

Book Review

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research. (Second Edition)

Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin

SAGE Publishing, 2021

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Overview

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was developed and introduced by Jonathan Smith when he put together the epistemological underpinnings of phenomenology and hermeneutics along with idiography (Smith, 2008). He then worked with Michael Larkin and Paul Flowers towards developing a comprehensive handbook for IPA. The first edition was in 2009 (Smith et al., 2009) and the second edition came out this year after IPA's long journey in the world of qualitative research. This new edition reflects these developments and expansion of applications of the method.

IPA has much to offer in the field of psychology research and especially in counselling and psychotherapy research. The epistemological underpinnings and the position of the IPA researcher has many similarities to a therapist being in a therapeutic encounter with a client. The focus on the person, their lived experience and the meaning they attribute to this experience renders IPA suitable to explore the on a deeper level significant areas such as the experience of psychotherapy (Fragkiadaki et al., 2021). The IPA researcher is encouraged to enter the participants' worlds with empathy, putting aside their own preconceived ideas, bringing IPA closer to the notions of psychotherapy. I strongly believe as a counselling psychologist and a qualitative researcher exploring psychological intervention processes that IPA is a method that provides the framework through which we can learn from our clients' experience and inform our practice in the discipline. I have read the first edition many times since I started drawing on IPA guidelines for my research in 2010 (Fragkiadaki et al., 2013). The robust philosophical framework and the idiographic element of IPA fit my research purposes and, as I discovered later on, the way I perceive the world and my work as a counselling psychologist.

Chapter 1:

The introduction sets the scene, offering a comprehensive summary of what can be expected by the reader of the second edition. From the beginning, the reader realises the significance of the "experience" for IPA. This is the case for all qualitative methodologies, however for IPA the experience is perceived from phenomenological lenses and must be significant for the person which differentiates it from the other main qualitative methodologies. IPA is concerned with the meaning attributed to the experience through reflecting, thinking and feeling. IPA epistemology touches on these significant facets of qualitative research analysis, drawing on significant philosophical ideas. The second edition of the IPA handbook focuses on how IPA has evolved since the first edition and how it has expanded and applied in areas and subjects of research beyond health psychology. The authors highlight that there are multiple ways of starting the book, even from the end. This represents almost the multiple ways IPA uses to analyse data drawing from the school of hermeneutics.

Chapter 2:

The second chapter considers the philosophical underpinnings of IPA. I was introduced to the phenomenological way of thinking when I read the first edition and that motivated me to pursue further readings. When I teach IPA I always highlight these significant schools of philosophy and I remind my supervisees to go back to them when they analyse their data. The IPA methodology offers the researcher the framework to go back to the experience 'on its own terms', let go of pre-conceived ideas and focus on the experiential accounts, albeit the meaning making accounts of the participants. The authors start with Husserl's phenomenology, the transcendental awareness he strived to achieve in his way of thinking and perceiving the experience. The authors discuss Heidegger's Dasein, Merleau – Ponty's body-subjects and embodied subjectivity as well as Sartre's existence and becoming. IPA highlights the interpretative part of understanding lived experience and the book explains the significant theory of hermeneutics. It offers methods to develop a relationship with the text and the analysis of language, just like the IPA researcher relates to their data. IPA represents this quest for meaning drawing on phenomenology and hermeneutics but also focuses on the individual and their personal perspectives rather than the group, rendering it an appropriate qualitative method for idiographic research designs. As the authors connect IPA to the philosophical schools in a separate section of the chapter, they also manage to present a simple, everyday way of understanding them which brings the reader even closer to these difficult concepts. Agreeing with the authors, phenomenology is a 'dynamic activity' rather than a collection of theoretical concepts and ideas. They illustrate the application of interpretative analysis and meaning – making processes as the researcher engages with their data with clear examples from practice. These illustrations are very important, as they link difficult theoretical concepts to qualitative research in practice.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 illustrate these ideas in practice, offering a detailed description of planning a study, collecting and analysing data, before moving on to writing up in Chapter 6. Another innovation of the second edition is that the authors and their team of researchers conducted a small – case study with three participants which is exclusively used to illustrate the stages of IPA research in these chapters. This is a wonderful way of illustrating with vivid examples the steps described in these sections of the book.

Chapter 3:

Even though the authors have spent considerable space and effort to present the methods of IPA, they also highlight how important it is for the researchers to interpret the guidelines and be creative in the way they apply these guidelines. Despite this being an IPA handbook, the authors approach the ways of designing a study (from the conceptualisation of the research question" until final analysis) encompassing the principles of qualitative research across methodologies. They situate IPA in the map of qualitative methods and invite the researcher to think how IPA fits their ambitions, passions. I agree with the authors that this is a very demanding process and - as I advise my supervisees - qualitative research is demanding, so they need to feel passion for their topic. IPA invites the researcher to situate themselves in the data, acknowledge any preconceived ideas and the influences on the project design and analysis of data. Another significant issue especially for novice qualitative researchers is building a robust rationale to justify their choice of method. The authors offer a comprehensive section with

examples of research questions related to the main qualitative methodologies, acknowledging where methodologies differ but also where they overlap, explicating the “confusing” stage of choosing the right methodology for one’s project. I have found this very helpful when I was first reading about IPA and I highlight this when I teach and supervise qualitative research. The authors also begin to introduce the substantial changes in IPA analysis terms in this section. The chapter also answers important questions, such as how many participants are an adequate IPA sample and addresses in detail the ethical principles when collecting qualitative data. As I am reading the second edition of the handbook, I realise that the authors now adopt a more flexible way of conceptualising homogeneity and sample size and I believe this reflects the bigger spectrum of areas and studies that have applied IPA over the years.

