Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis

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In this paper, we discuss two complementary commitments of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): the phenomenological requirement to understand and 'give voice' to the concerns of participants; and the interpretative requirement to contextualize and 'make sense' of these claims and concerns from a psychological perspective. The methodological and conceptual bases for the relationship between these phenomenological and interpretative aspects of IPA appear to be underdeveloped in the literature. We, therefore, offer some thoughts on the basis of this relationship, and on its context within qualitative psychology. We discuss the epistemological range of IPA's interpretative focus, and its relationship to the more descriptive features of phenomenological analysis. In order to situate our conclusions within a contextualist position, we draw upon concepts from Heideggerian phenomenology. The argument is illustrated by excerpts from our own research on relationship break-up. We conclude by encouraging IPA researchers to embrace the interpretative opportunities that are offered by this approach. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2006; **3:** 102–120

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Introduction: interpretative phenomenological analysis

There is a common misconception about interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996), which is that it is a 'simply descriptive' methodology. We can see this reflected in the comments of the University research supervisors who recently judged IPA to be one of the least demanding methods in qualitative psychology (reported in Madill *et al*., 2005), requir-

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ing the least amount of supervision. Certainly, students and researchers encountering it – or qualitative research – for the first time are rightly attracted to IPA for its accessibility, flexibility and applicability. But it is easy for flexibility to be mistaken for lack of rigour – and the subtlety and complexity of phenomenology's aims and origins are often overlooked.

As with so many qualitative methods, IPA can be easy to do badly, and difficult to do well: it demands that a number of rather testing 'balancing acts' are maintained by the researcher. For the novice, these balancing acts are not always easily judged in the wider context of qualitative psychology's complex epistemological field. Indeed, some other qualitative methods offer greater methodological prescription and epistemological certainty, and their circumscribed territories may actually provide a safer option for the novice researcher to explore. Unfortunately, the problem is circular: low levels of supervisory input and a lack of engagement with phenomenological theory can only perpetuate the expectation of 'simply descriptive' outcomes. By addressing the latter problem in this paper, we hope to encourage others to reflect upon the former. IPA is not an easy option perhaps, but it does try to do something a little different from other qualitative methods, and research in its image can be very powerful when it is carried out with the requisite care and commitment.

We suspect that the misconception about IPA's 'simple' and 'descriptive' qualities begins with an overuse of the phrase 'insider's perspective'. The phrase was borrowed by Smith (from Conrad, 1987) for his 1996 position paper on IPA, and it has acquired an easy prominence in subsequent work adopting an IPA stance (including our own). IPA seeks to offer an 'insider's perspective'. This is very easy to say, but much more difficult to deliver in a meaningful fashion. Further misconceptions about IPA seem to follow from the narrow scope of some of the empirical studies published in its name. Within health psychology, for example, many IPA studies have tended to be over-cautious, or at least to be too easily satisfied with a 'first-order' analysis (ie, one which summarizes participants' concerns, but does not develop further to an interpretative or conceptual level). It is easy to see how this comes about: when there are groups whose voices are not 'heard', it can seem sufficient to simply 'collect' and 'represent' these voices. But this oversimplifies the task of qualitative psychology, and undermines the potential of IPA to properly explore, understand and communicate the experiences and viewpoints offered by its participants.

IPA research is generally pitched at the idiographic level. This term has traditionally been associated with the study of 'individual' persons in psychology, although it originally served a wider function, namely to distinguish the study of *specifics* from the study of 'things-in-general' (or nomothetics; see Lamiell, 1998; Windelband, 1894/1998). Hence, the study of any specific situation or event might also be called idiographic. IPA often uses the term in such a way that it draws upon both these meanings, insofar as many of its exemplar studies concentrate on specific *individuals* as they deal with specific *situations* or *events* in their lives (eg, Robson, 2002; Smith, 1999).

On a methodological level, this means that an IPA study typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants. These verbatim accounts are generally captured via

semi-structured interviews, focus groups, or diaries, and the analysis then proceeds such that patterns of meaning are developed, and then reported in a thematic form. A number of papers have been published describing the analytic steps underpinning this basic process (eg, Flowers *et al*., 1997; Osborn and Smith, 1998; Smith *et al*., 1999; Willig, 2001). These papers demonstrate that there is considerable flexibility and variation with regard to the available routes through this process. It is true in all cases, however, that the analytic processes described are largely unremarkable when compared with other qualitative methods. Indeed, it may be more appropriate to understand IPA as a 'stance' or perspective from which to approach the task of qualitative data analysis, rather than as a distinct 'method'.

At the heart of this perspective (and hence at the core of any piece of IPA research) lies a clearly declared *phenomenological* emphasis on the experiential claims and concerns of the persons taking part in the study (something which clearly distinguishes it from discourse analysis, for example). Hence, an IPA researcher must approach their data with two aims in mind. The first aim is to try to understand their participants' world, and to describe 'what it is like'. Typically, this aim leads to a focus on the participants' experiences of a specific event, process or relationship. In doing so, however, we need immediately to recognize that access to 'experience' is both partial and complex (Smith, 1996). In other words, the analytic process cannot ever achieve a genuinely first-person account – the account is always constructed by participant *and* researcher – so the objective during this initial stage is simply to produce a coherent, third-person, and psychologically informed description, which tries to get as 'close' to the participant's view as is possible.

