.

The *new school of leadership*, established between the 1980s and 1990s, included approaches called neo-charismatic leadership, visionary leadership, and the most prominent of them, transformational leadership. From this perspective, a new type of leadership emerged based on a sense of purpose and an idealized mission. Moreover, the leader's inspirational behaviors induced followers to transcend their interests for the greater good. Finally, in the 2000s, *biological and evolutionary perspectives* approached *hard science* regarding measuring individual differences directly observable (biological variables or processes).

For Sorenson, Goethals, and Haber (2011), the leadership phenomenon is associated with the growth of organizational behavior science developed mainly in the United States in the last century. As a discipline, it sought to answer questions regarding how best to lead and govern the country's institutional and business life. According to the authors, the time's fashion was to seek direction in science. Consequently, leadership studies were established as a purported science of individual conduct informed predominantly by psychological and economic theory.

Wilson (2017), however, views the field differently; the author is critical of the historical unfolding process that has led to the emergence of different schools of thought – interestingly, there is no shortage of criticism surrounding leadership studies, as will be seen in the next section. For the author, it is not a “scientific” look at the progress of ever more robust and edifying knowledge that has shaped its historical path. Instead, what was considered problematic and demanding of response changed: scholars employed knowledge production and distribution mechanisms, connected their ideas to widely accepted beliefs and values, and repeatedly produced a new version of truth aligned with these factors. In effect, we observed distinct ways of viewing and studying leadership. Wilson also sought to justify why, over time, some approaches have gained more or less interest, thus culminating in forming islands of thought within the field (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019).

For analysis, we can consider the existence of four contemporary theories on leadership, which will be summarized later in this article: a) trait theories; b) behavioral theories; c) contingency theories; d) neo-charismatic theories (Cabral & Seminotti, 2009). Next, we present some criticisms and challenges imposed on leadership studies.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES: GAPS IN THE FIELD OF LEADERSHIP STUDIES

As mentioned, criticism is present in leadership studies either because of the magnitude of the field or the relevance of its study phenomenon. We can even speak of a specific current called critical leadership studies, which challenge hegemonic perspectives and critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are often reproduced and rationalized, sometimes resisted, and occasionally transformed (Collinson, 2019). This particularity seems optimistic, as it points to a horizon of epistemological maturity that reveals an interest in refining the practices and perspectives adopted in this context.

The proliferation and redundancy of perspectives are some of the characteristics that plague the field. For Ford, Harding, and Gilmore (2022), this productivity seems fueled by a relentless and unattainable search for new leadership theories. In addition to the “failure” to discover a viable general theory, even after 150 years of research (Ford et al., 2022, p. 811), there are also broad problems such as lack of replication, use of methodological shortcuts (*p-hacking*), and carelessness in conceptualizing and operationalizing research (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019).

Despite the variety of perspectives on the topic, the same diversity is not found in epistemology. Most research on leadership is still guided by functionalist assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The dominance of quantitative and positivist analyses is recognized (Avolio et al., 2009; Case et al., 2011; Ford, 2010; Tal & Gordon, 2016), and the scientific literature traditionally anchored by scholars raised in an organizational-industrial psychology tradition, who work on precise measurements and theorizations and employ statistically complex methodologies (Ashford & Sitkin, 2019). According to Wilson (2017, p. 25), this tendency makes it easily quantified according to accepted standards of statistical analysis “more reliable and worthy of attention” while broadly ignoring what cannot be quantified. For Collinson (2020), most leadership studies fall into what he calls the *mainstream/heroic* paradigm. They focus on the leaders’ qualities and practices, incorporate various theories, and direct their attention to individual leaders. According to Collinson (2020), these studies pay less attention to the contexts and relationships of leadership dynamics or their structural and cultural conditions and consequences. Much of this research articulates the positivist and functionalist values that have predominated in the United States since the 1930s.

Indeed, this approach is subject to many criticisms. Among them is the problem of the dichotomizing impulse (opposing binaries) such as leader/follower, theory X/theory Y. Dichotomy creates mutually exclusive alternatives (Collinson, 2019) and causes studies to be unable to capture nuances for the simple reason that they preclude the possibility of bifurcating paths to multiple answers (Spoelstra, Butler, & Delaney, 2020). Moreover, theories are discussed in terms of methodological rigor (the context of justification) rather than critically scrutinized (the context of discovery) (Spoelstra, Butler, & Delaney, 2016), in an attitude marked by faith in either leadership concepts or leadership as science (Spoelstra et al., 2020). In this regard, Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, and Lalive (2010) state that incorrect statistical specifications limit much empirical research and undermine the reliability of the results.

Research with the hypothetic-deductive method and its psychometric instruments is further seen as responsible for leveraging and popularizing leadership adjectives (authentic, servant, among others). For Spoelstra (2019), these adjectives point to constructs designed to produce positive results that abruptly end questioning, call for obedience, admiration, and mechanical testing. Conceptually, studies also highlight confusion in defining and measuring constructs in studies on leadership styles (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Furthermore, questions arise about quantitatively measuring charisma and authenticity (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Spoelstra et al., 2020) or defining them as fixed categories. According to Fischer & Sitkin (2023), the weaknesses identified in research on leadership styles can also be related to the valid research logic that has dominated the field for over seventy years.

Another set of criticisms thrown at leadership studies deals with the excess positivity identified in the last 15 years (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), such as Prozac leadership (Collinson, 2012). For Alvesson Einola (2019), these optimistic ideologies feed fantasies of the leader as the central issue and are reluctant to address issues of power and privilege (Collinson, 2019). In their study, Learmonth and Morrell (2021) sought to show how leadership can be recognized as a neoliberal political project. For the authors, the language of “leadership” represents a particularly subtle but powerful opportunity so that the

pursuit of individual elite interests is disguised. In a sense, the label (“leader”) is celebratory: it predisposes us to view elites in an overly optimistic light. It draws a veil over the antagonism at the heart of the labor relationship.

