

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Constructive Approach in Qualitative Research

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Abstract- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative research methodology has gained eminence in research. It is appealing to many researchers due to the method of detailed analysis and examination of lived experiences of a restricted number of participants. Jonathan Smith first proposed the interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological method and argued for an experimental approach that could work with the psychological studies. However other descriptive and social research have also benefited from its appeal. IPA aims primarily to make sense of individual life experiences and share an interpretation of these experiences to comprehend the elements. This study aims to present an overview of interpretive phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for specific qualitative research.

Keywords: Research Design, Interpretative phenomenological Analysis, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

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I. The Research Approach

As a qualitative research approach Interpretative phenomenological analysis comprehends and investigates people's experiences and their implications. Less perceptible meanings are analysed through qualitative enquiry. Qualitative research is designed to explore the complexities in the human world, whereas explaining the 'Hows' and 'How many' is preferred by quantitative study. Moreover, qualitative approaches are intended to study lived experiences of people and generally do not involve any quantitative concern with hypothesis and measuring. Exploring, recounting, understanding and interpreting the experience are important. There are multiple qualitative methods but they come together as the researcher attempts to make-making as people recollect and provide meaning to their own experiences. Qualitative research renders experiential understanding which is unique in its direct understanding of the phenomenon. Thus complex patterns and anticipated relationships are intricately explored. During the research, the researcher uses subjective judgement in a form of self evaluation and analysis while initiating preconceptions to shape the reflected knowledge.

Interpretative phenomenological Analysis seeks to comprehend insight into participant's perspectives from participants themselves, therefore being idiographic. The inside meanings are reflected by employing empathy, open mindedness, and curiosity as people narrate experiences and feelings in natural settings. Moreover the experiences are shaped by social, cultural and historical worlds. Qualitative research is further suitable as an approach which can be used to explore unexpected and in-depth knowledge appropriate to view a complex phenomenon to highlight multifaceted human experiences.

II. Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl began the study on phenomenology as a research approach which was later on build up by Martin Heidegger. Phenomenology endeavours to analyse human experiences as they appear to the consciousness. During the last decade of the 20th century phenomenological research has developed into a mature investigative qualitative approach. In multidimensional fields of everyday experience phenomenology has attracted attention. However the methodology has remained debatable as has ways of conducting the research using this methodology. Broadly there are two philosophical approaches of phenomenology identified as; hermeneutic and descriptive. The phenomenological approach offers diverse ways to examine the essence of human experiences without any external theoretical influence as experiences are linked to the data rigorously.

However the hermeneutic approach marks the possibility of reduction in support of interpretation of experiences and rejects personal opinions. Analysis and findings are interpretive and rational in nature which is a result of human experiences, Ricoeur, Heidegger, Lavinias and Gadamer, uphold the notion that certain

existing phenomenological approaches do not strictly fit into the Heideggarian and Husserlian hermeneutic-descriptive categories.

Four contemporary approaches to phenomenology which do not fit the above approaches are 1) the life world approach: relational reflexive approaches; this approach is meant to explore how everyday experiences deflect themselves in the individual life world. 2) The reflexive relational approach tries to find the relationship between the social and practical experiences of the individual as presented during narration of the experience. Researchers use their personal subjective experience in the first person approach to examine the essence of the phenomena inspired by Husserl. 3) Incorporating concrete narrative of momentous events with literary decisions; the first person approach reflects detailed and deep analysis. The dialogue between researcher and participants' brings about the reflexive approach or meaning in the research of Levinas, Gadamer, and Buber, that have been appreciated due to their empirical spirits and as subjectivity is celebrated.

