



INTRODUCING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Chapter 8

Phenomenological methods

✓ Learning objectives

After reading this chapter, you will have an understanding of:

- ✓ phenomenology as a way of thinking about human experience
- ✓ the aims and objectives of phenomenology as a research methodology
- ✓ the difference between 'descriptive' and 'interpretative' phenomenology
- ✓ the basic principles that underpin interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
- ✓ the methodological procedures associated with IPA, including techniques for gathering and analysing data, integrating analyses of individual cases, producing an interpretation and writing up the research
- ✓ IPA's limitations

In addition, you will be able to:

- ✓ locate IPA epistemologically and understand (1) what kind of knowledge it aims to produce, (2) what kinds of assumptions it makes about the world, and (3) how it conceptualizes the role of the researcher in the research process

Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology, as formulated by Husserl in the early twentieth century, is concerned with the world as it presents itself to us as humans. Its aim was to return to things themselves, as they appear to us as perceivers, and to set aside, or *bracket*, that which we (think) we already know about them. In other words, phenomenology is interested in the world as it is experienced by human beings within

particular contexts and at particular times, rather than in abstract statements about the nature of the world in general. Phenomenology is concerned with the *phenomena* that appear in our consciousness as we engage with the world around us.

According to a phenomenological perspective, it makes no sense to think of the world of objects and subjects as separate from our experience of it. This is because all objects and subjects must present themselves to us *as something*, and their manifestation as this or that something constitutes their reality at any one time. The appearance of an object as a perceptual phenomenon varies depending on the perceiver's location and context, angle of perception and, importantly, the perceiver's mental orientation (e.g. desires, wishes, judgements, emotions, aims and purposes). This is referred to as *intentionality*. Intentionality allows objects to appear as phenomena. This means that 'self and world are inseparable components of meaning' (Moustakas 1994: 28). Here, meaning is not something that is added on to perception as an afterthought; instead, perception is always intentional and therefore constitutive of experience itself. This means that, from a phenomenological perspective, it is not at all surprising that different people can, and do, perceive and experience (what appears to be) the 'same' environment in radically different ways. For example, for the health and safety officer the office environment constitutes a potential source of hazards and dangers. For her, the pile of dissertations left on the floor of the office represents a potential source of falls and back injuries, as staff may trip over them or move them in a way that damages their backs. For the lecturer, by contrast, the pile of dissertations constitutes work and it represents a certain number of hours that will be spent reading and marking them. For the students, the dissertations embody their thoughts and feelings and they constitute a manifestation of their knowledge and skills, and, as such, a potential source of success or failure. From a phenomenological point of view, the pile of dissertations in and of itself means nothing; in fact, it does not exist as 'a pile of dissertations' until it has been perceived with intentionality.

The phenomenological method

The phenomenological method of deriving knowledge forms a central part of transcendental phenomenology. Husserl suggested that it was possible to transcend presuppositions and biases and to experience a state of pre-reflective consciousness, which allows us to describe phenomena as they present themselves to us. Husserl identified a series of steps that would take the philosopher from a fresh perception of familiar phenomena to the extraction of the *essences* that give the phenomena their unique character. Knowledge derived in this way would be free from the common-sense notions, scientific explanations and other interpretations or abstractions that characterize most other forms of understanding. It would be a knowledge of the world as it appears to us in our engagement with it.

The phenomenological method of gaining understanding involves three distinct phases of contemplation: *epoché*, *phenomenological reduction* and *imaginative variation* (for a detailed account of these, see Moustakas 1994). *Epoché* requires the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgements and interpretations to allow ourselves to become fully aware of what is actually before us. In *phenomenological reduction* we describe the phenomenon that presents itself to us in its totality. This includes physical features such as shape, size, colour and texture, as well as experiential features such as the thoughts and feelings that appear in our consciousness as we attend to the phenomenon. Through phenomenological reduction, we identify the constituents of our experience of the phenomenon. In other words, we become aware of what makes the experience what it is. *Imaginative variation* involves an attempt to access the structural components of the phenomenon. That is, while phenomenological reduction is concerned with 'what' is experienced (i.e. its texture), imaginative variation asks 'how' this experience is made possible (i.e. its structure). The aim of imaginative variation is to identify the conditions associated with the phenomenon and without which it would not be what it is. This could involve dimensions of time, space or social relationships. Finally, textural and structural descriptions are integrated to arrive at an understanding of the *essence* of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology and psychology

Even though transcendental phenomenology was conceived as a philosophical system of thought, its methodological recommendations have proved to be of interest to researchers in the social sciences in

general and in psychology in particular. This is because phenomenology focuses upon the content of consciousness and the individual's experience of the world. As Kvale (1996b: 53) put it:

Phenomenology is interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears. It studies the subjects' perspectives of their world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects' consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings.

Empirical phenomenological research in psychology was pioneered and applied extensively at Duquesne University in the USA (see Van Kaam 1959; Giorgi 1970, 1994; Giorgi et al. 1975). Topics of phenomenological investigation included 'feeling understood' (Van Kaam 1959), 'learning' (Giorgi 1975, 1985), 'being victimized' (Fischer and Wertz 1979), 'anger' (Stevick 1971) and many other phenomena of human experience. In fact, any human experience can be subjected to phenomenological analysis. This is another reason why this approach appeals to psychological researchers. However, there are differences in focus and emphasis between *transcendental phenomenology* as a philosophy and the use of the phenomenological method in psychology.

Spinelli (1989) pointed out that phenomenological psychology is more concerned with the diversity and variability of human experience than with the identification of essences in Husserl's sense. In addition, few, if any, phenomenological researchers in psychology would claim that it is possible to suspend all presuppositions and biases in one's contemplation of a phenomenon. Rather, the attempt to *bracket* the phenomenon allows the researcher to engage in a critical examination of his or her customary ways of knowing (about) it (see the discussions on reflexivity in Chapters 1 and 3 pp. 10–25). Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger who was Husserl's student and who developed phenomenological thought in highly influential ways, many researchers embrace a hermeneutic version of phenomenology according to which interpretation, and the awareness (and analysis) of what the researcher brings to the text, constitute an integral part of phenomenological analysis. Finally, it is important to differentiate between phenomenological contemplation of an object or event as it presents itself to the researcher, and phenomenological analysis of an account of a particular experience as presented by a research participant. The former requires introspective attention to one's own experience, whereas the latter involves an attempt to 'get inside' someone else's experience on the basis of their description of it. In phenomenological psychological research, the research participant's account becomes the phenomenon with which the researcher engages.

