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Exploring the Expansive Properties of Interpretive Description: An Invitation to Anti-oppressive Researchers

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Abstract
There is an ever-present need to challenge, create, and expand upon qualitative research approaches in the applied and practice disciplines to avoid repeating mistakes of the past and to realize a research agenda for socially just practice. Toward these goals, anti-oppressive researchers engage with a variety of methodologies to co-produce accounts that reflect a comprehensive understanding of social problems with the people who experience them and to enact solutions for real world change. In this article, we reflect on the manner in which Interpretive Description may be a useful option for anti-oppressive researchers to consider as a methodological approach in meeting these philosophical and practical aspirations. We find that Interpretive Description offers guidance toward building the foundation, bringing your whole self to the research, remaining responsive to people, valuing people's expert perspective of their own experience, using power and privilege wisely, broadening contributors and consumers of research, embracing complications and variations, and enacting change. To illustrate this, we share examples from a participatory, anti-oppressive Interpretive Description study conducted by a team comprised of an inter-racial coalition of students, alumni, and faculty. Collectively, we investigated Black graduate student experiences of racism, inclusion, and expansion within a historically and primarily White university. This case example illustrates our contention that, as our commitment to anti-oppressive research and practice in the applied disciplines intensifies, Interpretive Description is well situated to help us advance practice knowledge in a manner that is transparent, equitable and credible.

Keywords
action research, emancipatory research, participatory action research, social justice, whole-systems change

Introduction

Many anti-oppressive scholars have made the point that research intended to be anti-oppressive is often performative, centering researchers over participants and compromising its own aspirations (Bilotta, 2020; Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito, 2019). When this occurs, the unintended impacts of unethical, racist, ableist, sexist, homophobic, and/or xenophobic+ research actions may continue to reverberate, negatively harming the communities that have been studied and hindering trust between study participants and future researchers. Scholars in the applied and practice disciplines such as social work, education and the health professions are under increasing pressure and scrutiny, because of the real-world consequences of their investigations for people and professionals, to consider

adopting an explicitly anti-oppressive stance in their programs of research (Biggeri & Ciani, 2019; Brockenbrough, 2015; Hardesty & Gunn, 2019). For instance, it has been observed that when research is driven by theoretical treatment models that do not account for everyday realities, marginalized communities can be inequitably impacted by

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impartial or misguided findings (Macdonald et al., 2016). Further, where academic researchers conduct their studies without meaningful consultation from in-the-field experts or practitioners, their findings may have little relevance for the intended world of practice (Miller, 2019; Risling et al., 2019). In a worst-case scenario, there is real potential for researchers at a distance from the communities or groups they study to reinforce their own ignorance (both theoretical and from a social equity perspective) with minimal correction from an external reality (Cawthorne, 2001). To be truly effective in a practice field such as health care, for example, it has been argued that research on interventions and service options ought to take into account the daily, individual, systemic, and structural barriers that prohibit patients from accessing care and seek out the experiences and perceptions of marginalized groups rather than making assumptions based on dominant population norms or theoretical models alone (Clough et al., 2014; Guerra-Reyes et al., 2021). Therefore, to make meaningful progress in anti-oppressive work, we must continue to honestly acknowledge past and present mistakes and pursue continued reflection, critique and learning when it comes to our application of our research methodologies to develop knowledge about those we seek to serve.

There is a need and desire, therefore, to build a methodological knowledge base with respect to how best to support researchers seeking to redress these past problems and to design studies that will be actively anti-oppressive, not only in their aspirations but also in all phases of their enactment. Clearly, on matters pertaining to diverse and complex human experience, this will require research approaches that capture the valuable experiential knowledge from those directly and indirectly impacted by the phenomena under study (Thorne, 2011). Thus, while we fully acknowledge the complementary and necessary role of multiple approaches to such research, including quantitative and mixed-methods inquiries (Pearce, 2015; Smith, 2009), we believe that there will often of necessity be a dominant role for qualitative inquiry within the anti-oppressive armament.

As we know, traditional research convention situates the researcher as expert in a top-down model that orients inquiry from the frame of the researcher and can therefore render the totality of people and their experiences invisible (Brown & Strega, 2005; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). There is notable power in the silence of not telling someone's story or telling their story incompletely (Staller, 2007). Higher education, a historically racist, classist, and colonized space, continues to encourage invented hierarchies of knowledge, valuing theory over practice and pure methods over applied research (Al-Harden, 2014; Miller, 2019; Smith et al., 2015). This can pressure scholars to engage in the revered methods of the time or face the consequences of unfunded grants and rejected journal manuscripts (Thorne, 2011). If we are to enact meaningful systemic change toward anti-oppressive knowledge generation, then we will need to push past the conventional hierarchies that have privileged theoretical over practice-based knowledge and quantitatively-derived evidence over that which can be generated qualitatively.

