Chapter 3 – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A. Chapter Introduction

This chapter is about Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an approach to qualitative research that explores in detail personal lived experience to examine how people are making sense of their personal and social world. IPA tries to understand what the world is like from the point of view of the participants. At the same time, IPA acknowledges that this understanding is always mediated by the context of cultural and socio-historical meanings. Therefore, the process of making sense of experience is inevitably interpretative and the role of the researcher in trying to make sense of the participant's account is complicated by the researcher's own conceptions.

The first part of this chapter presents the history of IPA and shows how it has evolved to take its place in psychological research. The theoretical underpinnings of the approach are discussed and this is followed by a consideration of the epistemological and ontological frameworks IPA employs. A detailed presentation of the stages involved in doing IPA follows, with illustrations taken from a study exploring the experience of women in rehabilitation for their problems of addiction. The chapter concludes with reflections on using IPA.

B. History of IPA

IPA was first used as a distinctive research method in psychology in the mid-1990s. Smith (1996) drew on theoretical ideas from phenomenology (Giorgi, 1995), hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), and on an engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts (Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995). IPA is also influenced by symbolic interactionism (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Symbolic interactionism provides a theoretical perspective with basic assumptions that people act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them and that meanings emerge in the processes of social interaction between people (Blumer, 1969). Thus, meanings are constructed and modified through an interpretative process that is subject to change and redefinition (Blumer, 1969). In this way 'people form new meanings and new ways to respond and thus are active in shaping their own future through the process of interpreting meaning' (Benzies & Allen, p.544).
By combining insights from phenomenology, hermeneutic philosophy and engagement with subjective experience, IPA proposes a middle way between different qualitative methods. In common with phenomenological psychology it offers researchers an avenue to study subjective experiences and the meanings that people attribute to their experience. In common with discursive psychology IPA accepts that the research process is fundamentally hermeneutic, with both researcher and participants engaging in interpretative activities that are constrained by shared social and cultural discourses.

This synthesis of ideas from different perspectives has led to the development of a distinctive qualitative psychological methodology. As Willig (2008) contends, the introduction of IPA into psychology has made phenomenological methodology accessible to those who do not have a philosophical background. In addition, by developing detailed descriptions of the analytic process, those new to IPA are encouraged to use it in their own research (ibid).

Much of the early use of IPA was concerned with health and illness (for a recent review of IPA’s use in health psychology see Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Other key areas for IPA research are sex and sexuality, psychological distress and issues of life transitions and identity (for overviews of research in these areas see Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). As Smith et al. (2009) point out, issues of identity are intertwined with most of the research in health and illness, sexuality and psychological distress. They contend that as IPA research often concerns topics of considerable existential significance, it is likely that the participants will link the specific topic to their sense of self/identity.

C. Ontology of IPA

Although IPA is grounded in the experiential dimension in its concern with a detailed examination of individual lived experience and how people are making sense of that experience, it ‘endorses social constructionism’s claim that sociocultural and historical processes are central to how we experience and understand our lives, including the stories we tell about these lives’ (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.184). In this respect it can be located at a centre-ground position between experiential approaches such as descriptive phenomenology and discursive approaches such as discourse analysis. In the experiential approaches the focus is on participants’ experiences and how they make sense of their experiences. The discursive approaches are focused on language as a social action that is used to construct and create the social world (Reicher, 2000).

The different qualitative methods are grounded in different epistemological stances (Henwood, 1996; Willig, 2008). These vary significantly, as ‘they have different philosophical roots, they have different theoretical assumptions and they ask different types of questions’ (Reicher, 2000, p.4). However, there is considerable overlapping between qualitative methods (Charmaz & Henwood, 2008; Lyons, 2007; Smith et al., 2009) and the distinction between the different approaches can be conceived in terms of a continuum from the experiential to the discursive and
from the empiricist to the constructionist (Lyons, 2007; Willig, 2008). With its focus on content and systematic analysis of a text to identify themes and categories, IPA shares some similarities with grounded theory (Willig, 2008). Through its concern with meaning-making IPA also shares strong intellectual links with narrative analysis (Crossley, 2007; Smith, et al, 2009). Eatough & Smith (2006) maintain that ‘IPA shares some common ground with Foucauldian discourse analysis, which examines how the people’s worlds are discursively constructed and how these are implicated in the experiences of the individual’ (p.118-9).

In this respect IPA can be described as located at the ‘light end of the social constructionist continuum’ (ibid) in relation to discourse analysis. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that ‘while IPA studies provide a detailed experiential account of the person’s involvement in the context, FDA offers a critical analysis of the structure of the context itself and thus touches on the resources available to the individual in making sense of their experience’ (p.196).

D. **Why do IPA**

IPA has been described as ‘an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.11). IPA draws on each of these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology.

