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# A Critical Overview of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Qualitative Research Approach

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## Abstract

**Context:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has become a dominant qualitative research methodology in many academic disciplines. The desire to understand the theoretical underpinnings of this research approach is evident.

**Objective:** This paper is aimed at providing an overview and limitations of IPA. This paper will hopefully equip researchers when deciding on the appropriate research methodology to their research topic.

**Methods:** A range of literature on qualitative research approach and phenomenology is reviewed. The relevant literatures on the theoretical underpinnings of IPA are examined.

**Results:** The article illuminates that IPA represents a highly useful methodology in providing a rich and nuance insight into the experiences of research participants.

**Conclusion:** IPA is a forward-looking research approach that adopts a flexible and versatile design to understand people's experiences.

**Keywords:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); Phenomenology; Qualitative research

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## Introduction

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has become a dominant qualitative research methodology in many academic disciplines. Its emphasis on convergence and divergence of experiences, as well as its mission in examining detailed and nuanced analysis of the lived experience of small number participants [1], is particularly appealing to many researchers. IPA is an integrative hermeneutic phenomenology [2] first proposed by Jonathan Smith [3] in a paper that argued for an experiential approach in psychology that could equally dialogue with mainstream psychology. But its structured approach and qualitative orientation seems to appeal to other disciplines in human, social and health care research [1,2]. IPA has two primary aims: to look in detail at how someone makes sense of life experience, and to give detailed interpretation of the account to understand the experience [1]. The desire to know more about this qualitative research methodology has intensified.

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview and limitations of IPA which has risen in popularity in many academic disciplines due

to its useful methodology in studying existential experience [2]. This study provides insights into this growing area of qualitative research approach. The paper begins with a brief overview and rationale for qualitative research approach. It will then go on to introduce the philosophical foundations of phenomenology. Then followed by the theoretical underpinnings and criticisms of IPA. The paper concludes by bringing together some thoughts for future researchers who might use IPA as their preferred research methodology.

## Qualitative Research Approach

IPA is a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research explores and understands the meanings people assign to their experiences [4,5]. Qualitative inquiries seek to shed light on meanings that are less perceptible. They also seek to investigate complexities of our social world. They are inductive and share similarities in exploring 'what' 'why' and 'how' questions, as opposed to 'how much' and 'how many' preferred by quantitative studies. What's more, qualitative research is designed to study people's life experiences and deliberately shuns quantitative

preoccupation with measuring, counting and prediction in favour of describing, exploring, understanding and interpreting how a phenomenon [2].

There are multiple and diverse epistemological roots for qualitative approaches, but they converge in the context of how meaning making takes place [6,7]. Researchers attempt to study things in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of, or interpret the meanings people assign to their experiences in everyday language [5]. The uniqueness of the qualitative inquiry is its experiential understanding of the complex interrelationships among phenomena and its direct interpretation of events. Therefore, the emphasis is upon seeking to explore the patterns of unanticipated and expected relationships in cases or phenomena [8,9]. Researchers achieve this by exercising their subjective judgement whilst making it visible how their preconceptions shape the knowledge produced through personal reflexivity in a form of self-analysis and self-evaluation during the research [7,8].

Furthermore, qualitative research seeks to understand the inside perspectives of the participants from the participants themselves. It is therefore emic and idiographic. The research questions determine the data-collecting strategies. Data is analyzed inductively to understand the meanings the participants assign to their experiences. Moreover, the interpretive nature of the approach enables the researcher to derive insights from the respondents by employing curiosity, open-mindedness, empathy, and flexibility to listen to people narrating their stories in their own natural settings to identify how their experiences and behaviours are shaped by the context of their social, cultural, economic and historical worlds [2]. Moreover, qualitative research can be used to explore less known or less understood topics or phenomenon to help bring to the forefront unexpected knowledge. Furthermore, the approach is suitable when a detailed in-depth view of a phenomenon is needed to explore a complex process and to illuminate the multifaceted nature of human experience [4].

## Introducing Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach began by Edmund Husserl and later developed by Martin Heidegger that seeks to study the lived human experiences and the way things are perceived and appear to the consciousness [1,2,10]. Phenomenology has evolved into a relatively mature qualitative research methodology during the last decades of the twentieth century largely due to a seismic shift from mainly deductive quantitative research to inductive research. Phenomenology has attracted growing interest in everyday experience in the domain of public and professional practice including nursing, education, psychology, and social work [10]. Though such interest has also contributed to the proliferation of the approach with little consensus of what constitutes the methodology. Heated debates have ensued about the appropriate ways to undertake phenomenological research. However, two broad categories can be identified: descriptive and hermeneutic. These follow the broad philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger, respectively [2].

