

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience. IPA is part of a family of phenomenological psychology approaches, all of which differ to some degree in their theoretical emphases and methodological commitments but are in broad agreement about the relevance of an experiential perspective for the discipline. IPA avows a phenomenological commitment to examine a topic, as far as is possible, in its own terms. For IPA this inevitably involves an interpretative process on the part of both researcher and participant. IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of particulars, first providing an in-depth account of each case before moving to look for patternings of convergence and divergence across cases. A text offering a detailed account of the theoretical foundations and empirical practices of IPA was published in 2009 (Smith, Flowers and Larkin).

IPA was first articulated in the UK in the 1990s and initially was picked up as an approach to the psychology of experience in health and clinical/counselling psychology. Since then it has considerably widened its reach. It is now one of the best established qualitative approaches in UK psychology but is also used increasingly by psychology researchers throughout the world. In parallel to this growth has been a broadening of the domains of inquiry IPA is employed in. One now finds IPA research in organizational studies (e.g. de Miguel, Lizaso, Larranaga & Arrospide, 2015; Tomkins & Eatough, 2014), education (e.g. Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Thurston, 2014), health (Seamark et al. 2004, Cassidy et al. 2011), sports science (see Smith, in prep) and the humanities (Hefferon and Ollis, 2006). What appeals to researchers in these diverse fields is IPA's explicit commitment to understanding phenomena of interest from a first person perspective and its belief in the value of subjective knowledge for psychological understanding.

Beyond these developments, IPA continues to mature with evidence of researchers adopting a creative and imaginative stance to the approach which is in keeping with its original spirit – to provide qualitative researchers with *ways of thinking* about and researching psychological topics which are underpinned by phenomenology and hermeneutics. As part of the process of helping researchers to conduct excellent hermeneutic phenomenological research, one of us has written papers elaborating evaluative criteria for what constitutes a good IPA study (Smith, 2011a, 2011b) and these will be discussed later in the chapter.

The chapter begins with a discussion of IPA's intellectual origins emphasizing the phenomenological and hermeneutic touchstones which inform it. Following this, some key characteristics of IPA will be identified and described, namely, experience, idiography and interpretation. IPA has always encouraged engagement with other qualitative approaches as well as working with developments in mainstream psychology and these will be reflected on paying particular attention to cognition and language. This will be followed by a section examining the current picture of IPA research. We finish the chapter with some concluding thoughts.

THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF IPA: PHENOMENOLOGY & HERMENEUTICS

IPA has a long and a short history. Although its articulation as a specific approach to qualitative research began in the mid 1990s (Smith, 1994, 1996), it connects with much longer intellectual currents in phenomenology and hermeneutics and with a quiet and persistent concern in psychology with subjective experience and personal accounts (James, 1890; Allport, 1953). Indeed a key motivation for the development of IPA was the articulation of a qualitative approach which locates itself firmly within psychology and acknowledges the discipline's historical lineage with respect to qualitative research (Eatough, 2012). In this section, our aim is to discuss some of the key ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics which underpin IPA and situate it as an experiential approach to doing research that owns explicitly the interpretative activity of the researcher. For a detailed exposition of the theory and philosophy which informs IPA readers are referred to Smith et al., (2009).

Phenomenology

Phenomenological philosophy is best conceived of as an ongoing project, one that aims “to bring philosophy back from abstract metaphysical speculation wrapped up in pseudo-problems, in order to come into contact with the matters themselves, with concrete living experience.” (Moran, 2000: xiii). Husserl’s rallying call ‘To the things themselves’ (*Zu den Sachen*) expresses the phenomenological intention to describe how the world is formed and experienced through consciousness. This intention is often understood as a ‘stripping away’ of our preconceptions and biases (such as those from science, tradition, common-sense), exposing the taken-for-granted and revealing the essence of the phenomenon whilst transcending the contextual and personal. For Husserl, this necessitates a shift from the *natural attitude* to the *phenomenological attitude* through a series of *reductions* leading back to the experience itself uncluttered by the detritus of prejudices acquired through the process of living one’s life. For example, the end point of the Husserlian reductions is not the individual train journey we experience from our singular vantage point but what train journeys have in common, their *whatness* – the invariant structure which makes a train journey a train journey rather than a boat or car journey.

Similarly, IPA is committed to clarifying and elucidating a phenomenon (be that an event, process or relationship) but its interest is in how this process sheds light on experiences as they are lived by an embodied socio-historical situated person. Rather than transcend the particular, IPA aims to grasp the texture and qualities of an experience as it is lived by an experiencing subject. The primary interest is the person’s experience of the phenomenon and the sense they make of their experience rather than the structure of the phenomenon itself. Arguably, it is this focus which has appealed to qualitative psychologists, especially those in applied areas who have a keen interest in understanding experiences of significant import, those which *matter* to individuals because they recast aspects of their lives through a demand for meaning making. In sum, “IPA has the more

modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people” (Smith et al., 2009: 16).

This more particular aim connects IPA with Heidegger’s working through of the phenomenological project and how to carry out experiential research. For example, Heidegger’s proposal is that a human being is a *Dasein*, which literally means ‘being there’ but is typically understood as ‘Being-in-the-world’ (Spinelli, 1989: 108). This resonates with IPA’s understanding of people and the worlds they inhabit as socially and historically contingent and contextually bounded. The great achievement of *Dasein* is that it replaces the individual predicated on Cartesian dualism (person/world, subject/object, mind/body and so on) with people as Being-in-the-world with things and with others. Our relatedness to and involvement in the world is mutually constitutive – we are a Being-in-the-world who is also a Being-with (*Mitsein*) in a with-world (*Mitwelt*). Moreover, it is an already existing world of language, culture, history and so on into which we are *thrown* (Heidegger, 1962/2004). As Merleau-Ponty (1945/2004: xii) puts it, ‘Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.’ The phrase ‘the rich tapestry of life’ gathers fresh meaning here standing for the inextricable interweaving of person and world and which is at odds with the idea of transcending the particularities of an individual life. The mutuality of *Dasein* is pushed even further by Merleau-Ponty and his ideas about how the body is a *body-subject* which discloses the world to each of us in specific ways. The phenomenological interest is with the lived body (*Leib*) not the body of physiological mechanisms and chemical interactions.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek verb, *hermēneuein*, to interpret and the noun *hermēneia*, interpretation and its aim is “to make meaning intelligible” (Grondin, 1994: 20). Hermeneutics began with the exegesis of biblical texts and has developed into a more general concern with the process of understanding (Palmer, 1969; Packer & Addison, 1989). Similar to phenomenology, hermeneutics can be seen as an ongoing project, a form of practical philosophy, comprising of a wide range of thinkers and diverse traditions.