Along this path, we can elicit critiques about leadership studies from the synthesis of eight deficiencies identified by Alvesson (2019):

- *Hollywoodization* and *Disneyland* are seen as ideologies. The former is for the hero mythology and indispensability of leadership, and the latter is a celebration of the moral virtue of the leader.
- *A closed system* that deals with abstracted leadership, formed by a limited unit that neglects other forces involved in and controlling organizational life.
- *Two kinds of person*: leader-follower dichotomy, ignoring that a manager or CEO may also be subordinate to, for example, the board of directors, customers, and legislation.
- *Bees and honey pot*: They represent that the leadership vocabulary may favor better possibilities for employment and promotion among academics and lucrative sources for development courses.
- *Reification*: The attitude of making leadership an “it”, a seemingly coherent, integrated, solid phenomenon and a suitable object for measurement.
- *Tautology*: The effects it creates define behavior, skill, or practice.
- *Hyper-reality*: Research practices (questionnaires, lack of observation, artificial experiments) make much of the knowledge produced unstable.

Given this, the argument goes that leadership theories reflect the interests of their proponents at the time (and in a superficial way), capturing what is popularized in business, following the life cycle of managerial fashions (Spoelstra et al., 2016). For Case et al. (2011), the entire field of leadership research is dominated by a propensity for scientism and instrumental thinking that does not meet organizational practitioners’ cognitive and affective needs. In this regard, it is recommended that researchers embrace the dominant critiques of science, seeking alternative ways to study the phenomenon (Spoelstra et al., 2016). A moratorium on new leader behaviors is also suggested until what is theoretically available can be cumulatively integrated (Banks, Gooty, Ross, Williams, & Harrington, 2018) and migration from dichotomy to dialectics can occur (Collinson, 2019).

All these criticisms provoke profound reflections. More than thinking about “what” we are studying – since consensus is an impossible task – they lead us to consider “how” we study the phenomenon of leadership and what results we achieve (or build) from these modes. What assumptions underlie and guide our research attitude? To what extent do we exercise healthy epistemological vigilance? Does all this plethora ultimately provoke more clarification, or does it just accumulate more and more concepts that cloud the intellect? Criticism also encourages, as a consequence, the search for alternatives that go beyond the *mainstream*, that can illuminate new paths, and that is an invitation for a radical change of attitude.

For this reason, we present phenomenology as an alternative epistemology distinct from the dominant paradigms in leadership research. The phenomenological perspective corresponds to Blom and Alvesson’s (2015) provocation to conduct studies from an *æmic* approach. It refers to the authentic and pure experience of how people develop a personal meaning of leadership and how this meaning transforms them. In this sense, we present introductory notions and concepts of phenomenology below to ground the article’s discussion, establishing a dialogue between these main gaps and the contribution of phenomenology to leadership studies.

PHENOMENOLOGY: INTRODUCTORY NOTIONS AND MAIN CONCEPTS

Phenomenology cannot be taken as a uniform project that remains unchanged over the years, so “the notion of a unified phenomenological research paradigm is one of the first myths we must dispel” (Larsen, 2023, p. 3). The idea of phenomenology dates back at least to the 17th century, having its turning point in the 19th century with Franz Brentano’s (1838-1917) descriptive phenomenology, Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) transcendental phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger’s

(1889-1976) hermeneutics (Djian & Majolino, 2021). Since then, the phenomenological project has been reworked by great and different names in the history of Western thought, such as Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Max Scheler, Alfred Schütz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, with its variants and unfoldings, becoming a solid presupposition and constant discussion partner of different theoretical formations (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Zahavi, 2019).

The concepts and foundations discussed in this article originate from the thought of Husserl (2008, 2020, 2014) – considered the founder of the phenomenological movement – representing a small portion of the vast epistemological contribution the mathematician and philosopher left. These concepts sought to clarify phenomenological philosophy and were chosen because of their potential contribution to leadership studies. We will thus present the following elements: the phenomenological perspective concerning the concept of the phenomenon; the absence of presuppositions as an extreme condition for the investigation of phenomena; the correlation between natural attitude and phenomenological attitude; *epoché* as suspension of judgment and a possibility to glimpse the phenomenologically given; the phenomenological reduction and the transcendental reduction, in which the experience of the object is described; the central role played by consciousness and its intentional property; the first-person point of view as a phenomenological approach; and, finally, the notion of the lifeworld as the world of pre-scientific experience.

On the etymological level, phenomenology can be understood by the conjunction of the Greek *φαινόμενον* (*phainomenon*) and *λόγος* (*logos*), thus constituting the study of phenomena (Boava & Macedo, 2011; Zilles, 1994). However, this outside understanding brings phenomenology closer to the meaning of theology, biology, and sociology. Heidegger (2005) enables us a further understanding when he indicates that these constitute the objects of their respective sciences (God, life, society) in their quantitative content. However, phenomenology, differently, does not characterize the actual quality of the objects of philosophical investigation but rather their way, as they are. The term phenomenology refers exclusively to how one demonstrates and treats what in this science is to be treated and says then – through the connection between “phenomenon” and “logos” – to let and make see for itself what is shown, as it appears from itself, equaling the maxim: “to things themselves!” (Heidegger, 2005, p. 65).

