

## **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

**Since last** decades, the mainstream experimental psychology based on quantitative methodology relied on a model, which involved testing theories by deriving hypotheses from them, which could then be checked in practice through an experiment or observation.<sup>1</sup> The researcher was looking for disconfirmation (falsification) of theory, and by eliminating claims which were not true he or she was believed to move closer to the truth. In contrast to this approach, we have observed a growing development of qualitative research methodologies, based on a different epistemological view.<sup>2</sup>

Qualitative researchers are mainly concerned with meaning (e.g., how individuals make sense of the world, how they experience events, what meaning they attribute to phenomena). In other words, they are more preoccupied with the quality of experience, rather than causal relationships. While quantitative research are generally more concerned with counting occurrences, volumes, or the size of associations between entities (which requires the reduction of phenomena to numerical values in order to carry out statistical analyses), a great deal of qualitative research aims to provide descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. In qualitative research, data is generally collected in naturalistic settings (at home, school, hospital). Both participants and researchers interpretation of phenomena is taken into account in the process of analysis.<sup>3</sup>

### **Formulating research questions**

Most qualitative research methodology rejects formulating hypotheses prior to research conduct. Instead, it promotes an open inductive approach to data collection and analysis. IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) emphasises studying people ideographically. It aims at generating rich and detailed descriptions of how individuals are experiencing phenomena under investigation.<sup>4</sup> Its concern with the in-depth exploration of their lived experiences and which how they are making sense of those experiences helps define the type of question which is suitable for an IPA study. Example research problems might be:

- What does jealousy feel like?
- How do young people experience the transition from school to college or university ?
- How do people make the decision whether or not undergo chemotherapy?

### **SAMPLING IN IPA**

The main concern in IPA is give full appreciation to each participant's account (case). For this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small, which enables a detailed and very time consuming case-by-case analysis. At an early stage, the researcher must decide whether he or she wants to give a comprehensive and in-depth analysis about a particular participant's experiences or present a more

general account on a group or specific population. Doing both is rarely possible, so the final goal will determine the subsequent methodology and research design. It is inappropriate to use a large sample size just because that is more common in psychological studies. With IPA, we aim at producing an indepth examination of certain phenomena, and not generating a theory to be generalized over the whole population.<sup>5</sup> (However, comparing multiple IPA studies on a particular problem may provide insights into universal patterns or mechanisms.)

#### COLLECTING DATA

The primary concern of IPA researchers is to elicit rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena under investigation. Semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews are the most popular method to achieve that, although other alternatives of data collection can also be used (e.g., diaries, focus groups, letters or chat dialogues). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time. They also give enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher may investigate in more detail with further questions.<sup>6</sup>

#### ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITATIVE MATERIAL

Analysing qualitative material using the IPA framework can be an inspiring activity, although complex and time-consuming. It is recommended that the researchers totally immerse themselves in the data or in other words, try step into the participants' shoes as far as possible. IPA aims at giving evidence of the participants' making sense of phenomena under investigation, and at the same time document the researcher's sense making.<sup>7</sup> the researcher is thus moving between the emic and etic perspectives. The latter is achieved by looking at the data through psychological lens and interpreting it with the application of psychological concepts and theories which the researcher finds helpful to illuminate the understanding of research problems. Showing the emic perspective protects researchers from psychological or psychiatric reductionism. On the other hand, by looking at data from the outsider's perspective, we have a chance to develop higher level theories and insights<sup>8</sup> (which the respondent himself or herself may have no access to). The researcher should be careful, however, when applying theories developed in one setting (e.g. western culture) to explain phenomena from a different one. Indigenous psychologists stipulate, that such theories might be irrelevant.<sup>9</sup>

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