Strategies to Enhance and Emphasize the Value of your Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Research

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Responses to unanswered session questions, October 2022.

1. **How is IPA different than other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory?**

Thanks for this question. IPA is different from other qualitative approaches in terms of aims, theoretical foundation or assumptions, and processes. This would be a really long response, if I tried to compare it to multiple other approaches, so I will focus just on grounded theory in this response. In another answer, I offer information to compare IPA with thematic analysis. I also want to refer you to a nice comparison of how a particular topic might be considered across multiple qualitative approaches, presented in Smith et al. (2022) on pages 39 and 40.

The aims of IPA are to identify areas of convergence and divergence within components (or themes) of a common experience. This differs from grounded theory where aims are typically related to identifying theoretical constructs and the relationship among the constructs, that taken as a whole, suggest a theory for something, often a process. I view grounded theory a major undertaking that may require multiple types of data, gathered over a substantial period of time. Grounded theory studies may also be iterative in design in the sense that the researcher conducts and analyzes one interview, then identifies what additional information is needed flesh out the construct/constructs of interest, and then plans the next interview or other means of data gathering needed. By nature, then ,grounded theory studies may be multi-perspective whereas a multi-perspective IPA is considered a variation and not necessarily a typical study design.

Included in IPA's underlying theoretical inspirations are that it is phenomenological – so focused on how individuals make sense of their experience of the thing of interest; idiographic – so focused on the individual experience (typically this tends to be the comparative experience of a group of homogenous individuals); and hermeneutic – so there is an explicit role of the researcher as an interpreter, typically described as the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their experience. Grounded theory studies may be focused on a relatively homogenous group, depending on the scope of the theory, but the phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations of IPA are not a part of grounded theory. Instead, the aim is theory building around a process, so the personal meaning making of key experiences is of less interest. Grounded theory researchers are seeking understanding and insight but would not necessarily view this as interpretive as respects the individual's meaning making with respect to experience.

IPA is also subtly different from other phenomenological qualitative methods and other non-phenomenological qualitative approaches. In the end, it is the research question, or purpose, with some consideration given to the state of current knowledge, what outcomes are desired, and time and resources available, that drive the selection of approach. In an area where a great deal of interpretive and exploratory work has been done, a theory building approach may be warranted. For something that is less mature in terms of conducted or published research, it may be necessary to develop basic understanding before anything more substantial, like theory building can be attempted, and IPA may be ideal for this purpose.

2. **Do you have any advice on how to decide which GETs to include in the final write up?**

This is a great question, and it is one I am certain some others are wondering about. One of the biggest challenges in qualitative data analysis and development of findings is condensing the data. This is a challenge at every stage because it typically feels that everything participants said was important. And many things seem to be at least indirectly related to the research purpose. So the first step in identification of the best group experiential themes, or GETs is in ensuring your process up to that point was efficient and has left you without an excessive number of GETs. At every stage in analysis, I would expect to see fewer – although it may happen that after all cases are analyzed, the researcher goes back to earlier cases and reconsiders personal experiential themes, or PETs in light of some of the later PETs. Still the aim should be, I think, if adding some new ones, to reconsider others, so the number of GETs is substantially less than the total number of PETs (which, by nature of a GET, it should be) and, hopefully less than the average number of PETs. This takes into consideration that some PETs may be combined as subthemes within a GET, so, for example, the same PET may be identified in three participants, and two variations identified across a further three, such that three PETs become one GET with subthemes.

Assuming you have done thorough analysis and feel you have condensed the data into the meaningful components of the experience of interest, I suggest you consider qualitative and quantitative considerations in deciding which to write up, and also take your audience into account. By qualitative considerations, I mean which GETs best address the research purpose, which may contribute new ways of looking at the issue, and which feel most compelling to you as the person who has been engaging with participants and data. There is no question of support from your data or these would not be GETs in the first place. Quantitatively I'll go out on a limb and say strive for around 3 (assuming there are subthemes) and no more than five in

a manuscript for publication. And ensure those are the most distinct if you have more than that many to consider. I think most readers, including myself, can easily digest and recall three dimensions – this creates a compact but still comprehensive presentation. Once you hit the level of 5 or over, you will experience challenges with word count in trying to present a comprehensive view of each GET, and you are likely to lose participant interest along the way as well.

