A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA) (A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD) AND A REFLECTION ON ITS APPLICATION TO MY UPCOMING DISSERTATION IN YEAR 3

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I CONFIRM THAT THIS WORK IS NOT AI-GENERATED.
SOME GRAMMARLY SUGGESTED WORDS WERE USED.

METHODOLOGY

A CONCISE INTRODUCTION TO IPA (WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT)

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

THEORETICAL/PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF IPA

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF IPA

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

A REFLECTIVE APPLICATION OF IPA TO MY DISSERTATION IN YEAR THREE

RESEARCH QUESTION THAT THIS METHODOLOGY CAN ADDRESS EFFECTIVELY

THE IMPACT OF THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS ON MY RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA COLLECTION, AND ANALYSIS

CONCLUSION

REFERENCES

INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA): A CONCISE INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS IPA

A qualitative research approach.

It explores how individuals make sense of their personal and lived experiences within the context of their personal and social world (Jose, 2025)

Rooted in phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Idiography (Smith & Nizza, 2021)

Widely used in fields like psychology, healthcare, social sciences, and education. (Jose,2025; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022)

WHAT IPA IS NOT

IPA IS NOT A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

NOT A LINEAR METHOD

NOT A GENERALISED DATASET

NOT A DETACHED DATASET

(WhatsApp Image, 2025)

LIVED EXPERIENCE: WHAT IS IT?

‘…a transformative or emotionally charged experience that leaves a
lasting impact – “a mark” –
on the individual's life (Frechette et al., 2020)

AN OUTLINE OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF IPA

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EDMUND HUSSERL:

Developed the Philosophy of Phenomenology at the beginning of the 20th Century.
'the science of the essence of consciousness' (Conroy, Smith, & Butler,2025; Cadjuo,2023)

PHENOMENOLOGY BEFORE HUSSERL:

Before Husserl, phenomenology emerged from the work of multiple
Philosophers of ancient Greece, like Plato, Aristotle and Descartes (Patton &Broward, 2023)

MARTIN HEIDDEGER:

Studied the early work of Husserl. In 1927, in his work 'Being and Time', he expanded Phenomenology and introduced the concept of interpretation.
Emphasising that experiences are always understood within a context (Patton & Broward, 2023)

JONATHAN SMITH:

Formalised IPA as a distinctive qualitative research approach
in the 1990s, especially in Psychology, Counselling and the Health Sciences.

EXPANSION OF IPA ACROSS OTHER DISCIPLINES

It started expanding and undergoing refinement
(Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022)

PHILOSOPHICAL/THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

HERMENUETICS

Hermeneutics is the Art and Science of interpretation in understanding human experiences.

'…it is the theory of interpretation, meant for providing a surer foundation for interpretation of biblical (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022)

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology, simply put, is the study of phenomena. How we experience things through our senses and perception (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022)

IDIORGRAPHY

Stems from the Greek word *'idios', which* means 'own' or 'private'. It is the approach that focuses on the individual and emphasises the Unique nature of human experience (Tutor2u, 2021)

KEY STRENGTH OF IPA

DETAILED INSIGHT: It works with small and in-depth samples, and it provides a clear and detailed understanding of participants' perspectives (Vicary & Ferguson, 2024)

THE COMBINATION OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND HERMENEUTICS: The blend brings about a meaning-making process which helps both researchers and participants in their interpretative venture.

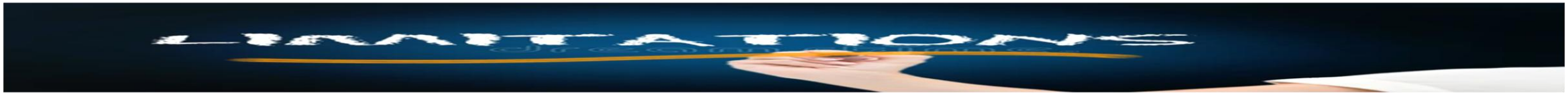
FLEXIBILITY OF DATA COLLECTION: Given the adaptability of IPA, it can be applied across other disciplines such as Education, Psychology and Health Sciences.

EMPOWERMENT OF PARTICIPANTS: In IPA, participants can express their experiences in their own words. This fosters originality of content and ensures that participants' accounts are not distorted.

SUITABILITY FOR SENSITIVE TOPICS: In an attempt to examine topics which are sensitive, ambiguous and emotionally laden, such as trauma and grief, IPA is generally suitable.

