

**Gordon Institute  
of Business Science**  
University of Pretoria

**Exploring how Leadership-Followership Dynamics Contribute to Psychological  
Safety in Workplace Settings**

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i. **Abstract**

This research examined how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to the co-construction of psychological safety in workplace settings. Psychological safety emerged as a relational climate shaped through continuous, bidirectional exchanges: leaders set the tone through encouragement and humility, whilst followers sustained this climate through constructive engagement and voice behaviours.

Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, semi-structured interviews across diverse organisational sectors explored the relational conditions enabling or constraining safety. Thematic analysis revealed psychological safety as not being a fixed state, but as a negotiated process shaped by the agency of both leaders and followers. Key themes included encouraging behaviours, open communication, followership styles, and the influence of power distance.

The study extends Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory by positioning psychological safety as a relational outcome instead of a leader-driven construct. It further advances followership theory by demonstrating how followers actively reinforce emotionally safe environments through trust-building and shared decision-making. Practical recommendations for stakeholders are offered, alongside avenues for future research.

ii. **Keywords:**

**Psychological Safety:** A relational climate in which individuals feel able to express concerns, ideas, and vulnerabilities without fear of humiliation or reprisal. It is co-constructed through ongoing leader, follower interactions and shaped by emotional tone, openness, and reciprocal trust.

**Constructive Followership:** Active follower engagement characterised by initiative, honest voice behaviours, and collaborative problem-solving. It strengthens the relational foundations of psychological safety by modelling trust-building and shared responsibility within organisational settings.

**Relational Dynamics:** The interplay of behaviours, emotions, and power relations between leaders and followers that influence how safety, trust, and openness are enacted. These dynamics reveal how psychological safety emerges as a negotiated or consulted, context-specific process rather than a static condition.

iii. **Declaration**

*I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Change Leadership at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.*

24 November 2025

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## **1. Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Business Relevance**

In today's volatile and complex organisational environments, psychological safety has become a strategic priority for leaders seeking to foster innovation, resilience, and sustainable performance. Psychological safety is defined as the shared belief that individuals can speak up, take interpersonal risks, and express themselves without fear of embarrassment or judgment (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). It is increasingly recognised as a foundational condition for effective teamwork, learning, and adaptive capacity. Recent global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, growing mental health issues, and the rise of hybrid working, have amplified the need for emotionally intelligent leadership and relational trust in the workplace (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

Research has shown that psychologically unsafe environments are associated with increased employee silence, reduced creativity, and diminished well-being (Newman et al., 2017). Failure by organisations to cultivate psychological safety can lead to disengagement from risk, burnout, and even high turnover. Teams with high psychological safety demonstrated stronger collaboration, faster problem-solving, and greater creativity across sectors and geographies (Carmeli et al., 2010; Zhan et al., 2025). These findings underscore the business imperative of creating relational climates where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued.

Leadership and followership dynamics are central to this process. While leadership has traditionally been viewed as a top-down function, research highlights the co-constructed nature of relational influence, where followers actively shape the emotional tone and behavioural standards of their teams (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). This shift reflects a broader move toward the distributed leadership models, where psychological safety is not just a product of leader behaviour, but emerges through mutual engagement, shared responsibilities, and relational authenticity (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2018).

Leader-member exchange (LMX) has been shown to influence perceptions of safety, trust, and inclusion (Liao & Hui, 2021). High-quality LMX relationships, which are characterised

by mutual respect, open communication, and emotional support, are positively associated with psychological safety and employee well-being (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2018). These dynamics, however, are not static. They evolve through ongoing interactions, emotional labour, and context-specific cues. Followers play an active role in shaping these relationships, challenging the notion that psychological safety is solely a leadership outcome (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Ayoko et al., 2023; Bastardoz & Andriaensen, 2023).

The relevance of this study lies in its focus on the lived experience of psychological safety within leadership-followership relationships. By examining how individuals perceive and navigate these dynamics, the researcher seeks to derive insights that are both theoretically significant and practically relevant. Organisations are increasingly recognising that relational intelligence, which encompasses the ability to build trust, manage emotions, and foster inclusion, is a core leadership competency. However, few studies have examined how psychological safety is co-created in everyday interactions or how followers contribute to this process (Motshaba-Ramuedzisi et al, 2021).

This study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research that prioritises emotional nuance, relational depth, and contextual specificity. Rather than treating psychological safety as a static construct, it examines how safety is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in real-time. This approach aligns with the call for more situated, voice-centred methodologies that honour the complexity of human interaction in organisational life (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). By foregrounding participant voice and relational meaning-making, the research offers insights that extend beyond metrics and compliance, inviting a more humanised understanding of leadership practice

## **1.2 Theoretical Relevance**

This study contributes to the evolving theoretical discourse on psychological safety and leadership-followership dynamics by exploring how these constructs are co-experienced and co-constructed in workplace settings. Psychological safety, conceptualised initially by Edmondson (1999), has gained renewed attention as a relational and emotional condition that enables learning, creativity, and interpersonal risk-taking. While much of the literature has focused on leadership behaviours that foster psychological safety, a theoretical gap remains in understanding how followers actively shape these relational climates (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Sacramento et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2017).

The study is anchored in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which posits that leadership is enacted through differentiated relationships between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). High-quality LMX relationships are characterised by mutual trust, respect, and open communication. All of which are foundational to psychological safety (Yuan et al., 2023). Traditionally, the LMX theory has emphasised leader-driven processes, often overlooking the agency of follower voice, emotional labour, and relationship engagement as central to the co-creation of psychological safety (Ayoko et al., 2023; Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023).

This research study aims to theoretically extend the LMX by integrating insights from the psychological safety literature and interpretivist inquiry. It positions psychological safety not as a static outcome of leadership style, but as a dynamic, relational construct shaped through ongoing interaction, emotional cues, and mutual engagement. This perspective aligns with recent calls for more nuanced, context-sensitive models of leadership that account for follower influence, relational complexity, and emotional authenticity (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

By focusing on lived experiences and relational meaning-making, the study also contributes to interpretivist leadership theory, which emphasises the subjective, co-constructed nature of organisational life. It challenges reductionist models that treat psychological safety as a measurable output, instead exploring how it feels, is interpreted, and is negotiated within specific leader-follower relationships. This approach provides a deeper understanding of how trust, vulnerability, and emotional safety are cultivated, as well as the active role followers play in shaping these dynamics (Hesmert & Vogel, 2024).

Ultimately, the study's theoretical relevance lies in its integrative stance; it bridges the leadership and psychological safety literature, centres on follower agency, and advances a relational, interpretivist model of workplace safety. In doing so, it addresses gaps identified in recent systematic reviews, which highlight the need for further research on the emotional and relational dimensions of psychological safety in the leadership context (Newman et al., 2017; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study examines psychological safety as a relational construct that emerges from everyday interactions between leaders and followers. Existing scholarship has largely emphasised leader-driven behaviours, yet recent research argues that followers also play an active role in shaping climates of trust, openness, and voice. Responding to these gaps, the study explores leadership–followership dynamics as co-constructed experiences that influence how individuals interpret safety, support, and interpersonal risk-taking in organisational life.

The main research question asks how leadership and followership dynamics are experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings. It focuses on how individuals make sense of their relational encounters with leaders and colleagues, and how these interactions influence perceptions of trust and openness.

Two sub-research questions (SRQ1 and SRQ2) deepen this examination. The first considers which relational qualities within leadership, followership interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety, foregrounding interpersonal cues, emotional exchanges, and behaviours associated with respect, empowerment, and mutual trust. The second explores how leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships, reflecting calls for more reciprocal and context-sensitive understandings of relational agency in organisational settings.

Together, these questions position the study within contemporary debates that shift psychological safety away from leader-centric paradigms towards a more relational, interpretivist account grounded in lived experience. Chapter 3 explains the research questions in greater detail.

### **1.4 Research Aims**

This study aimed to explore how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to the co-creation of psychological safety in workplace relationships. Drawing on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory and followership theory, the study sought to understand how relational qualities, such as trust, empowerment, and voice, shape perceptions of psychological safety within leader-follower interactions (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2022).

The study sought to:

- Investigate how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to psychological safety, with a focus on trust, empowerment, voice, relational repair, vulnerability and humility, open communication, emotional tone, and power distance as the core relational factors (Appelbaum et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2023).
- Examine the role of follower agency in shaping safe relational climates, including how followers contribute to trust-building, voice behaviours, and inclusive engagements (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Bastardo & Adriaensen, 2023).
- Extend LMX theory by integrating psychological safety as a relational outcome, moving beyond leader-centric models to include mutual influence and co-construction (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).
- Generate practical insights for organisations seeking to foster emotionally safe, inclusive, and resilient workplace cultures through relational leadership practices (Newman et al., 2017).

These aims reflect the study's commitment to exploring the emotional and relational dimensions of workplace safety and to advancing a theoretical framework that honours the lived experience of both leaders and followers.

## **1.5 Research Contributions**

The study contributes to both the theoretical and practical understanding of how leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety in workplace relationships. By integrating Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, with insights from followership theory, and grounding the inquiry into lived relational experience, the study offers a nuanced perspective on how psychological safety is co-created through mutual engagement, emotional openness, and relational trust (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2023).

### **1.5.1 Theoretical Contribution**

Theoretically, this study extends LMX theory by incorporating psychological safety as a relational outcome of leader-follower exchanges. Historical leadership models often prioritised hierarchical influence and leader-centric behaviours, overlooking the proactive role of followers in shaping workplace climates (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Einola & Alvesson,

2021). By foregrounding follower agency, this study challenges reductionist assumptions and contributes to a more reciprocal, relational model of leadership.

The study also advances followership theory by demonstrating how followers actively participate in modelling emotionally safe environments through trust-building, voice behaviours, and shared decision-making (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Bastardo & Adriaensen, 2023). It responds to calls for more context-sensitive, interpretivist research study that honours the complexity of relational dynamics and emotionally nuanced aspects in organisational life (Hesmert & Vogel, 2024).

By bridging these two theoretical domains, the study contributes to a broader framework that positions psychological safety as a co-constructed, relational phenomenon. One that is not shaped only by leadership behaviours, but by the quality of interactions, mutual influence, and emotional authenticity between leaders and followers.

### **1.5.2 Practical Contributions**

Practically, the study offers insights for organisations seeking to cultivate psychologically safe, inclusive, and resilient workplace cultures. It emphasises the significance of relational leadership practices that empower followers, foster trust, and promote open communication (Newman et al., 2017; Ayoko et al., 2023). These can inform leadership development programs, team-building strategies, and organisational policies to enhance employee engagement and well-being.

The study also provides actionable guidance for those who are in leadership, e.g. managers, team leaders etc., on how to recognise and support follower agency, especially in diverse work environments, and even hybrid work environments. By identifying relational factors that promote psychological safety, such as emotional openness, shared decision-making, and voice, the study equips practitioners with tools to build more adaptive, emotionally intelligent teams.

### **1.6 Scope of the Study**

This study examined how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to the co-creation of psychological safety across diverse organisational contexts. Rather than focusing on a single organisation, the study draws on insights from voluntary participants across the banking, higher education, government, and private sectors. This multi-sectoral approach

enables a richer, more nuanced understanding of how psychological safety is experienced and shaped across diverse organisational cultures and relational environments (Newman et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2023).

Participants included individuals occupying leadership, follower, or both roles, reflecting the fluid and often overlapping nature of workplace influence. This inclusive sampling strategy aligns with the study's interpretivist orientation and its goal of exploring the co-creation of psychological safety through relational engagement, emotional openness, and mutual trust (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

The study focused on:

- Relational constructs such as trust, empowerment, and voice, examined through the lens of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory and insights from followership theory.
- Lived experiences and meaning making, rather than generalisable outcomes or statistical modelling.
- Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, which support the preservation of participant voice, emotional nuance, and contextual depth (Einola & Alvesson, 2021)

This scope excludes comparative analysis between sectors or hierarchical levels. Instead, it centres on the relational quality of leader-follower interactions and the subjective experience of psychological safety as it unfolds across various organisational settings.

## **1.7 Overview of the Research Report**

The research report comprises seven chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the research problem from both theoretical and business perspectives, and by establishing the rationale and significance of the inquiry. Chapter 2 presents a detailed review of the relevant literature, providing the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the study's key constructs. Chapter 3 formulates the main research question and accompanying sub-questions derived from the literature review. Chapter 4 explains the research design and methodology, including the approach, sampling, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques used. Chapter 5 presents the empirical

findings from the data analysis. Chapter 6 provides a critical discussion of these findings in relation to existing literature. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the report by summarising the research outcomes, outlining the theoretical and practical contributions, acknowledging limitations, and offering recommendations for future research and organisational practice.

## **2. Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the scholarly literature that informs and contextualises the present study. It draws on peer-reviewed, high-impact sources that have shaped contemporary understandings of leadership-followership and psychological safety. The review is organised thematically to reflect the study's central aim, which is to explore how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to psychological safety in workplace settings.

The chapter begins by establishing psychological safety as a conceptual foundation, tracing its evolution and identifying key antecedents and outcomes. It then examines leadership theory, focusing on relational and emotional intelligence approaches that foster trust, voice, and inclusion. The review continues with an exploration of followership theory, emphasising follower agency, emotional labour, and the co-construction of relational climates. This is then followed by a discussion of relational constructs, trust, empowerment, and voice, which underpins psychological safety.

The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the literature, particularly the limited attention to follower perspectives, emotional nuance, and context-specific studies. A conceptual framework is then presented to guide the study's interpretive inquiry.

### **2.2 Interpretivist Paradigm and the Role of Literature Review**

This study was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially constructed, contextually situated, and shaped by human interactions (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Within the epistemological stance, knowledge is not discovered but co-created through dialogue, meaning-making, and relational engagement (Saunders et al., 2023). The literature review is a reflexive and relational process that situates the researcher within a web of scholarly conversations.

Interpretivist literature reviews prioritise depth over breadth, seeking to understand how constructs are experienced, narrated, and negotiated within specific contexts (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Rather than aiming for generalisability, it foregrounds nuance, complexity, and emotional texture. This approach is particularly relevant to this study's focus on psychological safety, leadership-followership dynamics, and relational climates, all of which

are shaped by subjective experience and interpersonal meaning-making (Saunders et al., 2023).

Thematic organisation is a hallmark of interpretivist reviews. Themes are not imposed, but they emerge through iterative engagement with the literature, guided by the researcher's inquiry and the relational contours of the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this chapter, themes such as psychological safety, LMX Theory, followership theory, and relational constructs are explored, not as isolated domains but as interwoven narratives that reflect the lived realities of organisational life.

Moreover, interpretivist reviews attend to the emotional and ethical dimensions of studies. They ask not only what is known, but also whose voices are heard, whose experiences are centered, and what relational labour underpins the constructs being studied (Saunders et al., 2023). This is especially critical in the South African workplace context, where historical legacies, cultural complexity, and power asymmetries shape how psychological safety is experienced and enacted (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

By adopting an interpretivist lens, this literature review seeks to honour the relational richness of leadership-followership interactions, foreground emotional nuance, and build a conceptual foundation that is both context-sensitive and ethically attuned. It is through this lens that the subsequent sections unfold, offering a layered exploration of psychological safety as co-constructed within organisational relationships.

## **2.3 Theoretical Anchors**

This section presents the theoretical anchor of the study, drawing on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and insights from Followership Theory. These frameworks offer a relational lens for understanding how psychological safety is co-constructed through leadership-followership dynamics. Rather than treating leadership and followership as fixed roles, both theories emphasise emotional nuance, mutual responsiveness, and the ethical labour that is embedded in workplace relationships. Together, they form the conceptual scaffolding for this study's interpretivist inquiry.

### **2.3.1 Leader–Member Exchange (LMX)**

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides a relational framework for understanding how leadership unfolds through dyadic interactions between leaders and their followers.

Rather than treating leadership as a uniform process, LMX theory emphasises the variability in relationship quality across different leader-follower pairs, distinguishing between high-quality and low-quality exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bein, 2014). It posits that leaders from differentiated relationships with followers produce high-quality in-groups and low-quality out-groups (Martin et al., 2018). High-quality exchanges are marked by mutual trust, respect, and emotional support, while low-quality exchanges tend to be transactional, rigid, and limited in relational depth (Ayoko et al., 2023).

Meta-analytic research confirms that high-quality LMX relationships are positively associated with psychological safety, trust, and inclusion. Liao and Hui (2021) found that emotionally supportive leader-follower exchanges foster environments where individuals feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, and engage in interpersonal risk-taking. Similarly, Dulebohn et al. (2012), emphasise that mutual respect and open communication within LMX dyads significantly predict employee well-being and psychological safety across diverse organisational contexts.

Ayoko et al., found that employees who experience high-quality exchanges are more likely to feel committed and productive. Wang (2018) emphasises that these outcomes emerge through sequences of empowering interactions that build organisational commitment. Recent studies have expanded the scope of LMX theory to include psychological safety as a relational outcome.

Yuan et al. (2023) argue that trust-based leader-follower relationships foster environments where individuals feel safe expressing concerns, admitting mistakes, and taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Their study highlights that psychological safety is not merely a team-level phenomenon but is deeply embedded in the micro-relational dynamics between leaders and individual followers. Ngubane and Mbokota (2025) highlight emotional regulation and inclusive communication as key leader competencies that foster psychological safety through high-quality LMX relationships.

In the South African context, LMX dynamics are shaped by historical legacies, power distance, and collective norms. Ngubane and Mbokota (2025) emphasise that emotionally intelligent leadership, encompassing inclusive communication, emotional regulation, and relational awareness, is crucial for fostering psychological safety. Their study reveals that leaders who engage in relational repair and affirm follower voice are more likely to sustain high-quality exchanges.

These relational dynamics are grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), which explains how relationships evolve through reciprocal exchanges of trust, respect, and emotional investment. SET provides the foundational logic for LMX, highlighting how high-quality exchanges are built on mutual benefit and relational depth (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2023).

From an interpretivist perspective, LMX is not merely a structural model, but a lived relational experience. Each dyad constructs its own meaning through interaction, emotional cues, and shared expectations. This view aligns with (Einola & Alvesson, 2021), who argue that relational quality is shaped by the emotional tone of exchanges, the responsiveness of both parties, and the contextual pressures that frame their engagement. In this sense, LMX becomes a site of meaning-making, where psychological safety is either cultivated or constrained. This framework reinforces the view that psychological safety is not merely a structural feature, but a product of ongoing relational negotiation. Recent work also highlighted that the emotional tone of exchanges shapes relational quality, underscoring the importance of vulnerability and responsiveness in sustaining psychological safety (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

Emotional labour is central to maintaining the exchanges. Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) found that followers often perform relational work to sustain trust, especially when leaders are emotionally unavailable or constrained by institutional pressures. This includes softening tone, initiating dialogue, and affirming inclusion, subtle acts that reinforce psychological safety, but are rarely acknowledged in formal leadership models. Such findings challenge the notion that LMX is solely a leader-driven construct, highlighting the reciprocal nature of relational quality.

However, LMX theory is not without critique. Scholars such as Northouse (2021) caution that the theory may inadvertently reinforce in-group favouritism, leading to perceptions of exclusion among those in low-quality exchanges. This has implications for psychological safety, as feelings of marginalisation can inhibit voice behaviour and trust. To address this, recent studies advocate for inclusive leadership practices that extend high-quality exchanges across all team members (Yuan et al., 2023; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

In the context of this study, LMX theory provides a foundational framework for exploring how leadership-follower dynamics contribute or even shape psychological safety. It enables a nuanced examination of relational quality, emotional labour, and the co-construction of

trust. These elements are central to understanding how psychologically safe climates are built, sustained, and sometimes fractured.

### **2.3.2 Followership Theory**

Followership theory challenges traditional leader-centric paradigms by positioning followers as active agents in shaping organisational culture, relational dynamics, and psychological safety. Rather than viewing followers as passive recipients of leadership influence, recent studies emphasise their role in co-creating meaning, initiating dialogue, and fostering inclusive climates (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). The theory suggests that follower empowerment facilitates the development of more robust safety climates, as noted by Newman et al. (2017). The research evidence suggests that leadership that welcomes diversity enhances work safety and operational outcomes (Edmondson et al., 2022).

Followership Theory emphasises shared power dynamics, where empowered followers demonstrate proactive workplace behaviours (Carsten et al., 2010; Goswami et al., 2020). However, the theory faces criticism for its lack of empirical development, with researchers calling for further research to understand how followership shapes leadership processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Furthermore, followership studies should account for cultural and organisational variations to ensure a contextually relevant understanding of follower-leader interactions.

From an interpretivist perspective, followership is not a static role, but a relational practice. It involves emotional labour, ethical responsiveness, and meaning making within complex organisational contexts. Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) emphasise that followers in the South African workplace often engage in trust-building, relational repair, and voice behaviours, especially in environments marked by hierarchy, cultural diversity, and psychological risk. These actions are not peripheral; they are central to the co-creation of psychologically safe environments. Followership is increasingly theorised as an expressively intellectual practice, where followers regulate their own emotions and engage in relational repair to sustain team cohesion (Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023)

Some studies challenge the notion of passive followership. Bastardo and Andriaensen (2023) argue that followers regulate their own emotions, interpret relational cues, and initiate inclusive behaviours that sustain team cohesion. Their model positions followership as a dynamic, emotionally intelligent practice that complements and, at times, compensates for

leadership gaps. This reframing aligns with this study's focus on mutual engagement and relational authenticity.

Voice behaviour is a key dimension of followership. It refers to the willingness to speak up, offer feedback, and challenge norms in the service of collective improvement (Ayoko et al., 2023). In psychologically safe environments, followers feel empowered to express dissent, share ideas, and engage in shared decision-making. However, voice is context dependent. In high-power-distance cultures, speaking up may be perceived as risky, requiring followers to navigate relational boundaries with caution (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

Carsten et al. (2010) argue that followers' self-perceptions significantly influence their engagement with leaders. When followers see themselves as empowered contributors, they are more likely to demonstrate proactive behaviours, challenge assumptions, and participate in shaping relational norms (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Sy, 2010). Self-perceptions of followership play a critical role in shaping agency, with empowered identities linked to greater voice participation (Sy, 2010). This aligns with interpretivist perspectives that view organisational life as socially constructed through interaction and shared understanding.