Chapter 4:

The qualitative methods of collecting data pose many challenges for the researcher. From the beginning of this chapter, the authors differentiate ‘IPA data’ to data collected in other methods of qualitative enquiry. It is indeed quite different to engage in semi-structured interviews but also be present and facilitate an in-depth elaboration of the participant’s experience. The authors offer comprehensive guidelines and examples of how this can be achieved in an IPA study. An important aspect of IPA interviews is the balance of the power in this relationship. The authors highlight how participants are the experts and should be treated this way as the interviewer is encouraged to follow their lead. The chapter is very useful for novice IPA researchers, as it describes the interview process in a thorough and detailed way and the authors offer a number of practicum exercises in the end that help the reader situate themselves in the art of IPA interviewing.

Chapter 5:

The authors offer a more detailed outline of IPA analysis presenting a step-by-step guide. Analysis now more overtly adopts a phenomenological and experiential position and the researcher actively seeks for ‘objects of concern’ and ‘experiential claims’ in the data. The authors start using the new terminology since the beginning of the chapter. It not only includes practical examples of analysis, but also provides an explanatory framework for each ‘exploratory note’ and where it derives from. This is the chapter mostly updated in the second edition as Smith, Larkin and Flowers have substantially changed the terminology of the analysis. We now discuss personal experiential themes and group experiential themes. The authors offer a comprehensive account of what IPA analysis looks like but at the same time they highlight the flexibility in this process, which is essential to represent the participant, the researcher and the project. The authors also highlight the double hermeneutics, the phenomenological lenses and the idiography through which data should be conceptualised.

Chapter 6:

This chapter brings everything together, offering suggestions for the writing up of an IPA report. It is always a challenge to present the analytic journey and the outcome in a journal article, a report or a dissertation. From my experience, students and supervisees struggle with finding the balance between offering an account of their analytic commentary and presenting enough quotes from the transcripts. The authors of the IPA handbook offer a comprehensive example and explain how important it is to have both and present explanations with each quote. As I will always remind my students “an IPA narrative represents a dialogue between participant and researcher” (p. 113).

Chapter 7:

Chapter 7 is a new chapter (building on the first edition), where the authors present a number of research designs that have applied IPA and relate them to the principles and applications of IPA. The authors elaborate on case studies, multiple perspective research, mixed methods designs, focus groups, online interviews, longitudinal and multi-modal designs. They situate IPA in the current developments of qualitative research but also illustrate vividly the potential of the method to be applied in a diversity of designs. It is interesting that the authors mention more complex designs which can even be user-led designs and the incorporation of Public and Patient Involvement groups. It is very important for novice and experienced researchers to explore these options and it is great to realise that exciting developments of the method are forthcoming. I am particularly interested in how IPA adds to the discussion of longitudinal psychotherapy research designs (Fragkiadaki et al, 2022).

Chapter 8:

This initiates the discussion between IPA and other established theories or theoretical frameworks in the science field, exploring especially the areas of cognition, language and emotions. As within a psychotherapy encounter, the IPA qualitative researcher facilitates a phenomenological exploration of a phenomenon through the experience of the participants, engaging them in a reflective journey and learning from it. In this chapter the authors offer a deeper account of what IPA explores and means through the phenomenological enquiry it facilitates, distinctive to cognitive experimental psychology. As if talking about a therapist, an IPA researcher seeks to explore the participants' experience within their culture to allow access to their subjective meaning of experiences. The experiential accounts that IPA strives to explore are connected to the embodied experiences which need to be part of the investigation.

Chapter 9:

Chapter 9 goes back to method and qualitative research quality criteria. These are primarily important and help IPA researchers apply their enquiry in the context of wider qualitative research standards which makes reports, writing up and publishing a more straightforward process. The authors address the issue of complexity in qualitative research and how the lists of criteria and standards tend to be overtly "prescriptive and simplistic" (p. 148). However, in an ingenious way, they relate the standards to IPA specifically, addressing the quality standards that make an IPA study a rigorous and methodologically sound one.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12:

These chapters demonstrate examples of 'good' IPA studies. They represent case studies and cross – case analysis and derive from the areas of health psychology and chronic illness, mental health and psychosis, identity and transition. In each chapter the authors expand their discussion to further IPA studies that have explored similar areas. In their conclusions, the authors make clear suggestions about how they would envision IPA to grow and encourage novice and experienced researchers to grow further in their research. This is indeed inspiring and motivates researchers to think openly and apply IPA in diverse projects.

Summary

The authors have written this handbook in a way that allows them to address the reader directly and 'speak' to the researcher's ambiguities, worries, doubts as well as need for certainty. Reading this book will help the researcher reflect on these issues and explore alternative ways of thinking about their research, their data but essentially a way to perceive the world and the 'truth'. Addressing the novice as well as experienced IPA researchers, the authors in the second edition use practical examples and a study they implemented for the purposes of this book in order to illustrate the research design, data collection and data analysis guidelines of IPA. The handbook also offers a deeper account of the epistemological underpinnings of the method, reminding the reader at various points the strong links to philosophical and theoretical framework which has guided the development of IPA.

The book also reflects the significant changes in the terms used in IPA research and analysis. The authors have incorporated more examples from diverse studies as they endeavour to represent the plethora of applications of IPA in the literature (explicitly presented in Chapter 7). Moreover, they situate IPA in the current qualitative research and criteria referring to Levitt and colleagues (2018) criteria and recommendations for writing up structure. Given the breadth and depth of focus, this is not a handbook that the reader - whether a novice or an experienced researcher - will read once.

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