

ONE

Introduction

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a recently developed and rapidly growing approach to qualitative inquiry. It originated and is best known in psychology but is increasingly being picked up by those working in cognate disciplines in the human, social and health sciences. This is a handbook offering a comprehensive guide to conducting research using IPA. It presents the theoretical underpinnings of the approach, a detailed guide to the stages of an IPA research project, and examples of high quality studies using the approach. We hope the book will be useful to people at different stages of their research careers, students interested in finding out more about IPA, people embarking on their first IPA study, and more experienced researchers wishing to widen their skills.

What is IPA?

IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences. IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms. The philosopher Edmund Husserl famously urged phenomenologists to go 'back to the things themselves', and IPA research follows his lead in this regard, rather than attempting to fix experience in predefined or overly abstract categories.

Of course, 'experience' is a complex concept, and we will be discussing it further throughout the book, but IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people. This usually occurs when something important has happened in our lives.

For example, imagine that you are about to take a swim in the sea on a hot summer day. You may not be mindful of the pebbles under your feet until you

remove your shoes, and then find that you have to hobble the last few steps down to the waterline. You may not be aware of the warmth of the sun on your back, until you begin to anticipate the first bracing contact with the cold water. Momentarily then, you are made aware of the flow of your experience; for most of the time, however, you are simply immersed in it, rather than explicitly aware of it. Now imagine that the event has further significance for you: you have been a keen swimmer since childhood, but have not swum on a public beach for some years, since undergoing major surgery for a serious health problem. The anticipation of this swim takes on a host of additional meanings. Perhaps you are concerned about the visibility of scars or other changes to your bodily appearance. Perhaps you have been looking forward to this moment for some time, as a marker of recovery, and the return of a lost self. Perhaps you are simply wondering whether you will be able to remember how to swim! In any of these cases, the swim is marked for you as *an* experience, something important which is happening to you.

This illustration demonstrates a hierarchy of experience. At the most elemental level, we are constantly caught up, unselfconsciously, in the everyday flow of experience. As soon as we become aware of what is happening we have the beginnings of what can be described as ‘an experience’ as opposed to just experience. As Dilthey (1976) says:

Whatever presents itself as a unit in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning, is the smallest unit which can be called an experience. Any more comprehensive unit which is made up of parts of a life, linked by a common meaning, is also called an experience, even when the parts are separated by interrupting events. (p. 210)

Becoming aware of the pebbles or the heat of the sun might count as examples of the ‘smallest unit’ of ‘an experience’ for Dilthey, and it would be possible to conduct an IPA study on such experiences. More commonly, however, IPA is concerned with Dilthey’s more ‘comprehensive unit’, where the experience has larger significance in the person’s life, as in this case where the anticipation of the swim is connected to important events in the past and is signified as a marker of recovery.

We have given this example to show the wide range of what can be encompassed by a concern with experience and the way the levels relate to each other. In practice, hearing about this particular experience of anticipating the swim would be likely to come about during an interview with a participant taking part in a research study on the experience of major surgery and its impact on their life. The comprehensive unit would be the impact of surgery and it would be composed of a range of ‘parts of a life’: for example receiving the diagnosis from the doctor, preparing for surgery, recovery from pain, dealing with reactions from significant others, displaying the body in public. The parts are separated in time but ‘linked with a common meaning’ and the aim of the interview would be to recall the parts and their connections and discover this common meaning.

When people are engaged with ‘an experience’ of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections. So an IPA researcher might be interested in looking in detail at how someone makes sense of a major transition in their life – for example, starting work, having a first child, losing a parent – or they may wish to examine how someone makes an important decision – for example, whether to emigrate to a new country, or to take a genetic test, or to commit to an elite sport. Some of these experiences are the result of proactive agency on the part of the person, some come unexpectedly and uncalled for. Some are discrete and bounded while others go on for a considerable period of time. Some will be experienced as positive, others are definitely negative. What they all have in common is that they are of major significance to the person, who will then engage in a considerable amount of reflecting, thinking and feeling as they work through what it means.

This attempt by the research participant to make sense of what is happening to them takes us to IPA’s second major theoretical axis. It is an interpretative endeavour and is therefore informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. IPA shares the view that human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience. IPA also recognizes that access to experience is always dependent on what participants tell us about that experience, and that the researcher then needs to interpret that account from the participant in order to understand their experience.