Hesmert and Vogel (2024) extend this view by examining how followers' implicit leadership theories shape their engagement and relational responsiveness. Their study reveals that when followers perceive their leaders as ideal or emotionally attuned, they are more likely to experience psychological safety and demonstrate work engagement. This reinforces the interpretivist view that psychological safety is co-constructed through relational expectations and emotional resonance.

In this study, followership theory provides a conceptual foundation for exploring how followers interpret, enact, and influence psychological safety. It foregrounds the relational labour performed by those without formal authority and highlights the co-constructed nature of trust, voice, and inclusion (Carsten et al., 2010). This perspective is especially relevant in the South African organisational contexts, where historical legacies, cultural norms, and hybrid work structures shape how followership is experienced and expressed (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014).

These theoretical perspectives converge in their emphasis on relational quality, emotional labour, and mutual responsiveness. All of which are central to the co-construction of

psychological safety. The following section provides an in-depth exploration of psychological safety.

## **2.4 Psychological Safety as a Relational Phenomenon**

Psychological safety is a foundational construct in understanding how individuals experience inclusion, trust, and voice within organisational settings. This construct has since evolved into a central pillar of relational and team-based studies, in the context of team learning, where psychological safety is defined as a shared understanding that team members are safe to take interpersonal risks (Harvey et al., 2022; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). This shift from individual to collective framing underscores the inherently relational nature of psychological safety. Leadership behaviours that invite voice and dissent are critical, as they determine whether employees perceive speaking up as legitimate or risky (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Recent studies continue to emphasise this relational dimension (Edmondson, 2018). Newman et al. (2017) identify psychological safety as a dynamic state shaped by leadership behaviours, team climate, and interpersonal trust in a systematic review of the literature. Their review emphasises the importance of context, noting that psychological safety is not a static trait but a socially constructed, continuously negotiated experience. Similarly, Frazier et al. (2017), through a meta-analysis of over 22,000 individuals, confirm that psychological safety is positively associated with learning behaviour, engagement, and performance. However, they caution against treating it as a universal good, emphasising the need to consider power dynamics, cultural norms, and organisational structures that may shape the experience of safety.

Edmondson and Bransby (2023) further argue that psychological safety has “come of age”, with the literature now moving beyond antecedents and outcomes to explore its embeddedness in systems of power, identity, and voice. They call for more nuanced, context-sensitive research that accounts for their emotional and relational labour required to sustain psychological safety, particularly in diverse and hierarchical environments.

Meta-analytic studies confirm the positive outcomes associated with psychological safety. Frazier et al. (2017) found strong correlations between psychological safety and learning behaviour, engagement, and performance across diverse organisational settings. However,

they caution against treating safety as a universal good, noting that cultural norms, power dynamics, and organisational structures significantly shape how safety is experienced. In high-power-distance environments, for example, speaking up may be perceived as insubordination rather than a contribution (Newman et al., 2017).

Ngubane and Mbokota (2025) emphasise the importance of leader competencies, such as emotional regulation, inclusive communication, and relational awareness, in their study of psychological safety within hybrid teams in South Africa's FMCG sector. Their findings reinforce the view that psychological safety is not merely a product of structural design but is actively shaped by relational behaviours and leadership presence.

Hybrid and distributed teams present additional challenges. Digital mediation reduced non-verbal cues, and asynchronous communication can erode trust and emotional connection (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). Song et al. (2025) argue that participative leadership and collaborative relationships are essential in such contexts, as they help rebuild psychological safety through intentional engagement and shared decision-making. This is especially relevant in post-pandemic work environments, where emotional fatigue and relational fragmentation are common.

In the South African context, where historical legacies of inequality and organisational hierarchies persist, psychological safety assumes added significance. The ability to speak up, challenge authority, or express vulnerability is not merely a function of individual confidence but is profoundly shaped by relational dynamics, cultural expectations, and perceived risks (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). This reinforces the need to explore psychological safety not as a fixed attribute, but as a co-constructed experience emerging from the interplay between leaders and followers.

Emotional labour plays a pivotal role in sustaining psychological safety. Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) highlight the invisible work followers perform to maintain trust, repair relational breaches, and foster inclusion. This labour is often unrecognised but essential, especially in diverse teams where psychological safety must be actively negotiated. Bastardo and Adriaensen (2023) extend this view by theorising followership as a relational practice that involves emotional regulation, vulnerability, and ethical responsiveness. High-quality interpersonal relationships further reinforce learning behaviours and resilience, demonstrating that trust and reciprocity are central to sustaining psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2009).

Team members expand their risk tolerance within organisational cultures that use mistakes to achieve learning objectives (Edmondson et al., 2022). Team members require supportive leadership to utilise voice behaviours, which involve expressing concerns and ideas to drive innovation (Dongen et al., 2024). Organisations that follow inclusive leadership practices develop safety environments through their commitment to equality alongside openness (Newman et al., 2017). Implementing psychological safety enables organisations to achieve higher team performance by reducing fear-based challenges, drives innovation, and retains valuable employees by integrating safety practices throughout the culture (Ahmad et al., 2022). The authors demonstrate that psychological safety is a vital link between core working relationships and business success.

Taken together, these studies underscore that psychological safety is not a fixed attribute but a co-constructed experience. It emerges through emotionally attuned interaction, mutual responsiveness, and relational repair. In this study, psychological safety is examined not as a managerial tool but as a lived, relational phenomenon shaped by leadership-follower dynamics, cultural context, and emotional labour (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Newman et al., 2017; Frazier et al., 2017).

While psychological safety is widely studied, this research focuses on four interrelated components that are especially salient in relational and interpretivist contexts. Those are trust, voice, inclusion, and empowerment. These dimensions are not treated as discrete variables, but as co-constructed experiences that emerge through everyday interactions between leaders and their followers (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Sacramento et al., 2023). Trust enables vulnerability, voice reflects agency, inclusion signals belonging, and empowerment fosters participation and shared influence. Together they form the relational fabric through which psychological safety is enacted (Ayoko et al., 2023). Reciprocity and relational repair are also crucial, as they ensure that trust and inclusion are continually renewed through mutual responsiveness (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Carmeli et al., 2009).

However, several gaps remain in the literature. First, most studies treat psychological safety as a team-level climate or leadership outcome, with limited attention to how it is experienced by followers in diverse, hierarchical, or hybrid contexts (Newman et al., 2017, Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). Second, emotional labour, particularly the invisible work of followers to maintain psychological safety, is often under-theorised (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

Third, few studies examine how psychological safety is disrupted and repaired in real-time, especially in culturally complex settings such as South African workplaces. Moreover, while psychological safety is increasingly linked to innovation and thriving at work, the mechanisms through which it enables these outcomes, especially in emotionally demanding environments, remain underexplored (Zhan et al., 2025). These gaps underscore the need for a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of psychological safety as a lived relational phenomenon.

This study addressed these gaps by examining how psychological safety is co-constructed through LMX quality, follower agency, and leadership-followership dynamics. It adopted an interpretivist lens to explore how participants make sense of psychological safety in their own words (Saunders et al., 2023), with particular attention to emotional nuance, relational rhythms, and contextual meaning-making (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). In doing so, the study contributed to a growing body of work that views psychological safety not as a static condition, but as a dynamic, ethically charged process of mutual engagement.

## **2.5 Leadership-Followership Dynamics as the Relational Core of Psychological Safety**

While Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and Followership Theory provide the conceptual scaffolding for this study, this section focuses on how leadership-followership dynamics function as the relational core of psychological safety. Rather than introducing a new theory, it brings together earlier ideas to demonstrate how leaders and followers jointly create psychological safety by managing emotions, responding to each other's needs, and adjusting their roles according to the situation. These dynamics are fundamental in complex work environments, where psychological safety is shaped through everyday interactions and shared relational efforts (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

In psychologically safe environments, leaders and followers build trust through open communication, shared decision-making, and emotional support. These relationships are shaped by the context in which people work, including cultural norms, power dynamics, and the emotional tone of their interactions (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When misunderstandings or tensions arise, both parties play a role in repairing the relationship by showing care, taking responsibility, and re-engaging with openness (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). This is especially important in hybrid teams, where it

can be more challenging to read emotional cues or maintain connections (Song et al., 2025). Participative leadership and collaborative structures are therefore vital in distrusted contexts, enabling psychological safety through shared decision-making and inclusive dialogue (Sacramento et al., 2023).

Followers often take the lead in maintaining psychological safety, especially when leaders are unavailable or under pressure. Research indicates that followers may soften their tone, initiate conversations, and create an inclusive space. All of which help rebuild trust and maintain strong relationships (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Bastardo and Andriaensen (2023) describe followership as a relational practice that involves managing emotions, showing vulnerability, and acting ethically. These contributions are often invisible yet essential, and they challenge the notion that only leaders shape team culture.

Recent studies show that leadership and followership are not fixed roles. Liegl and Furtner (2024) argue that influence can come from any direction, not just from the top. In many teams, followers lead by solving problems together, making decisions, and showing emotional intelligence. This view supports the idea that organisations are built through relationships, not just formal structures (Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014).

Relational leadership models also emphasise the importance of creating psychological safety through dialogue and emotional connection. Edmondson and Bransby (2023) explain that psychological safety develops when leaders and followers listen to each other, show empathy, and collaborate to create inclusive environments. These models value responsiveness, openness, and ethical behaviour. These are qualities that are central to this study's interpretivist approach (Carten et al., 2018; Einola & Alvesson, 2021)

This study positions leadership-followership dynamics as the relational engine of psychological safety. By examining how these roles are enacted, adapted, and repaired in the context, the research foregrounds the lived experience of participants and honours the emotional complexity of workplace relationships (Martin et al., 2016). It also challenges static models of leadership, offering a more nuanced understanding of how trust, voice, and inclusion are co-constructed across relational boundaries. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholars who view leadership not as a position, but as a relational practice grounded in empathy, responsiveness, and shared meaning.

## **2.6 Theorising the Relationship between Constructs**

This section synthesises the core constructs explored in the preceding literature, which are psychological safety, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, and followership theory, to develop a conceptual framework for this study. From an interpretivist perspective, theorising is not a linear or abstract exercise, but a relational act of meaning-making (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2016). It involves tracing emotional, ethical, and contextual threads across constructs to illuminate how they interact in lived experiences. In this study, the relationship between constructs is not assumed or imposed; rather, it is co-constructed through the voices, rhythms, and relational labour of participants (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014).

Psychological safety is often treated as a climate variable or a leadership outcome; this study reframes it as an emergent relational rhythm. It arises not from individual behaviours alone, but from the quality of interaction between leaders and their followers, shaped by trust, emotional, and mutual responsiveness (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). The South African workplace context, characterised by cultural diversity and historical legacies, adds further complexity to this process. Here, psychological safety is not a static condition, but a negotiated experience, co-constructed through voice, vulnerability, and engagement (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Carsten et al., 2018).

LMX Theory provides the structural foundation for understanding how differentiated relationships between leaders and followers influence trust, openness, and perceived fairness. High-quality LMX relationships foster psychological safety by enabling mutual respect, emotional support, and inclusive communication (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). However, these benefits are contingent upon the leader's ability to foster high-quality exchanges across all team members, thereby avoiding exclusionary dynamics that undermine safety.

While LMX theory offers a valuable structure for understanding relational quality, it often underplays the emotional and cultural labour required to sustain high-quality exchanges. In organisational workplaces, where inequalities and power asymmetry still shape workplace dynamics, trust is not automatically given but must be earned and continually nurtured (Amis, 2020). Leaders who rely solely on formal authority may struggle to foster openness, while followers may withhold voice to preserve dignity or avoid perceived risk (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). These dynamics underscore the importance of viewing LMX not

as a static exchange, but as a fluid, emotionally charged process shaped by context and individual identity.

Followership Theory complements this by emphasising the active role of followers in shaping relational climates. Followers contribute to psychological safety through voice behaviours, emotional labour, and adaptive strategies (Newman et al., 2017; Ayoko et al., 2022), especially in contexts where leadership is constrained or distributed (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Liegl & Furtner, 2024). Their agency is not merely reactive, but generative, influencing how leaders respond and how team norms evolve (Einola, K., & Alvesson, 2021).

Followership, in this sense, is not merely about compliance or support. It involves navigating complex relational terrain, balancing respect for authority with the courage to speak up and managing the emotional costs of doing so (Uhl-Bein et al., 2018). In many workplaces, followers engage in what Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., (2022) describe as “relational repair”, initiating trust-building behaviours when leaders are emotionally absent, overwhelmed, or constrained. This challenges traditional assumptions about influence and highlights the ethical and emotional labour embedded in followership.

Edmondson & Bransby. (2023) found that psychological safety mediates the relationship between LMX and discretionary work behaviours such as job crafting and knowledge sharing. This suggests that psychological safety is both an outcome of relational quality and a catalyst for deeper engagement (Loh et al., 2018). Psychological safety develops through iterative exchanges marked by vulnerability, responsiveness, and shared meaning-making (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Reinforcing the interpretivist view that safety is socially constructed.

These findings suggest that psychological safety is not merely a mediating variable, but a relational outcome that reflects the emotional tone and ethical quality of leader-follower exchanges (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). From an interpretivist standpoint, this means safety is not something that exists independently of people. It is created through their interactions, shaped by their histories, identities, and relational intent (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Edmondson, 2018). In organisational workplaces where factors like cultural diversity and historical legacies influence how trust and voice are expressed, psychological safety must be understood as a situated, co-constructed experience (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

The emphasis on vulnerability and shared meaning-making resonates strongly with relational dynamics in organisations (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022, Newman et al., 2017). Here, emotional labour is often performed quietly, through gestures of care, tone of voice, or the timing of feedback, rather than being explicitly communicated. Leaders and followers alike engage in subtle acts of repair, especially in environments where formal structures may not fully support inclusive dialogue. These micro-interactions are crucial to the development and maintenance of psychological safety (Newman et al., 2017).

Together, these theories and frameworks suggest that psychological safety is a relational achievement, co-authored by leaders and followers through emotionally attuned, ethically grounded interactions. This study adopts that view, theorising psychological safety not as a static condition but as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of LMX quality, follower agency, and relational responsiveness (Uhl-Bein et al., Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2023).

In summary, while scholars have established the centrality of leadership and relational processes in shaping psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Newman et al., 2017; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014), significant gaps remain regarding the nuanced role of follower agency, emotion work, and the repair of psychological safety in contextual complex environments, particularly in the local workplace (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). Prior research rarely explored how psychological safety is actively disrupted and restored in everyday interactions (Ayoko et al., 2023; Bastardoz & Andriaesen, 2023).

This study directly addressed these gaps by examining how leadership-follower dynamics and LMX quality experienced and enacted in the contemporary workplace settings, co-construct psychological safety. The study specifically seeks to understand the relational practices, emotional labour, and other contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the development and repair of psychological safety. The research questions in Chapter 3 guided the inquiry.

Regarding the conceptual framework, it places psychological safety at its core, representing it as a co-constructed and continually evolving phenomenon emerging from the dynamic interplay between leadership and followership, as well as the relational processes of trust, voice, empowerment, relational repair, and inclusion. Unlike hierarchical or linear models, this approach represents all core constructs as mutually influential. Each can both shape

and be shaped by psychological safety and by one another, as it is illustrated by the bi-directional arrows linking each element in Figure 1 below.

**FIGURE 1: NETWORKED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY THROUGH LEADERSHIP, FOLLOWERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS**



Adapted from Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, 2018), Edmondson & Bransby (2023), Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022), and Bastardo & Andriaensen (2023).

This aligns with literature that emphasises distributed agency, the importance of relational repair, and the ongoing negotiation of psychological safety and inclusion in contemporary organisational workplaces (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023). Surrounding the network are contextual forces, including work structure, emotional labour, cultural diversity, and historical legacies. Reminding us that these broader factors continuously shape how the core constructs interact. The framework aligns closely with the

current literature, which resists static, role-based, or leader-centric explanations in favour of a more fluid, embedded, and reciprocal understanding of psychological safety and its antecedents.

This layered framework reflects the study's commitment to emotional nuance and relational ethics. It acknowledges that psychological safety is not simply the product of leadership behaviours, but the outcome of co-authored interactions shaped by emotional labour and mutual responsiveness (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). In workplace settings, these interactions are often marked by subtle cues such as silence, humour, and indirect feedback that carry deep relational meaning (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

Importantly, the framework does not treat constructs as isolated silos. Instead, it visualises them as interdependent forces that shape and reshape each other through lived experiences. For example, a follower's voice behaviour may influence the quality of LMX, which in turn affects the leader's responsiveness and the psychological climate (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). These recursive loops are central to interpretivist inquiry, which seeks to understand not only what happens but also how meaning is constructed in context (Saunders et al., 2023).

Together, these constructs and frameworks, including leadership, followership, trust, voice, inclusion, empowerment, and relational repair, form a cohesive theoretical foundation for exploring how they contribute to psychological safety, the construction of, sustaining, and negotiating within workplace relationships. This foundation guided the analytic lens in Chapter 5, where participants' narratives were examined for relational patterns, emotional tone, and constructed meaning. By grounding the study in the integrated framework, the research honoured the complexity of organisational life and the lived experiences of those who shape it.

## **2.7 Summary**

This chapter explored the theoretical foundations underpinning the study's focus on psychological safety within leadership-followership relationships. It began with the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, which emphasises the relational quality of leader-follower dyads and their impact on trust, inclusion, and emotional tone. High-quality exchanges have been shown to foster psychological safety, whereas low-quality exchanges risk exclusion

and silence (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

Followership Theory was then examined as a complementary lens, highlighting followers' active role in shaping relational climates. Through voice behaviours, emotional labour, and adaptive strategies, followers contribute meaningfully to the co-construction of psychologically safe environments (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). This challenges traditional hierarchies and reframes leadership as a shared relational process.

The chapter then synthesised these perspectives through the lens of leadership-followership dynamics, emphasising mutual responsiveness, distributed influence, and relational co-authorship. These frameworks also ground the emotional nuance and ethical labour embedded in everyday workplace interactions. Actions of relational repair, such as informal check-ins, empathetic feedback, or culturally attuned gestures, were positioned as central to sustaining psychological safety, especially in contexts marked by power asymmetries and historical tension (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

In South African organisational settings, where cultural diversity and historical institutional legacies shape relational norms, psychological safety must be understood as a situated achievement (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). These contextual complexities are acknowledged in this chapter, positioning them not as barriers but as realities that inform how psychological safety is built, disrupted, and restored.

The relationship between constructs was theorised as a dynamic system of reciprocal influence. Psychological safety was positioned not as a static outcome, but as a relational achievement shaped by LMX quality, follower agency, and emotional responsiveness (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

In summary, this chapter establishes psychological safety as a dynamic, relational achievement that emerges from the multi-directional, reciprocal influences of leadership, followership, trust, voice, inclusion, empowerment, and relational repair, all within complex social and cultural contexts (Kolbe et al., 2020). These insights directly inform the study's research questions and analytic approach, positioning psychological safety as both a theoretical and practical accomplishment in contemporary organisational workplace life.

### **3. Chapter 3: Research Questions**

This chapter presents the research questions in line with the theoretical framing of the research problem as described in Chapter 1. The questions were developed to explore how psychological safety is experienced and constructed within leadership-followership relationships in workplace settings. They are grounded in the interpretivist and informed by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

The main research question was formulated to facilitate a deeper exploration of the relational nature of psychological safety and the co-construction of trust between leaders and followers (Wang et al., 2018; Song et al., 2025). The literature highlights the need to move beyond leader-centric models and examine how followers actively contribute to relational climates of safety (Wang et al., 2018). In response, this study aims to explore how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to psychological safety in diverse organisational contexts. As such, the research questions were structured as follows:

#### **3.1 Main Research Question**

In what ways are leadership-followership dynamics experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings?

This question explores how individuals interpret and make sense of their relational experiences with leaders and followers, and how these interactions shape their perceptions of psychological safety, openness, and trust.

This question addresses a gap in the literature, where psychological safety has often been examined through leader-centric models, thereby overlooking its relational and co-constructed nature in everyday workplace interactions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). Studies have called for more context-sensitive, interpretivist labour, voice, and trust-building behaviours (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Basterdoz & Andriaensen, 2023). This question contributes to a deeper understanding of how psychological safety is shaped within leader-follower relationships across diverse organisational settings by focusing on lived experience and mutual engagement.

### **3.2 Sub-Research Question 1 (SQR1):**

What relational qualities within leadership-followership interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety?

This question examines the interpersonal attributes, behaviours, and emotional cues that participants associate with feeling safe, respected, and psychologically supported. It draws on literature that emphasises trust, empowerment, and voice as relational qualities that foster psychological safe climates (Wang et al., 2018; Song et al., 2025; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Sacramento et al., 2023; Joo et al., 2023).

This question explores the interpersonal attributes of emotional cues and behavioural dynamics that participants associate with feeling safe, respected, and psychologically supported. It responds to calls for more nuanced, context-sensitive research that examines how psychological safety is shaped through relational engagement rather than static leadership traits (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Einola & Alvesson, 2021). The question contributes to a deeper understanding of how trust, openness, and mutual respect are cultivated in organisational contexts by focusing on lived experiences (Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

### **3.3 Sub-Research Question 2 (SRQ2):**

How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace?

This question reflects the relational nature of psychological safety, acknowledging that both leaders and followers contribute to its co-construction. While leadership behaviours have traditionally received more attention (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Wang et al., 2018), recent studies highlight the importance of follower agency, emotional labour, and mutual engagement in shaping safe relational climates (Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). The study advances a more reciprocal and context-sensitive understanding of psychological safety in workplace life by exploring both perspectives.

