

The Theoretical Underpinnings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the ways in which IPA draws on these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework. In addition, IPA's relations to other phenomenological approaches and issues of validity and quality in IPA studies are also considered.

Keywords

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); Epistemology; Theory; Quality and Validity in IPA.

Introduction

This paper is about the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. It was written in part as a response to the persistent view, not least in this journal, that IPA lacks a sound theoretical basis. Despite a large number of theoretical and empirical articles and a major book published since 1996, Sousa (2008) contends that IPA 'presents its theoretical basis in two pages' (p.149). More recently, Giorgi (2010) states that: 'The originators of IPA have given no indication as to how their method is related to philosophical phenomenology' (p.6). As a lecturer and a supervisor of research students I am aware that this view has influenced students, some of them readers of *Existential Analysis*, who sometime express the view that IPA is 'easy to do' as it does not require grappling with complex theoretical issues. This may be in part understandable considering, as Willig (2008) contends, that the introduction of IPA into psychology has made phenomenological methodology accessible to those who do not have a philosophical background. However, for students of existential-phenomenological psychotherapy, lack of engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, sometimes encouraged by comments like those of Sousa and Giorgi, seems a missed opportunity. I believe that with its theoretical underpinnings in phenomenology and hermeneutics and its idiographic perspective, IPA offers a method that is congruent with the existential-phenomenological paradigm and at the same time can link existential-

phenomenological research with the wider research literature in psychology.

This paper focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of IPA and the ways in which IPA draws on these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework. In addition, IPA's relations to other phenomenological approaches and issues of validity and quality in IPA studies are also considered.

Theoretical underpinnings of IPA

IPA was first used as a distinctive research method in psychology in the mid-1990s. In a seminal paper, Smith (1996) argued for an approach to psychology that will enable researchers to capture the qualitative and experiential dimension, yet still dialogue with mainstream psychology. His argument was that psychology could and should be both experimental and experiential. Smith drew on theoretical ideas from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and on an engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts. IPA is also influenced by symbolic interactionism with its concern for how meanings are constructed by individuals within both their social and their personal world (for overviews see Eatough & Smith, 2008 and Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Smith et al. (2009) describe IPA as 'an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography' (p.11). IPA draws on each of these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology.

The phenomenological philosophy initiated by Husserl provides IPA with a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience. In Husserl's conception, in order to be able to examine everyday experience, it is necessary to step back from the 'natural attitude', i.e. being unreflectively immersed in the taken-for-granted world. Instead, Husserl proposed a 'phenomenological attitude' which involves methodical steps in a process of 'phenomenological reduction'. Reduction in this context signifies 'a 'leading back' (*re-ducere*) or redirection of thought away from its unreflective and unexamined immersion in experience of the world to the way in which the world manifests itself to us' (Thompson & Zahavi, 2007, p.69). Thus, according to Husserl, adopting the 'phenomenological attitude' involves turning one's gaze towards how the object appears to consciousness:

Focusing our experiencing gaze on our own psychic life necessarily takes place as reflection ... Every experience can be subject to such reflection... when we are fully engaged in conscious activity, we focus exclusively on the specific thing, thoughts, values, goals or means involved, but not on the psychical experience as such, in which these

things are known as such. Only reflection reveals this to us. Through reflection ... We grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become 'conscious' of them, in which (in the broadest sense) they 'appear'. For this reason, they are called 'phenomena' and their most general essential character is to exist as the 'consciousness of', 'appearance of' the specific things thoughts (judged states of affairs, grounds, conclusions), plans, decisions, hopes, and so forth

(Husserl, 1927, para. 2, quoted in Smith et al., 2009, p.12-13).

In the extract above, Husserl refers to one's 'own psychic life'. As a philosopher, he was engaged in conducting a phenomenological inquiry on his own experience. However, in psychological research from a phenomenological perspective, a shift of focus and a modification in method is required towards engaging with other people's experiences (Giorgi, 1997; Smith et al., 2009), while still maintaining a phenomenological attitude. Considered from the perspective of IPA, Smith et al. (2009) contend that 'like Husserl, we see phenomenological research as systematically and attentively reflecting on everyday lived experience, and with Husserl we see that that everyday experience can be either first-order activity or second-order mental and affective responses to that activity - remembering, regretting, desiring, and so forth' (p.33).