It can be said that the IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them. This captures the dual role of the researcher. He/she is employing the same mental and personal skills and capacities as the participant, with whom he/she shares a fundamental property – that of being a human being. At the same time, the researcher employs those skills more self-consciously and systematically. As such, the researcher’s sense-making is second order; he/she only has access to the participant’s experience through the participant’s own account of it.

IPA is committed to the detailed examination of the particular case. It wants to know in detail what the experience for *this* person is like, what sense *this* particular person is making of what is happening to them. This is what we mean when we say IPA is idiographic. IPA studies usually have a small number of participants and the aim is to reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals. As part of this, the study may explore in detail the similarities and differences between each case. It is possible to move to more general claims with IPA but this should only be after the potential of the case has been realized.

IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail. Immediate claims are

therefore bounded by the group studied but extension can be considered through theoretical generalizability, where the reader of the report is able to assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge.

Data collection is usually (but not necessarily) in the form of semi-structured interviews where an interview schedule is used flexibly and the participant has an important stake in what is covered. Transcripts of interviews are analysed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis. This is then turned into a narrative account where the researcher's analytic interpretation is presented in detail and is supported with verbatim extracts from participants.

This book will examine each of the theoretical perspectives which are central to IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, in depth, showing the particular take IPA has on them. The following chapters take the reader through each of the steps required to put this approach into practice. The book will also provide detailed examples of studies which demonstrate what can be achieved by the careful examination of significant experiences in people's lives.

History of IPA

IPA has a short and a long history. Its first real mark came with the publication of Jonathan Smith's (1996) paper in *Psychology and Health* which argued for an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative, and which could still dialogue with mainstream psychology. An important aim at this point was to stake a claim for a qualitative approach centred in psychology, rather than importing one from different disciplines. The point here was not that there was anything wrong with other subject areas but to revive a more pluralistic psychology as envisaged by William James. Thus the argument is that psychology was, could and should be both experimental and experiential and recognizes the important, if suppressed, role for the experiential within the intellectual history of psychology. It is also the case that while IPA appeared on the scene in the mid-1990s, it is clearly drawing on concepts and ideas which have much longer histories. So IPA has been influenced by important theoretical ideas and is an attempt to operationalize one way of working with those ideas. It isn't the only research approach trying to make manifest ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics and it is also not a fixed thing itself. Although there are core features to IPA, this book will demonstrate the range of ways those core elements can be made to happen.

So IPA started in psychology and much of the early work was in health psychology. Since then it has been picked up particularly strongly in clinical and counselling psychology as well as in social and educational psychology. It is not surprising that the key constituency for IPA is what can broadly be described

as applied psychology, or 'psychology in the real world'. We prefer to use slightly different terms and to think of IPA's core interest group as people concerned with the human predicament; this clearly takes us to a focus on people engaging with the world.

We welcome the fact that IPA is also beginning to be used in cognate disciplines in the human, health and social sciences and we encourage this expansion. Yes, we think it is important that IPA is seen as psychological – its core concerns are psychological, and psychology needs space for approaches concerned with the systematic examination of the experiential – however, IPA is psychological with a small *p*, as well as with a big *P*. Researchers in other disciplines are interested in psychological questions, even if they are not formally psychologists. So, we think, for example, that a researcher in occupational therapy or film studies can use IPA and can therefore speak to the psychological aspects of that other identity.

The geographical distribution of IPA follows a similar pattern of expansion. Most of the early work was in the UK, which interestingly has been a real crucible for qualitative psychology in the last 20 years. However, researchers using IPA can now be found around the world. Not surprisingly, more of this work is in the English-speaking world, especially Australia and New Zealand, but it is also being picked up in regions where English is not the first language.

How does the book work?

As we said earlier, we have in mind a number of different types of reader for this book. For the newcomer we attempt to give a detailed and step-by-step guide to conducting an IPA study. Doing an experiential qualitative study for the first time can seem daunting, and each stage draws on skills which are different from those taught on the quantitative programmes which tend to dominate training in psychology courses. However, we have also tried to make clear the danger of 'methodolatory' (the glorification of method) so that we hope the novice also sees these guidelines as recommendations for getting started, rather than as permanent prescriptions. Relatedly, within each methodological chapter, we point to a range of ways of thinking, so that we hope the more experienced IPA researcher will also find much of value. Our aim overall has been to show the developmental process of doing experiential qualitative psychology. One starts by cautiously adopting tried and tested strategies but as confidence grows, one becomes more aware of process and development of skills, and the formal procedures shrink into the background.