The word *φαινόμενον* (*phainomenon*) has the same root as *φως* (*lux*: the light, the clarity), that is, the element, the means, in which something can come to reveal itself and become visible in itself. The phenomenon, therefore, is what is revealed, what shows itself in itself (Heidegger, 2005). For phenomenology, there is no “mere” appearance, and nothing is “only” an appearance. Things appear as they are and are as they appear; the way they appear is part of the being of things. Appearances are actual; they belong to being. These things, which the philosophical tradition declared merely psychological, are now ontological (Sokolowski, 2012). Thus, the phenomenon is understood as the manifestation of the thing itself, and phenomenology is interested in how objects themselves show themselves and the conditions of possibility of this appearing (Zahavi, 2015). According to Kockelmans and Jager (1967, p. 303), “the essential characteristic of a phenomenon consists in the fact that it is consciousness-of-its-object”; therefore, “the term phenomenon does not apply first or only to the object that appears, but to the experience in which, and according to which, it appears” (Marion, 1998, p. 53). The phenomenon is “the perspective” or the appearance and not the appearance itself, for phenomena are never appearances, but every appearance depends on phenomena (Larsen, 2023, p. 13).

One of the primary elements when discussing phenomenology is the absence of presuppositions. For phenomenology, our inquiry should be critical, not dogmatic, avoiding metaphysical and scientific biases. It needs to turn to the giving or the appearance of actual reality, the way reality is given to us in our experience, and not by what we expect to find in the face of our theoretical views (Zahavi, 2015). With that, we cannot let preconceived theories determine our experience, but our experience should instead direct our theories. For phenomenology, what matters is not prior assertions and knowledge about reality but the experience of consciousness of the world now.

Phenomenology describes our subjective ways of accessing objects. It articulates the structure of meanings or concepts that we always and everywhere use but assume without objectifying them (Pietersma, 2000). It focuses neither on the object experienced nor the subject experiencing but on the act of experiencing (Faria, 2022). By doing so, it tries to get a picture of a way of life as experienced (Pietersma, 2000). Furthermore, for phenomenology, one must question the epistemological and metaphysical assumptions that determine our everyday life and are accepted by the positive sciences, primarily our implicit belief in the existence of a compelling reality independent of consciousness and experience.

According to Sokolowski (2012), in the *natural attitude*, this kind of conviction or belief in the world takes place, and in which we accept things without questioning them. Through *natural attitude*, we are directed toward all the structural elements in the world: the self, tangible things, mathematical entities, laws, policies, and acts of the most diverse kinds. “In the natural attitude, we address ourselves directly to the object; we go straight to the manifestations of the object, to the object itself” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 59). The *phenomenological attitude*, in turn, is more radical and comprehensive through which we become aware of the giving of the object (Zahavi, 2015). It is an all-or-nothing movement in which we reflexively focus on everything from the natural attitude, including the underlying belief in the world. From the phenomenological point of view, we suspend all the intentionality we are examining, neutralize them, and contemplate them without exercising them. In the phenomenological attitude, we are no longer just participants in the world; we contemplate what it is to be a participant in the world. In gnoseological terms, in the first approach, the emphasis is on truth as possession and knowledge as a state; in the second, it is on truth as an object of search and knowledge as an activity (Pietersma, 2000).

According to Zahavi (2015), this entry into the phenomenological attitude requires a series of preparatory moves in which it is necessary to set aside, provisionally, our natural stance. The main one is called *epoché*, a term taken from Greek skepticism. *Epoché* does not aim at denying, doubting, abandoning, or excluding reality from our investigation. What it does is to put in round brackets (or square brackets) its validity (we would say, act with *indifference*). Its goal is “to suspend or neutralize a certain dogmatic positioning about effective reality [...] in order to be in a position to glimpse the phenomenologically given [...] more closely and directly” (Zahavi, 2015, p. 68). One speaks of suspending or neutralizing one’s presuppositions, including beliefs, judgments, opinions, and theories – even the most basic judgment that the world exists and is accurate (Gallagher, 2022). In this way, it is possible to speak of the world as a context for the manifestation of things because “putting it in square brackets retains exactly the modality and mode of manifestation that the object has for the subject in the natural attitude” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 59). However, this leaves us with nothing – it leaves us with the ongoing experience of the world and our awareness of the world (Gallagher, 2022). *Epoché*, therefore, deals with a change in positioning with reality that aims to free us from a natural dogmatism and a naive metaphysical look. It “allows us to investigate mundane objects in a new light: in their appearance or manifestation to consciousness, as their constituted correlate” (Zahavi, 2015, p. 75). Without this shift in positioning, both the fundamental structures of natural positioning and the particular features of our subjectivity remain veiled (Zahavi, 2019).

Gallagher (2022) places *epoché* as one of the three forms of phenomenological reduction. For the author, after *epoché*, *phenomenological reduction* itself occurs. At this stage, we direct our attention to phenomena as they appear and take what we experience as we experience it, describing (or exploring) what is given. However, to abandon a mere empirical description of the object, we appeal to a transcendental reduction, in which it is not the object itself that is described but our experience of the object (I do not say “the apple is red”, but “the apple *appears to be* red”). Another essential characteristic of reduction is that, in experience, the object always appears in a particular perspective. This characteristic of the experience, not of the object, presents it in an incomplete way each time. Finally, after the phenomenological reduction would come the third form, the *eidetic reduction*. Working in the transcendently reduced sphere of consciousness, this reduction provides a way to understand the phenomenon’s essence. The technique of imaginative variation is then applied, in which we use our imagination to change various features of the phenomenon until we reach the set of invariants that we can discover through this process, thus arriving at its essence. “The goal, then, is to bring this essence into the immediate and intuitive gift, that is, to allow it to emerge as a conceptual truth within the scope of one’s experience” (Gallagher, 2022, p. 39).