In this chapter I introduce the two major approaches to phenomenological research in psychology – the descriptive and the interpretative. Within these broad categories there are a number of different methods for collecting and analysing data (see Langdridge 2007; Giorgi and Giorgi 2008; see also Giorgi 1992; Lopez and Willis 2004; Finlay 2009 for comparisons between the descriptive and interpretative approaches to phenomenological research). This chapter provides a brief characterization of each approach and identifies key differences between them. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to a more detailed account of one of the interpretative phenomenological methods, interpretative phenomenological analysis (e.g. Smith et al. 2009). The chapter outlines the methodological procedures associated with interpretative phenomenological analysis and describes an example of a published interpretative phenomenological analysis study. This is followed by a critical appraisal of interpretative phenomenological analysis in particular and of phenomenological methods in general. The chapter closes with a discussion of phenomenological research in relation to the three epistemological questions.

Descriptive phenomenology

Descriptive phenomenology remains firmly within the tradition of transcendental phenomenology by positing that perception can be more or less infused with ideas and judgements. Although descriptive phenomenologists acknowledge that interpretation plays an important role in the ways in which people perceive and experience the world, they believe that it is possible to minimize interpretation and to focus on 'that which lies before one in phenomenological purity' (Husserl 1931: 262). This means that for Husserl, and for descriptive phenomenologists, 'description is primary and that interpretation is a special type of description' (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 167). Descriptive phenomenology requires the researcher to adopt a phenomenological attitude in which (s)he brackets all past knowledge (both lay or everyday knowledge as well as expert knowledge and theories) about the phenomenon under investigation. The

researcher attempts to be truly present to the phenomenon as it manifests itself in a particular instance (e.g. a research participant's account of it). The focus of the research is the phenomenon as it is experienced by the research participant rather than the phenomenon as a material reality. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003a, 2003b) provide detailed guidelines for descriptive phenomenological research. In summary, their version of descriptive phenomenology involves the following steps (see also Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 170, Box 10.1):

- 1 Obtain a concrete description of the phenomenon of interest.
- 2 Adopt the phenomenological attitude towards the phenomenon.
- 3 Read the entire description to gain an impression of the whole.
- 4 Re-read the description and identify 'meaning units' that capture different aspects or dimensions of the whole.
- 5 Identify and make explicit the psychological significance of each meaning unit.
- 6 Articulate the general structure of the experience of the phenomenon.

There are several versions of descriptive phenomenology, all of which share the focus on description although they differ in the extent to which they foreground particular dimensions of experience (e.g. psychological or existential). Some of the most widely cited sources include Colaizzi (1978), Moustakas (1994) and Ashworth (2003). Langdrige (2007: Chapter 6) also provides a detailed account of how to conduct descriptive phenomenological research.

Interpretative phenomenology

Interpretative phenomenology also aims to gain a better understanding of the nature and quality of phenomena as they present themselves. However, this version of phenomenology does not separate description and interpretation; instead, it draws on insights from the hermeneutic tradition and argues that all description constitutes a form of interpretation. As Van Manen (1990: 180, cited in Giorgi and Giorgi 2008: 168) puts it:

the (phenomenological) 'facts' of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process.

Similarly, understanding cannot take place without us making some preliminary assumptions about the meaning of what we are trying to understand. There is a circularity built into the process of meaning-making that is referred to as the 'hermeneutic circle' (Schleiermacher 1998). This means that 'parts can only be understood from an understanding of the whole, but that the whole can only be understood from an understanding of the parts' (Schmidt 2006: 4). On the most basic level, this can be demonstrated in relation to understanding a simple sentence. We cannot understand the whole sentence until we have made sense of the parts (i.e. the words) that make up the whole (the sentence). However, at the same time, we cannot make sense of a word's specific meaning until we have understood the sentence as a whole. This means that understanding requires a circular movement from presupposition to interpretation and back again. Our presuppositions are tested in the light of the evolving meaning of what we are trying to understand. Therefore, instead of attempting to bracket presuppositions and assumptions about the world, the interpretative phenomenological researcher works with, and uses, them in an attempt to advance understanding. As a result, the insights generated by such research are very much a product of the relationship between the researcher and the data. However, it is important to understand that this does not mean that the research is 'biased'; rather, it means that knowledge is only possible through the application of initial categories of meaning which the researcher then modifies through the process of interacting with the data.

As with descriptive phenomenology, there are several versions of this approach including Packer and Addison (1989), Van Manen (1990) and Smith (Smith et al. 2009). Again, Langdrige (2007: Chapter 7) provides a detailed account of how to conduct interpretative phenomenological research.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

IPA is a version of the phenomenological method that accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to research participants' life worlds. Even though it aims to explore the research participant's experience from his or her perspective, it recognizes that such an exploration must necessarily implicate the researcher's own view of the world as well as the nature of the interaction between researcher and participant. As a result, the phenomenological analysis produced by the researcher is always an *interpretation* of the participant's experience.

IPA shares the aims of other, more descriptive, phenomenological approaches to data analysis in that it wishes to capture the quality and texture of individual experience. However, it recognizes that such experience is never directly accessible to the researcher. Its founder, Jonathan Smith (1997: 189), characterizes IPA as 'an attempt to unravel the meanings contained in . . . accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the texts and transcripts'. As a result, the researcher is engaged in a 'double hermeneutic' as (s)he 'is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith et al. 2009: 3). Such interpretative engagement is facilitated by a series of steps that allows the researcher to identify themes and integrate them into meaningful clusters, first within and then across cases.

The systematic nature of its analytic procedure and the provision of ever more detailed descriptions of the analytic process (e.g. Smith 1991, 1999; Flowers et al. 1997, 1998; Jarman et al. 1997; Osborn and Smith 1998; Smith et al. 1999, 2009) have meant that IPA has become an increasingly attractive research method for psychologists (for reviews of studies see Reid et al. 2005; Brocki and Wearden 2006; Smith 2011). In the next section, I introduce the basic methodological procedures associated with IPA, together with a worked example. This is followed by an illustration of the method's application to the study of nine women's experiences of chronic pain (Osborn and Smith 1998).

