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Making Phenomenological Inquiry Accessible: A Review of Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research

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Abstract

Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin's *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research* is an accessible account of an emergent qualitative psychology methodology which has great potential for studying a variety of psychological areas as well as being applied to studies outside of the behavioral sciences. The authors avoid the complexity found in some texts on phenomenological inquiry and present a simple plan for conducting this style of research.

Keywords

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Ideography, Qualitative Research

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**Making Phenomenological Inquiry Accessible:
A Review of Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin's
*Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research***

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Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research is an accessible account of an emergent qualitative psychology methodology which has great potential for studying a variety of psychological areas as well as being applied to studies outside of the behavioral sciences. The authors avoid the complexity found in some texts on phenomenological inquiry and present a simple plan for conducting this style of research.

Key Words: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Ideography, and Qualitative Research

It is not often I can use “accessible” and “phenomenology” in the same sentence, but reading the new book, *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, and Research*, by Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin (2009) certainly provides me the occasion to do so. I can say this because these authors provide an engaging and clear introduction to a relatively new analytical approach in which they combine ideas and procedures from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography to help qualitative researchers examine “how people make sense of their major life experiences” (p. 1).

Smith helped to establish Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or IPA as a viable qualitative research approach a little over 20 years ago and since that time the approach has become a mainstay in qualitative psychology. With this new book, I think this method will begin to spread beyond its psychological home to assume a more prominent place among its contemporary qualitative methodologies especially with those researchers wanting to work from a more interpretive posture in their inquiries.

I think the secret to the authors' success in enticing new qualitative researchers and those to whom IPA is unknown to try this approach is the clear and simple prose they use to introduce what can be overly complex and abstract theoretical concepts and methodological procedures. It is this accessible style that makes this book quite a contrast with other phenomenology as research texts. This difference can be seen in Chapter Two where Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explain the major ideas of phenomenology and hermeneutics we need to know in order to understand how IPA works. That is the key to their success—the authors don't see the need to teach us these philosophical and interpretive orientations, but rather they focus on the important difference that we need to know the critical concepts so we can comprehend IPA within its intellectual contexts. This scenario does not overwhelm the reader with a surplus of philosophical ideas, but the authors' careful review of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schleiermacher, and Gadamer gives us the foundation we need to appreciate IPA as a form of

phenomenological inquiry and not as a series of eclectic methodological procedures employed without theoretical framework.

In presenting the pertinent concepts from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) conclude each major section of Chapter Two with insightful summaries which focus the reader on how these abstract ideas resulted in the creation of IPA into a particular form of interpretive phenomenology with particular focus on the particular in which “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p. 3). I don’t think phenomenological inquiry can be described any clearer than that!

After introducing IPA and its theoretical base, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe the steps qualitative researchers can take in conducting this approach to interpretive phenomenology. In these chapters the authors explain what steps researchers can take to plan and carry out IPA studies of their own. In presenting this material I really like how these authors are careful not to be overly prescriptive about the “proper” ways researchers must conduct an IPA. They certainly provide detailed accounts of how investigators can plan, collect data, analyze, and present their results, but they also encourage readers to explore their own ways to conduct an IPA.

In the “Planning an IPA Research Study” chapter, the authors take great care to help readers understand how certain qualitative research methodologies fit better with certain questions and gain an appreciation for what creating a good match between the query and the approach can bring to a study. Once they establish this critical design issue, the authors then give a number of examples of fitting IPA questions from published studies which allow us to explore how other researchers created studies from a coherent matching of question and method. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) wrap up this chapter by discussing samples, ethical concerns, and other management issues when designing and initiating a study.

In conducting phenomenological inquiries I think the two most difficult procedures to learn and execute effectively are conducting and analyzing interviews. In discussing both of these methodological concerns the authors continue to keep things simple without rendering these two parts of IPA as generic qualitative research techniques. I think they accomplish this difficult objective by focusing on their own lived experiences of conducting IPA so as to give the readers the facts of the process, but also what these steps mean to the researcher conducting the study. I think this can be seen most clearly when they discuss bracketing while conducting an interview. In some phenomenology inquiry texts the emphasis on bracketing is on the steps investigators take to exclude or bracket away personal experiences so they can become more sensitive to the experiences of the other during interviews and analysis. This approach can add complexity which can overwhelm the beginning researcher. In contrast, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) take a much simpler tact which seems to emerge from their reflections on how they bracket and what these steps mean to the research:

By focusing on attending closely to your participant’s words, you are more likely to park or bracket your own pre-existing concerns, hunches, and theoretical hobby horses. It is not that you should not be curious and questioning; it is that your questioning at this phase of the project should all be generated by attentive listening to what your participant has to say. (p. 64)

By establishing the importance of listening, the authors help to make bracketing an integral part of the live experience of conducting a phenomenological interview. Once that posture is established Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) then move into the questioning technology IPA investigators can use to help participants make sense of their lived experiences. They present a rich array of question styles that can help interviewers structure their conversations allowing participants to not only share their own interpretations, but to also help them go into greater depth regarding these experiences. The authors conclude the chapter with some great exercises designed to help researchers to construct questions and conduct interviews in this style and to reflect on their performances.

In the “Analysis” chapter, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) take a step-by-step approach to help beginners to IPA grasp the analytical procedures without becoming overly anxious and confused. This is a good strategy because qualitative research methodologies such as IPA transform the data more than what transpires in generic qualitative content analysis approaches (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003) which may only produce codes and categories. In contrast to generic qualitative data analysis, the authors show us how the IPA researcher goes beyond reading and re-reading the transcripts and initial noting by commenting on the interviews descriptively, linguistically, and conceptually. From this tripartite notational system, the IPA investigator looks for patterns that can become emergent themes—phrases the investigator uses to capture the essence of particular passages in the interview. As these themes emerge through this analytical phase, the IPA investigator then maps or charts how these themes appear to fit together. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin help the readers navigate through these discrete yet interconnected steps with a series of text boxes that show how the researcher notes a transcript and articulates themes without losing contact with the words of the interviewee.

From the analysis, the authors move into describing the process of writing up an IPA study. To this end, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) help readers manage the complexity of writing up an IPA paper by presenting a simple plan for organizing and composing a qualitative research report. I especially like how the authors alert the readers to the different challenges of writing up the results IPA studies with small or large samples and for shorter (e.g., journal articles) or longer (e.g., dissertations) textual forms.

From the “how to” chapters, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) walk us through four IPS studies and take us “back stage” so we can appreciate the lived experience of conducting a study of participants’ lived experiences of health and illness, sex and sexuality, psychological stress, and life transitions and identify. Collectively these chapters help readers appreciate the breadth of topics explored via IPA. Individually, the chapters are also effective in highlighting certain aspects of IPA. The authors also conclude each chapter with a guide to locating additional IPA research on the topic so readers can compare and contrast different ways researchers have explored these subjects. This approach also helps the authors to reinforce their earlier declaration that there is no one way to conduct an IPA project.

The authors conclude the book by reflecting on how IPA researchers can attend to validity and quality issues, can connect their research with the work being done by others in qualitative psychology, and can anticipate what the future might hold for IPA. Although the chapter situating IPA in psychology may be of more importance to

psychologists, the chapter on validity will be of more interest to researchers seeking to use IPA outside of the behavioral sciences.

In “Assessing Validity” Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) draw heavily on the work Lucy Yardley (2000, as cited in pp. 180-183) who posits qualitative researchers should attend to four principles for assessing the quality of qualitative research: (a) sensitivity to context, (b) commitment and rigor, (c) transparency and coherence, and (d) impact and importance. After defining what Yardley means by each distinction, the authors discuss how IPA can help researchers attend to each measure of quality. Although some readers might not like the application of criteria of goodness, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin while demonstrating the utility of such guides also acknowledge the importance of creativity in conducting IPA and encourage flexibility when researchers, reviewers, and editors decide to use such evaluative criteria.

In the final chapter, “Conclusions and Reflections on Future Developments,” the authors predict an increase in the number of IPA studies will result in the conduct of reviews and syntheses in which meta-analysts will attempt to discern patterns to the patterns across multiple studies in particular areas. In doing so both the researcher of the individual IPA case studies and the reviewer of the collective IPA case studies each will be making their own contribution to the collective interpretive consciousness of researchers’ interpretations of participants’ interpretations of their lived experiences. If this very accessible book on phenomenological inquiry has the type of success I think it will, then this prediction looks very much like a sure thing!

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