Our goal in this manuscript is to continue to build on the progress that has been made and to focus on how we can expand our appreciation for the potential of research methodologies to enact wide-reaching and long-term structural change in the systems that sustain oppression (Miller, 2020). If we want to consciously work toward a more expansive scholarship – one that ensures attention to the wider context within which human phenomena exist and does so in an anti-oppressive manner – then we will need to amplify existing research methodologies as well as create new ones (Davis, 2021; Staller, 2007). Therefore, as we progress, it is important to document and debate methodologies that counter the limiting forces within the dominant research paradigms and support knowledge generation within this transformative ideal (Garrett, 2018; Sherman, 1991).

Critical, descriptive, and interpretive research methodologies have been positioned within the applied and practice disciplines as playing a significant role in expanding our perspective and understanding (Smith, 2009; Wood & Ross-Kerr, 2006), and helping us build knowledge that creates space for a diversity of individual perspectives and lived expertise (Lee, 2017). In the applied and practice professions, we recognize a particular need to address bias directly within our research to avoid reproducing oppressive structures. For example, applied health scholars have long recognized the need to create space for the voices of patients and practitioners, to investigate individual experience and not simply group or standardized practices, so as to ensure that their studies become opportunities to challenge power disparities (Powers, 2002). However, the shift to qualitative approaches alone is insufficient; we need to focus on how to develop our understanding and application of their potential for this kind of work, building a sophistication of thought as to which design choices within those methodologies will and will not advance the cause.

We believe that Interpretive Description, as a non-prescriptive qualitative approach explicitly designed for development of knowledge in the applied and practice disciplines, can help anti-oppressive researchers achieve the kinds of expansive scholarship they are seeking (Thorne, 2016). It is methodologically well-suited to the flexibility required to investigate real-world questions, and its fundamental tenets are compatible with and complementary to both participatory and decolonizing work (Brewer et al., 2014; Burgess et al., 2021; Hunt, 2009; Wright et al., 2019). In this article, we focus on Interpretive Description as one methodological option with considerable potential for helping to advance the next generation of anti-oppressive research. We draw attention to its anti-oppressive tenets and consider how researchers might best deploy this approach in the interests of answering the questions that arise within the practice world in a manner that enhances both anti-oppressive knowledge and action capacity.

Interpretive Description as Methodological Option

Applied and practice disciplines were created for action in the real world rather than theorizing in the abstract, and consequently there was a need to develop and formalize qualitative methodologies for the applied disciplinary research context (Thorne, 2013). Within these disciplines, researchers tend to focus on problems in practice, such that their investigations seek to develop forms of knowledge with the potential to enact changes in service or practice interventions (Green & Thorogood, 2009). They therefore create a way to expand upon professional and practice knowledge while still adhering to rigorous scientific investigation methods (Thorne, 2016). The need for qualitative research of an applied nature is increasingly recognized beyond the health care context and has become a strong focus of other practice fields such as social work (Miller, 2019). Interpretive Description is one such explicitly applied methodology.

Interpretive Description was first named as a methodology by nurse scholars Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, and MacDonald-Emes in 1997. Naming it as a methodology was meant to both acknowledge a style of qualitative research that many nurses were already conducting in the field and to enhance the legitimacy of their practice wisdom or phronesis as playing a role in that research (Miller, 2019; Thorne et al., 1997). Researchers who take up this approach are therefore grounded in the knowledge of their discipline, valuing subjective and experiential knowledge, and they acknowledge the sometimes contradictory nature of perceived reality (Brewer et al., 2014). The methodology was formalized as a means to address the domination of traditional social science quantitative methodologies in health care at that time, and to allow for a rigorous exploration of clinical curiosities and patient experiences beyond the numbers outside of the theoretical constraints of the social science methodologies. As the qualitative methodologies of that era provided limited utility for many of the questions that scholars in the applied disciplines might want to ask (Thorne, 2016), its introduction as an alternative option provided license to conduct an inquiry informed by disciplinary logic into the messiness of life, and to study the world as it should be and not merely as it is.

Interpretive Description is a methodology that can stand alone or serve as decision model guidance along with other approaches. It creates an organizing logic rather than a prescriptive set of steps all scholars necessarily follow. This means researchers can make decisions as to design steps that are appropriate to the logic of their own applied disciplinary context, including drawing on techniques from existing approaches and even modifying them as appropriate to fit the research context. All such decisions must be documented and able to withstand critical scrutiny (Thorne, 2016). Researchers who employ Interpretive Description tend to be action oriented, valuing the application of findings to enhance practice and outcomes (Thorne, 2014; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). They also comprehensively draw on practice wisdom as well as empirically generated knowledge to design investigations oriented to what might be missing from the existing disciplinary knowledge base or even challenging widely accepted assumptions that may exist in a given discipline (Thorne, 2016). After 25 years of use, Interpretive Description is well established as a legitimate inquiry methodology for applied disciplines, and widely used in fields such as health, education, social work, and applied interdisciplinary studies. Here, we explore some of its major tenets in some depth alongside salient aspects of anti-oppressive research to illustrate the important alignments.