It is through consciousness that we attribute meaning to things. Consciousness, according to phenomenology, refers to being conscious of something; it is directed toward an object (Zahavi, 2015). It is not seen as a receptacle, which has no relation to the world, neither as a physical or specific place nor of a spiritual or psychic character (Ales Bello, 2006); it is directed to the world and its objects. Knowledge about a phenomenon is produced from how consciousness interprets it because reality is only understood according to how it manifests itself and not how it is (Faria, 2022). For phenomenology, “there is no reality or consciousness in itself, but a consciousness that attributes and gives meaning to things. The thing is its interpretation by the consciousness as it manifests itself to the subject” (Faria, 2022, p. 405). All forms of consciousness are determined by their inward tending (*in-tendere*) of objects. Thus, if a subject is directed toward an object and experiences it, it is not a matter of a real connection but of an intentional relation to something (Zahavi, 2015). In this way, phenomenology can be understood as a “logical interpretation of the specific structure of the phenomenon and the description of the structure of consciousness as

constituting the condition of knowing, of meaning, since to know purely and simply to apprehend at the empirical level and to constitute at the transcendental level the meanings” (Faria, 2022, pp. 411-412).

The intrinsic property of consciousness is *intentionality*. According to Sokolowski (2012), in phenomenology, the concept of intention cannot be confused with the purpose we have in mind when we act. It applies primarily to the theory of knowledge, not to the theory of human action. Thus, the concept – of intention – means the relation of consciousness to an object. In contrast to what Sokolowski (2012) called an “egocentric predicament”, that is, the notion that consciousness refers to a state of ourselves or our ideas, taken as an illusion or an enclosed cabinet that does not reach things “outside”, phenomenology shows that the mind is a public thing that acts not only within its boundaries. “The mind and the world are correlated. Things appear to us, things truly discovered, and we, on our part, reveal, to ourselves and others, the way things are” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 21). As Zahavi (2019, p. 20) points out, “The subject can only be understood in its relation to the world, and, conversely, we can only make sense of the world insofar as it appears to a subject and is understood by him.”

Intentionality is characterized by its independence from the existence of objects; the only thing that needs to exist is the intentional experience, whose structure includes being directed toward an object. Therefore, intentionality is not any external connection. The analysis of intentionality shows that there are acts of consciousness that, under their very constitution, are directed toward objects transcendent to the acts. The subject is, *per se*, self-transcendent. *Per se*, he is directed toward something other than himself (Zahavi, 2015). Intentionality, on the one hand, means that consciousness only exists as consciousness of something; on the other hand, the object can only be defined in its relation to consciousness by always being object-for-a-subject (Zilles, 1994).

For Pietersma (2000), what gives phenomenological character to an approach is objectifying the internal structure of experience. The focus is on the first-person point of view, in which one describes or articulates the experience from the perspective of the experience; after all, “the subject is a condition of possibility of the appearance or manifestation: Without subjectivity, there can be no appearance” (Zahavi, 2015, p. 78). The consciousness under study creates the state of affairs; it is the state of affairs from the subject’s perspective. Phenomenology makes us attentive to the appearance of the object and the subjective correlation of its appearance, and thereby to the mode of intentionality (Zahavi, 2019). Therefore, dear to phenomenology is the concept of meaning used to indicate the distinct perspective of its discourse. Pietersma (2000) points out that phenomenologists often say their discourse is about meanings, not objects. “An object becomes a meaning in the discourse context that focuses on our cognitive access to objects, not on the object as such” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, the object becomes meaning, specified only by reference to a particular form of consciousness.

The last concept presented in this text, which falls within Husserl’s late philosophy, is the notion of the *lifeworld*, one of the “most ambiguous and complicated in phenomenology” (Perreau, 2021, p. 271), whose meaning depends on the context (Zahavi, 2015). Husserl did not invent the term – it was present in the writings of Georg Simmel (1858-1918) and Rudolf Eucken (1846-1926) – and the close source of the Husserlian conception is the “natural concept of the world” by Richard Avenarius (1843-1896), founder of empirio-criticism, according to which there is a “pre-encountered” world of experience that precedes all conceptualization or all theorization and in which we encounter things in a constant flux of changing appearances (Perreau, 2021, p. 271).

The lifeworld is the world of pre-scientific experience, absolutely self-evident, which science has forgotten and repressed. In this experience, the world is given concretely, sensitively, and intuitively, and things are characterized by their relative, approximate, and prospective givens, whereas “science seeks to realize an ideal of rigorous, objective knowledge that is free from all ties to the subjective first-person perspective” (Zahavi, 2015, p. 182). For Husserl (2008), the positive sciences lack ontological and epistemological clarification and have also lost their existential meaning. Husserl’s major criticism, in effect, is directed at the naiveté of objectivism and scientism. According to Zahavi (2015), in scientism, (natural) science defines what can be considered accurate and effective; in objectivism, in turn, compelling reality subsists in the absolute sense, independent of subjectivity, of any interpretations, and of the historical community we form. Objectivism and scientism cause the investigator of nature to forget or ignore that the vital surrounding world is constantly presupposed as the basis, as the ground of activity upon which his questions and methods of thinking acquire meaning (Husserl, 2008).

In all sciences, this shortcoming is insinuated, in the last analysis, as a shortage of method [...] These problems stem from the naivety by which objectivist science takes what it calls the objective world to be the universe of all existing without considering that the creative subjectivity of science cannot have its legitimate place in any objective science (Husserl, 2008, p. 82).