Doing IPA

IPA works with transcripts of semi-structured interviews. Smith (1995b) provides guidance on how to conduct interviews that will generate data suitable for phenomenological analysis. In general, interviewing for IPA shares the principles and practices associated with semi-structured interviewing as introduced in Chapter 3. Since phenomenological research requires the researcher to enter the life world of the research participant, it is extremely important that the questions posed to the participant are open-ended and non-directive. Their sole purpose is to provide participants with an opportunity to share their personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation with the researcher. Focused and/or specific questions should be used to pick up on something a participant has already said, encouraging them to elaborate, rather than to check whether they agree or disagree with particular claims or statements offered by the researcher. Even though semi-structured interviews are the most widely used method of data collection in phenomenological research, it is also possible to ask participants to produce accounts of their experiences through alternative means, such as the use of diaries (audio, video or written) or various forms of writing. Whatever type of data collection method is used, IPA works with texts generated by participants. These are analysed one by one. IPA takes an *idiographic* approach whereby insights produced as a result of intensive and detailed engagement with individual cases (e.g. transcripts, texts) are integrated only in the later stages of the research (see also Chapter 9).

Analysis of an individual case

The first stage of analysis in IPA involves the reading and re-reading of the text. At this stage, the researcher produces wide-ranging and unfocused *notes* that reflect the initial thoughts and observations (s)he may wish to record in response to the text. These could include associations, questions, summary statements, comments on language use, absences, descriptive labels, and so on. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that it may be helpful at this stage to include 'descriptive comments' (which capture the participant's subjective experience), 'linguistic comments' (which are concerned with the use of language by the participant and its potential significance) and 'conceptual comments' (which focus on the context of the participant's experience and which tentatively identify more abstract notions which may help the researcher make sense of the participant's account). Smith et al. (2009: 83–90) provide a detailed account of what is involved in

producing each of these types of comment. However, they acknowledge that the three types are not intended to be overly prescriptive and that they constitute analytic tools which the researcher may (or may not) find useful. Notes produced at this stage constitute the most open form of annotation; they are a way of documenting the ideas that come up for the researcher upon his or her initial encounter with the text. These notes are recorded in the (right or left, depending on the researcher's preference) margin of the text.

The second stage of analysis requires the researcher to identify and label emergent *themes* that characterize each section of the text. These are recorded in the other margin. Theme titles are conceptual and they should capture something about the essential quality of what is represented by the text. Psychological terminology may be used at this stage. It is important to remember that phenomenological research is interested in the nature, quality and meaning of experience, and therefore theme labels ought to capture the experiential quality of what is being described. For example, themes that emerged from an interview with a chronic pain sufferer included 'loss', 'social comparison' and 'sense of self' (Smith et al. 1999).

The third stage involves an attempt to introduce structure into the analysis. The researcher lists the themes identified in Stage 2 and thinks about them in relation to one another. Some of the themes will form natural clusters of concepts that share meanings or references, whereas others will be characterized by hierarchical relationships with one another. For example, themes such as 'childhood memories', 'going to school' and 'relationship with mother' could form a 'childhood' cluster, while 'attending Spanish classes', 'watching Spanish movies' and 'practising Flamenco' would be subordinate to 'interest in Spain'. Smith et al. (2009: 92–9) identify a number of ways of looking for connections between emergent themes which can help the researcher to construct meaningful clusters. These include abstraction (putting 'like with like', thus creating a higher-level theme), subsumption (realizing that an emergent theme can subsume other emergent themes), polarization (identifying emergent themes which constitute opposite ends of a continuum), numeration (noting the frequency with which emergent themes appear) and function (identifying the functions of emergent themes within the account). Again, Smith et al. (2009: 99) emphasize that these analytic strategies are meant to be helpful suggestions rather than prescriptions, and advise the researcher to 'use ones that work for you and the material you have'. For example, it is quite possible that a single utterance can play a pivotal role in the analysis, although it is not repeated (see Smith 2011), demonstrating that 'numeration' does not necessarily tell us something about the significance of a theme.

Clusters of themes need to be given labels that capture their essence. These could be *in vivo* terms used by the respondents themselves, brief quotations or descriptive labels. For instance, our cluster comprising 'childhood memories', 'going to school' and 'relationship with mother' could be called 'when I was little' (*in vivo*/quote) or 'early years' (descriptive). Again, at this stage it is important to remember that the analytic focus of IPA is the participants' experiences and their attempt to make sense of these (Smith et al. 2009: 79). Themes generated by the analysis should capture these dimensions (i.e. of experience and interpretation) rather than simply being a 'shopping list' of topics mentioned by the participants. It is also important to ensure that clusters of themes identified at this stage make sense in relation to the original data. This means that the researcher needs to move back and forth between the list of themes (s)he attempts to structure and the text that generated the themes in the first place. The connections between themes identified on paper need to be reflected in the detail of the respondent's account.

The fourth stage of analysis involves the production of a summary table of the structured themes, together with quotations that illustrate each theme. The summary table should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant's experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This means that some of the themes generated during Stage 2 will have to be excluded. These may be themes that are not well represented within the text or which are marginal to the phenomenon. The researcher's decision about which themes should be retained and which should be abandoned is inevitably influenced by his or her interests and orientation. The summary table needs to include the cluster labels together with their subordinate theme labels, brief quotations and references to where relevant extracts may be found in the interview transcript (i.e. page and line numbers). A summary table could look like this:

Cluster label 1

• theme label	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers

Cluster label 2

• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers

Cluster label 3

• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers
• theme label brief	quote/keyword (<i>in vivo</i>)	page and line numbers

The numbers of clusters and themes identified can vary widely and depend entirely on the text being analysed. Some clusters consist of many themes, whereas others are much more narrowly focused. At the same time, there may be very many quotations that support a particular theme, while others are less frequently invoked in the text. The summary table should reflect the meanings that structure the participant's account rather than the researcher's expectations of what constitutes an acceptable number of clusters and themes.