Within these traditions, there is a fair amount of “definitional vagueness” (Gallagher, 1992: 3) and commentators have attempted to impose some order on this conceptual complexity. For example, two key developments in the history of hermeneutics have been identified: a) the work of Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger described as representing a move from “authorial intent to the linguistic turn” followed by b) a further shift to “dialectical hermeneutics” through the work of Gadamer, Habermas and Ricoeur (Sandage, Cook, Hill & Strawn, 2008). An alternative mapping orders these thinkers and their works into three approaches: conservative hermeneutics (Schleiermacher and Dilthey); moderate hermeneutics (Gadamer and Ricoeur) and radical hermeneutics (Heidegger, and also Derrida and Foucault) (Gallagher, 1992: 10).

In brief, Schleiermacher proposed a twofold interpretative perspective made up of the *grammatical* and the *psychological* and it is this dual stance which gives rise to understanding. Similarly, Dilthey believed that the purpose of hermeneutics is understanding and, taking a more epistemological view, he proposed that hermeneutics should be the method for the human sciences. In addition to texts, hermeneutics can be applied to lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and understanding is the moment when ‘life understands itself’ (Dilthey, 1976). For both Heidegger and Gadamer, however, the emphasis is on how interpretation is a foundational mode of Being and that to live a life *is* to interpret.

A key difference between Schleiermacher and Gadamer is the former’s focus on how interpretation tells us something about the individual and their individual intentions whereas the focus for Gadamer is the text itself and how it might be understood in the specific historical context it is being read. IPA aims to draw on both aspects in a productive manner; acknowledging Gadamer’s claim that “the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in thoughtful meditation with contemporary life” (Gadamer, 1990/1960: 168-169) whilst recasting Schleiermacher for the present-day:

The texts examined by IPA researchers are usually contemporary or have been produced in the recent past and in a response to a request by the researcher rather than a purpose

driven by the author. Under these circumstances we think that the process of analysis is geared to learning both about the person providing the account and the subject matter of that account, and therefore, that Schleiermacher usefully speaks to us across the centuries. (Smith et al, 2009: 37)

Thus, for IPA, our interpretations are, amongst other things, attempts to understand how we have come to be situated in the world in the particular ways we find ourselves. This hermeneutic standpoint is similar to Richardson, Fowers & Guignon's (1999) dialectical perspective:

Our nature or being as humans is not just something we *find* (as in deterministic theories), nor is it something we *make* (as in existentialist and constructionist views); instead, it is *what we make of what we find*. (p 212)

IPA researchers acknowledge the inevitability of biases, preoccupations and assumptions when conducting research; they reflect on how these shape their research inquiries and, following Gadamer, they aim to engage with them fruitfully for the purpose of understanding. This means taking a questioning and dialectical stance to these fore-understandings and the material they are seeking to understand, recognizing it is an always-unfinished activity. This is because, very often, we are simply not aware of what our assumptions might be when we begin a piece of research, rather we become aware of them as we question and clarify our emergent interpretations (Smith, 2007). Importantly, our prejudices should not be thought of as inherently "bad", rather we can have "good" prejudices which can be "bridled" (Dahlberg, 2006) and revised, giving rise to more useful and creative interpretations. Fischer conveys this ongoing activity well, giving it a sense of constant reflexive motion on the part of the researcher:

The researcher repeatedly discovers what his or her assumptions and interpretive understandings were and

reexamines them against emerging insights. Findings “regestalt,” are again disrupted, and again “regestalt.” (Fischer, 2009: 584)

In sum, Smith et al (2009) capture IPA’s dual phenomenological and hermeneutic framing when they say “Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen.” (Smith, 2009: 37).

KEY FEATURES OF IPA

Experience

Experience is the subject that IPA addresses and aims to understand in the context of the concrete and meaningful world of human being. Experience is a complex concept and for IPA it means attending to aspects of experience which *matter* to people and give rise to particular actions within a world that is ‘always-already to hand’ and inherently meaningful. This way of thinking about experience is similar to that of Yancher (2015) who suggests that experience can be understood as *concernful involvement* by situated participants rather than the contents of a private mind:

As agents who participate meaningfully in a meaningful world, humans encounter the events of their experience as mattering; that is, participational agency is characterized by a kind of *care* or *existential concern* with the affairs of living that provides a basis for action such as making judgments, taking positions, and engaging in cultural practices. (Yancher, 2015, p. 109)

For IPA, attending to things that *matter* to people means distinguishing between different *parts* of experience and making decisions about which *parts* to focus on. Smith et al. provide the following example to illustrate what they describe as a hierarchy of experience ranging from small experiential parts to more comprehensive ones:

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

feet until you remove your shoes, and then find that you have to hobble the last few steps down to the waterline. You may not be aware of the warmth of the sun on your back, until you begin to anticipate your first bracing contact with the cold water.

Momentarily then, you are made aware of the flow of experience; for most of the time, however, you are simply immersed in it, rather than explicitly aware of it. Now imagine that the event has further significance for you: you have been a keen swimmer since childhood, but have not swum on a public beach for some years, since undergoing major surgery for a serious health problem. The anticipation of this swim takes on a host of additional meanings. Perhaps you are concerned about the visibility of scars or other changes to your bodily appearance. Perhaps you have been looking forward to this moment for some time, as a marker of recovery, and the return of a lost self. Perhaps you are simply wondering whether you will be able to remember how to swim! In any of these cases, the swim is marked for you as *an* experience, something important which is happening to you. (Smith et al., 2009:2)

An IPA study could attend to the *small parts* of this experience, those moments of responsiveness such as how one becomes aware of the sun's warmth and what it is like to experience it. More typically, however, IPA researchers are more likely to focus on how the whole experience is meaningful in the context of one's life as it has been, is being and might be lived.

Experience is subjective because what we experience is a phenomenal rather than a direct reality. We 'stretch forth into the world' (Spinelli, 1989: 12) connecting with events, objects and people in the context of how they appear to us. IPA attends to all aspects of this lived experience, from the individual's wishes, desires, feelings, motivations, belief systems through to how these manifest themselves or not in behaviour and action. Whatever phenomenon is being studied, the emphasis is on how it is *given* to the person and how what is

given has a quality of *mineness*. For example, there is something it is like to drink a fine wine, see the sun rise over a mountain, feel the pain of migraine, receive a diagnosis of dementia. Understanding this first person givenness requires doing so from the perspective of the person experiencing it; in other words, treating the participant as the *experiential expert* in the phenomenon of interest.