Phenomenology attempts to show that the exact sciences are a transformation of the experience we have directly of things in the world and point out that they are derived from the lived world and the things in it (Sokolowski, 2012). According to Zahavi (2019), science is rooted in the lifeworld, requests intellections from the pre-scientific sphere, and is exercised by human subjects with a particular theoretical positioning that forms a specific cultural tradition. For Perreau (2021), the objectivism of modern sciences made us forget that the world around us is not a world of physical laws, causalities, and natural objects. It is valid only for a subject and remains bound to subjectivity. Thus, against the scientific view of an objective world without perspective, phenomenology rehabilitates the lifeworld as a horizon relative to the subject (Perreau, 2021), a world in which we live and act, a set of experienced meaningful contexts that are irreducible to the purely physical objects that surround us (Gallagher, 2022). It does not mean that the lifeworld is a private and solipsistic world or a world valid only for oneself; it is a pluralized and shared world. “The lifeworld is, however, experienced immediately and directly in the subjectivity of everyday life, that is, life lived day by day and day after day” (Perreau, 2021, p. 274).

After these initial theoretical indications about the Husserlian-inspired phenomenology, which sought to clarify, above all, the role of the phenomenon as a means by which things appear, show themselves, reveal themselves, and the attitudes that need to be addressed to deviate from objectivism and scientism, we next present how the subsidies offered by the phenomenological school can help leadership studies better understand their phenomenon of interest.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY TO LEADERSHIP STUDIES

This article presents phenomenology as an epistemology capable of broadening the possibilities of understanding the leadership phenomenon. Epistemology, traditionally, is considered a particular discipline within philosophy, which would find in the latter its principles and in science its object (Japiassu, 1979). One of the main projects of phenomenology is to claim the validity of epistemologies more associated with philosophy than with science. For Ladkin (2010), philosophical ideas provide new points of observation to expand commonly held views about leadership, and these new perspectives come from our ability to ask inspiring questions; after all, each question evokes a different kind of response, and the nature of the questions reveals different aspects of the phenomenon being examined. Thus, experiencing questions differently and living with different questions help destabilize and reposition some of our more habitual notions. Moreover, according to Ciulla (2008), both the social sciences and the humanities, with attention to holistic understanding and reliance on human capacities for storytelling, use of metaphor, and imagery in their meaning-making processes, can be mobilized to understand leadership as a phenomenon. For the author, this is a human phenomenon embedded in culture, which includes art, literature, religion, philosophy, language, and generally all those things that constitute what it means to live as a human being. We discuss below how premises from epistemological phenomenology can contribute to leadership studies.

The rescue of the lifeworld from objectivism

The notion of lifeworld suggests that it is essential to study leadership to understand it within the distinct worlds in which it operates. As a phenomenon that arises out of constructed social realities, the meanings it holds for those who engage with it, whether as leaders, followers, or researchers, significantly impact how it is experienced or viewed (Ladkin, 2010). In his critique of the objectivism of science, Husserl (2008) presents a world with man as its center, making it possible to recover the meaning of humanism and overcome the objectivist focus that impoverishes the rich reality.

For Ladkin (2010), immaterial “things”, such as leadership, can only be seen as existing within the socially constructed human communities in which they operate, in which lifeworld reaffirms the importance of meaning. Shared meanings allow humans to collaborate and live together in productive and potentially harmonious ways. However, these meanings are not objectively “given” entities but are created by the human communities that engage with them. They are, therefore,

socially constructed. According to Ladkin (2010), there would be no leadership without the lifeworld of human beings that would recognize, seek out, and respond to this phenomenon that they agree to call leadership. “Therefore, to understand leadership, it is essential to understand the lifeworld from which it springs” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 21), and reappears in different ways, continuously.

Reconciliation between subject and object: attribution of meanings

For phenomenology, the real has no ontology except that constituted by consciousness – consciousness actively establishes a relation with the world. In this way, the world can only be understood based on how it manifests itself in human consciousness since it is the latter’s role to attribute meaning to it (Faria, 2022). There is here a notion of codependency, in which the “subject can only be understood in its relation to the world, and, conversely, we can only give meaning to the world to the extent that it appears to a subject and is understood by him” (Zahavi, 2019, p. 20). This particularity shows a particular protagonist of the subject towards the object; however, it does not mean that phenomenology is inclined to a specific form of subjectivism, emphasizing some introspection mode. The field of phenomenological inquiry is not concerned with private thoughts but with intersubjectively accessible modes of appearance (Zahavi, 2015). In this case, the subject is the condition of possibility for the phenomenon’s appearance. “The phenomenological gaze alters the subject ↔ object relationship, for the essence of things lies neither in the subject nor the object, but in experience” (Faria, 2022, p. 405). Experience, in effect, is the point of contact between the two, and phenomenology would like to think beyond the subject-object dichotomy in order to precisely investigate the nexus between the world and subjectivity (Zahavi, 2019). By doing so, we can pave the way for destabilizing the dichotomization, as we elicited in the section on gaps in leadership studies, towards the dialectic of experience.

In leadership research, the protagonist of the subject concerning the object represents a decisive shift in epistemological terms. Instead of the researcher’s interest being directed at leadership as an abstract entity that can be isolated, measured, and quantified, this same interest necessarily needs to consider the mediating role of subjects, which will give specific meanings to the phenomenon of leadership. As Ladkin (2010) writes, leadership cannot exist separately from the specific individuals who are engaged and involved in any leadership dynamics. This shift responds to Alvesson’s (2019) critique that points to the reification of leadership research, in which the phenomenon is made a uniform, solid “it”, suitable for measurement, and even has methodological impacts, as only one participant may be sufficient to compose a given research design, as occurs with interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Lewis’s study (2015) explored how a female entrepreneur exercises leadership over time and how being a leader is integrated into developing an entrepreneurial identity. The research had only one participant, who was interviewed twice in about ten years.