Worked example

To obtain a sense of how to approach a text from an interpretative phenomenological perspective, let us look at a short extract from a young man's diary. The diary was written to document a process of change that he underwent over a period of time. The phenomenon of interest was, therefore, the experience of change and transformation. Here is what he writes:

- 1 I am on a train, or that's how I feel. Excited, alive, elated and a little
- 2 out of control; on the edge of control, like riding on a wave. Also
- 3 hungry, for experiences and impressions and seemingly insatiable.
- 4 I thought about manic states and how people say they feel like Napoleon –
- 5 and I thought, no, I don't want to rule the world, I just want to eat it!
- 6 The other day, I read something interesting about different stages in life.
- 7 It said that in one's youth, everything is still possible; opportunities arise
- 8 and can be taken up. Later in life, one learns to accept the place one has
- 9 arrived at and makes the most of it. That sounds about right to me.
- 10 I don't want to plan ahead or commit myself to anything in the long term,
- 11 because I want to be able to respond to new opportunities and challenges
- 12 which I expect to encounter. For me, there has to be movement all the time;
- 13 I feel that I am moving forward and changing. I need to feel free to change;
- 14 not to be pulled along by change but to move with it. Freedom and control
- 15 together – the freedom to respond to events and influences so as to change
- 16 in a way which is acceptable to me.

Stage 1: The researcher's initial encounter with the text

Upon initial reading, as the researcher I was struck by the way in which the author uses powerful metaphoric images to communicate his feelings ('I am on a train', 'riding on a wave', 'hungry', 'Napoleon'). However, while the first part of the diary entry (lines 1–5) employs lively and colourful language, the remainder is written in a calmer style, using more abstract or conceptual terminology (e.g. 'stages in life', 'opportunities and challenges', 'freedom and control'). The author attempts to make sense of his experiences by reference to psychological concepts such as psychopathology ('manic states') and lifespan development

('stages in life'). The closing part of the diary entry grapples with the relationship between freedom and control. The author wants to experience movement and change without losing control. He wants to 'move with change'. This invokes the image of a surfer and echoes the metaphor deployed earlier in the text ('riding on a wave', line 2).

Stage 2: Identification of themes

Following the initial open engagement with the text, the researcher moves on to a more systematic reading. The aim is to capture what is represented in the text through thematic labels. Working through the text line-by-line, I was able to identify the following themes:

- 1 Strong feelings (of arousal, of hunger, of excitement, of movement) [lines 1–3].
- 2 Psychopathology ('manic states') [line 4].
- 3 Hunger (for stimulation, experiences, impressions, for the world) [lines 3–5].
- 4 Life stages ('youth' vs 'later in life') [lines 6–9].
- 5 Need for movement and change ('For me, there has to be movement all the time') [lines 12–13].
- 6 Need for freedom ('I don't want to plan ahead or commit myself', 'I need to feel free to change') [lines 10–12 and line 13].
- 7 Control/agency ('a little out of control; on the edge of control', 'Freedom and control together . . .') [line 2 and lines 14–16].

Stage 3: Clustering of themes

Some of the themes identified in Stage 2 of the analysis share reference points and some of them constitute different manifestations of a particular condition or state. For example, themes 2 and 4 invoke psychological concepts, while themes 5 and 6 refer to a variety of needs. An examination of the seven themes in relation to one another allowed me to construct three clusters of themes. These capture the main categories of meaning that the author is using in his account of change and transformation. They are as follows:

- Cluster 1: Psychological states (themes 1, 2 and 4).
- Cluster 2: Needs (themes 3, 5 and 6).
- Cluster 3: Control (theme 7).

Stage 4: Production of a summary table

Finally, to obtain a clear and systematic overview of the themes that constitute clusters, together with keywords and the locations of relevant quotations, the researcher produces a summary table. The summary table for my analysis of the young man's diary entry about transformation and change looks like this:

Cluster 1: Psychological states

- | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| • Psychopathology | 'manic states' | line 4 |
| • Life stages | 'youth' vs 'later in life' | lines 6–9 |
| • Strong feelings | 'excited, alive, elated . . . hungry' | lines 1–3 |

Cluster 2: Needs

- | | | |
|------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| • Hunger | 'insatiable' | lines 3–5 |
| • Movement | 'there has to be movement' | lines 12–13 |
| • Freedom | 'I need to feel free to change' | lines 10–13 |

Cluster 3: Control

- | | | |
|-----------------------|--|-------------|
| • Loss of control | 'out of control; on the edge of control' | line 2 |
| • Freedom and control | 'freedom and control together' | lines 14–16 |

Integration of cases

There are two ways in which the researcher may approach integration. Having produced summary tables for each individual participant, the researcher may attempt to integrate these into an inclusive list of master themes that reflects the experiences of the group of participants as a whole. Data collection for IPA is usually based on *purposive sampling*, whereby participants are selected according to criteria of relevance to the research question. This means that the group of participants is *homogeneous* to the extent that they share the experience of a particular condition, event or situation (e.g. suffering from chronic pain, becoming a mother, having been victimized), which they are asked to describe to the researcher. It therefore makes sense to look across the entire corpus of data (i.e. all cases) to obtain a more generalized understanding of the phenomenon. As in Stage 3 above, it is important that the process of integration is carried out in a cyclical manner, whereby any emerging higher-order themes are checked against the transcripts. Integrative themes need to be grounded in the data just as much as lower-level conceptual themes are.

An alternative strategy for the integration of cases involves the use of the summary table for the first participant in the analysis of subsequent cases. Here, the original list of themes is used to code the other interviews, adding or elaborating themes in the process. Again, a cyclical movement is required so that themes that emerge in later transcripts can be checked against earlier transcripts. This allows the researcher to see whether newly emerging themes are merely new manifestations of old themes or whether they do, in fact, introduce genuinely new meanings or concepts. As a result of this process, a progressively integrated list of themes develops over time until, with the analysis of the final transcript, it reaches completion.

Irrespective of the approach used, integration should generate a list of master themes that captures the quality of the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation, and which, therefore, also tells us something about the *essence* of the phenomenon itself. The list of master themes should include the labels of superordinate themes and their constituent themes, together with identifiers that indicate which of the participants invoked them and where they did so (page and line numbers). A list of master themes could look like this:

Master theme 1

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos

Master theme 2

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos

Master theme 3

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos
• Constituent theme	page/line nos	page/line nos	page/line nos

Again, the numbers of master themes and constituent themes identified in any one study vary and should reflect the data from which they are derived. The researcher cannot know beforehand how many

master themes will be identified through the analysis. However, it is important to ensure that analysis continues until the point at which full integration of themes has been achieved. In other words, IPA is not complete until that which is shared between participants has been identified and captured in superordinate themes (master themes). This means that, even though we do not know exactly how many themes we will generate, we must not stop until all subordinate themes have either been integrated into or dropped from the analysis.