## **4. Chapter 4: Methodology**

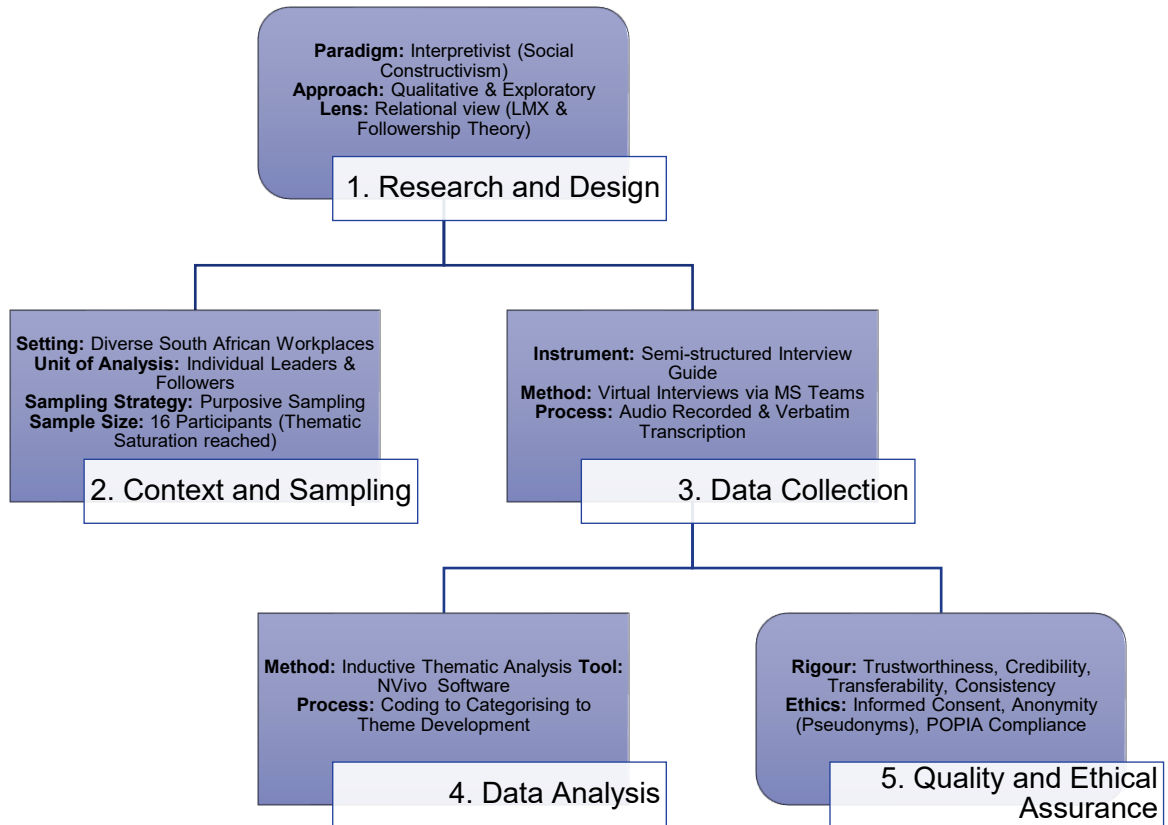
### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to explore how leadership-follower dynamics contribute to psychological safety within workplace environments. Drawing on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and followership Theory, the study took a relational view of organisational behaviour, emphasising trust, empowerment, and voice as core relational elements. These constructions served as the foundation for understanding how psychological safety is co-constructed through interpersonal engagement (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which is philosophically aligned with qualitative inquiry and emphasises participants' lived experiences as central to meaning making (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saunders et al., 2023). In line with this worldview, psychological safety is understood not as a static variable but as an evolving outcome shaped by leader-follower exchanges. This methodological approach enabled a nuanced exploration of context-bound relational dynamics, rather than relying on objective prediction or measurement.

Each component of the methodology, from the research philosophy to participant selection, data collection, and analysis, is carefully aligned to support qualitative rigour. Attention was given to trustworthiness through strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. The chapter presents these decisions in structured sections, ensuring transparency and coherence across the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024). Figure 2 below gives a diagrammatic breakdown of the methodology process flow.

**FIGURE 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY PROCESS FLOW**



Source: Author's own

#### 4.2 Research Paradigm

The study was grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saunders et al., 2023). Interpretivism is particularly suited to inquiries that explore meaning-making, relational nuance, and emotional depth. All are central to understanding how psychological safety is co-constructed through leadership-follower interactions.

The interpretivist paradigm rejects the notion of a single objective truth, instead emphasising the multiplicity of perspectives shaped by context, culture, and interpersonal relationships (Tracy, 2024). This philosophical stance aligns with the study's aim to explore how trust, empowerment, and voice emerge within relational exchanges and how these constructs contribute to psychological safety in diverse workplace settings.

The interpretivist paradigm informed every stage of the research process. It shaped the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms (Gioia, et al., 2013), and supported the application of reflexive thematic analysis, which enabled the researcher to interpret patterns while preserving the distinctiveness of each voice (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). The paradigm also guided the purposive sampling strategy, which prioritised conceptual richness and relational depth over statistical generalisability (Palinkas et al., 2015)

Throughout the study, the researcher adopted a relational and reflexive stance, engaging in dialogical exchange with participants and documenting interpretive decisions (Saunders et al., 2023). This approach reflected the interpretivist view that knowledge is co-constructed and that researchers' positionality must be acknowledged as part of the analytic process (Tracy, 2024). By grounding the study in an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher was able to uncover how psychological safety is relationally enacted, and not as a fixed trait or measurable outcome, but as a dynamic process shaped by interpersonal exchanges and role-based agency (Bell et al., 2019).

### **4.3 Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate how leadership-follower dynamics are experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings. The design was selected to align with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises context-bound meaning-making and the co-construction of knowledge through relational engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024).

An exploratory design was appropriate given the study's aim to uncover nuanced relational patterns, such as trust, empowerment, and voice, that are not easily captured through standardised instruments or deductive frameworks (Groenewald, 2004). Rather than testing hypotheses, the study sought to generate conceptual insights grounded in participants' lived experiences (Saunders et al., 2023; Maxwell, 2013).

The design was also iterative and reflexive, allowing the researcher to adapt interview protocols and analytical strategies in response to emerging themes. This flexibility supported the emotional and relational depth of the data, particularly as participants shared sensitive reflections on workplace psychological safety, role identity, and interpersonal dynamics

(Braun & Clarke, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate open-ended dialogue, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms while remaining grounded in the study's core constructs. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, enabling both within-case richness and cross-case comparison (Nowell et al., 2017). This design supported the study's commitment to ethical integrity, emotional nuance, and relational authenticity, all of which are central to understanding psychological safety in context.

#### **4.4 Research Setting**

The study was conducted across diverse South African workplace contexts, including higher education institutions, the banking sector, public service organisations, and private sector work environments. These settings were selected purposively to reflect a range of organisational cultures, leadership structures, and relational dynamics relevant to the study's focus on psychological safety and leadership-followership interactions (Saunders et al., 2023).

The South African context provided a rich backdrop for exploring how psychological safety is experienced in environments characterised by transformation, hierarchy, and cultural complexity. Participants were drawn from organisations which has undergone some form of strategic change, leadership renewal, or cultural redefinition. These are conditions that often amplify the importance of trust, voice, and relational safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The organisational context was considered in the analysis, particularly in relation to power dynamics, role expectations, and cultural norms that shaped how leadership-followership interactions were experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach supported the study's commitment to contextual sensitivity and relational authenticity.

#### **4.5 Level of Analysis**

As stated in the research question, the level of analysis focused primarily on individuals who volunteered from different organisations. Focusing on how participants, either as leaders, followers, or both, experienced and interpreted relational dynamics that contribute to psychological safety in their workplace contexts (Alase, 2017; Groenewald, 2004). This level was appropriate given the study's interpretivist orientation, which privileges subjective

meaning-making and contextually grounded insights over generalisable patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024).

By centering on the individual, the study explored how relational constructs, such as trust, empowerment, and voice, were enacted and perceived within specific relational exchanges. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how psychological safety is co-created through interpersonal interactions, rather than being viewed as a static organisational attribute (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

While organisational and cultural factors were acknowledged, the emphasis remained on the lived experience of each participant (Bell et al., 2019; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This enabled the researcher to preserve the emotional tone, conversational rhythm, and relational authenticity, all of which are essential to capturing the complexity of leadership-followership dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The individual-level analysis also supported the study's thematic approach, allowing for both within-case depth and cross-case comparison. This balance ensured that each narrative was honoured as distinct, while still contributing to broader conceptual patterns across the dataset (Nowell et al., 2017).

#### **4.6 Unit of Analysis**

The unit of analysis (and observation) in this study was the individual participant, who occupied either a leadership or followership role, or both, within a workplace setting (Alase, 2017; Groenewald, 2004). This choice was consistent with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the importance of understanding subjective experiences and relational meaning-making within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024).

Each participant was treated as a distinct case, with their narrative contributing to a broader understanding of how psychological safety is co-created through leadership-followership dynamics. The focus on individual accounts allowed the researcher to preserve emotional tone, conversational rhythm, and relational nuance. All of which are essential to capturing the complexity of interpersonal safety (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Rather than aggregating data to produce generalised findings, the study aimed to illuminate how relational constructs, such as trust, empowerment, and voice, were enacted and interpreted by participants within their own relational environments. This approach

supported both within-case depth and cross-case thematic development, enabling the emergence of patterns while maintaining the uniqueness of each story (Notwell et al., 2017).

The unit of analysis/observation also reflected the study's ethical commitment to honouring participant voice and ensuring that each contribution was treated with care, respect, and analytical integrity. By centring the individual, the research explored how psychological safety is not merely an organisational attribute but a relational experience shaped by role, context, and emotional engagement (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

## **4.7 Sampling Approach, Criteria, and Sample Size**

### **4.7.1 Sampling Approach**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who could offer rich, experience-based insights into leadership-followership dynamics and their contribution to psychological safety. This approach is widely used in qualitative research where the goal is depth, relevance, and conceptual richness rather than statistical generalisability (Palinkas et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2023). Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to select individuals with direct experience of relational dynamics in workplace settings and who could meaningfully reflect on constructs such as trust, empowerment, and voice. A participant screening form was used to select participants with the required experience to participate in the study.

This strategy guided the study's interpretivist paradigm, which prioritises contextually grounded, emotionally nuanced accounts over representative sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024). Participants were recruited through professional networks and personal professional networks. The sampling process was iterative, with early interviews informing subsequent recruitment to ensure diversity in role, sector, and relational experience (Alase, 2017).

### **4.7.2 Sampling Criteria**

Inclusion criteria required that participants:

- Occupied a formal leadership or followership role within an organisational setting.
- Had direct experience with relational dynamics that influenced psychological safety.
- Able to articulate their experiences in reflective and narrative form.

- Provided informed consent and met ethical clearance requirements.

Diversity in terms of gender, sector, and seniority was considered to enhance transferability and reveal varied relational patterns (as captured in the participant screening form). The criteria were designed to ensure that participants could speak to both the emotional and structural dimensions of psychological safety in their workplace contexts (Tracy, 2024; Braun & Clarke 2021).

#### **4.7.3 Sample Size**

The final sample size consisted of 16 participants, including both leaders and followers across public, private, banking, and academic sectors. This sample size was sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, which is defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews (Groenewald, 2004; Saunders et al., 2023). The 10th interview reached saturation, as no new data emerged from the subsequent interviews. According to Braun & Clarke (2021), this evidences data saturation. This confirmed the appropriateness of the sample size.

In qualitative research, sample adequacy is determined not by statistical thresholds but by information power, which is the degree to which the sample contributes to the depth, relevance, and nuance of the findings (Malterud et al., 2016). The sample in this study offered strong information power due to the clarity of the research aim, the specificity of the participant criteria, and the quality of the interview data (Saunders et al., 2023). Participants were articulate, reflective, and emotionally engaged, which enhanced the interpretive potential of each transcript.

The sample also allowed for role-based comparison, enabling the researcher to explore how psychological safety was experienced differently by leaders and followers. This comparative lens enriched the thematic analysis and supported the development of cross-cutting relational constructs such as relational trust, follower agency, and emotional transparency. While the sample size may appear modest in quantitative terms, it was methodologically appropriate for an interpretivist, qualitative study focused on relational depth and contextual nuance. Each participant's narrative was treated as a distinct case, contributing to both within-case richness and cross-case thematic coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2024).

Table 1 below lists the participants who were interviewed for this study. The participants' names and company names have been pseudonymised to protect their identities and those of their organisations. Random codes were assigned by the researcher for identification purposes in this study. The actual roles of the participants were also excluded to further safeguard their identities.

**TABLE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT LIST**

| Research participant    | Sector           | Years of professional experience |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Research Participant 1  | Government       | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 2  | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 3  | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 4  | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 5  | Government       | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 6  | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 7  | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 8  | Government       | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 9  | Higher Education | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 10 | Banking          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 11 | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 12 | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 13 | Private          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 14 | Government       | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 15 | Banking          | 5 years and above                |
| Research Participant 16 | Private          | 5 years and above                |

#### **4.8 Research Instrument**

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide, designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives about participants' experiences of psychological safety within leadership-followership dynamics (Saunders et al., 2023). This format was selected and used to align with the study's interpretivist paradigm, which values open-ended dialogue, contextual sensitivity, and co-constructed meaning (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Tracy, 2024).

An interview guide was developed iteratively, informed by the literature on psychological safety, relational leadership, and followership theory. Questions were crafted to explore key constructs such as trust, empowerment, voice, and relational agency, while allowing participants to shape the direction and depth of the conversation (Josselson, 2015). This flexibility fostered emotionally nuanced insights and preserved the conversational rhythm of each interview (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The interview guide in Annexure 1 was designed in accordance with the principles and guidelines as provided by Saunders et al. (2023). The guide was piloted first with two participants to assess clarity, emotional resonance, and ethical appropriateness. Minor adjustments were made to enhance the flow and ensure that the questions invited reflection without leading to predetermined responses. Throughout the data collection process, the guide remained adaptable, with follow-up prompts tailored to each participant's narrative.

The interviews were conducted virtually, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The instrument's strength lay not only in its structure, but in its relational use. The researcher's empathetic engagement, active listening, and reflexive stance were integral to the effectiveness of the study. The pilot interviews confirmed the appropriateness of the interview guide and the estimated length. From the pilot interviews, it was expected that the interviews would last no more than an hour.

#### **4.9 Data Gathering Process**

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their ability to support open, reflective dialogue and capture the emotional and relational nuances central to this study. This method aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, allowing participants to share their lived experiences in their own words while enabling the researcher to explore emerging themes in real-time.

Emails were sent to participants, inviting them to participate in the study and introducing the research topic. Once participants accepted the invitation and indicated their willingness to participate, calendar invites were sent with proposed interview dates, along with the consent and participant screening forms attached. Proposed dates were either accepted as is or the participant proposed a suitable date. A spreadsheet was maintained to track participants, including the date and time of the scheduled interview and confirmation that the participant's

consent form had been received. These efforts enabled the researcher to make follow-ups as necessary.

All interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams (MS Teams), a secure and accessible online platform. The platform allowed participants to engage from their familiar environments. This format supported emotional ease, reduced logistical barriers, and ensured privacy (Tracy, 2024). Each session was audio-recorded with the participant's consent and later professionally transcribed verbatim to preserve the conversational flow and emotional tone.

A consent form for the interview was provided to the participants before the interview. A copy is included in Appendix B. Participants were requested to sign the consent form. By doing so, the researcher is granted permission to record the interview and use the de-identified quotations as they appear in the report. Utilising all the collected data as part of the report. The virtual format also enabled participants to engage from familiar environments, which may have enhanced openness and emotional depth during the interviews. The setting was not treated as a static backdrop, but as a dynamic relational space.

Interviews ranged from 30 to 54 minutes, depending on the depth of the participant's narrative and the natural rhythm of the conversation.

**TABLE 2: INTERVIEWEE LIST**

| Participants | Length of Interview (in minutes) | Number of transcript pages (uncleaned) |
|--------------|----------------------------------|--|
| P1           | 42                               | 32                                     |
| P2           | 43                               | 38                                     |
| P3           | 54                               | 38                                     |
| P4           | 44                               | 46                                     |
| P5           | 30                               | 24                                     |
| P6           | 30                               | 30                                     |
| P7           | 51                               | 46                                     |
| P8           | 43                               | 37                                     |
| P9           | 43                               | 41                                     |
| P10          | 48                               | 41                                     |
| P11          | 43                               | 39                                     |

|              |            |            |
|--------------|------------|------------|
| P12          | 46         | 46         |
| P13          | 39         | 30         |
| P14          | 34         | 31         |
| P15          | 39         | 36         |
| P16          | 42         | 37         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>671</b> | <b>592</b> |

The semi-structured guide provided a flexible framework, with core questions focused on psychological safety, leadership and followership interactions, and relational dynamics. Follow-up prompts were adapted as needed, enabling deeper exploration of emerging insights.

The researcher maintained a reflexive and empathetic stance throughout the data collection process. Field notes and reflective memos were used to document emotional cues and ethical considerations. This relational engagement was crucial in building trust and ensuring that participants felt heard, respected, and emotionally supported by the end of each interview.

Research data, that is, audio recordings, transcripts, and the results of the analysis, were all stored in compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). Data files were created and securely stored in password-protected directories on encrypted drives, accessible only to the researcher. Sensitive files, such as audio and verbatim transcripts, were further protected with additional password protection, ensuring that only authorised personnel could access them.

#### **4.10 Data Analysis Approach**

As noted by Haven and Van Grootel (2019), qualitative analysis is inherently iterative, requiring researchers to engage in multiple rounds of interpretation to uncover meaning in participants' narratives. This cyclical process is fundamental in interpretivist research, where understanding is co-constructed and shaped by context, emotion, and relational nuance.

Thematic analysis was selected as the analytical method for this study. It is one of the most widely used approaches in qualitative research, offering a flexible, yet rigorous framework

for identifying and interpreting patterns across rich narrative data (Bell et al., 2019; Haven & Van Grootel, 2019).

This study employed a thematic approach to analysis, aiming to make sense of the insights and experiences shared by participants during the interviews (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis approach used to explore themes and essential ideas within unstructured datasets, such as interview transcripts (Federay & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2025). Thus, thematic analysis concerns the identification of relationships within interview transcripts, and the critical themes serve as the categories for qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis supports both conceptual clarity and emotional depth, enabling the researcher to construct meaning while preserving the distinctiveness of each voice (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Saunders et al. (2023) outline two orientations to thematic analysis:

- An inductive approach, where themes emerge directly from data, and
- A deductive approach, where themes are shaped by pre-existing theory or research questions.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The resulting transcripts were stored securely and used alongside field notes to support a rich, context-sensitive analysis. The researcher began by reading each transcript broadly to become familiar with the emotional tone and relational dynamics in the data. All transcripts were then loaded into the NVivo 12 (NVivo, 2025), a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated systematic coding and theme development.

Using an inductive thematic approach, the researcher identified recurring patterns and insights that reflected participants' lived experiences of psychological safety (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo was used to assign codes to meaningful segments of data, which were then grouped into categories and organised into nodes, digital containers that allowed for exploration of emerging relationships and conceptual structures (Federay & MUIR-Cochrane, 2006; NVivo, 2025). This process enabled the researcher to construct themes that were both analytically robust and emotionally authentic, grounded in the unique perspectives of each participant.

### 4.10.1 The Coding Process

The study had sixteen research participants. The researcher captured the interview transcripts into the NVivo qualitative data analysis programme (NVivo, 2025). Then, the researcher manually read each interview transcript many times to identify patterns in the data (Craswell et al., 2007). Next, all the crucial statements were coded into bins (themes), also known as nodes. To safeguard the privacy of the research participants, the researcher labelled them as Research Participant 1 through Research Participant 16. The coding exercise generated important themes that addressed the research objectives. Figure 1 displays the coding framework that stemmed from the data analysis exercise. Figure 1 contains sixteen nodes or themes into which words, phrases, or sentences were coded. Additionally, in Figure 4.1, the sources indicate the number of research participants who contributed information to a specific theme. In contrast, the references indicate the total number of entries linking to one particular theme, compiled by the various research participants. Appendix C presents the codebook, which summarizes the data analysis exercise. As shown in Figure 3 below, the code book lists all sources and references. Additionally, the codebook includes a description of every theme that emerged from the analysis.

**FIGURE 3: THE CODING FRAMEWORK: SOFTWARE USED NVIVO (2025)**

| Nodes  |         |            |            |                |
|--|---------|------------|------------|----------------|
| Name   | Sources | References | Created On |                |
| ● The Role of Followers                              |         | 14         | 55         | 02/10/25 00:55 |
| ● Active Participation                               |         | 13         | 42         | 02/10/25 00:56 |
| ● Shared Decision-Making                             |         | 11         | 28         | 02/10/25 00:57 |
| ● Trust Building                                     |         | 13         | 44         | 02/10/25 00:59 |
| ● Leadership-Followership Dynamics                   |         | 14         | 46         | 02/10/25 00:50 |
| ● Followers' Influence on Leadership and the Dynamic |         | 9          | 26         | 03/11/25 02:36 |
| ● Constructive Followership                          |         | 9          | 26         | 03/11/25 02:37 |
| ● Passive Followership                               |         | 9          | 26         | 03/11/25 02:38 |
| ● Power Distance Inclination                         |         | 10         | 27         | 03/11/25 02:39 |
| ● Trust and Reciprocity                              |         | 9          | 26         | 03/11/25 02:39 |
| ● Leader's Influence on Psychological Safety         |         | 14         | 50         | 03/11/25 02:31 |
| ● Challenging but Supportive                         |         | 13         | 52         | 03/11/25 02:24 |
| ● Discouraging Leadership Styles                     |         | 16         | 72         | 03/11/25 02:24 |
| ● Encouraging Leadership Styles                      |         | 12         | 26         | 03/11/25 02:21 |
| ● Open Communication and Feedback Culture            |         | 14         | 82         | 03/11/25 02:23 |
| ● Vulnerability and Humility                         |         | 11         | 36         | 03/11/25 02:22 |
| ● Relational Factors                                 |         | 15         | 107        | 02/10/25 01:04 |
| ● Empowerment  |         | 15         | 75         | 02/10/25 01:32 |
| ● Trust  |         | 13         | 52         | 02/10/25 01:32 |
| ● Voice  |         | 11         | 37         | 02/10/25 01:32 |
| ● Follower Agency                                    |         | 13         | 55         | 02/10/25 01:06 |

Fieldnotes were used to complement the transcript data by capturing emotional tone, contextual cues, and relational dynamics that may not have been fully expressed in spoken words. These notes included participant observations, affect, pauses, and emphasis (Saunders et al., 2023). During the analysis, fieldnotes were reviewed alongside transcripts to support interpretive depth and emotional authenticity. They helped the researcher identify subtle patterns in trust, vulnerability, and relational signalling. Especially where verbal responses were ambiguous or emotionally layered (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2024; Saunders et al., 2023). They also supported reflexivity, which allowed the researcher to track their own reactions and positionality throughout the coding process. This strengthened the study's commitment to preserving participant voice and relational nuance in theme development.