IPA is also influenced by the phenomenological and existential perspectives of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, which consider the person as embodied and embedded in the world, in a particular historical, social and cultural context. Moran (2000) contends that 'the philosophers who in some sense identified with the practice of phenomenology are extraordinarily diverse in their interests, in their interpretation of the central issues of phenomenology, in their application of what they understood to be the phenomenological method, and in their development of what they took to be the phenomenological programme for the future of philosophy' (p.3). IPA operates within these intellectual currents of phenomenology in the context of psychology, as it is concerned with exploring human lived experience and the meanings which people attribute to their experiences.

In agreement with Heidegger's views, IPA considers phenomenological inquiry as an interpretative process. From a Heideggerian perspective, 'the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation' (Heidegger, 1962, p.37). Although developed as two separate philosophical movements, Heidegger (1962) presents hermeneutics as a prerequisite to phenomenology: 'the phenomenology of Dasein is hermeneutic in the primordial signification of the word, where it designates the business of interpreting' (p.62). Phenomenology requires the

uncovering of meanings concealed by the phenomenon's mode of appearing. Thus, Moran (2000) contends that

Phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which is perhaps hidden by the entity's mode of appearing. In that case the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text and for this reason Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics. How things appear or are covered up must be explicitly studied. The things themselves always present themselves in a manner which is at the same time self-concealing

(ibid, p. 229).

Heidegger follows the original Greek etymology of the term 'phenomenon', meaning 'to show itself' 'to bring to the light of day, to put in the light' (Heidegger, 1962, p.51). The task of phenomenology is therefore 'to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself' (ibid, p.58). In Heidegger's conception the process engages the notion of '*aletheia*', the Greek term for truth in the 'sense of "dis-closing", "un-covering", "discovering", "revealing", that is: making manifest that which in some sense lies hidden' (Moran, 2000, p.230). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty (1964) contends that 'the proper essence of the visible is to have a layer of invisibility ... which it makes present as a certain absence' (p.187).

The process of revealing and making manifest what may be hidden engages the question of interpretation, as indicated in Heidegger's concept of logos. Heidegger translates *logos* as 'discourse' (*Rede*)' (Moran, 2000, p.229). According to Heidegger, discourse refers to a primordial human capacity which enables people to communicate with others:

Discourse is the articulation of intelligibility. Therefore it underlies both interpretation and assertion. That which can be articulated in interpretation and thus even more primordially in discourse is what we have called "meaning" ... The way in which discourse gets expressed is language

(Heidegger, 1962, p.203-4)

As discourse refers to a primordial human capacity, what is potentially disclosed is already immersed in the context of being-in-the-world. Therefore every interpretation is already contextualized in previous experience and can never be presuppositionless: 'Interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance – in a fore-having' (ibid, p.191). For every 'interpretation will be founded essentially upon the fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception' (ibid):

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a 'signification' over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on

it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation

(Heidegger, 1962, p190).

IPA is also interpretative in recognizing the role of the researcher in making sense of the experience of participants. Smith (2004) refers to 'double hermeneutics: The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world' (p.40). The researcher's point of access to participants' experience is through their accounts and through the researcher's own 'fore-conception'. The challenge for the researcher is therefore 'to critically and reflexively evaluate how these pre-understandings influence the research' (Finlay, 2008, p.17). As Smith (2007) contends, the fore-structure may present 'an obstacle to interpretation' (p.6). However, Heidegger states:

Our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves

(Heidegger, 1962, p. 195).

Smith (2007) notes that in this paragraph Heidegger suggests that 'priority should be given to the new object rather than to one's preconceptions'(p.6). In addition, it may not be possible to know in advance which part of one's fore-structure is relevant in the specific engagement with the text: 'Rather than putting ones preconceptions up front before doing interpretation, one may only get to know what the preconceptions ... are once the interpretation is underway' (ibid). Similarly, Gadamer points out that the fore-conceptions are constantly revised and are changing in the process of interpretation:

Every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation

(Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, quoted in Smith, 2007, p. 6-7).