The second aim of the IPA perspective is to develop a more overtly *interpretative* analysis, which positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context. This second-order account aims to provide a critical and conceptual commentary upon the participants' personal 'sense-making' activities (Smith and Osborn, 2003). This interpretative analysis affords the researcher an opportunity to deal with the data in a more speculative fashion: to think about 'what it means' for the participants to have made these claims, and to have expressed these feelings and concerns *in this particular situation*. Aspects of this interpretative work may also be informed by direct engagement with existing theoretical constructs (something which distinguishes IPA from grounded theory approaches) and the process is sometimes directed towards answering a preformed research question.

Our aim in this paper is to discuss in greater detail the phenomenological and interpretative aspects of IPA (and their relationship to each other) which we have touched upon here. Our discussion will draw upon a Heideggerian and hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, interpretation and related concepts (Dreyfus, 1995; Polt, 1999). By doing so, we hope to illuminate and further develop the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. But our intentions are not prescriptive. Through having prescribed only a relatively small core of defining concepts,[1] Smith *et al*. have ensured that IPA has developed quickly, imaginatively, and co-operatively. IPA is an approach which has already been widely adopted across a range of sub-disciplines in psychology – particularly 'applied' –

(see Reid *et al*., 2005) and which could certainly be utilized further in many other areas of the human sciences. Nonetheless, it remains a 'young' approach to qualitative analysis, characterized by open debates and collegiate development. It is our hope that this paper will contribute to that development and to the creation of a firmer theoretical foothold for IPA within the context of qualitative psychology.

Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology as the study of persons-in-context

> Heidegger [...] make[s] a compelling argument that it is impossible to ignore the subjectivizing influences of language, culture, ideology, expectations, or assumptions. [...] Heidegger makes the human individual a part of reality, rather than an ego dualistically separated from the world, thereby reconciling relativism and realism (or objectivism). Heidegger's realism is more practical than rational, however, and so it is difficult to find a way through him [...] back to reason, knowledge production (epistemology), and hence, method. The challenge is thus to recognize Heidegger's strong argument regarding relativism while extending his realism in a way that makes room for method. (Rennie, 1999: 6)

We should perhaps begin by acknowledging that the view of the human individual as an inclusive *part* of reality – as an entity that is essentially embedded, intertwined and which is otherwise immersed in the world that it inhabits – is certainly not a view that is restricted to Heidegger and his phenomenology. Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological approach (and Heidegger's mentor), was also profoundly set against the dualistic separation of egos from worlds (and hence, in the modern parlance, the separation of subject from object). This simple fact is often overlooked, however, for in making human *consciousness* (and its intentionality or 'directness-at-objects') central to his analyses, Husserl seems, all too frequently, to have been interpreted in a fashion that perpetuates the image of an isolated ego (and an 'inner', subjective domain).

If we were to develop a phenomenological psychology from these mistakenly dualistic conclusions, then we could only be interested in how things *appear* 'subjectively' to people, whilst other (perhaps more 'scientific') approaches would deal with how things actually *are* 'objectively' (or 'in reality'). The reader may even recognize this state of affairs as a reflection of a distinction, often drawn by supporters of the empirical mainstream in psychology, in order to distinguish qualitative methods (which are supposed to do the former) from their quantitative counterparts (which claim the latter). Husserl was, nonetheless, trying to make a more profound point: that the *only* certain or objective knowledge humans could have of anything would have to be attained via processes of consciousness (for we must inevitably encounter the world through that medium). In one sense, then, he brackets out the whole question of whether a reality exists which is separate from us (and our thoughts about it). In another more profound sense, his view offers us the possibility of a completely fresh interpretation of the word 'reality', which acknowledges that the term is indeed derived from a verb which means 'to think'. Following this interpretation through, we might suggest that 'reality' is better understood to mean something approximate to 'what is thought about things in general' (see Bohm, 1980 for a full outline of this argument), rather than 'how things

really are when thought is removed' (which seems to be the typical modern interpretation).

Heidegger's robust response to the misreading of Husserl was to systematically expunge any remnants of an isolated ego from his hermeneutic phenomenology. His version of phenomenology retains 'intentional directedness as essential to human activity, but [in contrast to Husserl] he denies that [such] intentionality is mental, (Dreyfus, 1995: 50–51). Obviously, it would be foolish to question the existence of private thought, but that is not what Heidegger was doing. He was, instead, questioning the *priority* that the Western tradition has given to such thought and to a host of hypothesized mental structures that are supposed to give rise to it (see Harré, 1999 for a modern development of this argument). Heidegger suggested that thought is ephemeral and *ad hoc* in nature, and is little more than a *derivative* aspect of the overall intentionality that we exhibit as we actively engage with the world around us. It is apparent, for example, that when we are able to cope skilfully in a particular situation, 'thought' is very rarely an issue at all – it becomes necessary *only* when the normal order-of-things breaks down, or when we hit a problem of some kind.