Anti-oppressive Research as Disciplinary Aspiration

We use the term *anti-oppressive research* as an umbrella category that can include decolonizing, anti-racist, participatory, emancipatory, and other expansive research aspirations. Our goal is not to tease out the nuanced differences between these philosophies; rather we highlight key tenets of Interpretive Description methodology that we believe align well with anti-oppressive motivations. We recognize that research methodologies are inherently imperfect and reflective of their time. We also expect that they will continue to shift as we collectively aspire to do better and realize a more constructive impact with our work. Our current analysis is therefore limited by our present-moment understanding within an ongoing desire to explore research methodologies that help us more fully enter and engage with anti-oppressive spaces.

Anti-oppressive research requires power-sharing, commitment to participants, and space for social justice and research to simultaneously coexist (Macdonald et al., 2016; Potts & Brown, 2005; Staller, 2007). Researchers committed to anti-oppressive approaches link research, theory, and practice in a manner that consciously considers whose perspectives are being gathered and how that impacts our understanding or framing of societal problems (Brown & Strega, 2005; Staller, 2007). Scholars in this genre seek not only to identify problems but to also find solutions and strengths, particularly in their work with marginalized communities (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). They aspire to challenge existing assumptions and narratives rather than reproducing them (Potts & Brown, 2005). While they know that power cannot be eliminated from interactions, anti-oppressive researchers seek to remain aware of the role of power in such research steps as accessing communities, striving to make study design decisions that will balance scientific rigor with ethical and socially responsible behavior (Riese, 2019). Moreover, in working *with* study participants and communities, anti-oppressive researchers seek to be humble learners, to know their limitations and strengths, and to take responsibility both inside and outside the academy for their work with the communities they study

(Gómez & Castañeda, 2019; Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito, 2019; Mwambari, 2019).

Taking up Interpretive Description in Anti-oppressive Research

Because we believe Interpretive Description to be an excellent fit with the aims of anti-oppressive research, we encourage anti-oppressive researchers to consider ways in which the methodology may serve their particular aims. Here we explore the anti-oppressive characteristics of Interpretive Description, specifically describing how researchers might use the methodology to build the foundation, bring your whole self to the research, remain responsive to people, value people's expert perspective of their own experience, use power and privilege wisely, broaden contributors and consumers of research, embrace complications and variations, and enact change (Table 1).

For us, this is not just a philosophical exercise, but rather one that informs our research practice. Therefore, we draw on examples from our research to illustrate processes and actions based on what we consider the anti-oppressive tenets of Interpretive Description. The study exemplar we draw upon was designed as a participatory, anti-oppressive Interpretive Description study. Together, as Black and White students, alumni, and faculty, we (anonymized for review) investigated Black graduate social work students' perceptions and experiences of racism and inclusion within a multi-location and historically White university in the U.S. We completed semi-structured interviews with current students and recent alumni to gather their perceptions and experiences. We then worked as a research team to transcribe, verify, code, categorize, and thematically analyze the results before sharing our findings at our institution and through peer-reviewed venues. Finding our research process to be fully as important as our results and recognizing how that conscious process had helped us to create authentic and informed findings consistent with anti-oppressive ideals, we expanded our study team to include a methodological expert (anonymized for review) to assist us in our critical reflections about the implications of what we had learned. We share our collective ideas about the potential of Interpretive Description, used with anti-oppressive tenets, in the hopes of encouraging others to consider its use in their own expansive research work.

Building the Foundation

Anti-oppressive researchers can draw on Interpretive Description to expand their research topics, creating an opening to the study of what is happening within complex human contexts. The *what* of a phenomenon should not be under-valued and needs to be understood before the *how* and *why* can be investigated in a meaningful way (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005; Miles et al., 2020). Pragmatic methods for qualitative investigations have historically been viewed as inferior to more conventional theory-driven approaches, despite the value they may have for professional practice (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012). Consequently, the *what* may be overlooked and theory may be generated prematurely, leading to incorrect or misleading assumptions in practice. However, through investigating the *what,* we can learn about the embedded complexity of practice-relevant issues, such as what internet information newly diagnosed individuals with cancer access (Haase et al., 2016) or and what experiences Indigenous mothers caring for infants have in the health care system (Wright et al., 2019). We can also identify challenges and resources for frontline practitioners, such as investigating their emotional well-being, or exploring the ethical and professional integrity dilemmas they face in their work (Thorne et al., 2018; Williams & Haverkamp, 2015). These kinds of real world problems necessitate real world scientific investigation to discern what is happening in the practice context and thereby to improve conditions. That attending to the *what* of a phenomenon is one of the practices Interpretive Description entails, making it an appropriate methodology for that form of real-world investigation.

In the applied disciplines, it is well recognized that a researcher cannot plan for every unique dimension that might surface in practice; therefore, applied scholars constantly position themselves to explore new situations as their practice world and their understanding of it evolves (Thorne, 2013). Interpretive Description therefore presents an opportunity for anti-oppressive researchers to study phenomena that were not anticipated in textbook knowledge, such as in the example of developing a protocol to assist families who bring dead persons into the emergency department (Bove et al., 2020). As a methodology, Interpretive Description encourages researchers to turn a critical lens on existing theoretical and clinical knowledge (Oliver, 2012). For instance, researchers can critically scrutinize presuppositions in their discipline-specific training toward the goal of generating new perspectives and enhancing practice (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021; Thorne, 2016).