If this is a dissertation or thesis, you may not have much of a choice and may be expected to develop a larger number of GETs than is realistic for a manuscript. I would still consider anything in the double digits (10) as excessive due to the simple fact that this is hard on readers. If there is an expectation of writing up many/most GETs, I suggest fully developing a small number and providing an abridged presentation - maybe as table items - of those that seem less compelling or relevant.

I also suggest not to discount the benefit of having a new look at your findings as you write them up. I often go back and reconsider things because I find I am unable to put the pieces together in the text of a paper as well as I would like. Or I might find previously unseen similarity or overlap among themes. There is nothing wrong with revisiting analysis while writing up your findings. If you are stuck in some part of analysis, it might help to start writing up the findings – sometimes having to justify something in the text of a write up, forces you to take a fresh look at it.

3. **Given that analysis can be laborious, how does one justify the sample size**

This is a really good question and probably one that can be asked about many types of qualitative inquiry, although IPA analysis clearly requires time, focus, and a great deal of thoughtful work. I am not personally in favor of large samples in qualitative interview research* and it is possible to publish findings from one case or a small number of cases. I would not advocate for use of IPA with a large sample. But sample size is often a matter of negotiation based on reasons other than the research purpose and potential value of findings from a small sample. Instructors, research supervisors, funding organizations, and colleagues may all have reasons – practical or personal – for recommending or requiring a larger sample size. Some journal editors will not consider your small sample studies either. Here are a few things to consider:

Is this a novel research study? Having a novel aspect may help support use of a smaller sample.

Are participants unique and/or rare? This is another argument for a small sample. If, however, they are extremely rare, you want to ensure there is need for and ample interest in the research in the first place.

Are you working alone or on a compressed time frame? This may be a reasonable argument for a smaller sample size in some academic settings.

Do you need to use IPA or can you use a more flexible approach to data analysis – including coding data into pre-determined themes? This possibility may depend on how much interrelationship there is between your purpose and the IPA method. For example, if identifying some concrete aspects of an experience is adequate, then perhaps a more descriptive approach, where you can apply a less labor-intensive analysis process and accommodate a larger sample, may be a possibility.

> *The thinner your data per case are, the larger the sample needs to be – so the sample size to conduct realistic and meaningful analysis of a single open response item on a survey needs to be substantially larger than the sample for an interview study

4. **How is IPA different from Thematic Analysis?**

This is an important question and I want to share one of the best responses I have ever seen to this question. This was contributed to the IPA listserv (I provide the sign-up link at the end of this question list) by this scholar:

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In terms of the differences between thematic analysis and IPA, I teach about this because it's a distinction that often confuses students. The main reason for this is the flexibility of thematic analysis. It's possible to conduct a thematic analysis that looks just like an IPA. But it's also possible to conduct a thematic analysis that looks nothing like an IPA. Some may argue that IPA is a specific kind of thematic analysis, in the very loose sense of generating themes through a process of inductive, bottom-up analysis. But the word "specific" is important here. Someone

who tries to do an IPA while regarding it as basically like thematic analysis, will probably do a poor IPA.

To my mind, there are two main characteristics of IPA that aren't shared with many kinds of thematic analysis. It may be unfair to say that these are differences between IPA and thematic analysis because (as far as I know) thematic analysis permits this approach. The point is that these things are mandatory in IPA but not in thematic analysis:

1.) IPA is always about subjective lived experience. Thematic analysis can be about that, or about any number of other things. This is obviously the case for research questions, but is also reflected in interview questions, theme names, and other aspects of the data collection and analysis.

2.) IPA has a commitment to idiography, which means in practical terms that an understanding of each case comes before the cross-case analysis. Essentially, you do a case study of each participant. It may be possible to do this in thematic analysis, but commonly all cases are regarded as one data set from the start in thematic analysis. This makes a difference to what the analysis and report will look like.