Another way of thinking about this is that IPA researchers are interested in understanding the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the realm of immediate human experience (Halling & Carroll, 1999: 98) from the perspective of the reflective meaning-making individual. The lifeworld is what all knowledge is grounded in – including both our lived subjective knowledge and the objective knowledge of scientific abstraction – and both presuppose it. These different knowledges are captured beautifully by the following two descriptions of a table. The first is a description from the astrophysicist, Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington and the second a contrasting description from the philosopher, Lubica Učník:

My scientific X is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electrical charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the X itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient X. It supports my Y as satisfactorily as X No. 1; for when I lay the Y on it the little electric particles with their headlong speed keep on hitting the underside, so that the Y is maintained in shuttlecock fashion at a nearly steady level. If I lean upon this X I shall not go through; or, to be accurate, the chances of my scientific Z going through my scientific X is so excessively small that it can be neglected in practical life. (Eddington, 1933: xii)

It is a table that unites people when they come to visit me and we talk in agreement. It also seems to divide us when we disagree. But it is always in between us, familiar and dependable: to put cups of coffee on; or indeed for whatever

purpose we might use it at different times. I sit at that table when I am happy as well as when I am sad, and many memories come rushing in when I look at it. It is slightly damaged on one side from the time my daughter tried to climb up onto it and the table toppled onto her. Years later, she has no scars left, but the table reminds us of this event by the scratch that has remained there ever since: it is a memory writ large. I like to stroke that chipped table, as it reminds me of all the people who sat there once upon a time; and I imagine that others will sit there sometime in the future. It is not just a useful table that I have breakfast on, it is a part of my life. (Učník, 2013: 34-35)

The latter description is the lifeworld. For Husserl, these two descriptions of the same table are not, or should not be seen, in opposition to one another; rather the first one, couched in scientific formalized thinking, is “our human achievement” (Husserl, 1970: §34d:127) and presupposes the lifeworld. However, it is a partial description ignoring those aspects which are significant and meaningful for us as we live our lives; attending to these aspects is critical for a full understanding of what it means to be human. Knowledge comes in many forms and IPA is clear about the contribution that subjective knowledge of this sort can make to psychological understanding.

Idiography

Idiography is concerned with how to understand the concrete, the particular and the unique whilst maintaining the integrity of the person. Allport (1940) noted the decline of the idiographic perspective, the lack of interest in the individual case, and the increasing neglect of experience in psychology. A focus on all three, he proposed, would help to redress the limitations of psychology’s preoccupation with actuarial predictions saying that “An entire population (the larger the better) is put into the grinder and the mixing is so expert that what comes through is a link of factors in which every individual has lost his (sic) identity” (Allport, 1937: 244). He concluded that psychology was becoming the province of ‘one-sided tests of method’ (Allport, 1940: 17).

Although an idiographic approach continues to sit uneasily within psychology, more recently an interest in the idiographic has manifested itself in the development of strategies such as the single-case experimental design (Barlow, Nock & Hersen, 2008; Barlow & Nock, 2009) as well as a range of experience sampling methods that emphasise natural settings and real-time and multiple occasions (Conner, Tennen, Fleeson & Barrett, 2009; Hurlbert, 2011; Hurlbert & Heavey, 2015). Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) is one such approach (Heavey, Hurlbert & Lefforge, 2010) demonstrating that the idiographic, the personal and the contextualised is not simply a qualitative concern.

In the context of qualitative research, IPA is resolutely idiographic, always beginning with the particular and ensuring that any generalizations are grounded in this. Rather than taking an either/or stance, IPA argues for (a) the intensive examination of the individual in her/his own right as an intrinsic part of psychology's remit and (b) that the logical route to universal laws and structures starts from an idiographic base, as indicated by Harré:

I would want to argue for a social science ... which bases itself upon an essentially intensive design, and which works from an idiographic basis. Nevertheless such a science is aimed always at a cautious climb up the ladder of generality, seeking for universal structures but reaching them only by a painful, step by step approach. Harré (1979: 137)

On a practical level, one way IPA studies express their commitment to the idiographic is by the use of single person case studies (e.g. Smith, 1991; Smith, Michie, Allanson and Elwy, 2000; Bramley and Eatough, 2005; Eatough & Smith, 2006; Rhodes & Smith, 2010; Solli, 2015; Cheng, 2015). One clear advantage of a single person case study is that they "offer a personally unique perspective on their relationship to, or involvement in, various phenomena of interest." (Smith et al, 2009: 29). The holistic nature of the single person case study allows what Mischler (1984) called 'the voice of the lifeworld' to become visible. Thus, the case is a portrayal of the person's ways-of-being-in-the-world. However, case studies can do more than this; they can offer a *way of seeing* that illuminates and affirms 'the centrality of certain general themes in the lives of all particular

individuals' (Evans, 1993: 8). Thus, the idiographic researcher is brought closer to noteworthy aspects of the general by connecting the individual unique life with a common humanity.

Beyond single person cases, IPA studies more commonly use small and situated samples so that each individual can be attended to idiographically before attempting a comparative analysis of participant material. The commitment to detailing the diversity and variability of human experience alongside demonstrating what are shared experiences amongst participants can create a tension, albeit often a productive one, that encourages creative thinking in how to retain the insights of both (Thackeray, 2015).

The potential of idiography is still being developed within IPA and in psychology more generally. One way to strengthen IPA's idiographic commitment is to design more studies which focus on multiple snapshots of experience and which emphasize patterns of meaning across time, exploring in ever more detail the historical and social contingencies of individual lifeworlds. We come back to this later in the chapter and point to how studies are beginning to do this.

Interpretation

IPA is an explicitly interpretative endeavour and this section introduces two ways this endeavour might be realized in practice, namely the careful development of and navigation between *layers* of interpretation and the concept of the 'gem' (Smith, 2011). Underpinning this interpretative engagement are: the hermeneutic circle that lies at the heart of hermeneutic theory, Heidegger's notion of appearing, and IPA's "double hermeneutic" (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and these three ideas will be discussed first.

The hermeneutic circle encourages researchers to work with their data in a dynamic, iterative and non-linear manner, examining the whole in light of its parts, the parts in light of the whole, and the contexts in which the whole and parts are embedded and doing so from a stance of being open to shifting ways of thinking what the data might mean. One way that IPA thinks about this part/whole dynamic is as a set of relationships which can be used to work

interpretively with the data:

<i>The part</i>	<i>The whole</i>
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life
(Smith et al, 2009: 28)	

Moving between these parts and wholes is one way of gleaning meanings from the material which can themselves be examined and amplified.

