

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Theory, Method and Research

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SESSION ONE

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Jonathan Smith (<http://www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk/about-ipa>):

“IPA is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. Therefore it is centrally concerned with the meanings which those experiences hold for the participants.”

A type of thematic analysis, but focusing upon subjective **meanings** of personal **experiences**, not just patterns of words

“...an individual’s personal perceptions or account of an event or state” (Smith)

Not an attempt to produce an objective record of the event or state

1. **Phenomenology:** A philosophical approach to the study of experience

- **Husserl:** - Human experience should be examined in the way that it occurs and in its own terms.
 - Finding a means by which someone might come to accurately know their own experience of a given phenomenon.
 - Stepping out of everyday experience (natural attitude), adopting a phenomenological attitude (reflexive mode)
- **Heidegger:** - A more practical, less theoretical approach
 - Questioned possibility of knowledge outside of interpretation
 - Still grounded his view in the lived world (things, people, relationships and language)
 - Conceptual basis of existence: 'worldliness' affords the embodied, intentional actor a range of physically-grounded (possible) and *intersubjectively*-grounded (meaningful) options

Theoretical Foundations

1. **Phenomenology:** A philosophical approach to the study of experience

- **Merleau-Ponty:** - The embodied nature of our relationship to the world. Our bodies are a means of communicating with the world.
 - Perceptions of 'other' always develops from our own embodied perspective.
 - We can feel empathy, but can never fully share another's perspective.
- **Sartre:** - Emphasises the developmental nature of the self – we are always becoming ourselves – the process is constant.
 - The focus is on what we will be, not what we are. Looking forward.

Theoretical Foundations

2. **Hermeneutics:** the theory of interpretation

- Schleiermacher: - Interpretation is an art – it does not follow mechanical rules
 - Opens up notion of subjectivity – purpose of research, wider subject knowledge
 - Connections can be made by researcher – larger data set – than participant
- Heidegger: - “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon the... fore-conception.”
 - Interpretation is never pre-suppositionless. (opposes Husserl)

Theoretical Foundations

The hermeneutic circle

Series of levels: To understand part, need to understand the whole

To understand the parts, look to the whole

The part	The whole
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

Thus IPA does not follow a linear method

Theoretical Foundations

3. **Idiography:** the focus on the particular/the 'case'

a. A commitment to the particular

b. How specific people understand a phenomenon, from their perspective, in a particular context

Results in a personally unique perspective

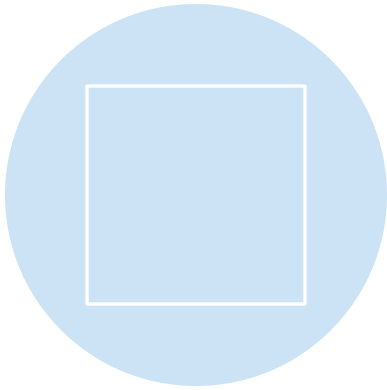
Attention to detail

Highlights that people experience the world in unique ways

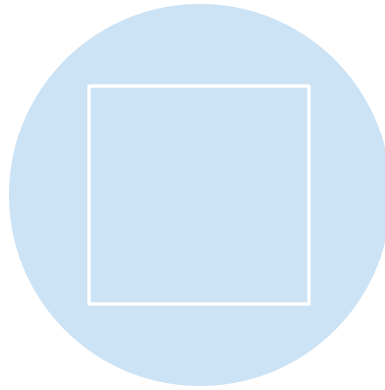
Theoretical Foundations



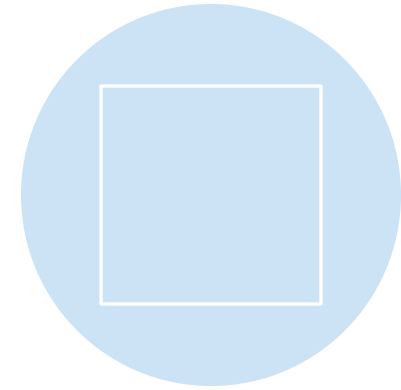
IPA and the theory



REFLECTING ON
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE



THE 'HERMENEUTIC
TURN'



FOCUSING ON THE
PARTICULAR



Ethical Practice

Group work:

Identify ethical issues that apply to researching using IPA

Explain these ethical concerns

Suggest ways in which to researchers can limit these potential risks



Designing an IPA study

Group work:

Identify a research topic and focus

Specific ethical concerns?