5. **For undergraduate or Masters' dissertations, how many Ps would you say is reasonable for work at this level?**

   Thanks for asking this. I personally would argue for one to three. I think there is a lot of value in having more than one participant, because otherwise there is no cross case analysis, and the variations in experience come to light during cross case analysis. With each additional participant, the effort increases so sometimes does the tendency to rush analysis. I lean toward three and feel that three seems more powerful than two. But given a thorough guide and a high-quality participant, especially one who has had a relatively unique, dramatic, or otherwise interesting experience, one participant can inform a great study. Unfortunately, my opinion, as much as I stand by it, may not have much weight with your research supervisor.

6. **Do you find IPA's philosophical underpinnings important to understand?**

Thanks for this question. Since I barely acknowledged this in my presentation, it is an important question. I studied and taught in the U.S. but have read many theses and dissertations completed by international scholars. Almost without exception I have seen more content and

focus on the philosophical foundations of IPA among international scholars. U.S.-based scholars may list and briefly describe the philosophical underpinnings – I did in my own dissertation - but are less likely to compare, for example, Merleau-Ponty or Sartre, to Husserl or Heidegger, or to distinguish potential contributions from the works of each. I think in a way you are asking: *to what extent is deep understanding important* – not just of the phenomenological nature but the other attributes including hermeneutics. My response is that it is important to understand why you are doing the research in the way you are doing it – and these philosophical underpinnings help you understand why you do individual analysis, then cross case analysis (influenced by the idiographic nature of IPA) and provide the rationale or precedent for researcher interpretation of participant meaning making (the hermeneutic turn). I think, however, if as an early IPA researcher with a limited background in philosophy, you abandon your progress to immerse yourself in Husserl and Heidegger, you may learn a lot about philosophy and make little progress on your research. I honestly believe your need and capacity to dive more deeply into the philosophical foundations, not just of IPA but the entire philosophy of science, increases as you mature and accrue more experience as a researcher. I have, over time, made some adjustments to my teaching – moving away from use of philosophical information to introduce qualitative inquiry, and instead beginning with emphasis of the practical value and engaging in applied activities. I was influenced by an introductory qualitative text by Saldaña and Omasta (2017) which uses a similar sequence to the content. When I was a student, ontology, epistemology, counterfactual and others, were terms I tried to memorize definitions for, but I struggled to see the relevance to my work. However ,the more research I was involved in – in a variety of roles – the more I found myself craving deeper understanding and looking for new (or old) words to express my thoughts about Research, broadly speaking and not just the specific research I was doing. My general advice is to be aware of the underpinnings and what they mean to IPA and to your research and be able to use this knowledge to explain your approach to others. I would also not feel bad if you struggle to find time to read original works by Husserl right now and be open to the idea that you may be much more motivated to deeply explore the original sources as you continue to progress in your identity as a scholar or researcher.

7. **How to manage to respond to editors or journals when you get a revise and resubmit or accepted with major revisions when the main criticism of the study is having a small sample 3-6 people? Another issue that I find is reviewers not being familiar with IPA and criticizing the method.**

Thanks for this question – this is a subject that is very important to me. Someone recently self-published a book of terrible mean reviews given by art critics to artists. Luckily most of the contributing artists had a sense of humor, or have one now, about these comments. This idea stood out to me because I have for a long time wanted to save up and publish the terrible,

often mean comments from peer reviewers. The worst are those who tell you “you must” or “you cannot” do something and you know they are wrong. As with many things in life, how you respond depends on your role and your needs.

First, if you were not desk rejected by the editor prior to review, you have a chance of getting published. If you were asked to revise and resubmit, your chance is even better. No one is realistically (I hope) expecting you to go out and get more participants, revisit your analysis and then dramatically revise your paper. So I would view the sample size criticism as a potential opportunity for you to defend your work. Keep in mind you may not convince the reviewer, but it is the editor who makes the final decision, or should anyway. If I received (or when I do get) this criticism, I’m not going to do anything to my research, so I would keep this in mind when addressing other criticisms and look for small ways I might make revisions. The reviewer is a human, too, with some stake in this process (they put time and thought into it) and refusing to consider any of their recommendations is not ideal, although sometimes it cannot be helped.

