

Leadership Mentoring Programme for Women: Framing Leader Identity through Dialoguing and Relating

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Abstract: This paper restores the focus on the essence of human *beings* as fundamentally relational. It underlines a concern for genuine relatedness (Pope and Nicolaides, 2021) between mentee and mentor, as foundational to leader identity formation for women in a leadership mentoring programme. Expressions of the centrality of connection, the relational self, have been extended by feminist scholars, in particular, across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Fletcher (2001) pointed to the “disappearing” of the very behaviour needed to be successful in the workplace. The capacity of human *beings* to connect and care, Gilligan (2014) argues, is lessened when living the values of patriarchy (Fishbane, 2023). Positioned at the intersection of mentoring at work (Kram, 1983, 1985/1988) and relational science (Berscheid, 1999), this multiperspectival qualitative study explored the research question: How do women mentees experience leadership mentoring in an Irish Higher Education context? Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, (IPA) underpinned by three major areas of the philosophy of knowledge, namely, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, offered a pathway to illuminating the intersubjectivity between mentees and mentor within their dyads. The mentoring dyads comprised of women mentees who participated in a leadership mentoring programme and their matched mentors. Semi-structured interviews followed by three levels of analysis were conducted with mentees, mentors and the dyads. Energised by close attention to participant accounts, consistent with the principles of IPA, exploring the experience of participants in their own terms, required setting aside pre-existing assumptions and ideas (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Conducting multiple iterations of analysis and interpretation, the findings underscored the importance of a focus on both the quality of the *Developmental Relational Mentoring Space (DRMS)* (Ganly, 2024) and the relational orientation within each dyad, for meaningful and effective mentoring experiences. This study developed the innovative DRMS construct to describe the relational dynamics in mentoring dyads, thus significantly enhancing insights into mentoring relationships. The DRMS is the mentoring space between mentee and mentor, co-created through dialogue influenced by both. A novel conceptual model, a feminist perspective, is presented emphasising the importance of intentionally attending to dialogue as a catalyst for reframing leader identity in mentoring dyads.

Keywords: Dyads; IPA; Leadership Mentoring Programme; Women in Mentorship

1. Introduction

In a turbulent working world, mentoring, in the form of meaningful developmental relationships, continues to receive attention in academic and practitioner journals. Formal mentoring programmes for women are viewed as a tool to contribute to leadership development, career advancement and to address challenges faced singularly by women in gendered organisations.

A specific impetus for this study was the recommendation of mentoring, by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2016; 2018), as an intervention to address the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions within Irish higher education. Notably, it was apparent at the outset of this research that despite the growth in the number of women in the Irish higher education workforce, the chasm between the number of women relative to the number of men across senior leadership positions was nonetheless discernible. During the research, women dominated the number of Irish university presidents (Walshe, 2023) for the first time in the history of Irish higher education. The primary research question was: **How do women mentees experience leadership mentoring in an Irish Higher Education context?**

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) dyad methodology to examine the leadership mentoring process where sense was made of the lived experience of both mentees and mentors, on their terms, within their unique dyads. IPA makes accessible the fundamental nature of human *beings*. In particular, this study developed a construct, the *DRMS* (Ganly, 2024), to describe the relational dynamics in mentoring dyads (Figure 1).

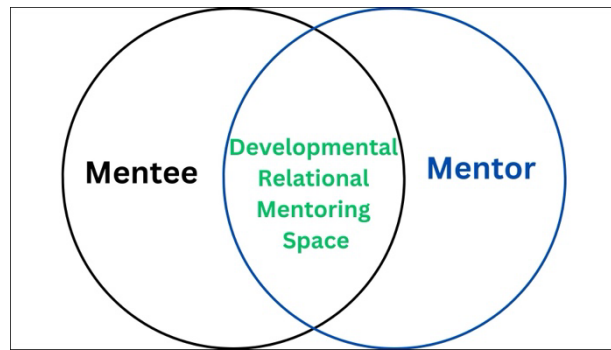


Figure 1: Situating the DRMS (Ganly, 2024)

Emphatically framed within the work of Martin Buber (1923/1970) and Kathy Kram (1985/1988), this paper emphasises the importance of dialogue within the *DRMS*. An awareness and ability to alternate between the two basic attitudes that constitute the essence of human *being*, the impersonal, I-It, and the personal, I-Thou (Buber, 1923/1970), must be at the heart of how mentee and mentor engage. When in balance, a reframing of leader identity is enabled within the *DRMS*. As a relational and dialogical construct, the *DRMS* encapsulates a bridge between the mentee and mentor, conceptualising the intersubjective space where mentee and mentor come together within a leadership mentoring dyad. Therefore, attention to relationality and dialogicality constitute the essence of this paper.