Our study began as our research team of students, alumni, and faculty, heard concerns voiced and had experienced or witnessed racial inequities, albeit from different positionalities at our institution. Because it did not appear that our university had a well-informed strategic plan to serve our Black students across its locations, we conducted an Interpretive Description study to investigate students espoused needs and perceived resources within our graduate program and the university. Using this applied methodology, our research team was able to generate findings that explored students' experiences with racism and inclusion, identified fundamental gaps in institutional services and drew attention to communal, programmatic, and institutional strengths on which to build. By gathering this kind of foundational knowledge, we created a platform upon which to inform a strategic plan to address the needs of graduate Black students that were previously overlooked.

Table 1. Anti-Oppressive Tenets, Practices, and Examples of Interpretive Description.

Anti-oppressive tenets of interpretive description	Anti-oppressive practices in interpretive description	Examples of anti-oppressive practices in interpretive description from our research
Building the foundation	Identify the *what* without assumptions Juxtapose the professional foundation against real world experiences Generate new foundational knowledge that will enhance practice	Identified fundamental gaps in institutional services Identified communal, programmatic, and institutional strengths to build on
Bringing your whole self to the research	Maintain co-membership as researcher and researched Remove "othering" Retain knowledge based on personal, professional lived experiences	Participants as Co-primary investigators (Co-PIs) Study team had multiple (participant and Co-PI) and fluid roles (from students to alumni) Shared insider knowledge based on our positionality
Remaining responsive to people	Adapt methods to participants and data to be gathered Permission to deviate from textbook Maximize resources and minimize burden on participants and communities of study	Interviews offered in person or via zoom or email Switched to remote data analysis during COVID-19 Allowed research team members to pause involvement and return as life circumstances permitted
Valuing people's expert perspective of their own experience	Bridge gap/divide between practitioner and client Incorporate the consumer experience into evidence-based practice Take an "and" rather than "or" position to simultaneously hold multiple realities as true	Created a coalition to bridge gap between black students and white faculty Shifted black graduate students into the role of experts
Using power and privilege wisely	Work towards horizontality Defer to participants to strengthen the collaborative aim and research findings	Hosted more black students/alumni than white faculty Balanced workload and opportunities for input Asked people with more racial privilege to do more work with checkpoints Took risks and shared access to our networks and communities
Broadening contributors and consumers of research	Offer clear method options to who conducts and contributes to research Use accessible language to widen the research audience	Financially compensated student/alumni researchers Co-created meaningful opportunities to engage in and present scholarship Scaffolded skills to enhance confidence with methods Created and shared a 2-page findings memo with institutional administrators
Embracing complications and variations	Incorporate multidimensional realities Identify themes and unique, natural variations	Sought themes and variance in findings Acknowledged inconsistencies as a natural part of the interview process Held all participants' experiences and perceptions as true and contextually situated variance
Enacting change	Improve practice Change policy	Provided workshops on practical improvements employees could make at our institution Successfully advocated for institutional policy changes

Bringing Your Whole Self to the Research

One way in which Interpretive Description may appeal to anti-oppressive researchers is in its encouragement to bring themselves fully into the research. Often researchers have co-membership in the groups and communities they study. Interpretive Description recognizes that there is often no strict boundary between researcher and researched, and therefore invites scholars to build and sustain relationships that reduce objectifying and offer a way to avoid *othering* research participants (Shannon & Truman, 2020; Sherman, 1991). Practitioners, may witness patterns worthy of investigation during their work (Thorne, 2013), and then build those observations into investigations of practice gaps (Thorne, 2014). In some more traditional research methodologies, researchers who are members of the group being studied are required to choose a singular identity (Sweeney & Beresford, 2020). However, the community does not typically have an issue with the duality; it is the academy that has historically sought to retain a monopoly on determining how to conduct research properly (Shannon & Truman, 2020). Undoing duality and removing the othering creates an important opportunity to move beyond exclusively colonized knowledge (Al-Harden, 2014), an approach that is consistent with the Interpretive Description approach.

While some qualitative methodological approaches would position community membership as something of a researcher bias, the explicitly applied orientation of Interpretive Description invites the researcher to bring valuable experience and knowledge into the process rather than considering it as something that needs to be bracketed out (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021). For instance, a nurse can investigate the experiences of nurses without developing amnesia of their professional knowledge or a bi+sexual researcher can explore bi+sexual community members' perceptions without discarding their own lived experience. In this manner, Interpretive Description allows anti-oppressive researchers an opportunity to build on what is known, both experientially and theoretically, to expand the discipline's relevant understanding (Thorne, 2016).

Our research team all had multiple and fluid roles. No one was asked to leave any of their identities at the door, and we created space for active participation rather than requiring research team members to remain as objective observers. Following an Interpretive Description methodology, we welcomed insider knowledge throughout the research process. With our varied racial and national identities (Haitian American, African American, person of color, and White) as well as different roles (students, alumni, and faculty) we had access to different spaces and conversations, and thus knowledge. Together, our collective insights enabled us to comprehensively understand participants' common and distinctive experiences within their institutional and societal contexts. In this way, we were able to bring our perspective and experiences into the research and to engage in robust dialogues about racism, inclusion, and expansion. This further allowed us to move the interpretation and implications aspect of our study forward expeditiously. In our case, for example, we purposefully planned the project to overlap with the students' graduation, allowing for a collective understanding of the shifting power dynamics as the students moved position from student to alumni.

