

Supplementary file

Pearls of wisdom: Rationale for using interpretive phenomenological analysis and the single case study or ‘gem’

This supplement to the paper *Pearls of wisdom: Using the single case study or gem to identify strategies for mediating stress and work-life imbalance in healthcare staff*, has been written to expand on the rationale for using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and to provide greater detail on the data analysis process and how themes are identified in IPA.

Rationale for IPA

My rationale for using IPA in this study was based on a four-fold decision making process. First, the nature of the study was well suited to a phenomenological approach i.e. the subjective nature of everyday experience (Finlay, 2009). Second and crucially, IPA has a distinctive prismatic lens that focuses on individual meaning-making; thus it is ‘meticulously idiographic’ (Smith, 2015: 646). It is this approach that validates its interest in the unique individual case and the notion of the gem i.e. ‘the small extract that offers powerful illumination of the topic under investigation’ (Smith, 2015: 646). Third, IPA offers a clear and transparent process to work through in terms of data analysis and adopts an interpretive stance that supports the active nature of the researcher as a co-participant in the process of sense-making and analysis. This is done through the use of the *double hermeneutic*, a method that offers a means to evince how:

The participants are trying to make sense of their world; [and] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world (Smith and Osborn, 2008: 53).

Finally, IPA is embedded in philosophical principles that draw from descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism and interweaves these three strands to create a unique approach that:

- Attempts to ‘go back to the things themselves’ (Husserl, 1900-1901/2002: 168 cited in Smith, 2015: 644), in an ability to explain the *essence* of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009).
- Applies the *interpretive* element of hermeneutics, accepting the researcher as an active participant in the study and understanding that to be human is essentially a process of meaning making through interpretation.
- Incorporates an interest in how individuals construct *meaning* and *make sense* of their everyday life experiences in the *social* and *cultural* contexts in which they exist. This situates individual narratives and the sense-making processes within the real-world situation, facilitating the exploration of both intersubjective and enculturated accounts (Smith et al., 2009).

These strands are underpinned by an existential ‘lifeworld’ and idiographic perspective that identifies IPA as a methodology with a phenomenological ontology and epistemology in its own right. This not only makes IPA distinct from other forms of phenomenology that hold different perspectives, but also other qualitative methods and approaches. This further identifies why IPA is much more than a process of thematic analysis, which is a method or tool without an associated methodological or epistemological perspective (Tuffour, 2017).

The data analysis process

In line with the interpretive nature of IPA, analysis requires an inductive (working from the data) and iterative (re-entering and re-examining that data) stance, accompanied by a reflexive and rigorous approach to interpretation (Smith and Osborn, 2008). By using the hermeneutic cycle to support self-questioning and inductive reasoning, so a reflexive stance to the emerging themes was taken.

To support transparency and robustness in the process, a diary was kept and reflexive notations, along with the emerging themes, were discussed with a mentor who was an experienced IPA researcher. This second layer of exploration and discussion was formative in addressing my own process of sense-making and subjectivity in terms of the emerging nature of the individual's themes.

The idiographic nature of IPA requires an in-depth examination of each case in its own right before progressing onto the next. To support this, interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture individual nuances and emerging themes were directly linked to participants voices. I found mind maps to work exceptionally well in supporting this process because the emerging themes could be linked directly to the voice of the participant. These could also be colour coded and simply organised into the different branches of the map software.

To assure credibility in the data collection process itself, I asked for clarification during the interviews and summarised emerging themes at the end of each interview to check out shared meanings and understandings (Smith et al., 2009). Working as a first stage of interpretive analysis, this type of clarification is a form of member checking; but also facilitates the researcher to be a ‘vocal collaborator’ in the data collection process (Rapley, 2001: 22). It offers the opportunity for the researcher and indeed the participant, to investigate and challenge preconceptions by seeking clarification in the interview situation and thus assure sense-making in terms of the emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). Applying these strategies aimed to assure the credibility and transparency of the data collection and analysis process (Smith et al., 2009). To explicate this, let’s look at the stages I passed through when working with Arial’s individual story.

Analysing Arial’s story

Although not prescriptive, IPA offers a staged approach to guide data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). First, as noted previously, each transcript is analysed one transcript at a time. The data is read and re-read for sense-making and the text is annotated with any points of interest. This stage is about making sense of the narrative, noting critical sections or areas of interest, identifying patterns and noting any ‘contradictions and paradoxes’ (Smith et al., 2009: 82).

Following the IPA process I entered Arial’s data and explored the *descriptive, linguistic* and *conceptual* comments made in the text (Smith et al., 2009: 84).

First at the *descriptive* level I noted in detail, what Arial was actually saying. This built on the initial phase of sense-making I had encountered in the interview (and field note) stage and enabled me to come to understand Arial’s perspective as a person.

Second, I considered the *linguistic* content of the transcript. This is about noting the way content and meaning are presented by the participant; it includes highlighting phrases, metaphors and use of language to express feelings. If you look at the main paper, you will see I have italicised some comments by Ariel – this reflects the emphasis she gives to certain statements or reflects an emotional response in her story. By noting and inductively working with these kinds of elements I began to unfold a contextual and meaning-making approach to the analysis.