2. Mentoring

A substantial volume of research attempts to demonstrate the benefits of mentoring and the centrality of the relationship for transformational outcomes (such as Deng and Turner, 2024; Eby and Robertson, 2020; Ghosh and Chaudhuri, 2023). The implications of understanding mentoring relationships as attachments is advanced by Robertson and Zhang (2024). This study is different. Taking a step further in our understanding of the process of leadership mentoring, this study found out what impacts what goes on within the *DRMS* in a meaningful leadership mentoring relationship, which makes the leadership mentoring work or not work.

The early work of Kram in the 1980s brought mentoring into contemporary organisational scholarship. More recent collaborative work (Murphy and Kram, 2014; Murphy, Gibson and Kram, 2024; Yip and Kram, 2017) emphasises the importance of developmental networks echoed by other mentoring scholars (Ghosh and Chaudhuri, 2023; Joo and Cruz, 2024; Munro et al, 2024). Furthermore, mounting evidence asserts meaningful connections impact well-being (Dreer-Goethe, 2023; Hurd & Singh, 2021). Many scholars assert, compared to men, women lack access to informal mentors, are often not included in networks and can benefit from safe spaces for leadership identity development (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013; Maguire, Anderson and Chavez, 2024; O'Connor, 2020; Picariello et al., 2023). Accessing multiple developmental relationships enriches relational learning and contributes to the advancement of women in leadership in the workplace. Consequently, women mentees were the concern of this study.

3. Methodology

IPA, a qualitative methodology, is anchored in the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Pausing to reflect on the immensity of the philosophical learning journey, before embarking on participant recruitment, enabled the researcher gain perspective on the distinctive features of IPA for this study (Table 1).

Table 1: Distinctive Features of IPA

No.	Feature	Description
1	Epistemological Grounding	The epistemological grounding is anchored in three pillars upon which IPA is built - phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.
2	Amplifying Voice	Giving attention to the individual voice of each participant was enabled through a rigorous systematic analysis of each transcript revealing a deep understanding of each voice.

No.	Feature	Description
3	Inductive Deepening	The individual themes, called Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) in IPA, and the cross-case themes, called Group Experiential Themes (GETs) pointed the researcher to the dialogical work of Martin Buber (1923/1970). This inductive deepening of insights brought attention to the I-It and I-Thou, and the centrality of engaging in genuine dialogue in leadership mentoring dyads.
4	Systematic & Rigorous	The rigour demanded of the systematic analysis process of IPA is not for the faint-hearted. For this researcher, conducting a pilot study was essential to get experience-close to doing IPA before embarking on fieldwork.
5	Versatility	Engaging in the “messy chaos of the lived world” (Smith et al., 2022, p. 52) that is the essence of IPA brings versatility in modes of sense-making as the multiple layers of meaning-making unfold.
6	Co-Creation	Embracing and acknowledging the role of the researcher in making sense of each participant’s sense-making of leadership mentoring demands reflexive moments throughout the IPA process.

Overall, IPA made accessible the fundamental nature of human *beings* within a leadership mentoring dyad by inviting participant voices on their terms, not employing interview questioning in line with pre-existing mentoring scholarship.

This multi-perspectival research design comprised 12 participants consisting of six mentoring dyads. The six mentees were women and five mentors were women. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, recorded and transcribed.

4. Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted at three levels: mentee, mentor and dyad (Figure 2) to get a rich understanding of participants’ sense-making of their leadership mentoring experiences.