Remaining Responsive to People

We also found Interpretive Description to be a helpful methodology to support anti-oppressive researchers who desire the flexibility to adapt their original research intentions to meet the evolving needs and expectations of both the people being studied and their environment. In Interpretive Description, the selection of specific approaches and techniques can be considered somewhat fluid, although grounded in a transparent logic model that guides the evolving design decisions (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Researchers guided by this approach develop research questions based on initial knowledge that is understood as inherently limited and therefore can be adjusted as the study progresses (Hardesty & Gunn, 2019; Thorne et al., 2002). Similarly, as the research protocol strives to fit the context, culture, question and resources, elements within it can be modified as needed throughout the study without jeopardizing the integrity of the process (Thorne, 2007, 2016). This flexibility creates the opportunity for study participants to inform both the research design and the findings and for researchers to honor participants without forcing them to conform to undue methodological rigidities holding an abstract appointed value (Burgess et al., 2021). Often, deviation from the textbook approach first envisioned can serve a strategic purpose as the study progresses, and the "messiness" that may have conventionally been associated with a lack of scientific rigor can actually be reflective of sensitivity to the real world and enhance the validity of the findings (Cawthorne, 2001; Thorne, 2016).

Interpretive Description is consistent with a multiplicity of approaches to data generation and analysis that may usefully inform the evolving inquiry (Thorne, 2013). It seeks not to limit the scope of researchers as agents of knowledge production, but rather to expand it. Much like our professional practices in the real world, Interpretive Description values effectiveness over adherence to tradition. Because of this, anti-oppressive researchers can employ Interpretive Description to build in considerations such as resource maximization and minimizing the burden on study participants and communities of study without losing a focus on quality. In these ways, it can support anti-oppressive researchers in respecting the communities' time, practitioners' time, and even the time of underpaid or unpaid researchers and research assistants (Risling et al., 2019).

Within our research, for example, we initially focused on being as responsive as possible to study participants' needs.

We offered them the opportunity to participate in the research in person or via zoom, phone, or email. While these different data collection strategies may lead to different forms of data – that's ultimately the point; flexibility allowed us to capture a range of experiences, and not just the experiences of those for whom it is convenient to participate in a pre-determined data collection approach. We did not want to overlook or marginalize the voices of busy, adult learners for the sake of our research protocol, and found that Interpretive Description allowed us to be expansive in creating room for participation within the study, Within our research team, we also worked to remain flexible and responsive to real life challenges as they arose. We were in the midst of data analysis when COVID-19 shutdowns began. We moved to remote work and allowed for an ebb and flow of active research team members to accommodate the conditions. Some team members took a step back as they grieved the loss of family members or adjusted to remote work and home schooling, married, or had a baby. As a collaborative community, we rotated shared responsibilities to keep our momentum going. We focused on making room for our *humanity* as researchers and consciously sought to avoid the dominant practices we associate with capitalist, White supremacist institutions that sacrifice quality of life for researchers in the name of scientific commitment. We see this as highlighting the kind of anti-oppressive work that allows us to enact our applied practice values within the realities of our academic environments.

Valuing People's Expert Perspective of Their Own Experience

Anti-oppressive researchers often seek an opportunity to capture and include subjective experiences within the scholarly conversation associated with their study. Using Interpretive Description, they can work with research as a tool, such as in the exploration of patients' experiences in therapeutic relationships (Miciak et al., 2018). It can help them as they work through identifying such issues as what causes the *us* versus *them* divide at the individual and systemic levels so as to facilitate a dialogue of sorts between providers and clients to improve professional practice and care experiences (Abdul-Razzak et al., 2014; Thorne, Con, et al., 2004; Vandyk et al., 2018). There is a strong understanding within the applied disciplines that we need to include practitioners in active research team roles (Palinkas et al., 2017). Enhanced collaborations across typically siloed spaces will lead to improved knowledge generation that aligns practice, theory, and research (Palinkas et al., 2017). Examples of this kind of collaboration found in the literature include bringing the patient and frontline worker perspectives into evidence-based care (Duff et al., 2020) and using insights from immigrant families and service providers to inform policy and practice recommendations (Benavides et al., 2021).

Subjective, objective, professional, and experiential knowledge each have value (as well as limitations) and can coexist as multiple realities (Riese, 2019; Thorne, 2014, 2016; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Researchers committed to anti-oppressive approaches using Interpretive Description are able to take an *and* rather than *or* position, as it does not require 'fit' with what is already known as a quality measure (Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). In this context, anti-oppressive researchers can consider knowledge from multiple sources, such as participants, practitioners, the discipline, the literature, and theory, as they work to craft a comprehensive and potentially emancipatory understanding of the phenomenon under study (Corle et al., 2021). Novel findings can therefore be used to expand our conceptualization about and empathy for diverse perspectives as we continue to refine and develop an informed, socially relevant, and ethical practice. This constitutes a reciprocal and dynamic exploration; for instance, extant theory can inform analysis without imposing a reproduction of existing assumptions, and new data can be used to challenge existing knowledge.

