



Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

43

Vicki Squires

43.1 Brief History of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Phenomenology draws from the discipline of philosophy, and as the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach developed it was built upon these roots. IPA includes fundamental principles from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and expands upon the work of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as the more contemporary phenomenology researchers such as van Manen (Smith et al., 2009). While phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of a particular phenomenon, IPA researchers focus on “exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 40). IPA emerged as a separate approach in the 1990s (Smith et al., 2009), led by the work of Jonathan Smith and his colleagues. Because IPA is relatively new, the research approach is still being developed and refined. Although it is becoming more prominent in psychology and health psychology, it has not been as widely adopted in other fields to this point (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) contended that, as a larger body of IPA work is published, there will be opportunities to explore connections with other qualitative approaches and to push interpretation further.

43.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Method

IPA is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on studying individuals’ interpretations of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As such, the

V. Squires (✉)
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada
e-mail: vicki.squires@usask.ca

researcher relies on personal interviews with participants, and engages in an extensive process of analysis with first each individual interview (or case), and then conducts an analysis across cases. IPA as a research approach has three theoretical orientations, according to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014). First, the aim of an IPA study is “to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). Second, IPA emphasizes sense-making and is often referred to as a double hermeneutic process or a dual interpretation process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The participants make sense of their experiences and relate their understandings to the researcher, who then interprets their stories through the analysis of the data. Third, IPA is an idiographic approach, meaning that the research involves an in-depth analysis of each individual case, focusing on the unique contexts and perspectives and the particulars of a case (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Once each case has been analyzed independently, the researcher then begins to look for convergent and divergent superordinate themes and subthemes.

43.3 What Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Can Be Used to Study

IPA is appropriate for studies where the researcher wants to examine the common essences of a human experience or phenomenon across several individuals. It has been used to investigate questions aimed at uncovering the very nature of a particular human phenomenon, such as grief, shame, homelessness, sense of belonging, and group work (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

43.4 Why Use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis?

IPA is a suitable research approach when the researcher wants to investigate how individuals understand a particular situation and how they are making sense of their personal and social experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The IPA researcher wants to explore individual experiences in-depth and understand each participant’s interpretations of the phenomenon. As a qualitative research approach, the researcher is interested in rich, detailed data gathered through individual accounts of a particular human experience. Smith et al. (2009) stated that they saw “the value of IPA studies, first and foremost, as offering detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience” (italics in original) (p. 37).

43.5 Sample Domains for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Use

Studies in social science and health disciplines would be appropriate fields or domains for IPA research. It has been used in the same disciplinary fields that can employ phenomenological research approaches, especially sociology, nursing,

psychology, and education. Health psychology is an area where IPA methodology has been especially prominent (Smith et al., 2009). Sample types of research questions include a wide-number investigations of experiences such as surviving heart attacks, changing gender identity, parenting autistic children, living with brain trauma, and being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

43.6 Process for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Step 1: Clearly articulate the research problem. The definition of the experience, event, or phenomenon will help determine inclusion and exclusion criteria for the desired participants.

Step 2: Recruit participants. The goal of IPA research is to provide rich, detailed data regarding the participants' perceptions and understandings of an experience; because of this in-depth focus, sample sizes are intentionally small. Depending on the aims of the research and "pragmatic restrictions" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9), sample sizes can range from one to fifteen but usually are between six to eight individuals. Generally, researchers try to recruit a purposeful sample from a relatively homogenous group, connected by a common experience or phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Step 3: Collect data. The goal of IPA research is to uncover rich, detailed and first-person accounts of a particular experience or phenomenon. Because of that aim, semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used, although other data can be collected using journals or focus groups (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smith and Osborn (2003) identified that semi-structured interviews are the "exemplary method for IPA" (p. 57).

Step 4: Analyze the data. Smith et al. (2009) noted that researchers have the flexibility to use whichever type of data analysis process they would like; however, they suggested a stepped approach for novice researchers. The researcher should begin with one case, and read the material (transcript, journal, etc.) multiple times, annotating key ideas and interesting thoughts in one margin. Then, reread the material and note emergent themes and subthemes in the other margin. After multiple readings, the researcher then begins with the next case and repeats the process. Smith et al. recommended organizing these themes in an ongoing fashion by constructing a table outlining the themes from each case to make cross-case analysis easier.