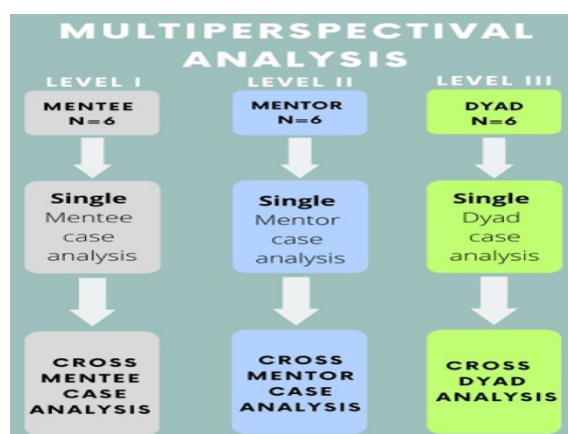


Figure 2: Levels of Analysis

In IPA, participants are also referred to as cases. Thus, each participant case was analysed from transcript to Personal Experiential Statements (PESs) to the level of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs), exploring, describing, interpreting and situating how each participant made sense of their leadership mentoring experience. A cross-case analysis was conducted to the level of Group Experiential Themes (GETs), for both mentee and mentor cases (Figure 2). In the third level of analysis, the dyad analysis, the individual mentee and mentor transcripts and themes were brought together to make sense of the experience of each dyad. The sense-making and meaning-making of what mattered to participants in the lived experience of their leadership mentoring dyads directed the gaze to the *space between* mentee and mentor. The active relational ingredient across the six dyads, the space between, was conceptualised as the *DRMS*.

5. Findings

This study explored the leadership mentoring process, where sense was made of the lived experience of both mentees and mentors, on their terms, within their unique dyads. The findings identified the quality of the *DRMS* and the mentoring style (or relational orientation) as the factors delineating the differing mentoring relational experiences (Figure 3) across the six dyads.

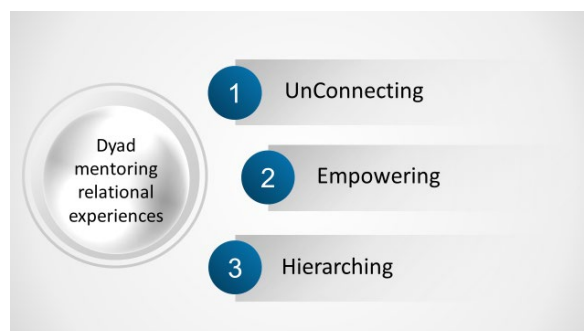


Figure 3: Dyad Relational Experiences

5.1 Dyad Mentoring Relational Experiences

Deepening the understanding of the interplay between mentee and mentor, bringing the mentee and mentor of each dyad together in analysis, enabled an interpretation of the mentoring relational experience of each dyad, classifying as unconnecting (Dyad 4), hierarching (Dyad 1), and empowering (Dyad2, Dyad3, Dyad5, Dyad6). Without bringing mentee and mentor together for dyadic analysis, an area of future research to better understand the dyadic microsystem advocated by Chandler, Kram and Yip (2011), these dyad relational experiences would remain hidden (Table 2).

Table 2: Types of Mentoring Relational Experiences Across Dyads

Dyad No.	Mentoring Relational Experience	Verbatim
1	Hierarching	Aoife: <i>it definitely wasn't a relationship of equals</i> L226 Aoife: <i>to be honest it did feel a bit like a tick the box exercise</i> L96 Sinead: <i>we had addressed all of the professional aims and goals</i> L161
2	Empowering	Máire: <i>for me it felt like very welcoming</i> L179 Monica: <i>we were both part of the movement</i> L393
3	Empowering	Tatiana: <i>it was nice opportunity...to speak I suppose quite freely with somebody</i> L400/2 Tatiana: <i>I would feel more confident I've done a little bit of mentoring in a tiny small way myself since the experience</i> L690/2 Gemma: <i>my style would always be quite collaborative</i> L69 Gemma: <i>I probably would be not a bad listener so I always knew myself it would be ... a more collaborative kind of an approach to mentoring, although I reckoned I would learn a lot from it myself just from the skills of mentoring but also from that person's experience and what they were doing</i> L70/5
4	Unconnecting	Fiona: <i>our mentoring on that programme pretty much didn't happen</i> L100/1
5	Empowering	Orla: <i>it was very very much two colleagues talking</i> L117 Susie: <i>there is always that piece which is the focus on task but there is also the really important goal which is this social that social relational</i> L516/7
6	Empowering	Shauna: <i>she would share some of her experiences with me which helped me to develop my own confidence</i> L118 Saoirse: <i>it became a bit more of a two-way thing</i> L55