Knowing, therefore, the importance that the individual has in phenomenological research, a question that emerges is: How should the experience of this individual, in this case, the leadership, be considered? We saw earlier that the phenomenon appears through an intentional consciousness, a “consciousness of”, because intentionality is a characteristic of consciousness. What is important is that, according to Gallagher (2022), in experiencing, the object always appears in a particular perspective, never in its totality. This “perspectivist appearance” (Zahavi, 2015, p. 25) reveals that no particular phenomenon is ever in a position to exhaust the whole object because this object constantly transcends it is given being. “The thing can always be presented more modestly than we already know; the thing always holds more manifestations in reserve” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 37). It signals the impossibility of a total and complete apprehension of the phenomenon of leadership. According to phenomenology, there will be as many different descriptions of leadership as there are situations in which it arises because “the way any perceived phenomenon is known is entirely interwoven with the viewpoint of the perceiver” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 17). In this respect, it is clear that phenomenology goes in the opposite direction from *mainstream* approaches to leadership studies. These, as aforementioned, marked by the dominance of quantitative and positivist analyses, follow hypothetic-deductive approaches in adherence to the natural sciences model, are concerned with methodological rigor, reproducibility, and replicability, and aim to generalize their results. As Antonakis (2023) wrote in a recent editorial in *The Leadership Quarterly*, “good science” (Antonakis, 2023, p. 2) is about doing “robust, replicable, and reproducible” (Antonakis,

2023, p. 2) research, and anything less than that is “not science” (Antonakis, 2023, p. 1). For phenomenology, the world can only be understood differently from how it appears to human consciousness (Faria, 2022).

Sokolowski (2012) writes that when we see a cube, there are three layers in which the visual experience of the object is given to us: the sides, the aspects, and the profiles. The sides are the visible parts and the parts that are not seen but that we intend and are, therefore, also part of what we experience. Aspects are how the side is given and can be, in the example of the cube, a picture, a trapezoid, or a line. Unlike the side or aspect many observers can see, the profile is a momentary, temporarily individualized representation. In reflecting on these elements in the experience of leadership, we can say that there are many different “sides” to the phenomenon: the person who is perceived as the leader, the follower, the community, the organizational context, and the historical situation that brought all these factors together. Moreover, these would be the visible sides. However, we know that others do not appear in the immediate situated reality and are also parts of the phenomenon, such as knowledge asymmetries, market agendas, and scarcity of resources. “The phenomenological idea of ‘sides’ points out that all these co-intended sides of leadership are vital to its occurrence” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 22).

Leadership can be viewed further from different aspects. Ladkin (2010) notes that leadership will be perceived differently if the percipient is the receptionist or the CFO of the same company, and interviewing each would produce quite different accounts of the same phenomenon. However, what is the point of getting diverse perspectives? Sokolowski (2012) provides a clue by addressing a distinct dimension: identity. According to the author, identity is more than the sum of its sides, aspects, and profiles. These are presented to us; they are appearance, but what is given to us is its identity, for identity belongs to what is given in experience, and the recognition of identity belongs to the intentional structure of experience. Thus, “the intentionality of consciousness is ‘of’ something in the sense that it intends to the identity of objects, not just of the stream of appearances presented to it” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 28). Identity will always be beyond the reach of human apprehension, and by holding this position, phenomenology assumes an orientation to knowledge radically different from that assumed by logical positivism (Ladkin, 2010). Phenomenology highlights the existence of these distinctions and encourages researchers to be transparent about what they are seeking and why they are seeking it at any given time. For the scholar, recognizing that leadership consists of different sides and that people will experience these sides in particular aspects is like a reminder of the importance of identifying which of these sides and aspects may be most helpful in addressing the specific purposes sought.

Following Sokolowski’s (2012) contributions, structural forms constantly appear in phenomenological analyses, among them the structure of parts and all and the structure of presence and absence. The parts-and-all structure shows that totalities can be analyzed into two different types of parts, which are pieces and moments. Pieces can subsist separately from the whole, like the branch of a tree. On the other hand, moments cannot be presented separately from the whole to which they belong, like the vision of the eye. In this sense, Ladkin (2010) argues that leadership can best be understood as a moment of social relations. Recognizing leadership as a “moment” suggests that “we can never get at the reality of leadership separate from the particular contexts in which it arises; the author proposes that this conceptualization explains the plethora of existing theories and definitions of leadership” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 26). Indeed, leadership only exists with people who are in some way identified as leaders or led, and it also exists outside of a particular community culture or organizational history.

In turn, the structure of presence and absence is the objective correlate for full and empty intentions. Full intentions aim at something in its physical presence, and empty intentions aim at something that is not there, something absent to the one who intends it. According to Sokolowski (2012, p. 44), there is an identity “behind” and “in” presence and absence, and these are “of” the same thing, for they belong to the being of the thing identified in them. The author draws attention to the unique role of absence, which should be addressed, although it is also intended in its identity. “We constantly live in the future and the past, in the distant and the transcendent, in the unknown and the imagined; we do not live only in the world around us as given to our five senses” (Sokolowski, 2012, p. 45). In particular, the structure of absence may represent new avenues for leadership research. While the presence of leadership has been documented and analyzed for over a hundred years in research practice, few studies take the absence of the phenomenon as a starting point.