Smith et al. use Heidegger's notion of *appearing* to suggest that interpretation is similar to the work of detection. As such the researcher is *mining* the material for possible meanings which allow the phenomenon of interest to "shine forth" (Smith et al, 2009: 35). In turn, these meanings are examined critically, compared with each other as well as with the researcher's evolving and shifting fore-understandings. However, this shining forth of the phenomenon is always in the context of the lifeworld of an embodied situated person. IPA's double hermeneutic is a reminder of this and is captured by the phrase "The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them." (Smith et al, 2009: 3). Here, the double hermeneutic points to how interpretation and understanding involves a synthesis, in this instance, of research participants' sense-making (typically in an interview setting) and that of the researcher during the stages of analysis.

Doing IPA involves navigating between different *layers* of interpretation as one engages deeply with texts of participants' personal experience (Smith, 2004). The double hermeneutic can be invoked here also, suggesting that interpretative layers arise out of a dual interpretative engagement: a hermeneutics of empathy or affirmation and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). For Ricoeur, interpretation is "the work of thought which exists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning" (Ricoeur, 1974, cited in Kearney, 1994: 101). For IPA, these two hermeneutics are employed to encourage researchers to adopt a both/and

approach; on the one hand to assume an empathic stance and imagine what-it-is-like to be the participant, whilst on the other hand, to be critical of what appears to be the case and probing for meaning in ways which participants might be unwilling or unable to do themselves. The former aims to produce rich experiential understandings of the phenomenon under investigation and remain close to the participant's sense-making. The latter involves the researcher putting aside what they have previously accepted at face value in order to develop a textured multilayered narrative of possible meanings. However, it is always the case, that for IPA, the starting point is the participant who is privileged as the source for the interpretative activity of the researcher. This sort of work requires sustained immersion in the data, pushing for more fine-grained interpretations whilst at the same time attempting to keep interpretative order.

Developing interpretative layers

To illustrate this textured multi-layering, we present examples from two different studies, one on chronic pain (Osborn & Smith, 1998), the second on women's anger and aggression (Eatough and Smith, 2006b).

In the first example, four possible interpretations are offered which mirror the movement between the two hermeneutic positions (empathy and suspicion) described above. In an interview focusing on her experience of living with chronic pain, Linda says:

I just think I'm the fittest because there are three girls and I'm the middle one and I thought well I'm the fittest and I used to work like a horse and I thought I was the strongest and then all of a sudden it's just been cut down and I can't do half of what I used to. (Osborn & Smith, 1998, p70)

There are several interpretative possibilities here, potentialities of meaning which can shed light on what might be going on for Linda. Taking this at face value and holistically (as in the parts and wholes discussed earlier) one understanding is that Linda is comparing herself to her sisters in order to

emphasize how her pain has changed her. There seems little to dispute here; it is easy to imagine oneself in a similar situation and comparing oneself to others in order to get a grasp of what is happening. However, as Osborn & Smith go on to show, one can be more interrogative and focus in on Linda's metaphoric use of working like a horse. Clearly, Linda and we know that she was never as strong as a horse but describing herself as such exaggerates the strength she had in the past in order to draw attention to how weak and fragile she feels in comparison now. Similarly when Linda describes being cut down it evokes images of a scythe slicing through a field of grass or a crop of hay.

Deepening the interpretative engagement, one can examine the temporal referents. See Box 1, an extract from a paper by Jonathan (Smith, 2004) which pursues this.

Linda begins in the present tense:

I just think I'm the fittest because there are three girls and I'm the middle one.

So initially one might assume Linda is referring to herself now – well yes there probably are still three of them and her birth order won't have changed, but *I'm the fittest*? Surely she means 'I used to be the fittest', in contrast to how she is now? And indeed she then slips into the past tense:

And I *thought* well I'm the fittest and I *used* to work like a horse and I *thought* I *was* the strongest.

This seems to confirm that Linda is referring to a time in the past when she had such great strength and which she has now lost. So how does one explain the apparent contradiction- 'I am the fittest', 'I was the fittest'? Well I think this goes to the heart of the psychological battle for Linda, as her sense of identity is ravaged by her back pain. Thus, on the one hand, Linda acknowledges that she has lost an identity a strong, proud and autonomous self, which has been replaced by an enfeebled and vulnerable self. On the other hand, Linda still 'identifies' with the strong self so that in part her sense of who she is is still represented by the super-fit being in the image. Thus Linda is struggling between being taken over by a new self, *defined* by her chronic pain, and hanging on to an old self, *in spite of* that pain. This struggle is literally illustrated in the temporal changes in the passage itself.

Box 1: Shifting time in Linda's extract

This is a close reading of the data, a stretching of the interpretative threads which are tethered to Linda's actual words and which is likely to be supported with evidence elsewhere in the account. What IPA resists, certainly in the early stages, is top down interpretations, those that import theory before one has had the chance to dwell with the data and work towards disclosing meaning. For example, as Jonathan points out in his paper a psychoanalytic interpretation might be that the horse symbolizes Linda's sexual appetite which is frustrated by her pain. This psychoanalytic meaning-making is not necessarily wrong but it goes beyond the interpretative work of IPA and does risk severing the threads which connect the various possibilities of meaning and the account itself.

In the anger study we demonstrated the interpretative range of IPA, showcasing interpretations that were more closely grounded in participants' own accounts (Eatough, Smith & Shaw, 2008) and ones which were more probing and questioning of their meaning making (Eatough & Smith, 2006a, 2006b). To illustrate this range here, we present three extracts from interviews with a participant we have called Marilyn. In the first one, Marilyn is offering a reason for her anger, namely a hormonal one:

It's awful but I mean that's all hormones as well which explains away a lot of my moods and aggression and that. But I mean I don't know whether it I mean I have got a lot of hang ups about my family but I think a lot of it is hormonal my aggression and things like that.

