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Advancing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a novel methodological tool in deepening insights and amplifying the voices of Women Mentees in Leadership Development Programmes in Irish Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Positioned within the field of Educational Leadership, this paper asserts the value of adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as a qualitative methodological approach to explore and unravel the lived experience of women mentees (academics, professional, management and support services staff) in leadership mentoring relationships in an Irish Higher Education context.

The research context focuses on the intersection of leadership mentoring and gender in Irish academia, prompted by the under-representation of women in senior positions, coupled with IPA as an underutilised methodology in educational leadership research.

Women's' voices are an important part of the process of consciousness-raising in discourses within Educational Leadership, of making what is invisible, visible; more especially in terms of enablers and barriers to women's career advancement. Giving time and space to hear these voices, through the utility of IPA, allows their stories to unfold, by attending to their experiences, understanding, perceptions and views, of being in a leadership mentoring relationship. This paper showcases five distinctive features of IPA: (a) epistemological grounding, (b) amplifying individual voice, (c) inductive deepening of insights, (d) versatility and flexibility, and (e) co-creation between researcher and women mentees, to reveal what it is like for these women. In the process of this unveiling, IPA can make an iridescent contribution to the discourse on gender equality, leadership development, policy practice and action within an Irish higher education context.

Keywords

Gender; higher education; IPA; leadership mentoring; gender

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Introduction

The global pandemic has precipitated unforeseen disruption with lasting changes in the world of work and education, in particular, how we communicate, connect, collaborate, interact and lead, demanding changes for individuals, both men and women, organisations and their leadership practices. 'Existing leadership and management models', Campbell-Stephens (2022:114) asserts, 'are incapable of taking us into an uncertain future'. Mentoring is largely applauded as a key ingredient for development of individuals in the workplace (Eby & Robertson, 2020), often cited as 'an important workplace learning strategy' (Ellinger, 2002:15). With quantitative studies dominating extant mentoring scholarship, (Wilson, 2022), what can be observed is a paucity of studies (Allen & Eby, 2007; Ragins & Kram, 2007) illuminating the experience of women mentees in leadership mentoring relationships in Irish higher education. The rationale for spotlighting women mentees are threefold:

Firstly, the OECD (2017:17) forcefully stated that 'gender inequality pervades all aspects of social and economic life, and affects countries at all levels of development'. Consonant with this assertion, the under-representation of women in senior leadership positions in higher education is one issue highlighted by the National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEA, 2016). Drawing on data from the global U-Multirank monitor (n.d.), O'Connor and Hazelkorn (2022) affirm that 'stereotypes and gender bias persist in higher education globally' where 'women are still under-represented as one goes up the academic ladder'. However, it must be acknowledged that some women make strategic choices not to seek advancement to senior leadership levels, choosing another path, such as professorship (Harford, 2020). Mentoring has been identified as an effective career development strategy for women in higher education (HEA, 2018), widely acclaimed to be 'one of the most fulfilling and transformative relationships' (Ragins, 2016:228) experienced at work. Despite some advancements in gender equality, higher education and society, in general, continue to grapple with some questions and challenges relating to the mentoring context which have persisted over the decades – the need 'to understand more thoroughly the relationship between women and mentors' (Chandler, 1996:80); and the need to

better understand the 'black box' of mentoring (Chandler, Kram & Yip, 2011:536) in such high-quality mentoring relationships that promote 'mutual growth, learning and development within the career context' (Ragins, 2012:519).

Secondly, aligned with the wealth of literature reinforcing the value of mentoring to those involved (see for example, Allen *et al.*, 2004; Baugh & Sullivan, 2005; Allen *et al.*, 2006; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Scandura, 1992; De Vries *et al.*, 2006), mentoring is certainly receiving more attention as a tool of critical importance to help the strategic advancement of women (Harford, 2020; HEA, 2018; Grant & Ghee, 2015), in particular increasingly being integrated into human resource interventions within organisations (Fowler *et al.*, 2021:59).

Thirdly, the emergence of the positive psychology movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) set the foundation for envisioning positive relationships at work as 'a rich new interdisciplinary domain of inquiry' (Dutton & Ragins, 2007:3) where relationships are viewed as "front and center' in organizational life' (Dutton & Ragins, 2007:4). Foregrounding relationships in organisational studies, shifting the focus to relationships between people at work, concurs with Gilligan's (2000:xviii) aims 'to see difference as a marker of the human condition rather than as a problem to be solved', setting the stage for exploring organisational phenomena of interest through the detailed examination of individual lived experience.

Positioned within the field of Educational Leadership (Gunter, 2022), concerned with 'leadership as a social practice of influence' in addition to treating 'leadership as position' (Showunmi & Moorosi, 2022:2), this paper asserts the value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an underutilised methodology in educational leadership research, to explore the lived experience of women mentees (academics, professional, management and support services staff) participating in leadership mentoring within an Irish Higher Education Institution (HEI) context. IPA lends itself as an appropriate methodology to reveal the meaning-making bestowed on these experiences, exploring what 'may drive or depress women's aspirations and career orientations' (Morley, 2013:2), and the opening of the 'black box' of mentoring (Chandler *et al.*, 2011).

