

## Review

# Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research

***Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin***

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Last week, as part of an undergraduate lab class on qualitative research, I gave a short lecture on coding qualitative data, I then asked the students to read and code an extract of data. Many of them looked rather confused and hesitantly began to read the data. It was only when I and the teaching assistants spoke to the students and *walked* them through the process of coding the data extract that they began to have a meaningful and practical understanding of qualitative coding. In many ways, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* is the closest thing to having an experienced qualitative researcher guide you through the process of doing qualitative research in the classroom. This book also answers many of the practical questions my students had (the types of

questions that are rarely addressed in books on qualitative research): What's the difference between a code and a theme? How many codes should I have? Is ten themes too many?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the newest entry to the cannon of qualitative approaches to data analysis, introduced by Jonathan Smith and colleagues in the mid-1990s, it has become an increasingly popular qualitative approach, particularly in applied areas like health and counselling psychology (it's fair to say that some academic qualitative researchers are less enthusiastic; see Parker, 2005). IPA can be seen as an alternative to discursive approaches, which gained ascendancy in the 1990s. Whereas discursive approaches aim to provide an alternative to mainstream psychology and are, discursive psychology (DP) in particular, strictly anti-cognitivist and seek to deconstruct core cognitive constructs like attitudes, body image, and, even, memory (Edwards and Potter, 1992), IPA aims to 'dialogue with mainstream psychology' (p. 4) and is unashamedly cognitivist in orientation. Furthermore, whereas DP questions the value of the category 'experience' and emphasises text over the people producing the text, understanding people's lived experiences, and the meanings they attach to their experiences is the central focus of IPA. IPA arguably represents the repopulation of qualitative psychology with self-reflective, self-interpretative beings. In my experience, IPA, alongside Thematic Analysis and Grounded Theory (GT)-lite, the GT methods rather than the methodology (Braun and

Clarke, 2006), is an effective gateway into the often mystifying world of qualitative analysis, particularly for undergraduate students.

Although there have been many useful chapters and papers outlining IPA (e.g., Smith and Osborn, 2003; Reid et al., 2005), this is the first book-length introduction to IPA. The book is divided into three sections – the first outlines the theoretical foundations of the approach and provides detailed discussions of planning, conducting and writing up an IPA study. The second section provides four examples of IPA studies from the author’s research on the topics of dialysis treatment for kidney failure and the transition to motherhood (Smith), gay men’s perspectives on sex and sexuality (Flowers), and psychosis (Larkin). The third and final section explores issues around interpretative validity, drawing on Lucy Yardley’s (2000; 2008) work in particular, the relationship between IPA and other qualitative approaches such as DP, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, GT, and other phenomenological approaches, and ends with some brief reflections on the future development of IPA.

I have been using this book in teaching since it was published – recommending it to undergraduate and postgraduate students both as the definitive account of the IPA approach and as an accessible introduction to experiential qualitative research more broadly. The chapters on designing an IPA study, collecting and analysing data, and writing up an IPA study in particular are excellent. They provide detailed guidance on developing

research questions, providing lots of examples of suitable research questions (and comparing these to the types of questions asked when using other qualitative approaches) and sampling (the authors recommend between three and six participants as a reasonable sample size for a student project, noting that their own practice “is now to treat  $n = 3$  as the default size for an undergraduate or Masters-level IPA study” p. 52, and  $n = 4-10$  for a professional doctorate). The chapter on data collection highlights the in-depth, semi-structured interview as the ideal method for IPA studies. Although this chapter is tailored to the specifics of the IPA approach, I think it provides an insightful introduction to qualitative interviewing in general, and the account of the method is supported by lots of clear and accessible examples of different types of interview questions (including types to avoid), interview schedules, probes and by some useful practical exercises in constructing questions and interviews.

The chapter on data analysis again serves as a lucid introduction to the IPA approach and of experiential qualitative analysis more broadly. The authors provide a very useful discussion of coding (or in IPA-language, ‘initial commenting’), which alongside the chapter on ‘coding in GT practice’ in Kathy Charmaz’s 2006 book on GT, stands as the one of the most accessible descriptions of qualitative coding I have come across. The analysis chapter again contains excellent examples – of initial comments on a portion of transcript, followed by an example of emergent themes developed from the same transcript. The chapter on writing is also very practically oriented –

providing clear advice on the whole processing of writing up from developing a title to connecting extracts of data to the analytic narrative.

Although the detailed guidance provided by the authors is no doubt very reassuring and useful for students, it is unclear how prescriptive the guidance is intended to be. For various reasons, I encourage the students I supervise doing interview-based IPA/experiential research to collect larger samples than is recommended by the authors of this book. For example, in my view a student research project is part of research training and novice researchers are unlikely to collect 'gold standard' data from their first few interviews (I cringe when I think back to the initial interviews I conducted!). Completing only 3 interviews is unlikely to give students the opportunity to reflect on and develop their interviewing skills; also a sample of 3 interviews offers little opportunity for 'piloting' and refining an interview schedule. I am left wondering whether student projects with samples larger than 3 will still count as an IPA study, when the boundaries and procedures of IPA have been so tightly drawn by the authors. However, this book remains an invaluable addition to the toolkit of resources for teachers and students of qualitative research.

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