Step 5: Write up the findings. Smith and Osborn (2003) noted that there are two possible strategies for presenting the data. One strategy is to present the results as emergent thematic analysis, followed by a discussion that connects the finding to the literature. The other strategy includes presenting each subordinate theme one by one and including the connections to the literature in the same section. A key point to the presentation, though, is to ensure that each participant's voice is included in the narrative and that the themes are linked and relate to the overall analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

43.7 Strengths of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The methodology supports the researcher stance of “hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of questioning” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36), allowing for a researcher to adopt an emic or insider position within the research in order to more fully understand the participant’s interpretation of their experience. Smith (2004) stated that “IPA researchers employ techniques which are flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge during analysis” (p. 43); the themes are emergent after close analysis of each case and are not built upon a priori hypotheses (Smith, 2004). The approach thus has the potential of uncovering essences of human experiences and providing insights that can inform practice in fields such as medicine, nursing, psychology, and education. Building an understanding of the experiences of patients and/or clients can be not only incorporated into the development and training of professionals in those fields, but it can also promote clients’ or patients’ self-understanding.

43.8 Limitations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Because the participants’ stories are so critical, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) identified that “some degree of interviewing experience is indispensable” (p. 13). Additionally, the analysis phase of the approach includes a double hermeneutic loop, and novice researchers may have difficulty interpreting participants’ interpretations of their experiences. Smith and Osborn (2003) contended that new researchers should limit their sample size to three participants as the researcher can then engage more deeply in each case, and yet has an opportunity for a detailed examination across cases. Interpretation relies heavily on reflexivity and the ability to articulate the details of the experience which has implications for both the language abilities of participants and the researchers. In addition, because it is an emergent approach, issues of establishing criteria for judging quality and validity need to be further investigated (Smith et al., 2009).

43.9 Applications of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA has been used commonly in health psychology, especially because this methodology is well-suited for engaging in patient-centred research. Several authors have noted that this approach is especially helpful for beginning researchers because of the well-articulated guidelines that can structure the analysis. Although it is used primarily in psychology, IPA does have application for educational studies such as ones examining student or teacher perspectives of a phenomenon they have all experienced. For example, Hartman studied the role of shame in post-secondary students’ tendencies to seek help. In this study, Hartman interviewed seven undergraduate students who had all identified that they had felt

shame because of their experiences in class. Following IPA guidelines, he created six super ordinate themes (Processing shame, Impact on self, Motivation, Belonging, Factors that promote help-seeking, Factors that deter help-seeking) and 32 subordinate themes. Hartman, (2019). The role of shame in student persistence and help-seeking. <https://harvest.usask.ca/handle/10388/12401>

Engagement Activities

1. Within one qualitative study with six participants, would it be possible to ensure that everyone would describe a common experience in very similar ways? Why or why not?
2. Give an example of a specific experience (ie. recovering from an addition, grieving the loss of a parent, mentoring younger students). How would you approach this study if you were going to use IPA? What might be some further examples from the field of education where students or teachers experience a common phenomenon?
3. Analysis in IPA is conducted from the ‘bottom up’; in other words, the researcher constructs codes from the data. Patterns, called themes, begin to emerge; eventually, some of those themes can be grouped into super ordinate themes, and within each theme there may be related subordinate themes. If you were examining a topic such as learning to drive a vehicle, what might be some super ordinate themes and subordinate themes? Can you illustrate that in a diagram?
4. According to IPA researchers, how should one handle outliers in the data? What if one participant mentions a unique and relevant idea/feeling/experience? Should it be included in the findings or not?

References

- Hartman, A. (2019). *The role of shame in student persistence and help-seeking*. Unpublished Master’s thesis. University of Saskatchewan. <https://harvest.usask.ca/handle/10388/12401>
- Pietkiewicz, I., & Smith, J. A. (2014). A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Czasopismo Psychologiczne—Psychological Journal*, 20(1), 7–14.
- Smith, J. A. (2004). Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(1), 39–54.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2003). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology—A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (2nd ed). (pp. 53–80). Sage Publications Ltd.
- Smith, J. A. & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology —A Practical Guide to Research Methods* (2nd ed., pp. 51–80). Sage Publications.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. Sage.

Additional Resources

- Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 5(2), 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>
- Gill, M. J. (2014). The possibilities of phenomenology for organizational research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 17(2), 118–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428113518348>
- IPA community: Brief introduction to 3 coding strategies in IPA. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3cz4Z2_GcE
- Roberts, T. (2013). Understanding the research methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Midwifery*, 21(3), 215–218. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjom.2013.21.3.215>
- Use of IPA in Qualitative Data Analysis: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHoR1WEWDL0>



Vicki Squires, Associate Professor. Department of Educational Administration. University of Saskatchewan. Area of Specialization: Student Wellbeing in Post secondary Education Research Interest: Exploring the implementation and evaluation of health promotion frameworks on campuses to facilitate the wellbeing of students, faculty, and staff. Additional research interests include the scholarship of teaching and learning and leadership in PSE.