

Book Report – “Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis:  
Theory, Method and Research”  
KA-719 ARM – Transformative Phenomenology  
E. Christopher Mare – March 2011

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) have written a practical and readily approachable yet stimulating introduction to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It was Smith himself who set the mark for IPA with the publication of his (1996) paper in *Psychology and Health*, a paper “which argued for an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative, and which could still dialogue with mainstream psychology” (p. 4). This intention to remain adaptable to new terrain yet complementary with existing approaches is repeated throughout the book; indeed, toward the end the authors suggest that “mixed methods approaches” – combining the meaning-making of IPA with the measurement and statistical analysis of cognitive psychology – “may have considerably more capacity to bring about change (in practices and policies) than singular designs” (p. 192-3). Nevertheless, throughout its history IPA has remained consistent to its original focus as “a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p. 1).

IPA has theoretical foundations in two major branches of philosophy: phenomenology and hermeneutics. The book provides insightful overviews of the work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre – as innovators in the field of phenomenology – and Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer – as influential theorists in the field of hermeneutics. In each case, the authors distill essential philosophical principles from these thinkers while adapting these principles to the practice of qualitative psychological research. For example, it is observed from looking at phenomenology, “we have come to see that the complex understanding of ‘experience’ invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person’s embodied and situated relationship to the world” (p. 21). This is precisely what the authors thought was missing in mainstream psychology, this appreciation of lived experience *in context*, and the meaning that might be derived by interpreting this experience, which brings in the hermeneutic aspect. Additionally, IPA is defined as being “idiographic,” which means that it is concerned with particular individuals’ experiences rather than with broad faceless surveys. These, then, comprise the theoretical foundations of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

The authors provide quite an extensive treatment of research methodologies consistent with IPA. It seems as if they want to set a standard for how IPA is used; and I believe this standard is an attempt to assure respectability for IPA – and qualitative research more generally – in the eyes of traditional psychological peers. In the book, separate chapters are devoted to “Planning an IPA research study,” “Collecting data,” “Analysis,” and “Writing.” Explication of

each of these important aspects of qualitative research is guided by the overall purpose that makes it uniquely IPA: “In choosing IPA for a research project, we commit ourselves to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences. Thus, IPA researchers need first of all to access rich and detailed personal accounts” (p. 40). With this in mind, choosing IPA over any other qualitative approach should be based on assessing whether or not the research question will be able to access such rich and detailed accounts. As the authors repeatedly remind us, “IPA research is always concerned with the detailed examination of lived experience” (p. 47).

As I was reading through the methodology chapters, I got the impression that success of an IPA study is utterly dependent on the willingness of the research “participants” to divulge very personal, and often quite sensitive, material about their lived experience. At times I wondered how many people are even capable of this – not only to reveal themselves so openly within the context of a “research study” but to reveal themselves in an articulate enough manner that psychological interpretations can be derived? For example, the authors suggest that much potential awaits in utilizing diaries as the basis for IPA studies (p. 57). I have to admit, I wouldn’t want to show my diaries to anybody, especially knowing that they will be intently scrutinized, line by line, for the purpose of finding rich “data” upon which to make a psychological interpretation. Trust will be a real issue here. Perhaps for this reason, the authors portray the research interview as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). Semi-structured interviews with a schedule are recommended for beginning researchers while the ideal seems to be to advance in competency to the point where unstructured interviews – what might be called ‘empathic conversations’ – are employed. This stage involves developing a “research persona” (p. 67) guided by strict professional ethics.

The process of converting data into a meaningful (and publishable) psychological interpretation is well-covered in the book. Once again, it seems to be the intention of the authors to encourage diffusion of IPA studies, yet to do so in a way which will continue to confer credibility on qualitative approaches. In this sense, I thought the chapters devoted to “Analysis” and “Writing” often verged on the prosaic, even tutorial – as if the intention was to guide students in the organization of their thoughts and the preparation for a final report. More experienced practitioners may find this material helpful as a way to cross-reference their own thought processes. Within this milieu, a particularly valuable concept emerges by observing the phenomenon of the “double hermeneutic:” “IPA is concerned with examining how a participant makes sense of, or sees meaning in, their experience. We have suggested that sense-making is indeed a core human activity and one that participants share with researchers; hence the double hermeneutic whereby the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant making sense of x” (p. 187). Perhaps this could be expanded to a *triple* hermeneutic by noting that the *reader* is trying to make sense of the researcher who is trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of their lived experience. Thus it all comes down to interpretation: “Interpretation in IPA is a form of *amplification* or *illumination* of meaning” (p. 204-5, emphasis in original).

*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (2009) incorporates four useful case studies to demonstrate exemplary IPA research in action: Flowers contributes a chapter devoted to “sex and sexuality,” Larkin a chapter on “psychological distress,” and Smith provides two reports: “health and illness” and “life transitions and identity.” We can see by the content of these case studies that the IPA approach lends itself well to interpreting personal lived experience of a very deep and potentially emotional nature; thus it is able to access profoundly meaningful psychological content that quantitative studies could never reach. I was struck when reading these accounts by the vivid emotional testimony the researchers were able to capture in their reports. I was touched by the frail “humanness” of the participants’ description of their lived experiences. To be sure, these were not experiences common to everyone; indeed, the participants were chosen for these studies because they had special conditions that would be of interest for psychological analysis – and that’s what made the accounts so vividly *human*, how the participants attempted to make sense of their condition within the context of trying to live a so-called normal life.

This book is a wonderful introduction to IPA research in particular and qualitative psychological research more generally; it is suitable for both the novice and the experienced practitioner. In the penultimate chapter, the authors extend to their peers a survey of how IPA relates to other approaches. Distinctions and commonalities are drawn between IPA and cognitive psychology, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, narrative analysis, embodiment approaches such as neurophenomenology, Giorgi’s structural phenomenological focus, Van Manen’s explicitly hermeneutic phenomenological framework, and grounded theory, the main alternative method for someone considering IPA. Throughout the survey, IPAs particular strength is revealed as accommodating those studies, or research questions, which wish to access “identity development” and “emotional experience” (p. 200). Within the explorations of these phenomena, the researcher needs to remain aware that “the important thing is that interpretations should be clearly developed from the phenomenological core, from the concerns of the participants themselves” (p. 204). The authors assert that this is what they mean when they say “interpretations should come from within, rather than from without” (p. 204). With this position, IPA amounts to a profound re-orientation to traditional psychology, perhaps a revolution in meaning-making – for no longer is the origin of meaning coming from the theoretical framework of a detached ‘expert;’ rather, meaning originates in the sensitive interpretation of the real experiences of real people in real life contexts. Perhaps that is why the authors are able to claim: “IPA provides a fascinating and very rich way of engaging with, and understanding, other people’s worlds” (p. 205).