The distinctiveness of IPA, an integrative hermeneutic phenomenology, emerging as 'a dominant qualitative research methodology in many academic disciplines' (Tuffour, 2017:1), creates a context for this paper as a tool to provide rich insights into the lived experiences of research participants. Its distinctiveness lies in the commitment 'to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which participants make sense of their experiences' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022:35), in essence, exploring what matters and what is significant to research participants within the context of the phenomenon being studied, which in this study is mentoring. IPA provides for deepening the understanding of the process and content dimensions of

leadership mentoring for women mentees within Irish higher education.

Engaging IPA moves beyond being purely phenomenological by drawing on two additional touchstones of the philosophy of knowledge, namely hermeneutics and idiography, which contribute to the theoretical underpinning distinctiveness of IPA. Chandler, Kram and Yip (2011:555) highlight a reliance on 'single-source (protégé)' studies focusing on individual differences in mentee and mentor and dyadic factors, such as relationship quality. Mentoring outcomes are determined by more than individual and dyad factors - such as influences of others in a developmental network, the workplace in which individual is a part of, environmental factors - which Chandler, Kram and Yip (2011:520) assert 'enable, constrain, or shape mentoring and other developmental relationships'. Thus, the emerging ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1976) on mentoring at work advocated by Chandler, Kram and Yip (2011) offers a platform for engaging a qualitative methodology foregrounding 'the importance of meaning, context and nuance' (Smith *et al.*, 2022:119), adding to the appeal of engaging in-depth interviews and IPA to get to the essence of this phenomenon.

To explore this interplay between leadership mentoring and gender, the study invites women mentees, and their mentor partner, to share with the researcher their lived experience of being in a leadership mentoring programme. This approach is consistent with McIntosh's (2010:5) assertions that '...opinions invite argumentation. Telling about experience invites listening. Opinions tend to bring on conflict, whereas shared experiences tend to elicit curiosity and empathy'. Therein lies the initial attraction of IPA as this study aims to '*make sense of experience* from someone else's perspective' (Smith *et al.*, 2022:119), attending to both the individual participant account and the similarities and differences across participant accounts.

Women's voices are an important part of the process of consciousness-raising in the discourse of making what is invisible, visible; more especially in terms of enablers and barriers to women's career advancement. Widening the perspective of what it is like inhabiting different worlds, and 'bringing women's voices into the open', Gilligan (2000:xxvii) asserts, contributes to 'the on-going process of changing the voice of the world, thus asserting a new conversation'. To more appropriately 'portray the very texture and fabric of many lives, in all of their richness and variation' (Miller, 1986:ix), there is a need to elaborate on the nature, meaning, behaviours, emotional responses, complexities and ambiguities of women in a leadership mentoring programme (Burton *et al.*, 2015; Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Antoine, *et al.*, 2018). However, research with this qualitative undertone is scant and it is here that IPA asserts its real value.

Emergence of IPA

IPA came to prominence as a qualitative research methodology in the latter part of the twentieth century (Smith, 1996), with particular attention to the field of health psychology. Since its inception, IPA continues to evolve and develop as a methodology (Smith & Eatough, 2019), spanning many fields. In more recent years, expanding into other areas of scholarship, for example, sports psychology (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019; Bentzen *et al.*, 2020; Brown *et al.*, 2018); engineering education (Kirn *et al.*, 2019); workplace learning and development (Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Sengupta *et al.*, 2022); couple and family therapy (Allan & Eatough, 2016); contemporary dance education (Clements & Redding, 2020). IPA's 'scope and influence have increased substantially' (Smith & Eatough, 2019:163), as it becomes 'a well-established member of the qualitative methods repertoire' (Nizza *et al.*, 2021:1).

Underpinning the qualitative research approach of IPA, developed initially within the field of health psychology (Smith, 1996), are the theoretical perspectives of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The methodological *fit* between IPA and experiences of leadership mentoring, posited here, is anchored in the *double hermeneutic*, the engagement of the researcher in making sense of the women mentees, the co-researchers, sense making. It is this holistic analytical interpretation, the combination of interpretation and reflection demanded by IPA, which is central to the dynamic relationship between the *part* and the *whole* (Smith et al., 2012). The *part* is the researchers' encounter with each participant, and the *whole* draws on the breadth and depth of the researchers' knowledge and experience.

