



Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis



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Introduction - What is IPA



Qualitative research method into human experience

- 1990s - Patient experiences in healthcare and psychology settings
- E.g., psychological consequences of limb amputation (Roşca et al., 2021), waiting lists (Punton, Dodd, and McNeill, 2022)

Participant as experiential expert:

- Humanistic, person-centred
- Participant experiences are “socially and historically contingent and contextually bounded” (p. 4)
- Same for researchers!

Phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography

Phenomenology

Experience - “attending to things that matter to people”
(Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p. 7)

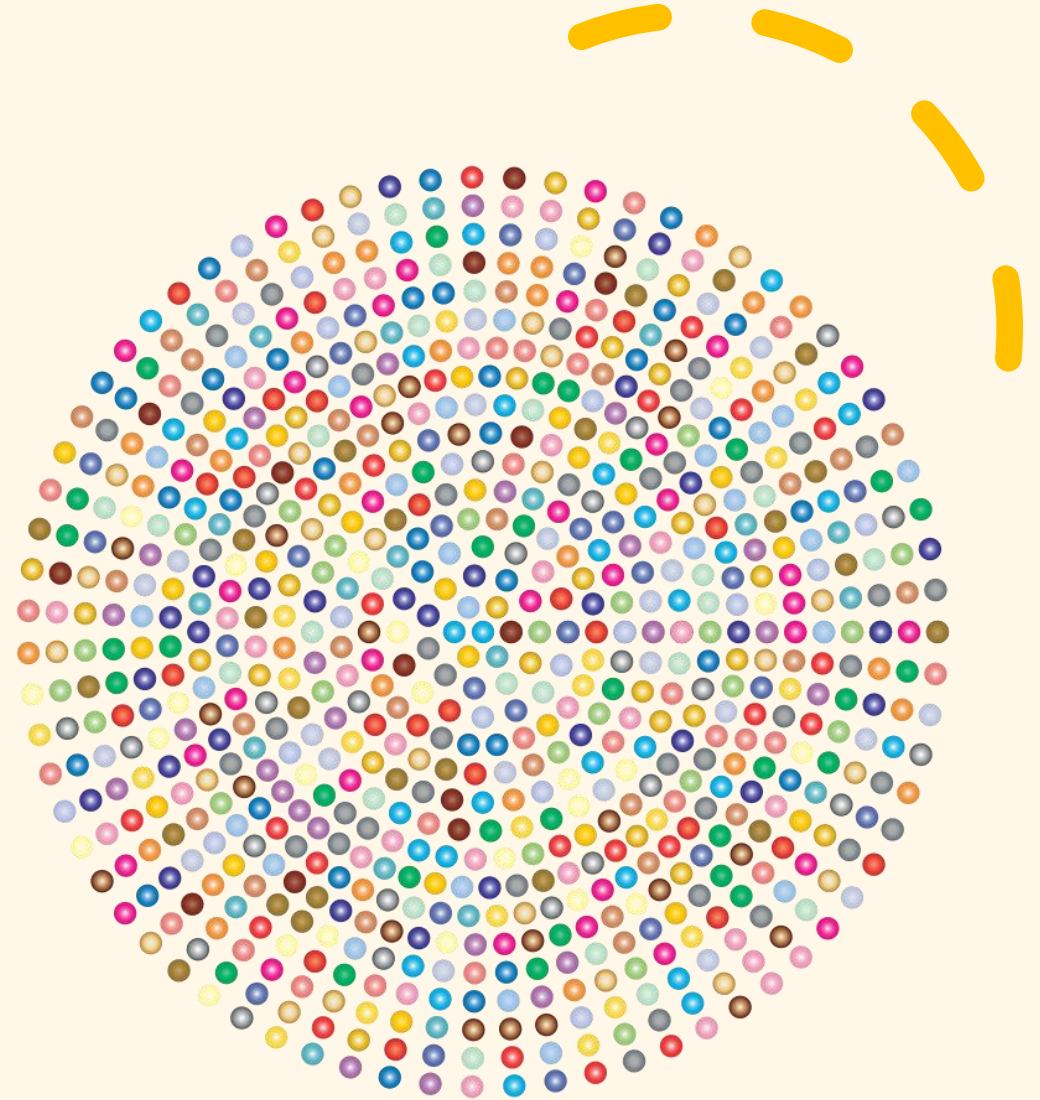
- E.g. Lived experience of pain (Smith and Fieldsend, 2021)

Descriptive - Phenomenology began with Husserl

- Trying to bracket off biases to get to descriptive, reductive generalities explaining human experiences

Interpretative - Successors Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Merleau-Ponty said we can never do this:

- “our observations are always made from *somewhere*... while phenomenology might be descriptive in its inclination, it can only ever be interpretative in its implementation.” (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p. 102).



