QSIG Qualitative Research Method Seminar Series

Exploring Lived Experience Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): Reflections from Dementia Care Research in Rural China

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About Me

- A final year PhD student in Nursing studies at the University of Edinburgh

- Background as a registered nurse in China

- Research Focuses: Dementia care

- My PhD programme: Exploring the lived experiences of caregivers of people with dementia in rural Chinese care homes using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Today's journey Through IPA

- Historical Foundations of IPA

- Emergence and Methodological Evolution of IPA

- Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA

- Why IPA for My PhD Research

- Research Conducted Through an IPA Lens

What is IPA?

IPA is concern with:

- Personal lived experience

- The meaning of the experience to the participant

- How the participant makes sense of the experience

- People as meaning makers

> **We explore 'experience in its own terms'** (Smith et al., 2022, p.1)

Historical Foundations of IPA

Phenomenology as a Predecessor

- Phenomenology is an umbrella term for a philosophical movement and a range of research methods and methodologies

- Phenomenological philosophy was a movement inaugurated by Husserl in the early 20th century as a new and radical way to do philosophy

- A body of work from a number of thinkers

- The philosophical study of *'being'* and/or (human) experience

- A return to concrete, lived human experience

Key Thinkers in Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl – Descriptive Phenomenology

- Defined phenomenology as the study of the *essence of conscious* experience.

- Advocated *"going back to the things themselves":* setting aside preconceptions to access pure experience.

- Introduced the *phenomenological attitude* and the method of *bracketing* (epoché) to suspend judgment about the natural world.

Martin Heidegger – Hermeneutic (Interpretative) Phenomenology

- Shifted focus from pure description to *interpretation* of lived experience.

- Developed the concept of *"being-in-the-world" (Dasein):* existence is always situated and relational.

- Emphasised *historical and social context* as inseparable from experience.

Key Thinkers in Phenomenology

Maurice Merleau-Ponty – Embodied Phenomenology

- Argued that perception is foundational to how we engage with and understand the world.

- Emphasised that experience is inherently *embodied* — we relate to the world not only through cognition but through bodily perception and action.

Jean-Paul Sartre – Existential Phenomenology

- Focused on *freedom, choice, and responsibility* as central to subjective experience.

- *Existence precedes essence*: we define ourselves through existence and action.

- Asserted that humans are *"condemned to be free",* always responsible for how they respond to circumstances.

Emergence and Evolution of IPA

- The philosophy is important, but phenomenology is something available to all of us

- Challenge: to translate philosophy into research methodology/method

    IPA attempts to do this

- This connects IPA with core ideas from a number of phenomenological philosophers: complementary rather than competing
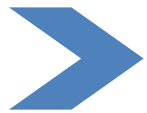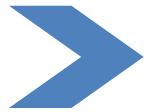
Emergence and Evolution of IPA

- IPA was initially developed by Jonathan Smith in 1996 within health psychology, and later expanded by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, etc.

- Bridges the gap between abstract philosophical concepts and empirical investigation

- Over time, IPA evolved into a structured yet flexible methodology:

  - Ongoing philosophical engagement with meaning-making

  - Clear stages for data collection and analysis

- Evolution from individual psychological studies to diverse health and social research

Theoretical underpinnings of IPA

Phenomenology

Hermeneutics

Idiography

Phenomenology in IPA: The Study of Lived Experience

Rooted in Husserl's Phenomenology:

- Return to 'things themselves' and intentionality (consciousness directed toward something)
- Bracketing (epoché) to focus on pure experience. (IPA adopt a more reflexive bracketing)

Heidegger's Influence:

- Being-in-the-world (Dasein) and situated, embodied existence
- IPA aligns more closely with Heidegger's interpretative stance

Merleau-Ponty's Contribution:

- Embodied experience: perception through the lived body, not just cognition

Sartre's Existentialist Influence:

- Meaning-making as a dynamic, ongoing process
- Emphasis on freedom, choice, and becoming

Hermeneutics in IPA: Key Thinkers and Contributions

Key Hermeneutic Thinkers in IPA:

- Schleiermacher: Holistic textual and psychological interpretation.

- Heidegger: Fore-structures of understanding; situatedness of interpretation.