Phenomenology is both a philosophical approach and a range of research methods concerned with how things appear to us in our experience. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) initiated modern phenomenology at the beginning of the 20th Century and since then it has become a major philosophical movement that has impacted on many strands of contemporary philosophy (Zahavi, 2008). Other phenomenological philosophers, namely, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty contributed to the philosophical perspective of a person as embodied, embedded and immersed in the world in a particular historical, social and cultural context (for a comprehensive overview of phenomenology see Moran, 2000). Phenomenology as a research method draws on the phenomenological philosophy initiated by Husserl. Although a number of diverse approaches have been developed, the focus on subjective experience has remained a fundamental principle of all phenomenologically informed research methods, including IPA (for a discussion of various phenomenological approaches in psychology, see Langdrige, 2007).

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, constitutes another major theoretical underpinning of IPA. Historically, hermeneutics developed from interpretations of biblical texts but was subsequently established as a philosophical foundation for a more general theory of interpretation. Although phenomenology and hermeneutics were developed as two separate philosophical movements, Heidegger (1962) presented hermeneutics as a prerequisite to
phenomenology. According to Heidegger, the meaning of hermeneutic resides in ‘the whole manner in which human existence is interpretative’ (Moran, 2000, p.235). Thus, Moran contends that:

Phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which is perhaps hidden by the entity’s mode of appearing. In that case the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text and for this reason Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics. How things appear or are covered up must be explicitly studied. The things themselves always present themselves in a manner which is at the same time self-concealing (ibid, p. 229).

In this view, interpretation is a necessary part of phenomenology because the entity’s mode of appearing may conceal something that is hidden. The task of interpreting is therefore to engage in the dynamic of conceal/reveal, making manifest what may lie hidden. In Heidegger’s conception, every interpretation is already contextualized in previous experience in a particular context, as according to Heidegger, human existence is fundamentally related to the world: human beings are thrown into a world in a particular historical, social and cultural context (Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, understanding of events or objects in the world is always mediated and constrained by already existing knowledge: ‘Interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance’ (ibid, p.191). Heidegger recognizes the danger that such preconceptions may present an obstacle to interpretation (Smith et al., 2009) and therefore, in interpretation priority should be given to the new object rather than to one’s preconceptions. Interpretation is thus envisaged as a dynamic process, an interplay between the interpreter and the object of interpretation.

Idiography constitutes the third theoretical underpinning of IPA. An idiographic approach aims for an in-depth focus on the particular and a commitment to detailed finely-textured analysis of actual life and lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). A commitment to idiography is linked to a rationale for single-case studies. Smith (2004) suggests that a detailed analysis of a single case would be justified when one has a particularly rich or compelling case. A detailed single case study offers opportunities to learn a great deal about the particular person and their response to a specific situation, as well as to consider connections between different aspects of the person’s account. It is also possible to consider a case study as a part of a larger study involving a number of participants. The individual case can be used as a starting point in the process of analytic induction, affording an opportunity for working from the ground up by drawing together additional cases to move towards more general claims. Perhaps the important point to consider is that the details of a single case also illuminate a dimension of a shared commonality, as ‘the very detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity’ (Smith, 2004, p.43).

IPA draws on each of these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology:

• IPA is phenomenological in its detailed examination of the personal lived experience of practical engagement with the world and in exploring how participants make sense of their
experience. IPA acknowledges that the understanding of an event or an object is always mediated by the context of cultural and socio-historical meanings. The term lived experience is often used ‘to encompass the embodied, socio-culturally and historically situated person who inhabits an intentionally interpreted and meaningfully lived world’ (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.181). In agreement with Heidegger’s views, IPA considers phenomenological inquiry as an interpretative process. In this view, interpretation is necessary because the entity’s mode of appearing may conceal something which is hidden.

Consistent with its phenomenological underpinning, IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the participants. At the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also involve asking critical questions of participants’ accounts. Thus, interpretation can be descriptive and empathic aiming to produce ‘rich experiential descriptions’, and also critical and questioning ‘in ways which participants might be unwilling or unable to do themsleves’ (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.189).

- IPA is interpretative in recognizing the role of the researcher in making sense of the experience of participants. Smith (2004) refers to ‘double hermeneutics: The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world’ (p.40). The researcher's point of access to participants’ experience is through their accounts, usually obtained through direct contact with participants. The concept of 'double hermeneutics' refers also to the researchers’ own involvement through their own preconceptions and ‘prejudices’ which may constitute an obstacle to interpretation (Smith, 2007) unless priority is given to the phenomenon under investigation.

Drawing on Ricoeur’s (1970) distinction between two strategies for understanding meaning, namely, a hermeneutics of meaning recollection, of empathic engagement, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, of critical engagement, Smith (2004) has argued that both modes of hermeneutic engagement can contribute to a more complete understanding of the participant's lived experience. However, ‘within such an analysis the empathic reading is likely to come first and may then be qualified by a more critical and speculative reflection’ (Smith, 2004, p.46). Smith et al. (2009) maintain that IPA occupies a ‘centre-ground position’ whereby it is possible to combine a hermeneutic of empathy with a hermeneutic of questioning ‘so long as it serves to “draw out” or “disclose” the meaning of the experience’ (p.36), in contrast to employing a theoretical perspective imported from outside the text. Larkin et al. (2006) contend that the strategies chosen by the analyst ‘may be informed by prior experience and knowledge, psychological theory, or previous research - provided that they can be related back to a phenomenological account’ (p.116).