Gadamer refers to fore-conceptions as 'prejudices'. In his view, 'prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous ... In fact, the

historicity of our existence entails that prejudices ... constitute the initial directness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world' (Gadamer, *The universality of the hermeneutic problem*, quoted in Moran, 2000, p.278). At any given time our prejudices are positioned in a specific horizon: 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point... the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinancy' (Gadamer, 1989, p.301). However the horizon is constantly evolving through a process of fusion with other horizons:

The horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past ... rather understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves

(ibid, p.306) [emphasis in source]

As Smith contends, it may not be possible to know in advance which part of one's preconception may be relevant in the specific situation and the preconceptions themselves are changing in the process of interpretation. Therefore the process of interpretation is dynamic and iterative, engaging the concept of the hermeneutic circle in an interplay between parts and whole and between the interpreter and the object of interpretation. This complex and dynamic notion of fore-understanding and of the relationship between the researcher and the data calls for 'a more enlivened form of bracketing as both a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved' (Smith et al., 2009, p.25).

The process of 'multiple hermeneutics' is also involved in combining different levels of interpretation. Drawing on Ricoeur's (1970) distinction between two strategies for understanding meaning, namely, a hermeneutics of meaning recollection, of empathic engagement, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, of critical engagement, Smith (2004) has argued that both modes of hermeneutic engagement can contribute to a more complete understanding of the participant's lived experience. Consistent with its phenomenological underpinning, IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the participants. At the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also involve asking critical questions of participants' accounts. Thus, interpretation can be descriptive and empathic, aiming to produce 'rich experiential descriptions', and also critical and questioning 'in ways which participants might be unwilling or unable to do themselves' (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.189).

As an example Eatough and Smith (2008) use an analysis employing several levels of interpretation. Beginning with an empathic sharing of the participant's feelings, the analysis then moves through a series of levels to a more interpretative stance and then further towards a more abstracted and conceptual reading, while still grounded in the participant's words. Smith et al. (2009) contend that 'for IPA, a successful interpretation is one which is principally based on a reading from *within* the terms of the text which the participant has produced' (p.37). Similarly, Larkin et al. (2006) present an example of multiple possibilities in interpretation, ranging from providing an insight into the participant's lifeworld, offering an interpretation provided by the participant, an example of the cultural resources used by the participant, an expression of the participants unconscious conflicts and desires, or an account of a unique social interaction between two people in the interview situation. They suggest that each of these possibilities offers a potential entry into the hermeneutic circle and that IPA can potentially engage with any of them as long as the account can be traced back to a core account focusing on the participant's lifeworld.

However, 'within such an analysis the empathic reading is likely to come first and may then be qualified by a more critical and speculative reflection' (Smith, 2004, p.46). Smith et al. (2009) maintain that IPA occupies a 'centre-ground position' whereby it is possible to combine a hermeneutic of empathy with a hermeneutic of questioning 'so long as it serves to "draw out" or "disclose" the meaning of the experience' (p.36), in contrast to employing a theoretical perspective imported from outside the text. Larkin et al. (2006) contend that the strategies chosen by the analyst 'may be informed by prior experience and knowledge, psychological theory, or previous research - provided that they can be related back to a phenomenological account' (p.116). In summary,

IPA requires a combination of phenomenological and hermeneutic insights. It is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavour for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen

(Smith et al., 2009, p.37).

Idiography constitutes the third theoretical underpinning of IPA. An idiographic approach aims for an in-depth focus on the particular and commitment to a detailed finely-textured analysis, not possible in nomothetic research studies which focus on aggregated data (Smith, 2004; Smith, Harré & Van Langenhove, 1995). The terms idiographic and

nomothetic were first used in English by Gordon Allport (1937, 1962) who borrowed the terms from the writings of the German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1894-1998). Allport, following Windelband, described nomothetic knowledge as knowledge of general laws, and idiographic knowledge as knowledge about unique events, entities, and trends (Krauss, 2008; Pelham, 1993; Runyan, 1983).