Interpretation

Much research using IPA stops with the construction of the table of master themes. However, more recently researchers have begun to move beyond this and have completed their analysis with a more explicit interpretation of the themes identified in the research. This may involve drawing upon existing theoretical constructs and formulations (see Larkin et al. 2006). Eatough and Smith (2008) advocate the adoption of two distinct levels of interpretation (see also Smith 2004). The first one, a more descriptive, empathic level, aims to allow the researcher to enter the participant's world, whereas the second critically interrogates the participant's account in order to gain further insight into its nature, meaning and origin. The second level of interpretation, therefore, takes the researcher beyond the participant's own words and understanding(s). Clearly, this second level is more tentative and speculative than the first, and should not be held too rigidly. While higher levels of interpretation enrich the research by generating new insights and understanding, they also give rise to ethical issues around the imposition of meaning and giving/denying voice to research participants (see Larkin et al. 2006; Willig 2012a for a fuller discussion of the ethics of interpretation).

Writing up

Following an introduction to the substantive area of research and the specific research question (Introduction), the report needs to provide an account of the methodological rationale and process associated with IPA (Method). This is followed by a presentation of the themes identified in the analysis together with illustrative quotations from participants (Analysis/Results). The Analysis/Results section of the report may be structured around master themes. Each theme is introduced and its various manifestations are discussed. Quotations from participants are included to illustrate the ways in which themes are mobilized. Relationships between themes should also be addressed. The presentation of the results can be supported by the inclusion of a table of themes or a diagram showing the relationships between themes. Either way, the presentation of results should be organized around the themes that emerged from the analysis. The aim of this section is to provide a convincing account of the nature and quality of the participants' experience of the phenomenon under investigation. It is important to be clear about the distinction between participants' comments and the researcher's interpretation of those comments. *Reflexivity* issues should be addressed within this context. Finally, the Discussion section of an IPA report considers the themes identified in the analysis in relation to the existing literature in the field. Implications for future research and theoretical developments are addressed. Phenomenological research can also inform recommendations for improved practice, particularly in the areas of health and counselling psychology.

An example of IPA

This example is taken from 'The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain' by Osborn and Smith (1998).

Aims

The aim of this study was to explore the experience of chronic pain as it is mediated by the personal meanings that sufferers attribute to it. The experience of chronic lower back pain is not a simple product of organic pathology, and psychological factors appear to play a crucial role in determining a sufferer's levels of distress and disability. In this study, IPA was chosen as a suitable method to 'explore explicitly the psychological processes that determine and maintain the dynamic relationship between the participant's chronic pain, distress and disability' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 67).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with nine female patients at a hospital outpatient back clinic were carried out and transcribed. The women were aged 25–55 years, they had suffered from chronic back pain for at least five years, and their pain experiences were characterized by high levels of distress and disability. The interview schedule was constructed with the aim of letting the participant tell her own pain story and to allow her to give expression to the psychological experience of her chronic pain.

Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed, one by one, in accordance with the principles of IPA. Each transcript was read and re-read before themes were identified. These were tentatively organized and then explored in more detail. Each theme's relation to other themes was also examined, and interrelationships between them were established. Finally, themes were integrated across transcripts in order to identify shared themes that captured the essence of the participants' experience of chronic pain.

The researchers were interested in the psychological experience of chronic pain, which meant that the psychological content of the pain experience constituted the analytical focus of the study. This is where the researchers' *interpretative* engagement with the texts becomes apparent. Their research interests led them to ask certain kinds of question, which took the analytic process in a particular direction. This shows that IPA does not claim to produce a definitive, or 'true', reading of participants' accounts; instead, the results of such analysis are necessarily 'a co-construction between participant and analyst in that [they emerge] from the analyst's engagement with the data in the form of the participant's account' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 67).

Findings

Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: 'searching for an explanation', 'comparing this self with other selves', 'not being believed' and 'withdrawing from others'. 'Searching for an explanation' refers to participants' motivation to understand and explain their situation. The need to know why they were suffering together with the absence of a meaningful explanation for their pain was experienced as frustrating and bewildering. This search for meaning pervaded the women's accounts and reappears throughout, thus forming a part of all other themes. 'Comparing this self with other selves' captures participants' tendency to engage in social comparisons with past and future selves as well as with other people. Participants made favourable as well as unfavourable comparisons. They talked about their losses (of mobility, of activity, of social life, etc.) by invoking what they used to be able to do (comparison with past selves) and by highlighting what other people are capable of doing (comparison with others). They also compared themselves with those who were even more unfortunate than themselves (e.g. the terminally ill, the severely disabled) to emphasize their existing strengths; however, these comparisons were often experienced as counterproductive as they made participants worry about their own future prognosis. The uncertainty and ambiguity associated with lower back pain and the participants' frustrated 'search for an explanation' meant that social comparisons tended to emphasize loss and grief. 'Not being believed' refers to participants' concern about other people's views of their illness status. Participants were aware that, since it is invisible and without a clear clinical diagnosis, chronic pain may be perceived as 'not real' or as a form of 'malingering'. As a result, participants experienced guilt and shame in relation to their disability. They also felt the need to show signs of being in pain (e.g. through appearance and demeanour) so as to be believed. 'Withdrawing from others' was a consequence of participants' fear of rejection and awkwardness in social settings. Not wishing to be perceived as 'a burden' or 'boring' in company, participants chose to withdraw from social involvement and to stay at home.

Discussion

The authors suggest that participants' failure to relieve their feelings of uncertainty and confusion was partly the result of their application of a purely medical model that does not provide a clear explanation for the occurrence of chronic lower back pain. Participants would be helped by gaining access to an explanation that allowed them to establish a basis for taking therapeutic action, to retain a sense of control over their pain and to gain a sense of legitimacy in relation to their suffering and disability. The use of social comparison and its association with a pervasive sense of loss and grief indicates that participants had not

developed a positive self-concept in the face of chronic illness. Instead, they were preoccupied with their past, idealized selves and with what they had lost through their illness. To repair the disruption to their sense of self, participants would need to be able to make sense of it within the context of their life story. Participants' inability to make sense of their pain led to feelings of guilt and shame in relation to their claims to illness status and the adoption of the sick role. To assert legitimacy for their suffering, participants felt obliged to appear ill by displaying signs of distress and disability. In addition, they withdrew from social engagement with others in order to avoid misunderstanding and rejection. The authors conclude that chronic pain patients could benefit if the themes that emerged from this study were addressed within the context of chronic pain management programmes. They propose that patients and their loved ones may be helped 'to understand their condition in less self-persecutory ways and realise greater benefits in the longer term through better adjustment and accommodation' (Osborn and Smith 1998: 80). However, they acknowledge that issues around guilt, shame and denial may also require substantial psychotherapeutic input.