- IPA is idiographic in its focus on detailed examination of particular instances, either in a single case study or in studies of a small group of cases. In such studies the analytic process begins with the detailed analysis of each case, moving to careful examination of similarities and differences across cases to produce detailed accounts of patterns of meaning
and reflections on shared experience. A single case study offers an opportunity to learn a great deal about a particular person in a specific context, as well as focusing on different aspects of a particular account. In addition, through connecting the findings to existing psychological literature, the IPA writer can help the reader to see how the case relates to other relevant research.

IPA is particularly suitable for research where the ‘focus is on the uniqueness of a person’s experiences, how experiences are made meaningful and how these meanings manifest themselves within the context of the person both as an individual and in their many cultural roles, for example as an MS or epilepsy sufferer, as a parent, sibling, employee, student, friend, Spouse’ (Shaw, 2001, p.48). For example, in health psychology, in order to understand the meanings and the significance of a particular condition on a person's everyday life, the researcher may need to gain access to in-depth accounts of individuals’ experiences. At the same time, studies of several participants also highlight the shared themes and concerns. In addition, the individual case can be used as a starting point in the process of analytic induction, affording an opportunity for theory development from the ground up by drawing together additional cases to move towards more general claims.

Examples of suitable research include explorations of questions like:

- How do people make decisions about taking a genetic test?
- What is it like to experience anger?
- What is it like to donate a kidney?
- What is it like to be a carer of a person with Alzheimer?
- How do couples make the decision to have children?

The approach to recruiting participants for an IPA study follows from the theoretical account of the epistemology of IPA. This means that participants are selected purposively. Purposive sampling refers to a method of selecting participants because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration of the phenomena being studied. Because the primary concern of IPA is with a detailed account of individual experience, IPA studies usually benefit from an intensive focus on a small number of participants. Sample size can vary according to the research question and the quality of data obtained. In the studies reviewed by Brocki & Wearden (2006) participant numbers vary from one to thirty although they point out that a consensus towards the use of smaller sample sizes seems to be emerging. As discussed above, IPA also makes a strong case for a single case study which could be justified when one has a particularly rich or compelling case. Smith et al. (2009) suggest a sample size between three and six for undergraduate or Masters-level IPA projects.

IPA researchers usually try to identify a homogenous sample. With a small number of participants it seems helpful to think in terms of a defined group of participants for whom the
research questions will be meaningful. Making a decision on extent of ‘homogeneity’ is guided by the focus of the study. An investigation of a phenomenon that is rare (for example living with a rare genetic disorder) may in itself define the boundaries of the relevant sample. Alternatively, with less specific issues the sample may be drawn from a population with similar demographic or socio-economic status.

IPA requires a data collection method which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first person accounts of experiences. Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have been used most often, as they are particularly useful for in-depth idiographic studies exploring how participants are making sense of experiences. Such interviews enable the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue, modify questions and follow interesting aspects that come up during the interview (For overviews of quality and concerns over the status and use of interview data see for example, Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003; Roulston, 2010). However, other methods suitable for collecting rich verbal accounts have been used, for example diaries (e.g. Smith, 1999), focus groups (e.g. Flowers, Knussen & Duncan, 2001) and email dialogues (Turner, Barlow & Ilbery, 2002).

It is helpful to envisage the interaction during interviews as a conversation, which although guided by the researcher’s pre-prepared questions, opens up a space for participants to provide detailed accounts of experiences guided by their own concerns. During the interview, it may be more fruitful to follow unexpected turns initiated by the participant’s accounts, rather than adhering to the specific questions in the original sequence. As Smith et al. (2009) contend, ‘unexpected turns are often the most valuable aspects of interviewing: on the one hand they tell us something we did not even anticipate needing to know; on the other, because they arise unprompted, they may well be of particular importance to the participant’ (Smith et al., 2009, p.58).
Research example

**Background**
Chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (CFS/ME) is a condition of unknown aetiology that consists of symptoms such as fatigue, muscle and joint pain, gastric problems and a range of neurological disturbances. Previous qualitative research in the area of CFS/ME has focussed on participants' beliefs about the cause of their illness and symptomatology, but the factors that influence how individuals with CFS/ME perceive their symptoms have not been investigated from a phenomenological epistemology. The authors contend that as CFS/ME has a wide-ranging influence on individual's lives, investigating this condition within the patients' phenomenological experience will provide depth and detail to our present understanding of CFS/ME.

**Method**

**Participants**
The sample consisted of two male and six female participants with ages ranging from 35 to 67. The average length of time the participants had been living with CFS/ME was 21.4 years although this varied widely from 6 to 53 years.

**Data collection**
Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews consisted of a range of open-ended questions, including prompts that allowed further elaboration of the topic under discussion. The interview started with a broad question ‘Can you please describe to me how you became ill with CFS/ME?’ and followed by more specific topics: the cause of CFS/ME, the effect on one's life, the process of diagnosis, and advice that one would give another individual who believed that he/she might be suffering from CFS/ME. The duration of the interviews was between 26 and 90 min, with an average interview lasting 40.8 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Analysis**
The transcripts were analysed using IPA. The analysis followed the staged process described in Smith & Osborn (2003), first for one transcript and then repeating the procedures for each
transcript. In the final stage the superordinate themes and subthemes for the study as a whole were established. Six distinct themes that illustrated the participants’ experience and perception of their symptoms were identified.