In the unconnecting mentoring experience, the dyad did not extend beyond the first meeting, thus not allowing the mentoring relationship to be cultivated. Mentee4 stated, *it wasn't compartmentalised enough to be separated from the operation* (284), impacting negatively on the mentee's level of trust and bringing the leadership mentoring programme to a close for Dyad4. The proximity of the working relationship outside of the mentoring programme was an obstacle and presented a missed opportunity to experience a growth-fostering leadership mentoring programme. In the hierarching relational mentoring experience, the sense-making of the mentee lived experience indicated adopting a one-directional approach to the dyad. Mentee1 stated: *you're definitely 'oh I'm a little mentee down here* (224), indicating mentee1 was adopting a traditional student-teacher mentoring identity. Viewing mentor1 as the "prevailing source of power, influence and expertise in the

relationship" (Fletcher and Ragins, 2007, p.375), underestimating the mentee source of influence and expertise, inhibited the growth-fostering potential of the leadership mentoring dyad for mentee1. In the empowering relational mentoring experience, bi-directionality in a welcoming relational mentoring space is discerned in four dyads. Both partners in these dyads concurred on mutual positive learning experiences. For example, in Dyad2, the mentor stated: *we were both part of the movement in the programme* (393); in Dyad5, the mentor stated, *if we care enough we'll ask them all the tough questions, we will ask people to look at what it is that's stopping them and is it always other people that are doing that* (445/8); in Dyad6, *it became a bit more of a two-way thing* (55). The reciprocal two-directional empowering experience of four dyads aligns with high-quality relational mentoring (Ragins, 2016). The dyad mentoring relational experiences put the spotlight on the quality of the DRMS and relational orientation as central characteristics of high-quality mentoring experiences.

5.2 Delineating Dyad Mentoring Experiences

In delineating an effective and meaningful leadership mentoring experience, it is the quality of the DRMS and the mentoring style or relational orientation that mattered to participants.

5.2.1 Quality of DRMS & Psychological Safety

The DRMS, capturing the essence of the "black box of mentoring" (Chandler, Kram and Yip, 2011), epitomises the space between both partners in a dyad, within which the mentoring relationship was experienced. "Like the other great forces of nature", Berscheid (1999) asserts, "a relationship itself is invisible; its existence can be discerned only by observing its effects" (p.261). Exploring the effects of the DRMS on the dyads helped discern the potency of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990) in determining a quality relational outcome. Various definitions: "feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career" (Kahn, 1990, p.708); "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes...a sense of confidence that your voice is valued" (Edmondson, 2020), the interpersonal construct of psychological safety mattered to mentee experiences of leadership mentoring within the DRMS.

Furthermore, interpersonal trust, central to psychological safety (Edmondson and Lei, 2014), can be discerned in Dyad6 as an empowering mentoring experience, although interpreted in different ways by the mentee and mentor. Trust, in particular relational trust, Robbins (2016) asserts, consists of three elements. Firstly, it is a "tripartite concept" (p.975) concerning two individuals and the matter at hand, in this study the mentee, mentor and mentoring focus. Secondly, it is a "cognitive process" (p.975) concerning a belief about the world held by an individual. Thirdly, it is "a function of the trustworthiness of others" (p.975). For Mentee6, the trust within the DRMS was attributed to her knowledge of the previous experience of her mentor, and the positive feedback from others whom she had previously mentored, an expression of her mentoring schema (Ragins and Verbos, 2007): *she had the experience and she mentored people before and I did trust her from the beginning and then as we talk more and more you know the trust was built that way* (Mentee6 212/4). Although a feeling of trust was expressed within the dyad, Mentee6 indicated uncertainty about whether this trust was reciprocated: *I don't know if she trusted me straight away* (212/4). Mentor6, not explicitly using the word trust, indicated a comfort in engagement within the DRMS: *I don't think it went through stages, I think it pretty quickly went from Hi nice to meet you to so you'll never guess what happened last week and maybe that was because of the personalities involved* (427/9). Thus, psychological safety, displayed through trust, was observed in analysing the accounts of Dyad6, which influenced the positive nature of the DRMS towards an empowering dyadic experience. Feeling comfortable to ask questions was embedded in the feeling of trust in her mentor, Mentee6 stated: *I trusted her that I could ask a question and that I would get a positive response* (400/1). Emanating from the contracting at the outset of the mentoring programme influenced the expression of trust within the dyad. Mentor6 stated: *and of course that trust is going to be a huge part of the social relational element* (718/23).