Back to the sample size issue, your defense might begin with any relevance between sample/sample size and purpose, might include the idea that you have recruited very high-quality participants, includes the fact that data analysis processes are systematic and thorough so likely to yield high quality, credible, comprehensive findings. I would not mention that this is time consuming, or that you experienced challenges in recruitment, or anything else that sounds like an excuse. You may, if not already done, cite examples of small sample/single case studies including any that have been influential, or are somehow similar to your work.

If you do get desk rejected on sample size, my advice is to move on to another journal. There are, or have been some places I do not submit. Sometimes when the editor-in-chief changes, your opportunities may change, so periodically check to see if this has happened, if the journal is one you care about for disciplinary or other reasons.

Dealing with anti-IPA scholars may be a larger challenge. Sometimes these are experts and their opinions weigh heavily with editors. I see this as more of a danger than the sample size concern. In my experience anti-IPA scholars may be those who favor another variety of phenomenology and are skeptical about IPA. In this instance I think you must do the best you can to educate, using Smith and Nizza (2022) or Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2nd, 2022). I would for certain use an original source and not an open access article someone wrote about the method. If you can convince this reviewer your work is credible and was done with care, and your results are meaningful and informative, then even if they have personal dislike for or mistrust of the method, they may give a positive response to the editor.

Dealing with researchers who have some knowledge about qualitative research but not IPA – so the grounded theory only people, or the people who do not know there are different

approaches to qualitative inquiry – may present the most challenge of all. I saw someone once make a presentation about a qualitative research project and it was clear to me the individual's understanding of qualitative inquiry was very different from mine. The researcher incorporated quantitative criteria and made some critical remarks about qualitative inquiry I felt were unfair. But this was a senior faculty member who has received funding and published many works, so the researcher has had no reason to question their practice (clearly they are not publishing in the same journals I submit to). If you get this person or someone similar as a reviewer, they are not likely to respond positively to your efforts to educate them, as you are essentially attacking their believed expertise with regard to qualitative research (and rare are those people who embrace the opportunity to realize they do not know as much as they think they do). When you encounter the limited knowledge but highly confident reviewer, I think you need to acknowledge and agree as much as possible, and use evidence from others so it does not become an argument between you and the reviewer, e.g., "The reviewer is correct that grounded theory methods may benefit from a sample size of 30 +. However, according to Smith et al. (2022), the text which guided this study, smaller sample sizes are used in IPA because [insert useful quote here]".

The next-to-last piece of advice I have regarding unpleasant, opinionated, or uninformed reviewers, is to take opportunities when you find them, to talk in real time with other qualitative researchers, or other IPA-ers, compare notes, and let yourself find the humor in this. I have had many cathartic enjoyable conversations at reviewers' expense and fortunately they knew nothing about this.

The final piece of advice I have is participate in the peer review process yourself, be informed, take it seriously, and use your activity in this role to educate authors and your fellow reviewers, in the instance when editors share comments among reviewers You may find yourself telling authors how to rationalize their study, or how to describe their methods. But better to be part of the solution, than to let the problems persist and potentially discourage passionate researchers from publishing really meaningful work.

8. **When using mixed methods, would you seek out a different N for the quantitative methods of the study?**

   Thanks for asking this question. I think mixed methods studies have a lot to offer and am pleased whenever people are able to use these designs. What you described – two samples - may be a useful strategy although it depends on what comprises your quantitative data stream. You need to have an appropriate sample size for the chosen

statistical analysis methods and take into consideration effect size if you are looking for indicators of effect, such as a change in score or behavior. If the IPA interview sample is on the large side (12 or more, perhaps), and you have multiple bouts of quantitative data collection, then you have potential to generate more observations than if the interview sample is small and you can only gather data one time.

Another consideration is what constitutes the data of interest. If people are creating journal entries, or counting every time something occurs, a small sample can grow quickly. Multiple data points studies are examples of within subjects or repeated measures designs so the statistical assumption of independence is violated and your statistical analysis methods need to take this into consideration.