Reflecting on the development of IPA and its contribution to qualitative psychology almost two decades ago, Smith (2004:39) outlined the key characteristic features of IPA as "idiographic, inductive and interrogative". Featuring in the distinctiveness of IPA set out in this paper are two complementary commitments of IPA, emphasised by Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006). Firstly, the phenomenological aspect, the *P* of IPA, giving voice to participant's concerns, and secondly, the interpretative aspect, the *I* of IPA, making sense of these concerns from a psychological perspective. In addition, a number of key quality indicators are highlighted by Nizza, Farr and Smith (2021:1): 'constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; attending to convergence and divergence'. Acknowledging that differences exist in qualitative methodologies, Yardley (2000:215) offers some further 'open-ended, flexible principles' (p. 215), 'sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; impact and importance' - to be embraced as a guide to navigating quality in a qualitative study. Each of these principles are accounted for in this IPA study. Firstly, *sensitivity to context* is illustrated by the focus on women's voices; secondly, *commitment and*

rigour is embedded in IPA's triad of commitments - idiographic, hermeneutic and phenomenological; thirdly, the iterative and inductive analytic process directing the researcher's gaze from single participant case to cross-cases, analysing convergence and divergence while engaging in reflexivity are central to *transparency and coherence* of this IPA study; and finally, presenting new knowledge on mentoring, the phenomenon being studied, addresses Yardley's (2000) principle of *impact and importance* through the inductive deepening of insights.

IPA, Mentoring and Gender

Voice, a 'powerful psychological instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds' (Gilligan, 2000:xvi), is the central source of knowledge in this study to understand what it is like for women mentees in a leadership mentoring programme. Gilligan (2000:xvi) asserts that 'to have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard; it is an intensely relational act', reinforcing the multi-modality of understanding individual 'relatedness-to-the-world' (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006:106), fundamental to IPA.

There exists a paucity of women's voices in mentoring scholarship in an Irish higher education context, since Levinson's groundbreaking classic *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (Levinson et al., 1978), a platform from which mentoring research emerged in the seminal work of Kathy Kram (1985; 1983). Initially considering a sample to include twenty men and twenty women, Levinson's 'intense desire to understand his own adult development' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996:ix) informed his final decision to study men rather than women, highlighting 'it is essential to study the adult development of both genders if we are to understand either' (p. x). Acknowledging that 'a strongly male-centred view of adult life has for centuries been prevalent in our scientific and cultural institutions' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996:x), Daniel Levinson conducted a second parallel study of women. This second study, aiming 'to tap as directly as possible into the lives of women' (p. x), involving an 'in-depth exploration' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996:4) of the lives of forty-five women, using Intensive Biographical Interviewing to 'help the participant give a fuller, more coherent and more textured account' (Levinson & Levinson, 1996:9), culminated in *The Seasons of a Woman's Life*, completed by his wife, after his passing in 1994. The dominant-subordinate situation influencing the direction of Levinson's work, permeating history, 'was – and – is depriving and distorting to members of both sexes, but in different ways for each' (Miller, 1986:xix), amplified by 'theories in which men's experiences stands for all human experience - theories which eclipse the lives of women and shut out women's voices' (Gilligan, 2000:xiii). Hearing 'women's and men's voices differently' (p. xiv), for Gilligan (2000:xiv), 'it was concern about relationship that made

women's voice sound "different" within a world that was preoccupied with separation and obsessed with creating and maintaining boundaries between people'. Understanding human relations, the work of Carol Gilligan asserts, reveals insights into human living and human being in the world, 'because people's lives are deeply connected, psychologically, economically and politically '(2000:xiv). Advancing an understanding of such human relations, this paper advocates that the emergence of IPA, anchored in philosophical commitments informed by, for example, Heidegger's (1927) 'being-in-the-world', and the situated and interpretative nature of this 'relatedness-to-the world' (Smith et al., 2022:13), aligned with Husserl's (1927) concern to 'find the essence of the experience' (Smith et al., 2022:11) by *going back to the thing itself*, allows the researcher tap into, as directly as possible, this nuanced experience of individual participants.

One launchpad for the approach to this research is the work of Jean Baker Miller (1986), highlighting the wealth of new knowledge on the psychology of women contributed during the latter decades of the twentieth century, describing 'women's lives and women's development in the terms in which it is lived rather than to force it into categories which we have inherited, categories that originated in the attempt by men to describe all of life' (Miller, 1986, p. xviii). Much of this *new knowledge* (Miller, 1982; Surrey, 1984; Levinson & Levinson, 1996; Gilligan, 2000), focusing on women's active participation in the development of others (Miller, 1986:xx) illuminating women's use of power, has scope for more visibility in contemporary mentoring scholarship to better understand women's experiences as a mentee. Consistent with leadership historically being associated with men (Shah, 2022:58), adopting and showcasing IPA offers one way to unveil such understanding of what it is like for women in leadership mentoring programmes.

Leveraging IPA in Educational Leadership Research

As advocated by Farrell (2020:2), phenomenological research approaches, enable 'researchers access a wealth of valuable information and understanding' about the lived experience of a particular phenomenon, a commitment of IPA, where the researcher is committed to learning from these experiences of others, which 'is essential for education researchers' Farrell (2020:1). Surprisingly, adopting a methodology to 'deepen our Understanding (with a capital U) of the experiences of others' (Farrell, 2020:1), phenomenological research, remains underrepresented in education research, thus missing opportunities to augment research and practice within the sphere of education (Farrell, 2020). Grasping an opportunity to fill this aforementioned void, this paper advocates embracing this qualitative approach of IPA to give voice to women mentees within this research context.