- Gadamer: Fusion of horizons — meaning emerges through dialogue between past and present perspectives.

IPA's Hermeneutic Stance:

- Interpretation is inevitable and productive, not a distortion of experience.

- The researcher's perspective is part of the meaning-making process.

- "The Hermeneutic Circle" and "Double Hermeneutics".

Hermeneutics in IPA: The Hermeneutic Circle

The dynamic relationship between part and whole in the interpretative process.

Part		Whole
Single word		Sentence in which word is embedded
Single extract		Complete text
Particular text		The complete works
Interview		Research project
Single episode		Complete life

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Hermeneutics in IPA: The Hermeneutic Circle

- Interpretative process moving between part and whole at multiple levels

- Understanding the part through the whole and the whole through its parts

- Applied at different levels within IPA research:
  - Non-linear analytical process of moving back and forth
  - Enables deeper levels of interpretation
  - Ensures interpretations remain grounded in participants' accounts
  - Researchers oscillate between the participants' accounts and the broader context to develop a richer understanding.

Influencing the world since 1583

Hermeneutics in IPA: Double Hermeneutic

The researcher is making sense of the participants' making sense of their experience

Two interpretative stances:

- Empathic hermeneutics: Trying to understand experience from the participant's perspective

- Questioning hermeneutics: Asking critical questions about the account

Implications for Research:

- The researcher's role is active and explicit in the interpretative process

- Interpretations go beyond participants' explicit claims

- Balance between "giving voice" and "making sense"

- Requires reflexivity throughout the research process

- Establishes transparency about the researcher's role in co-constructing meaning

Idiography in IPA: Commitment to the Particular

Idiographic Foundation:

- Focus on specific experiential phenomena understood by particular individuals in particular contexts

Two levels of commitment:

- Depth of analysis for and detailed, contextualised engagement with individual cases
- Understanding specific phenomena in particular contexts

Idiography in Practice: Research Design and Process

Study design:

- Purposive, contextually-informed sampling
- Selection of participants who offer insight into the specific phenomenon
- Small, relatively homogeneous samples are traditionally recommended

Data Collection:

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews
- Prioritising depth over breadth
- Encouraging participants to articulate experiences in their own terms

Data Analysis:

- A case-by-case approach before cross-case comparison
- Detailed engagement with individual transcripts
- Stepwise movement from individual to shared themes
- Preserving individual voices within broader analysis

My PhD Research Focus

Understanding dementia caregiving in Chinese care homes in rural areas of China:

- Exploring the lived experiences of formal caregivers (care assistants, managers and healthcare workers) of people with dementia within care homes.

- Examining multiple perspectives within shared caregiving environments.

- Highlighting caregiving practices in under-researched rural Chinese institutionalised contexts.

My PhD Research Context

The rural care home settings:

- Rural institutional care settings in China – less developed and in their infancy.

- Emerging care infrastructure with limited training and resources.

- Cultural values such as filial piety and societal expectations strongly influence caregiving perceptions and practices.

Participants Characteristics:

- Most participants are middle-aged or older adults

- Limited formal education and professional dementia knowledge

- Navigating caregiving within constrained environments (e.g., heavy workload, lack of rest) and evolving societal expectations.

Why IPA was Particularly Suitable

Alignment with research aims:

- IPA's focus on subjective lived experience matches the complexity of the dementia caregiving experience.
- IPA validates experiences shaped by cultural and resource constraints.

Suitability for under-represented Voices:

- Participants had limited formal education and constrained resources.
- IPA enabled stepping into their world, respecting their meaning-making processes.
- Avoids imposing predefined theoretical models; foregrounds participants' own perspectives.

Multiple perspectives IPA

o Extends to a relatively larger group of participants by combining two or more focal perspectives

o People are involved in a system or group, and have shared an experience (care assistants, managers and healthcare workers of people with dementia)

| each perspective illuminates an important aspect of a shared experience | consider the relational, intersubjective, and microsocial dimensions of a given phenomenon |

Data collection

IPA is best suited to the method that will invite participants to offer rich, detailed, first-person account of their experience (Smith et al., 2022).