Hermeneutics



Interpretation – “to describe something is to first encounter and interpret it ‘as something’” (Eatough and Smith, 2017, p.22)

- Include biases explicitly when offering interpretations (Larkin and Thompson, 2012)

Hermeneutic circle - iteratively moving between parts and the whole

Hermeneutic constancy - Trying to achieve coherent and consistent interpretation (Larkin and Thompson, 2012)

- Closely tied to participant’s own words

Double hermeneutic - “The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them.” (Smith et al., 2009, p.3)”

- Healthy tension between ‘affirmation’ and ‘suspicion’

Hermeneutics

The ‘gem’ - a single phrase or instance that seems of particular importance for understanding the participant’s experience

- *Shining* – obvious, clear, heavy with meaning
- *Suggestive* – less obvious, has to be worked out
- *Secret* – elusive

“My mum was always with my brother, he was always you know, he was the lad and my mum used to be like, say that I used to look like my dad and she didn’t like my dad so I always thought she didn’t like me... **She was always my brother [sic]**. I mean my brother could never do anything wrong...” (p. 17-18)

Idiography

Focusses on individual experience - “always beginning with the particular and ensuring that any generalizations are grounded in this” (p. 11)

- **Small samples** – each are analysed individually before comparing and cross-analysing
 - “increasingly confident in its promotion of studies with $N = 1$ as having a central place in qualitative psychological approaches” (p. 29)
- **Healthy tension** between shared experience and unique individuality
 - A “cautious climb” towards generalisations (p. 11)



Conducting IPA



Research Questions

- **Primary Qs** - open and exploratory, focussing on “the experiences, and/or understandings, of particular people in a particular context” (p. 103)
- **Secondary Qs** - more precise and are addressed in the discussion, generally about how the exploration interacts with existing theory, models, modalities, etc

Participants - should have a connection to the subject

- Intentionally selecting participants reflect this – small **homogenous** sample
- Usually semi-structured 1:1 interviews, often multiple times
- Could be focus groups or written accounts

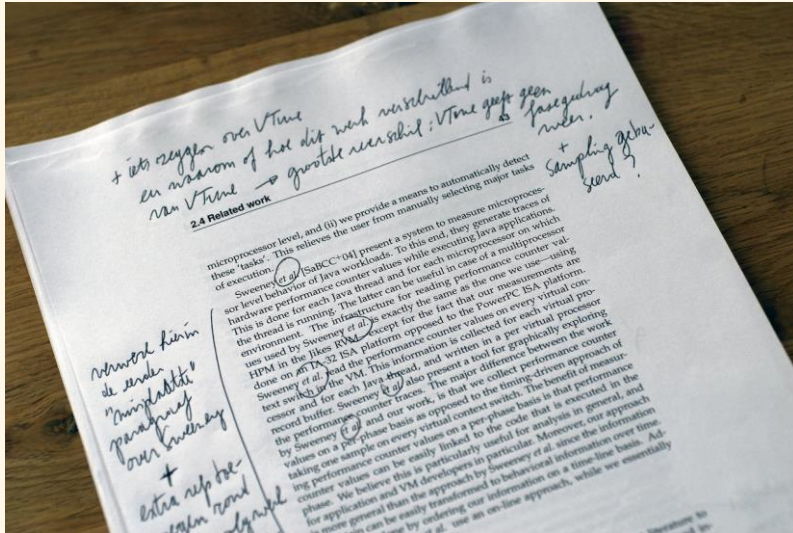
Analysing Data - Coding

Free coding – initial pass

- Biased, emotional, unsystematic,
- Getting a general sense of the data
- Uncovering biases and internal frames of reference

Coding - analysis, close coding. Line by line annotation

- Aiming for a “coherent, third-person, and psychologically informed description” (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006, p. 104) of what it is like being/living as the participant
- **Objects of concern** - meaningful events, experiences, values
- **Experiential claims** – indicating what the meaning is
- Individual first, then ‘cross-sectional’



Coding

Developing line-by-line coding, staying close to data; generating possible interpretations	Transcript excerpt	Checking/clarifying core content
(Something is) <i>annoying</i> • I don't go out much (<i>very occasionally</i>) • I have to use the wheelchair • 'The wife' pushes me (Loss of agency/mobility) – <i>threat to masculinity?</i> • People we know . . . • Officials (important people?) . . . • . . . talk to my wife, <i>not to me</i> (Loss of face/status) – this is what's <i>annoying</i>	Well the annoying thing is, when I go out, very occasionally, it has to be in a wheelchair. Now, when the wife is pushing me, er, we may see someone that we know or possibly an official. That person talks to my wife rather than me'	<i>Object of concern:</i> Other people's lack of recognition of/respect for my status as a human being <i>Experiential claim:</i> This is 'annoying' (understatement?) Spoiled identity?