In a review of mentoring literature from 1980 to 2009, Haggard *et al.* (2011:294), in their work, posit a number of key characteristics distinguishing a mentoring relationship from other forms of interpersonal relationships, namely, 'reciprocity, developmental benefits, and regular/consistent interaction'. Observing a continuum of mentoring relationship quality from effective to dysfunctional, the authors note that research examining benefits, not problems, dominates mentoring scholarship. Arguing that one definition is not desirable or even possible (Haggard *et al.*, 2011) creates a space for a qualitative focus that 'directs our analytic attention towards our participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences' (Smith *et al.*, 2022:75) bringing the utility of IPA to mentoring scholarship.

Collecting participant data via in-depth interviews, foregrounds for the researcher interviewer, 'the importance of meaning, context and nuance' (Smith *et al.*, 2022:119), providing deep insights into the lived experiences of these individuals. The distinctiveness of IPA for unravelling these first-person accounts to reveal the essence of mentoring experiences are multiplicitous: having a theoretical underpinning; amplifying a single voice; inductive deepening of insights; versatility and flexibility; and, enabling co-creation between researcher and participant - see figure 1.

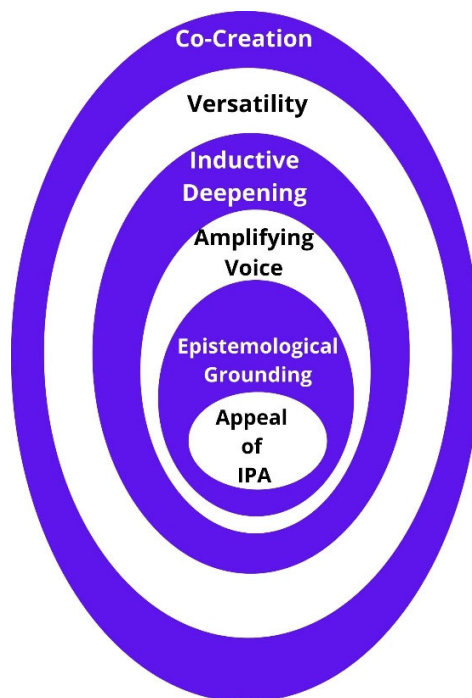


Figure 1. The appeal of IPA

Epistemological grounding – triad of IPA

The intertwining of three theoretical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, can be considered a uniqueness of this IPA approach. Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach concerned with the study of lived experience, represented by the *P* within IPA, requires the researcher to get ‘experience-near’ (Boden *et al.*, 2019:218) to capture rich content, “uniquely embodied, situated and perspectival” (Smith *et al.*, 2012:29), becoming the focii of interpretation. This process of engagement and interpretation, the *I* of IPA, comprises a dual lens, firstly, the participant making sense of their experience, and, secondly, the researcher making sense of the participant sense-making, there being no *I* without the *P*. In this, lies the second theoretical underpinning of IPA, namely hermeneutics, also known as the theory of interpretation, represented in the double hermeneutic of both participant and researcher’s involvement in sense-making of the lived experience. Idiography, the third theoretical influence on IPA, is concerned with the focus on the individual participant, rather than a ‘nomothetic’ focus, which Smith *et al.* (2022:24) argue is ‘concerned with making claims at the group or population level’. To meet this idiographic commitment, “a rich detailed first-person account” (Smith *et al.*, 2022:53) of participant experiences is essential.

While IPA is comparable to other qualitative approaches, for example, discourse analysis and IPA are ‘heavily linguistically based approaches’ (Smith, 2011b:11), the distinctiveness of IPA is an amalgam of the first hand account of the participant foregrounding the embodiment, emotional response and sense-making of this experience. In contrast, Smith (2011b:10) asserts that the concern of discursive approaches is ‘the linguistic resources participants are drawing on in order to provide accounts of experience and/or the conversational features occurring while giving that account’.

The methodological *fit* between IPA, positioned as ‘an integrative approach’ (Smith *et al.*, 2022: 133), and women’s experiences of leadership mentoring is centred, in particular, around the idiographic and hermeneutic theoretical underpinnings – ‘without phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen’ (Smith *et al.*, 2022:31). As a qualitative approach to creating knowledge, IPA moves beyond phenomenological and it ‘is distinctive because of its combination of psychological interpretative, and idiographic components’ (Basini *et al.*, 2017). This conjoining of elements challenges both participant and researcher in their reflective and interpretative endeavours for deep learning. It is the active listening to human lived experience of the phenomenon being studied, looking deeper at what is being said and how it is being said – what are these women mentees trying to say – converging

and diverging from the everydayness of the phenomenon, that brings this new knowledge into the social narrative.