In Dyad5, a growth-fostering relationship can be interpreted through the presence of trust and the outcome of confidence to take action, observed by Mentor5: *the person tried some things that they might not have... confidence was probably one of the critical things* (603/5). Echoing the importance of trust (Eby and Robertson, 2020) within the mentee-mentor bond, the DRMS in this study, the work of Kahn (1990) reveals trust as a key characteristic within work relationships enabling the engagement or disengagement of individuals. In the presence of psychological safety, in Dyad3, the mentee felt comfortable being vulnerable, and with that, a freedom to be vulnerable within the DRMS: *to speak I suppose quite freely with somebody* (402). Enabling the development and articulation of a new perspective on leadership for Mentee3 in the workplace, shifting her

mindset in a quality *DRMS*, beyond leadership as a position, embracing “leadership as a social practice of influence (Showunmi and Moorosi, 2022, p.2), Mentee3 shared her learning, too: *look for opportunities where you can do things and you can bring solutions maybe to things that are needed* (80).

The presence of trust in the dyads in this study illuminated the engagement of mentees and mentors in the relationship, experiencing leadership mentoring at its best as a high-quality relationship, an empowering relational experience (Table 2). Conversely, the absence of trust created a sense of dissociation or Unconnecting in Dyad4, the mentee seeking support in other developmental connections, affirming the need for a constellation or network of developmental relationships (Higgins and Kram, 2001; Murphy, Gibson and Kram, 2024) for career development of women in the workplace. Although Dyad4 was classified as an UnConnecting mentoring relationship, being in the formal mentoring programme brought benefits to the mentee, acting as a catalyst to reach out for informal mentoring by the mentee.

Empirical studies of psychological safety (PS) in organisational and industrial contexts spanning individual-level, organisational-level and group-level research reveal the potency of psychological safety for workplace effectiveness (Edmondson and Lei, 2014). Reviewing these studies, Edmondson and Lei (2014) amplify three key outcomes of a climate of PS: a) having a role in enabling performance, b) mitigating interpersonal risks or consequences “inherent in learning in hierarchies” (p.36), and, c) promoting speaking up in the workplace. In Dyad2, Dyad3, Dyad5 and Dyad6, a climate of psychological safety was indicated in mentee accounts where speaking freely and building their voices mattered (Table 3).

Table 3: Discerning Psychological Safety

Verbatim	Dyad
<i>Just building the confidence and building my voice</i> L22)	Dyad6 Shauna
<i>I felt like somehow I was understood</i> L320	Dyad2 Máire
<i>I was confident with them I wasn't afraid to ask questions</i> L398/9	Dyad5 Orla
<i>It was a nice opportunity to clear your head and get away from the whole space</i> L400/1	Dyad3 Tatiana

Conversely, for Dyad4, the absence of trust and confidence in the relationship indicated an absence of a climate of psychological safety, where consequences of risking speaking up disabled the mentee voice within the mentee-mentor *DRMS*. Mentee4 stated: *my ability to engage with this person as a mentee where you should be able to have confidence and trust in the relationship was seriously lacking* (83/5). Beyond Dyad1's *DRMS*, within the mentee's peer network, Mentee1 stated: *really rewarding and a really rich experience* (62), amplifying the developmental impact of sharing and discussing workplace challenges between peers in similar positions: *that sounding board of people in the same or similar positions to be able to discuss frustrations with, discuss positive aspects of the job with, to discuss successes with, to talk about opportunities for progression ... And so that was really rich because if there was a frustration or something that one of us was struggling with the rest of us could say oh well when I had to deal with that last year this is what I did and this is who I talked to* (72/6).