The general focus of the descriptive phenomenological approach is to examine the essence or structure of experiences in the way

it occurs to our conscious. Thus, descriptions of the experiences are anchored rigorously to the data without the influence of any external theory. This approach is based on the philosophy of Husserl's phenomenology which involves the principles of epoché, intentional analysis and eidetic reduction. Put simply, the researcher is required to adopt a phenomenological attitude and bracket or put aside past knowledge or presuppositions [2].

A sharp departure from the above is the ideas from hermeneutic or interpretative approach which is based on the principles that reduction is impossible and thus, rejects the idea of suspending personal opinions in favour of interpretation of experiences. Thus, research findings are suffused with philosophical, theoretical, literary and interpretative lenses resulting to an aspect of human experience grounded on unrestricted imagination and metaphorical sensibility. Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Levinas are the key figures of this approach [1,2].

Furthermore, four contemporary phenomenological approaches which do not easily fit the Husserlian and Heideggerian or the descriptive-hermeneutic divide have been identified: Life world approaches; first person accounts; reflexive, relational approaches; and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [2].

Lifeworld is a descriptive and/or hermeneutic research approach used to explore how everyday experience shows itself in the lifeworld of individuals. This approach strives to find the intentional relationship between the conscious, social, perceptual, and practical experiences by analyzing time, space, and the taken-for granted presentation of experience. The key philosophers of this approach are Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Schutz, van den Berg, and two contemporary philosophers: Dahlberg and Ashworth [2].

In the first-person approach, researchers use their own subjective experiences and descriptive or hermeneutic approaches to examine the quality and essences of a phenomenon. The approach is inspired by the ideals of Husserl who believes that access to the world is through consciousness as experienced from the first-person perspective. The first-person approach incorporates concrete narrative descriptions of momentous events with theoretical discussion and/or literary flourish thus, catapulting personal reflection to a detailed and deep analysis that embellishes experiences [2].

In reflexive-relational approaches, data and/or meanings are seen to emerge out of the context or dialogue between the researcher and the participant who is regarded as co-researcher in the embodied dialogical encounter. Researcher reflexivity and researcher-participant (inter-)subjectivity is celebrated. These approaches can be drawn from any of the major philosophers of phenomenology work, but the works of Gadamer, Gendlin, Levinas and Buber are particularly appreciated because of their dialogical and empirical spirits [2].

## Introducing IPA

As seen from the above, various phenomenological inspired research approaches use different approaches ranging from pure description to interpretation [11]. However, a modern way of

conducting a phenomenological research is IPA. IPA is particularly attractive because of its commitment to explore, describe, interpret, and situate the participants' sense making of their experiences [1,12]. The main theoretical underpinnings of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, idiography [1] is next discussed.

## IPA and Phenomenology

IPA seeks to understand the lived experience by integrating the works of four major phenomenological philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre to illuminate phenomenology as a singular and pluralist endeavour existing in a continuum. One of the striking features of IPA is a detailed and systematic analysis of consciousness. Like Husserl, researchers primarily seek to capture the participants' experiences of a phenomenon by bracketing their fore-knowledge [1]. To identify core structures and features of human experience, Husserl encouraged the questioning of natural attitude through phenomenological reflection and dissuaded things being taken for granted. Husserl believed that this could be achieved by consciously setting aside our previous knowledge and to detach ourselves from prejudices, prior understandings and our own history [2]. Therefore, given that the basis of IPA is the examination of the thing itself; thoughtful focus and the careful examination of experience in the way it occurs to the participants proposed by Husserl is essential [1,2].

Husserl's thesis on phenomenology has been criticized by many for being too philosophical, conceptual and difficult to decipher [1]. Moreover, the notion that the ultimate human experience can be examined by setting aside pre-conceived knowledge has been dismissed as simplistic and unattainable [13]. Furthermore, pure experience advocated by Husserl is elusive and inaccessible because experience is usually witnessed after the event has already happened [1].

IPA has emerged by identifying more strongly with hermeneutic traditions and utilizing the works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre to explore and interpret personal lived experience of the participants. The works of these philosophers complement each other and collectively contribute to a mature, multi-faceted and holistic phenomenology. For example, Heidegger's and Sartre's phenomenology are focused on existentialism, and Merleau-Ponty's centres on embodiment [1]. Together, these authors have formulated the argument that we are embedded in the world of language and social relationships and that we cannot escape the historical accuracy of all understanding [2].