Themes & Interpretations

Themes - Cluster quotes, ideas, 'units of meaning' around particular objects of concern or experiential claims

- Fleshing out **phenomenological core**

Interpretations and meaning

- Putting "the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context... [dealing] with the data in a more speculative fashion: to think about 'what it means' for the participants to have made these claims... in this particular situation." (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006, p. 104)

Box 8.2 Keeping Track of the Emerging Themes

Diagnosis is ...

- 1/41 – required as an end goal
- 2/16 – described as disreputable or sinful
- 2/24 – irrelevant, bears no relation to people's lives
- 2/32 – something that dictates treatment, removes thinking process, is functional but. . .
- 3/10 – insensitive/reductionist, might miss something meaningful
- 3/11 – leads to stigma, discrimination, exclusion
- 3/33 – outdated, does not view the person
- 4/35 – requires interpretation of experiences
- 7/32 – unavoidable if you know criteria (trapped by the knowledge?) but does not need to be stated
- 7/35 – something that patients must be protected from
- 9/10 – a careless, even aggressive, act
- 10/18 – polarized against meaning
- 10/24 – an easy way out, does not require thought
- 12/19 – 'by looking at symptoms you are missing the person' and that is more real/certain

- Diagnosis as a necessary functional tool/object
- A damaging object, to be avoided to minimize harm
- A blunt implement (lazy, careless, insensitive, outdated)
- Meaningless (to the patient and also polarized against meaningfulness)

Example from De Boos (2008)

These are all of the meanings attached by one participant to one object of concern (in this case 'diagnosis' – the participant is a psychiatrist). They are all identified by page and line number so that the context of these claims and concerns can easily be checked against any developing interpretations

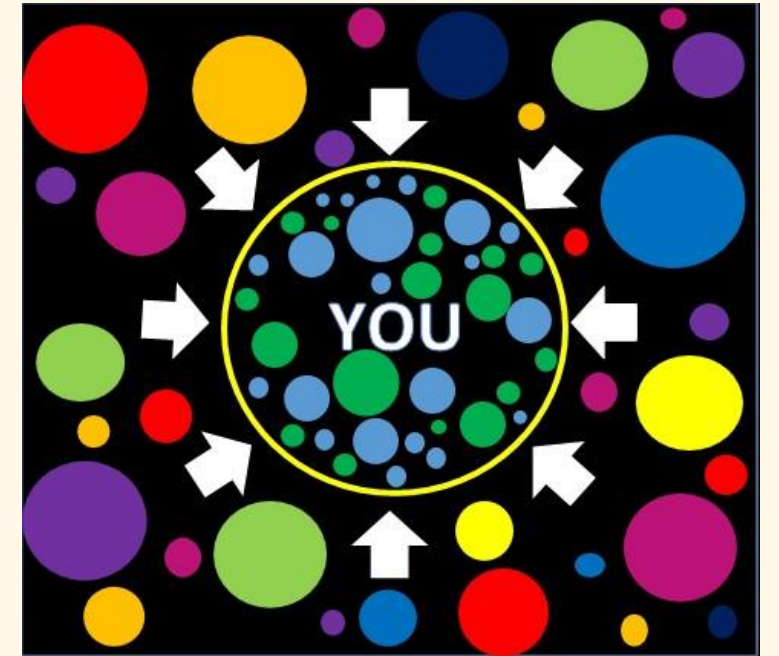
This is the analyst's summarizing work which identifies the cluster of meanings that characterize the content, above

Larkin and Thompson, 2012,
p. 108

Limitations

Sample size and generalisation – small, homogenous samples makes generalising and transferring insights more difficult

- **Echo chamber** - ‘People like me’ (Robinson, 2010).
 - Awareness of internal frame of reference
- Smith et al. (2009) argue a successful IPA has broader value and implications
- “...if the research account is rich and transparent enough, and sufficiently related to current literature, the reader should be able to assess and evaluate transferability” (Pringle et al., 2011, p.17)
- **Analytic commentary** - looking across studies for commonalities can contribute to theory
- **Priorities** - deep and rich vs broad and more generalisable