An example of this uniqueness is the study by Kars-Unluoglu, Jarvis, and Gaggiotti (2022), which investigated the non-leading phenomenon characterized by spontaneous initiatives and leadership actions undertaken by communities, companies, and individuals who were reluctant to frame their practices under a rhetoric of leadership. For Ladkin (2010), it is possible to

understand more about leadership by thinking about what is missing when leadership does not take place because when it is fulfilling its purpose, it is difficult to “see”. “By articulating what is missing in such instances, leadership can paradoxically reveal itself more explicitly, thereby gaining insight into the purpose it serves when it is present” (Ladkin, 2010, p. 46). Thus, the author recommends that when the interviewee says one thing, the researcher’s instinct says another: pause. One of the invisible, intangible, negative presences at the core of the specific leadership moment being investigated may be trying to reveal itself.

By confronting objectivist premises, we can further recognize that part of leadership studies’ problems is relying on mistaken assumptions, which do not achieve an understanding of the phenomenon. We believe, on this basis, that leadership is static, that it can be learned quickly and easily, and that a form of leadership can be taught simultaneously to different people in different situations, that context is of secondary or even tertiary importance, and that being a leader is better and more important than being a follower (Kellerman, 2012). Assumptions are born from an objectivist outlook, where subjectivity and context disappear. From the phenomenological perspective, leadership is mobile in that it receives a specific meaning depending on the awareness of who experiences the phenomenon and at what moment that experience occurs. Consequently, there will not be a single leadership model to be taught, nor will there be greater or lesser importance given to who, supposedly, has greater explanatory capacity about the phenomenon. Furthermore, the notion of lifeworld informs us that there is a rich, multifaceted, and complex reality that the human being itself constitutes and, simultaneously, is constituted by it. It is the realm of a pre-scientific life at the basis of theory and the sciences, and that is the foundation and horizon of transcendental subjectivity.

Nevertheless, what problems or limitations are generated by an objectivist gaze? For Ladkin (2010), the assumption that the approach used in the physical sciences can be applied to examine leadership is witnessed by many studies that identify particular leadership characteristics, traits, or competencies. In this way, leadership is “broken down” into its components, and then, from a logical conclusion, the traits, characteristics, or competencies are measured using a variety of psychometric or ideographic indicators. Ladkin (2010) exemplifies transformational leadership theory. She presents its components and a questionnaire that identifies strengths and weaknesses and gives insight into what needs improvement. According to the author, this generates at least two limitations. On the one hand, what would be a collective process that encompasses not only leaders but also those who are led and the context: leadership is broken down into leaders, a unit of analysis based on the individual: This implies that what would be the perfect amount of individual consideration in a car factory, would be wholly inappropriate in a university department. On the other hand, by isolating particular variables, such approaches can lead us to think that the ingredients that make up an entity are all needed to create it.

Epoché and the change of position

Phenomenology alerts us to a starting condition inherent to the researcher, the natural attitude. It invites us to transpose it to reach the phenomenological attitude to investigate how practical reality is given through experience. As we have seen, one of the necessary movements for this transposition is *epoché*. In our view, in the context of leadership research, one of the essential aspects of *epoché* is that it does not aim at denying, doubting, or excluding reality from our investigation but putting in round brackets (or square brackets) its validity. In effect, this is a bold invitation because it reaches into the metaphysical positioning of the researcher, that is, the way reality is considered as such. Along with this, *epoché* also guides us to suspend beliefs, judgments, opinions, and theories that undermine our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To suspend does not mean to exclude either, so what phenomenology postulates about prior knowledge is that it should be set aside momentarily. It is worth saying that the trait, behavioral, continental, and neo-charismatic theories of leadership are not excluded from the research but are suspended. Provisionally, their validity and scope are round-bracketed, and the researcher is encouraged to encounter leadership as it occurs in the experience of anyone who can provide an emic account of the phenomenon.

According to Moustakas (1994), the practice of *epoché* requires patience and a willingness to explore it until an intention directed toward something with clarity and meaning is achieved. This exercise involves a connection in a situation, person, or issue, with the possibility of reviewing thoughts and feelings toward that object. With each review, we let go of preconceptions to look again with hope and intention to see it with new and receptive eyes. In effect, the process of *epoché* inclines the

researcher toward receptivity, openness, and the capacity to listen and reduce the interference of habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing and habitual ways of labeling, judging, or comparing.

In this sense, phenomenology is an incentive to assume the non-neutral posture of the researcher. From this perspective, there is no image of an aseptic scientist dressed in his lab coat and handling a specific sample in a laboratory. The subject is not neutral, and the knowledge of the object is constituted as an extension and product of the cognizing consciousness (van Manen, 2017). However, “what assumptions should be round-bracketed in the practice of phenomenological human science?” (Ashworth, 1999, p. 708). For the author, one is the temptation to impose on research claims that emanate from objective science (theories and findings, casual relations, variables); the other is the imposition of validity criteria that arise outside the lifeworld.

In effect, “the researcher must suspend presuppositions in order to enter the life-world (and must continually practice the epoché in order to remain there)” (Ashworth, 1999, p. 709). In phenomenological research, questions that arise from positivist science, such as causation or legitimate relationships between “variables”, are irrelevant to describing the phenomenon. There is no search for scientific explanations or external explanatory constructs imposed by the observer. Furthermore, the researcher does not adopt any position on the correctness or falsity of the claims made by the research participant in the views and judgments intrinsic to their lifeworld. “Lifeworld phenomena are to be understood in terms of their meaning systems” (Ashworth, 1999, p. 709) and are not to be explained in terms of causes drawn from objective physical reality. All these orientations, however, cannot be folded into a determinable qualitative program with strategies, calculation schemes, codes, and analytical technicalities that will not produce or provide original thoughts or creative insights (van Manen, 2017). Original and creative insights are produced in the encounter of consciousness’s intentionality with the phenomenon’s apparent features. They are, therefore, an effect of the relationship between the knowing subject and the object given to know.