Although the theoretical terminology may appear daunting on first reading for the novice IPA researcher, persistently engaging with the practice of IPA, interspersed with multiple readings of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Theory, Method and Research* (Smith et al., 2022), becomes a growth-fostering experience for self, researcher and the phenomenon being studied. Undertaking a pilot study of one or two sample participants is one way to experience the challenges and gifts, the nuts and bolts, of doing IPA, before embarking on recruiting a homogenous sample to address research question(s).

Amplifying Individual Voice

Fundamental to IPA is exploring an in-depth account that privileges the individual participant, the participant being the 'experiential expert' (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is in the unpredictable world of in-depth interviewing - 'an integral part of the inductive principles of phenomenological interviewing' (Smith et al., 2022: 62) - where key features of IPA, a 'focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience' (Smith et al., 2012:45), can be unveiled.

Giving voice to participants, understanding participant's experiences of the phenomenon being studied is the idiographic component of IPA, getting an insider perspective on what it is like to be in a leadership mentoring programme. Anchored within the idiographic mode of inquiry, treating 'in-depth first-person accounts as data' (Smith et al., 2022:119), each mentee is interviewed, the interview transcript transcribed verbatim and pseudonymised before embarking on analysis. Smith (2011a:6) asserts the importance of a focus on a single extract, which can have 'a significance completely disproportionate to its size', unearthing a *gem* which can play 'an illuminative role in a research study'. Being aware of the continuum of gems suggested by Smith (2011a:13) – shining ('already clearly apparent'); suggestive ('something needs attention'); secret ('lots of peering to uncover') – which can feature in a single case, or none, demands the IPA researcher be awake to their presence and potential, in particular during hermeneutic interpretation of a transcript.

The analysis begins by examining a single participant case where researcher interpretation comes to the fore – making sense of the participant making sense of their leadership mentoring experiences, the double hermeneutic commitment of IPA in action – resulting in a number of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant mentee. These two layers of interpretation operationalise the dual aspect of the *I* of IPA, the interpretative nature of participants

making sense of their experiences, followed by 'analysis as a systematic attempt at making sense (e.g. via synthesizing, abstracting, contextualizing, analogizing, or illuminating meaning) of the experiential claims and concerns of participants' (Loaring *et al.*, 2015:427).

The 'doing' of IPA, through in-depth interviews, demands active listening from the researcher, consistently following participant concerns and remembering the experiential expert is sitting opposite in the interview space. To amplify the voice of each participant requires the researcher to adopt multiple lenses when reading the transcript in order to understand, make sense and express what concerns each participant. Firstly, a descriptive lens as a way to summarise what the participant has said and describe what matters to them, for example, 'events, experiences, processes, locations, principles..' (Smith & Nizza, 2022:36). Secondly, adopting a linguistic lens, looking closely at the words used by participant and the way they are spoken, for example 'pronouns, verb tenses, pauses, laughter, repetitions, hesitations, and tone..' (p. 36). Thirdly, a conceptual lens taking the form of questions 'initiated or prompted by your curious reading of what the participant is actually saying' (p. 38). Such exploratory noting of each verbatim transcript informs the development of Personal Experiential Statements (PESs), which clustered together result in a number of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for each participant (for example, see Figure 2).