What are the possible meanings that might be disclosed by a close and critical interpretative engagement? From the hermeneutic stance of empathy, the researcher can accept Marilyn's claim that hormones are responsible for her anger and point to how the claim negates alternative understandings and enables Marilyn to not take responsibility for her actions because the assertion can be seen as arising out of a biomedical discourse which denies agency. Alternatively, adopting a hermeneutics of suspicion means the researcher might home in on the phrase. "I have got a lot of hang ups about my family" and question the robustness of Marilyn's hormonal sense making. Indeed, Marilyn

does have a troubled relationship with her family; in particular a painful relationship with her mother and the pervasive presence of this relationship in her accounts pointed to the importance of maintaining a more critical and probing attitude. As Kearney says, “it is not sufficient simply to describe meaning as it *appears*; we are also obliged to interpret it as it *conceals* itself.” (Kearney, 1994: 94)

Marilyn described a relationship defined by feelings of rejection and separateness:

My mum was always with my brother, he was always you know, he was the lad and my mum used to be like, say that I used to look like my dad and she didn't like my dad so I always thought she didn't like me. It was that type of relationship, not close at all.

The first sentence captures our attention and it shows that Marilyn thinks her mother prefers her brother to her. We can reflect that by the time most children reach adulthood, they are aware that there are qualitative differences in the ways they are loved by their parents. For many people, this can be a positive experience in that their individual qualities make up who they are and they are loved, if not because of them, then at least in spite of them. However, feeling that a sibling is preferred over oneself is very different, especially if that preference is overlaid with a negative comparison to a disliked and absent parent.

Staying with the first sentence we can reflect further on Marilyn's use of the word *with* and offer a tentative interpretation that mother and brother have a shared identity that excludes Marilyn and places her outside. To give support to this interpretation, we look for substantiation elsewhere in the data. And in this case it is not hard to find:

She was always my brother [sic]. I mean my brother could never do anything wrong but I think that was because she was in two minds whether he was my stepfather's. She, I think she'd been having an affair with him and I think she might have thought he was my stepfather's and not my real dad's. She used to always compare me

to my dad in my ways and my looks and my actions and that and it just wasn't, but I mean there was never any affection. I mean I can't remember ever her putting her arm around me and kissing me. My stepdad he used to, but my mum never. My dad was very loving. I remember that, he really was.

The opening sentence carries tremendous symbolic weight; her mother and brother do not simply have a close bond, rather it appears they have psychologically merged for Marilyn into 'one' person. This supports the shared identity reading and at the same time pushes the interpretation further: Marilyn experiences the identification between mother and brother as not simply shared but actually merged.

Symmetrically, Marilyn and her father have become 'one', and it is a 'one' that is hated by her mother. From Marilyn's perspective, there is a clear division between herself and her father who looked and behaved the same (the old family); and her mother, brother and stepfather (the new family). We do not know when Marilyn first became aware that her brother might be her stepbrother but whenever the suspicion arose it offered her an explanation for the perceived rejection. But having an explanation does not ease Marilyn's pain; rather mother and brother and stepfather have become identified in a way that Marilyn feels excluded from. They form a nexus which amplifies Marilyn's sense of separateness.

Thus, in both examples, there is a deepening interpretative reading which shifts from foregrounding the participants' meaning making to harnessing that of the researchers. The meaning making of the researchers includes some more abstract properties and reflects their psychological thinking. For Linda, this thinking centres around identity issues whilst for Marilyn, the focus is on the damage that can be done when significant family relationships are experienced as isolating and polarized. In both cases however the researchers' thinking is still prompted by, and responding to, the account by the participant

The concept of the gem

In a 2011 paper, Jonathan proposed the concept of the gem as a valuable interpretative tool for IPA specifically and experiential qualitative psychology more generally. The key feature of the gem concept is its capacity to *illuminate* and enhance interpretation and understanding. Typically the gem is a singular remark which jumps out at the researcher or a small extract from an entire interview that the researcher is drawn to and has a hunch might be key to understanding “a person’s grasp of their world.” (Ashworth, 2008:4-5). In response to the question of what gems do, Smith proposes that they can provide analytic leverage, shine light on the phenomenon under study, on a whole interview transcript or even the entire corpus of data (Smith, 2011c: 7).

Smith proposes a spectrum of three types of gem: shining, suggestive and secret. A gem that shines literally shines with meaning; the meaning is manifest. For example, Smith recounts an example from a study by Seri (2009) of a Jewish mother who describes her son’s circumcision saying, “*Everybody’s watching my son being chopped to pieces.*” (p206). Smith explains why this is a shining gem:

I think it is a brilliant utterance because it is literally true. Circumcision involves removing a piece of skin, so that her son, who was once intact, has now been chopped into pieces: a little piece and a big piece. The potency of the expression, however, lies in its ability to convey the psychological impact of this simple procedure...And it’s a shining gem because so much is already manifest, it requires less peering or probing to work out what the meaning of the extract is. (Smith, 2011c: 11)

With a suggestive gem the meaning is less manifest, less present and the researcher has to work harder to disclose the meaning, moving repeatedly around and within the hermeneutic circle. Finally the secret gem is the most elusive, can be easily missed and only shows itself through an absorbed attentiveness with the material which allows “this small quiet part to be illuminated by the larger and louder corpus in which it is embedded” (Smith, 2011c: 13). Marilyn’s utterance “*She was always my brother*” which was

discussed earlier is one example of a secret gem.

COGNITION AND LANGUAGE

Whilst IPA takes a critical stance towards many of the dominant methodological and epistemological assumptions of the discipline, it challenges these from within by adopting an interrogative position to both its own findings and the extant psychological literature. For example, it shares Bruner's (1990) regret that the cognitive revolution led to a cognitive psychology of information processing rather than a psychology whose core concern was meaning making as originally envisaged.

Smith (1996) has pointed to how both social cognition and IPA share a concern with unravelling the relationship between what people think (cognition), say (account) and do (behaviour). Both epistemologically and methodologically this concern manifests itself differently; IPA's conceives of cognition as "dilemmatic, affective and embodied. It is complex, changeable, and can be hard to pin down, but it is cognition none the less." (Smith et al, 2009: 191). IPA studies aim to demonstrate that when people are thinking and deliberating about significant events in their lives, this thinking is an aspect of Being-in-the-world and not simply detached disembodied cognitive activity. This is more akin to how some artificial intelligence theorists drawing on phenomenology talk of structural couplings in which 'Thinking is not detached reflection but part of our basic attitude to the world' (Mingers, 2001: 110).