At the heart of this argument lies Heidegger's view of the person as always and indelibly a 'person-in-context'. It is a mistake to believe that we can occasionally *choose* to take up a relationship with the various somatic and semantic objects that 'make up' our world, because such relatedness is a *fundamental part of our constitution*. We cannot occasionally jump out of an isolated subjective sphere to impose meaning on a world of otherwise meaningless objects, because we are always-already 'out there' in a meaningful world (and such meaningfulness is a fundamental part of *its* constitution). In short, we are a fundamental part of a meaningful world (and hence we can only be properly understood *as a function of our various involvements with that world*), and the meaningful world is also a fundamental part of us (such that it can only be properly disclosed and understood *as a function of our involvements with it*). This fundamental rejection of the Cartesian divide between subject and object is captured by Heidegger's characterization of human-being in terms of *Dasein*. *Dasein* means 'there being' (or 'being there'), by which he implies that our very nature is to be *there* – always somewhere, always located and always amidst and involved with some kind of meaningful context.

The ontological and epistemological bases for investigating the person-in-context

This view of persons has a number of interesting implications, for psychology in general, and for IPA in particular. Perhaps the most immediately pressing issue for psychology is the recognition that it is not actually possible – even if it might be desirable – to remove ourselves, our thoughts and our meaning systems from the world, in order to find out how things 'really are' in some definitive sense. Somewhat ironically, this is a conclusion that has long since been accepted at the 'cutting edge' of the hard sciences. Prigogine and Stengers (1984: 54), for example, urge us to challenge what they call:

> the rather naive assumption of a direct connection between our descriptions of the world and the world itself. Objectivity . . . takes on a more subtle meaning. . . Whatever reality may mean, it

> always corresponds to an active intellectual construction. The descriptions presented by science can no longer be disentangled from our questioning activity.

In general, however, psychology has been reluctant to accept such alien notions. The idea that 'reality' might be an intellectual construction, or that the descriptions of the discipline cannot be fully disentangled from its questioning activities, go hard against the grain. There has been concern that accepting these propositions must inevitably lead to a state of rampant relativism, in which arbitrary decisions and claims can be made about what is real, in which we have no criteria for distinguishing good claims from bad, and in which the very existence of material objects seems somehow to have become dependent upon us. Indeed, a few psychologists will no doubt consider these fears to have been made manifest via some of the more 'relativistic' presentations of social constructionism (Gergen, 1994).

Heidegger would nonetheless claim, as we suspect would many qualitative psychologists, that accepting such ideas need not automatically lead us to relativism, nor to a state of disciplinary anarchy. In fact, Heidegger was undoubtedly a realist. Dreyfus (1995) describes him as a 'minimal hermeneutic realist'. This is a rather complex philosophical position, yet its general sense is captured by the following statement (and this 'general sense' is enough for our purposes):

> What is *real* is not dependent on us, but the exact meaning and nature of *reality* is.

The minimal hermeneutic realist duly recognizes that certain 'things' exist and would have existed even if humans had not (and that these 'things' are real), but that the very question of this separate existence (and hence questions about the *nature* of their reality) can only arise because *we are here* to ask the question. In short, Heidegger's position recognizes that nothing (literally no-thing) is ever revealed as anything (real or unreal, thing or no-thing) except when *we encounter it* and, hence, when it is brought meaningfully *into the context of human life* (see Polt, 1999). In this context of human life, it is evidently we (in the collective sense) who decide what is allowed to count as real and what is not. In *History of the concept of time*, Heidegger (1985): 217) expresses this same idea in phenomenological terminology:

> It must be stated that the entity as an entity is 'in itself' and independent of any apprehension of it; yet, the being of the entity is found only in encounter and can be explained, made understandable, only from the phenomenal exhibition and interpretation of the structure of encounter.

The implications for psychological research are clear enough – any discoveries that we make must necessarily be a function of the *relationship* that pertains between researcher and subject-matter (person and world, subject and object, etc.) – a dilemma of reflexivity familiar to most qualitative researchers. Indeed, this function is precisely what we would expect, given that we *must* identify the researcher as an inclusive part of the world they are describing. The emergent 'reality' (ie, the resultant explanation and/or understanding of the nature of the subject-matter) can thus be seen to be dependent upon the processes of intellectual construction that shaped the 'structure of encounter'.

This evidently means that our choice of approach is very important. To gain answers of value, we must carefully and reflexively consider the approach to take, and choose the best questions to ask of particular subject-matters, in particular circumstances.

But the choice is not an *arbitrary* one for a number of reasons. First, it cannot be arbitrary as soon we acknowledge that our decisions have real *implications.* Second, our choices must, to some extent, cohere with what we (again, as a collective) think we already know about our subject-matter, and so we must reflect upon the consequences of presuming that we know what a 'good choice' is. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the nature of an observed object will inevitably place constraints on what *can* be revealed, such that approaches which are most sensitive and responsive to the nature of a subject-matter will evidently yield the most profitable outcomes. This 'sensitivity and responsiveness' is central to Heidegger's phenomenological approach, and it is also fundamental to our view of the 'P' in IPA.

In this Heideggerian sense, the central goal of phenomenology is to approach and deal with any object of our attention in just such a way that it is allowed maximal opportunity to show itself 'as itself'. Another way of putting this is that the phenomenologist aims to reveal any subject-matter *on its own terms* (ie, not according to the imposition of any *preconceived* set of assumptions and expectations). It is, nonetheless, inevitable that we will fall short of this target, for being a 'person-in-context' (and hence an observer, indelibly situated within the meaningful world that we observe) we can never fully escape the 'preconceptions' that our world brings with it. But this should not discourage us from making the attempt. If the empathetic treatment of our subject-matter is central to our approach, and we are prepared to adjust our ideas and assumptions in response to the promptings of that subject-matter, then we are on the way to developing a Heideggerian phenomenology. The important point is that our success as phenomenologists will not ultimately be dependent upon our revealing the 'pure' experience of a participant; it will be dependent upon our being prepared to do the most sensitive and responsive job we can, given our inherent epistemological and methodological limitations.