Limitations of IPA

IPA is concerned with experiences and meanings. It looks at phenomena from the point of view of those who experience them. Its aim is to capture an experience and to unravel its meaning(s). To this end, it provides researchers with clear and systematic guidelines, which allow them to identify and progressively integrate themes. Ideally, upon completion, it will have generated a table of master themes that captures (something of) the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The introduction of IPA into psychology has made phenomenological methodology accessible to those who do not have a philosophical background. Smith and his colleagues take care to provide detailed descriptions of both the theoretical underpinnings and the analytic process associated with IPA (e.g. Smith et al. 2009) which means that those new to the method are encouraged to use it in their own research. Like all forms of phenomenological research, it does suffer from several conceptual and practical limitations. These concern the role of language, the suitability of accounts, and explanation versus description. These limitations will be discussed in turn.

The role of language

Phenomenological analysis works with texts. Data collection techniques used include semi-structured interviews, diaries and other forms of accounts such as descriptions of events or situations. Here, language is the means by which participants (attempt to) communicate their experiences to the researcher. In so far as phenomenological research is interested in the actual experience itself, the use of such data collection methods presupposes that language provides participants with the necessary tools to capture that experience. In other words, phenomenological analysis relies upon the representational validity of language. However, as will be discussed in Chapters 10 and 11, it can be argued that language constructs, rather than describes, reality. That is, the words we choose to describe a particular experience always construct a particular version of that experience. The same event can be described in many different ways. This means that language can never simply give expression to experience. Instead, it adds meanings that reside in the words themselves and, therefore, makes direct access to someone else's experience impossible. From this point of view, an interview transcript or a diary entry tells us more about the ways in which an individual *talks about* a particular experience within a particular context, than about the *experience itself* (see Chapter 10). Alternatively, it may be that the availability of a particular way of talking about an issue also provides the categories of experience, and that, as a result, language *precedes* and therefore *shapes* experience (see Chapter 11). From this perspective, language does not constitute the means by which we express something we think or feel; rather, language prescribes what we *can* think and feel. Either way, the conceptualization of language in much phenomenological research can be criticized for not engaging sufficiently with its constitutive role (see also Willig 2007 for more on this).

Suitability of accounts

Phenomenology is concerned with the texture of experience. The aim of phenomenological analysis is to explore the quality of experience and to obtain a better understanding of *what it is like* to live a particular moment or situation. In its original formulation, transcendental phenomenology attempted to bracket

abstract (scientific, common-sense and conventional) knowledge about a phenomenon in order to better understand the essence of the phenomenon as it revealed itself in a particular experience. Even though IPA is more modest in its aims, it also attempts to capture the experiences and meanings associated with a phenomenon rather than to identify people's opinions about it. But while phenomenology as philosophy works with introspection, whereby the philosopher explores his or her own experiences through phenomenological meditation, phenomenology as social scientific research method relies upon participants' descriptions of their experiences. This raises difficult questions. To what extent do participants' accounts constitute suitable material for phenomenological analysis? How successfully are participants able to communicate the rich texture of their experience to the researcher? And how many people are able to use language in such a way as to capture the subtleties and nuances of their physical and emotional experiences?

For example, Moustakas (1994: 177) reports that, in a phenomenological study of coronary artery bypass surgery, participants were asked to provide 'vivid, accurate and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience'. It could be argued that such descriptions are very difficult to produce, particularly for participants who are not used to expressing their thoughts, feelings and perceptions in words. Similarly, in a study of the phenomenology of patients' experience of care in an accident and emergency department (Lemon and Taylor 1997), patients who had sustained head injuries, suffered convulsions or taken drugs were excluded from the study. Again, this demonstrates that phenomenological research methods are not suitable for the study of the experiences of those who may not be able to articulate them in the sophisticated manner required by the method. This limits the applicability of the phenomenological method (but see Chapter 13 and Appendix 2 for examples of attempts to get around this problem by using visual methodologies).

Explanation versus description

Phenomenological research, including IPA, focuses upon *perceptions*. It aims to gain a better understanding of how the world appears to participants, of how participants perceive and experience the world, from their own perspectives. Here, 'the important reality is what people perceive it to be' (Kvale 1996b: 52). Phenomenological research is concerned with *how* the world presents itself to people as they engage with it in particular contexts and with particular intentions. It does not make claims about the nature of the world itself. In fact, from a phenomenological point of view, it does not make sense to conceive of 'the world' and 'the person' as separate entities. Instead, there is only 'experience of the world' based upon a relational unit of self/world (see also O'Connor and Hallam 2000). As a result, while it is able to generate detailed, rich descriptions of participants' experiences of situations and events, such research does not tend to further our understanding of *why* such experiences take place and *why* there may be differences between individuals' phenomenological representations. That is, phenomenological research *describes and documents* the lived experience of participants but it does not attempt to *explain* it.

It could be argued that an exclusive focus on appearances, without regard for their cause or origin, limits our understanding of phenomena. Much of what human beings perceive is not a direct reflection of the conditions that give rise to the perception. Our visual perception of the stars in the sky at night, for instance, does not reflect the ideal standpoint of geometric projection (see Holzkamp 1983). The same applies to social and psychological perceptions and experiences such as pain, love or prejudice. If we want to move beyond sharing an experience with our participants, and understand their experiences well enough to explain them, we need to be aware of the conditions that gave rise to these experiences in the first place. Such conditions can lie far beyond the moment and location of the experience itself. They may be found in past events, histories or the social and material structures within which we live our lives (see also Willig 1999a).

Is there a place for cognition in phenomenology?