Limitations

Bracketing – overemphasis? (Gyollai, 2020)

Quality – Variable (Nizza, Farr, and Smith, 2021)

Data sets – lengthy interviews with multiple Ps can produce vast amounts of data

- “The major problem we face in qualitative inquiry is not to get data, but to get rid of it.” (Wolcott, 1990, p. 18)
- How to decide which variables/themes are relevant
- Time spent coding and analysing



Limitations

Interviews

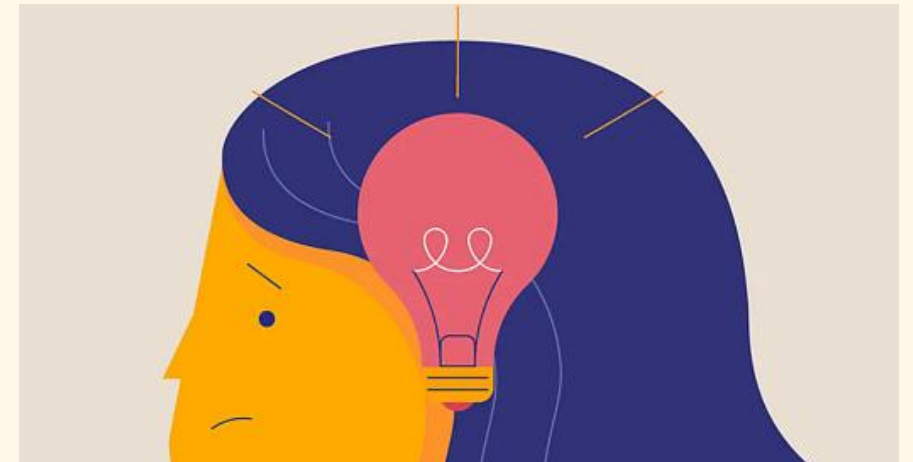
- **Reliability** – participants “adopt a ‘discursive costume’ suited to the context of the interview, and [are] in some sense engaged in an act of ‘self-reconstruction’” (Robinson, 2010, p. 57)
 - Co-construction and researcher reflexivity (Engward and Goldspink, 2020)
- **Persona** – how the researcher behaves will affect how the participant constructs the narrative
 - **Power dynamics** - “I felt that to attempt the role of neutral interviewer... would be to appear as an outsider surely passing silent judgement on their ideas and practice” (Robinson, 2010, p. 46)
 - **Researcher role/title** - Experienced therapist vs trainee, friend vs stranger. Master’s researcher?



Ethical considerations

Participant vulnerability

- **Power dynamics** – Master’s researcher, trainee therapist, psychologically trained
- **Anxiety-provoking**
 - “I made a point of continuing to chat informally as the tape began to record, to demonstrate that the recording itself was not sacrosanct.” (Robinson, 2010, p. 46)
 - Self-care, care of Ps
- **Trust** – if a participant is trusting the researcher with intimate accounts of lived experience, it is “difficult, perhaps morally indefensible, to go “public” with an interpretation which is other than celebratory” (Thomas, 1995, p. 171)
 - Care when probing data with the more ‘suspicious’ and interpretative lens
- **Confidentiality, consent, anonymity**
- **Focus groups** (Love, Vetere and Davis, 2020)



Strengths



Bottom-up - can provide richer, more diverse understandings than a top-down, theory driven or quantitative approach (Pringle et al., 2011)

Meaning - how people make meaning of their experience

- how we make meaning of their meaning-making - affirmation and suspicion (Smith et al., 1999)

Interprets – goes beyond thematic analysis by interpreting, looking beyond the words

Rooted in data - direct quotes to show interpretations are rooted in what the P is saying directly (Nizza, Farr, and Smith, 2021)

Opens conversations and narratives - rather than establishes facts

- ‘Theoretical dialogue’ arising from IPA is valuable (Pringle et al., 2011)
- Aiming for ‘theoretical transferability’ not ‘empirical generalizability’ (Smith et al., 2009)

Conclusion

- Qualitative methodology for exploring the experience of a particular phenomenon for a specific set of people
 - Describes and interprets, affirms and probes
- Strong at exploring narratives and meaning rather than establishing facts or testing theories
- Could be used for investigating the lived experience of e.g., connection
 - Good for phenomenology, the felt experience
 - Precise research question(s)
 - Sample

Thank you!



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