**Findings**
The paper illustrates the shared themes but also the particular details of individual participants’ experiences. In the present study, symptomatology and illness course, interference with daily and working life, frequency of symptoms, external information, diagnosis and treatment each played a part in the recognition of individuals’ symptoms as CFS/ME. Although the interviewees stated that fatigue was the predominate symptom of their illness, they listed a range of other symptoms including pain, gastrointestinal problems, cognitive difficulties and sleep impairments. The narrative is constructed as a journey from the initial experience of bodily sensations, through the disruption these symptoms imposed on individuals’ lives. Trying to make sense of their experiences, participants initially evaluated their symptoms in terms of known diseases. When the known disease proved inadequate explanations of their symptoms, participants sought external information and a diagnosis to shed new light on their personal experience. However, a diagnosis of CFS/ME was not the end of the journey and, in fact, may have only been the beginning in the search for treatment.

**Discussion**
The symptomatological findings in this study were in accordance with previous studies … As in the Cohn (1999) study the participants described their predominate symptom in terms of energy levels, where an individual is allocated a set amount of energy and any expenditure that exceeds this amount will result in ill health. Equally, the description of CFS/ME symptomatology as fluctuating in nature (Ware, 1999) was also apparent in the present study. However … it was not the symptoms themselves that concerned the interviewees, but rather the frequency of bodily disturbance (Radley, 1994). This incidence of symptoms prompted the interviewees to question whether their complaints were ‘everyday’ occurrences or a sign of a more serious underlying disorder. However, even with an increased understanding participants still had a struggle for recognition of their condition. Furthermore, even with a positive clinical diagnosis of CFS/ME the journey continued with a search for treatment.

The authors suggest that as the participants in the study had CFS/ME for many years, in future research it may be useful to look at individuals at different points in their condition. The authors conclude that by using a method of investigation that does not constrain the findings to be interpreted in terms of pre-set hypotheses, their study has highlighted the lived experience
and meaning-making of those with CFS/ME. The findings should be useful for researchers and/or practitioners to increase their understanding of the process by which individuals recognise their symptomatology as being consistent with CFS/ME.

E. Methods: How to do IPA

This section outlines step by step guidelines for conducting an IPA study, illustrated with an extended example from a study exploring the experience of women in rehabilitation for addiction problems. However, the stages described below should not be treated as the 'correct' method for doing IPA as IPA provides a flexible framework which can be adapted by researchers in accordance with their research aims.

The research question

The main reason for choosing a research methodology is that it is consistent with the epistemological position of the research question. As IPA is concerned with the in-depth exploration of personal lived experience and with how people make sense of their experience, the type of research question suitable for an IPA study is likely to involve issues and experiences of considerable significance to the participant. Often these are transformative issues concerned with personal and social identity. These could be current, emotive, dilemmatic issues or issues involving longer term reflection across the life course. For example, Box 3.1 illustrates examples of research questions suitable for IPA studies:
Box 3.1. Examples of research questions suitable for IPA studies

- How do people with chronic back pain describe the impact on their sense of self? (Smith & Osborn, 2007)
- How do people experience chronic fatigue syndrome? (Arroll & Senior, 2008)
- What does it mean to be a donor offspring? (Turner & Coyle, 2000)

An IPA study starts with formulating suitable research questions. The questions are open and exploratory, designed to focus on exploring participants’ accounts of lived experience, understandings and sense-making within the particular context of their lives. For example, Box 3.2 illustrates the research questions which guided my project exploring the experience of women in rehabilitation for addiction problems (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009).

Box 3.2 Research questions from project exploring the experience of women in rehabilitation for addiction problems

- How do the participants describe their experiences of addiction and recovery?
- In what contexts do their experiences occur?
- How do the participants understand and make sense of their experiences of addiction and recovery?
- How are individual differences reflected in the participants’ accounts of their experiences with alcohol/drug addiction and recovery?

The first two questions are descriptive, in line with a phenomenological approach, and they frame the accounts in the context of participants’ world. The third question opens up an interpretative avenue for participants to reflect on their own accounts in their attempts to make sense of their
experiences. The fourth question provides a prompt to remain focused on the particular, the detail, texture and nuance of the participants’ lived experience.

**Sample and Recruitment of participants**

Potential participants can be reached by approaching relevant groups, agencies or gatekeepers, through personal contacts, or through ‘snowballing’. Snowballing refers to a method of selecting a sample in which potential participants are asked whether they know of other people with relevant characteristics and experiences who might be approached. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit “hidden populations,” groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies. Participants in the rehabilitation study were recruited through agencies offering treatment and recovery programmes for people with problems of addiction. Considering that some participants in rehabilitation may be vulnerable, it seemed sensible to secure agencies’ support, not only in suggesting suitable possible participants, but also in providing a follow-up support for participants. However, using agencies required obtaining consent both from the agency and the participant. The sample for the rehabilitation study consisted of six female participants who have been involved in their programmes between one and two years. The age range was between 31 and 52 years.