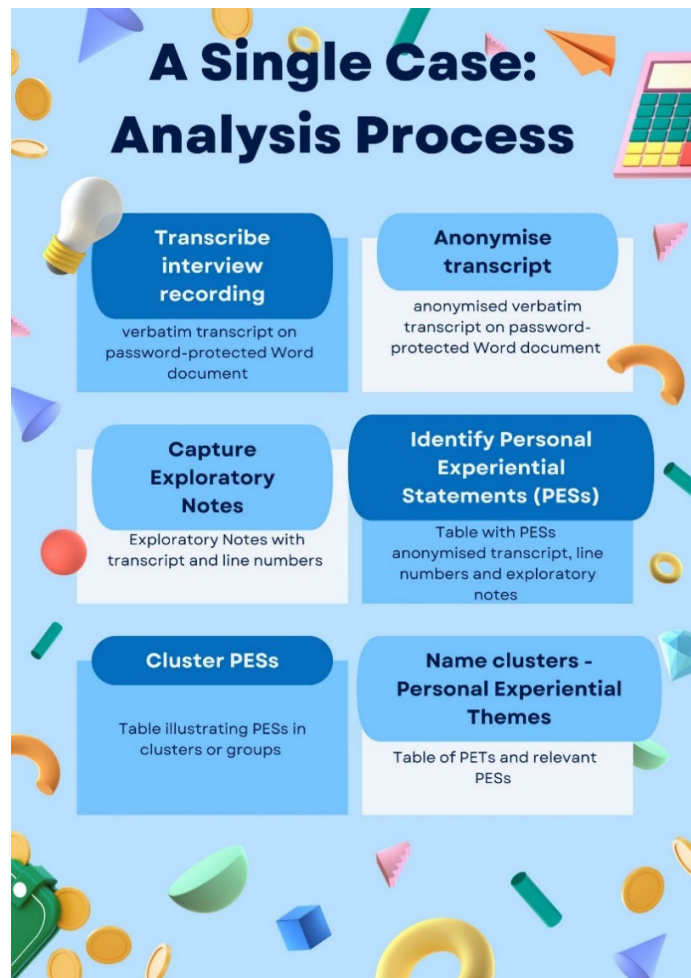


Figure 2. Single case analysis

Inductive deepening of insights

IPA requires the researcher to systematically and rigorously engage in an analytical process which evolves as the researcher travels the research journey. The essence of ‘its analytic focus’ (Smith *et al.*, 2022:75) is characterised by the flexible application of a set of common processes and principles, not following a prescribed single method nor cookbook guidelines. IPA emphasises exploring the convergence and divergence of individual personal lived experiences to get to the essence of the phenomenon being studied, with an audit trail to trace the findings back to individual transcripts. Figure 3 illustrates the iteration of steps, reflection and reflexivity to bring together the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) of multiple cases. The resulting Group Experiential Themes (GETs) capture within case and across case themes, thus deepening the insights into the phenomenon being studied, consistently drawing from the voice of individual women mentees.

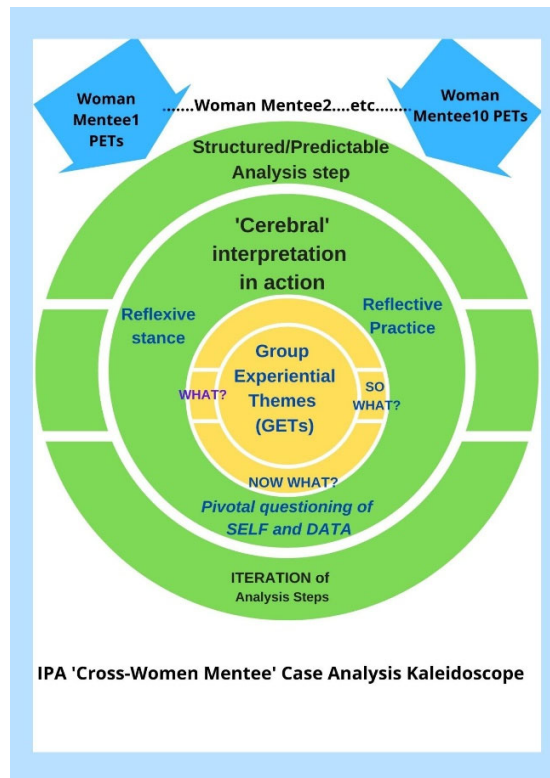


Figure 3. From PETS to GETs

Attending to convergence and divergence ‘allows researchers to illustrate representation, prevalence and variability within the analysis’ (Nizza *et al.*, 2021:376). Following this in-depth analysis of each case, the forensic search for patterns across participants balances convergence and divergence within the sample of women mentees, ‘not only presenting both shared themes but also pointing to the particular way in which these themes play out for individuals’ (Smith, 2011b:10).

Being data driven, inductive by nature, not testing hypotheses nor trying to fit the experience into current conceptualisations or predefined categories (Smith *et al.*, 2012), going back to the everydayness of ‘the thing itself’, its ‘relatedness-back-to-itself’ (Husserl, 1927:10), creates an opportunity for novel findings, and another way of knowing to contribute to the enrichment of the field of education research and practice (Farrell, 2020). Adapting the Johari Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955; Oliver & Duncan, 2019) is one way to make sense of and to illustrate a distinction

between the different sources of this *new* knowledge that can be captured in emerging patterns through IPA analysis – see figure 4.