For example, in a study examining how families think about the process of donating the brain of a family member, it was clear that the decision was not simply made through the rational deliberation of a person simply weighing up the pros and cons as the information processing perspective would have us believe. Rather, emotions, feelings and context were inextricably caught up with attempts to be rational (Eatough, Shaw & Lees, 2012:15). This insight grounded in personal descriptions of the *how* of decision making supports and adds flesh to current cognitive psychological theorising that suggests decision making is underpinned by two qualitatively dissimilar systems: one that is affective, fast

and intuitive and one that is more deliberative (Usher, Russo, Weyers, Brauner & Zakay, 2011). IPA's re-appropriation of cognition has been fruitful, leading to a body of studies with ramifications for policy change in a wide range of arenas (e.g. Flowers, Smith, Sheeran and Beail, 1997; Oke, Rostill-Brookes & Larkin, 2012; Burton, Shaw & Gibson, 2013; Spiers, Smith & Drage, 2015). Similarly, IPA researchers see fertile ground for collaboration with those cognitive scientists who are drawing on phenomenological philosophy to inform their embodied active situated cognition (EASC) approach (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011).

In sum, for IPA, cognition lies at the heart of the phenomenological project but it is a cognition that is "dynamic, multi-dimensional, affective, embodied, and intricately connected with our engagement with the world." (Smith et al, 2009:191). Following Husserl, IPA researchers wish to understand 'the experiences in which something comes to be grasped as known' (Moran, 2000: 108. (See Smith et al, 2009 for a discussion of the relationship between cognition and reflection).

Just as IPA conceives of cognition differently from cognitive psychology, it thinks about language in a fundamentally different way from discursive studies. The poststructuralist and social/cultural constructionist underpinnings of discursive psychology leads to an emphasis on the *effects* of language and discourse and what might be accomplished through talk, text and so on (Willig, 2012: 111). From this perspective, discursive researchers are interested in how people talk about and construct their experiences. In contrast, IPA, drawing from Heidegger, subscribes to a more expressivist ontology, viewing people as *existential world-disclosers* in a world of situated concerned involvement (see earlier section on experience) rather than *epistemic world-constructors* (Yancher, 2015):

In this respect, it might be said that participational agents disclose (or reveal) a world through their concerned involvement; or that the world shows up for agents based on what they are doing as part of their fully-embodied, largely tacit practical involvement in the world. (Yancher, 2015: 111)

This position is not unlike that of symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), both of whom espouse a particular image of human beings as creative agents who have a hand in constituting (as opposed to constructing) their social worlds, despite limitations imposed by material and biological conditions and social, cultural, historical linguistic processes. This is possible, in part, by appropriating, refiguring and discarding the linguistic conventions and discursive practices of one's culture.

Of course, IPA recognizes the action oriented nature of talk and that people negotiate and achieve interpersonal objectives in their conversations, and that reality is both contingent upon and constrained by the language of one's culture. Therefore it shares some ground with discursive psychology (Willig, 2003). However, IPA suggests that this represents only a partial account of what people are doing when they communicate. For IPA the lived life with its many vicissitudes is much more than historically situated linguistic interactions between people.

For instance, if we consider emotion: even if emotions and emotionality are discursive acts which can be analysed 'something like conversations' (Harré and Gillett, 1994: 154), they are not simply language games and/or an effect of discourse. Missing from such accounts are the private, psychologically forceful, rich and often indefinable aspects of emotional life. As Chodorow (1999: 165) points out: 'even emotion words and emotional concepts must have individual resonance and personal meaning'. She goes on to say:

That thoughts and feelings are entangled and that thoughts are thought in culturally specific languages – these ideas do not mean that there is no private feeling or that any particular thought has only a public cultural meaning. Culturally recognizable thoughts or emotion terms can also be entwined in a web of thought-infused feelings and feeling-infused thoughts experienced by an individual as she creates her own psychic life within a set of interpersonal and cultural relations. (Chodorow, 1999: 166)

Our telling of the events in our life has personal relevance and an ongoing significance for the individual concerned (Smith, 1996). We propose that when people tell stories of their lives, they are doing more than drawing on the culturally available stock of meanings. People may want to achieve a whole host of things with their talk such as save face, persuade and rationalize, but there is almost always more at stake and which transcends the specific local interaction. Rosenwald (1992: 269) poignantly notes: 'If a life is no more than a story and a story is governed only by the situation in which it is told, then one cannot declare a situation unlivable or a life damaged'. Amongst other things it seems to us that our personal accounts are also concerned with human potential and development, with *making* our lives by connecting the past with the present and future; they are 'imaginative enterprises' (Reissman, 1992: 232).

IPA AND OTHER QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

Other phenomenological psychology approaches

Both phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutic theory are characterised by agreement as well as diverse (yet inherently connected) perspectives and emphases. This diversity has provided fertile ground for the development of a range of phenomenological psychology approaches which themselves have both different and shared emphases and commitments. These include descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997); hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990); lifeworld research (Ashworth & Ashworth, 2003; Ashworth, 2016; Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008); dialogal approach (Halling, 2008) and critical narrative analysis (Langdridge, 2007). In what follows we briefly describe some of these emphases (for a fuller discussion, see Dowling, 2007; Finlay, 2009 and Langdridge, 2007).

A key feature that unites phenomenological psychologists is their interest in experience and their belief that studying experience can provide valuable insights into human life. Similarly, they are agreed that this study requires valuing the evidence of everyday life; it is through the close examination and reflection of this life that its meaningfulness and significance is made known.

A key concern emerges between the approaches with the differential weight they give to the place of description and interpretation. Descriptive phenomenology is heavily indebted to the ideas and method of Husserl which aim to develop “the hidden intentionalities of consciousness so that we may examine their essential structures in a new, presuppositionless manner.” (Kearney, 1994: 18). The end result is a description which discloses the phenomenon and shows it in a pure and primordial sense. In the context of descriptive phenomenology, this aim manifests itself as a greater interest with the universal structures underpinning individual experiences of a given phenomenon rather than the individual experiences themselves. For example, moving from several singular experiences of joy to a structure or class of features which describe ‘being joyful’.

In contrast, IPA is equally indebted to Heidegger and his view that “the very term “description” already implies that what is described has been phenomenally *encountered* and *interpreted* “as” something.” (Churchill, 2014:5). Hence IPA’s attention to and incorporation of ideas from hermeneutic theory (see *Hermeneutics* section above) with the goal of valuing particularity, preserving variability and acknowledging contingency.

The dialogal approach places a particular emphasis on fostering dialogue *between* researchers in order to deepen understanding of a phenomenon. It aims to facilitate a conversation which flickers with what Gadamer called ‘a spirit of its own’ and which arises out of authentic collaboration. The approach can be described as a discovery process of sustained and regular dialogue over a period of time which moves from individual to collaborative understanding. For this dialogue to be successful, researchers work at embracing both structure and freedom, what Halling has called ‘disciplined spontaneity’. This requires researchers to commit to and value collaboration alongside a willingness to live with uncertainty and ambiguity; to be comfortable not knowing what the dialogue might ‘throw-up’ or where it might take you.