REFLEXIVITY: IPA recognises and emphasises being aware of and acknowledging your own biases, assumptions, and perspectives that may influence the results (Delve, Ho & Limpaecher, 2023)

LIMITATION OF IPA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS



PERSONAL BIASES: This can affect the outcome of the study

CHALLENGES IN DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS: Because IPA is deeply rooted in individual experiences and interpretations, it can lead to subjectivity in data collection and analysis (Danmax, 2025)

FINDINGS ARE NOT GENERALISABLE: Characteristically, IPA uses small, purposive samples; this impedes the generalizability of findings

LANGUAGE DEPENDENCE – IPA depends on language and communication. This becomes impossible for participants who cannot articulate and communicate their experiences (Elias, 2022)

ENORMOUS DIFFICULTIES: When engaged with sensitive research like Trauma, Grief and Bereavement, enormous difficulties could be encountered (Taylor et al., 2024)

TIME-SENSITIVE PROCESS: When embarking on IPA research, especially for emotionally charged data collection, sensitivity of time is of the essence.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN IPA

INFORMED CONSENT: Participants should be free to choose whether to participate or withdraw.
Clear communication and understanding of potential risks and benefits

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY: The Identities and personal information of participants are to be protected (BACP, 2018)

POTENTIAL HARM: Every step must be taken to sensitise participants on the possibility of Potential harm or distress and efforts to minimise such harm or distress

REFLEXIVITY: Researchers should be aware of their own biases and the possibility of influencing The research process.

(Brodowicz, 2024)

IPA COULD BE A CHALLENGING VENTURE!

The Researcher goes through the
LAYER BY LAYER RIGOURS OF STUDYING AND ANALYSING THE DATA COLLECTED.

NO PREASURE, NO RUSH. (Istock, ND)
HE KNOW WHEN HE STARTS…

WHEN WOULD HE BE DONE WITH ANALYSIS?
HE DOES NOT KNOW!

THE HEIDEGGERIAN 'DASEIN' – BEING-IN-THE-WORLD: THE STRENGTH OF RESPECT FOR CONTEXT IN IPA

Heidegger: '… our experiences are inseparable from the surrounding environment and social contexts'(van Lier, B., 2024)

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'DOUBLE HERMENEUTICS…'

…WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE PARTICIPANTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATIONS

THE NONLINEAR NATURE OF IPA: THE JOURNEY TO THE *AHA* MOMENT

(Brucefeiler, ND)

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When is the Real *Aha* moment for both the Participant(s) and Research?

BETWEEN IPA AND THEMATIC QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS: A COMPARATIVE/CRITICAL ANALYSIS

IPA: It provides an effective way to understand the unique experiences of individuals.

Can help develop new theories based on lived experiences.

Thrives on few participants for a deeper and more effective data analysis.

THEMATIC RESEARCH METHODS: Allows for exploring diverse subjects like social structures, beyond personal experiences.

Can identify patterns that can be generalised to a larger population.

Engages in effective data analysis with the use of broader and more participants.

IPA

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THE COMMON GROUND BETWEEN IPA AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS:

Both IPA and TA are effective methods for analysing qualitative data

But also maintain their essential differences (Finlay,2021)

TA

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PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF IPA

ESEARCH STUDIES: ⟷ PREVIOUS RESEARCH STUDIES

RESEARCH IN HEALTH & ILLNESS: This year, IPA has been used to explore the experience of Cancer patients and the management of pain (Osgood &Farr, 2025)

RESEARCH IN EDUCATION: For example, 'Black academics' lived experiences of race and racism within psychotherapy education settings' (Dhillon-Stevens, Mukamel, & Hussein, 2025)

RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY: A range of Psychological phenomena, such as Trauma, Grief and the impact of disability, are explored using IPA. (Delvetool, 2023)

RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCES: Whilst its roots are in psychology, it is increasingly being drawn upon by scholars in the human, social and health sciences (Noon, 2018)

SOCIAL MEDIA AND WELL-BEING: In 2019, IPA was used in Exploring Interpretations of Social Media, Perception of Self, and Well-Being amongst University Students (Gardiner-McGregor, 2019)

IN THE BUSINESS WORLD: IPA is used to explore the subjective experiences of business owners and Customers.

IPA: TESTED, TRUSTED AND RELIABLE …?

YES, BUT…

SOME CRITICISMS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS?

1. Emphasis on Individual Experiences: Do these represent the experiences of others within the same wider context?
2. The dilemma of Objectivity and Researcher Bias plagues IPA: How can a researcher be objective given personal history, culture and social context?
3. Lack of rigor and reliability due to its reliance on subjective interpretation.
4. IPA criticised for ambiguities as well as lacking standardisation (Tuffour, 2017)