Smith (1996: 263) argues that IPA is concerned with *cognition* because it is concerned with understanding 'what the particular respondent thinks or believes about the topic under discussion'. He proposes that IPA is compatible with a social cognition paradigm because it subscribes to 'a belief in, and concern with, the chain of connection between verbal report, cognition and physical state' (Smith et al. 1999: 219). In other words, Smith's version of the phenomenological method implies a Cartesian conceptualization of the

individual as the owner of a set of cognitions (ideas, beliefs, expectations, etc.), which (s)he uses to make sense of the world and to act in the world.

From this perspective, an understanding of a person's cognitive register should allow us to make sense of his or her experiences and actions. However, it could be argued that an emphasis on cognition is not, in fact, compatible with some aspects of phenomenological thought. This is because phenomenologists challenge the subject/object distinction implied by cognitive theory. They aim to transcend the separation between 'the knower' and 'the known', between 'person' and 'world'. Phenomenology is concerned with knowledge that is non-propositional; in other words, its objective is to capture the way in which the world presents itself to the individual in an immediate (unmediated) sense, including 'vague feelings, pleasures, tastes, hunches, moods and ideas on the margin of consciousness' (O'Connor and Hallam 2000: 245). These precognitive aspects of experience are seen as central precisely because they are inarticulate and unfocused. Smith et al. (2009: 188) stress that IPA is particularly interested in 'experiences where the individual is prompted to contemplate, take stock, worry, and try to make sense of what is happening'. Indeed, a recent review of IPA studies has found that 'illness experience' has been the most popular topic for such studies (Smith, 2011). IPA research is, therefore, particularly concerned with obtaining a better understanding of how research participants interpret and make sense of significant experiences, and it could be argued that this has encouraged a focus on cognition. At the same time, Smith et al. (2009) draw attention to the fact that there are different levels of reflection, some of which are more emotionally inflected than others (e.g. 'hot cognition', see Smith and Eatough 2006), and that, therefore, a more differentiated conceptualization of cognition would be helpful. The meaning and use of the term 'cognition' in phenomenology require further exploration.

Three epistemological questions

To conclude this chapter, let us look at IPA's position in relation to our three epistemological questions about the kind of knowledge it produces, the assumptions it makes about the world it studies, and the role of the researcher in the research process.

What kind of knowledge does IPA aim to produce?

IPA aims to gain an understanding of how participants view and experience their world. Although it acknowledges that it is impossible to obtain direct, unmediated access to someone else's personal world, IPA researchers are urged to engage with participants' accounts in such a way as to encourage an insider perspective. The objective of the analysis is to obtain an insight into another person's thoughts and beliefs in relation to the phenomenon under investigation. IPA starts from the assumption that people's accounts tell us something about their private thoughts and feelings, and that these in turn are implicated in people's experiences. It aims to produce knowledge of what and how people think about the phenomenon under investigation. In this, it could be said to take a *realist* approach to knowledge production. At the same time, however, IPA recognizes that a researcher's understanding of participants' thoughts is necessarily influenced by his or her own ways of thinking, assumptions and conceptions. However, these are not seen as 'biases' to be eliminated; instead, they are seen as a necessary precondition for making sense of another person's experience. In other words, understanding requires interpretation. Here, IPA is influenced by *hermeneutic* versions of phenomenology, such as Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (see Moran 2000: Chapter 8). The knowledge produced by it is, therefore, also *reflexive* in so far as it acknowledges its dependence on the researcher's own standpoint.

What kinds of assumptions does IPA make about the world?

IPA is concerned with the ways in which individuals perceive the world. It is interested in participants' subjective experience of the world rather than the objective nature of this (social or material) world. It also assumes that individuals can experience the same 'objective' conditions (e.g. a particular disease process or a social event) in radically different ways. This is because experience is mediated by the thoughts and beliefs, expectations and judgements that the individual brings to it. In other words, people attribute meanings to events that then shape their experiences of these events. IPA does not share the positivist view that the external world directly determines our perception of it. In fact, IPA does not make any

claims about the external world. It does not ask whether participants' accounts of what happened to them may be 'true' or 'false' or to what extent their perception of an event corresponds to an external 'reality'. What matters to IPA is how participants *experience* the situation or event. In this sense, it subscribes to a *relativist ontology*. However, at the same time, it recognizes that the meanings people ascribe to events are the product of interactions between actors in the social world. This means that people's interpretations are not entirely idiosyncratic and free-floating; instead, they are bound up with social interactions and processes that are shared between social actors. As such IPA is grounded in a *symbolic interactionist* perspective.

How does IPA conceptualize the role of the researcher in the research process?

IPA acknowledges that any insights gained from the analysis of a text are necessarily the product of *interpretation*. Although the aim of IPA is to better understand the participant's psychological world, researchers accept that such understanding can only be gained through the researcher's engagement with and interpretation of the participant's account. This means that the researcher is necessarily implicated in the analysis. As a result, the analysis is both *phenomenological* (i.e. it aims to represent the participant's view of the world) and *interpretative* (i.e. it is dependent on the researcher's own conceptions and standpoint). In this sense, IPA requires a *reflexive* attitude from the researcher. However, it does not *theorize* reflexivity. In other words, it recognizes the importance of the researcher's perspective but it does not actually tell us how to incorporate this insight into the research process and it does not show us how exactly the researcher's own conceptions are implicated in a particular piece of analysis. Thus, although IPA research does not claim privileged, or direct, access to participants' meanings and experiences, the terminology used in the presentation of its findings invokes a sense of discovery rather than of construction: themes are said to *emerge* and categories are *identified* in a way that resonates with grounded theory methodology rather than social constructionism (see also Snapshot Box 8.1).

Conclusion

It is important to bear in mind that IPA is but one version of phenomenological research methodology, which in turn grew out of a rich tradition of philosophical thought. Phenomenology as philosophy is itself by no means a unified system; there are diverse strands of phenomenology, including existentialist, transcendental and hermeneutic varieties (see Spinelli 1989; Moran 2000; Schmidt 2006). Each of these makes different assumptions about issues, such as the role of language and interpretation, the nature of being and human action. As a result, to describe an approach as *phenomenology* or as *phenomenological* means different things to different people. It is, therefore, important to be specific about which version of phenomenological thought one is referring to. IPA constitutes one way in which phenomenological ideas have inspired research practice. There are, however, many others. Nevertheless, I want to close by drawing attention to what unifies, rather than what separates, empirical phenomenological research. To this end, Kvale (1996b: 38–9) reminds us that 'A phenomenological perspective includes a focus on the life world, an openness to the experiences of the subject, a primacy of precise description, attempts to bracket foreknowledge, and a search for invariant essential meanings in the description.'