**Data collection**

As noted above, IPA requires a data collection method which will invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first person account of their experiences and phenomena. Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have been used most often, and this method is used in the following example. An interview schedule should be prepared in advance to help the researcher to anticipate and prepare for possible difficulties, for example in addressing sensitive issues and in question wording. Interview questions should be open and expansive, to encourage participants to talk at length. Questions should not make too many assumptions about participants’ experiences and should not lead towards particular answers. As some questions may be too abstract for some participants it is helpful to prepare more specific prompts to be used if required. It is usually helpful to start the interview with a descriptive question about the present, as in the example in Box 3.3 which illustrates the interview schedule for the rehabilitation study.

**Box 3.3** Interview schedule from project exploring the experience of women in rehabilitation for addiction problems (extract)

1. Can you tell me what place alcohol/drug has in your life at the moment?
   
   *Possible prompts: what happens? how do you feel? how do you cope?*
2. Can you tell me about a recent time when you used alcohol/drugs?
   Possible prompts: what happened? how did you feel? how did you cope?
3. Can you describe how alcohol/drinking/using drugs affect your relation with other people?
   Possible prompts: partner, family, friends, work colleagues?
4. Can you tell me how you started drinking/using drugs?
   Possible prompts: how long ago? what do you think brought this about? can you describe how you felt about alcohol/drugs at that time?
5. Have you changed the ways you used alcohol/drugs over time?
   Possible prompts: in what ways? does anything make it better? does anything make it worse? how do you feel about these changes?
6. What would be for you a positive development?
   Possible prompts: how can your situation improve? can you imagine what it would feel like?

The schedule starts with a question about the present which provides a focus for participants to describe current issues in their life at some length. Questions about potentially sensitive issues and questions inviting reflection appear later in the schedule. This allows time for participant and researcher to become more comfortable with each other and with the interview situation and to feel their way into the dynamics and the rhythm of the interview. Prompts are prepared in case participants find it difficult to respond, and to offer them a range of possible routes. The schedule includes 10 questions which tend to occupy between 45 and 60 minutes of conversation, depending on the topic.

Box 3.4 Case study

Constructing an interview schedule for an IPA study. The study explores the psychological impact of chronic back pain through in-depth personal accounts of sufferers and the manner in which their sense of self unfolded and developed as their pain progressed.

Imagine a novice IPA researcher constructing an interview schedule for the first time asking for your help in re-drafting and refining the interview questions.
A. Write down what you think is wrong with each of the questions in the schedule below:
   1. Was it a shock when the pain started?
   2. So you have been having this pain for five years then, do you think it is going to get better or not, what do you hope will make it better?
3. What is the most frightening thing about being in pain?
4. Do you get angry when you are in pain?
5. Living with chronic pain must be very tough. Do you describe yourself as a tough person?
6. I can imagine the pain is demoralizing – is that right?

B. How would you improve these questions? Draft alternative questions and add additional questions suitable for the study.

C. What would be a suitable sample to interview (characteristics, how many participants)?


Analysis
IPA provides a flexible framework of processes and strategies for analysis. Analysis in IPA is an iterative, complex and creative process which requires the researcher's reflective engagement in a dialogue with a participant's narrative and meanings. Although in practice the analysis is fluid, iterative and multi-directional, for the purpose of illustrating the process here it is useful to describe distinct stages.

Initial Stage
The initial stage consists of reading the whole transcript a number of times to become thoroughly familiar with the data. It is useful to record some observations and reflections about the interview experience as well as any other thoughts and comments of potential significance in a separate reflexive notebook. This is accompanied by a detailed textual analysis that starts with writing notes and comments on the transcript. The process of engaging with the transcript in close analysis involves focusing on content, use of language, context and interpretative comments arising from the engagement with the material. Other notes include initial interpretative comments and reflections. This process is illustrated in Box 3.5 which contains a short extract from an interview with Claire (name changed).

Box 3.5 Initial comments (extract)
Not being able to work and going into rehab which was very difficult and having to go back into my past so it’s been a huge upheaval of everything you know, you know like the hornets nest

P: What was in your hornet’s nest?
C: Erm, what was in there quite a lot really I mean, as I said nothing major, nothing major has ever happened to me in the sense of the conventional kind of stuff, you think it was because I was abused, it was because, that didn’t happen, but you know my childhood wasn’t as functional as I thought you know I had a very, yeah my dad was an alcoholic but I didn’t really see him as one because he was a functional and sociable one you know, good job it was all of that kind of thing he wasn’t there a lot so my home life was kind of like that and then he left erm so it was just me and my mum and my sister so it’s been very much like that ever since it’s always been the three of us so it’s always been this very intense thing that no men can never penetrate us three do you know what I mean, we’ve always been very close like that and I suppose I find it quite hard to trust people you know, a sense of loss I suppose as well and the way I got over that was to have a drink it made me more confident well I thought I did it made me ease in erm, you know disastrous relationship with men all my life you know there’s always been like my father