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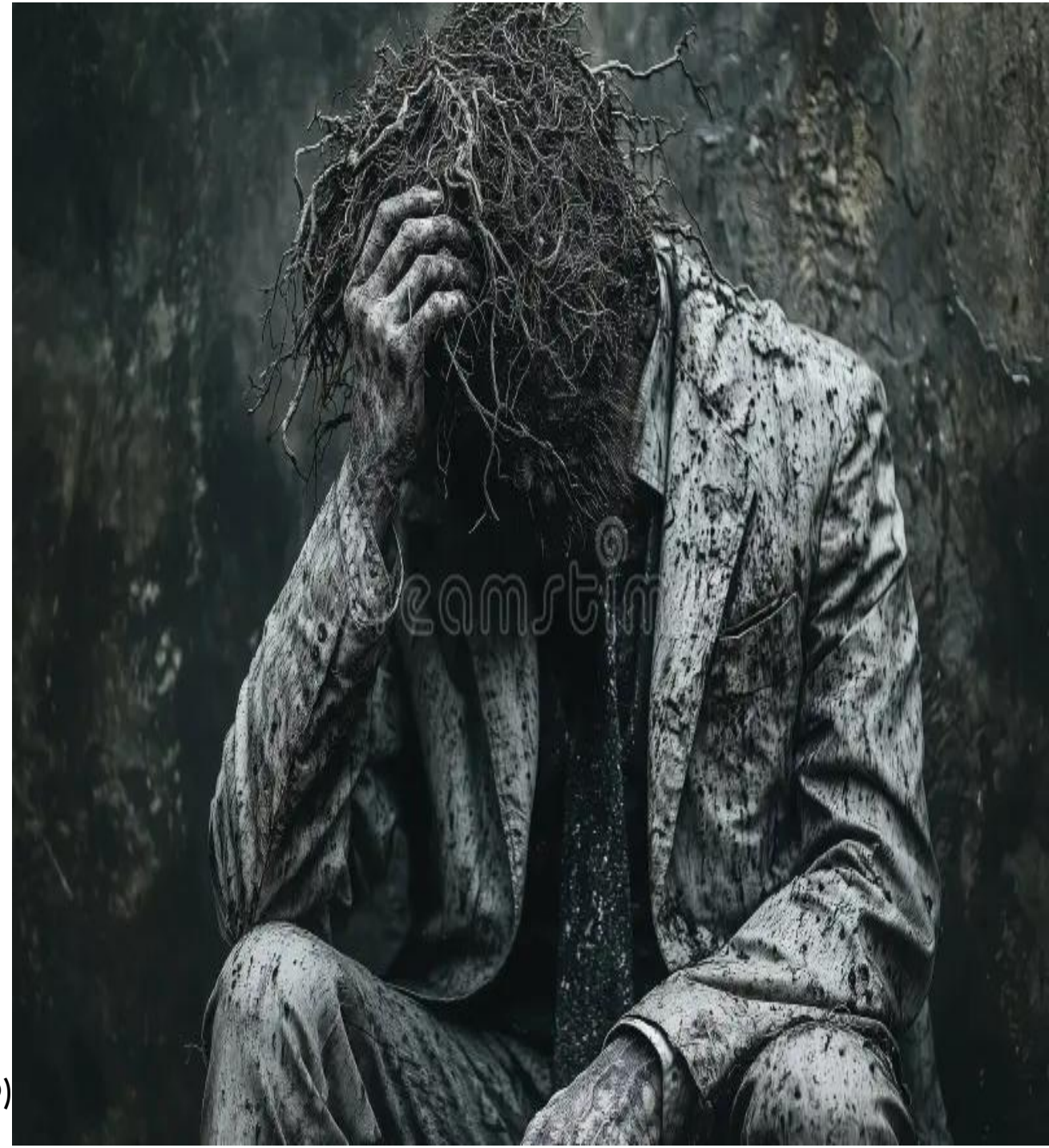
THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

EXPERIENCE BEYOND WORDS!

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IPA

HOW DOES IPA ACCOUNT FOR THE SHORTFALLS IN HUMAN CAPACITY TO EXPLAIN SOME EXPERIENCES?

(Dreamstime, ND)



MY DISSERTATION TOPIC.

‘THE TRAUMATIC IMPACT OF TEENAGE OPHANAGE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS’

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MOST RECENT IPA STUDY ON CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT.

‘Echoes of loss: An interpretive phenomenological study of the expressions of childhood bereavement after the death of a parent…’
(Shorer & Mahat-Shamir, 2025)

APPLICATION OF IPA TO MY DISSERTATION:

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THEMATIC ANALYSIS: IPA helps identify key themes such as grief, resilience, identity shifts, and emotional struggles, providing insights into how bereavement shapes psychological development.

RICH DATA GENERATION: Using IPA in my dissertation will generate rich and detailed data that deeply explains my experiences.(Delvetool, 2023)

FOCUSING ON MY NARRATIVE: This enhances deep analysis of my lived experience of bereavement of both parents as a teenager and analyses how other teenagers interpret and process the loss of both parents.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW: I will conduct in-depth interviews with bereaved teenagers or adults who experienced this trauma in adolescence, and I will ensure rich, detailed accounts of their narratives.