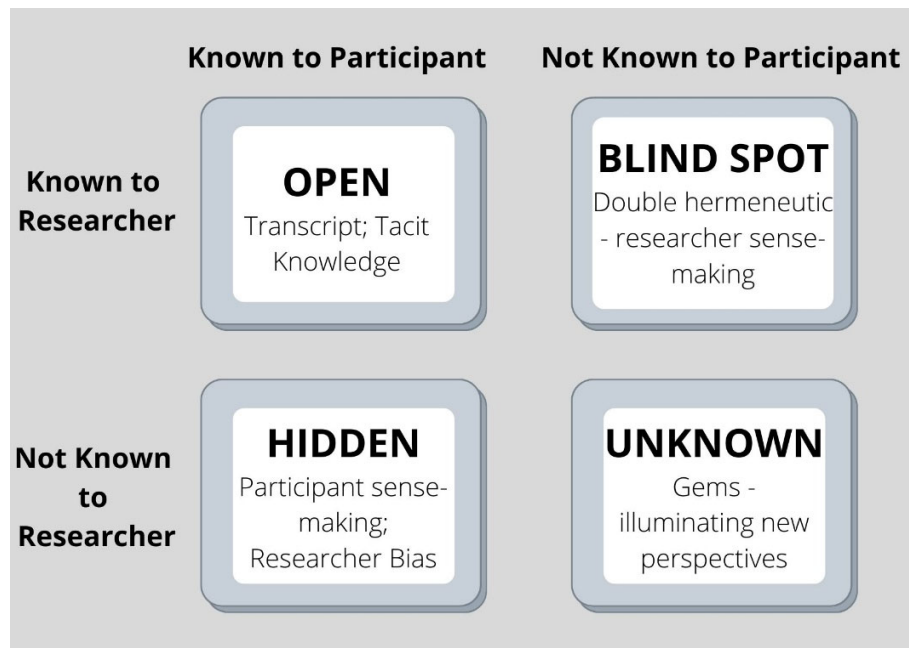


Figure 4. Sources of 'new' knowledge

The potential to make visible what is hidden, to highlight blindspots and emerge with such *new* knowledge - a gem, 'the relatively rare utterance that is especially resonant and offers potent analytic leverage to a study' (Smith, 2011a:6) - is one gift of IPA which appeals. In addition, acknowledging a tension in distinguishing between differing contributions to knowledge, such as Group Experiential Themes (GETs), biases and tacit knowledge – a discussion for a future paper.

Versatility and Flexibility

Variation in the analytic process, and researcher interpretation, is evident across the range of published IPA studies reinforcing that 'the analytic process cannot ever achieve a genuinely first-person account – the account is always constructed by participant *and* researcher' (Larkin *et al.*, 2006:104). IPA offers a 'flexible and versatile approach to understanding people's experiences' (Tuffour, 2017:5), with accessibility, applicability and rigour (Larkin *et al.*, 2006) appealing to these researchers. Living in a messy world, particularly following the unforeseen disruption of the global pandemic, the world of work is reshaping, virtual and hybrid working commonplace, and changes

in how we communicate, connect and lead being demanded. Engaging IPA as an approach to elicit the meaning of leadership mentoring for women mentees is one way of engaging with this messiness.

A particular concern, asserted by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022:27), for ordinary everyday experience that 'becomes 'an experience' of importance' for the participant as a result of reflection on its significance and engagement in sense-making, adds to the appeal of this methodology.

In the dearth of studies of women mentees, Gibson's (2004:173) phenomenological study, used conversational interviewing to gather data from nine full-time women faculty members working in US universities, to 'understand and describe the essential nature and meaning of the experience of being mentored' for women mentees. Five themes emerging from Gibson's (2004) study were: 'having someone who truly cares and acts in one's best interest' (p. 179), 'a feeling of connection' (p. 180), 'being affirmed of one's worth' (p. 181), 'not being alone' (p. 181), 'politics are part of one's experience' (p. 182). Focused solely on the mentee perspective, Gibson (2004:186) calls for capturing additional insights into these relationships through undertaking a 'corollary study on the mentoring relationship from the perspective of the mentor'.

Versatility and flexibility become evident when moving beyond capturing a single perspective of the lived experience of leadership mentoring. Deviating from the classic IPA study, the evolution of this study to a multiperspectival study illustrates this versatility offered by IPA. This multiperspectival conceptualisation uses two complementary sub-samples - women mentees and their mentor partners - to view the phenomenon of mentoring from multiple perspectives, although privileging the voice of women mentees.

Co-creation between Researcher and Participant

Applying the IPA perspective, the fulcrum of which is the person of the participant concerned with search for meaning on the part of both participant and researcher, sets out to understand 'what it is like' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014:8) - the bright side and the dark side (Willig, 2012:9) – 'to stand in the shoes of' (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014:8) these women mentees who have engaged in a leadership mentoring programme. Bengsten and Barnett (2017:114) assert that 'the darker educational aspects of everyday higher education practice' must be faced in order to 'find renewed hope in the university as an institution for personal as well as professional imagination and growth'. It is the researcher's empathic stance that endeavours to access 'the participant's personal world' (Smith, 1996:218) to capture and meaningfully reveal what it is like for these women.

IPA, also acknowledges that the participant and researcher influence each other throughout the research process and understands the researchers' attitudes, feelings and intentions as part of

this dynamic (Langdrige, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2012). Search for meaning on the part of both participant and researcher is an inherent concern and responsibility of the researcher (Smith, 2019), recognising that individual experiences engender much cerebral activity – ‘reflecting, thinking and feeling’ (Smith *et al.*, 2022:3), which can be emotionally laden. Getting to each participant’s unique perspective - perspectival knowing – involves separating out the researcher world view from that of participants. As pivotal contributors to an IPA study, an awareness that participants and researcher, in equal measure, hold prejudices, assumptions, expectations and beliefs (Wallace & Wray, 2021) is a critical ingredient to a quality outcome, and attending to such ‘echoes’ (Goldspink & Engward, 2019) is central to the practice of reflexivity by the IPA researcher. Thus, in communicating the ‘varieties and subtleties of primal lived experience’ (Van Manen, 2017:779), a responsibility lies with the researcher, as co-creator, to be cognisant of the ‘complexities’ in making sense of the unique personal accounts of participants. Embracing reflexivity (Goldspink & Engward, 2019) challenges the IPA researcher to reflect on how her or his experiences impact on the interview process and the subsequent analysis and the outcome of the double hermeneutic, demonstrating the researcher’s impact on making sense of participant experiences.