If you have in mind a fairly straightforward design such as interviews followed by or preceded by administration of a structured questionnaire or survey, you may need a larger sample and perhaps it will be a different sample. If inclusion criteria are well defined, then clearly the larger sample needs to be similar to the IPA interview sample. On the other hand, you may want to assess the applicability of items to a broader range of individuals, in which case use of a different sample can be justified to meet needs for analysis and needs for research design. In some circumstances, the IPA interview sample may comprise a subset of the quantitative sample.

9. **If we want to analyze how a psychotherapeutic treatment method worked for client/patient focusing at process, will you suggest grounded or IPA?**

Thanks for this question about fitting approach to research. I think there are several factors you need to consider with respect to addressing this area of interest with a research perspective. I also suggest in considering qualitative approaches, you not necessarily restrict the selection to IPA or grounded theory.

In general I view process questions as better addressed by grounded theory approaches. But if your sample is one client or patient, that is not adequate for theory-building. Due to the desire for comprehensive development of constructs within a theory-grounded-in-the-data, it would probably be essential to get other participants' perspectives. These might include not only multiple patients, but practitioners, people the client/patient interacts with outside of the treatment context, and maybe others, depending on the specifics of this setting. To build a theory of efficacy (or lack of), I believe you would benefit from developing a very comprehensive picture that takes into account as contextual details as possible. There may be

an existing body of knowledge to refer to – and a grounded theory study can certainly be informed by multiple data streams and types, including secondary uses of existing data.

If this feels like a new approach or new topic and you would benefit from in depth understanding of the experience as described by the client or patient, IPA may be a useful approach. Also, there is no reason results from an initial IPA study cannot be used to inform design or comprise data in a follow up grounded theory study. And if you really are starting at the beginning with trying to gain initial understanding, a single case IPA study might help give you valuable insights for designing and carrying out a future theory building research study. I think there is a common tendency to think of projects singly – plan, do, over, done, move on - when in fact, if you have a genuine research agenda, it is important to identify, create, and emphasize relationships among studies. Your prior or pilot work may be far more useful than the traditional/typical review of literature, for providing current context and a strong rationale for your follow up and ongoing work. IPA also does not require multiple perspectives and can be done with a single case. In this specific instance you may have the opportunity to conduct multiple interviews with one individual.

Other possible ways to approach this include use of language focused approaches like discourse analysis. Is the role, shape, intent, and use of language an area that might add insight regarding efficacy (and I am assuming treatment efficacy is a concern)? Another way to frame this is in a more general qualitative (or mixed methods) framework like evaluation research or a case study. Either of these approaches, like grounded theory, can accommodate multiple or mixed methods. (By "multiple" I mean more than one qualitative and/or more than one quantitative stream, and by "mixed" I mean at least one of each.) If you aim to see the extent to which something was effective, evaluation research, not just summative but developmental (see Patton, 2011), which is a dynamic way of seeing evaluation as an ongoing process, may provide a good guiding framework. Case study is more of a comprehensive view of the single case, so might incorporate an intentionally designed reflective interview with other available data like case or session notes, or responses to assessments or other measures. IPA could be a qualitative component within one of these larger frameworks, if it made the most sense to gather data to address an IPA consistent question. Alternately, to get broader details about how things went, a simple descriptive qualitative design, integrated with other data types, might provide ample insight.

The thing I think about with IPA is wanting to know what something feels like for someone, who has been involved in or engaged with or has or is experiencing that thing. If I want something more like their opinions, views or commentary, or their description of events and observations, and do not need to delve into *how that made them feel at that time,* then I'm not convinced IPA – appealing as it is- is necessarily the best approach.

10. **What are some strategies to bridge the reflexivity between the researcher and the people whose lived experiences are being analyzed? How can we enhance our understanding of a lived experience that is quite distant from our own?**

Thanks for this question – this is a challenge for a lto of researchers and is something that comes up in other qualitative contexts. I sit on my institution's IRB and the identity of interviewers is sometimes discussed because perceptions of the interviewer may influence the participant's responses and quality of data. You have gone further with your question to talk not just about generating data but about trying to adequately interpret the data.