Exploratory comments

Original transcript

Issues from the past – upheaval of life as lived at present
Using metaphor – indirectly pointing to problematic experience underneath image of conventional ordinary life

Dysfunctional childhood family – father alcoholic

Intense relations with mother & sister, female bond no male

‘penetrate’ – man as hostile, aggressive sexual image, yet feeling of loss

repeated pattern of dysfunctional relationship with men – attributes to childhood experience of father

Drinking as means of dealing with painful feelings
Initial positive experience of
Second stage

The next stage involves returning to the transcript to transform the initial notes into emerging themes. The main task involves an attempt to formulate concise phrases that contain enough particularity to remain grounded in the text and enough abstraction to offer a conceptual understanding. Although still focusing on the immediate text, at this stage the scope broadens as the researcher will also be influenced by having already analysed the transcript as a whole. Box 3.6 represents the emergent themes for the extract from the interview.
Box 3.6 Developing emergent themes (extract)

**Original transcript**

Not being able to work and going into rehab which was very difficult and having to go back into my past so it's been a huge upheaval of everything you know, you know like the hornets nest.

P: What was in your hornet's nest?

C: Erm, what was in there quite a lot really I mean, as I said nothing major, nothing major has ever happened to me in the sense of the conventional kind of stuff, you think it was because I was abused, it was because, that didn't happen, but you know my childhood wasn't as functional as I thought you know I had a very, yeah my dad was an alcoholic but I didn't really see him as one because he was a functional and sociable one you know, good job it was all of that kind of thing he wasn't there a lot so my home life was kind of like that and then he left erm so it was just me and my mum and my sister so it's been very much like that ever since it's always been the three of us so it's always been this very intense thing that no men can never penetrate us three do you know what I mean, we've always been very close like that and I suppose I find it quite hard to trust people you know, a sense of loss I suppose as well and the way I got over that was to have a drink it made me more confident well I thought I did it made me ease in erm, you know disastrous relationship with men all my life you know there's always been like my father

**Emerging themes**

*Facing the past - upheaval*

*Dealing with painful emotions*

*Dysfunctional childhood family*

*Alcohol in childhood family*
Second stage
The next stage consists of examining the emerging themes and clustering them together according to conceptual similarities. The task at this stage is to look for patterns in the emerging themes and produce a structure which will be helpful in highlighting converging ideas. The clusters are given a descriptive label which conveys the conceptual nature of the themes in each cluster (see Box 3.7).

Box 3.7 Initial clustering of themes (extract)
Focus on addiction

- Intensity of engagement in addictive behaviours
- Harmful experience of being drunk
- Drinking as means of dealing with painful feelings
- Drinking as support

Relationships with others

- Dysfunctional family dynamics
- Dysfunctional adult relationships
- Obsessive patterns of relationships
- Social isolation

Focus on recovery

- Recovery as arduous experience
- Feeling safe
- Self-awareness
- Support from others

Final stage

In the final stage a table of themes is produced. The table shows the structure of major themes and subthemes. An illustrative data extract or quote is presented alongside each theme, followed by the line number, so that it is possible to check the context of the extract in the transcript. As Eatough and Smith (2006) write, ‘for the researcher, this table is the outcome of an iterative process in which she/he has moved back and forth between the various analytic stages ensuring that the integrity of what the participant said has been preserved as far as possible. If the researcher has been successful, then it should be possible for someone else to track the analytic journey from the raw data through to the end table’ (p. 120).

Moving on

The next step in projects involving more than one participant consists of moving to the next case and repeating the process for each participant. Inevitably the analysis of the first case will influence further analysis. However, in keeping with IPA’s idiographic commitment, it is important to consider each case on its own terms, trying to ‘bracket’ the ideas and concepts which emerged from the first case. In following the steps rigourously for each case separately it is important to keep an open mind to allow new themes to emerge from each case. As the analysis of subsequent transcripts continues, earlier transcripts are reviewed and instances from earlier transcripts added and included in the ongoing analysis.

Once all transcripts have been analysed and a table of themes has been constructed for each, a final table of themes is constructed for the study as a whole (see Box 3.8). In the process of
constructing the final table, the tables of themes for each participant are reviewed and, if necessary amended and checked again with the transcript. The process is iterative and requires repeated returns to the data to check meanings. In constructing the final table of themes it may be possible to amalgamate some themes or to prioritize and reduce the data included in the individual tables. In selecting themes it is important to take into account prevalence of data but also the richness of the extracts and their capacity to highlight the themes and enrich the account as a whole.