Smith et al. (2009) contend that individuals can offer a unique perspective on their engagement with phenomena, therefore for researchers, individuals can become the unit of study. Thus, ‘a commitment to an idiographic psychology is obviously closely linked to the rationale for case-studies’ (Smith et al., 1995, p. 63, see also Runyan, 1983). Smith (2004) suggests that a detailed analysis of a single case would be justified when one has a particularly rich or compelling case (see for example, Eatough & Smith, 2006; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009). The details of a single case also illuminate a dimension of a shared commonality, as ‘the very detail of the individual also brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity’ (Smith, 2004, p.43).

The idiographic commitment of IPA retains a focus on detailed examination of particular instances, either in a single case study or in studies of a small group of cases. In such studies the analytic process begins with the detailed analysis of each case, moving to careful examination of similarities and differences across cases to produce detailed accounts of patterns of meaning and reflections on shared experience. A single case study offers an opportunity to learn a great deal about a particular person in a specific context, as well as focusing on different aspects of a particular account. In addition, ‘through connecting the findings to the extant psychological literature, the IPA writer is helping the reader to see how the case can shed light on the existing nomothetic research’ (Smith et al., 2009, p.38).

IPA and its relation to other phenomenological approaches

Phenomenological psychology can be considered as a group of approaches informed by the divergent perspectives of phenomenological philosophy. As noted above, Moran (2000) points out the extraordinary diversity of phenomenological philosophy. It is therefore not surprising that phenomenological psychology developed divergent theoretical and methodological positions (e.g. Ashworth, 2003; Giorgi, 1997; Todres, 2007; Van Manen, 1990). Yet, as Finlay (2009) contends, despite the divergent and sometimes conflicting approaches, there are shared features common to phenomenological research:

Phenomenological research characteristically starts with concrete descriptions of lived situations, often first-person accounts, set down in everyday language and avoiding abstract intellectual

generalisations ... Phenomenologists also concur about the need for researchers to engage a 'phenomenological attitude'. In this attitude the researcher strives to be open to the Other and to attempt to see the world freshly, in a different way

(p.10).

The version of descriptive phenomenology developed by Giorgi (1985, 1997) adheres most closely to the Husserlian approach, in its descriptive focus and in aiming to establish the general structure, the essence, of the phenomenon. In this method 'idiographic analysis may form part of the process of analysis but the eventual aim to explicate – eidetically – the phenomenon as a whole regardless of the individuals concerned. Idiographic details are thus discarded or generalized' (Finlay, 2009, p.9). In contrast, IPA's idiographic focus is a key feature of the approach: 'IPA has a more microscopic lens arising from its idiographic commitment, emphasizing the way in which the study of how psychological meanings are constituted can be very usefully pursued through the detailed examination of unique individual lives' (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p.182). In addition, IPA draws on hermeneutic approaches which provide opportunities for interpretative analysis, contextualising participants' accounts in reflections and relevant theoretical material, thus making it possible to link the findings to the psychological literature.

Smith et al. (2009) contend that the concern with the idiographic and particular suggest that 'IPA is working at quite an early stage in relation to Husserl's ambitious programme for phenomenology' (p.38). While Husserl was intent on establishing eidetic structure or essence of experience (as practised in Giorgi's phenomenological method), the priority for IPA at present is the task of attending to the detail of particular cases and lived experience. With a growing corpus of IPA cases it may be possible to develop a capacity to consider the essential features of particular phenomena.

As Smith et al. (2009) note, this different emphasis tends to result in different research outcomes. The result of a study using descriptive phenomenology will typically take the form of a third person account, 'a synthesized summary statement outlining the general structure for the phenomenon under question. The result of an IPA analysis usually takes the form of a more idiographic interpretative commentary, interwoven with extracts from the participants' accounts' (p. 200-1).