IPA and Phenomenology

IPA is a modern phenomenological approach basically appealing due to its descriptive, explorative, interpretive and sense-making abilities. The particular theoretical elements of IPA are; phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The works of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are integrated in the field of interpretive phenomenological analysis. The systematic and detailed analysis of the consciousness is a striking feature of IPA. The researcher needs to bracket their pre understanding of the phenomena and primarily endeavours to capture the participant's experience objectively. Husserl highlighted that the basic features and core human experience can be identified by phenomenological reflection of questioning the natural attitude, highlighting that things should not be taken for granted. According to Husserl, the researcher could achieve this by keeping their preconceived notions aside and practice detachment from previous understandings and prejudices. Furthermore qualitative research is a suitable approach which can be used to explore unexpected and in-depth knowledge suitable to view a complex phenomenon to highlight multifaceted human experience. It requires the researcher to be open-minded, flexible, and empathetic towards the narrator while listening to their experiences of the phenomenon faced by them. Husserl's approach to phenomenology has been criticised by many philosophers as being too difficult to understand and very conceptual in nature. Moreover the fact that human experience can be examined objectively without the influence of preconceived knowledge has been dismissed as unreasonable and non-attainable. Moreover, the experience witnessed as pure experience is inaccessible because it can occur only after the event has already happened.

Identifying most strongly with hermeneutics, IPA has emerged as utilising the works of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to interpret and explore participants' lived experiences. These philosophers collectively contribute to the holistic and multifaceted phenomenological approach. Heidegger further argued that unique existence of human beings and their interpretation of the experiences is the primary concern of existential phenomenologist. Therefore the work of Dasein inspire researchers to immerse themselves in the world of the participants' socio cultural and historical meaning therefore the culture, language and society when detached from the pre-existing world of individuals cannot be meaningful. Heidegger, therefore influences the idea that researchers should support their stand within the sphere of people's society, language and relationships. Fundamental to philosophical enquiries is also researcher's ability to question the interpretation of constructing meaning from the experiences. Heidegger also suggests that researchers must be reflexive while interpreting the investigated phenomenon.

Merleau-Ponty focused on the relationship and subjectivity within our world. Therefore he correlated human existence to phenomenology as a physical being, considering this as a major role played by a human in accepting and describing the humanity. He therefore advocated that being unique, every human is also different hence their overall ability to connect with this world is also different from each other. He further argued that the adequate conceptualisation of the mechanics of the judgement and perception needed to acknowledge a human existence, and the way elementary principles are shaped in the world cannot be done through empiricism. For IPA researches the work of Merleau-Ponty can be vital from the way he portrays how the human body is important in gaining knowledge about the world. Different phenomenologist laid different emphasis on the way a physiology and sensation is related to rational and intellect; however the fact that the human body is an essential element cannot be overlooked.

Sartre discussed psychology, responsibility of the human in action and freedom of the human. His perception concerning phenomenology is more about understanding human rather than understanding the world. According to him human nature is related more to responsibilities towards ones action along with freedom of choice which means it is more about becoming than being.

Sartre views on phenomenological analysis of human experience is considered by researchers as the most comprehensive guide investigating experiences in the context of personal and societal relationships and ethical encounters.

Transcendental phenomenology

Philosophical discussions over centuries have discussed various aspects of phenomenology however in the early 20th century Edmund Husserl gives a concrete definition of phenomenology. The transcendental approach to phenomenology can be well understood if we highlight the academic history of Husserl's reflection on phenomenology. Husserl's initial focus of study was on mathematics; thereafter he began to explore other phenomena. 'Right to Equality' as described by Husserl, values objective as well as subjective experiences within his philosophical approach; culminates in his body of work in "Pure Phenomenology", where he wanted to provide Universal foundation of Science and philosophy.

Husserl argued that the individual perception a phenomenon should be subjected to scientific study rather than positivism's objective focus on absolute observations of external truth. Therefore Husserl believed that phenomenological inquiry should contain no assumptions, no scientific theory, and no logical procedures of scientific or psychological speculations informing the inquiry. He reflected that the focus of the design should be an individual's direct intuition. According to Staiti, this approach towards phenomenology is similar to 'a scientific discovery of a previously unknown dimension.' This requires the researcher to shift the focus to oneself to be able to discover the meaning and the nature of things. Husserl asserted that all particular and genuine scientific knowledge ultimately results on inner evidence. This inner evidence is the one that occurs in the consciousness and that is where the phenomenon is to be studied. Therefore Husserl meant that objective and subjective understanding are essentially intertwined. The real phenomenon needs to be understood totally to be able to comprehend the lived experiences of a person. Husserl therefore believed that the yet to be discovered dimension of being, is actually this lived experience.