It is also possible for phenomenological researchers to attend to shared aspects of the lifeworld in order to deepen understanding of experience. These aspects

or fractions are pervasive characteristics of each persons' lifeworld and include temporality, spatiality, embodiment, moodedness, self-hood, sociality, discourse and project (Ashworth, 2016). Spatiality refers to the physical environment that surrounds us, feelings of interior and exterior space, and our sense of place, home and dwelling – in other words, lived space. Attending to this lifeworld fraction can shed light on how aging alters a person's relationship to their home, a relationship imbued with physical, cultural and personal meanings (Barry, 2012).

Finally, a more interrogative stance is taken with critical narrative analysis which takes up the hermeneutic insights of Ricoeur, in particular the hermeneutics of suspicion. This approach retains a focus on experience and subjective understanding but broadens the context to include the political sphere and extends analysis to include aspects of social theory. For example, work on sexualities and sexual citizenship (Langdrige, 2013).

These various methods have been described as “a family of approaches, a fuzzy set where all share the basic tenets of phenomenology but each articulates an approach in a particular way.” (Smith et al, 2009: 200). While exploring the rich potential of the different emphases of different phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, we think it is valuable, at the same time, for experiential qualitative researchers to recognise their common grounding and purpose.

Other qualitative approaches

Although IPA is an explicitly experiential approach grounded in phenomenology and hermeneutics and one which places the person at the heart of all its research endeavours, it has always been open to working with other approaches in order to deepen experiential and subjective understanding. In the first edition of this book we proposed that IPA has a natural affinity with various forms of narrative analysis and this is supported by the growing number of studies using IPA and some form of narrative approach (Davidsen & Reventlow, 2010; Lavie-Ajayi, Almog & Krumer-Nevo, 2012; Thylstrup, Hesse, Thomsen, Heerwagen, 2015). In

particular, we see common ground with those approaches which view narrative as an “interpretive feat (Bruner, 1987:13); this connects directly to IPA’s interpretative commitment as well as taking the view that people are not simply tellers of stories but are involved in the mutual constitution of self and world. An interest in narrative beyond how it is constructed to how ‘it operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality’ (Bruner, 1991: 6) chimes with IPA’s belief that lived experience is the fundamental unit of analysis.

For example, in the anger research described earlier in this chapter, we included an examination of how counselling sessions for one particular participant had begun to disrupt her longstanding narrative of biochemical agents as having causal explanation (Eatough and Smith, 2006b). We were struck by how this woman appeared caught up in a struggle to *re-story* her life (Gergen, 1999: 172) and how this reconstructive function is a key aspect of many counselling and psychotherapeutic approaches. The underlying principle is a narrative one; clients are encouraged to re-interpret their lived experiences so that their lives become more livable. Indeed, one aim of counselling is to investigate the past so that ‘it can be faced, renegotiated and in some respects even relived “but with a new ending.” (Jacob, 1986: 5)

Beyond narrative approaches, there is the potential for fertile links to develop with Foucauldian discourse analysis because it shares a concern with how discursive constructions are implicated in the experiences of the individual (Willig, 2003). For example, in experiential emotion work when participants talk about both bottling up and venting anger they often invoke images of a *container* which is unstable and explosive. This symbolization is derived from the hydraulic model of emotion which has dominated both popular and scientific discourses throughout the twentieth century. This model supposes that our emotions are beyond our control, that they are ‘discharge processes’ that inflict themselves upon the individual. Consequently, we think of being driven by our anger and of our anger being out of control, metaphors which are imbued with passivity. This view of anger renders people as passive agents and is implicated in how anger is lived and experienced. Just as IPA works iteratively with the parts and wholes of participants’ accounts, similarly it can work discursively and

experientially, attending to the myriad ways in which discourses are *lived* in the life of a person. Currently there are a small number of published papers which have used these two approaches either together (Johnson, Burrows & Williamson, 2004) or as part of a combination of several approaches (Frost, Holt, Shinebourne, Esin, Nolas, Mehdizadeh & Brooks-Gordon, 2011; Josselin & Willig, 2014).

The past five years or so has seen a welcome and growing interest in pluralist approaches within qualitative psychological research (Frost, Nolas & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Johnson & Stefurak, 2014). In a recent article for *The Psychologist*, several forms of pluralist approaches were identified, suggesting they share the belief that:

human experience is multidimensional and multi-ontological,
that its exploration can be better served by combining methods
to address the research question in many ways, and that
embracing the differences that different paradigms bring can
help us better understand the complexities of human experience
and interaction. (Shaw & Frost, 2015:2)

These approaches variously embrace pluralism that is methodological (Frost, 2009), analytical (Barnes, Caddick & Clarke, 2014), interpretative (Coyle, 2010) and dialectical (Johnson, 2012). Such diversity bodes well for qualitative psychology helping to foster collaboration which avoids 'methodolatry' (Chamberlain, 2000, 2012) and it is hoped that more qualitative researchers including those using IPA will embark on work which incorporates a pluralist sensibility.

WHAT DOES IPA RESEARCH LOOK LIKE?

IPA has produced a steadily growing corpus of research studies since its inception in the mid-1990s. In this section we discuss briefly the areas of psychology key constructs that seem to be emerging from the corpus, the implications of an idiographic sensibility as well as the expansion of data collection methods beyond the semi structured interview which is the

exemplary technique for IPA researchers.

The reach of IPA beyond psychology into other disciplines as well as its application by researchers to an ever-increasing range of topics leads us to reflect on whether certain themes can be identified from the corpus of published work. Typically, IPA studies explore existential matters of considerable importance for the participant. These matters are often transformative, bringing change and demanding reflection and (re)interpretation for the individuals concerned. As a result, it is possible to glean patterns within the studies: a concern with identity and a sense of self, a focus on participants' meaning making and an attention to bodily feeling within lived experience. Significant events and topics may have considerable effect on the sense of self and IPA's detailed fine-grained analyses of individual lived experiences enable these effects to come to the fore.