IPA and persons-in-context

If we take 'love' as an example subject-matter, it should by now be apparent that an IPA researcher is not primarily concerned with the nature of love *per se*, but with this *particular person*, and with their experiences and understandings of love. This acknowledgment is potentially quite radical inasmuch as it involves a shift in subject-matter: *love* is replaced by the *person* experiencing love. It is also quite radical given, as we have already discussed, that accessing the 'experience' of individual persons is a notoriously problematic and complex pursuit. This has often led 'the subject' to be bracketed out of discursive analyses (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987 for the seminal statement of this position). It seems obvious, therefore, that IPA must proceed along its chosen path with a good deal of caution, and hence the 'inevitably partial' nature of the process has been reiterated throughout the paper thus far.

It remains a disappointment that so many psychological methods and approaches (even qualitative methods) have continued to push 'people' to one side. For the IPA researcher, therefore, such difficulties have come to function as analytic prompts for very careful reflection and caution, rather than as a signal to abandon 'the subject' altogether. In this spirit of caution, for

example, it would not be wise for IPA to claim the equivalent of a reductive move from discourse to some sort of enduring and certain knowledge of an *inner, conscious,* or *cognitive domain.* But the work that we have carried out in earlier sections has been to suggest that this need not automatically signal the absence of phenomenology, nor the impossibility of accessing what traditionally would be called a participant's 'subjective world' (or, in a phenomenological context, their 'lifeworld'). This is precisely because we are indelibly 'persons-in-context'. For Heidegger, this means that our subjective worlds are not primarily mental, or 'hidden inside', because the very nature of our being is to 'be there' out in the world, located and observable in our relatedness to some meaningful context. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) it implies that our personal experiences have 'a structure that spreads [or extends] across space and time that can be communicated to others through appropriate expression' (Giorgi, 1995: 37). Given this image, Merleau-Ponty would no doubt contend that a communicated account of love *can* legitimately be used to reveal something of the person who produced it. Indeed, our modern notions of romance positively demand that this sort of assumption be made (eg, Luhmann, 1998; Evans, 2002).

It is nonetheless necessary, again in the spirit of caution, to qualify this very carefully. From our point of view, an account can be used to reveal something about a person, but *only* that person's *current positioning* in relation to the world of objects – the bodies and bodies-of-knowledge – which have come to constitute love in their experience, culture and locale. We can, to put this otherwise, only glimpse a person's current subjective mode-of-engagement with some specific context or aspect of the world (and that is what IPA tries to achieve). Thus, as analysts, we focus in upon the person-in-context (a *particular* person in a *particular* context), and that person's *relatedness to* 'the phenomena at hand' (eg, love) is our topic. That is, we are interested in how they understand and make sense of their experiences in terms of their relatedness to, and their engagement with, those phenomena.

Other qualitative methods have decidedly different concerns. A discourse-analytic study of 'love' in the ethnomethodological tradition, for example, might outline various constructions of love, as they are made visible in accounts offered during a social interaction, and might then focus on the functions of those constructions within the localized situation of *that interaction*. Alternatively, a more Foucauldian analysis might treat such interactions as a text through which the bodies-of-knowledge that *constitute* love in a wider cultural environment might be accessed. Note that in the former case, the focus is performative, and *interaction* (discursive action) is the topic. In the latter, the focus is textual, and *knowledge* (discursive structure) is the topic. Whatever one's focus, however, we think it very important that all qualitative researchers (regardless of their particular interests and concerns) now begin to recognize that the findings of their studies should not, and indeed *cannot*, simply be described (or dismissed) in terms of mere 'subjectivity'.

If the subject/object distinction is abandoned (as Husserl, Heidegger, and many in the hard sciences would now advocate), it is apparent that what is objective and what is subjective cannot be teased apart in any simple fashion. If the *objective* reality we discover is partly dependent upon processes of intellectual construction and

hence upon our various modes of *subjective* engagement with the world (as Prigogine and Stengers argued above), then any analysis of our intellectual constructions must also reveal something of the objective reality. An account produced by a research participant can hence be used thematically to reveal something very tangible and *very real* about the constitution of the 'object' we are studying. In this case, each of these three approaches makes a very real contribution to our semantic knowledge of the overall *reality* that we call 'love'. Discourse-analytic approaches, for example, make a contribution to our understanding of the means by which 'love' can be understood and enacted. As we have seen, IPA simply uses the participant's account in an inverse fashion, to reflect upon 'love' from the perspective of a participant's engagement with it.