Our intention in this article is to present how phenomenological epistemology (then identifying premises) can contribute to understanding the phenomenon of leadership. In this sense, we seek to eschew more operational and instrumental approaches to phenomenology. However, to try to make the practice of *epoché* more palpable, we describe some steps presented in Gearing (2004). The first of these, an *abstract formulation*, is formed by the researcher’s orientation perspective (their epistemological and ontological position) and the theoretical framework that guides the study. The second, more central and branched, encompasses the key elements of the *epoché* and consists of five elements described below.

In the *foundational focus*, *epoché* is seen as the suspension of assumptions surrounding a phenomenon and the process of focusing on its essences and structure to understand the underlying universals. *Internal and external assumption* deals with what needs to be put into suspension, respectively, on the side of the researcher (personal knowledge, history, culture, experiences, values, orientations, theories) and the side of the phenomenon (its history, definition, and broader environmental factors). The *temporal structure* involves delineating the *epoché*’s beginning, duration, and end. Finally, the *round-bracketing (boundary) composition* defines how rigid, specific, or porous the boundaries must be to keep out and suspend assumptions. Finally, the third stage consists of *reintegration*, understood as the data reinvestment into the broader investigation and presented in the study’s analysis section.

It is worth noting that the notion of *epoché*, when understood as a technique, requires from the researcher a set of qualities, among them, self-criticism and self-awareness (reflexivity), curiosity, precision, insight, willingness to be wrong, openness, organization, honesty, and transparency (Hamill, 2010). Thus, to evoke *epoché* in the context of leadership studies is to invite researchers to overcome or recognize the limitations of the excess of procedures, standardizations, and metrics that take center stage in a rhetoric and aesthetic of subject-object neutrality typical of the natural sciences.

CONCLUSION

The study of leadership from a phenomenological perspective is part of an academic effort to move away from mainstream approaches, predominantly functionalist and positivist, and therefore reductionist approaches to leadership as a phenomenon in the world. Seeking to answer the central question of this article, namely, “What is the contribution of phenomenology to the understanding of the phenomenon of leadership?” we presented some propositional reflections. First, considering that, in phenomenology, the phenomenon is that which shows itself in itself, that which is revealed through an intentional consciousness that gives meaning, leadership as a phenomenon will not be studied in an objective, external, isolable, measurable, fragmented way, as it is done in the natural sciences. Leadership will be given and revealed as a “consciousness of leadership”. This consciousness must necessarily be investigated and analyzed through the mediation of a subject, which causes the researcher’s orientation to change from an attitude of discovering what “leadership” is as an object of natural science to another that seeks to know what “meaning” leadership has for a given percipient. Moreover, instead of consciousness being taken as an egocentric predicament, there will be a notion of fusion between consciousness and object that represents, in the end, an intertwining between subject and object.

Second, such a sense of leadership will be in perspective, revealing a side, aspect, or profile present in the phenomenon, while others absent will be there and will be intended, although not revealed. Thus, the leadership experience of a person will probably be different from that of a CEO; in the same way, the leadership experience of these same actors will also not be the same in the context of crisis, transformation, or calm. It is, therefore, about multiple perspectives.

Third, phenomenology invites us to change the ontological positioning of the researcher. Thus, if the metaphysical principles of the researcher are those that take reality as external, possible to isolate, measure, and quantify, their epistemological and methodological attitude will be under this position. If the perspective changes to a phenomenological look, which informs us that the real has no ontology other than consciousness, a positivist approach with quantitative methods will not be followed because there is no adequacy or applicability. There is no way to measure, objectify, or quantify an experience; the effectiveness of any act of leadership will be judged within particular social and historical moments. Reductionist methods must be equipped to provide adequate insight into how leadership emerges from such instances.

From the above, empirical research should be conducted in different organizational contexts as a future research agenda. Likewise, the researcher may guide the establishment of their relationship with the object based on the premises of phenomenological epistemology, as we have elicited throughout this text (reconciliation between subject and object, *epoché*, retrieval of the lifeworld), having as a starting point the constitution of leadership as a phenomenon in the world. More than that, we may suggest that other phenomenologists may inspire new premises for developing studies that reconcile phenomenology and leadership. For example, Crevani and Lammi (2023) suggests expanding leadership to more dimensions of practice than the discursive dimension many leadership studies have emphasized. These dimensions include materiality and embodiment (which can be investigated inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (2018, for example) insofar as we understand that someone who engages in practice engages with their body, and this, in conjunction, occurs with objects on which the practices critically depend. Not only objects but also affections, environments, and the space where interactions and relationships occur are essential for exercising leadership. For example, living bodies serve as tangible media through which various leadership practices are negotiated, fractured, resisted, or integrated (Küpers, 2013). Another example is O’Neill’s research (2019), which focuses on women leaders’ subjective experiences and highlights the disappearance phenomenon, in which female bodies, which signify a socially problematic presence in this context, appear to the subject in a disruptive or unwanted way within their self-perception.

Finally, as a limitation, we acknowledge that the article does not offer techniques for operationalizing research supported by phenomenological premises. We explain, however. According to Faria (2022), in human, social, and applied social sciences studies, phenomenology is simplified into a research technique or classificatory support, which the author calls formal technicalities. For reasons like these, we proposed offering epistemological subsidies for using phenomenology in leadership research, leaving the methodological operationalization and the study objective up to each researcher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) for the doctoral scholarship awarded to Vicente Reis Medeiros. This study was also supported by the ANP (Brazilian National Agency for Petroleum, Natural Gas and Biofuels).

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