Article:
Peat, G, Rodriguez, A orcid.org/0000-0001-9104-1999 and Smith, J orcid.org/0000-0003-0974-3591 (2018) Interpretive phenomenological analysis applied to healthcare research. Evidence-Based Nursing, 22 (1). pp. 7-9. ISSN 1367-6539

https://doi.org/10.1136/ebnurs-2018-103017

Research Made Simple Series

Title: Interpretive phenomenological analysis applied to healthcare research

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In the last Research Made Simple Series article we briefly outlined the main phenomenological research approaches in relation to investigating healthcare phenomena including interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA was originally developed as a method to undertake experiential research in psychology[1] and has gained prominence across health and social sciences as a way to understand and interpret topics which are complex and emotionally laden, such as illness experiences.[2] In this article we detail in more depth, the philosophical and methodological nuances of IPA.

Overview of IPA

The aim of IPA is to uncover what a lived experience means to the individual through a process of in depth reflective inquiry.[3] IPA draws on phenomenological thinking, with the purpose to return 'to the things themselves' (p 168).[4] However, IPA also acknowledges that we are each influenced by the worlds in which we live in and the experiences we encounter. Therefore, IPA is an interpretative process between the researcher and researched, influenced predominantly by Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography,[2,3] summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Philosophical influences underpinning IPA

	Influence			
	Phenomenology		**Hermeneutics**	**Idiography**
	Descriptive	Interpretive		
Purpose	Describe the lived experience without assigning meaning	Reveal and interpret the meaning of the lived experience	To guide the interpretation of the text of individual accounts	Identify and value the perspectives of individuals in context
Dominant Scholars and influences	Husserl: put to one side pre-conceived judgements, known as the epoché or 'bracketing', in order to better appreciate the experienced phenomena	Heidegger: we as researchers are part of the research Merleau-Ponty: interpretation comes from our own perspective/ being in the world Sartre: we are always in a state of becoming	Schleiermacher: understanding involves grammatical and psychological interpretation Heidegger: recognises that researchers have preconceived ideas and experiences that they bring to the study Gadamer: meaning making is a fusion of participant and researcher perspectives	
Applied to IPA	1. On-going reflecting on the phenomenon itself rather than exploring how experiences can fit with pre-defined criteria 2. Bracketing, where each previous case is put to one side before the researcher moves on to read and analyse the next transcript	1. The interpretation of an individual's meaning making is considered in light of the researcher's perspective, at that time 2. Researchers observe and empathise but view phenomena from their own perspective or being in the world; the researcher cannot fully share the experiences of others 3. The narrative is developed through interpretation	1. Interpretation becomes an art; through detailed and meaningful analysis participants accounts can be appreciated providing insights into their lived worlds 2. Making sense of what has been shared involves close engagement with the data, but interpretation can only occur in light of our own experiences, therefore a cyclic approach to bracketing is required 3. The researcher cannot be separated from the researched, engaging with a world transforms the researcher in some way	1. Case by case, systematic analysis

IPA is particularly useful for understanding under researched phenomena or perspectives. Unlike other phenomenological research approaches, IPA offers direction on how to approach a phenomena of interest with guidance for sampling, data collection and analysis. Table 2 details the prescriptive methods of IPA.[3]

Table 2 Methods associated with IPA

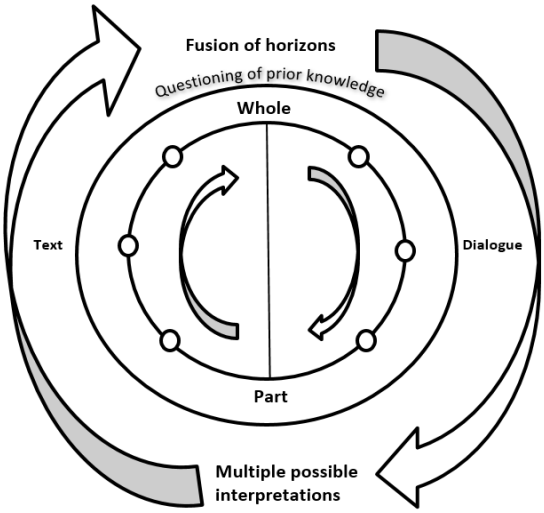
Methods	Application to IPA
Sample and recruiting participants	IPA focuses on small and homogenous samples; the research question being addressed must be meaningful to participants who are purposively selected because they have experience of the phenomena The number of participants in IPA studies is small (typically less than 10) to enable a detailed micro-level analysis of the participants' accounts[3] Each participant offers a rich reflective account of their experience/s and represent their own perspective/s[3] Notions of generalisability are a contradiction in IPA because participants are recruited for their individual experience/s and perspective/s, rather than to represent perceptions of a wider population[3]
Data collection	IPA has been undertaken using numerous qualitative data collection techniques that allows the participant to provide a rich account of their personal and lived experience including: written accounts such as paper and online diaries, interviewing and focus groups However, the in-depth semi-structured interview is typically used to collect data in IPA The aim of the interview in IPA is to facilitate participants to share the experiences that are important to them; while an interview topic guide may be used the participant leads the direction of the interview. The researcher's role in the interview is to guide the discussion in a way that focuses on the lived experience of the phenomena of interest
Data analysis	Analysis begins with the close examination of the first case, leading to the development of case themes and then consideration of themes across the data set. IPA analysis involves a step-by-step approach:[3,4] 1. Reading and re-reading: the researcher immerses themselves in the data or transcript of a single case 2. Initial noting: as the researcher reads the case, observations are recorded which are often noted in the margin of the transcript 3. Developing emergent themes: the researcher 'chunks' data relating to the observational 'notes' of the case 4. Searching for connections across emergent themes: the researcher clusters the 'chunks of data' and 'notes' together and considers how they relate 5. Moving to the next case: the themes derived from the previous case are 'bracketed' as the new case is considered with 'open and fresh eyes', again becoming immersed in the case Steps 1-4 are undertaken for each case before progressing to the next stages of the analysis 6. Seeking patterns across cases: the researcher asks, are there any themes/qualities identifiable across cases?, these are highlighted making a note of any idiosyncratic differences 7. Moving the interpretation to a deeper level: reviewing the themes across the data set and by using metaphors and temporal referents the researcher aims to further elicit the meaning of the experience The final stage of analysis the researcher draws on existent theory/concepts to further explore the data IPA findings are presented as a coherent analytic account including pertinent participant quotes and a detailed interpretative commentary
Rigour, reflection and	Four broad principles are used to judge the credibility of IPA: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour in undertaking the analysis; transparency and coherence of the narrative produced; and impact and importance.[7] Strategies to establish trust and credibility in IPA