In Heidegger's *Basic problems of phenomenology*, he lays out an argument which suggests that 'the subject' (as a 'person-in-context') is always accessible to analysis as a reflection of its current intentionality and directedness. In common with all reflections, however, the view this gives us is neither perfect nor complete. In an IPA context, this means we must inevitably accept a third-person view of a 'first-person' account. Yet, if one is prepared to be truly phenomenological in the Heideggerian sense – to be sensitive and responsive to the subject and to adjust one's assumptions accordingly – then a third-person account *can* go some way to revealing a research participant as they are 'in themselves' (which must mean 'in their relatedness to the world'). We can strive to see the world as they see it. This is the initial 'phenomenological stage' of an IPA. In simple terms, IPA is concerned with understanding the person-in-context, and exploring persons' relatedness to, or involvement in, the world. In choosing IPA for a research project, we commit ourselves to exploring, describing, interpreting, and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences. Madill *et al*. (2000) have described this position as 'contextualism'. For our purposes, this term will serve as a convenient shorthand for an integration of our preferred ontological ('minimal hermeneutic realism') and epistemological (we learn about particular *persons-in-context*, and about how something has been *understood*) positions, as we have described them above.

Finally, we should reiterate that our view of phenomenology does not imply that any 'inner' experience has been grasped. On the contrary, any conclusions one draws about a research participant are possible *only* because they are primarily and always to be found amidst a world of already meaningful objects. We can come to know something about them only because – through their discourses and subjective engagement with the world – it is possible with careful and sympathetic attention to see how they care for various 'things', how they are concerned or distressed by them, and ultimately how they are tied up and involved with some particular event or aspect of their life. Our conclusions do not find any inner experience, then; they simply acknowledge that the *only way* to find the subject is as a 'person-in-context'.

Giving voice: the 'phenomenological goal' demonstrated

We have seen that phenomenology in the Heideggerian tradition demands that the analyst develop a hermeneutic account of the person's relatedness to the prevailing

topic of interest. Typically, this requires us to identify, describe and understand two related aspects of a respondent's account: the key 'objects of concern' in the participant's world, and the 'experiential claims' made by the participant. These are the key features of first-order, descriptive coding in our use of IPA. In the following sections, we draw from a study exploring close relationship break-up (Clifton *et al*., 2001), and develop a brief analysis of an account offered by a participant, 'Nigel', in order to illustrate the argument offered so far. In these extracts, Nigel, a White British man in late middle age, is interviewed by Elizabeth Clifton. In the interview, Nigel discusses the failure of his 20-year marriage to 'Rose', which had ended 2 years prior to the interview.

In this case, we use interview transcripts to infer something of Nigel's *particular* position in relation to the world of objects (the bodies and bodies-of-knowledge) which constitute and define the experience of 'love', 'marriage' and 'divorce' in our culture. These experiences are revealed to us under some aspect, from some perspective, in each instance – but are not accessed directly or entirely. The same is true for Nigel – we study him with the aim of capturing something of *what is important* to him in this context, and with this topic at hand.

For Nigel, two major *objects of concern* are money and fidelity. Money may well provide Nigel with a non-threatening basis for discussing the breakdown of his marriage (perhaps because money can be discussed in terms which are practical and concrete, even non-emotive). But money permeates Nigel's account, and saturates his concerns about marriage and divorce, to such an extent that it must be acknowledged as a key element of his lifeworld. Indeed, in some respects, Nigel is pleased with his divorce, because money has *not* been the problem:

R: Money is the crux, though, that really upsets marriages. I know the divorcees I've met where one's had to sell the house and one's had to move out and the other one has had to pay maintenance. That's what destroys the love, that's the worst.

I: Do you think?

R: Yes, when the husband has to pay, and the ex-wife has got a bloke living with her and they are both earning – have you met that?

I: Yes.

R: Yes, and also I've had, 'I'm not getting married again, because I'm not letting that cow do what she did/another cow do what the first cow did to me.'

I: Oh right.

R: I suppose that could be the reason I'm not with anyone, because I don't want it to happen again.

I: No.

R: I'm not worried about the house and the money, that's basically no problem. It's the broken heart, it just hurts.

We can see from his final comment, above, that Nigel's relief about money does not mean that he is entirely happy with how things have worked out, however. Neither does it mean that he is unable or unwilling to discuss his feelings about the divorce in more emotional terms, only that he appears to be less comfortable in doing so. Thus, money is a recurring concern in Nigel's account, where it often appears as a defining feature of his relationship with Rose. He is also keen to emphasize his role as breadwinner, and Rose's dependence upon him. He is less keen to acknowledge the exact circumstances of Rose's departure,

and these observations bring us tacitly onto the question of fidelity:

I: [LAUGHS] Um so how would you describe the type of relationship you had?
R: Friendly [...] It's like most marriages we had our ups and downs [...] Er... mostly downs were financial [INAUDIBLE] we had to pay the bills. I don't know if Rose told you but she was an invalid.
I: So she couldn't work then basically?
R: Yes that's right.
I: So do think that was like... financial?
R: Well yeah [LAUGHS] but I don't think it caused the split.
I: No.
R: It didn't cause the split, I know that.
I: No... Um so what do you actually think caused the split in the relationship?
R: Did Rose tell you, did Rose give you an answer? [LONG PAUSE] 'Cause I've never told anybody, and I won't, so...
I: Oh right, okay, okay.
R: If Rose has told you why she thought we split, that's it, I'm agreeable with that.
I: Right, okay obviously I can't say... well, she said that you were quite amicable, the divorce didn't involve solicitors and things like that.
R: Oh yes, we had a few nights on the piss doing that, I can tell you [...] We did it ourselves. [...] It's cheap, one hundred and seventy quid.
I: Yes, without solicitors.
R: Yes, it would have been fifteen hundred to two thousand pounds.