Husserl believed that a critical question regarding phenomenological exploration, was embedded in an epistemological attitude; "What does it feel like for an individual to be conscious and aware of a phenomenon? whereby extended analysis beyond near sensory perception of see hear or touch to higher experiences of emotion, memory, imagination and experiences related to thought could be the object of experienced phenomenological study."

Husserl went on to explain that the phenomenon of the lived experiences had factors that were perceived by individuals who commonly experienced the phenomenon. Common or universally perceived characteristics could be identified and would help to develop a more generalized description of the phenomenon. According to Kasara the essence of a phenomenon represented the truthful nature of that particular phenomenon. In this regard the researcher engaged in Husserl's phenomenological design has to "describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection. The process involves a blending of what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings; thus, a unity of the real and the ideal."

Therefore the challenge for the researcher is to conduct a study of the lived experiences of a person with regards to a particular phenomenon that highlights the universal essences. "To do this the researcher has to focus on identifying the essence of the phenomenon while studying the participant's experience of the phenomenon and at the same time suspends their own ideas or presuppositions in order to remove any researcher's bias." Husserl made a great contribution to science and philosophy by developing this method to enable researchers "to suspend the natural attitude as well as the naïve understanding of what we call the human mind and to disclose the realm of transcendental subjectivity as a new field of inquiry."

Husserl's descriptive approach or transcendental phenomenology requires that the researchers should "attain transcendental subjectivity whereby the researcher's impact on the study is continuously neutralized, by assessing that biases and preconceptions don't influence the study objectivity. Therefore researchers have to isolate themselves and not permit their subjectivity to influence the participant's narrated descriptions."

The researcher can best approach this dimension of lived experience through the "Transcendental I; in this state the researcher objectively moves from the participants narration of the lived experiences to the universal essence of the phenomenon at which point consciousness could be seized. The researcher in the state of the transcendental I, is able to grasp the participant's experience of the phenomenon without resorting to categorization on conceptualization, and quite often include what is taken for granted. In this state of the transcendental I, the researcher maintains the position of a blank paper which uses participants experiences to understand the essence of the phenomenal. There are no preconceived hypothesis, expectations, assumptions and definitions for the study."

The researcher achieves this state through a series of reductions. Transcendental stage is the first reduction which requires transcendence from the previous understandings, past knowledge, personal views and experiences of the researcher and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest also known as the process of bracketing. Transcendental phenomenological reduction considers individual participant experience in the second stage. This is described completely as meanings and offences are constructed. The third phase is reduction by imaginative variation where the participant's descriptions of the experiences are extracted by

using the practice of 'free variation' resulting in cohesive combination of the real meanings. To obtain the quintessence from the phenomenon, free variation necessitates visualizing multiple variations of the experienced phenomenon. Finally all knowledge regarding the phenomenon is derived from these essences.

Husserl's notion of bracketing has been continuously debated by modern philosophers. To successfully achieve bracketing the researcher has to set aside their entirety of the world around including the researcher's physical existence. Husserl asserts that dedication to bracketing is challenging yet is to be necessarily maintained. To find the Transcendent I suspending reliance on corporal reality and abandoning the human experiences is the only way. However, to achieve this goal a researcher may borrow approaches from other qualitative research methods.

IPA and Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a major development in IPA. Meaning-making is seen as something which flows to open new revision and insight leading to interpretation. The hermeneutic philosophy was advanced by Heidegger, Ricoeur, Gadamer and Schleiermacher who influenced the hermeneutic phenomenology greatly.

According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics and philosophy are intertwined hence language and experience is co-evolving. Experience is described using language in figurative and poetic ways. Hermeneutic theory utilises aesthetic and prosaic use of language as the creation of hermeneutic research. Heidegger highlights that interpretive situations in the world around us compels us to ask questions. Heidegger believes that to make sense of the revealed experience, the essence of interpretation lies in it being ready to be explored and revealed by the researcher in the light of their personal experience, and preconceptions.