reflexivity	include: 1. Epoché ('bracketing'): the researcher must make their assumptions explicit in an attempt to reduce researcher bias that could influence data collection and analysis processes 2. Peer critique: enhances the plausibility and acceptability of the findings by involving a peer group to critique each stage of the research process and comment on the descriptive validity and the transparency of the interpretation of the data and findings 3. Structure resonance: others with similar experiences are invited to comment on findings, focusing on whether the findings resonate with them 4. Participant verification: the participants are invited to comment on the researchers' interpretation of the data 5. Triangulation: using different data collection methods or different conceptual frameworks can increase the validity of a study because the phenomena under investigation is approached from a range of perspectives The researcher must offer detailed reflection and document decisions made at each stage of the research process

The role of the researcher in IPA

The phenomenological and hermeneutic tenets of IPA (Table 1), position the researcher as an integral part of the research process (Table 2). Whilst IPA researchers view the participant as the experiential expert, they acknowledge that experience cannot be simply revealed.[3] Rather, a process of rich engagement and interpretation involving both the researcher and researched is required. This engagement is commonly referred to as the double hermeneutic approach to analysis, whereby the researcher seeks to make sense of the participant(s) making sense of their world(s).[5] To assist this meaning-making process, IPA calls on researchers to engage with what is known as the hermeneutic circle (Figure 1). The hermeneutic circle can be thought of as an iterative process involving a moving between the smaller units of meaning and the larger units of meaning, or between the parts and the whole of the investigated phenomena or lived experience.[3]

Figure 1 The hermeneutic circle congruent with IPA



How the researcher's prior conceptions interact with new experiential encounters is of significance to IPA. Heidegger emphasised that rather than bracketing our prior conceptions prior to engaging with participants and the data, we should acknowledge how they consistently reveal themselves throughout the research process.[3] Therefore, an IPA researcher needs to be mindful of their own beliefs, perceptions and experiences so that they can enrich their interpretations rather than them being an obstacle to making sense of the participant's experiences. This is achieved through the art of reflexivity.

Reflexivity is the process of 'being aware' and bringing to light how the researcher influences the research process.[7] A range of reflexive practices exist for different methodological positions.[7] IPA draws on intersubjective reflexivity, an approach that aims to unravel the dynamic that exist within the researcher/participant relationship.[6] The double hermeneutic dynamic central to IPA is also of relevance when considering the beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes that may interplay between the researcher and researched. For example, commonalities and disparities between the participant/s and researcher may reveal themselves as the experiential account is explored and subsequently influence the analysis of the account/s. Likewise, pre-existing roles may influence perceptions, particularly if participant/s and researcher were familiar with one another prior to engaging in research activity. This can be particularly relevant if the researcher has a dual role of researcher and health professional.[6] Engaging in the art of reflexivity facilitates IPA researchers to strengthen the adequacy and ethical quality of their research, not least through acknowledging their own biographies and prior conceptions, and the manner in which they influence the research process.[6]

Good Practice in IPA

The hermeneutic underpinnings of IPA offer researchers the opportunity to go beyond surface level description of findings, to offer insightful interpretative accounts of the lived experiences of participants. Central to credibility in qualitative research is confidence, or trustworthiness, in that the findings reflect the experiences of participants in relation to the phenomena being explored.[8] A robust IPA study is able to offer an enlightening interpretative analysis that is supported by a transparent evidence trail that maintains a clear connection between the data and interpretation.[3] This is achieved through an active engagement with the hermeneutic circle, ensuring both a substantial voice is given to the experiences of the participants and the researchers' interpretations of their narratives. In addition, findings should be presented in a manner that both highlights the key shared themes whilst also presenting the idiographic uniqueness of the individual lived experience.[3]

In summary, IPA is a meticulously idiographic and hermeneutic phenomenological approach that seeks to illuminate the way individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Engaging in this method of qualitative enquiry can facilitate researchers to construct insightful interpretative accounts of experiences that can enrich understanding and bring to light prominent matters within healthcare.

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