Fidelity is identifiable as an object of concern here, even though its presence remains unstated in this exchange (though it is stated more clearly in Rose's own account). It also illuminates something further about our previous concern: money is still important, and here functions as an effective distraction from the discomfort caused by Rose's actions (and inadvertently, the interviewer's question). Moving on from these objects of concern, and picking up on one or two of the points made so far, we can begin to examine the respondent's experiential *claims*. In fact, for Nigel, the 'broken heart' is a recurring motif, even though it is often framed in semi-comical or masculinized terms:

R: I didn't think there was such a thing as a broken heart but there was.
I: Yes.
R: And of course unbeknown to me it was too late, but I don't know.
I: Do you think that physically hurt you then?
R: Yes it did, it's/it's here [POINTS TO CHEST] physical pain, I tell you, you get this pain – 'I've got to go to the quack's, man, I'm having a heart attack.' Trust me I'm/um I've been in the forces, been out East – I've seen bombs and people being killed and all that sort of stuff, but that never affected me. It/this was a physical pain [...] And I couldn't believe it, I went to the nurse and said 'I'm going apeshit here with this pain, I'm going bananas.' It's a physical pain.

Thus, we might observe that Nigel responds enthusiastically to the invitation (made on the basis of an earlier remark) to talk about the physical manifestations of his 'broken heart'. He discusses his feelings about the separation in terms of pain and distress, and offers a powerful account of somatized emotions. A rich and detailed description of this sort of response would seem to be central to an understanding of people's reactions to relationship break-up. It includes an 'object of concern' (a *broken heart*: understood as a potentially *dubious* object in some claims, but as verifiably *real* in these circumstances; as a source of pain; and as a source of *panic* and *confusion*, in both its *intensity* and its *embodied*

physicality) and an experiential claim (that Nigel was caused emotional pain by the separation; that this pain was severe and real, even in comparison to more visibly distressing events, such as war; and that this pain required medical help).

Making sense: the 'interpretative repertoire' revisited

As we stated in our introduction, IPA research aims to go a little further than description of this experience. This is only partly because IPA researchers will recognize the obvious problems inherent in identifying a point where description ends and interpretation begins. For example, in the above excerpt it is evident that masculinity plays an important part in Nigel's understanding of emotions and pains, and in his response to the interviewer's prompt. This cannot be separated from our understanding of his concerns and claims, and so, even in 'giving voice', IPA researchers are necessarily balancing representation against interpretation and contextualization. This is, of course, a dilemma familiar to qualitative researchers:

> Qualitative researchers return home with hours of field notes, voices on tapes, intimate knowledge of communities under siege, [and] they grow uncomfortably aware of many incompatible responsibilities. There is a responsibility to hear what informants are saying about their lives and the meaning of their experiences, and a responsibility to construct interpretations that may or may not conform to what informants have told us... Whether we agree with the words of informants or not, whether we even like them or not, we have an obligation to surround their words with analyses for which we are the authors... Partial, temporary and tentative, we have a responsibility to position ourselves in relation to our data, and our position will not necessarily be the same as our informants' (have no illusions – they will not agree with each other either). (Kidder and Fine, 1998: 48–49)

IPA also goes beyond description for another reason, perhaps more integral to its phenomenological origins. This is because it focuses upon sense-making activities and our 'involvement in the world'. As we suggested in our introduction, there is a misconception about IPA that seems to view it as a 'simply descriptive' methodology. Here we wish to emphasize that taking 'the insider's perspective' is only part of the analytic process. The analyst in IPA is doing more than this; he or she is also offering an interpretative account of what it *means* for the participant to have such concerns, within their particular context. This whole point can be summarized very easily. The method is called *Interpretative* Phenomenological Analysis:

> Hermeneutic approaches [...] do not subscribe to a 'correspondence theory of truth', which assumes that the truth of a particular theoretical statement is determined by the degree to which it corresponds to the hard and fast 'facts' of reality, and thus which understands that the ultimate goal of any science is to provide accurate (or, at the very least, 'falsifiable') descriptions and explanations of an independent reality. Rather, hermeneutic approaches view the knower and the known as fundamentally interrelated, and thus assume that any interpretation necessarily involves an essential circularity of understanding – a hermeneutic circle in which the interpreter's perspective and understanding initially shapes his [sic] interpretation of a given phenomenon, and yet that interpretation, as it interacts with the phenomenon in question, is open to revision and elaboration, as the perspective and understanding of the interpreter, including his biases and blind spots, are revealed and evaluated. (Tappan, 1997: 651)

IPA has been developed specifically in order to allow the researcher to produce a theoretical framework which is based upon, but which may transcend or exceed, the

participants' own terminology and conceptualizations (Smith, 2004). IPA researchers may draw upon considerable 'interpretative range' to achieve this. The approach has a clear primary focus – on generating an insider's perspective – but it states no *single*, closed, *a priori,* theoretical assumption about how that insider's perspective may be interpreted. This can be a great strength, provided that the phenomenological account is: (a) central; and (b) contextualized. This epistemological openness is quite unique among qualitative approaches in psychology. Because of this, IPA researchers can make cautious inferences about discursive, affective *and* cognitive phenomena (Smith, 1996). As Reid *et al*. (2005) have observed, this capacity for engagement with other forms of knowledge goes some way towards explaining IPA's rapid expansion in the areas of applied psychology.