#### **4.11 Research Quality and Rigour**

The integrity of this study was upheld through the application of four key elements as outlined by Hammarberg et al. (2016):

- **Trustworthiness:** achieved through transparent documentation of research design, methodology, and analytical procedures, ensuring they are clearly explained, justified, and accessible to the reader.
- **Credibility:** supported by the use of triangulated data sources (interview transcripts and field notes) and the inclusion of verbatim participant quotes to substantiate interpretations.
- **Transferability:** addressed through thick description of participant contexts and relational dynamics, enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings to their own settings.
- **Consistency:** ensured through a systematic and replicable approach to data collection and analysis, enhancing the reliability of the findings.

Trustworthiness in this study was further reinforced through the application of these four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These were all embedded throughout the research process to ensure both analytical rigour and ethical integrity (Bell et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

A standardised interview guide was used for all interviews, ensuring consistency across participants while allowing flexibility in the relational approach. This protocol was directly aligned with the research questions outlined in Chapter 2.

To enhance credibility, triangulation was applied by integrating insights from transcripts and the researcher's reflections. Verbatim quotations are presented in Chapter 5, to illustrate key themes and preserve participant voice, thereby supporting both internal and external validity (Saunders et al., 2023). The applicability of the findings is addressed in Chapter 7, where the study's contributions to the literature on psychological safety and leadership-follower dynamics are discussed. By centring participant experience and emotional nuance, the study offers insights that are both contextually grounded and theoretically meaningful.

#### **4.12 Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical research principles outlined by Belle et al. (2019), ensuring the protection, dignity, and autonomy of all participants. Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection commenced. All procedures followed the guidelines set out by the university's ethics committee (Tracy, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Given the relational and emotionally reflective nature of the interviews, ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the different stages. Applying the moral principles outlined by Bell et al. (2019), the researcher ensured that:

- The study posed no harm to participants.
- Informed consent was obtained before data collection.
- Participants were given complete and transparent information about the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of their participation.
- Participants were made aware of their rights to withdraw at any point in the interview without consequence.
- Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all transcripts.
- Participants had a clear understanding of the research aims and how their contributions would be used.
- All personal identifiers were removed during the transcription and analysis.
- Pseudonyms were assigned to participants,

- Audio recordings and transcripts stored on encrypted, password-protected devices
- Transcribers signed a non-disclosure agreement before receiving audio files.

These measures ensured that sensitive data remained secure and that participants' anonymity was preserved throughout the process. The collected data was stored electronically, without identifiers, on the researcher's encrypted OneDrive cloud storage platform. This is in line with the Gibs requirements for retaining data for a minimum of 10 years. Access limited.

#### **4.13 Limitations and Delimitations**

As with all interpretivist research, the potential for researcher bias was acknowledged and actively managed. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance, using field notes to document emotional responses, assumptions, and interpretive decisions. This reflexivity helped surface potential bias and guided more transparent, ethically grounded analysis (Tracy, 2024).

During data collection, bias was mitigated by using a semi-structured interview guide that allowed participants to shape the conversation in their own terms. The researcher adopted an empathetic yet non-directive approach, avoiding leading questions and remaining open to unexpected insights. NVivo software supported the systematic coding and helped ensure consistency across transcripts.

The study focused on a purposive sample of 16 participants across public, private, academic, and banking sectors. While this sample provided rich, emotionally nuanced data and supported thematic saturation, it may not have captured the full diversity of experiences across broader organisational contexts. The findings are therefore contextually grounded, rather than universally generalisable.

For this interpretivist study, the findings reflect co-constructed meaning between the researcher and the participants. The researcher's positionality, emotional engagement, and interpretive lens shaped the analysis. While reflexivity was maintained throughout, complete objectivity is not claimed (Tracy, 2024).

The study was conducted within a defined academic timeline. This may have limited opportunities for extended member reflections or longitudinal follow-up. Though the analysis

was iterative and reflexive, additional time might have allowed for deeper engagement with emerging themes or broader consideration of participants' perspectives.

The study was intentionally delimited to explore psychological safety within leadership-followership dynamics across South African organisational workplace settings. The focus was placed on relational constructs such as trust, empowerment, and voice, rather than on structural or policy-level factors. The study included participants who occupied formal leadership or followership roles. It excluded comparative analysis across sectors or hierarchical levels, as the aim was to explore lived relational experience rather than sectoral trends. The study focused on individual-level narratives rather than team or organisational-level dynamics. This choice reflected the researcher's aim to preserve emotional nuance, conversational rhythm, and relational authenticity in understanding the dynamics of leadership-followership and their contribution to psychological safety.

## 5. Chapter 5: Results

### 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents the detailed results of this study, examining how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to psychological safety within workplace settings. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected from 16 experienced professionals across the government, higher education, banking, and private sectors. These insights provide a multidimensional understanding of the interpersonal and structural factors that shape psychological safety at work.

The chapter moves beyond mere description to provide nuanced, evidence-based interpretations of participant narratives. This analytical process enables accurate identification of recurring themes that illuminate both the enablers and barriers to psychological safety as experienced by research participants.

The findings presented herein address each research objective: exploring the influence of leadership-followership dynamics, clarifying the co-creative role of followers, identifying key relational factors, and examining how follower agency shapes psychological safety outcomes. Tables present the demographic context, while rich verbatim excerpts bring participant voices to the fore.

Ultimately, this chapter offers evidence to bridge the gap between theory and practice, supporting contemporary literature that calls for more relational approaches to organisational psychological safety. The subsequent sections proceed as follows: participants' demographics; an overview of the thematic analysis method; a detailed presentation of findings for each research objective; and a concluding synthesis of key insights for future, theoretical, and practical applications.

The results are presented in charts and tables to facilitate a better understanding of the topic. Moreover, the research results are strengthened by verbatim excerpts from the research participants, in line with the research objectives outlined earlier. The research objectives were specified as follows, as they support the listed research questions:

- To explore how leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety.
- To explore the role of followers in co-creating psychological safety.
- To identify relational factors that influence psychological safety.

- To explore how follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety.

## **5.2 Research Questions**

Main Research Question: In what ways are leadership-followership dynamics experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings?

SRQ 1: What relational qualities within leadership-followership interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety?

SQR 2: How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace?

While the results in this chapter are organised according to the study's research objectives for clarity, soundness, and consistency, each objective and its subsequent thematic findings directly address one or more aspects of the main research question and its sub-questions. This approach also ensures that each aim is systematically mapped onto the overarching research questions, as illustrated in Table 3. The table explicitly demonstrates how the research objectives, interview questions, and resultant themes are integrally linked to the study's core research questions. The analysis provides comprehensive coverage, enabling nuanced, evidence-based responses to the central and subsidiary research questions while advancing the original objectives set at the outset of the study. The successive sections comprise the biographic information of the research participants, the presentation of the results, the presentation of the results relating to the research objectives, and the conclusion.

## **5.3 Demographic Information**

The participant group in this study consisted of sixteen professionals from various sectors, including government, higher education, banking, and the private sector. Maintaining strict confidentiality, pseudonymisation was applied (Research Participant 1-16 – in Table 1). Ensuring alignment with best practices for protecting the privacy of research subjects.

Diversity in sectoral representation promotes broader insights into psychological safety across the organisational landscape. Importantly, all participants had at least 5 years of

professional experience, which the literature shows enables richer critical reflection on organisational norms and leadership practices. This sample design enhances the transferability and validity of thematic findings.

While a broad base of experience enriches understanding of leadership-followership dynamics, it is acknowledged that the sample may underrepresent the views of new entrants to the work settings. Sectoral differences, such as government versus private sector incentives or organisational culture, may further contextualise participants’ perspectives on psychological safety. These dynamics will be revisited in the discussion section.

#### 5.4 Presentation of the Findings

The findings of this study are presented clearly and systematically in this section. The results are organised according to the main themes that emerged from the data, each aligned with the research objectives. Data is presented descriptively, drawing on both recurring perspectives and unique or contrasting experiences from the participants. Each subsection compares viewpoints across different participants and, where relevant, across sectors. Verbatim quotations are included to illustrate the breadth and diversity of perspectives and to support the credibility of the findings.

Table 3 below shows the alignment between the main research question and sub-questions, the corresponding research objectives, and the detailed themes that emerged from the analysis. Each theme and subtheme has been explicitly mapped to the research questions through the objectives, ensuring complete alignment and transparency from research design through to interpretation. This explicit mapping demonstrates that the organisation or structure of the findings, by objectives, fully supports and systematically answers all aspects of the stated research questions.

**TABLE 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RESEARCH OBJECTIVES, AND EMERGENT THEMES/SUBTHEMES**

| <b>Main Research Question and Sub-Questions</b>                           | <b>Research Objective</b>   | <b>Emergent Themes/Subthemes</b>  |
|---|---|---|
| Main RQ: In what ways are leadership-followership dynamics experienced as | RO1: To explore the influence of leadership-followership dynamics on psychological safety | - Encouraging Leadership - Vulnerability and Humility - Open Communication & Feedback Culture - |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings?  |   | Challenging but Supportive - Discouraging Leadership Styles   |
| SRQ1: What relational qualities within leadership-follower interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety?                  | RO2: To identify relational factors that influence psychological safety   | - Trust - Empowerment - Voice   |
| SRQ2: How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace? | RO3: To explore the role of followers in co-creating psychological safety<br>RO4: To explore the ways in which follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety | - Constructive Followership - Passive Followership - Power-Distance Inclination - Trust and Reciprocity - Active Participation - Shared Decision-Making - Maintaining Professional Standards - Improving Relationships - Empowering Team Members - Fostering Openness |

All the interview questions contributed to essential themes in this research. Additionally, the interview questions align with the research questions, objectives, and concepts from the literature review presented in Chapter 2.

In the following sections, the study results are presented in accordance with the research objectives. To realise this, the results were strengthened with verbatim quotations from the research participants.

## 5.5 Presentation of the Findings Relating to the Research Objectives

### 5.5.1 Exploring how leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety

This section presents the key findings relating to how leadership-followership dynamics shape psychological safety within workplace environments. Drawing from the lived experiences of participants across diverse sectors, several recurring themes were identified as central to the creation and maintenance of psychologically safe workplace environments. These themes reflect both the actions and interpersonal qualities of leaders and followers, as well as broader relational patterns at play in workplace organisations.

To provide a clear and accessible overview, Table 4 below summarises the major themes that emerged from the analysis, along with short explanatory descriptions and illustrative participant quotes. This overview serves as a roadmap for the detailed thematic discussion that follows.

**TABLE 4: OVERVIEW EMERGENT THEMES/SUBTHEMES AND PARTICIPANTS QUOTES**

| No. | Theme                           | Description/Manifestation                        | Example Participant Quotes   |
|-----|---------------------------------|--|--|
| 1.  | Encouraging Leadership          | Leaders empower, support, and care for teams     | “They help us reflect and grow.” – P2<br>“Empowerment...genuinely care.” – P1  |
| 2.  | Vulnerability and Humility      | Leaders admit mistakes, foster trust             | “Leaders who communicate freely...address their own mistakes.” – P10<br>“Don’t be scared to have people who know more.” – P3 |
| 3.  | Open Communication and Feedback | Open dialogue: feedback welcomed                 | “If the leader is not open-minded...people feel discouraged.” – P3<br>“When things are going wrong, we communicate.” – P7    |
| 4.  | Challenging but Supportive      | Support during challenges encourages risk-taking | “I faced something that challenged me...the company organised that event.” – P3<br>“When people feel supported,              |

|     |                            |   |  |
|-----|----------------------------|---|--|
|     |                            |   | they're more likely to speak up." – P10  |
| 5.  | Discouraging Leadership    | Autocratic, unsupportive climates             | "Employees often concerned to talk because they are fearing..." – P10 "Mental wellness...not truly supported." – P10 |
| 6.  | Constructive Followership  | Proactive, solution-focused engagement        | "I have an open-door policy. My colleagues know they can come into my office..." – P9                                |
| 7.  | Passive Followership       | Withholding input, disengaged                 | "I just kept quiet and did what I was told, even when I had concerns." – P15   |
| 8.  | Power Distance Inclination | Hierarchical, restricted feedback             | "If I say, this chair is black, she reports it as greyish." – P1   |
| 9.  | Trust and Reciprocity      | Mutual trust enables openness and sharing     | "I feel that trust has already been extended..." – P7  |
| 10. | Active Participation       | Engaged in decision-making and risk-taking    | "We wanted to express how we'd prefer to work...but it felt unsafe." – P1  |
| 11. | Shared Decision-Making     | Collaborative choices, inclusiveness          | "It felt like she was calling the shots." – P15  |
| 12. | Trust Building             | Building honest, supportive relationships     | "When you leave them alone to get the work done, and by giving them a chance to ask questions..." – P9               |
| 13. | Relational Factors         | Trust, empowerment, and voice as core pillars | "People will deliver. People won't be afraid to ask for help..." – P9  |
| 14. | Follower Agency            | Professionalism, ownership, openness          | "By embracing professionalism and nurturing relationships, followers model behaviours..." – P16                      |

### 5.5.2 Leaders' Influence on Psychological Safety

Participants described a range of leadership behaviours that shaped their sense of psychological safety in the workplace. According to the research participants, leaders can

influence psychological safety through the following ways: encouraging leadership styles that foster vulnerability and humility, promoting an open communication and feedback culture, being challenging yet supportive, and discouraging leadership styles that undermine psychological safety. While all themes were present, participants placed greater emphasis on encouragement, open communication, and trust, including trust building, which were consistently described across as foundational to psychological safety. Humility and vulnerability were also acknowledged, often in contexts where leaders admitted mistakes or sought feedback.

### Theme 1: Encouraging Leadership

Encouraging leadership emerged as a foundational driver of psychological safety across participants' accounts. Participants described leaders who empower their teams, foster trust, and create open communication channels. This supportive environment enables individuals to take initiative, express ideas, and learn from their mistakes, without fear of negative consequences. Several participants emphasised the role of leaders who empower and genuinely care for their team members. These leaders are described as approachable, supportive, and attentive to both employee well-being and performance.

**TABLE 5: LEADERS EMPOWER, SUPPORT, AND CARE FOR TEAMS**

| Research Participant | Quote   |
|----------------------|---|
| RP10                 | <i>“Empowerment starts with being a people person—genuinely caring about your team. Managers should be aware of their staff’s strengths and weaknesses and support them accordingly. Regular check-ins help. When people feel supported, they’re more likely to speak up and ask for help.”</i> |
| RP11                 | <i>“My leadership skill is more around just making sure that I understand what everyone is going through and sympathise, but not shy away from giving feedback.”</i>  |
| RP13                 | <i>“You must lead with examples so that they would see that what you want them to do, you can do it yourself. ... Have an open discussion with the team, allow them to give the ideas, and acknowledge if you’re going to use the ideas.”</i>   |
| RP8                  | <i>“In a workplace, most people want to feel acknowledged. They want to feel seen. Appreciation matters—even a simple thank you or a little recognition creates a safer, more open environment.”</i>  |

|      |  |
|------|--|
| RP14 | <i>"I believe in a working team, not in working individually...If we are in a team and we have a project...I share ideas and support others because if you come with your ideas, I cannot just immediately say, 'Well, no, it's wrong' without first understanding."</i> |
|------|--|

Participants' evidence showed that encouraging leadership significantly contributed to psychological safety by fostering an environment of support, empowerment, and genuine care. Followers described how leaders who take the time to acknowledge individual needs, offer constructive feedback, and show appreciation create the conditions for open communication and risk-taking. Participants felt more comfortable contributing, reflecting, and asking for help when they sensed that their leaders were invested in their personal and professional growth. The consistent reference to empowerment and nurture further highlights the critical role that leader behaviours play in shaping employees' willingness to engage, innovate, and admit mistakes without fear of embarrassment. Such practices of encouragement were reported as essential to enabling both team effectiveness and well-being in diverse workplace settings.

### **Theme 2: Vulnerability and Humility**

Vulnerability and humility in leaders repeatedly surfaced as significant contributors to psychological safety. Participants described moments when leaders openly admitted mistakes, displayed self-awareness, or sought input from others as powerful signals that it was safe to speak up and be authentic at work. They viewed this openness as key to building trust and, therefore, psychological safety. This transparency fostered mutual trust, encouraging both leaders and followers to engage honestly and support one another through challenges.

**TABLE 6: LEADERS ADMIT MISTAKES, FOSTER TRUST**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P10                | <i>"Leaders who communicate freely and acknowledge their own mistakes build more trust for their teams."</i>  |
| P3                 | <i>"Don't be scared to have people who know more than you in certain areas. That's how you learn and grow together."</i>                                |
| P14                | <i>"For me, I listened, even where I might not be the expert in the room. That creates a safe space, because people see that you're also learning."</i> |

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| P11 | <i>"I admitted to my team that I was not sure how best to handle it and asked for their ideas. This changed how the group worked together."</i> |
| P16 | <i>"When a leader opens up about a challenge or mistake, it lets you know there's no shame in not knowing everything."</i>                      |

As shown in Table 6 above, participants consistently identified humility and vulnerability in leaders as central to promoting psychological safety. By openly discussing limitations, asking for advice, or candidly addressing their own errors, leaders permitted followers to do the same. This reduced the stigma of mistakes, encouraged collaborative problem-solving, and established an environment where shared learning could thrive. Participants found such leaders approachable and trustworthy, affirming that authentic connection, rather than authority, was the key to team openness and growth.

### **Theme 3: Open Communication and Feedback Culture**

Participants commonly valued leaders who encouraged open and honest dialogue and welcomed constructive feedback. This was seen as essential for team psychological safety and learning. Participants consistently described open communication and a strong feedback culture as crucial for psychological safety in the workplace. Many emphasised that an environment where feedback was welcomed, dialogue was encouraged, and leaders modelled transparency enabled team members to express concerns, share new ideas, and participate in problem-solving without fear of repercussion.

**TABLE 7: OPEN DIALOGUE: FEEDBACK WELCOMED**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P3                 | <i>"You cannot do any of that if the leader is not open-minded and doesn't want to do this and just wants to do things the old way, because then it's difficult and almost everyone feels discouraged."</i> |
| P7                 | <i>"If things are going wrong, you know, you communicate, and that's the whole purpose of having a team."</i>   |
| P11                | <i>"We have feedback sessions every two weeks... everyone on the team is encouraged to speak up, reflect on what went well or didn't, and share ideas."</i>   |
| P14                | <i>"I share ideas and support others... I cannot just immediately say, 'Well, no, it's wrong' without first understanding."</i>   |

|     |  |
|-----|--|
| P16 | <i>“Once psychological safety is there, even when I’ve done wrong, the team has the confidence to come and tell me.”</i> |
|-----|--|

The quotes above illustrate that open communication and an inclusive feedback culture empower employees to voice their opinions and drive team improvement. Participants described how such practices not only resolved day-to-day issues but also nurtured a sense of belonging and trust. Regular opportunities to share feedback meant individuals felt heard, and learning was continuous. When managers and team members were approachable and willing to listen, discussion of difficulties and mistakes became constructive rather than punitive, further reinforcing psychological safety and supporting collective growth.

#### **Theme 4: Challenging but Supportive**

Some participants shared that feeling challenged, combined with support, encouraged growth, and reinforced psychological safety. A strong sub-theme emerging from the data was the positive impact of leaders who both challenge and support their teams. Participants described how being assigned demanding tasks or pushed out of their comfort zones proved motivational and developmental when accompanied by support, encouragement, or trust. This interplay created an environment where individuals felt comfortable taking risks, trying new things, and learning from difficulties.

**TABLE 8: SUPPORT DURING CHALLENGES ENCOURAGES RISK-TAKING**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>   |
|--------------------|--|
| P3                 | <i>“I faced something that challenged me. The company organised that event, so I had to hire someone within 48 hours to approve the design. it's a lot of work.”</i>   |
| P2                 | <i>“There were moments when I wanted to ask for help, but I didn’t know if that would be seen as weakness. My manager said, ‘You’ve got this,’ but then didn’t follow up. I kept wondering: is this empowerment or abandonment?”</i> |
| P8                 | <i>“Sometimes, after a challenging week, my manager checks in just to ask, ‘How are you?’ Not about work. That support helps me recover, reflect, and go again.”</i>   |
| P10                | <i>“When people feel supported, they’re more likely to speak up and ask for help.”</i>   |

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| P16 | <i>“As a leader, I challenge my mentee but make sure she knows I’m on her side. Building that support over time means she can handle bigger challenges when they come.”</i> |
|-----|---|

These accounts consistently show that participants valued a balance between being tested and having a safety net of support. When challenging situations lacked guidance, some team members felt hesitant or isolated; yet when leaders provided encouragement and checked in regularly, they felt empowered to stretch their abilities and admit their vulnerabilities. The blend of high expectations and visible support signalled to participants that growth and learning were prioritised over simple error avoidance, reinforcing a climate of psychological safety even in high-pressure contexts.

### **Theme 5: Discouraging Leadership Styles**

Negative leadership behaviours, such as unsupportive, were described as barriers to psychological safety. Negative behaviours can negatively affect open communication and a feedback culture in organisations. Some participants expressed their encounters with leadership styles that undermined psychological safety. Themes of autocratic decision-making, lack of support, public criticism, and disregard for well-being were linked to reduced openness, disengagement, and increased anxiety within teams. These discouraging leadership approaches or behaviours inhibited participation, stifled initiative, and created a work climate in which staff members hesitated to voice their concerns or admit mistakes.