Following on from this I re-entered the data to identify any *conceptual* sections i.e. to explore the more abstract and tacit elements of the narrative. This is a critical process and requires attention and time. It was a particularly interesting process for Ariel as her narrative had this potential contradiction in terms of her presentation. As noted in the main paper she spoke of a need to utilise a process of ‘internal talking’ (see main paper) in order to reconcile herself to her choices to be family orientated and not only work part-time, but actively withdraw from seeking promotion. Yet intriguingly, she also posited a potential ‘what if’ in terms of making other choices that could have offered her a more traditional career path:

So you’ve got to make choices because there’s probably a lot more I could have done [in my career]..... Or I might have, you know, made the decision I wasn’t happy with it [being family centred; not seeking promotion] and probably feel *awful or upset then that I hadn’t risen with the ranks.*

My initial response was ‘Aha here is the *real* truth... she *does* feel bad; she really does want the career and she *does* feel compromised’; but however hard I tried to explicate that potential truth, to pinch a phrase from AA Milne (1994:126), the more I looked inside the more it wasn’t there. So what did I do? There were several interrelated processes that had been applied and/or were in action that enabled me to move forward from this point.

Developing the themes

I re-entered the data and tried to make sense of Arial's story by looking for patterns and connections between emerging themes. I also interrogated the text for 'oppositional relationships' (Smith et al 2009: 96); those things that sit uncomfortably with the wider narrative or are negative in aspect. I was particularly attentive to her approach to work and to her family values. I looked for frequency in doubts and possible hidden or unrecognised dilemmas in terms of the work-life choices she had made. I reflected on the nature of the narrative and whether the story served a function, for example a presentation of self to assuage a compromise or conflict. I also reflected on the interaction in the interview itself and the dialogue we had co-created. I found my reflexive diary and the guidance of my mentor most useful in this process.

Reflexive engagement

Reflexivity is of course, a crucial tool throughout the IPA data analysis process and as the researcher I had to continually check out and consider my own unique sense-making process; this was to assure that any bias, where possible, was challenged and transparent.

From my personal experience, Arial's themes were a real test for me in addressing my own previously unrecognised assumptions. As noted in the main paper, my initial thoughts following the interview with Arial were that there was nothing of worth in her narrative; this was because she reported *no* work-life imbalance issues and very little work-based stress. I was acutely aware that my 'aha' response at this point too was in line with that thinking (so was it wrong? biased?). This was supported by the fact that my assumption just did not pan out in the context of the rest of narrative; there was something inherently honest about the way Arial described her process of 'internal talking' to 'justify things to yourself and being happy with that I think'. I was uncomfortably aware of that and this made me more alert to the meaning and sense making process in terms of Arial's worldview. The application of the double hermeneutic at this point of the data analysis really helped me to meet this self-imposed challenge.

Questioning and the double hermeneutic

IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side. To facilitate this, IPA analysis involves asking critical questions of the data for example: 'What is the person trying to achieve here? Is something leaking out that wasn't intended? Did I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?' (Smith and Osborn, 2008: 53-54). As a questioning approach can also be used at the data collection point itself i.e. in the interview situation, I was also able to investigate Arial's own sense-making in terms of her choices in situ, as she described them to me, and as the narrative unfolded. In simple terms I was able to ask Arial questions about *why* and *how* she had no work-life balance/ stress issues as we co-participated in the interview; thus, I was able to explore with her some of her decisions and choices first hand.

It was this technique of questioning, both within the interview and data transcript analysis stage that facilitated the emergence of Arial's process of: first rationalisation; then second and essentially, the ability to reconcile herself to any potential concessions she had to make to achieve her chosen preferences. It was through this process, along with the reflexive approach that I employed that I was eventually able to recognise that Arial was reconciled with her choice *because* there was a sense of congruence with her personal values and those of her family that she was content to nurture. Without the use of this questioning and interpretive strategy I may have lost the opportunity to capture the understandings and meaning making processes she so clearly described because, at the time of collecting or analysing them, I did not recognise their value to the wider study. As Laudan succinctly (1977: 15) puts it:

Both historical examples and recent philosophical analysis have made it clear that the world is always perceived through the 'lenses' of some conceptual network or other and that such networks and the languages in which they are embedded may, for all we know, provide an ineliminable 'tint' to what we perceive.

To date I have described the analysis of one single case. In a larger IPA study this process is completed for all individual participants in turn. Following completion of this, the second stage of analysis is to expand the process to consider the connections and differences across the different interview data sources i.e. each unique interview. This critical process of comparative analysis results in the clustering of themes into a synthesised table of themes from all data sources. For me, some of these were clearly common to all participants; others, and specifically in Arial's case, were unique, yet powerful enough to offer a critical lens to data analysis and so included in this table. As this interpretive process continued, so the third stage of analysis began to take place and a final table of key themes was produced (Smith et al., 2009).

This process can be challenging because the final themes have to be ‘warrantable within the data and checked out’, meaning that the link of the key themes to data is an integral aspect of quality and rigour in the writing up process (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008: 220). To support this process, data was triangulated, to a certain extent, by iteratively working with emerging themes, checking these with existing theories, other participants’ accounts and identifying patterns and differences in the data to question themes as they emerged (Silverman, 2005). It was at this point Arial’s gem really came to the fore and began to shine a light onto the wider corpus of the study. These processes all serve to increase the transparency, credibility and trustworthiness of both data analysis and the emergent themes and thus support the rigour of the IPA process. As Pringle et al., (2011) posit, the effectiveness of any IPA study and its transferability can be measured by the richness and transparency of the account given, the credibility of its analysis in terms of its links with current literature, and the light it throws into the wider context. These then are key issues to consider in any IPA study and I hope, through this supplement, I have gone some way to explain how you can achieve them.

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