To be honest, I believe there are some experiences that may be very, very difficult for analysts to appreciate fully. This may have to do with the individuals or contexts of the experience. Speaking as a person who has conducted research with some similar others and comfortable contexts, and also worked on projects that involve dissimilar others or unfamiliar contexts, I found the former easier and was more confident earlier on about my results. Some strategies I offer to address your concern include:

Be involved in as much of the research process as possible, from design to data gathering, through analysis, interpretation, and writing. Immerse yourself in context-associated content – whether it is research items, resources (maps, photographs) or even fiction (film, books, music, verse) to get a sense of familiarity with context, use and details. In some locations or groups, maybe in all locations or groups, I think there are distinct rhythms to life that comprise a sort of undercurrent or foundation (although it may be more fluid than solid) to life. Getting a sense of this rhythm can help you get in a good mindset to approach the research.

If conducting interviews yourself, and it is appropriate, ask for, or offer analogous circumstances. The ability to do this, and its effectiveness is very situation-specific and hopefully you can get a feel for whether this is an appropriate strategy in a given interview – it may just not feel right in some instances. But trying to find a common experience, as a comparison – for example if the participant describes stress associated with the experience of interest, and you and the participant are both graduate students, you might ask how the experience of interest compares to anxiety prior to a major exam or oral assessment, or something else you have in common. Regardless of the responses, you may get more vivid or relatable language regarding the original experience, or an alternative analogous experience, or both.

During analysis, I suggest you interrogate the data with some of the same things in mind, especially during initial commenting. Asking yourself "Is this like x?" may help you find clues in

another part of a transcript or recording, or in information from another case, assuming there are multiple participants.

What I have not addressed her are concerns related to language – such as translated language, or use of dialect or an abundance of unfamiliar idiomatic expressions. In those instances, I think you are best advised to get assistance in analysis from a person who has intimate knowledge of the language or language use. Even then, regional, family, local and generational differences may impact expressions, as may simple errors, such as malapropisms and mispronounciations.

11. How does one justify the selection of participants and non-selection of others who may be eligible on the basis of the enormity of analysis.

Thanks for this great question! If you are in the happy circumstance of having an excess of eligible, enthused, and available participants, it is hard to turn anyone down. In my experience, other factors help you select participants, including actual (versus potential) availability when you get serious about scheduling interviews, the time frame you have to work with, and some losses of people who expressed interest but for whatever reason become difficult to connect with. If your participants are equally appropriate, it may just be a matter of who is easiest to schedule. If someone has played a more substantial role – for instance has helped you recruit – I feel that you should do what you are able to include that person fully in an individual interview (assuming that is your method) if they want to participate.

For a labor-intensive analysis process like IPA, there is a tendency sometimes to not analyze all of the interviews, or work with all of the data. I believe this is doing a disservice to participants who have contributed their time and personal stories. So, while it may feel unkind to tell someone you already have ample participants, it is a far better decision than ending up doing an interview you do not make good use of.

I would not make it sound like a competition but in recruiting documents or approach wording, I recommend you let people know roughly how many participants you are looking for and indicate that priority will be given to the ones you are able to schedule soonest. That way you make it clear that there is a possibility that not everyone who expressed interest can be included. If you have a very large potential number of motivated participants, consider whether you can use some additional data stream – would responses to, for instance, a five-item survey about the experience of interest, or some standard assessment, be useful? If you had 100 responses to a brief survey and completed eight in depth interviews, you might find some potential to confirm or disconfirm the findings from the IPA process.

References cited in these responses:

Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use.* Guilford.

Saldaña, J. & Omasta, M. (2017). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life.* Sage (A second edition, published in 2021 is also available.)

Smith, J.A. Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* (2nd ed.), Sage. (A first edition was published in 2010.)

Smith, J.A. & Nizza I.E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis.* American Psychological Association.

Here are a couple of additional resources:

Interpretative phenomenological analysis – link to general information page hosted by Professor Jonathan Smith's institution:

http://www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk

International Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis interest group/email list

https://groups.io/g/ipaqualitative