This potential to bridge gaps in understanding, knowledge, and experiences made Interpretive Description an ideal fit for our study. Our research team sought to shift the typically overlooked and marginalized voices of Black graduate students into the position of appreciating their expert knowledge. We therefore honored the unique perceptions of each of the participants who generously shared their time and lived experience with us. We accepted everything they shared as the truth of their experience and perspective. We focused on making our research team a bridge between the many *us* versus *them* dichotomies (e.g. student – faculty; Black – White) that can occur in an academic space, as in the wider society. As an interracial team of students, alumni, and faculty we engaged in discussions on effective ways to bridge gaps that can occur in understanding and practice based on one's positionality and exposure to different life experiences. Following Interpretive Description methodology, we were able to center these dialogues as a pivotal aspect of the research process and salient to crafting comprehensive research findings.

Using Power and Privilege Wisely

In the anti-oppressive research tradition, researchers are expected to minimize hierarchical structures and practices as they work towards horizontality (Valenzuela-Fuentes, 2019). We found that Interpretive Description was helpful in this regard as it has focused since its inception on shifting power differentials within both research process and product. We recognize that all research occurs in the real world fraught with its complicated history, politics, and societal inequities (Al-Harden, 2014). However, we found that Interpretive Description gave useful guidance to help researchers understand the power and privilege of their positions, such that their inquiries model both respect for and belief in the stories shared, while integrating them into

evolving disciplinary practice knowledge (Staller, 2007; Thorne, 2016).

In qualitative research generally, data are the constructions offered by or in various sources, and data analysis leads to their reconstruction toward some purpose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorne et al., 1997). Interpretive Description recognizes that researchers and participants relationally influence one another, and knowledge is thereby understood as to some extent co-produced (Archibald et al., 2021; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Throughout the research process, including data analysis, strategies for community member contributions, such as member checking (in the sense of challenging, elaborating upon or nuancing the evolving interpretations), should be given thoughtful consideration, notwithstanding their potential limitations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). Ultimately, although it is the researcher who will make the final technical and design decisions, this methodology encourages the scholar to remain mindful that these are inherently ethical decisions, decisions that impact people, and the reality of this power differential should be explicitly acknowledged (Riese, 2019; Staller, 2007; Thorne et al., 1997; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & O'Flynn-Magee, 2004). This guidance aligns well with the desire of anti-oppressive researchers to be carefully attuned to opportunities for deferring to the participants' wishes or perspectives so as to strengthen the collaborative aim and research findings.

In our study, for example, we acknowledged the immutable power differences that accompanied our varied roles and races. We purposefully hosted more students and alumni than faculty and more members of the Global majority than White individuals. While these numeric differences will not alone shift the historic and perpetuated power imbalance, they became one tactic that we used to disrupt power differentials. We also worked as a team throughout the project to balance the workload and input, such as attempting to have those with more privilege to do more work but with consistent input and checkpoints from those with less privilege. Using Interpretive Description from an anti-oppressive frame, we co-created all aspects of the research with continual check-ins on issues of race and power to ensure no one's voice was getting lost along the way.

We also took personal and professional risks to leverage our various forms of power and privilege. To begin, students and alumni had access to the communities we wanted to engage in the research, but there was risk in sharing access to the communities. As a team, we took this powerful entry seriously and knew we needed to do right by participants to fulfill our research commitment and build trust long-term. The faculty also shared entry into their circles (meetings and lunches with scholars and deans) for the purposes of professional networking for future educational and professional opportunities, even when these did not seem directly related to the research. They were also able to access grant funding to financially (albeit inadequately) compensate the students and

alumni for their work on the project and sharing their knowledge. This financial award and membership in our self-appointed coalition manifested a certain legitimacy within and outside of our institution, enhancing our collective sense of shared power.

As individuals with or seeking graduate degrees, we acknowledged that we all possessed a certain level of privilege. We tried to harness the associated power to improve institutional conditions for Black students and students of color more broadly across our university locations and programs. We strategized the most effective ways to use our power and privilege wisely, and we discussed the potential consequences and backlash from our actions. Interpretive Description methodology gave us a sense of permission to focus on the applied nature of our research. We agreed as a team upon each risk and each of our actions in an attempt to fulfill our commitment to study participants and to enact meaningful change more generally. Eventually, we had these conversations became so frequent that they became comical as we questioned – *well, why stop now?*

Broadening Contributors and Consumers of Research

We also found Interpretive Description to have useful potential for anti-oppressive researchers to broaden both the research audience and the capacity of a wider population to conduct qualitative inquiry. Rather than assuming the necessity for deep preparation within the academic community prior to legitimate participation as a co-investigator, anti-oppressive researchers can bring culture to the forefront, making researchers and participants of marginalized identities visible, and encouraging practitioners to see themselves as active contributors to scholarship (Brewer et al., 2014; Davis, 2021; Newman & McNamara, 2016; Zhuo et al., 2021). In some applied disciplines, there may be an easy crossover for the dual role of practitioner and researcher (Hunt et al., 2011; Ng, 2021). For instance, social work practice and social work research both require similar skills, working with similar people, and seeking similar goals (Newman & McNamara, 2016). By aligning the goals of the research with the inherent social mandate of the discipline and considering research as part of the natural intellectual detective work that advances the discipline, the important epistemological underpinnings that justify and guide a study become less theoretical and abstract and more applied and practice oriented.