The intrinsic richness of qualitative data is easily demonstrated, and this suggests that methods of qualitative data analysis may benefit from a certain amount of epistemological flexibility. An example of IPA's ability to provide this can be illustrated with recourse to a further excerpt from Nigel:

R: Let's take couple A, yeah? They live together. After having children, love goes out the window, basically, because you have the house to look after, the kids to look after. So the love relationship disappears, so you become friends and I think we didn't have time for each other because of the children. So you spend so much time looking after them you distance yourself and other activities within ... er marriages ... er like one partner goes to night school to get educated and they think, 'God I've married an idiot. I can't do this, I want somebody at my level now.'

I: Right.

R: I think marriages break up because of that – marriages break up because of financial reasons, other than a lot of reasons like female issues... [INAUDIBLE]... And women want their/more women want their independence as in, women's rights [...] And they go out on their own, you see and I've seen it – the old ring comes off and away they go on the pull. One night stands, and away back home to their loving husbands. [EYEBROW RAISED] I know.

I: Argh! All right.

R: You go to any night club and you're in the queue there and – [MIMES THE ACTION TO TAKE OFF A WEDDING RING]. (Nigel, 252–78)

This excerpt is clearly rich with possibility. We have been encouraging our readers to think interpretatively, and so it seems reasonable to present an example. Borrowing and adapting some prompts from Willig (2001), we might observe the following features in the preceding extract:

- An attempt to offer a particular interpretation of an event [*I think marriages break up because of that – marriages break up because of financial reasons, other than a lot of reasons like female issues*...]. Nigel provides a rationalization, but it is also a rationalization that draws upon two of his preferred resources for making sense of relationships: money, and gender differences.
- An insight into the respondent's lifeworld [*I've seen it – the old ring comes off and away they go on the pull*]. A range of experiential claims are made; here the claim is evidential, to support

the veracity of his explanation. Elsewhere in the interview [*'I'm having a heart attack man!'*] physical and emotional experiences are described to establish the personal consequences of relationship break-up.

- An example of the 'cultural resources' which may be deployed in order to account for relationship breakdown [*Let's take couple A, yeah? They live together*]. Nigel deploys a story from 'out there' in the world, which requires little detail to communicate its point: that this experience is not unique, and may even be seen as an inevitable progressive consequence of partnership and parenthood.
- An expression of the respondents' unconscious conflicts and desires [*After having children, love goes out the window, basically, because you have the house to look after, the kids to look after*]. The story about 'couple A' begins in a detached form. The degradation of the pronoun use (from 'they', to 'you', to 'me') might indicate the personal relevance of the story for Nigel.
- An example of the moral rules which must be obeyed when accounting for relationship break-up [*And women want their/more women want their independence as in, women's rights*]. When Nigel blames 'female issues' for relationship break-up, whilst talking to a female interviewer, he appears to realize that the situation requires repair. His response is to reach for a 'rights' discourse.
- A unique social interaction between two people [*Argh! All right*]. The interviewer's reaction here is a reminder, if we needed one, that interviews are complex social events.

Each of these possibilities offers the analyst an entry into the hermeneutic circle. IPA can potentially engage with any of them – provided that the analytic account can be traced back to a recognizable core account, focusing on Nigel's lifeworld, and capturing a sense of the struggle which lies at the centre of it (remember: we are reading the account of someone struggling to make sense of a difficult and distressing situation, and who is drawing upon familiar resources to do it), and provided that analytic claims can be related to a particular research question. In effect, we are aiming to balance the 'hermeneutics of empathy' against the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (after Ricoeur, 1970) here, and to do so in a manner such that any balance struck can be reconciled with the researcher's commitments to understanding the participants' lifeworlds. A useful centre-ground position is offered by the 'hermeneutics of meaning-recollection', which is where interpretative work can be judged to 'draw out' or 'disclose' the meaning of the experience. This latter seems consistent with the descriptive and interpretative commitments of IPA (see Smith, 2004 for an example of an account judged to be excessively 'suspicious').

Obviously, we should be clear that the *objects* of our research questions are of an order which can be accommodated by IPA – eg, experiences, understandings, sense-making, meaning. And there *are* some obvious epistemological limits here: IPA cannot tell us 'why relationships break-up', or 'what love is', for example. But in accounting for Nigel's experience of relationship break-up, and the means by which he has come to understand that break-up, we also need to consider his wider involvement in the world. In this case, that might include his use of various cultural resources, and the nature of his

interactions with female research interviewers. Approaching the matter more reflexively, we might also want to write about why it is that our responses to Nigel's claims involve a certain amount of conflict. In presenting all of this, we would also want to offer a well-structured analysis. To achieve this, we would draw upon those conventional aspects of qualitative analysis which are typically utilized in IPA – cumulative coding (when patterns of meaning are generated within a transcript) and integrative coding (when patterns of meaning are generated across a set of transcripts) – in order to develop a plausible thematic account. Finally, we might also want to draw upon existing theoretical concepts to assist us in the development and elucidation of these themes.

