**INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Researchers have developed a range of methodologies to conduct qualitative research. This document outlines a methodology that is designed to be straightforward, even for researchers who are not experienced in research, called interpretative phenomenological analysis or IPA (Smith, Jarman & Osbourne, 1999). IPA is a technique that is often utilized to enable researchers to share the lived experience of interesting people.

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| **An overview of IPA** |

To conduct interpretative phenomenological analysis, researchers tend to complete about five key activities. The following table outlines these activities.

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| Key activity | Details |
| Identify suitable  people to study | * Identify a situation in which you would like to understand the experience of people. * The situation usually revolves around a unique setting or a significant change in the lives of these individuals, such as a physical illness or psychological disorder |
| Identify the sample | * Decide from which participants you would like to collect information. * Usually choose between 1 to 10 individuals who could provide key insights about this experience. |
| Conduct interviews  or focus groups | * Conduct interviews—and sometimes focus groups or other approaches—to collect these insights. * Develop questions that prompt the participants to discuss their experience as well as how they derive meaning from this experience. * Yet, deviate from these questions as well, whenever necessary |
| Analyse the data | * Begin by affixing various codes, like “fear she will not walk again”, to these answers. Afterwards, uncover clusters of codes that revolve around a similar underlying concept, called a theme |
| Write a report | * Write a report, in which you summarize and integrate the themes, with reference to specific quotes as well as previous literature |

These steps are common to many qualitative methodologies. Nevertheless, one distinct feature of interpretative phenomenological analysis is the underlying theoretical perspective.

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| **The theoretical perspective that underpins IPA** |

Interpretative phenomenological analysis combines three broad philosophical positions or perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. This combination of approaches was first proposed by Jonathon Smith in the mid 1990s.

**Phenomenology**

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| Image result for dictionary icon | Consistent with the philosophy of **phenomenology**, research should attempt to characterize the lived experience of individuals—such as their sequences of thoughts, insights, perspectives, feelings, sensations, and urges. |

Indeed, Jonathon Smith felt that many researchers, especially psychology researchers, tended to neglect the experiences and perspectives of individuals. These researchers delineate the behaviour and cognitive of people with reference to broad traits and numbers, neglecting the rich internal lives of people. This focus on phenomenology was intended to redress this limitation.

**Hermeneutics**

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| Image result for dictionary icon | In general, **hermeneutics** reflects the motivation of researchers to interpret the meaning and significance of data rather than merely restrict their discussion to the data itself. |

When conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis, hermeneutics refers to two processes. In particular

* First, participants are encouraged to derive meaning from their own experiences. They might ask questions to themselves like “Why is this experience important to me?” or “What are the implications of this experience?”
* Second, the researcher attempts to derive meaning from the insights that participants offer. They might ask questions to themselves like “What does this person mean?” or “Why is this interpretation important for the participant”. In this sense, as Jonathon Smith highlights, researchers strive to derive meaning from the attempts of participants to derive meaning from an experience—called a double hermeneutic.

**Idiography**

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| Image result for dictionary icon | Idiography refers to the inclination of some researchers to focus attention on each person separately—including the experience, and to some extent the context, of this individual. Researchers who adopt this perspective do not simply aggregate their results across participants or disregard the distinct perspectives and experiences of each person |

When conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis, idiography sometimes manifests as case studies. That is, researchers tend to describe the distinct experience and perspective of each participant separately. In addition, researchers will often highlight the similarities and differences that emerge across participants, called convergence and divergence separately. But even during these analyses, the distinct perspectives of each person are retained.

**Overall**

Taken together, interpretative phenomenological analysis can be very illuminating. The insights of participants can be utilized by other people in similar circumstances or by practitioners.

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| **Activity 1: How to clarify your topic** |

To conduct interpretative phenomenological analysis, you first need to clarify your research question or topic. Overall, you should reflect upon your values, interests, passions, and skills—as well as the expertise of your supervisor—when you formulate a topic. For interpretative phenomenological analysis, the question will usually resemble something like “What is the experience of people in this interesting situation and how do they interpret this experience?” To clarify suitable topics for interpretative phenomenological analysis, you should probably skim quit a few past examples. A few illustrative topics appear below.

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| Illustrations |
| * How to people with chronic fatigue conceptualize their symptoms and contemplate their situation (Arroll & Senior, 2008)? |
| * What are the problems and possibilities that people experience when diagnosed with Parkinson's disease( Bramley & Eatough, 2005)? |
| * How do carers of Huntington's disease patients cope with their role (Aubeeluck, Buchanan, & Stupple, 2012) |
| * How do adults with visible acne reflect upon this disorder (Murray & Rhodes, 2005)? |
| * How does MS change the attitudes of individuals towards themselves (Mozo-Dutton, Simpson, & Boot, 2012)? |
| * How to people feel that visual art contributes to their experience of cancer (Reynolds & Lim, 2007)? |
| * What do people feel were the causes of their heart attacks (French, Maissi, & Marteau, 2005) |
| * What are the experiences and perspectives of individuals after they are told they are at risk of heart disease? |
| * What are the reactions and experiences of individuals with hypochondria during mindfulness based training (Williams, McManus, Muse, & Williams, 2011)? |
| * What is the experience of patients during a live craniotomy (Fletcher, Nair, das, Macniven, Basu, & Byrne, 2012)? |
| * How do people reappraise their life to cope with spinal cord injuries (Kaiser & Kennedy, 2011) |
| * How to people with chronic fatigue conceptualize their symptoms and contemplate their situation (Arroll & Senior, 2008)? |
| * What are the problems and possibilities that people experience when diagnosed with Parkinson's disease( Bramley & Eatough, 2005)? |
| * How do carers of Huntington's disease patients cope with their role (Aubeeluck, Buchanan, & Stupple, 2012) |
| * How do adults with visible acne reflect upon this disorder (Murray & Rhodes, 2005)? |
| * How does MS change the attitudes of individuals towards themselves (Mozo-Dutton, Simpson, & Boot, 2012)? |

Then ,to ensure your topic has not been studied extensively before, perhaps choose an experience that is recent. To illustrate

* you might want to consider a recent attack, event, or movement
* you may decide to examine the experience of cyclists when they discovered that Lance Armstrong cheated

Alternatively, to ensure your topic has not been studied extensively before, undertake a comprehensive literature. You may, for example, enter your topic, such as “cyclists cheat”, together with “qualitative” into Google scholar.

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| **Activity 2: Identify your sample** |

After clarifying the topic, you then need to identify your participants. Typically, for one study, you might interview between 5 and 10 individuals. Note that

* rather than seek a representative population, the sample should be purposive: That is, recruit the people you feel are more likely to offer key insights into the topic of interest.
* all the participants will share some experience. They may, for example, be avid cyclists. Yet, your participants could also differ on some relevant attribute, such as whether or not they compete.

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| **Activity 3: Collect the data** |

You are likely to convene interviews or focus groups—in which you, in essence, interview two or more people at once—to collect your data. You may construct about 3 to 10 questions, but then modify these questions, or probe the participants with additional remarks, each time, called a semi-structured interview. The following table illustrates some typical questions:

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| Typical questions |
| Describe how you felt after you discovered that ... Lance Armstrong had cheated |
| How did these experiences affect your behaviour? |
| How did these experiences affect your thoughts about your identity or your attitudes towards yourself |
| What are some of the other effects of this experience on your life? |
| How do you feel these experiences might affect your life in the future |

Interviews should last, approximately, between 30 min and 90 minutes. For each topic, you can apply a funnelling approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), in which you begin with a general question and then ask more specific questions. “Describe your illness?” may be followed by “What is the effect of this illness on your life” and “What advice would you offer someone with this concern?” You could also examine various issues in chronological order. Here is a suitable sequence of activities.

* Before you interview someone, undertake an enjoyable task. Positive moods can enhance your intuition and social skills
* Although you should be natural and trust your interpersonal skills, behave about as friendly, or slightly friendlier, than your participants. Be respectful, especially if the other person is confident. Also, if you can, demonstrate confidence, especially if the other person is shy. Research indicates that similarity in amicability, but not confidence, enhances rapport.
* Use a voice recorder. Ask the person whether they are willing to be recorded—with the promise their answers will be anonymous and confidential.
* Initially, highlight the aim of this study. Mention that all of their perceptions are interesting to you.
* The earlier questions should be enjoyable to participants—perhaps a question that relates to their topic of expertise and is not too sensitive. More sensitive questions can be presented later.
* Most of your questions should be open-ended, beginning with words like “How” or “Why” rather than “What” or “When”. Vary between “how” and “why”, however—because these two words focus attention on specific details and broad patterns respectively. Furthermore, ask general questions before more specific questions; answers to specific questions can bias answers to general questions but not vice versa (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982).
* To probe for more information, you can utter simple comments like “Do you have any other examples?” or even “Mmm”. Demonstrate that you are curious and interested, facilitating rather than challenging the other person.
* If someone is not answering questions extensively, you could also include a few prompts or examples to facilitate. Ensure these prompts are diverse, such as “Did you feel concerned, happy, or nothing? Why?”

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| **Activity 4: Analyse the data** |

Roughly speaking, to analyse the data, researchers first tend to transcribe all the questions and answers. They read this text three or so times, coding each insight with a few words. Next, they organize the codes into clusters to uncover themes. They also consider the relationship between these themes to uncover super-ordinate themes. Finally, they read this text again, reflecting upon the extent to which the themes characterize the responses of participants.

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| If possible, before you begin reading and coding the data, you should attempt to suspend your preconceptions or knowledge. Immerse yourself in every answer or argument rather than reflect upon your previous insights. |

**Read the answers of each participant several times while coding**

As you read each answer, try to confine your attention to a specific remark from participants—a remark that could range from a few words to a long paragraph. Attempt to code each of these remarks with a short phase. Initially, some of these codes may merely summarize a superficial or tangible description. For example:

* A participant might have said “After I discovered that Lance Armstrong was a cheat, I did not feel like riding the next day. I did not feel as proud as usual of my bike.
* The research could write a few words alongside this quote, such as “Avoided riding” and “Less pride”

**Also include codes that interpret the meaning or perspective of the participant**

The same quote, for example, could be coded as “Negative associations with riding replaced previous pride”. Furthermore, some codes might correspond to emotions, motivations, beliefs, paradoxes, changes, as well as contradictions of previous remarks.

Consistent with the underlying theoretical perspective, this code cannot be completely derived by the behaviour of this person. The participant interpreted his or her own actions. The researcher also interpreted the meaning of this interpretation or description.

**List these codes, perhaps in Word or on post-it notes. Arrange the codes into clusters**

. Codes that are related to each other may reflect underlying patterns, called themes. For example, the following codes may, at first glance, reflect a theme called “Shift in self-identity”.

• “Negative associations with riding replaced pride”

• “Reluctance to discuss riding”, and

• “Felt need to try another sport”

**Define each theme**

Write a short paragraph about the scope of this theme—as well as how this theme manifests differently in various times or people. For example, you could write “Some people shift their identity by engaging in other activities, whereas other people shift their identity by reframing their past”.

**Consider how the themes may be related to each other.**

For instance:

* Two themes may correspond to the same category, called a super-ordinate theme
* One theme may tend to precede another theme in time
* Two themes may conflict with each other, and so forth.

**Reread the answers of each participant again**.

Consider whether their answers are related to these themes. Perhaps identify answers that do not relate to these themes—indicating that perhaps the themes could be clarified or additional themes could be introduced.