**TABLE 9: AUTOCRATIC, UNSUPPORTIVE CLIMATES**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P10                | <i>“Employees are often concerned to talk because they fear losing their jobs... Organisations are more open to ideas that benefit them than to concerns about employee well-being. Mental wellness is often just a checkbox, not something truly supported.”</i> |
| P16                | <i>“Some people, you’ll talk to them in a passing conversation, they’ll grab it, and tomorrow you’ll get a report of what you were talking about. Other people feel that if I’m being scolded, that’s the frustration I pass on.”</i>                             |
| P2                 | <i>“My manager gave me a task and then changed it without discussion—I wasn’t consulted, it made me feel sidelined, like my views didn’t matter.”</i>   |

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| P15 | <i>"I just kept quiet and did what I was told, even when I had concerns. It made me question whether my contributions were seen as valuable or just as complaints."</i> |
| P7  | <i>"In a hostile environment, you're not even going to want to engage; you're just going to sit there and do your thing, and that's it."</i>                            |

The experiences shared above confirm that discouraging leadership styles create environments where psychological safety is compromised. Participants recounted how intimidation, micromanagement, and disregard for staff input fostered silence and compliance, rather than engagement. Unpredictable or unsupportive behaviours, such as public criticism or exclusion from decision-making, led to withdrawal and passivity. Overall, these patterns highlight how unsupportive leadership practices can quickly erode trust, limit participation, and restrict even team innovation.

### **Followers' influence on leadership and the dynamic**

Participants described the reciprocal nature of leadership and followership, emphasising that followers actively shape the climate of psychological safety in the workplace. The leader initiates the mood while the follower's behaviours shape the ongoing dynamics and can support or destabilise the leader's efforts. The influence occurs through constructive followership, passive responses, attitudes towards power distance, and mutual trust.

This section describes how followers actively influence the broader leadership dynamic and psychological safety in their organisations, highlighting the reciprocal relationships that exist in real organisational work settings.

In keeping with the research participants, followers can influence psychological safety through the following ways: Constructive followership, Passive followership, Power distance inclination, and Trust and reciprocity.

### **Theme 6: Constructive followership**

Several participants described situations where proactively engaging with leaders or the team, voicing their perspectives, and contributing to solutions was encouraged, leading to a more constructive environment. They further described how proactive, solution-focused, and engaged followership helped to co-create a climate of psychological safety. Followers who modelled openness, voiced suggestions, and supported their peers contributed to a more positive and resilient team environment.

**TABLE 10: PROACTIVE, SOLUTION-FOCUSED ENGAGEMENT**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>   |
|--------------------|--|
| P9                 | <i>“I have an open-door policy. My colleagues know that they can come into my office and discuss anything with me. I don’t micromanage. I believe in giving people autonomy to get their work done, and I also try to be as approachable as possible.”</i> |
| P13                | <i>“I always encourage my teammates to bring their ideas—even if I think differently, I want them to feel their voice matters for the team’s goals.”</i>   |
| P11                | <i>“My leadership skill is more about just making sure that everyone is comfortable telling me when something is wrong, so we work together and fix it.”</i>   |
| P3                 | <i>“...He actually did listen to me. That made me want to give my best.”</i>   |
| P7                 | <i>“They say you must own your responsibility, but also give others support. That’s what I try to do in my role, as much as possible.”</i>   |
| P10                | <i>“Empowerment is not just about leaders; it’s also about how my teammates and I treat each other—helping, constructive feedback, and care.”</i>  |

Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that constructive followership is not a passive state, but a participatory process that encourages safety and shared leadership. Participants who viewed themselves as active contributors were more likely to engage, take interpersonal risks, and encourage others to do the same. Their willingness to voice suggestions and provide mutual support created a work climate where collaboration became the norm, not the exception. This approach not only improved group morale but also often inspired leaders to be more attentive and responsive to their team members. Further reinforcing psychological safety. Ultimately, the practice of constructive followership set a precedent for growth, team cohesion, and resilient problem-solving, regardless of hierarchical status.

### **Theme 7: Passive followership**

Passive followership is often characterised by withholding input, avoiding engagement, or strictly adhering to instructions without questioning or taking initiative. Many participants explained how, in contexts where psychological safety was perceived as low, due to fear of negative consequences, feeling undervalued, or witnessing autocratic leadership

behaviours, followers would choose silence over sharing, rather than expressing concerns, ideas, or feedback. These individuals prioritised conformity and risk avoidance. This behaviour, although sometimes self-protective, was also seen by some participants as contributing to a work climate in which learning, innovation, and honest communication were blocked.

**TABLE 11: WITHHOLDING INPUT, DISENGAGED**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P7                 | <i>"In a hostile environment, you're not even going to want to engage; you're just going to sit there and do your thing, and that's it."</i>                            |
| P12                | <i>"Yeah, for me in that case you must be true as long as you know you are following procedures you've done right."</i>   |
| P15                | <i>"I just kept quiet and did what I was told, even when I had concerns. It made me question whether my contributions were seen as valuable or just as complaints."</i> |
| P5                 | <i>"I try not to say anything, because sometimes raising issues brings stress, and I feel safer just being quiet."</i>  |
| P2                 | <i>"When management doesn't involve us, I stop offering input. It's easier just to do what's required and go home."</i>   |

The participants' responses above reveal how passive followership is both a consequence and a perpetuator of low psychological safety in workplace organisations. Team members withdrew or limited their engagement to protect themselves from perceived risks, leading to a cycle of missed feedback, unaddressed problems, and stagnation. This passivity was not necessarily a character trait, but an adaptive response to unreceptive or punitive contexts. Participants highlighted the emotional toll of being silent, describing feelings of frustration, isolation, and questioning their value on the team. The prevalence of this theme highlights the importance of organisational climate in either fostering participation or marginalising individuals, often to the detriment of both individuals and group outcomes.

## Theme 8: Power distance inclination

The inclination toward power distance, where hierarchy, authority, and status dominate workplace interactions, was a persistent theme among participants. In these contexts, followers described a reluctance to question leaders, take initiative, or contribute new perspectives, out of fear of negative judgment. Many recounted instances in which rigid leadership structures or highly formal communication protocols made them feel their role was limited to obedience rather than part of shared problem-solving. This dynamic often led to disengagement, withholding of ideas, and a culture that undermined psychological safety. Not by hostility, but by invisible but powerful expectations about ‘knowing your place’.

**TABLE 12: HIERARCHICAL, RESTRICTED FEEDBACK**

| Participant | Quote   |
|-------------|---|
| P1          | <i>“If I say, this chair is black, she reports it as greyish. That dynamic affects how we work together—you stop talking, so there’s no more friction.”</i>   |
| P4          | <i>“I believe you must ensure that your approach is one of support, not a one-upmanship approach that suggests, ‘I’m in charge, and you are not doing your work.’ Power plays break the team down.”</i> |
| P6          | <i>“There’s an assumption that leaders know best... Even if you think there’s another, better way, you might not challenge it because you don’t want to create conflict.”</i>                           |
| P10         | <i>“In my previous environment, I did not feel comfortable raising issues in the chain—everything needed to follow protocol, and it felt as if you went above, you’d get punished.”</i>                 |
| P2          | <i>“Even if you had ideas, you had to get them approved in layers... by the time it came back, it felt pointless.”</i>  |

Across these accounts, participants demonstrated that power distance served as a subtle yet effective barrier to psychological safety. The presence of overt hierarchy, inflexible rules, and a ‘top-down’ mentality prompted employees to censor themselves, avoid conflict, and fail to undertake responsibility for improvement. Team members felt discouraged from proposing new solutions or from respectfully challenging the leader's choices, worried that it could be seen as insubordination. While some respected the clarity of roles, most described a persistent undercurrent of disengagement and missed opportunities for growth.

The power distance dynamic not only silenced dissent but also removed the personal agency and voice that underpin genuine teamwork and organisational learning.

### Theme 9: Trust and reciprocity

Trust and reciprocity formed the backbone of psychologically safe teams across the participants' accounts. Many explained that when trust is both extended and earned, both between leaders and followers and among peers, individuals feel empowered to take initiative, admit mistakes, ask for help, and support one another without reservation. Reciprocity, in this context, meant giving and receiving support, honesty, and vulnerability as an ongoing, two-way process. Participants were quick to note that, where trust was lacking or conditional, silence and self-protection replaced the open exchange necessary for growth and innovation. Thus saying, trust and reciprocity emerged not as static conditions, but as interactive dynamics that could be cultivated or eroded through daily actions and responses.

**TABLE 13: MUTUAL TRUST ENABLES OPENNESS AND SHARING**

| Participant | Quote  |
|-------------|--|
| P7          | <i>"For me, I feel that trust has already been extended and that has made my transition or my settling in much, much easier. When you know the team trusts you, you want to do more."</i>  |
| P5          | <i>"In that case, the trust won't be broken, but it will be limited. You know where your boundaries are with some people, but with others, you can be more open."</i>  |
| P1          | <i>"One of the recent interactions that challenged me, I experienced with my supervisor around trust. She asked me to complete a task, and although we have open communication about deliverables, I often feel she doesn't trust my input."</i> |
| P9          | <i>"When you leave them alone to get the work done, and by giving them a chance to ask questions—being honest with your answers—builds that trust."</i>  |
| P4          | <i>"Reciprocity goes both ways. If I help my manager or a colleague, and they help me back, it creates a sense of team spirit. If they ignore you, you stop helping."</i>  |
| P13         | <i>"You only get trust if you also give trust—no matter your role."</i>  |

Participants' stories here emphasised that trust is inherently relational, a continuous, reciprocal process rather than a single act. When leaders and followers demonstrate belief in each other's competence, respect one another's boundaries, and respond supportively to vulnerability, trust becomes contagious. Many noted that such dynamics fostered a willingness to take interpersonal risks, share uncertainties, and offer honest feedback. Where a lack of reciprocity or suspicion crept in, however, the effect was immediate—disengagement, guardedness, and reduced enthusiasm for collaboration. The evidence affirmed that sustaining psychological safety relies not on authority or good intentions alone, but on everyday exchanges of trust, honesty, and mutual support among all team members.

### **5.5.3 To explore the role of followers in co-creating psychological safety**

#### **5.5.3.1. The role of followers**

Participants conveyed that psychological safety in organisations is not solely created by leaders but instead is actively co-constructed by all members. The findings reveal that active participation, shared decision-making, and trust-building are key ways in which followers contribute to, or hinder, psychological safety within their teams and in the organisations. The role of followers in co-creating psychological safety is threefold, namely: Active participation, shared decision-making, and trust building.

#### **Theme 10: Active participation**

Active participation was highlighted as a core way in which followers co-create psychological safety within workplace organisations. Participants described how, when they felt encouraged to speak up, share suggestions, and contribute to decision-making processes, they were more likely to take interpersonal risks and engage constructively with their teams. This involvement was seen as especially vital in meetings, problem-solving sessions, and feedback opportunities. The ability of followers to voice opinions, even if those opinions challenged the status quo or leadership preferences, was identified as a central mechanism by which teams create an environment that values learning, adaptability, and mutual respect. Conversely, the absence of genuine participation often led to caution, silence, and a reluctance to innovate.

**TABLE 14: ENGAGED IN DECISION-MAKING AND RISK-TAKING**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P1                 | <i>“Yes, during staff meetings. We wanted to express how we’d prefer to work with our manager, but it felt unsafe, like we were trying to reshape her beliefs. Also, when I sent a WhatsApp message and she insisted on an email, it undermined the comfort and trust we’ve built.”</i> |
| P2                 | <i>“There was a team meeting where I suggested a new approach. My manager dismissed it immediately. She said, ‘that won’t work,’ without asking any questions or trying to understand the idea. After that, I stopped sharing ideas in meetings.”</i>                                   |
| P3                 | <i>“When everyone at the table is invited to share, you know your input matters. It’s not always easy, but it helps the entire team find better ways of doing things.”</i>  |
| P7                 | <i>“Speaking up wasn’t always easy in my team. But when we saw that new ideas would be listened to, more of us started participating instead of holding back.”</i>  |
| P8                 | <i>“It matters that my manager asks for feedback, and sometimes when I see my opinion used, it encourages me to speak up again.”</i>  |

Participant accounts illustrated the transformative role of genuine participation in shaping psychological safety. Where leaders welcomed follower input, even when it diverged from their own views, team members reported greater confidence and a sense of shared purpose. These behaviours helped break down hierarchy, making it easier for all voices to be heard and for collective ownership of team outcomes to emerge. Active participation also enabled teams to adapt more quickly, identify blind spots, and learn from diverse viewpoints. Importantly, when such inclusion was lacking, followers described feeling siloed, isolated, anxious about judgment, or disengaged from group goals. The data therefore confirmed that daily practices of inviting, utilising, and respecting follower participation are fundamental to both psychological safety and team effectiveness.

### **Theme 11: Shared decision-making**

Shared decision-making surfaced as a vital component of psychological safety, as followers detailed how being included in workplace decisions shaped their willingness to contribute and their sense of belonging. When leaders intentionally invited input, explained the

rationale for choices, and genuinely consulted team members before making decisions, followers reported feeling respected and empowered. By contrast, exclusion from the decision-making process, top-down directives, or situations where participant feedback was ignored led to disengagement, frustration, and self-restriction. The findings suggested that shared decision-making is more than just a fair process. It is a trust-building practice that acknowledges each team member’s expertise and humanity, laying a foundation for genuine commitment to organisational goals.

**TABLE 15: COLLABORATIVE CHOICES, INCLUSIVENESS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P6                 | <i>“In the next meeting, that person is very quiet, and when you ask them, they don’t say anything because they don’t want to be embarrassed. When a boss embarrasses you in a meeting, you are not going to be able to speak again in the next meeting because you don’t want to.”</i> |
| P15                | <i>“It felt like she was calling the shots. Yes, during a team meeting. I stopped volunteering for ideas in meetings. I didn’t want to risk being labelled again.”</i>  |
| P2                 | <i>“Sometimes decisions are just handed down from management—no discussion, we’re just told what to do. It makes me less interested in how things turn out.”</i>  |
| P13                | <i>“The best teams I’ve worked in are those where decisions aren’t just made at the top, but everyone discusses what will work.”</i>  |
| P8                 | <i>“When my manager actually explains the options and asks for our views, you feel like your opinion means something.”</i>  |

These participant reflections highlight the profound impact of shared decision-making on psychological safety. Active participation in team choices not only increased motivation and clarity but also helped followers feel genuinely valued, regardless of their title or seniority. As individuals saw their recommendations being considered, and even implemented, their confidence in leadership and the broader organisational mission grew. On the other hand, autocratic or unclear decisions tended to diminish the engagement and breed scepticism. Shared decision-making emerged as a key lever for cultivating mutual trust, enabling open

dialogue, and ensuring that all voices contribute meaningfully to shaping the team’s path forward.

**Theme 12: Trust building**

Trust building surfaced as a cornerstone of psychological safety, woven into nearly every participant's narrative about healthy, resilient teams. Participants explained that trust within a team is not assumed; it must be earned. It must be continually built and reinforced through honest communication, reliability, openness, and mutual respect. Followers described taking deliberate steps to earn their colleagues’ trust by speaking truthfully, holding confidences, fulfilling promises, and participating authentically in the team. Crucially, reciprocal trust was repeatedly noted as an enabler for expressing concerns, admitting mistakes, or offering constructive feedback. Where trust-building behaviours were absent, reluctance, defensiveness, and hesitancy to speak up quickly filled the gap. The findings indicate that trust building is not only a leadership responsibility, but also an equally important follower skill and commitment for co-creating the foundation of psychological safety.

**TABLE 16: BUILDING HONEST, SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P7                 | <i>“The fact that they brought me into a space I had no experience in, no prior knowledge, for me, I feel that trust has already been extended—and that made my transition so much easier.”</i> |
| P14                | <i>“So, I must trust myself first. If I don’t, it’s hard to trust others or speak up... You have to start by being honest.”</i>   |
| P5                 | <i>“It’s not just about trusting leaders—it goes both ways. I have to show my colleagues I care about their confidence and their secrets. That’s how we build a team.”</i>                      |
| P10                | <i>“Trust is built over time—when you show you’re reliable, don’t judge mistakes, and always back up your team.”</i>  |
| P1                 | <i>“If my input is trusted, I feel more confident to offer solutions, but if not, I start second-guessing myself and stay quiet.”</i>   |

The evidence above shows that trust building is a daily, dynamic process in which both leaders and followers play vital roles. Team members repeatedly described how small acts

of consistency, empathy, and acknowledgement could lay the groundwork for taking interpersonal risks and supporting one another through challenges. Importantly, the absence of these behaviours was immediately felt, producing isolation and a loss of courage to engage. Participants emphasised that establishing trust was not a one-time act, but a continuous, shared effort to maintain a psychological safety environment. In organisations where trust building was clear and reciprocal priorities were established, teams were more willing to communicate honestly, admit mistakes, and collaborate toward shared goals.

### 5.5.4 To identify relational factors that influence psychological safety

#### 5.5.4.1. Theme 13: Relational factors

Participants identified several interpersonal and relational elements as central to fostering psychological safety within their teams and organisations. These findings highlight that trust, empowerment, and the presence of voice within teams significantly contribute to employees' feelings of psychological safety and engagement. The relational factors that influence psychological safety include 1) trust, 2) empowerment, and 3) voice. These human interactions were described as the actual currency of psychological safety. More so than any formal policy or organisational program. When colleagues and leaders demonstrated trust, enabled empowerment through autonomy and support, and encouraged the active expression of voice, team members felt safe to participate fully and authentically. Conversely, the absence of any of these factors led to anxiety, passivity, or self-restriction. The interplay between these relational elements was said to underpin collaboration, learning, and engagement. Making teams adaptable, innovative, and resilient in the face of challenges.

#### 1) Trust

TABLE 17: TRUST, EMPOWERMENT, AND VOICE AS CORE PILLARS

| Participant | Quote   |
|-------------|---|
| P9          | <i>"When you leave them alone to get the work done, and by giving them a chance to ask questions—being honest with your answers—builds that trust."</i> |
| P5          | <i>"Trust is shown when a manager trusts our expertise and lets us make decisions."</i>   |
| P1          | <i>"If my input is trusted, I feel more confident to offer solutions, but if not, I start second-guessing myself and stay quiet."</i>                   |

|    |  |
|----|--|
| P7 | <i>“When I experienced real trust from the team during my transition, it gave me confidence to settle in quickly.”</i> |
|----|--|

Participants widely recognised trust as the anchor for psychological safety in teams and broader organisational contexts. It was described as both the foundation and the outcome of repeated, respectful interactions in which leaders and colleagues demonstrated reliability, empathy, and transparency. Participants saw trust as something built through consistency between words and actions, confidentiality, and openness to feedback. When present, trust unlocks honest conversations, collaboration, and the willingness to admit mistakes without fear of punishment or judgment.

The narratives consistently demonstrate that trust is not just a “nice-to-have” but a transformative force that enables honest conversations, constructive disagreements, and innovation. Where trust was present, participants spoke openly, raised critical issues, and tackled problems collaboratively. In the absence of trust, contributors self-restricted, withheld feedback, and avoided conflict—the very opposite conditions of a psychologically safe environment and team. The data reinforce the need to model and reciprocate trust actively; its presence acts as a catalyst for all other dimensions of psychological safety.

## **2) Empowerment**

Empowerment emerged as a dynamic driver of psychological safety, directly linked to feelings of autonomy and value. Participants described empowerment as being trusted with meaningful tasks, included in decision-making, and supported in trying new approaches. Empowerment did not simply mean freedom from oversight. It meant being actively encouraged and resourced to use one’s own creativity and judgement. Some participants commented on the importance of feeling empowered in their roles, particularly when leaders removed hierarchical barriers or gave due recognition for contributions. Empowerment was associated with greater initiative, creativity, and voice in the workplace.

**TABLE 18: TRUST, EMPOWERMENT, AND VOICE AS CORE PILLARS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P5                 | <i>“Empowerment for us is knowing that the manager trusts our expertise and actually lets us make decisions.”</i>                       |
| P8                 | <i>“When leaders give us space to try new things and don’t micromanage, I feel like I own my work. That’s when I’m most motivated.”</i> |
| P7                 | <i>“If people know their ideas might actually be implemented, they think more creatively and work harder.”</i>                          |
| P13                | <i>“Leaders who give us control and trust us with responsibility make the team stronger.”</i>   |

Empowerment fosters engagement and high performance, enabling team members to solve problems, think creatively, and build resilience in the face of setbacks. These stories highlight that empowerment is experienced both in small daily permissions and in big strategic decisions. Teams thrived when individuals could influence both “how” and “what” of their own work. Conversely, when empowerment was lacking, feelings of passivity, frustration, and disengagement grew. The data underscore that psychological safety is not static but is renewed and maintained through empowering relational practices day by day.

### **3) Voice**

The ability to express ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of being dismissed or penalised emerged as another key relational factor. Participants indicated that psychological safety depended on being heard and acknowledged within the team or in the organisation. The relational factor of “voice” was experienced as the lifeblood of psychological safety, comprising the freedom to speak honestly, share disagreement, raise concerns, and propose solutions. Participants described the climate for voice as set not just by tolerance, but by leader and team behaviours that validated contributions, asked open-ended questions, and responded constructively, even to criticism.

**TABLE 19: TRUST, EMPOWERMENT, AND VOICE AS CORE PILLARS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P13                | <i>“Having a voice means you can speak up without worrying your idea will be shut down. That is what makes a team healthy and creative.”</i>                            |
| P7                 | <i>“Managers ask for input before big decisions; that makes everyone more committed to the project.”</i>  |
| P4                 | <i>“In previous teams, if you spoke up with a challenge or unconventional idea you would be excluded. Here, I know people will hear me out, even if they disagree.”</i> |
| P10                | <i>“When my view was welcomed, even if it was different, I felt like I belonged.”</i>   |

Participants reported that teams with robust voice not only solved problems more quickly but also built mutual respect and a culture of continuous learning. Importantly, voice was most effective when it influenced decisions, not just when it was permitted to do so. Where participants feared dismissal or being ridiculed, disengagement and “groupthink” increased. The findings established voice as a necessary “safety valve”. Allowing the organisation to adapt and enabling each member to find purpose and a sense of belonging.