The quality of the mentoring space is further illuminated by the sense of the importance of being part of a formal organisational mentoring programme. For mentor in Dyad5: *formalisation of it was that it was invested with an importance because it went into the diary, it went into the planner* (320). As a mentor working in the same organisation as her mentee, having had *some excellent allies* (600) during her career, despite not having spare time, fulfilling a mentoring role was important in making her contribution to women in academia: *I think we should be giving back for a start but also because it makes you see the other persons experience and we all learn from each other* (558/60).

5.2.2 Mentoring Style/Relational Orientation

The mentoring style captured the essence of the relational orientation adopted in traditional mentoring, a one-way power-over approach, and relational mentoring, a two-way power-with approach, delivering, respectively, average or high-quality mentoring experiences (Ragins, 2016). Consciously moving between a focus on task-related outcomes while also building the social-relational component of the dyad, emphasised in Dyad5, contributed to sustaining the mentoring through the disruptive Covid-19 pandemic. Mentor5 enabled and observed mentee during this disruptive time: *steer a steady course for themselves* (194). Conversely, in Dyad1 with a focus on a practical solution-focused approach, which worked well for mentee and mentor, reinforced variability in approaches depending on mentee goals at the time of mentoring. Mentor1 stated: *we worked in*

a very similar way, very practical, very goal oriented, looking for a solution (54). Recognising mentee had further expectations of mentoring to pursue other aspects of career advancement, for example, understanding how things get done beyond the academic level, brought the mentee to peer developmental support.

Becoming a two-way relational experience brought a sense of satisfaction to the relationship within Dyad5, enabled by sharing of experiences by both mentee and mentor. Mentee5 stated that: *she would share some of her experiences with me which helped me to develop my own confidence* (118).

In Dyad4, the mentoring relationship can be interpreted as less satisfying illuminated by the aforementioned lack of trust felt by the mentee in a relationship that was not considered, by the mentee, a mentee-mentor relationship. Mentee4 stated: *my ability to engage with this person as a mentee where you should be able to have confidence and trust in the relationship was seriously lacking* (83/5). Capturing the experience of high-quality mentoring in their peer relationships rather than one-to-one mentoring was an area of divergence for Dyad1 and Dyad4, with Mentee1 reflecting that group or peer mentoring may be best for her: *maybe that's always the thing that would work much better for me is having a group of people to engage with* (212).

For Dyad6, the mentee applauded the *push and focus* which she felt within her mentoring encounters with her mentor, engendering accountability and *a very positive experience* (116) resulting in building mentee confidence and voice. For her mentor, taking what can be interpreted as an empowering relational stance, contributed to this outcome. Mentor6 stated: *it is not about telling a person what to do it's about guiding that person to reflect on where they're at in certain things and what they want to work on* (155/6).

Contrasting with this empowering approach was the pursuit of solutions in Dyad1, both mentee1 and mentor1 working in a very similar way *very practical, very goal oriented, looking for a solution* (54). One interpretation of the interplay within Dyad1 was the impact of this pursuit of solutions on bringing a feeling of a *tick the box* (102) to the mentoring experience, compared to interacting with a peer mentoring group that was *more of a leadership mentoring experience* (124) for mentee1. Therefore, illuminating the sense-making of participant lived experiences emphasises the impact of mentoring style on the learning experience for both mentee and mentor within dyads in this study. Furthermore, it illuminates the "black box of mentoring" (Chandler, Kram and Yip, 2011) to better understand the psychology of workplace mentoring (Eby and Robertson, 2020), thus, laying the foundation for the meaning-making of a novel leadership mentoring model (the focus of another paper).