It has been well recognized, however, that a hindrance to including an expanded audience in the work of scholarly production is the confusing language of qualitative analysis (Thorne, 2007). Therefore, anti-oppressive researchers recognize an obligation to try to demystify the process and involve a wider range of contributors in the analytic arena. This becomes an opportunity to invite novice scholars, potential scholars, and community members into the analytic process,

so as to diversify who conducts research and who is interested in research. Further, when reporting findings, ideally researchers will ground the wording in the language of participants and explain the methodology in a manner that makes the logical flow of descriptive and interpretive analysis accessible to the audience, whether practitioners, study participants, or academics (Chafe, 2017; Glasser & Bridgman, 1999; Neergaard et al., 2009; Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012). This transparency that can be facilitated using the data analysis guidance of Interpretive Description has the advantage of allowing the audience to judge the inductive reasoning process and outcomes for themselves. Although Interpretive Description methodology is more accessible to applied practitioners than is one that is primarily oriented to theory development, that accessibility also potentially makes it vulnerable to devaluation within some sectors of the academic universe. However, to achieve the anti-oppressive aims of our applied disciplines, we must strategically expand our knowledge application and reach beyond the confines of the scholarly journal, toward sharing a compelling story of research findings that also speaks to policy makers, practitioners, and the general public (Archibald et al., 2021; Thorne, 2011).

In our study, this was the first experience conducting research for the students and alumni within our team, yet their social work skills provided an entry level familiarity with many aspects of the research process. As a team we sought to create space for all of the changes that can occur for new scholars including the work of making sense of processes, content, and identities (West et al., 2018). We consistently engaged in conversations about the most effective way to scaffold the research, balancing the imperative to conduct the research in a timely fashion with the comfort level and developmental phase of the team members. Interpretive Description gave a logic to this flexibility. For instance, we began publicizing our findings through workshops at our university before moving to peer-reviewed conferences. We also adjusted who would cover what topic within our presentation, moving from findings to methods as team members' confidence was strengthened. Our goal was to push ourselves, each other, and the rules without pushing anyone over the edge. We found this to be a reciprocally reinforcing process – as the confidence of each team member grew, our collective confidence in the entire team also grew.

Additionally, we took guidance from Interpretive Description as we sought to meet potential consumers of our research where they were figuratively and literally to broaden the research audience and uphold the motivation for conducting applied research. Therefore, we created a two-page document that conveyed findings and recommendations in concise bullet points for busy practitioners in higher education, and we sought to present our research directly to practitioners within existing ongoing meetings as well as in newspapers and podcasts. We also shared copies of all of our research products with participants to reinforce the importance of their having shared their time and knowledge.

Embracing Complications and Variations

Interpretive Description can also be useful to anti-oppressive researchers seeking Description to identify the very complicated and overlapping problems that people face due to structural inadequacies and inequities without assuming there will be quick fixes, as well as always searching for thoughtful and actionable solutions for real people (Nkulu Kalengayi et al., 2012). Proponents describe Interpretive Description as being conducted using an ecosystems perspective, with all the history, culture, intricacies, and complications that are active in the environment being studied (Oliver, 2012). For instance, McCall et al. (2009) used the methodology to document the colonial derived and intersecting issues of poverty, violence, substance use, trauma, marginalization, discrimination, poor health, and HIV/AIDS that Canadian Aboriginal women face and that impact their access to services. Within their report, that research team also told the story of the women's' resilience, individualism, and activism. A more simplified view, aiming at neat and tidy data organizing taxonomy comprised of the most common themes appearing across the data set might have omitted their multidimensional realities and rendered their life circumstances unrecognizable to the study participants.

An important feature of Interpretive Description is that it encourages researchers to look beyond common themes to also interpret unique variations and diversities (Hunt, 2009). This enables anti-oppressive researchers to recognize that the overarching themes that some research approaches privilege may reflect dominant population views and marginalize the perspectives of the few. Thus, reports of qualitative findings of complex situations can be dangerous if they privilege commonalities, while study findings that demonstrate respect for variations and diversities within data sets can be helpful in expanding anti-oppressive practice in the field. Using Interpretive Description, researchers are explicitly encouraged to seek out disruptive or unsettling data and to frame their findings in a manner that can help illuminate and ultimately eradicate inequities in the profession's arena of practice (Thompson Burdine et al., 2021). Findings that simply restate what we have always known or offering nothing surprising are typically unhelpful and do little to move the discipline forward (Thorne, 2016). Rather than interpreting less frequent occurrences as outliers, Interpretive Description encourages a focus on these natural variations, including features of a phenomenon that can be rendered invisible in large data sets, by asking the wrong questions or asking them of the wrong people, or by generally dismissing infrequent data as insignificant or not fitting the existing theory (Summers et al., 2021). Where quantitative research requires a decision given prescribed options, qualitative researchers have often prioritized one participant response over another based on the