### **5.5.5 To explore how follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety**

Participants described several ways in which their own initiative, professionalism, and interpersonal approach contributed to creating a psychologically safe workplace. These acts of “follower agency” included empowering team members, maintaining professional standards, fostering openness, improving relationships, and promoting self-awareness.

#### **5.5.5.1. Theme 14: Follower Agency**

Follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety through the following ways: Empowering teams by giving them 1) ownership, 2) maintaining a high professional standard, 3) promoting openness, 4) improving interpersonal relationships, and 5) training and self-awareness.

##### **1) Empowering teams by giving them ownership**

Participants described how follower agency includes actively boosting the confidence and capabilities of their peers. Rather than leaving empowerment solely to leaders, several

recounted moments when team members uplifted one another, delegated responsibility, or created an inclusive environment that built trust and enabled others to contribute. These empowering actions fostered psychological safety by allowing more voices to emerge and signalling that support was shared across the team, and not just from top to bottom.

**TABLE 20: PROFESSIONALISM, OWNERSHIP, OPENNESS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>   |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>P13</b>         | <i>"I always encourage my teammates to bring their ideas. Even if I think differently, I want them to feel their voice matters so they can grow."</i>  |
| <b>P11</b>         | <i>"In my team, empowering others means sharing information and not holding onto it just for yourself. We help each other succeed."</i>                |
| <b>P9</b>          | <i>"Sometimes, it's up to us to back each other, especially when management is not around. That kind of team support is what keeps people trying."</i> |
| <b>P7</b>          | <i>"I tell the new team members, 'We learn together. Ask for help and help back.' That's how we build trust."</i>                                      |

These accounts highlight that peer empowerment was everyone's responsibility. Participants noted that even without formal authority, they could create safe learning opportunities, set examples, and foster a sense of shared ownership. Empowering one another breaks down silos, encourages initiative, and supports more effective collaboration, all of which are crucial to nurturing psychological safety.

## **2) Maintaining a high professional standard**

A follower agency is also characterised by its willingness to set and uphold professional standards within teams and organisations. Rather than passively accepting the status quo, team members described calling out negative behaviours, reminding colleagues of shared values, and modelling integrity, even in challenging circumstances. This active maintenance of standards helped reassure everyone of a predictable and reliable working environment, thereby lowering anxiety and reinforcing psychological safety.

**TABLE 21: PROFESSIONALISM, OWNERSHIP, OPENNESS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P15                | <i>“When someone crosses a line or acts against our values, I’ll say something. It’s not just the boss’s job to hold the line.”</i> |
| P4                 | <i>“Professionalism means doing the right thing even if nobody is looking. That helps me feel safe with my colleagues.”</i>         |
| P10                | <i>“Sometimes, you have to remind the team about boundaries—even if you’re not the boss, you have to uphold the standard.”</i>      |
| P6                 | <i>“My team respects me because I’m fair and consistent with expectations, not just a follower.”</i>                                |

Participants reported that consistency and accountability from peers and leaders helped reinforce a safe and ethical workplace climate. They felt more secure and respected in environments where everyone worked to high standards, as this promoted fairness and reduced uncertainty around group expectations and consequences.

### **3) Promoting openness**

Another primary form of follower agency involved fostering openness and creating spaces for candidness, vulnerability, and honest dialogue. Participants recalled actively welcoming debate, sharing lessons from both successes and failures, or encouraging those who were hesitant to speak up. This peer-driven openness deepened psychological safety, showing that authenticity and constructive challenge were valued by the team, not just permitted by leaders.

**TABLE 22: PROFESSIONALISM, OWNERSHIP, OPENNESS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>  |
|--------------------|---|
| P8                 | <i>“A lot of people are scared to speak up. I try to go first—to share honestly. It helps others relax and see that it’s safe.”</i>   |
| P1                 | <i>“We check in with each other, not just about work. If someone’s quiet, we’ll ask if they’re okay. That openness builds trust.”</i> |
| P12                | <i>“Openness isn’t just about meetings. It’s how we talk in the hallway and solve problems every day.”</i>                            |
| P14                | <i>“If I show I’m not perfect, sometimes others feel better about speaking up too.”</i>   |

The findings indicate that every team member could ‘set the tone’ for openness by demonstrating care, receptivity, and transparency in their interactions. When followers were open about failures or invited constructive feedback, they dismantled barriers to participation and made it psychologically safer for all to contribute.

#### 4) Improve interpersonal relationships

Participants highlighted everyday acts of building and nurturing work relationships as a form of follower agency that supported psychological safety. These relational investments included mentoring, lending a listening ear, celebrating success, and diffusing conflicts between peers. These ‘small acts’ were credited with sustaining morale and resilience under pressure, allowing teams to weather challenges and maintain psychological safety over time.

**TABLE 23: PROFESSIONALISM, OWNERSHIP, OPENNESS**

| Participant | Quote   |
|-------------|---|
| P16         | <i>“I always try to support anyone new, check in, and let them know I’m there. Strong relationships make it easier to get through tough projects together.”</i> |
| P7          | <i>“If you celebrate people’s wins, they’re more likely to support you when you need it.”</i>   |
| P11         | <i>“Sometimes big progress happens just by listening well and building trust over time.”</i>  |
| P5          | <i>“I know I can speak up because my colleagues have my back. That’s teamwork.”</i>   |

Participants repeatedly credited relational warmth and investment. Not just formal policies, but also a sense of community that makes the workplace feel safe. Teams where members proactively built camaraderie and trust achieved greater cohesion, more frequent help-seeking, and higher satisfaction, especially during stressful times.

#### 5) Promoting Self-awareness

Some participants described practicing and promoting self-awareness as a crucial dimension of follower agency for achieving psychological safety. This included recognising their own limits, reflecting on feedback, and staying mindful about how their words or actions affected the team climate. By modelling humility and open self-reflection, these followers provide an example that helps normalise vulnerability and continuous learning for everyone.

**TABLE 24: PROFESSIONALISM, OWNERSHIP, OPENNESS**

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Quote</b>   |
|--------------------|--|
| P14                | <i>“So, I must trust myself first. If I don’t, it’s hard to trust others or speak up.”</i>                       |
| P8                 | <i>“I’m honest about what I know and what I don’t, so that others also feel safe to admit the same.”</i>         |
| P13                | <i>“Feedback helps me see my blind spots. I always try to learn from the team.”</i>                              |
| P10                | <i>“Sometimes I realise I’m stressed and might shut others out. Recognising that helps me invite people in.”</i> |

Self-aware followers contributed to psychological safety not only by avoiding harm but also by inspiring collective reflection, growth, and empathy. Their ongoing openness to personal learning sent a signal to their peers that vulnerability was not only tolerated but also respected within the team’s framework.

The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrated that psychological safety is neither the product of a single leadership act nor the sole responsibility of leaders. Instead, it emerged from a dynamic interplay of leadership behaviours, follower agency, relational factors, and supportive team norms. Acts such as empowering colleagues, upholding professional standards, fostering openness, nurturing relationships, and promoting self-awareness shape how individuals experience psychological safety, voice, and trust within their teams. Collectively, these findings highlight the power of collaborative participation and mutual responsibility in sustaining a psychologically safe work climate. Table 25 below shows how each theme overlaps and integrates with the others.

**TABLE 25: SUMMARY OF OVERLAPPING THEMATIC CONSTRUCTS**

| <b>Category</b>               | <b>Factors/Themes</b>  | <b>Illustrative Examples</b>                          |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| <b>Leader behaviours</b>      | Encouragement, humility, open communication, empowerment               | Admitting mistakes, fostering feedback culture        |
| <b>Follower behaviours</b>    | Voice, relational repair, active participation, shared decision-making | Speaking up, improving relationships                  |
| <b>Overlapping constructs</b> | Trust, emotional tone, power distance                                  | Mutual trust, managing hierarchy, reciprocal openness |

The following section draws these insights together, reflecting on their practical and theoretical implications for organisations seeking to enhance engagement, innovation, and well-being.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter presents a comprehensive account of the study's findings, addressing the research objectives and questions. The results revealed a multi-dimensional understanding of how psychological safety is experienced within diverse workplace environments. Highlighting both the roles of leaders and followers as well as the relational factors that enable or hinder the development of a supportive climate.

A major finding is that leadership-followership dynamics have a significant influence on psychological safety. Participants identified that leader behaviours such as providing encouragement, demonstrating humility, fostering open communication, and maintaining a supportive presence directly impact team members' willingness to express themselves, ask for help, and take interpersonal risks. In contrast, discouraging leadership was widely perceived as suppressing openness and diminishing psychological safety.

Followers were also found to be active agents in shaping psychological safety. Both constructive and passive followership emerged, revealing that team members' engagement, initiatives, and collaboration can enhance psychological safety, while disengagement or rigid power hierarchies may erode it. Trust and reciprocity between leaders and followers played a central role in this dynamic.

The findings further highlighted the importance of co-creation and shared responsibilities. Psychological safety was strongest in contexts where followers could participate meaningfully, contribute to shared decisions, and build trust within the team and organisation. The presence of these processes depended not only on leaders' actions but also on how followers presented themselves, engaged with others, and supported the work culture.

Among the most critical relational factors identified were trust, empowerment, and voice. Participants who felt empowered, trusted, and heard reported higher confidence, innovation, and overall well-being. Conversely, the absence of these factors correlated with withdrawal, reluctance to contribute, and reduced psychological safety.

The final theme underscored how follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety. Participants emphasised that their professionalism, openness, interpersonal actions, and self-awareness set examples and create ripples, shaping the overall climate for themselves and others.

The structure of this chapter and the analytic approach adopted were crafted to ensure alignment between the research objectives, research questions, and the emergent themes. By making these linkages, the chapter demonstrated a transparent and systematic design, also ensuring that all aspects of the research questions were firmly and comprehensively addressed, and laying a clear foundation for the discussion in Chapter 6.

In summary, this study demonstrated that psychological safety is a co-constructed phenomenon arising from a complex interplay among leaders, followers, and the quality of their relationships. The findings answer the research questions by illustrating the specific ways in which leadership-followership dynamics, follower roles, and relational factors each foster or inhibit the development of psychological safety.

## **6. Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter interprets the study's findings through the relational, co-constructed model of psychological safety discussed in Chapter 2, integrating constructs such as leadership, followership, trust, voice, empowerment, and inclusion (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). The chapter undertakes a systematic and in-depth discussion of the key findings from Chapter 5, rigorously comparing them with recent peer-reviewed literature on Leader-Member Exchange Theory, Leadership-Followership Theory, psychological safety, and Followership Theory. In-depth academic argumentation is used for each research question, highlighting similarities, differences, and nuanced extensions or contradictions found in the current study.

This approach ensures that the discussion directly addresses the research's core aims, provides comprehensive answers to each question, and demonstrates how the new knowledge generated by this study informs, extends, or changes prevailing theories and empirical evidence (Ahmed, 2025). Conclusions are drawn for each question, explicitly stating whether findings are consistent with, extend, or challenge the literature, thereby laying a rigorous foundation for recommendations in the final chapter.

The discussion drew from major theoretical lenses and empirical studies in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) leadership-followership, and psychological safety (Martin et al., 2016; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Special attention was paid to context-specific influences, such as organisational culture, sectoral dynamics, and the South African socio-historical landscape, as highlighted in recent studies (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

The analytic structure adopted in this study, as detailed in Chapter 5 and mapped in Table 4, ensures a transparent and systematic correspondence between the research objectives, research questions, and the emergent themes discussed herein. By anchoring the discussion in the alignment provided by Table 3, this chapter continues to engage each research question directly, systematically interrogating the findings, considering theory, and existing literature. Having outlined the analytic structure, the discussion now turns to the overarching research question, followed by an unpacking of each thematic dimension in detail.

In responding to the research questions, the discussions in the subsequent sections are organised as follows:

### **Main Research Question**

#### **In what ways are leadership-followership dynamics experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings?**

This section unpacks how participants described the overall influence of leader and follower behaviours, attitudes, and interactions on fostering or inhibiting psychological safety. Interrogating the bidirectional nature of these dynamics, critically comparing results with literature, and in turn, connecting the analysis directly with themes and subthemes from chapter 5, and systematically relating them to relevant literature.

#### **SRQ1: What relational qualities within leadership-followership interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety?**

This section analysed the relational qualities reported by participants, such as trust, openness, and empowerment, that were identified as central in shaping perceptions of psychological safety. Critically comparing results with literature, and in turn, connecting the analysis directly with themes and subthemes from chapter 5, and systematically relating them to relevant literature.

#### **SRQ2: How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace?**

This section examined how both leaders and followers perceived and enacted their roles in creating and sustaining psychological safety within workplace organisations. These findings were interpreted in conjunction with recent literature, highlighting the shared and reciprocal responsibilities involved, and analysed participants' own descriptions regarding their roles and agency. It explored the enactment of leadership and followership in daily practices, drawing out nuances of shared responsibility, active agency, and evolving roles in the co-construction of psychologically safe work environments.

## **6.2 Responding to the Main Research Question**

The findings revealed that the dynamics between leaders and followers significantly shaped psychological safety in workplace settings. A key pattern identified was the bidirectionality of influence, where both leader behaviour, such as providing support, modelling humility, and fostering open communication, and follower engagement, including proactive participation and constructive feedback, contributed additively to the team climate. This dynamic extended beyond top-down influence, highlighting the reciprocal nature of trust and voice within teams (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Newman et al., 2017). These insights are consistent with recent literature emphasising that psychological safety is relationally co-constructed through daily interactions, rather than imposed by positional authority alone.

The study also affirmed that the organisational context, including hierarchy, culture, and sectoral norms, can either amplify or constrain the positive effects of collaborative leadership-followership exchanges, supporting the findings of Edmondson & Bransby (2023) and Ayoko et al. (2023). These dynamics are further illustrated through specific themes, beginning with encouraging leadership as a foundational driver of psychological safety.

### **6.2.1 Encouraging Leadership**

Thematic analysis demonstrated that encouraging leadership emerged as a pivotal theme underpinning psychological safety. Leaders who showed support, empowerment, recognition, and sincere interest in team well-being were widely seen as fostering open dialogue and motivation (Graen & Uhl-Bein, 2014; Martin et al., 2018). These leaders provided not only task guidance but also emotional backing, making it safer for team members to contribute ideas, admit mistakes, and take interpersonal risks (Lee et al., 2018). Such leadership practices were particularly effective in environments marked by high complexity or diversity, where individualised encouragement and flexibility enhanced both trust and innovation (Wibowo & Hayati, 2019). This pattern aligns with the broader literature, which shows that supportive leadership is closely linked to team learning, engagement, and resilience (Wang, 2018; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). In summary, the data reinforced that encouraging leadership, characterised by authentic care and developmental focus, serves as a foundation for psychological safety and team success across organisational contexts (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Lee et al., 2020).

### **6.2.2 Vulnerability and Humility**

The analysis revealed that leaders who consistently demonstrated vulnerability and humility played a crucial role in establishing and maintaining psychological safety within their teams. In practice, this meant leaders openly acknowledged their own limitations, admitted mistakes, and sought input from team members. These behaviours helped normalise learning from failures and created a climate in which team members felt more comfortable speaking up and taking interpersonal risks (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

By modelling these qualities, leaders diminished perceived power distances and fostered mutual respect, making it easier for both leaders and followers to engage in authentic problem-solving and innovation. This theme is strongly supported by recent research, which emphasises that leader humility and vulnerability are catalysts for psychological safety, particularly in multicultural and hierarchical work settings (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Hu et al., 2018 and Ngunane & Mbokota, 2025). The findings suggest that these relational behaviours should not be viewed as signs of weakness, but as strengths that empower teams to learn, adapt, and thrive in dynamic organisations (Carsten et al., 2010).

### **6.2.3 Open Communication and Feedback Culture**

A culture of open communication and regular, constructive feedback was found to be central to the experience and maintenance of psychological safety across the workplace contexts. When both leaders and team members actively promoted transparent dialogue through regular team meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and digital communication channels. Teams became more resilient, adaptive, and willing to share ideas without fear of negative repercussions. The findings align with Edmondson's emphasis on open and honest communication as a primary mechanism for enabling voice, surfacing problems, and supporting innovative behaviours (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

In organisations where feedback was ongoing and collaborative practice was not just a top-down process, trust and team cohesion were significantly strengthened. Regular and honest feedback encouraged risk-taking, facilitated learning from mistakes, and enabled teams to tackle challenges proactively, as supported by the literature on learning organisations and employee motivation (Newman et al., 2017; Edmondson & Harvey, 2018).

These patterns confirmed that open communication and feedback-rich environments are foundational not only for engagement and satisfaction, but also for sustaining psychological

safety in diverse, hierarchical, and hybrid workplace alike (Ayoko et al., 2023; Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017; McKinsey, 2021; Coutifaris & Grant, 2022).

#### **6.2.4 Challenging but Supportive Environments**

The analysis highlighted the importance of balanced environments, where team members experience both challenge and support, for optimal psychological safety and growth. When leaders provided demanding assignments, honest constructive feedback, or set high expectations, employees often described increased motivation and personal development, so long as this challenge was matched by visible encouragement, guidance, and emotional support (Wang, 2018; Newman et al., 2017). This combination fostered an atmosphere in which individuals felt safe to stretch themselves, take calculated risks, learn from their mistakes, and ultimately achieve higher levels of team and personal performance (Hans & Gupta, 2018; Edmondson, 2018).

Research affirms that high-performing, innovative teams thrive not just on encouragement and comfort, but also on being stretched out of their comfort zones with a suitable platform and resources for success (Edmondson, 2018; Frazier et al., 2017). In this study, the presence of challenge, combined with ongoing emotional support and constructive feedback, enabled team members to discuss mistakes openly, ask for help, and collaborate more effectively in dynamic work settings (Ayoko et al., 2023).

#### **6.2.5 Discouraging Leadership**

The findings illustrated that discouraging leadership behaviours, such as micromanagement, disciplinary responses to mistakes, inconsistent communication, and displays of favouritism, undermine psychological safety in significant ways. When leaders responded to errors with blame, criticism, or punitive consequences, team members often described a growing reluctance to speak up or take risks, fearing negative personal or career repercussions. This contributed to defensive silence, withdrawal, and missed opportunities for constructive learning and creativity (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 2018).

Blame-oriented leadership reinforced a culture of self-protection, rather than collaboration or innovation, making teams more susceptible to mistakes and groupthink (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018; Carmeli et al., 2009). A lack of trust, unclear expectations, or exclusion further deepened this effect, as those who felt marginalised or undervalued disengaged from collective goals. The results support evidence that psychological safety can be eroded

quickly through inconsistent or punitive leadership, and that reversing these patterns requires sustained efforts to rebuild trust and a learning-oriented culture (Newman et al., 2017; Edmondson & Lei; Carmeli, 2009). While leadership behaviours set the tone, participants also emphasised relational qualities that underpin psychological safety, addressed in Research-Sub Question 1.

### **6.3 Responding to SRQ1: What Relational Qualities within Leadership-Followership Interactions are Perceived to Foster Psychological Safety?**

This section addresses Sub-Research Question 1, building on the mapping established in Table 5.2 and findings in Chapter 5. The discussion centres on relational qualities, including trust, empowerment, and voice. Participants identified as critical in shaping perceptions of psychological safety. Each theme is integrated with theory and research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the qualities that underpin safe, high-performing workplaces.

#### **6.3.1 Trust**

Trust emerged as the most foundational relational quality in the development and sustainability of psychological safety within leadership-followership interactions (Frazier et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2017). Thematic analysis confirmed that when team members perceived their leaders and peers to be consistent, fair, and respectful, a strong sense of interpersonal trust was established. This trust enabled the open expression of ideas, honest reporting of mistakes, and mutual support during uncertainty, promoting a climate in which employees felt genuinely safe to take interpersonal risks (Joo et al., 2023; Dirks & de Jong, 2022).

This overlap moves the discussion beyond separate categories of “leader behaviour” and “follower behaviours” toward an integrated understanding of trust as a shared relational construct. Trust is mutually beneficial, evolving through ongoing exchanges in which each party’s actions strengthen the other’s confidence. Trust operating as a relational bridge, binding leader and follower contributions into a co-constructed climate of psychological safety.

Empirical research demonstrated a close relationship among leader authenticity, empathy, and trust, with authentic leadership significantly predicting both trust and psychological

safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). When leaders openly acknowledged their fallibility, acted with integrity, and listened empathetically, trust grew and psychological safety was reinforced (Clark, 2020; Ayoko et al., 2023; Sacramento et al., 2023). Conversely, inconsistent, manipulative, or self-interested leadership rapidly eroded trust, heightening fear, silence, and disengagement.

Trust also played a crucial role in peer interactions, where reciprocal support and the fair treatment of all voices reduced the stigma of making mistakes, supported group learning, and increased collective engagement (Edmondson, 2018; Edmondson & Lei, 2014). The findings underscore that trust is not static; it is actively built and maintained through everyday relational practices at both individual and team levels, and it remains central to psychological safety, regardless of sector or organisational structure.

### **6.3.2 Empowerment**

Empowerment has emerged as a vital relational quality that fosters psychological safety within teams and organisations. The analysis revealed that when leaders purposefully delegated authority, encouraged autonomous decision-making, and recognised individual strengths, team members felt more confident to contribute proactively and innovatively without fear of reprimand or dismissal. Empowerment does not simply entail the absence of micromanagement. Still, it is characterised by affirming team members' capabilities, providing meaningful resources, and making it safe for individuals to challenge established norms or propose ideas (Lee et al., 2018; Edmondson, 2018; Clark, 2020).

Research demonstrates that empowerment enhances engagement, learning, and resilience, empowering individuals to recover from mistakes and strive for continuous improvement (Frazier et al., 2017; Hans & Gupta, 2018). Empowering environments are marked by mutual respect, constructive challenges, and shared ownership for outcomes. All of which strengthen psychological safety and team cohesion (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). Conversely, when empowerment is absent due to rigid hierarchies or the reluctance of leaders to share control, team members are more likely to withdraw, disengage, or conform to prevailing opinions, hindering both innovation and personal development (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

The theme of empowerment highlighted the critical role of relational trust, autonomy, and support in shaping a safe and enabling workplace climate, consistent with evidence on effective team functioning and psychological safety (Wang et al., 2018).