Box 3.8  Table of themes (part)

**Superordinate theme 1 - Focus on addiction**

**Addiction as an affliction**

Katherine: Addiction is like you have this big boil here and it's like full of poison 682

Tracey: I am the floor, pissed and throwing up and crying 178-9

Susie: the paranoia and the fear every time I woke up without knowing where I’ve been 284-5

Meera: Just normal everyday things like bathing, like cooking, didn’t bother to eat properly 218-9

Claire: This feeling of complete despair [ ] if I could kill myself 291-2

**Intensity of engagement in addictive behaviours**

Claire: I can’t stop until there’s nothing left or until I pass out [ ] continue, continue, continue 131-2

Meera: Was all all consuming as well, the alcohol consume me 44

Susie: I walked around with a bottle of vodka everywhere I went, I couldn’t survive 259

Tracey: All I wanted was cocaine, I didn’t give a shit about friends or anything 263

Katherine: I still force it into my body, my body tried to tell me no but I still do it 33-4

**Addiction as support**

Susie: My first, my only love which was drugs and alcohol 241

Meera: I drink alcohol sometimes to enhance whatever I am feeling 568-9

Julia: I didn’t feel safe to face it sober, I mean it is also crutches 199

Claire: The way I got over that was to have a drink, it made me more confident 70-1
Superordinate theme 2 - Focus on self

Perception of self

Claire: I'd always kind of hit myself down for it like this isn't good enough
590-1

Susie: Felt I'm not good enough 'cause I always compared myself to other people 304
Katherine: I never really liked myself in my life I was never good enough 495
Tracey: Thoughts like oh I'm worthless or no one cares about me 537
Katherine: I value myself I didn't before but now [in recovery] I do 758
Susie: I've discovered [in recovery] there are good things about me which I never saw 127-8

The table of themes provides the basis for writing up a narrative account of the project. The narrative account consists of the interplay between the participants’ account and the interpretative activity of the researcher. It is sensible to take the superordinate themes one by one and write them up in that order. The writing style reflects the IPA approach to analysis, beginning with a close reading grounded in participants’ accounts before moving towards a more interpretative level. The narrative account should aim to be persuasive and to mix extracts from participants’ own words with interpretative comments (see Box 3.9). In this way it is possible to retain some of the ‘voice’ of the participant and at the same time to enable the reader to assess the pertinence of the interpretations.

Box 3.9  Narrative account (extract)

The engagement with addiction was portrayed metaphorically as the deep attachment evoked by love and friendship: ‘My first, my only love which was drugs and alcohol’ (Susie), ‘you've got a bottle of wine and that's your best friend’ (Tracey). Embracing the love object, all other attachments are abandoned, as described by Claire (‘my relationship ended, my friends disappeared’) and Tracey:

All I wanted was cocaine, I didn’t give a shit about friends or or anything like that if you do, if you weren't a cocaine user than you're no use to me, d'you know what I mean, so I have lost a lot of friends because ahm of the cocaine and stuff like that.

All participants described an all-consuming intense and obsessive experience, overshadowing all else in life. Yet the insatiable hankering turns out to devour the self and presents a being reduced to its one desire:
Meera: I couldn’t answer the front door without having a drink, answer the telephone without having a drink, ahm I didn’t want to see anybody so it was very much ahm it was just me and ah whatever I was drinking was all was all important, was all all consuming as well, the alcohol consumes me.

Claire: I can’t stop until there’s nothing left or until I pass out [   ] continue, continue, continue and just mentally obsessed that I need more when am I gonna get more.

Katherine: All my life it’s either been slimming pills, uppers, downers, I was very hooked on pain killers, codeine erm, for many years, in fact anything I touch I become addicted to actually.

Katherine’s account highlights the transferable pattern of addictive behaviour. Like Katherine, other participants described a range of addictive behaviours. Julia, Claire and Katherine described problems of addictive behaviour with food. Susie, Julia and Claire were engaged with obsessive exercising, swimming and running. Susie, Julia and Claire also described themselves as perfectionists, having to do everything to the best. Engaging in addictive behaviours seems to offer participants a strategy to escape from facing negative feelings towards themselves:

Susie: I didn’t realize that the level of self-loathing, I don’t allow myself um to look at that self-loathing because I drank alcohol or picked drugs to fix that [   ] that’s part of why I drank because I didn’t like who I was.

Katherine: Everything in my life is to do with escape you know the drinking the drugs whatever I mean the sleeping around it’s you know, all being because I couldn’t be with who I am just everything is a bad escape.

**Presenting the research**

The final report starts with an introduction which describes what the project is about and outlines the rationale for the project. The introduction also explains the rationale for using IPA and describes the stages in the process. Following the introduction, in IPA studies the ‘literature review’ is quite short as the primary research questions are phenomenological and the process is inductive rather than theory-driven. The literature is used concisely to develop some picture of the current state of research in the specific area. The literature review is useful to identify gaps in the field which the study aims to address, outline some existing key contributions and offer an argument why the study
makes a contribution to the field. It is recognized that during the analysis issues may arise which were not anticipated at the outset. These will be picked up at a later stage by engaging with literature in the Discussion section.

In a typical IPA study the next section provides a step by step guide to the actual method used in the research, including details of participants, data collection method and the process of analysis. This is followed by presentation of the analysis in narrative form which includes detailed extracts from participants’ accounts (see Box 3.9). In the final section, the discussion shifts the focus towards a wider context of a dialogue with existing literature, complementing, illuminating or problematizing other perspectives in the literature. The reader is then able to engage in the process of considering the study in relation to their professional and personal experience as well as the relevant literature. The discussion and conclusion may point towards applications in practice and provide suggestions for further research.