In her reflections on using a descriptive phenomenological approach, Willig (2007) suggests that something important was lost by the absence of the participants' voices from the final statement, wondering whether the style of writing of the final statement was 'capable of capturing the quality of participants' experience of the phenomenon' (p.217). Willig believes it is important to find ways to include the emotional and expressive dimension of

participants' accounts of the phenomenon. The expressive features of participants' narratives are also highlighted in Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Van Manen emphasises the importance of attending to participants' language, to 'the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak' (p. 112), and to creative forms of writing to present the results of research. In common with IPA, Van Manen connects phenomenology and hermeneutics, focusing on understanding participants' accounts within the context of their lifeworld.

Critical narrative analysis (Langdrige, 2007) is similarly informed by both phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches. Langdrige follows Ricoeur's approach, including both analysis grounded in the participants' accounts, the hermeneutics of meaning recollection, and at the same time also another layer of analysis, grounded in a specific hermeneutics of suspicion. Langdrige argues that the hermeneutics of suspicion he advocates is not a depth hermeneutic such as psychoanalysis, but rather an 'imaginative'¹ hermeneutic: 'The analyst aims to gain an alternative way of seeing: not a way that reveals the truth hidden beneath the surface, but rather a way of taking up an alternative position ... specifically an alternative grounded in broader sociocultural discourse' (p.136-7). Langdrige believes such an approach may open up new possibilities, offer new understanding 'that may complement or contradict – but definitely not supplant – those discerned through empathic understanding' (Langdrige, 2008, p. 1138). In this respect it seems that critical narrative analysis occupies a similar ground to the notion of multiple levels of interpretation in IPA discussed above, where an 'empathic reading is likely to come first and may then be qualified by a more critical and speculative reflection' (Smith, 2004, p.46).

As noted above, one problem perceived with using descriptive phenomenology was the absence of participants' voices from the final account of the phenomenon under investigation. In the hermeneutic approaches the importance of attending to participants' language seems to be accommodated, at least to some extent, by including excerpts from interviews to retain some of the specific nuances and textures of individual voices. However, there is also another issue implicated here, concerning 'the representational validity of language' (Willig, 2008, p.66). Willig maintains that as phenomenological research is interested in the experience 'it must assume that language provides participants with the necessary tools to capture that experience' (ibid). Langdrige (2008) notes that phenomenological psychology's notion that discourses are simply reflective of lived experience has been deeply challenged by discursive psychology's view of language.

However, 'when Heidegger writes of language as "the house of Being", he points out that our interpretations of experience are always shaped, limited *and* enabled by, language' (Smith et al., 2009, p.194). Similarly, Ricoeur follows Heidegger's concept of discourse as a primordial capacity

constitutive of being-in-the-world (discussed above) which points to language as grounded in historical, socio-cultural and linguistic context, inevitably constraining and enabling what can be said about a phenomenon. At the same time, Ricoeur (1991) contends that ‘even if it is true that all experience has a “lingual dimension”, and that this *Sprachlichkeit* imprints and pervades all experience, nevertheless it is not with *Sprachlichkeit* that hermeneutic philosophy must begin. It is necessary to say first what comes to language’ (p.41). Referring to Heidegger’s subordinating the level of linguistic assertion (*Aussage*)² to the level of discourse (*Rede*), Ricoeur maintains that ‘the level of assertion can therefore claim no autonomy; it refers back to the existential structures constitutive of being-in-the-world’ (p.42). Furthermore, Ricoeur suggests that ‘the reference of the linguistic order back to the structure of experience (which comes to language in the assertion) constitutes ... the most important phenomenological presupposition of hermeneutics’ (ibid). In common with Ricoeur’s notion of foregrounding experience rather than the linguistic order, ‘IPA gives a central place to experience while acknowledging the multiple influences on it; its historical and cultural situatedness including language and social norms and practices’ (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 119).

Validity and quality in IPA studies

The guidelines for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research produced by Yardley (2000) and Elliott, Fischer & Rennie (1999) present broad ranging criteria that can be applied irrespective of the specific theoretical orientation of the qualitative study. Yardley suggests four key dimensions by which studies using qualitative methods can be assessed: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

According to Yardley, sensitivity to context can be established in different ways, for example sensitivity to relevant theoretical literature, to the socio-cultural context of the study and to the participants involved in the study. In IPA sensitivity to context can be demonstrated from the initial choice of method and the rationale for its adoption, as choosing IPA implies a commitment to idiographic principles and a focus on recruiting participants from a particular context with a particular lived experience. Sensitivity to context is also required during engagement with research participants with sensitivity to their individual experiences and understanding of their predicaments.