### **6.3.3 Voice**

Voice was also identified as a core relational quality directly tied to psychological safety and team effectiveness. The analysis showed that when both leaders and followers fostered an environment where all team members could freely share ideas, raise concerns, and challenge consensus respectfully, teams reported higher trust, stronger engagement, and more innovative outcomes. This climate of voice was achieved through active encouragement by leaders, transparent communication of psychological safety norms, and equitable opportunities for participation, ensuring no team member felt marginalised or silenced (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Clark, 2020; Edmondson & Besieux, 2021).

The research literature demonstrates that voice not only reduces 'groupthink' but also facilitates early risk identification, learning from mistakes, and collective problem-solving (Edmondson, 2018). Empowering voice amongst junior or the historically less-heard team members, was found to be a critical lever for inclusion, equity, and psychological safety (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025). When voice was discouraged, through leader domination, subtle power imbalances, or even cultural resistance, teams became less resilient, less creative, and more prone to errors (Frazier et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018).

These findings underscore that intentional, consistent support for team voice through leader behaviours and explicit team practices is a crucial contributor to psychological safety, mirroring evidence across organisational settings (Frazier et al., 2017). Together, trust, empowerment, and voice highlight the relational foundations of psychological safety. The next section explores how leaders and followers enact these qualities in practice.

## **6.4 Responding to SRQ2: How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace?**

This section synthesised the evidence on leader and follower roles in co-creating psychological safety. The analysis highlighted the shared, reciprocal, and evolving responsibilities that both leaders and team members enact to sustain safe team climates. It also explored the nuances of agency, power dynamics, and context, revealing that psychological safety is maintained not just through top-down leadership, but also through active follower participation, peer-to-peer support, and ongoing negotiation of relational boundaries.

This approach is consistent with contemporary followership and leadership theory, which emphasises that today's work environment or settings demand distributed leadership, shared accountability, and empowered contributing across all organisational levels (Frazier et al., 2017; Edmondson, 2018; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). The following subsections systematically examine the major themes associated with this question, including constructive and passive followership, power distance, trust and reciprocity, and the mechanisms by which followers shape the climate and outcomes.

#### **6.4.1 Constructive Followership**

Constructive followership has been identified as critical for sustaining psychological safety in teams and broader organisational contexts. The analysis showed that followers who took initiative, provided honest feedback (both upwards and peer-to-peer), and actively contributed to problem-solving played a direct role in creating a climate of openness and innovation (Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023). These followers were proactive in voicing concerns, suggesting improvements, and supporting colleagues' behaviours that reinforced mutual trust, learning, and team resilience (Edmondson, 2018; Clark, 2020; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Sy, 2010).

The literature confirms that constructive followership is strongly linked to improved psychological safety and enhanced performance (Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). Encouragement and recognition from leaders amplified these behaviours, empowering other team members to participate more fully and distributing responsibility for safety and well-being throughout the team (Carsten et al., 2010). In contrast to constructive contributions, passive followership presented significant challenges, as explored next.

#### **6.4.2 Passive Followership**

Passive followership emerged as a key challenge to sustaining psychological safety in organisational settings. The thematic analysis revealed that team members who refrained from voicing opposition, defaulted to compliance, or consistently waited for direction from leaders, rather than engaging proactively, exerted a dampening influence on open dialogue, risk-taking, and the learning climate. Such passivity, often reinforced by hierarchical team structures, uncertainty about psychological safety norms, or prior experiences of punitive leadership, was linked to group silence, disengagement, and the tendency for errors or concerns to go unaddressed (Frazier et al., 2017).

Conversely, passive followership, characterised by compliance, avoidance, and deference, had a notably adverse effect on psychological safety. Teams with high levels of passivity often described waiting for direction, hesitancy to express opposition, and reluctance to challenge prevailing assumptions. The results reiterated research demonstrating that passive or avoidant followers contribute to disengagement, curb learning, and inhibit early problem detection (Carsten et al., 2018). Work environments marked by uncertainty, strict hierarchy, or punitive leadership often bred such passivity, reinforcing or enabling silos and diminishing collective accountability (Carsten et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2017). Over time, persistent passive behaviours threatened innovation and the sustainability of psychological safety.

The literature strongly supports that passive followership in contrast to active, constructive contributions, undermines adaptive performance, especially in complex or high-risk contexts (Leung et al., 2018; Clark, 2020). When psychological safety is lacking, team members are more likely to avoid challenging group decisions, defer to authority, and minimise participation, thereby directly limiting the group's collective wisdom and increasing groupthink and uncorrected errors (Detert & Burris, 2007; Carmeli et al., 2009; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

Conversely, even small acts of follower engagement, such as asking clarity questions or supporting a peer, had a positive ripple effect (Carsten et al., 2018). Emphasising that overcoming passivity is not only possible but also crucial for fostering robust psychological safety. This dynamic was further complicated by power distance, which shaped how voice and agency were expressed.

#### **6.4.3 Power Distance**

The theme of power distance, how authority, hierarchy, and control are distributed and perceived within teams (Appelbaum et al., 2020), emerged as a significant determinant of psychological safety in this study. The analysis revealed that in teams and organisations characterised by high power distance, team members were significantly less likely to challenge authority, offer dissenting views, or express concerns openly. This respect led to communication silos, groupthink, and a climate where valuable input was withheld, even when it could have benefited team outcomes (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Edmondson, 2018; Clark, 2020).

Recent literature strongly supports the notion that higher power distance inhibits psychological safety by undermining the perceived legitimacy of speaking up, disproportionately silencing lower-status team members (Frazier et al., 2017; Clark 2020). Conversely, when power gradients were intentionally flattened by leaders through inclusive practices, deliberate invitations for input, and explicit signalling that all voices held value, teams became more resilient, mistakes surfaced sooner, and adaptability improved (Detert & Burris, 2007; Newman et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2018).

The findings demonstrated that managing power distance is an ongoing relational practice and reducing hierarchical barriers is critical for sustaining psychological safety and high performance in adverse workplace settings. Trust and reciprocity emerged as mechanisms that could counteract these hierarchical barriers.

#### **6.4.4 Trust and Reciprocity**

Trust and Reciprocity were also found to be deeply entwined as essential relational mechanisms for the emergence and maintenance of psychological safety in the workplace. The study's analysis highlighted that psychological safety flourished when trust, not merely in a downward (leader-to-follower) sense, was present. But as a mutual quality, it was actively sustained among all team members. This trust created the "reciprocal expectancy"; as the leader trusted team members with authentic feedback and support, followers mirrored these actions through openness, reliability, and constructive engagement (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022).

The literature confirms that reciprocity underpins a righteous cycle. When individuals see their vulnerability met with support rather than judgement, they are more likely to "give back: in the form of peer support and constructive challenge, multiplying psychological safety's effects (Newman et al., 2017; Carmeli et al., 2009; Frazier., 2017). Organisational research also demonstrates that a lack of reciprocity, such as unreciprocated trust or repeated instances of one-sided engagement, quickly erodes team cohesion and leads to relational withdrawal or defensive silence (Newman et al., 2017; Carmeli et al., 2009).

Findings from this study and other related studies emphasise that both leaders and followers share ongoing responsibility for reinforcing trust and reciprocity. Actively acknowledging effort, expressing appreciation, and engaging transparently in team challenges are ways these relational foundations are renewed daily, and where they exist, psychological safety

reliably endures (Joo et al., 2023). Active participation extended these relational foundations into everyday team practices.

#### **6.4.5 Active Participation**

Active participation has been identified as a key contributor to psychological safety in organisations and their teams. The analysis revealed that when employees or followers felt comfortable, they meaningfully participated by raising questions, giving input during meetings and feedback sessions, and challenging assumptions, thereby contributing to a safer, more resilient, and higher-performing team environment (Sacramento et al., 2023). Teams with high active participation exhibited greater engagement, faster problem resolution, and more robust cycles of innovation, as individuals took interpersonal risks to share novel ideas or highlight concerns without fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023; Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Clark, 2020).

The literature further highlights that such active participation is enabled by both structural factors, such as inclusive meeting formats and regular opportunities to speak, and relational factors, including leader modelling, feedback, and positive reinforcement. Clark (2020) describes “challenger safety” as the point at which individuals feel secure not only to contribute but also to challenge the status quo respectfully. Consistent research confirms that teams with high participation also experience improved job satisfaction, mental health, and lower turnover, all of which are crucial for sustained organisational effectiveness and psychological safety ultimately (Edmondson, 1999; Carmeli et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2017).

Both the data and literature emphasise that active participation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process that requires intentional cultivation at every level. Where all voices are invited, heard, and acted upon consistently. These result in the strongest outcomes for psychological safety, including both inclusion and performance (Carmeli et al., 2010; Mohase et al., 2025). Shared decision-making further institutionalised these practices, embedding psychological safety into collective processes.

#### **6.4.6 Shared Decision-Making**

Shared Decision-Making was repeatedly highlighted as a core practice supporting psychological safety, inclusion, and team effectiveness. The results revealed that when both leaders and followers engaged in collaborative decision-making, it involved goal setting, problem-solving, or resource allocation. Team members developed a sense of shared

ownership, increased trust, and deeper investment in outcomes (Carsten, 2010). This active involvement in choices affecting their work fostered open dialogue and signalled that every perspective was valued, irrespective of hierarchy (Clark, 2020, Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017).

Recent literature demonstrates that shared decision-making not only builds engagement but is also closely related to higher resilience, reduced stress, and more creative problem-solving even in high-uncertainty or high-stakes organisational contexts. Effective teams establish consistent processes for co-creating solutions and encourage dissent or debate as productive, rather than threatening (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017). The findings further demonstrate that inclusive shared decision-making can mitigate the adverse effects of power distance, encourage the surface of diverse ideas earlier, and prepare teams to adapt quickly in rapidly changing environments (Mohase et al., 2025).

Shared decision-making supports psychological safety by institutionalising both agency and voice, reinforcing that all members are critical stakeholders in collective success and team learning. Finally, maintaining professional standards provided the ethical and relational anchor for psychological safety.

#### **6.4.7 Maintaining Professional Standards**

Maintaining professional standards, encompassing reliability, skill and competence, ethical conduct, and respect, emerged as a crucial underpinning of psychological safety within teams and broader organisational contexts. The analysis showed that when all members, both leaders and followers, consistently upheld high standards of integrity, competence, and accountability, trust between colleagues deepened, and open, respectful dialogue became the norm, i.e., the order of the day (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Newman et al., 2017). Professionalism signalled that feedback, critique, and error-reporting were about growth and improvement, rather than personal attack or blame game (Carmeli et al., 2009; Frazier et al., 2017).

The literature emphasised that psychological safety is not synonymous with relaxing standards or lowering expectations, but instead with supporting individuals in meeting clearly articulated, collectively upheld norms or codes of conduct (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Newman et al., 2017). Environments where mutual respect, constructive criticism, and commitment to continuous learning were normative enabled both leaders and followers to

challenge performance shortfalls, share lessons learned, and ask for help without fear of stigmatisation or judgment (Sacramento et al., 2023).

Research also indicates that fostering professional standards promotes diversity of thought, enhances organisational resilience, and enables teams to navigate ethical dilemmas with transparency and collaboration (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Ultimately, maintaining high professional standards supports not only individual and collective efficacy but also anchors the stable, ethical, and high-performing cultures in which psychological safety thrives.

#### **6.4.8 Improving Relationships**

Improving interpersonal relationships within teams emerged as a central mechanism for cultivating and sustaining psychological safety (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). The analysis found that teams with open, respectful, and trust-based relationships were significantly more likely to engage in honest communication, effective collaboration, and rapid conflict resolution. All of which are foundational to psychological safety. Improving relationships involved both structured efforts, such as regular feedback sessions, mentoring, and team-building exercises. Every day relational behaviours, including empathy, active listening, and constructive criticism (Clark, 2020; Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014).

The literature affirmed that strong workplace relationships drive psychological safety by reducing interpersonal fear, promoting direct and supportive feedback, and helping teams recover from mistakes or disagreements more quickly (Clark, 2020; Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). For leaders, interventions that improve relationships, such as modelling vulnerability, embracing productive conflict, and encouraging cross-functional interactions, are vital for fostering inclusivity, team engagement, and innovation.

Research also highlights that high-quality relationships foster resilience and mitigate the effects of organisational stressors and uncertainty, thereby enhancing the team's ability to adapt to change (Clark, 2020; Carsten et al., 2010; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014). Ultimately, sustained attention to relationship-building not only enhances individual and team well-being but also supports a high-performing, psychologically safe culture.

#### **6.4.9 Empowering Team Members**

Empowering team members is a cornerstone of psychological safety in workplaces. The analysis showed that when leaders intentionally transferred decision authority, encouraged initiative, and recognised individual strengths, team members were not only more engaged but also more willing to collaborate, propose innovative solutions, and contribute beyond their regular formal roles. Empowerment reduced fear of failure, built individual confidence, and generated a shared sense of ownership for both successes and challenges within the team (Wang et al., 2018; Clark, 2020; Uhl-Bein et al., 2014; Carsten et al., 2010).

The literature underscores that empowerment is an active, ongoing process that requires both structural support, such as training, resource allocation, and growth opportunities. As well as daily relational behaviours like authentic feedback, visible trust, open recognition, and peer support. Empowered environments enable teams to experiment safely, learn from mistakes, and collectively adapt to unexpected changes. These are key ingredients of organisational resilience (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The findings also highlighted the crucial role of peer-to-peer empowerment, in which colleagues mentor, encourage, and coach one another rather than relying solely on formal leaders for validation or guidance. This collaborative form of empowerment enables greater diversity of thought, more inclusive participation, and continuous reinforcement of psychological safety at every level of the organisation.

#### **6.4.10 Fostering Openness**

Fostering openness is a central pillar for achieving and sustaining psychological safety in a team or organisation. The analysis revealed that when team members and leaders alike prioritised open dialogue, transparent communication, and inclusive feedback practices, individuals felt empowered to share concerns, propose new ideas, and challenge established norms. Driving both team learning and innovation. Openness encourages the normalisation of honest mistakes and builds a culture where risk-taking and growth, rather than silence or self-censorship, become the default (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 2018; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

The literature emphasises that fostering openness requires concrete actions, including setting up explicit communication channels, holding open forums, ensuring regular feedback sessions, and modelling vulnerability and curiosity from leadership (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Detert & Burris, 2007). High-performing and innovative teams are those in which complex

topics can be addressed productively and every member feels psychologically safe speaking their mind without fear of being ridiculed or negative consequences (Edmondson, 2018; Sacramento et al., 2023).

Furthermore, openness extends to emotional honesty and the validation of diverse perspectives, contributing to greater morale, team satisfaction, and collective resilience in the face of change (Newman et al., 2017). Organisations that maintain and protect openness report not only higher psychological safety but also improved engagement, well-being, and sustainable performance, ultimately benefiting both individuals and the organisation as a whole.

The preceding discussion has highlighted that psychological safety is nurtured through a constellation of interdependent relational and organisational practices, including empowering participatory power, fostering openness, sustaining high professional standards, and investing in trust-based relationships. As this chapter has shown, the success of these practices depends not only on formal leaders but also on the active, reciprocal engagement of all team members. The findings outlined here set the stage for the concluding section, which extracts the key insights, implications, and avenues for future research that emerge from this study’s analysis of psychological safety in the workplace.

The key factors that influence psychological safety, as identified in the findings and supported by the literature, are summarised in Table 25 below.

**TABLE 26: FACTORS INFLUENCING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

| Factor                           | Description (Concise Synthesis Based on Findings and Literature)  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Constructive Followership</b> | Proactive behaviours such as initiative, honest upward and peer feedback, and collaborative problem-solving contribute directly to openness, innovation, mutual trust, team learning, and resilience. Strengthened by the leader's encouragement and recognition.                             |
| <b>Passive Followership</b>      | Compliance-driven, avoidant, or deferential behaviours that suppress voice, inhibit learning, reinforce silence, and increase the risk of unaddressed errors. Often rooted in punitive leadership, hierarchy, or uncertainty. Over time, this undermines innovation and psychological safety. |
| <b>Power Distance</b>            | High power distance reduces voice, dissent, and challenge of assumptions, leading to groupthink and withheld input. Lower power   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | distance, achieved through inclusive leader behaviours and explicit invitations to contribute, enhances adaptability, early error detection, and team resilience.  |
| <b>Trust and Reciprocity</b>              | Mutual trust and reciprocal relational behaviour form a self-reinforcing cycle that supports openness, reliability, and constructive engagement. When vulnerability is met with support, psychological safety expands; when trust is unreciprocated, withdrawal and defensive silence increase.      |
| <b>Active Participation</b>               | Meaningful engagement in discussions, questioning, feedback, and constructive challenge. Enables faster problem-solving, innovation, and team resilience. Supported by inclusive structures (e.g., meeting formats) and relational cues (e.g., leader modelling and positive reinforcement).         |
| <b>Shared Decision-Making</b>             | Collaborative involvement in goal setting, problem-solving, and resource decisions. Builds ownership, trust, engagement, and adaptability. Mitigates power distance and institutionalises agency, voice, and psychological safety through structured inclusivity.                                    |
| <b>Maintaining Professional Standards</b> | Consistent competence, integrity, ethical conduct, and respect across team members. Signals that feedback and critique relate to improvement rather than blame. Strengthens trust, supports learning, and anchors psychologically safe cultures without reducing performance expectations.           |
| <b>Improving Relationships</b>            | Strong, respectful, trusting interpersonal relationships enabling open communication, rapid conflict resolution, and supportive feedback. Built through both formal activities (mentoring, team building) and everyday behaviours (empathy, active listening). Enhances resilience and adaptability. |
| <b>Empowering Team Members</b>            | Delegation of authority, recognition of individual strengths, and encouragement of initiative. Builds confidence, reduces fear of failure, and increases willingness to collaborate and innovate. Peer-to-peer empowerment further reinforces inclusive participation.                               |
| <b>Fostering Openness</b>                 | Promotion of transparent communication, candid dialogue, and the normalisation of mistakes. Enables individuals to challenge norms safely and support learning and innovation. Requires explicit channels, regular feedback practices, and vulnerability modelling by leaders.                       |

## 6.5 Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrated that psychological safety is relationally co-constructed through leadership-followership dynamics, rather than imposed by positional authority. Leaders foster psychological safety by encouraging behaviours, promoting humility, facilitating open communication, and adopting balanced challenge-support practices. In contrast, followers contribute through constructive engagement, trust-building, and voice-behaviours. These bidirectional exchanges confirm the interpretivist emphasis in Chapter 2, that psychological safety emerges from relational rhythms of trust, empowerment, voice, and inclusion (Graen & Uhl-Bein, 2014; Carsten et al., 2010).

The study further highlighted that discouragement leadership styles, passive followership, and high-power distance undermine psychological safety. Requiring relational repair and emotional labour from the followers to restore trust (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022; Bastardo & Andriaensen, 2023).

Trust, empowerment, and voice remain central pillars, but their enactment is profoundly shaped by context. In South African workplaces, historical legacies, cultural diversity, and hierarchical structures amplify the importance of inclusive leadership and reciprocal followership (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Hincapie & Costa, 2024). These contextual influences confirm that psychological safety is not a universal condition, but a negotiated, context-sensitive experience (Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Newman et al., 2017).

Overall, the findings extend the existing literature by showing that psychological safety is sustained through shared responsibility, relational repair, and ethical labour. They challenge static, leader-centric models and affirm the interpretivist view that psychological safety is a dynamic, co-constructed phenomenon embedded in everyday interactions (Edmondson, 2018; Frazier et al., 2017; Carmeli et al., 2009). This conclusion provides a foundation for the recommendations in Chapter 7, emphasising the need for relationally attuned leadership and empowered followership in diverse organisational contexts

Demonstrating that psychological safety is constructed through multifaceted, context-sensitive, and reciprocal processes, this study, anchored in current relational and team learning literature, confirms and advances the scholarly debate. The findings substantiate recent calls for informed research and practical interventions that foster psychological safety intentionally through shared relational commitment at all organisational levels (Ayoko et al.,

2023; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Mohase, 2025; Clarke et al., 2024). The contribution of this study lies in its evidence for foundational and actionable roles of trust, empowerment, voice, and inclusion. Offering a robust theoretical and empirical platform for future studies and organisational best practices.

These findings point to a need for organisational work settings to develop leaders and followers with explicit skills in communication, intersectional inclusion, and proactive psychosocial support (Ayoko et al., 2023). Leadership development systems, training, and HR strategies must align with these demands to sustain psychological safety in rapidly evolving and diverse workplace contexts (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).

## **7. Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the main conclusions of the study, drawn from the discussion in Chapter 6. The research examined how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to the co-construction of psychological safety in workplace settings. Psychological safety emerged as a relational climate shaped by bidirectional exchanges, in which leaders set the tone through encouragement, humility, and open communication. And followers sustained psychological safety through constructive engagement, trust-building, and voice behaviours. These conclusions confirm Edmondson's (1999) foundational view of psychological safety as a relational construct, while extending Newman et al.'s (2017) meta-analytic findings by demonstrating the critical role of follower agency.

The conclusion highlights that psychological safety is not imposed by positional authorities but negotiated daily through relational practices, reciprocity, and contextual sensitivity. This chapter integrates these insights into principal theoretical conclusions, outlines the study's contributions to literature, provides recommendations for management and organisational leaders, and reflects on limitations and directions for future research.

This study examined how leadership-followership dynamics contribute to the co-construction of psychological safety in workplace settings. Psychological safety is a critical relational construct that enables trust, voice, inclusion, and innovation, yet most research has been leader-centric, overlooking the reciprocal role of followers. By foregrounding both the leader and the follower agency, this study addressed an essential gap in the literature, showing that psychological safety is not imposed by positional authority but negotiated daily through relational rhythms of trust, empowerment, and voice. This matters because organisations increasingly operate in diverse, sometimes hybrid, and high-pressure contexts, where psychological safety is essential for resilience, collaboration, and sustainable performance.