REFLEXIVITY: Using IPA, I must acknowledge my own biases and perspectives, ensuring that interpretations remain faithful to participants' lived experiences.

POSSIBLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS
OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

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1. How do Teenagers make sense of their grief when they are orphaned within short intervals?

2. How do they describe their experiences of attachment, loss, and hope for the future?

3. How do teenagers perceive and navigate post-traumatic growth after bereavement?

4. What emotional and psychological challenges do teenage orphans describe in their everyday lives?

5. What role does social support play in the recovery of an orphaned teenager?

6. How do teenage orphans interpret and cope with the transition to adulthood?

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IMPACT OF THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF IPA ON MY RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

IMPACT OF IPA'S LIMITATIONS ON MY RESEARCH DESIGN

FOCUS ON DEPTH: IPA's idiographic focus means you'll likely need a smaller sample size, which can affect the design

SUBJECTIVITY AND BIASES: This can affect the outcome of the study. This can also affect the design of the research (Shi, Rubel, & Tan, 2025)

RESOURCES COMMITMENTS: This requires an iterative process of interpreting and reinterpreting data.

TIME CONSUMPTION: This takes so much time for data collection, analysis and writing up findings.

IMPACT OF IPA'S LIMITATIONS ON MY DATA COLLECTION:

TIME INTENSIVE NATURE: IPA needs thorough analysis. This means I must allocate adequate time for data collection

SMALL SAMPLE SIZE: This will imply that I will adjust my data collection strategy to prioritise depth. I may need to collect longer and more in-depth interviews (Love, Vetere, & Davis,2020)

RESEARCHER BIAS AND INTERPRETATION: This points to the fact that I must be mindful of my own biases and ensure objectivity in data collection and analysis

LARGE DATA GENERATION: I need to put in

HOW IPA LIMITATION CAN IMPACT MY RESEARCH ANALYSIS:

BIASES AND SUBJECTIVITY: Inability to accurately capture the richness and essence of someone else's experiences because of personal biases could affect the research design (Cuthbertson, Robb & Blair, 2020)

LIMITED GENERALIZABILITY: The impact here is that it will limit my research design choice, sample size and research questions as well.(Delvetool, 2023)

TIME-INTENSIVE ANALYSIS: The impact here is that it will delay my completing the analysis and the total Project timeline.

HOW IPA STRENGTH CAN IMPACT MY RESEARCH DESIGN:

FOCUS ON LIVED EXPERIENCE: Rather than just describing the experience of participants, it will enable me to explore what meaning the participants attach to their experiences

FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE: IPA provides a structured framework for analysis and allows me to approach and adapt my desired design (Smith & Fiedsend,2021)

STRENGTH IN SPECIFIC RESEARCH AREAS: IPA can also be very great in understanding issues in areas like healthcare, social issues and education. This will help me as a researcher to understand my research design.

HOW IPA STRENGTH CAN IMPACT MY RESEARCH DATA COLLECTION:

CONVERSATIONAL APPROACH: IPA interviews are meant to be Conversational in nature. It fosters the relationship between the researcher and participant. This will bring about cordiality and openness, which are crucial to data collection (Jose,2025)

FOCUS ON LIVED EXPERIENCES: IPA places priority on the meaning individuals attach to their experiences. This makes it crucial to collect data that explains and captures their perspective.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW: This creates space for participants to freely share their narratives, and it allows for a deeper exploration of their experiences.

HOW IPA STRENGTH CAN IMPACT MY RESEARCH ANALYSIS

MAKING A DEEP DIVE INTO MEANING: I have the freedom to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences rather than merely focusing on observation at the surface.

CAPTURE OF UNIQUE PERSPECTIVES: With rich and detailed data, it will elicit a robust analysis.

FLEXIBILITY: Because IPA is adaptable, allowing me to explore complex and sensitive topics which enhances the quality of analysis.

EMMERGING THEMES: In IPA, one can identify themes and patterns in the data, leading to new insight within the analysis (Rajasinghe *et al.*, 2024)

CONCLUSION

(Vecteeze, ND)

IPA: It explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, and it is not a linear method.

IPA: Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Idiography.

STRENGTH: In-depth insights into personal experiences. Flexible and adaptable to various research contexts, captures complexity and acknowledges interpretation.

LIMITATION: Small sample sizes, limiting generalizability, Time-consuming, highly Subjective and requires skilled analysis, making it unfriendly for starters.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: Healthcare, Psychology, Education and Social Sciences and other areas.

APPLICATIONS TO MY DISSERTATION: It will explore the Traumatic Impact of Teenage Orphan.

It will also examine the fact that in many cases, orphaned teenagers experience profound emotional and psychological shifts, shaping their identity and worldview.

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