**Reflection on Practice**

I was attracted to IPA through the commonality with my background in existential psychotherapy which is grounded in a phenomenological approach and encourages clients to explore their own experiences, interpretations and meanings in the context of their life. In my research work I have always enjoyed the process of thematic analysis and clustering concepts and ideas according to conceptual similarities. For me the added excitement in working with IPA was two fold: First, retaining the idiographic perspective, giving voice to the experiential accounts of the participants and at the same time exploring commonalities across cases. The possibilities for developing multiple levels of interpretation offered another attraction. Using IPA enabled me to develop a more holistic concept of the research process from a perspective congruent with my worldview. It enables me to combine ideas of phenomenological and existential philosophy with a flexible analytic approach which is focused on both subjective experience and interpretative possibilities.

When I started the analysis I kept very closely to the participant’s story, an approach of ‘empathic understanding’. I explored the intensity of the embodied metaphors of the visceral connection with the baby and her emotional responses. As the analysis progressed I began to interrogate the participant’s story more critically and explore alternative readings and theoretical perspectives, for example, gendered discourse, social stereotyping and social comparison.

Having read the other analysts’ interpretations I was particularly struck by a possibility of considering how IPA and Foucauldian discourse analysis could be made complementary, despite epistemological differences. Both IPA and FDA share a concern with how context is implicated in the experiences of the individual. IPA starts by staying close to participants’ own accounts in their own context, while FDA offers a critical analysis of the context that brings into awareness the operation of social and cultural relations within which the individual is positioned. Despite possible tension, incorporating both perspectives in the inquiry is likely to lead to a richer analysis.
I was also struck by the interplay between the consensual meanings and the individual interpretations. Together the different accounts open up a range of possible meanings and greater transparency. Participating in this project helped me to reflect on my own research practice in a way that might not have been possible as an individual researcher.

F. **Chapter Summary**

- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research concerned with exploring in detail personal lived experience and examining how people are making sense of their personal and social world.
- IPA considers that understanding is always mediated by the context of cultural and socio-historical meanings and therefore the process of making sense of experience is inevitably interpretative.
- IPA considers that the role of the researcher in trying to make sense of the participant’s account is complicated by the researcher’s own conceptions.
- IPA shares some common grounds with other qualitative approaches. It can be located at a centre-ground position between experiential and discursive approaches.
- IPA draws on concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, to inform its distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology.
- Research questions in an IPA study are likely to involve experiences and issues of considerable significance to the participant.
- In line with its idiographic focus IPA encourages the study of small, relatively homogenous samples.
- IPA makes a strong case for a single case study, justified when one has a particularly rich or compelling case.
- IPA requires a data collection method which will invite participants to offer detailed, first person accounts of experiences. Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews have been used most often.
- IPA provides step by step guidelines for conducting a study. The guidelines constitute a flexible framework of processes and strategies which can be adapted in accordance with the research’s aims.
- Analysis in IPA is an iterative, complex and creative process which requires the researcher’s reflective engagement in a dialogue with a participant’s narrative and meanings.
- The final narrative reflects the IPA approach to analysis, beginning with a close reading grounded in participants’ accounts before moving towards a more interpretative level.
Further Reading


This chapter discusses the theoretical foundations of IPA and considers a range of current issues.


This paper provides a summary of the theoretical basis for IPA.


This book is the most comprehensive and up-to-date guide to IPA. The book covers the theoretical foundations for IPA; detailed step-by-step guidelines to conducting IPA research and extended work examples from several areas.


This chapter illustrates IPA applied to three different areas in the psychology of health.
References


**Glossary**

**Hermeneutics:** Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. Historically, hermeneutics developed from interpretations of biblical texts but was subsequently established as a philosophical foundation for a more general theory of interpretation. According to Heidegger
(1962), every interpretation is already contextualized in previous experience in a particular context. This is because human existence is fundamentally related to the world: human beings live in a particular historical, social and cultural context. From this perspective, understanding of events or objects in the world is always mediated and constrained by already existing knowledge. The voice that speaks from the text engages the interpreter in a conversation. The process can be envisaged as a ‘dialogue between what we bring to the text and what the text brings to us’ (Smith et al. 2009, p.26).

**Idiography:** Idiography is a term which describes an in-depth focus on the particular and commitment to detailed finely-textured analysis of actual life and lived experience.

**Phenomenology:** Phenomenology is both a philosophical approach and a range of research methods concerned with how things appear to us in our experience and are perceived in our consciousness. The phenomenological method involves setting aside preconceived ideas and theories and letting ourselves experience the world. Phenomenological research in psychology draws on the philosophical approach in its ‘focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them’ (Langdridge, 2007, p.4). Although a number of diverse approaches have been developed, the focus on subjective experience of the world has remained a fundamental principle of all phenomenologically informed research methods, including IPA (for a discussion of various phenomenological approaches in psychology, see Langdridge, 2007).

**Purposive sampling:** Purposive sampling refers to a method of selecting participants because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration of the phenomena being studied.

**Snowballing:** Snowballing refers to a method of selecting a sample in which potential participants are asked whether they know of other people with relevant characteristics and experiences who might be approached. Snowball sampling is often used to find and recruit ‘hidden populations’, groups not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies.