



ESSENTIALS OF

# **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

**Jonathan A. Smith  
Isabella E. Nizza**

ESSENTIALS OF

**Interpretative  
Phenomenological  
Analysis**

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AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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# Series Foreword

Qualitative approaches have become accepted and indeed embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences, as scholars have realized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection and equally penetrating examination. Quantitative approaches often cannot capture such phenomena well through their standard methods (e.g., self-report measures), so qualitative designs using interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures offer exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed is remarkable. We remember Bill Stiles saying (quoting Chairman Mao) at one meeting about methods, “Let a hundred flowers bloom,” indicating that there are many appropriate methods for addressing research questions. In this series, we celebrate this diversity (hence, the cover design of flowers).

The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among approaches and how to learn the different methods. Many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear enough descriptions of the methods, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of these approaches, with lots of examples to illustrate the method so that readers can grasp how to use the methods.

The purpose of this series of books, then, is to present a range of qualitative approaches that seemed most exciting and illustrative of

the range of methods appropriate for social science research. We asked leading experts in qualitative methods to contribute to the series, and we were delighted that they accepted our invitation. Through this series, readers have the opportunity to learn qualitative research methods from those who developed the methods and/or who have been using them successfully for years.

We asked the authors of each book to provide context for the method, including a rationale, situating the method within the qualitative tradition, describing the method's philosophical and epistemological background, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to describe in detail the steps of the method, including the research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analysis, and variations on the method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing a manuscript emerging from a study that used the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of the approach, along with the benefits and limitations of the particular method.

This series of books can be used in several different ways. Instructors teaching courses in qualitative research could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time to expose students to a range of qualitative methods. Alternatively, instructors could choose to focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from studies that have been published using the approaches, and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches.

In this volume, Smith and Nizza provide clear descriptions, with many examples, of how to conduct interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method based on the philosophical foundations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. IPA researchers focus on lived experiences and how people make sense of these experiences within the context of their personal and social worlds. IPA goes beyond summaries of what people have said to trying to make sense of what the experience is like from the person's view. Rather than being prescriptive about exact steps that must be followed, they

provide an engaging and encouraging framework appropriate for both beginners and professionals who want to learn how to conduct IPA.

—Clara E. Hill and Sarah Knox

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# 1

## WHAT IS INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS?

Imagine waking up on your first day at university away from home: You open your eyes and look around your new room; it is a sunny day, so you set out to explore the campus. You have been looking forward to starting university for a long time. You arrived late last night; it was dark, and you went straight to your room, so this is your first day as a university student.

So, what is that like? What is it like in the moment to realize that this is the start of a new time for you? Can you describe that feeling? What is it doing to you physically? What thoughts come to mind? How does it relate to what you expected? Now describe your walk around campus, looking at the buildings, working out how to find the library, eating at the cafeteria, watching other students and academics, talking to some of them. The experience of your first day at university is an example of a topic suitable to be investigated using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

IPA is a method designed to understand people's lived experience and how they make sense of it in the context of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). IPA can be used to address a variety of research questions in different areas. For example, there are

published IPA studies exploring major life changes, such as becoming a parent or migrating; health-related experiences, such as receiving a medical diagnosis or living with a chronic illness; mental health issues, such as living with depression or recovering from psychosis; emotional experiences, such as feelings of wonder or awe, anger or guilt; professional experiences, such as being a therapist or a health care worker; and issues of identity, such as being a musician or being homeless. While early IPA studies were primarily in psychology, the approach has now been adopted in many disciplines to address many research questions, and IPA research is conducted in many different countries in the world.

With IPA, the objective is to get as close as possible to the lived experience of participants so that it can be examined in detail. Accordingly, IPA researchers aim for insight into what it is like to have an experience from the point of view of the person who has had it to elicit rich descriptions, trying to capture the emotions surrounding the experience and how people understand it and make sense of it. The personal meanings associated with lived experience are considered particularly important in IPA, as is how the experience relates to people's views of their world and their relationships.

So, what do we gain from an IPA study? First and foremost, it gives an opportunity to get a close and detailed understanding of what an experience has been like for an individual and how they make sense of it. IPA is particularly valuable when those experiences are of great importance to participants. The approach is also especially good at illuminating ambiguity and tensions in people's reactions to what is happening to them. IPA studies can stand on their own as detailed academic accounts of lived experience. They can also help illuminate prior quantitative studies by providing rich and nuanced analyses of constructs of interest. IPA work can also be drawn on by practitioners to assist with designing and making sense of their interactions and interventions with clients.

IPA is one of a number of different qualitative methods now used in psychology. While psychology has traditionally been dominated by quantitative research methods, we are witnessing a fast-growing recognition of the added value that qualitative approaches can bring

to research. Quantitative and qualitative approaches to research are complementary, offering answers to different research questions and providing an understanding of the human mind in different ways. Where quantitative studies are generally hypothesis driven and based on a quantification of the phenomena under study so that statistical methods can be applied, most qualitative studies are used to answer open exploratory questions, and researchers tend to engage with linguistic descriptions of the phenomena they study and analyze them textually.

This is an exciting time for those of us who are interested in qualitative research, as qualitative methods are included in many undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, and a growing number of students are choosing to carry out qualitative research projects. The recent American Psychological Association (APA) –sponsored publication guidelines (Levitt et al., 2018) reflect an expanding interest in qualitative research in the United States.

The publication by the APA of the series of which this book is a part is indicative of how qualitative research is not a single entity but rather a collection of approaches, each with its own defining methodological features and theoretical underpinnings. In this book, we introduce you to IPA, explore its origins, and provide practical guidance on how to use it, assuming you have limited or no experience with qualitative methods. To make the topic more approachable, we provide examples using data from our published and unpublished studies. While IPA originated in psychology, it is now used by researchers in many subject areas. Hence, we are writing this book for anyone interested in learning more about the methodology, regardless of disciplinary background.

Because different qualitative methods are defined by their own set of philosophical underpinnings, we start by providing you with an overview of the ideas and theories on which IPA draws and explain the purpose of some of IPA's distinguishing characteristics. Then, step by step, we guide you through the stages of an IPA project. Our primary aim is for this book to provide practical guidance to students and researchers approaching IPA for the first time. At the end, you will find a list of the references cited throughout the book, including

methodological articles, chapters, and books on IPA, and there is an appendix giving examples of good IPA studies you might find useful.



## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this book, we introduce some modifications to the terminology employed in doing IPA. This is a result of an exercise with two other senior figures in IPA: Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin, who, along with Jonathan Smith, wrote the first book on IPA in 2009 (Smith et al., 2009). The new book you are now reading was written at the same time as a second edition of the older book is being prepared. The two books are complementary. This book is a short introductory text; the other book is a fuller and more advanced volume. In preparing the two books, we have all considered how the procedures for doing IPA are described. We think most of it works well, but we have decided to modify a small number of the terms used in describing the analytic process to make them clearer. We use the new terms in the chapter on analysis and describe the changes we have made in a footnote at the relevant point. We are confident readers will find the new terminology helpful.

We use the full original spelling for interpretative phenomenological analysis in this book. Readers may sometimes come across an alternative spelling for the same approach: interpretive phenomenological analysis.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF IPA

A helpful way of understanding the different qualitative approaches is to subdivide them into two large categories: experiential and discursive (Reicher, 2000). As the name suggests, experiential methods are commonly used to explore human experience from the point of view of those who are having the experience. Participants are considered experiential experts in the topic under investigation, so their input is obtained to understand what has happened to them or to know what their thoughts and feelings on a certain topic are. The focus is on what they do (or have done), think, and feel about the experience. Although researchers have different standpoints in the value they assign to participants' accounts (e.g., whether they consider the accounts to be a reflection of objective reality or a subjective interpretation of it), the focus with experiential approaches is mostly on the contents of the accounts that participants provide. Discursive methods, however, stem from a strongly social constructionist view of the world (Burr, 2006), and researchers using them are primarily interested in how we, as people, talk about ourselves and the world around us. The focus is on language as the means through which reality is coconstructed, and the aim is to understand how language is used to create meaning. For example, an experiential researcher and a discursive researcher may both interview a person with a heart condition. The experiential researcher will draw on what the person says in the interview to make an interpretation of how the condition is impacting them and their life. The discursive researcher will be interested in the language that the person is able to draw on to give an account of being ill. For more on discursive analysis, see the relevant volume by McMullen (2021) in this book series.

As you may imagine from what we have said so far, IPA can be classified as an experiential method. More specifically, it has three primary theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. We should clarify that IPA is not philosophy. It is an approach developed for the close examination of participants' experience. This approach draws on philosophical principles in the process of establishing a set of procedures and techniques to enable

that examination and analysis of accounts of experience provided by those participants. What are privileged then are the research processes, but it is important that these are anchored in the theoretical ideas. We hope this connection between theory and practice is apparent throughout the book. It is important first, however, to give a short statement on the underlying theoretical ideas themselves.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of human experience. A founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way it occurs and on its own terms, rather than according to predefined theoretical categories (Ashworth, 2015). Husserl (1859 –1938) was the first phenomenological philosopher to write programmatically about this approach. He wanted to understand how the experience of a given phenomenon could be known accurately enough to determine its essential qualities. Husserl (1900/2001) is famously quoted as asserting the need to “go back to the things themselves” (p. 168), by which he meant the core components of our consciousness. Husserl was critical of the claims by his contemporary scientists to a privileged access to knowledge. He thought our everyday life, or lifeworld, should provide the grounding for objective scientific work, so a study of subjective experience should be the precursor for any subsequent scientific account of the world. Similarly, when conducting phenomenological inquiry, we should strive to put aside existing scientific constructs or any presupposed view of the world, which can act as a concealing barrier from the experience under investigation, to focus on our own perception of the world. The focus on examining lived experience through one’s conscious awareness and reflection are central to most phenomenological methods of inquiry, including IPA.

Heidegger (1889 –1976) was a student of Husserl’s who inherited his tutor’s commitment to a close examination of experience in its own terms. However, Heidegger’s phenomenology took on its own distinctive qualities. Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasized the worldly nature of our subjective experience as we engage in our daily practical activities. He also added a temporal dimension to phenomenology and, in particular, was concerned with the individual life as something finite, which had mortality.

Heidegger was also influenced by hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation. Crucially, from an IPA perspective, he articulated the importance of viewing phenomenology as an interpretative endeavor. Heidegger considered that the meaning of experience was not always self-evidently visible and that getting at that meaning involved digging deeper beyond the surface appearance or account. Therefore, being phenomenological involves detective work, closely engaging with what is seen or said, searching for clues to work out what it actually means.

IPA researchers recognize that it is not just the researcher who is interpretative but also the participant. People generally do not just passively receive big things that happen in their lives: They try to make sense of them. In IPA, we talk about research involving a double hermeneutic (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51) whereby the participant is trying to make sense of what is happening to them while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense making.

The final major theoretical perspective influencing IPA is idiography. Idiography is defined as a focus on the particular and is often discussed in contrast to a nomothetic approach, which is concerned with establishing laws or generalizations that can be valid for a population of people. Quantitative researchers normally adopt a nomothetic approach by testing hypotheses and formulating theories that aim to say something about the whole group under question. The problem with such an approach is that even though data may have been collected from a particular person in the first place, the process of analysis moves away from being able to say distinctive things about that person. Rather, findings are expressed in actuarial and probabilistic terms; so, for instance, a questionnaire designed to measure a psychological construct will indicate a certain probability of an individual displaying a given trait (Lamiell, 1987).

An alternative approach is the idiographic approach, in which the lens is focused closely on the case study. Here, by considering a single individual at a time, it is possible to examine their account in detail, in its own context and on its own terms. Social scientists have been slow in recognizing the value of an idiographic approach, which is surprising considering the insight it can afford on how meaning