The underlying philosophy of IPA is just as important as matters of procedure. Researchers who familiarize themselves with it will be able to produce more consistent, sophisticated and nuanced analyses. They will also be able to draw on their understanding of the underlying philosophy to help them to

solve unanticipated problems, and, as their confidence and experience grows, to develop their IPA work in ways which extend *beyond* the procedures described above. Therefore, we have attempted to present some complex philosophical ideas, again in an accessible manner. We believe the IPA researcher does need to know something of the philosophical theory which has influenced and informed IPA. At the same time the key thing is appreciating the spirit and sensibility of IPA. IPA is not trying to operationalize a specific philosophical idea, but rather draws widely, but selectively, from a range of ideas in philosophy.

We also believe one of the most helpful things for the newcomer is seeing what the results of IPA look like in practice. We present a set of studies where we have used IPA to examine a range of topics. These will help the reader to see what can be achieved using IPA and give researchers at different levels illustrations of quality work they can aspire to.

Being a book, there has to be a linear structure. And we suspect most people will find it useful to work through the chapters in the order presented. However, it is perfectly possible to read them in different sequences and we encourage people to decide for themselves how to navigate through the book. Thus some people will wish to begin with the practical chapters on how to do IPA and will choose to come back to the theory chapter later. Others may well decide to start by seeing what IPA looks like in practice and therefore go first to some of the chapters showing completed studies in Section B, before returning to chapters in Section A, which show what it takes to produce one of those studies. We also hope readers will find themselves coming to the book a number of times as their needs and levels of experience change.

The chapters

Chapter 2 outlines the main theoretical underpinnings of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography. The philosophical literature here is pretty difficult, and the aim of this chapter is to present some of the core ideas in an accessible way. We think IPA researchers need to know something of the history of phenomenology and hermeneutics in order to be able to place IPA in an intellectual history. Therefore the chapter starts with a narrative to show the developments within phenomenological and hermeneutic thinking. The chapter then makes explicit how IPA draws on each of the main theoretical ideas.

Chapters 3–6, which comprise the rest of Section A, take the reader step by step through the stages involved in the process of conducting an IPA study: research design (Chapter 3), data collection (Chapter 4), analysis (Chapter 5), writing up (Chapter 6). As we have said above, the aim is not to be prescriptive but rather to have two ways of seeing in mind – offering an accessible guide to practice for the newcomer and offering other insights to help more experienced researchers.

Section B has four chapters which each show a completed piece of IPA research. The research examples come from our own research projects and all but one appear in print for the first time. We have been careful to select examples that we think are good and which we are proud of. The aim is to show the diversity of topics which can be examined with IPA and so we have studies on health and illness (Chapter 7), sex and sexuality (Chapter 8), psychological distress (Chapter 9), life transitions and identity (Chapter 10). The examples also show the different ways that IPA works: for example, as a case study, or with a larger sample; staying close to the material, or dialoguing with other theoretical frameworks.

Finally, in Section C there are two chapters concerned with important current issues for IPA. Chapter 11 considers ways of evaluating the validity of IPA research, and Chapter 12 considers the links between IPA and core concerns for psychology as a whole, for example, cognition, language and embodiment. As part of this, the chapter describes the relationship between IPA and other qualitative approaches and how IPA can connect with other approaches to psychology. Chapter 13 consists of a few concluding comments and looks to some future developments for IPA.

Most of the chapters are clearly multi-authored in the sense that usually one of us wrote a first draft for a chapter but then extensive redrafting incorporated text from the others and we consider the finished pieces to be ones which genuinely reflect a collective vision or voice. We have thus been conscious as we write the book that this vision is both singular and plural. The chapters reflect our long experience working with IPA and most of them reflect the wide range of possibilities within an approach which has agreed principles at the core. However, the chapters in Section B work rather differently. They are drawn from our separate research studies and therefore have been written by us as individual authors, as is clearly signalled in the introduction to each of them. Just for the record, Chapter 7 and 10 are written by Jonathan, Chapter 8 by Paul and Chapter 9 by Michael, though in each case we have had helpful comments from the other co-authors which have led to changes being made.