How might you devise an interview schedule to elicit the data you require?

Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis

Michael Larkin¹, Simon Watts² and Elizabeth Clifton³

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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

Doing IPA

SESSION TWO

Descriptive comments

Note key objects, events, people and experiences in the participant's life world – might be positive, negative or neutral

Such key elements may be highlighted by descriptions, assumptions, sound bites, idiosyncratic figures of speech and emotional responses

At this stage – face vale – what is standing out – through its vividness, its consistency etc?

Linguistic comments

How does the transcript reflect the ease in which the content and meaning were presented?

Content and language use may be interrelated

- E.g. tone, pauses, laughter (is this topic always joked about?) repetition (“a terrible thing...a terrible thing” [pause])

Smith (2010) jack – ‘shell-shocked’

Why shell-shocked? What does it tell us?

Conceptual comments

This level – more interpretative – dealing with the transcript at a conceptual level

Conceptual annotating often shifts the focus:

- away from explicit claims and statements
- Towards the participant's overarching understanding of the matters they're talking about

It takes time to reflect and refine your ideas

Abstraction

Basic form of identifying themes and developing a sense of superordinate themes

Putting like with like and developing a cluster – the cluster will need a name

Smith (2010): 'Jack':

Excessive thinking, mourning and grief, depression, shock, loss of self-esteem

Superordinate theme: *'Psychological consequences of HIV diagnosis'*

Subsumption

A theme acquires superordinate status – **helps to bring together a series of related themes**

Smith: Jack:

‘Diagnosis as transforming the self’ - theme that draws together a number of others (will become sub-themes)

e.g. Loss of self, mourning and grief, the questioning self, the self as performance, work of managing the self, denial to protect old self, loss of future etc.

Polarisation

Highlighting 'difference' – **oppositional relationships**

Smith (2010) Jack:

Re-affirmation of self, the constant self, rebuilding the self, being a better person etc.

Oppositional device might be a superordinate theme e.g. *'Loss/Re-affirmation'*

Contextualisation

Connections made by **identifying contextual or narrative elements**

May be temporal, cultural or narrative themes

May be clusters relating to particular narrative moments in the story, key life events

Jack: the diagnosis, disclosure to friends

Numeration

Frequency with which a theme is supported (referred to)

Frequency is not crucial to the importance of theme though e.g. shellshock only mentioned once

- Something might be so sensitive it cannot be referred to more than once
- Not just number – **look for patterns**

Function

How is the participant using themes to construct his account? **What are their functions?**

E.g. Jack (HIV diagnosis)

- Victim – to elicit sympathy
- Fighter/survivor (elicit praise, agreement, acceptance)

Themes serve a function in presentation of self in an interview

Themes are not introduced for no purpose – even if they are just to distract

Bringing it together

More than one way to analyse

Make notes about how YOU did the 'method of analysis'

Keep an analysis diary to record what you did

Try to form a graphic representation of the structure of your themes

- Could be in table format or box diagram format

Step 1: Familiarisation with the transcript content

Step 2: Initial noting

Step 3: Developing themes

- Reducing volume of detail
- Shift to working primarily with your notes – should dilute the account
- The whole becomes a set of parts – a new ‘whole’ by the end of the analysis
- Interpretations can ask questions, suggest – but motivated to tell the participant’s story

Step 4: Searching for connections across themes

- First – ordered more or less chronologically
- Eventually a structure is produced that highlighted the most interesting and important aspects of the account
(subjectivity, purpose of research)
- A discarded theme, might become relevant later

Doing IPA

Individual/Group work:

Using the example transcript available on Moodle, begin a tentative analysis of one person's experience of specific learning differences

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