### **7.2 Principal Theoretical Conclusions**

This study concludes that psychological safety is a relationally constructed phenomenon, rather than a static climate imposed by leaders. The discussion in Chapter 6, demonstrated

that safety emerges through bidirectional exchanges, where leaders set the relational tone through encouragement, humility, and open communication, and followers sustain it through constructive engagement, trust-building, and voice behaviours. These findings confirm Edmondson's (1999) foundational view that psychological safety is embedded in interpersonal risk-taking, while extending Newman et al.'s (2017) meta-analytic insights by highlighting the critical role of the follower.

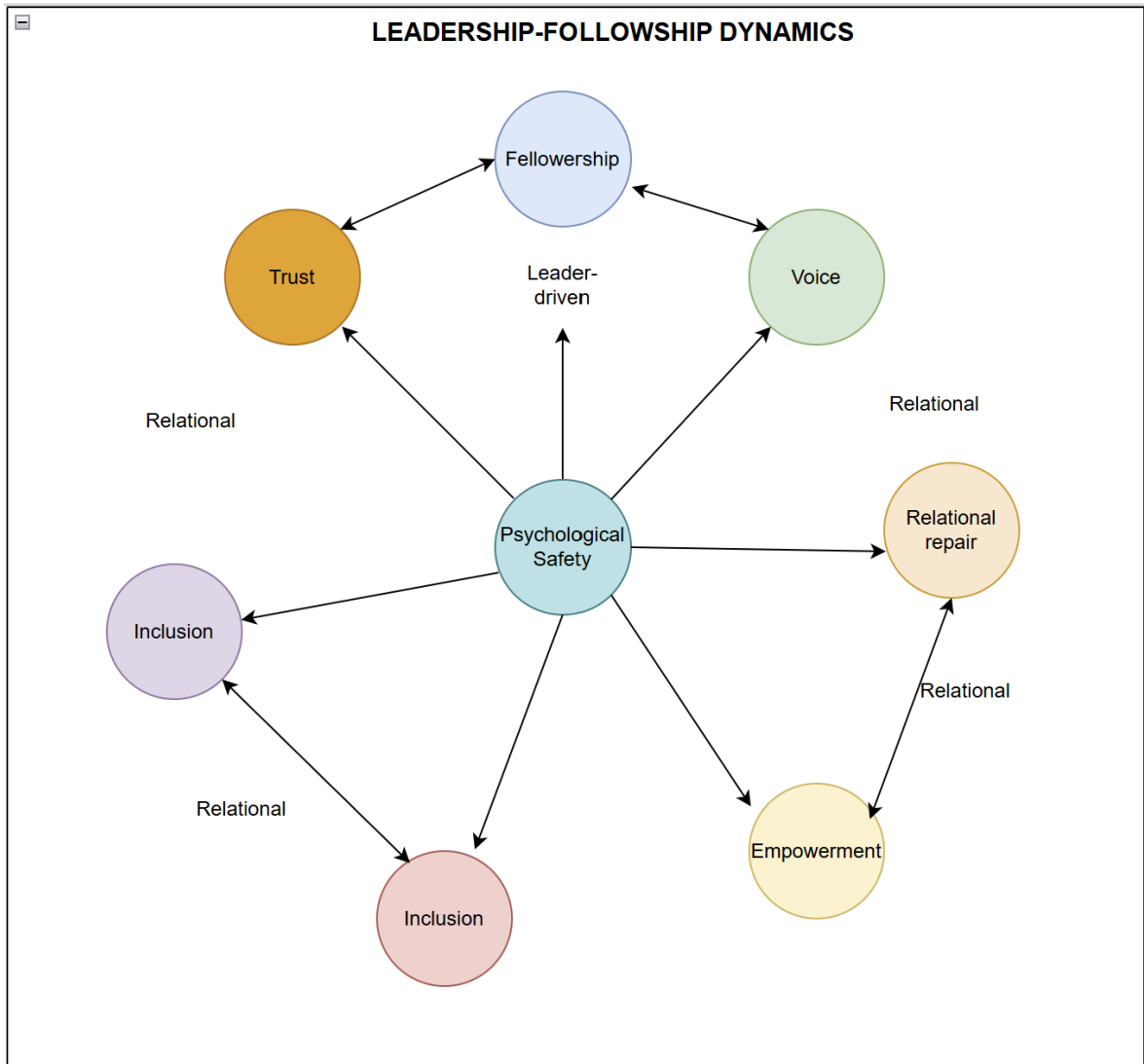
A second conclusion is that psychological safety depends on relational pillars of trust, empowerment, voice, and inclusion. These constructs were consistently evident in participant accounts, underscoring that psychological safety is negotiated through everyday practices of reciprocity and relational repair. This aligns with Carmeli et al. (2009), who emphasise the importance of high-quality relationships for learning behaviours and extend Bartardoz and Andriaensen's (2023) theorisation of followership as emotional regulation and ethical responsiveness.

Third, the study concludes that power distance and contextual legacies significantly shape how psychological safety is experienced. In South African workplaces, hierarchical structures and socio-historical inequalities amplify the risks of speaking up, requiring deliberate relational practices to flatten hierarchies and foster inclusion. This supports Ngubane and Mbokota's (2025) findings on the importance of emotionally intelligent leadership in hybrid teams, while adding nuance by showing how followers actively repair and sustain psychological safety in hierarchical contexts.

Finally, the study concludes that psychological safety is sustained through reciprocity and mutual responsiveness. Leaders and followers alike engage in relational repairs when psychological safety is threatened. Demonstrating that psychological safety is not a one-time achievement, but an ongoing process of negotiation. This reinforces the interpretivist perspective's view that organisational life is socially constructed through interaction, vulnerability, and shared meaning-making (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

### 7.3 Revisiting and Refining the Conceptual Framework

**FIGURE 4: REVISED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF BIDIRECTIONAL CO-CONSTRUCTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**



The original framework presented in Chapter 2 positioned psychological safety as a relational outcome shaped by leadership-follower dynamics. The findings of the study affirmed and extended that model, revealing psychological safety as a bidirectional process co-constructed through emotional labour, relational repair, and contextual sensitivity. Leadership and follower roles were fluid, with followers often initiating trust-building and leaders responding with vulnerability and openness.

The refined framework above integrates these insights. It retains the centrality of psychological safety while emphasising the dynamic interplay between leader-driven, follower-driven, and relational elements. The inclusion of “Relational Repair” and Contextual Sensitivity” reflects the study’s emphasis on emotional nuance and situational complexity. This revised model offers a more textured, ethically attuned understanding of how psychological safety is cultivated in diverse workplace settings.

#### **7.4 Research Contribution**

This study contributes to the literature and the body of scholarship by reframing psychological safety as a dynamic, co-constructed process rather than a static climate imposed by leaders. This discussion in Chapter 6 demonstrated that psychological safety is sustained through reciprocal exchanges, relational repair, and follower agency, extending Edmondson’s (1999) foundational work on interpersonal risk-taking. By highlighting the active role of followers, the study challenged leader-centric models and affirms Bastardo and Andriaensen’s (2023) argument that followership involves emotional regulation, ethical responsiveness, and proactive engagement.

The second contribution lies in contextualising psychological safety within workplaces. The results showed that power distance, supported by historical legacies, significantly shapes how safety is experienced and negotiated. This adds nuance to Newman et al.’s (2017) meta-analytic insights by demonstrating that psychological safety is not universally experienced but is deeply influenced by context. In doing so, the study advances literature on organisational behaviour in high-power distance environments and contributes to global debates on inclusion and trust.

Lastly, the study reinforces interpretivist perspectives by demonstrating that psychological safety is socially constructed through dialogue, vulnerability, and shared meaning-making. This aligns with Einola and Alvesson’s (2021) emphasis on emotional tone and responsiveness in relational quality. At the same time, it extends the literature by showing how leaders and followers co-construct psychological safety through everyday practices of reciprocity. The study therefore contributes both theoretically and methodologically, offering a relational, context-sensitive lens that enriches the scholarly understanding of psychological safety.

## 7.5 Recommendations for Management and/or Stakeholders

This study concludes by highlighting that psychological safety is co-constructed through relational practices between leaders and followers. To embed these insights into organisational life, various recommendations are proposed for management, leadership, and stakeholders:

- Leaders should consistently demonstrate humility, openness, and encouragement. These behaviours set the relational tone and foster climates where employees feel safe to speak up and take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson & Brandsby, 2023).
- Organisations should create structures that enable followers to participate in shared decision-making, exercise voice, and engage in relational repair. Empowerment strengthens trust and reciprocity, sustaining psychological safety (Newman et al., 2017).
- High power distance was found to inhibit psychological safety. Management and/or leadership should flatten hierarchies by promoting inclusive communication, reducing unnecessary bureaucracy, and ensuring equitable access to leaders (Ngubane & Mbokota, 2025).
- Psychological safety thrives when relationships are reciprocal and transparent. Organisations should promote fairness, accountability, and recognition of relational labour, ensuring that both leaders and followers contribute to sustaining safety (Carmeli et al., 2009).
- Both leaders and followers from training that enhances emotional intelligence, relational awareness, and self-reflection. Such programs equip individuals to manage emotions, repair relationships, and maintain professional standards (Bastardo & Andriaesen, 2023).
- Management should design a workplace that balances performance expectations with relational support. A culture of inclusion, transparency, and encouragement reduces fear-based behaviours, thereby strengthening innovation and retention.

## **7.6 Research Limitations**

This was conducted within a limited timeframe, spanning a single semester, which constrained the breadth of data collection. As a result, the sample size was smaller than ideal. While the findings are robust within the studied organisations, broader generalisation across industries and sectors should be approached with caution.

A second limitation lies in the interpretivist qualitative design. While this approach provided depth, nuance, and contextual sensitivity, it privileges lived experience over statistical generalisability. The reliance on semi-structured interviews means that findings reflect participants' perspectives at a particular moment in time, rather than longitudinal dynamics.

A third limitation is that the study was situated or conducted within the South African organisational work context. While this setting offered unique insights into power distance, cultural diversity, and historical legacies, it also meant that the conclusions may not have fully translated to contexts with different cultural or structural conditions. Finally, the study did not explore specific relational dimensions, such as the role of third-party stakeholders in shaping psychological safety. These boundaries were intentional, ensuring focus on leader-follower dynamics, but they nonetheless limit the scope.

## **7.7 Suggestions for Future Research**

This study opens several avenues for further exploration into the relational dynamics of psychological safety:

- Future research could track leader-follower relationships over time to examine how psychological safety is rebuilt after violations, and what relational practices sustain it across organisational change.
- Given the influence of socio-cultural context, comparative research across different national or organisational cultures could deepen understanding of how power distance, historical legacies, and identity shape psychological safety.
- This study focused on dyadic leader-follower interactions. Future work could include explorations of those outside the immediate work team, for example, HR practitioners, to explore how psychological safety is perceived and influenced by those outside the immediate span.

- Experimental or action research could test the impact of relational leadership training, emotional intelligence development, or structured voice mechanisms on psychological safety outcomes.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Approved Ethical Clearance

**Gordon Institute  
of Business Science**  
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance**  
**Approved**

Please be advised that your application for **Ethical Clearance** has been approved.

You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.

We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards

This email has been sent from an unmonitored email account. If you have any comments or concerns, please contact the GIBS Research Admin team.

## Appendix B: Interview Consent Form

### Informed consent for interviews

*Note: This standard informed consent letter to be used in qualitative interviews, must be separate from interview guide, must be signed before the interview commences. The signed form must be stored separately from the data collected*

I am conducting research on *[insert the topic of your research]*. Our interview is expected to last *[insert actual time for interview]*, and will help us understand *[insert your main research question]*. **Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty.** By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

- The interview to be recorded;
- The recording to be transcribed by a third-party transcriber, who will be subject to a standard non-disclosure agreement;
- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation;
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

|                 |                          |
|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Researcher name | Research Supervisor name |
| Email           | Email                    |
| Phone           | Phone                    |

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Main Research Question:** In what ways are leadership-followership dynamics experienced as contributing to psychological safety in workplace settings?

**Sub-question 1:** What relational qualities within leadership-followership interactions are perceived to foster psychological safety?

**Sub-question 2:** How do leaders and followers describe their respective roles in shaping psychologically safe relationships within the workplace?

### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I truly appreciate your time and willingness to share your experiences. This conversation is part of a research study exploring how leadership-followership dynamics (*Leadership-followership* refers to the dynamic relationship between those who take on leadership roles and those who follow, where influence, support, and responsibility are shared and shaped through interaction). They are experienced in relation to psychological safety (*Psychological safety* means feeling safe to speak up, share ideas, ask questions, or admit mistakes without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or punishment. It's about being able to be yourself at work.) in the workplace.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and everything you share will be treated with strict confidentiality. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your honest reflections and lived experiences. You are welcome to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. With your permission, I will be recording this session to ensure accuracy in analysis. Shall we begin?

### Section 1: Leadership-Followership Interactions

**Primary Question:** Let's start with a moment at work. If you can reflect on a recent interaction at work with a supervisor/manager or team member, maybe something that stood out because it challenged you or was impactful to you and why?

### Probes:

- What made the interaction effective or challenging?
- How did trust or communication influence that experience?
- In the interaction that you've outlined, in what ways did your role (as a leader or follower) shape the quality of that experience in that interaction did it feel like you were both working together, or was someone mostly calling the shots? Or did it play out a different way?

*Thank you for unpacking that moment. Now let's explore how your relationships with others shaped or influenced what happened/happens.*

## **Section 2: Psychological Safety**

**Primary Question:** At work, what helps you feel comfortable speaking up, sharing ideas, or raising concerns, even if they are difficult? What makes you feel safe to be yourself? /Your truth

### **Probes:**

- Can you share a moment when you felt either comfortable or uncomfortable sharing your thoughts?
- How did your manager or team members affect how you felt in that situation?
- Did things like how people spoke to each other, how trusted you were, or how supported you felt, make a difference?
- Have you ever held back from speaking up? What made you feel that way?

*That gives great insight into how the interactions played out. Let's look now at how those settings made the room or did not, for you to truly be yourself.*

## **Section 3: Trust, Empowerment, and Voice**

**Primary Question:** When you think about work relationships, how do things like trust, feeling supported, and being able to speak up show up on a day to day?

### **Probes:**

- What kinds of things help build trust between managers and their team, and what kinds of things might cause that trust to break down?
- In what ways do leaders empower their teams or how do followers experience empowerment?
- Do you feel encouraged to express ideas, concerns or feedback?
- What helps or hinders your ability to speak up?

*Given what you've shared about, I'd like to dig into how much influence or choice you experienced.*

#### **Section 4: Follower Agency**

**Primary Question:** What do you do at work to help others feel comfortable, supported, or safe to speak up?

**Probes:**

- What kinds of things do you do to help build trust or support the people you work with?
- Have you ever done something that helped others feel more confident or safe to speak up?
- When your manager/leader acts in ways that affect how people feel, good or bad, how do you usually respond?
- Do you feel like your input matters in shaping how your team works together? How

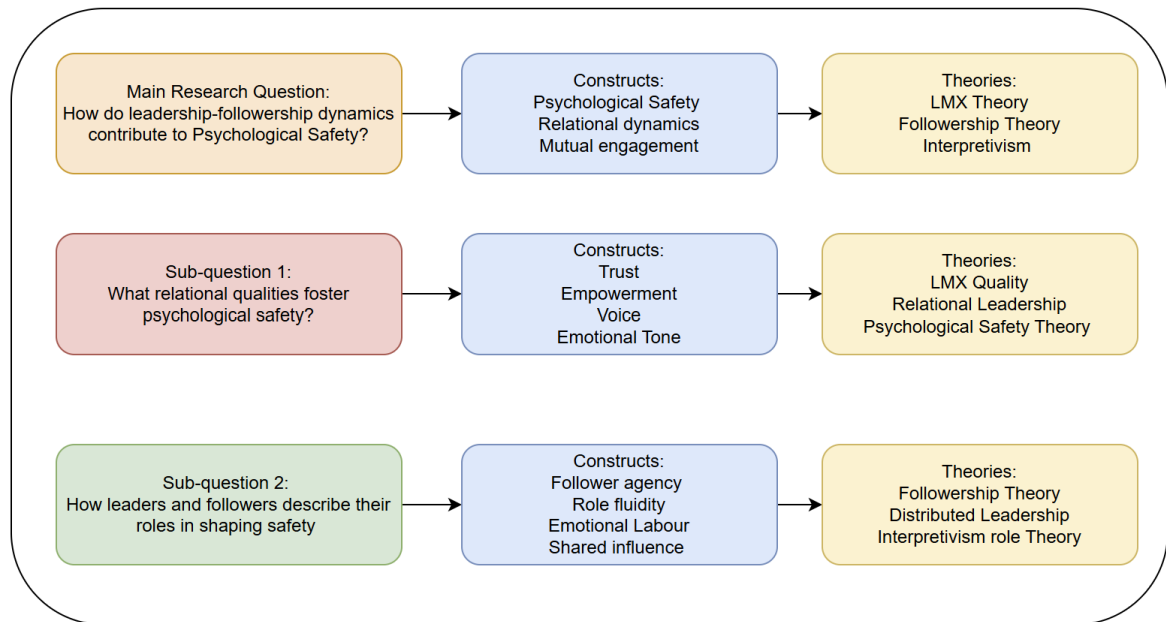
#### **Wrapping Up**

Thank you very much for sharing your insights today. Your reflections are incredibly valuable and will help deepen our understanding of how workplace relationships shape psychological safety. Before we end our interview, is there anything you would like to add, perhaps something we did not cover, or a final thought that you would like to share? If you have any questions about the study, or how your responses will be used, I would be delighted to answer them now. Once again, thank you ever again for your time and openness.

### Appendix D: Literature Consistency Matrix

| Author(s) and Year                | Construct Focus            | Theoretical Contribution                      |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Edmondson & Lei (2014)            | Psychological Safety       | Foundational definition; team dynamics        |
| Uhl-Bien et al. (2014)            | Followership Theory        | Shared leadership; reciprocal influence       |
| Einola & Alvesson (2021)          | Leader–Follower Dynamics   | Emotional tone; relational complexity         |
| Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al. (2022) | Emotional Labour           | Follower agency; relational repair            |
| Ayoko et al. (2023)               | LMX Quality                | Interpersonal behaviors; emotional regulation |
| Bastardo & Adriaensen (2023)      | Followership Agency        | Downward following; emotional nuance          |
| Ngubane & Mbokota (2025)          | Psychological Safety in SA | Inclusive leadership (Hybrid teams)           |
| Sacramento et al. (2023)          | Voice & Creativity         | Openness; team safety                         |
| Yuan et al. (2023)                | LMX Agreement              | Meta-analysis; relational alignment           |
| Hesmert & Vogel (2024)            | Implicit Leadership        | Ideal leader perceptions                      |

## Appendix E: Literature Roadmap



## Appendix F: The Code Book

| Name   | Description   | Sources | References |
|--|---|---------|------------|
| Follower Agency                                    | How follower agency contributes to the co-creation of psychological safety        | 13      | 55         |
| Leadership-Followership Dynamics                   | The ways in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety | 14      | 46         |
| Followers' Influence on Leadership and the Dynamic | Followers' influence on leadership and the dynamic                                | 9       | 26         |
| Constructive Followership                          | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 9       | 26         |
| Passive Followership                               | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 9       | 26         |
| Power Distance Inclination                         | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 10      | 27         |
| Trust and Reciprocity                              | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 9       | 26         |
| Leader's Influence on Psychological Safety         | Leaders' influence on psychological safety  | 14      | 50         |
| Challenging but Supportive                         | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 13      | 52         |
| Discouraging Leadership Styles                     | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 16      | 72         |
| Encouraging Leadership Styles                      | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 12      | 26         |
| Open Communication and Feedback Culture            | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 14      | 82         |
| Vulnerability and Humility                         | A way in which leadership-followership dynamics influence psychological safety    | 11      | 36         |
| Relational Factors                                 | Relational factors that influence psychological safety                            | 15      | 107        |
| Empowerment  | A relational factor that influence psychological safety                           | 15      | 75         |

|                        |  |    |    |
|------------------------|--|----|----|
| Trust                  | A relational factor that influence psychological safety                                  | 13 | 52 |
| Voice                  | A relational factor that influence psychological safety                                  | 11 | 37 |
| The Role of Followers  | The role of followers in co-creating psychological safety                                | 14 | 55 |
| Active Participation   | The role of followers in co-creating psychological safety through active participation   | 13 | 42 |
| Shared Decision-Making | The role of followers in co-creating psychological safety through shared decision-making | 11 | 28 |
| Trust Building         | The role of followers in co-creating psychological safety through trust-building         | 13 | 44 |

**Appendix G: Thematic Consistency Matrix**

| <b>Factor/Theme</b>      | <b>Abstract</b>                  | <b>Research Aim (1.4)</b>  | <b>Findings (Ch. 5)</b>                                      | <b>Discussion (Ch. 6)</b>                                |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--|--|
| Trust                    | trust-building, reciprocal trust | trust                      | Table 13 ( <i>Mutual trust enables openness</i> )            | 6.3.1 ( <i>Trust</i> )                                   |
| Empowerment              | empowerment                      | empowerment                | Table 5 ( <i>Leaders empower, support, and care</i> )        | 6.3.2 ( <i>Empowerment</i> )                             |
| Voice                    | voice behaviours                 | voice                      | Tables 14–15 ( <i>Follower agency and voice</i> )            | 6.3.3 ( <i>Voice</i> )                                   |
| Relational Repair        | relational repair                | relational repair          | Table 16 ( <i>Improving relationships</i> )                  | 6.4.8 ( <i>Improving Relationships</i> )                 |
| Vulnerability & Humility | humility                         | vulnerability and humility | Table 6 ( <i>Leaders admit mistakes</i> )                    | 6.2.2 ( <i>Vulnerability and Humility</i> )              |
| Open Communication       | open communication               | open communication         | Table 7 ( <i>Open dialogue: feedback welcomed</i> )          | 6.2.3 ( <i>Open Communication and Feedback Culture</i> ) |
| Power Distance           | power distance                   | power distance             | Table 12 ( <i>Hierarchical, restricted feedback</i> )        | 6.4.3 ( <i>Power Distance</i> )                          |
| Emotional Tone           | emotional tone                   | emotional tone             | Table 25 ( <i>Factors influencing psychological safety</i> ) | 6.4.4 ( <i>Trust and Reciprocity</i> )                   |