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| **Refining and reporting your themes** |

In practice, you need to complete the previous activities several times, gradually refining and improving your themes. To ascertain whether your themes are adequate, perhaps write a provisional results section of your report. As you write, you can more readily determine whether or not your themes need to be refined more.

In essence, the results section of a report will usually comprise a description and discussion of each theme in turn. For each theme, you would include a definition, a discussion on how the theme manifests differently across people or time, and some reference to the prevalence of this theme—all substantiated with specific quotes from the participants.

**Ensure the themes are representative**

Ensure your themes are discussed by at least half your participants—and even more if the number of participants is fewer than 5. If you cannot collect enough quotes to illustrate a theme, you may need to reanalyse your data. For example, you may need to integrate two distinct themes.

**Avoid themes that are superficial and merely describe tangible behaviours or events.**

For example, the theme “refrain from exercising” is unlikely to be an interesting theme. Instead, construct themes that are nuanced and intangible—often integrating two conflicting tendencies or concepts. For example:

* You might want to blend the codes “refraining from exercising” and “working harder” to construct a more sophisticated theme like “undertaking unrelated activities to utilize unused energy”.
* Usually, the title of these themes would be shorter, however.

**For each theme, highlight the commonalities and differences across participants or times.**

For example:

* When describing the theme “undertaking unrelated activities to utilize unused energy”, you might highlight that all participants immersed themselves in other demanding activities.
* You could then present a few quotes that substantiate this claim.
* Then, you could highlight that some participants immersed themselves in physical activities, whereas some participants immersed themselves in only cognitive activities. Or, you could emphasize some other variation across participants.
* Again, you would present a few quotes to verify this claim.

**Check with participants**

Before you construct the final report, send this preliminary version of the results to your participants. In particular:

* Inform participants of the pseudonym you assigned them
* Seek their feedback on the accuracy of your understanding of their description
* Permit these participants to include other remarks they may have overlooked the first time

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| **Write the final report** |

Besides the results section, the rest of the report will resemble a typical study. Nevertheless, a few differences need to be considered. Read as many past studies as you can that adopted this approach to clarify these differences.

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| Image result for writing icon | For the introduction and literature review:   * Attempt to highlight the importance of this topic. For example, if discussing reactions to the discovery that Lance Armstrong cheated, you could include literature about how individuals identify with celebrities and so forth. * Do not include hypotheses. * Outline the philosophy you adopted. That is, describe IPA, perhaps with reference to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. * Justify the suitability of IPA. For example, you could mention that IPA is especially applicable when the meaning that individuals attach to their experience could affect the behaviour. |

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| Image result for writing icon | In the Method section:   * Specify the range and the mean duration of each interview. * Outline some of the questions you asked. * If applicable, indicate the interviews were semi-structured (Smith, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003) * Describe how you derived the codes and themes as specifically as possible. Include each phase of this process, such as the number of times you reread the data or attempted to integrate related themes. * Include references to how you optimized the extent to which the interpretations are trustworthy (Smith et al., 1999). For example, maintain a reflexive diary of all insights about the themes to maintain an audit trail of the process. If possible, two independent researchers should derive the codes and themes. |

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| Image result for writing icon | In the Results section:   * Describe each theme in turn. Most papers describe between two and six key themes. * Ensure your quotes align closely to your description of the theme * Estimate the prevalence of each theme, and justify how you arrived at this estimate. |
| Image result for writing icon | In the Discussion section:   * Reiterate the overall aim and the key themes that emerged * Discuss how these themes may be integrated or related * Show how these themes align to previous theories or literature. The themes may be used to clarify or challenge past constructs. Or past theories can be utilized to clarify the causes or consequences of the theme * Discuss the limitations of this study, coupled with suggestions for future research * End with a conclusion that may refer to the implications of your work. |

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| **Further reading and complications** |

You can also consider many other practices and features to enhance this research. Perhaps read about cross validation, cooperative inquiry, triangulation with quantitative data, and independent audits.

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