researchers' perspectives or beliefs (Hartman, 2015). In contrast, describing variability across phenomena allows for an investigation that reflects an understanding of the spectrum that exists within a field (Miles et al., 2020). Anti-oppressive researchers appreciate that great variation can exist, even within one interview or data segment, including experiences such as those indicative of resistance, complicity, and oppression. It is important to acknowledge such inconsistent realities and allow for the full chorus of experiences to exist simultaneously rather than trying to force our findings about human perceptions into static and rigid dichotomies or thematic groupings (Hartman, 2015). Even in a world in which the dominant (evidence-based) ethos favors standardized practice, applied practitioners understand that there must be limitless variation, such that practices can be flexible in the moment to match the reality of the presenting situation (Thorne, 2013).

In our study, we found a continuum from racist experiences to empowering experiences throughout the participants' accounts of their graduate studies. Congruent with Interpretive Description guidance, we sought data reflective of variations along the continuum as well as contradictory data elements. Rather than considering in our team conversations whether we suspected a participant got it wrong or was an outlier, we viewed their reported experiences as their truth in the moment and understood that humans have experiences that they may interpret differently over time and telling. We sought to understand and contextualize but not contort data. For instance, we noted that some of the variance in participants' graduate level experiences could be attributed to their experiences at undergraduate universities. A participant who completed their undergraduate studies at an Historically Black College or University often had a different perspective and expectations compared to participants who had only attended historically and predominantly White institutions. Additionally, throughout the course of an interview, individual participants sometimes wavered in their own narratives, such as from describing having had no experiences of racism to detailing extensive experiences of racism. We acknowledged these inconsistencies as a natural part of the interview dialogue process, ultimately allowing both to be true – people have moments when racism is not present in their experience and times when it is.

Enacting Change

Lastly but perhaps most importantly, Interpretive Description may appeal to researchers interested in an anti-oppressive methodology due to its emphasis on inspiring change. Its underlying motivation is the generation of knowledge that is are inherently action oriented, translating participants' voices into actionable knowledge to improve practice, change policy, and enact meaningful and socially just change in the real world (Thorne, 2013). Research that is overly aligned with generation of theory can sometimes lead to inaction; theorizing

becomes a form of privilege, allowing the system to continue to reproduce itself without interruption. In contrast, when applied practitioners becomes research activists, they are engaged in action to transform prejudice and discrimination in the direction of disciplinary social mandate ideals (Baez, 2002; Garcia, 2015). Researchers in the applied and practice disciplines cannot, and should not, be detached observers who are unconcerned with practical improvements or unintended consequences resulting from their work (Thorne, 2014). Thus, conducting anti-oppressive research using Interpretive Description, researchers can expose such issues as how implicit racism, sexism, ableism, and anti-immigration manifest as biases in practice arenas, and can thereby identify corrective ways to improve professional practice ultimately enhancing people's quality of life and life outcomes (Freeman et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2015).

In our study, we sought immediate change to dismantle systemic and institutionalized racism at our university. Because of this, our study was ramping up rather than winding down as we concluded our analysis. In keeping with the knowledge mobilization aspirations of Interpretive Description, we consciously strategized the most effective way to message our findings to enact institutional change, and we continue to advocate for policy and procedural changes to enhance racial equity at our institution. Simultaneously we have sought broader systemic change by sharing our findings and processes in peer-reviewed spaces. In these ways, we seek change in our own back yard, but we also seek change beyond. We see this article as one such artifact, inviting anti-oppressive researchers to consider Interpretive Description as a methodological tool for meeting their emancipatory goals.

Conclusion

Based on our experience, we believe that Interpretive Description is a modern, accessible methodology that has the potential to enable researchers to build upon what they know by virtue of conventional qualitatively derived knowledge in anti-oppressive ways and thereby to advance anti-oppressive analysis. Applied researchers with an anti-oppressive commitment, simultaneously value the complexities inherent in people and the importance of scientific rigor in the work of enacting socially just change. The methodology presents an opportunity for anti-oppressive researchers to conduct expansive investigations leading to comprehensive understandings of complex phenomena within their real-world context.

In the context of our study, we found that Interpretive Description enabled us to systematically adapt our approach as the research context shifted and maintain momentum in our collaborative co-creation of knowledge and advocacy for practical change. Given the sensitive nature of our research topic, the imperative to interrogate power throughout the research process, and the applied discipline of higher education which formed our research context, participatory anti-

oppressive Interpretive Description was the perfect methodology for our study. As our commitment to anti-oppressive practice in the applied disciplines intensifies, there will be an increasing need to articulate research methodologies that can assist in this aim. Interpretive Description – both with its fundamental approach to knowledge generation and in the kinds of knowledge it is capable of producing – is exceptionally well situated to move our research and our applied professions equitably forward.

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