Thus, the analysts' role in IPA does require the generation of an 'insider's account', but it also requires that meaning and commonality are sought *beyond* that point. This requirement reflects Heidegger's distinction between 'phenomenology' (which, as we have seen, implies the revealing of something 'as it is in itself') and 'interpretation', which instead demands that something is (very deliberately) revealed 'as something else' (Dreyfus, 1995). In developing a more interpretative account of Nigel's claims and concerns, for example, it seems reasonable to consider gender as an important issue. It is difficult to engage with gender without invoking, even implicitly, an external body of theory and critique. Certainly, we can see that Nigel is keen to make distinctions between 'the needs and actions of men', and 'the needs and actions of women'. Within Nigel's own account, it is possible to see that a certain kind of masculinity is defended and claimed (with no little help from his *concerns* about 'money', and *claims* to be 'broken-hearted'). We might reasonably infer that such a defence implies the presence of a threat, too – and gender turns out to be a salient issue for Rose and Nigel as a dyad. A comparison with Rose's account is beyond the scope of this interview, but the reader can reasonably speculate as to where this might lead.

We have seen, in this example, that a range of analytical strategies may be used at the interpretative stage of IPA. This helps the analyst to manage some of the 'balancing acts' (eg, description and interpretation; individual cases and more general patterns) of IPA work. The strategies chosen will depend upon the commitments and interests of the researcher, the research question in hand, and the more general requirement for a coherent analysis. Our point here is that the analyst has the opportunity to draw from a wide repertoire of analytic strategies, and that these may be informed by prior experience and knowledge, psychological theory, or previous research – provided that they can be related back to a phenomenological account of the kind described above.

To manage this epistemological openness, one requires carefully formulated research questions, and an analysis which follows from them; a willingness to reflect on the process of collecting and analysing data; and in the final form, a contextualized account (obviously, this does require a more fully developed account than the one presented as a brief example here). In this respect, IPA can potentially offer us examples of what Michaels identifies as an emerging new paradigm in psychology. This new paradigm is distinguished by 'epistemological eclecticism' and 'is ready to encompass the real *and* the constructed' (Michael, 1999: 58) Thus, we may treat the wide range of available interpretative frames as a *practical* problem:

> The history of critical thought shows that both realism and relativism are typically deployed strategically. Writers ground their critiques in aspects of the world which they wish to make or remain real and, from this grounding, relativize aspects of that they want to question or deny. Which aspects of the world are to be relativized and which 'real-ised' is a choice typically shaped by moral, political or pragmatical precepts, not epistemology or ontology. (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999: 8)

The frames we use in any one analysis must be sufficiently coherent and clearly positioned in order that they make sense *for that analysis* – but this is a question of judgment, purpose and pitch as much as it is a question of epistemology.

Summary

Qualitative methods in psychology tend to vary *epistemologically*, of course, in terms of what their advocates would define as suitable objects of study. They also tend to differ *categorically* – in terms of where the boundaries of any 'method' are thought to lie. IPA has developed as a set of core ideas (eg, an idiographic, phenomenological, and interpretative analysis, with first-person accounts as data, etc.). Alongside these, a range of peripheral ideas have been left open to preference and exploration (epistemological flexibility, variability in details of procedure, etc). This seems to be a healthy state of affairs and, as a result, IPA has developed through practice.

To summarize, we began by suggesting that IPA's distinctiveness is best captured in terms of the *approach* that it offers, rather than as a particular set of 'analytic steps'. At its best, this approach combines the rich description of a phenomenological 'core' (which aims to capture something of the claims and concerns of the 'person-in-context') with the more speculative development of an interpretative account (which considers the *meaning* of such claims and concerns). We have shown that this combination is informed by Heidegger's phenomenology, and that this is consistent with a 'contextualist' position. In doing so, we have hoped to encourage IPA researchers to embrace the interpretative range and flexibility of this approach. It is through this aspect of analysis that IPA's great strength – as a form of qualitative research which can engage with other forms of knowledge – becomes most evident.

Thus, we have offered some further articulation of core concepts for IPA. These are not intended as limits to further expansion, but as *prompts* for development:

1) IPA's phenomenological component maps out the participants' concerns and cares – their orientation toward the world – in the form of the experiences that they claim for themselves (eg, 'How has this phenomenon been *understood* by this person?').
2) IPA's interpretative component contextualizes these claims within their cultural and physical environments, and then attempts to make sense of the mutually constitutive relationship between 'person' and 'world' from within a psychological framework (eg, 'What does this *mean* for this person, in this context?').
3) The overall outcome for the researcher should be a renewed insight into the 'phenomenon at hand' – informed by the participant's own relatedness to, and engagement with, that phenomenon.

Phenomenology is enjoying renewed interest within psychology. This is partly because it offers the opportunity to engage mean-

ingfully with aspects of both the cognitive (eg, Thompson, 1999) and constructionist (eg, Cromby, 2004) traditions. For us, phenomenology is important because it returns people's perspectives and experiences to the forefront of psychological study. In this sense, an IPA approach reinforces the view that such 'personal' phenomena are an important part of psychology's subject-matter, and that attempts at their explication are a disciplinary responsibility (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999).

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Clifton now works at St. Andrew's Hospital, Northampton.
2. Prescribed features appear to be limited to: an *idiographic* analysis balancing *experiential* claims against more overtly *interpretative* analyses; drawing from *small samples*; and focusing upon *verbatim* accounts.

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