Sensitivity to context is involved in all further stages of the analytic process, in particular in the commitment to care and attention to detail in analyzing data. As Smith et al. (2009) contend, because great care is taken in data collection and in grounding the analytic claims in participants’

accounts, a good IPA study will demonstrate a sensitivity to the raw material and ‘will always have a considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants’ material to support the argument being made, thus giving participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check the interpretations being made’ (p.180-181). Sensitivity is also demonstrated in writing IPA projects, taking care to offer interpretations as possible readings grounded in the data and contextualizing the report in relevant existing literature.

Yardley’s second criterion, commitment and rigour, can be demonstrated through prolonged engagement with the topic and immersion in the data of the research. Rigour refers to the thoroughness and completeness of the data collection and analysis. In IPA commitment is demonstrated throughout the research process: from selecting the sample which might require perseverance in accessing potential participants; through commitment to engaging with participants with sensitivity and respect and commitment to attending to detailed and meticulous analysis. Rigour in IPA ‘refers to the thoroughness of the study, for example in terms of the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand, the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis’ (Smith et al., 2009, p.181).

In Yardley’s third criterion, transparency refers to the clarity of the description of the stages in the research process. For researchers using IPA this entails providing specific details of the process of selecting participants, constructing the interview schedule, the conduct of the interview and the stages in the analysis. Coherence may refer to presentation of a coherent argument, yet finding ways to include ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the data in a coherent way. According to Yardley, ‘coherence also describes the “fit” between the research question and the philosophical perspective adopted, and the method of investigation and analysis undertaken’ (p.222). It is therefore expected that an IPA study would be consistent with the underlying principles of IPA: attending closely to participants’ experiential claims and at the same time, manifesting the interpretative activity of IPA.

Aiming for coherence also engages the researcher in considering an imagined reader who is ‘trying to make sense of the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of X’ (Smith et al. 2009, p.41). Engaging the reader or ‘resonating with readers’ (Elliot et al., 1999) can be seen as a crucial dimension in assessing validity in qualitative research, for ultimately ‘the real validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful’ (Smith et al., 2009, p.183), a perspective which links to Yardley’s fourth criterion. Yardley argues that notwithstanding how well research is conducted in terms of other validity criteria, impact and importance constitutes ‘the decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged’ (p.223). However, she contends that ‘there are many varieties of usefulness, and the ultimate value of a piece of

research can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom the findings were deemed relevant' (ibid).

Smith et al. (2009) suggest an independent audit as a powerful way of approaching validity in qualitative research. In an IPA study an audit trail might consist of initial notes on the research question, the research proposal, the interview schedule, recorded transcripts, annotated to trace the process of establishing the thematic analysis, tables of themes, analysis and writing up. An audit trail can form the basis for an independent audit conducted by an independent researcher or a research supervisor. This can take place as a final check or as a series of ongoing mini-audits at different stages of the project, as more common with research supervisors.

In summary, this paper focused on the theoretical underpinnings of IPA and the ways in which IPA draws on these theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework. As an approach to qualitative research in psychology

IPA is concerned with human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it. These meanings, in turn, may illuminate the embodied, cognitive-affective and existential domains of psychology. People are physical and psychological entities. They do things in the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful, existential consequences (Smith et al, 2009, p.34).

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Notes

¹ The notion of 'imaginative' hermeneutic connects to Husserl's concept of 'imaginative free variation', changing different elements of a phenomenon to explore which aspects are necessary and which contingent.

² The concept of assertion (*Aussage*) in Heidegger denotes the familiar type of discourse of everyday 'present-at-hand' attitude (Inwood, 1999). Inwood points out that assertion remains an inferior mode of discourse throughout Heidegger's thought, in contrast to saying (*Sage*) which means to show to let appear.

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