6. Discussion

Thinking together the view of self as relational (Mead, 1934/1967), the dynamic relatedness, comprising inter-personal and intra-personal dialogic interactions, and participant sense-making of their lived mentoring experience, guided the proposed conceptual model (Figure 4). Concomitant with the phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity, the uniquely situated quality of *being* human, participant concerns with "the shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022, p.13) were illuminated. Illustrating the inductive nature of IPA, prompted by a central concern with *the space between* in the sense-making of participant experiences, the researcher was guided to the work of Martin Buber (1923/1970) in particular, the "sphere of the interhuman" (Buber, 1965, p.65). Examining and developing a construct to describe the relational dynamics in mentoring dyads, *the space between* mentee and mentor was conceptualised as the *DRMS*. Other scholars have contributed to the space between. In the therapeutic relationship, Linda Finlay (2011) emphasises "that mysterious intersubjective space where the client and therapist meet" (p.22). Exploring the discourse of relatedness, Ruthellen Josselson (1996) emphasises the *between*, asserting, "the way the space is filled or reverberates - becomes all-important" (p.5). To develop an understanding of meaningful and flourishing relationships, Galovan and Schramm (2018) integrate empirical evidence with the work of Buber, asserting that the idea that self is formed in dialogue with others is "fundamental to the dialogical perspective" (p. 200). However, despite mentoring being fundamentally a relational phenomenon, the concept of dialogue deep-rooted in Martin Buber's work is notably absent from mentoring scholarship.

Understanding and alternating the two basic attitudes of relating, two poles of human interplay (Buber, 1923/1970), the impersonal I-It and the personal I-Thou, are central to the practical application of the ATN leadership mentoring model. The capacity to display dialogic fluidity concerning these attitudes of relating enables the shaping and reshaping of the leader identity of dyad participants. Furthermore, framing within the "phenomenological attitude" (Finlay, 2008), striving to "suspend presuppositions and go beyond the natural attitude of taken-for-granted understanding" (p.2) allowed the researcher to make sense of participant sense-making in reframing leader of identity (Figure 4).

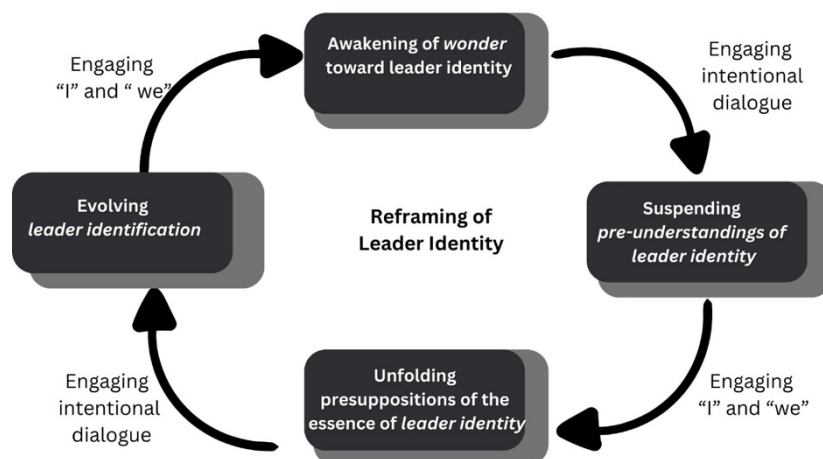


Figure 4: Dialogue and Leader Identity

In adopting 'I-It' way of relating, an individual stands in relation to the other as an object. In contrast, adopting 'I-Thou' way of relating, an individual stands in relation to the other as a whole person, open to the realities of the other. For Buber (1923/1970), being in dialogue is more than a conversation; it can be a transformative experience by not relating exclusively in I-It mode, rather paying attention to I-Thou where the individual of the individual other is appreciated.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this paper spotlights the duality of both a relational and dialogical focus when navigating the space between mentee and mentor within a mentoring dyad. Making sense of the "black box of mentoring" from within dyad data revealed the centrality of a quality *DRMS* and relational orientation in the space between mentee and mentor to make visible the process of reframing leader identity. Embedded in the tradition of Martin Buber's (1923/1970) work and understanding the meaning of dialogue offers opportunities for meaningful and effective mentoring experiences where leader identity can be shaped and/or reshaped within the *DRMS*. Restoring a focus on the role of dialogue is enabled through engaging two relational constructs of I-It and I-Thou encounters (Buber, 1923/1970) within mentoring dyads. In I-It encounters, an individual treats the other as an object. In I-Thou encounters, each individual "sees the fullness and humanity of the other (the other as subject)" (Fishbane, 2023, p.449). The empirical findings from this study underscore the centrality of a quality *DRMS* and relational orientation to make visible the process of reframing of leader identity. Furthermore, formal leadership mentoring programmes for women act as a pathway for propagating an organisational culture supportive of mentoring and the advancement of women, gender equality, and leader identification within the workplace.

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