Heidegger suggested Dasein to represent the unique existence of human beings or literally being there in the world to express the inter-relationship and inter-connectedness of human experience [2,13]. Heidegger argued that the primary concern for existential phenomenologists is to investigate and interpret existence as it is humanly experienced [13]. Therefore, the IPA researcher embarks on studying Dasein by immersing himself/herself in the world of the participants through a lens of cultural and socio-historical meanings [14]. Or to examine what Heidegger terms as throw-ness. In that Dasein is thrown into this pre-existing world of people and objects, language and culture, and cannot be meaningfully detached from it. Thus, Heidegger's work

invites IPA researchers to ground their stance in the lived world of things, people, relationships and language, and question knowledge outside interpretation because interpretation of people's meaning-making of their experience is fundamental to phenomenological inquiry. His work also prompts IPA researchers to be reflexive in their interpretation in relation to their fore-understanding of the phenomenon being investigated [1].

As already noted, Merleau-Ponty focused much of his work on subjectivity, embodiment and our relationship to the world [1]. Thus, he linked phenomenological description to the human existent as a bodily being or 'body-subject' [15]. At the core of his philosophy is a protracted argument about the pivotal role perception plays in understanding and engaging the world [2]. Thus, Merleau-Ponty suggested that humans are unique and different from everything else in the world, and therefore use their holistic sense to engage with the world. He also argued that empiricism has failed to adequately conceptualize the mechanisms of perception and judgement, and that it is essential to acknowledge human existence in shaping the elementary principles of knowing the world. The lessons IPA researchers can take from Merleau-Ponty's work is how he portrays the vital role the body plays in knowing about the world. While it is acknowledged that different phenomenologists place different emphasis on the role of sensation and physiology in relation to intellectual or rationale domain, the place of the body as essential element in experience cannot be overlooked [1].

Furthermore, Sartre's existential phenomenology is about understanding human existence as opposed to understanding the world. Central issues of Sartre's work also covered human freedom and responsibility and the psychology of human action [15]. In Sartre's view, human nature is more about becoming than being therefore; there is freedom of choice as well as responsibilities for our own actions. That said, he acknowledges that certain human complexities require the individual's life, his biographical history, and the social situation to be taken into consideration. Sartre's work offers IPA researchers the most comprehensive glimpse of what a phenomenological analysis of human experience should look like in the context of personal, social relationships, and moral encounters [1].

## IPA and Hermeneutics

The next major theoretical underpinning of IPA is hermeneutics, which is the art and science of interpretation or meaning. Meaning in this context is deemed as something fluid that is continuously open to new insight, revision, interpretation, and reinterpretation [1,10]. IPA employs four influential philosophers: Heidegger, Schleiermacher, Ricoeur and Gadamer to advance the thesis of hermeneutic phenomenology [1].

Ricoeur linked phenomenology and hermeneutics by explaining that experience and meaning are closely intertwined. Thus, meaning in his view is indispensable to experience. Hence, for both Ricoeur and hermeneutics experience and language is co-emergent. Language is not only used for descriptive purposes, but as an expressive force of experience. Experience reveals itself only when it is expressed in poetic, figurative and rhythmic language. Thus, through interactive and textual interpretation,

hermeneutic theorists utilize their subjective expressions to reconstruct original meanings during textual interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology therefore embraces the literary and poetic aesthetic application of language that emanates from the process and product of research [10].

Furthermore, Heidegger illuminates that our being in the world presents us with fundamental interpretative situation that compels us to ask questions about our world [10]. Thus, IPA believes that Heidegger's concept of appearance of being captures the essence of interpretation well. The notion is that there is a phenomenon out there ready to be explored but requiring the detective work of the researcher to bring it to light using his/her prior experience, assumptions or preconceptions to make sense of the experience once it is revealed [1].

Significantly, Heidegger and Gadamer believed that all understanding assumes an essential element of presumptions and interpretation [15]. Thus, making sense of the respondents' narratives requires the IPA researcher to engage in close interpretation, but the researcher may not necessarily be conscious of his/her preconceptions beforehand. But the complex and dynamic way they unpack the relationship between interpretation and fore-understanding may reveal a more robust and cyclical reflexive bracketing [1].