In-depth interviews   Diaries

Facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon

Data Collection Reflection

Researcher positioning:

- Built rapport and self-preparation through cultural sensitivity and genuine curiosity

- Consciously adopted a stance as a learner rather than an expert

- Recognised participants as authorities on their own experiences

- Maintained awareness of power dynamics in the research relationship

Bracketing and Reflexivity during the interview:

- Aware of preconceptions from academic dementia knowledge

- Actively worked to suspend pre-defined frameworks during interviews, to make sure participants' perceptions reflect their genuine experiences

IPA Data Analysis

- Starting with the first case (Reading and re-reading)

Exploratory
noting

Searching for connections
across experiential statements

Experiential
statements

Personal experiential
themes (PETs)

- Case by case (bracketing the preconception)
- Group experiential themes (GETs) across cases

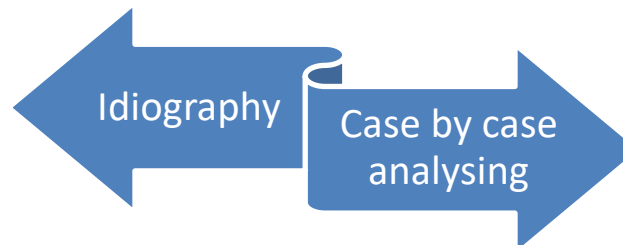(Smith et al., 2022)

Data Analysis

In IPA' case, that focus directs the analytic attention towards the participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences.

Typically, analysis could been described as an iterative an inductive cycle (Smith, 2007) .

- Moving from the particular to the shared
- From the descriptive to the interpretative
- A commitment to an understanding of the participants' point of view
- psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts

Data Analysis

Bracketing the preconception refers to the process by which the researcher temporarily sets aside their own preconceptions and biases in order to better understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Idiography

Case by case analysing

Be aware of and mindful of the researchers' preconception when interpretation

Data Analysis Reflection

Commitment to Experience-Close Interpretation:

- Regularly asked reflective questions during analysis:

    - "Is this truly the participant's perspective?"

    - "Am I imposing my assumptions?"

- Avoiding the imposition of predefined knowledge (e.g., personalised care strategies & person-centred care; unique intention and motivation)

Ongoing Reflexive Practice:

- Acknowledged the dynamic relationship between the researcher's cultural background and interpretation.

Data analysis

Original transcripts	Exploratory notes-Descriptive	EN-linguistic	EN-conceptional	Fieldnotes&reflection	Experiential statements
G: Actually, for this job, theoretically, the key is you have to care about every elderly person (residents there) unconditionally and this is your responsibility as a caregiver, right? In another word, it is to treat the elderly (care receiver) like your parents, and treat the elderly as if they were your own relatives. If you have this kind of kindness and love, you can do your job well, right? That's the premise.	Emphasis the caring attitude for care receivers on his work	'theoretically, unconditionally and responsibility' shows G put the caring attitude as an obligation of the caregiving job

Parents and relatives are metaphors for caregivers' caring attitude as responsibilities and obligations. | Put the moral standard as important and obligatory requirement of CAs | In Chinese culture, it has been a consensus that taking care of parents is an obligation and responsibility of the children. | Obligated to providing care in a caring way |

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Data analysis

• Multiple perspectives design

- Developing PETs for each participant

- GETs for each sub-sample (add another layer for analysis)

- Work across the sub-samples and their GETs to produce experiential themes for the whole sample

Identifying patterns and connections, or indeed conflicts and differences, between and across groups or system

It is effectively a mini-meta-synthesis, not only within a sample but also between samples

Conclusion: Reflections on IPA in Dementia Care Research

Strengths:

- Enabled rich, contextually grounded exploration of complex caregiving experiences.
- Supported participant-led meaning-making rather than imposing predefined frameworks.

Challenges:

- Balancing deep interpretation while staying close to participants' original expressions.
- Managing personal reflexivity — ensuring academic preconceptions did not overshadow participants' meaning-making.

Contribution: Expanded understanding of dementia care in culturally-specific, resource-limited settings

Future directions:

- Potential for informing culturally-sensitive care practices and policies

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Thanks for listening!

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