Making sense of the concerns and claims of participants is a key component of the interpretative requirement of IPA, drawing on the ‘phenomenological requirement to understand and ‘give voice’ to the concerns of participants’ (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006:102). It is incumbent on the researcher to engage in pivotal questioning of self and the interview data, to reveal the essence of what it is like being in a leadership mentoring programme.

Honouring the analytic integrative approach of IPA, applying the double hermeneutic requires the researcher to make sense of each participant’s sense-making of their experience, moving through the hermeneutic circle - oscillating back and forth between text and interpretation, looking to the whole and the parts (Smith *et al.*, 2022).

To deepen insights and amplify the voices of these women mentees, a cross-case analysis of individual cases can be conducted, exploring the convergence and divergence in Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) across cases, and resulting in Group Experiential Themes (GETs) for a homogenous sample of women mentees in a leadership mentoring programme in an Irish higher education context. It is these GETs which are the entrée to the write-up of the results section of an IPA study, where these themes are outlined, illustrating the convergence and divergence across individual cases (p.111), thus bringing the reader into the hermeneutic dialogue (p. 109) - a third hermeneutic, the reader making sense of the researcher making sense of the words of the participants (co-researchers).

The qualitative researcher, as co-creator, is likened to a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018:11), of which there are many kinds. 'The methodological bricoleur is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to intensive self-reflection and introspection' (p. 12); 'the interpretative bricoleur produces a bricolage, that is, a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation' (p. 12), which are the combined commitment of the IPA researcher.

Conclusion

In the chaordic (Hock, 2000) connected world of the twenty-first century, 'work in organizations has become much more relational, interdependent, and collaborative in nature' (Parise, 2007: 360), thus prompting engagement with novel ways to create knowledge. In this study, IPA licenses the researcher to interpret the women mentee's experience, who in turn are trying to make sense of their own mentoring experience - the double hermeneutic or interpretation (Smith *et al.*, 2012) in action. It is incumbent on the researcher, being part of the critical stance in an IPA study, to be cognisant of the tendency to unconsciously reframe evidence that challenges deeply held beliefs rather than reflect on and shift these beliefs (Syed, 2015). Some criticisms of IPA prevail, for example, that findings are reliant on the experience of the researcher to collect and interpret rich and nuanced data (Tuffour, 2017). Thus, it is the ability of the researcher to oscillate between sense-making of cognition, language, culture, narrative, embodiment and emotion that facilitates a 'detailed experiential account of the person's *involvement*' (Smith *et al.*, 2012:196) in the phenomena under study.

As a qualitative research methodology, IPA differs from quantitative approaches seeking reliability, validity and generalisability to illustrate the quality of the research. IPA aims for trustworthiness of findings where it is incumbent on the researcher, representing a dual position (Smith *et al.*, 2022:29), to integrate strategies to enhance credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015). The intent of IPA is exploratory not explanatory. The methodological *fit* between IPA, positioned as 'an integrative approach' (Smith *et al.*, 2022:133), and women's experiences of leadership mentoring is centred, in particular, around the idiographic and hermeneutic theoretical underpinnings. The capacity of IPA for 'context sensitive, within-person idiographic design', Basini, Garavan and Cross (2017) assert, makes IPA 'potentially a significant methodological contributor to knowledge'. Engaging with IPA for the first time can be daunting for the novice researcher with the range of new terminology and theoretical underpinnings. IPA offers a unique way of becoming and being a qualitative IPA researcher which is truly embodied in the *doing* of

IPA aligned with the *being* of reflection and reflexivity, bringing forward new knowledge for researcher, participant and the phenomenon being studied.

In summary, showcasing the distinctiveness of IPA, a qualitative methodology, to illuminate the voices of women mentees, by attending to their experiences, understanding, perceptions and views of leadership mentoring, is the intent of this paper. Engaging IPA as a methodological approach has the potential to give space to the voices of these women mentees, deepening our understanding of their experience and contributing directly to the vision for Ireland to be 'a world leading country for gender equality in higher education' (HEA, 2018:5) by 2026. To address the dearth of studies, this IPA research aims to open the 'black box' of mentoring (Chandler, 2011), to advance knowledge and understanding of the everyday experience of leadership mentoring as perceived by women mentees in an Irish higher education context. In addition, the evolving multiperspectival approach gives voice to more than one perspective, balancing the understanding of the women mentees with that of mentor partners, as advocated by Gibson (2004), offering a range of variation in themes to contribute to the broadening of the discourse. Thus, IPA can make an iridescent contribution to the discourse on educational leadership, gender equality, leadership development, policy, practice, and action, within an Irish higher education context.

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