An IPA researcher is also said to engage in 'double hermeneutic', in that the researcher is making sense of the participants' sense making. Therefore, the researcher assumes a central role in analysis and interpretation of the participants' experiences [1]. Therefore, the researcher intuitively seeks to probe the surface meanings by reading in between the lines for deeper interpretation [2]. The dynamism of interpretation and reflection resonates excellently with the hermeneutic circle model that deals with the dynamic relationship between the 'part' and the 'whole' at numerous levels for a holistic analytical interpretation. In relation to IPA, the 'part' corresponds to the encounter with the participant in a research project, and the 'whole' the drawing of knowledge and experience of the researcher [1].

## Idiography

IPA is also said to be fundamentally idiographic, in that it is committed to the detailed analysis of a phenomenon under investigation [16]. It takes great care of each case, offering detailed and nuanced analysis, valuing each case in its own merits before moving to the general cross-case analysis for convergence and divergence between cases [1]. Researchers are required to carefully follow this idiographic approach throughout the analytic process for a meticulous detailed examination of the convergence and divergence between the participants' experiences.

In view of all that has been discussed so far, one may understand that IPA is indeed a forward-looking research methodology that has the potential in understanding and interpreting the experiences of people [17,18], because it offers practical and accessible guidelines in conducting phenomenological research [1,19,20]. However, it has methodological limitations and need to be considered.

## Criticisms of IPA

IPA has been criticized for being riddled with ambiguities as well as lacking standardization [21]. Others also point out that it is mostly descriptive and not sufficiently interpretative [12,22,23]. But the increasingly large quantity of publications that outline the theoretical, methodological and philosophical underpinnings of IPA has been pointed out to the critics [1].

The most vigorous criticism of IPA is that the methodology suffers from four major conceptual and practical limitations. Firstly, IPA like many phenomenological studies gives unsatisfactory recognition to the integral role of language [7]. But in their rebuttal of this criticism, they accept that meaning making takes place in the context of narratives, discourse, metaphors etc., and whilst the primary purposes of IPA are to gain insight into experience, it is always intertwined with language [1].

Secondly, questions have been raised whether IPA can accurately capture the experiences and meanings of experiences rather than opinions of it. Whilst phenomenology as philosophy is associated with introspection allowing the philosopher to explore his or her experiences through 'phenomenological meditation', phenomenology as a research approach relies on the accounts of participants and the experiences of researchers. Yet, the critical unanswered question is whether both the participants and researchers have the requisite communication skills to successfully communicate the nuances of experiences. Moreover, phenomenological research is suitable with the most eloquent individuals [7]. This may be particularly the case when interviewing people about sensitive issues such as mental illness. But the criticism could be seen as elitist, suggesting only those having access to the right level of fluency are allowed to describe their experiences. However, it is sensible for readers hoping to use IPA for future projects to note this criticism and take extra attentiveness to collect rich and exhaustive data from participants.

Thirdly, the fact that IPA, like other phenomenological inquiries focuses on perceptions is problematic and limiting to our understanding, because phenomenological research seeks to understand the lived experiences but does not explain why they occur. An authentic research inquiry seeking to understand the experiences of its participants will also seek to explore the conditions that triggered the experiences which are located in past events, histories or social-cultural domain [7]. But, Smith et al. [1] have argued that IPA uses hermeneutic, idiographic and contextual analysis to understand the cultural position of the experiences people.

Finally, the assertion that IPA is concerned with cognition exposes it to criticism because some aspects of phenomenology are not compatible with cognition and the role of cognition in phenomenology is not properly understood [7] However, Smith et al. [1] rebuff this by arguing that the IPA's prerequisite of sense-making and meaning-making which encompass formal reflection clearly resonates with cognitive psychology.

In summary, it has been shown from above that even in the presence of solid philosophical foundation; many IPA studies are still conducted badly. Consequently, readers who are planning to adopt IPA are advised to take active steps to give voice to the experiences of the participants, followed by sufficient interpretation of their narratives. Though, it is important to bear in mind that IPA is fundamentally a subjective research approach, so two analysts working with the same data may come up with different interpretations [1,22].

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## Conclusion

This study has argued that qualitative research in general and IPA specifically offers flexible and versatile approach to understanding people's experiences. This paper has provided a valuable contribution to our understanding of IPA, future researchers who are motivated in providing interesting and detailed insights into the subjective lived experiences of people [1] might consider IPA as their preferred research methodology.