Interactive exercises

- 1 Select an everyday activity (e.g. a bus journey or eating a meal). When you engage in it the next time, adopt the phenomenological attitude and see how this changes your experience of the activity and what you can learn from this about your experience. Remember that the phenomenological attitude requires you to put aside, as far as possible, your knowledge, assumptions and expectations (e.g. do not think about what you know about the calorific value of the food you are eating or how it has been obtained and cooked, and focus instead upon the flavour and texture of it). It also

means staying in the present as far as possible and trying not to project yourself forward in time (e.g. do not think about the end of your bus journey and what you are going to do when you get there). Be warned that adopting the phenomenological attitude can turn your experience of an everyday activity from something mundane and routine into something unsettling and potentially disturbing.

- 2 Select an experience you have had recently (e.g. an enjoyable evening out with a friend or a disappointing visit to the theatre). Describe the experience phenomenologically. You can either do this in writing or you can record and then transcribe a verbal account of it. Remember that a phenomenological account needs to stay close to the quality and texture of the experience. This means focusing on what was going on inside of you as you underwent the experience rather than on what you know about it (e.g. if two hours in the theatre felt like an eternity then, phenomenologically, this is what matters). Having produced the account, read and re-read it line-by-line. Ask yourself what makes the experience what it is? What is its essence (e.g. What is the essence of boredom in the theatre?)? Which features of the experience need to be present to make it what it is (e.g. What makes time with your friend enjoyable – is it the food you had? The wine you drank? The way your eyes met?)? Which are redundant?

Further reading

- Eatough, V. and Smith, J.A. (2008) Interpretative phenomenological analysis, in C. Willig and W. Stainton Rogers (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. London: Sage.
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- Osborn, M. and Smith, J.A. (1998) The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: an interpretative phenomenological analysis, *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 3: 65–83.
- Smith, J. and Willig, C. (2012) A conversation with Professor Jonathan Smith, in C. Willig, *Qualitative Interpretation and Analysis in Psychology*, Appendix 3. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Smith, J.A., Jarman, M. and Osborn, M. (1999) Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis, in M. Murray and K. Chamberlain (eds) *Qualitative Health Psychology: Theories and Methods*. London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage.



Snapshot 8.1

What's new? The relationship between IPA and grounded theory

IPA is a relatively recently developed, and still evolving, approach to qualitative research in psychology. IPA is increasingly being used as a qualitative method, particularly in health psychology research (see Smith et al. 1999; Smith, 2011) and, more recently, also in counselling and clinical psychology.

IPA and (the abbreviated version of) grounded theory share many features. Both aim to produce something like a cognitive map that represents a person's or a group's view of the world. Both proceed by systematically working through a text in order to identify themes or categories that are progressively integrated until higher-order units (core categories, master themes) are established that capture the essence or nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Both start with individual cases, which are then integrated to obtain a composite picture that tells us more about the phenomenon than any individual case would have been able to. Finally, both methods use categorization in order to achieve systematic data reduction, which, it is hoped, will produce some form of general understanding or

insight into the fundamental process (grounded theory) or essence (IPA) that characterizes the phenomenon of interest.

Smith himself has repeatedly acknowledged the affinity between IPA and grounded theory. For example, in his writings about IPA, he recommends the use of analytic techniques 'commonly associated with grounded theory' (Smith 1999: 232; see also Smith 1997: 193) and he directs readers to grounded theory literature for guidance because it 'adopts a broadly similar perspective' (Smith 1995b: 18). In addition, IPA shares much of its analytic terminology with grounded theory; it talks about *themes* and *categories* that *emerge* through analysis, and it works with concepts such as *saturation*, *negative case analysis*, *analytic induction* and *memo-writing*. In line with grounded theory, IPA is conceptualized as a *cyclical process* that involves the *constant comparison* of data and their codes, leading to a continuous process of assignment and reassignment of data to evolving categories.

So what is it that IPA offers the researcher that grounded theory cannot provide? Why should psychologists choose to use IPA when they have access to grounded theory, which is, after all, a more established and better-known qualitative method? There are two possible answers to this question. First, while grounded theory was developed to allow researchers to study basic social processes, IPA was designed to gain insight into individual participants' psychological worlds. In other words, IPA is a specifically psychological research method. Even though, more recently, grounded theory has been used to produce systematic representations of participants' experiences (especially the abbreviated version, see Chapter 7), it could be argued that it is better suited to address sociological research questions. This is because grounded theory aims to identify and explicate contextualized social processes that *account for phenomena*. By contrast, IPA is concerned with gaining a better understanding of the quality and texture of individual experiences; that is, it is interested in the *nature or essence of phenomena*. Smith et al. (2009: 202) explain that while both grounded theory and IPA adopt an inductivist approach to knowledge generation, 'an IPA study is likely to offer a more detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of a small number of participants' whereas 'a grounded theory study of the same broad topic is likely to wish to push towards a more conceptual explanatory level'. So, for example, a researcher who is interested in the phenomenon of 'anger' could choose to study the topic by asking, 'What are the main experiential features of being angry?' and use IPA to address this research question; alternatively, they could ask, 'What factors influence how people manage being angry?', and this would call for a grounded theory approach (Smith et al. 2009: 45). Thus, although IPA and grounded theory methodology share some significant features, they lend themselves to different research questions, and they generate different types of insight.

The second reason why psychological researchers may prefer to use IPA is that grounded theory is now associated with so many debates and controversies as to make its application something of a challenge. There are now several versions of grounded theory (e.g. full vs abbreviated, Straussian vs Glaserian, realist vs social constructionist) that suggest different directions for grounded theory research. The researcher needs to engage with these debates before (s)he can choose the version of grounded theory that is most appropriate to his or her research question. By contrast, IPA is a new and developing approach that leaves more room for creativity and freedom to explore on the part of the researcher who uses it. However, researchers should never choose a method simply because it is more accessible; the method chosen needs to be appropriate to the research question. If the research question calls for grounded theory, then the researcher will have to bite the bullet and familiarize themselves with the literature around the different versions of the theory.



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