Issues of identity and self may well emerge as a key organizing principle for IPA or even qualitative research more generally (Smith, 2004; Smith et al, 2009) and it is unsurprising that this is the case. IPA deals with issues that *matter* to people and that in some way, change or influence how people think about themselves and their place in the world. Similarly, IPA's concern with how participants impose meaning on events in their lives generates questions which can tap into 'hot cognition' – those matters in a person's life which are burning, emotive and dilemmatic or those involving 'cool cognition' – involving longer-term reflection across the life course. Increasingly, there is evidence of IPA researchers attending more explicitly to bodily experience (especially emotional experience) alongside sense making and mentation and this is timely (Gill, 2015; Lewis & Lloyd, 2010; Loaring, Larkin, Shaw & Flowers, 2015; Pemberton & Fox, 2013) because it connects with recent interest in affect (Wetherell, 2012; Burkitt, 2014; Cromby, 2012, 2015) but as importantly, it speaks to how IPA continues to develop, often through an engagement with the philosophy that underpins it.

As previously discussed, IPA is deeply committed to the idiographic method and this inevitably has consequences for sample size. The number of participants

might range from one to thirty with the norm being towards the lower end, and increasingly, there is a clearer and more robust articulation for smaller sample sizes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith et al, 2009). For example, keeping sample size small and homogenous and interviewing participants several times (e.g. Clare, 2002, 2003; Rodriguez & Smith, 2014; Snelgrove, Edwards & Lioffi, 2013) is a strategy that retains IPA's idiographic emphasis whilst embedding any emerging patterns in a rich and detailed context. Clearly, a number of factors determine sample size: practical restrictions, the richness of individual cases and the strength of commitment to a case-by-case approach (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Nonetheless, IPA studies do not want to lose sight of the particularities of individual lives, emphasizing that convergence and divergence across these lives are more compelling when they emerge from a case-by-case approach. And although IPA wants to retain its flexible, non-prescriptive stance with respect to methodological issues such as sample size and strategy, form of data collection and so on, it is also increasingly confident in its promotion of studies with $N = 1$ as having a central place in qualitative psychological approaches (Smith, 2004; Smith et al, 2009).

Interviewing is one of the most powerful and widely used tools of the qualitative researcher. A range of interview styles are possible and a range of terms are adopted for those styles (e.g. structured, semi-structured or unstructured). However, as with much else in qualitative research, there is considerable variability in how different researchers use these and how they work in practice. There is also lively debate about the importance of interviews for qualitative research in psychology (see special section on interviewing, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2005).

There is no a priori requirement for IPA to use the interview, and Smith (2004, 2005) has encouraged more use of other data collection methods such as diaries and personal accounts in IPA work. However it remains the case that the interview is by far the most common way of collecting data in IPA and for good reason – the real-time interaction with the participant gives major flexibility for the researcher in facilitating the participant in exploring their lived experience.

Typically, the IPA researcher employs semi-structured interviews which means developing a set of questions which are used to guide, rather than dictate, the course of the interview. One way to think about this is that the participant is the *experiential expert* (Smith & Osborn, 2003), a story-teller not a respondent with respect to the topic of interest while the researcher aims to be an *enabler* who helps the participant evoke and bring to life the phenomenon being talked about. Equally important is being open and receptive to novel and/or unexpected topics and issues introduced by participants. This requires the researcher to facilitate the giving and making of an account in a sensitive and empathic manner, recognizing that the interview constitutes a human-to-human relationship (Fontana and Frey, 2000). An appropriate metaphor for the IPA researcher is a traveller who:

wanders along with local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of conversation as 'wandering together with'. (Kvale, 1996: 4)

Thus, the IPA researcher aims to enter into the lifeworld of the participant rather than investigate it; to move between guiding and being led; to be consciously naïve and open; and to be receptive to change and ambiguity.

IPA's continuing development as an experiential qualitative approach is reflected in the growing number of studies that employ multi-modal forms of data collection alongside the semi-structured interview. These include the use of focus groups (MacParland, Eccleston, Osborn, Hezseltine, 2011; Palmer, Larkin, de Visser & Fadden, 2010; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010); combining the typical IPA interview with other forms of creative interviewing such as the Imagery in Movement and Focusing approaches (Boden & Eatough, 2014); asking participants to create pictorial representations of their experience (Kirkham, Smith & Havsteen-Franklin, 2015; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011); using a photo elicitation approach (Lawson & Wardle, 2013); and poetry (Foster & Freeman, 2008; Gregory, 2011; Spiers & Smith, 2012).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

IPA encourages researchers to be imaginative and flexible in the design and execution of a research study within the parameters of some clearly accessible guidelines. This both/and position speaks to the novice as well as the more experienced researcher and highlights the dynamic nature of the research process. Qualitative researchers are in the business of wanting to variously understand, interpret, explain and know something. This means using tried-and-tested principles alongside a willingness to adapt these in the face of what research throws up– so neither a rule-bound rigidity nor a methodological free-for-all.

IPA is an experiential psychological approach that draws inspiration from phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutic theory. In this spirit, IPA *encourages* researchers using the approach to engage with its theoretical and epistemological underpinnings whilst recognizing that they are not philosophers and that often their research will be driven by pragmatic concerns. Even so, at the very least, IPA wants researchers to assume a sensibility which is imbued with these underpinnings, a phenomenological and hermeneutic stance which helps them achieve their aims of research that is ‘experience-near’.

It is worth noting that IPA has always positioned itself as an evolving dynamic way of doing research and an approach which reflects critically on its development. These sentiments are very much in keeping with the spirit of phenomenological philosophy and hermeneutics. Smith (2011a, 2011b) developed a set of evaluative criteria for IPA research so that IPA researchers can examine their work in light of these to ensure that they are sensitive to those touchstones and characteristics which define IPA. Smith proposes three quality levels (good, acceptable, unacceptable) which can be applied to published papers (so the emphasis is on the products of research rather than the process) and he delineates these carefully providing detailed examples of work that meets the criterion of good. In addition, he identifies the key characteristics that make for a good IPA; these include a sustained focus on a particular aspect of experience, rich experiential data, assessment of the thematic structure through the use of a

measure of prevalence, careful elaboration of themes and of course, a detailed interpretative engagement with the material. It is likely that these criteria will be honed and further developed and it would be interesting to see the community of IPA researchers reflect on their usefulness.

So IPA continues to develop. It is being used to address an ever-wider range of research questions in an expanding array of disciplines. We have commented on the increasing use of multimodal forms of data collection supplementing the tried and tested in-depth interview. And the emergence of the pluralist qualitative position offers helpful grounding for the development of studies combining IPA with other methodologies. All of this is to be welcomed. For the researcher then the challenge, and the opportunity, is to design and conduct high quality research exploring the full potential of IPA while retaining its core commitment to the importance of sustained engagement with the individual's attempts to make sense of their personal lived experience.

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