Gadamer and Heidegger are of the view that understanding humans is an essential element resulting in interpretation. Thus sense making of the respondent's narrative experience entails that the researcher engages in close analysis without necessarily being conscious of their preconceptions, but this interpretation is to be robustly and reflexively bracketed.

The IPA researcher involves themselves in sense making of the participants' interpretation also known as 'doubles hermeneutic'. The researcher therefore presumes a major responsibility in interpreting and examining the participants' lived experiences. Thus the researcher has to analyse the stated and implied meaning of the interpretation, the hermeneutic model highlights the dynamic relationship of the individual and excellently reflects on the interpretation of their experiences on a more analytical and holistic level. During the research project, the depiction of experience and knowledge of the researcher corresponds with the participant interaction, thus drawing together the part and the whole of the study at numerous levels.

Idiography

IPA takes into account detailed investigation of a phenomenon and is said to be idiographic. The process offers greater value to the study of analysis in each case before moving on to general convergence and divergence amongst cases in its own merit. For a meticulous examination researchers need to follow this approach carefully as part of each personal experience and their sense-making elements. Thus IPA is essentially a modern research methodology that has great potential for integrating personal lived experiences of people. Though it has methodological limitations it is practical and accessible for considering and conducting phenomenological research.

Phenomenological Practice and Constructivism

The constructivist paradigm has a great influence on the present analysis. This theory endeavors to construct meaning from individual experiences and permits individuals to reflect uniquely on the phenomenon experienced (Crotty, 1998).

The researcher using the constructivist paradigm presumes that individual reality is uniquely constructed and that each person's interpreted meaning is important, exclusive, and study worthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1990; Patton, 2015). This structure believes that the individual mind holds a substantive reality which may be understood by studying the individual's mental build up. The constructivist theory also holds that experience of OCA is 'Real' though mostly mental and not observable as also much of the lived experience is 'Palpable.' (Adams & Van Manen, 2008; Alkin, 2013).

This framework also permits individuals to comprehend all aspects of the phenomenon through the expression of their experience. Additionally, it also allows for thorough inquiry and provides voice to the personal experience that the participant is prepared to talk about. Furthermore, the framework is extremely useful for academic researches which take place in the educational environment as it enables an insight into practical experiences (Patton, 2015; Creswell, 2005, 2013, 2014).

Four assumptions of the constructivist framework were implied by Guba and Lincoln (1989) which have implication on the present study:

- (1) Knowing the context of the phenomena is essential for understanding the 'Lived Experience'. The

engineering student's experience of OCA is best understood and analyzed in the context of the participating institution. In the constructivist paradigm generalization to other locations or contexts are not allowed. Also personal narratives have no implication on other individuals (Maxwell, 2013).

(2) The focus of constructivist research is on the narrated reality of participant versions and perceptions rather reality of objective facts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Taylor et al., 2016, p. 21). Consequently, this investigation endeavors to understand the unobservable reality which is the individual lived experience as communicated by the individual (Linde, 1993; Maxwell, 2013)

(3) Third, constructed realities such as OCA and its effects result from individual created societal structure whereas, OCA reality and its knowledge exists within the framework of society and is a social factor. (Maxwell, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). The rules and regulations for communication lead to natural anxiety following the pressure to abide by the constructs; this however is a participant created 'constructed reality' (Patton, 2015). The constructivist researcher believes that though the nature of CA has not been fully explored. OCA experience reality is partly due to conscious rules of societal normalcy contained in the individual. (Nagel, 1994)

(4) The frame of obtaining meaning is exclusive for the researcher as the experience of OCA is a individually unique. (Creswell, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016) For both the researcher and the participant an approach to epistemological knowledge is subjective (Patton, 2015). This study relates to the notion that lived incidents are exclusive and subjective and for investigating one such phenomenon the method is also subjective, (Lincoln & Guba; 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) This uniqueness often undermines the significance of the person's description, thus the researcher's role is significant for investigation in the constructivist concept.

Role of Primary Researcher in the Study

The researcher may influence a qualitative study significantly; limiting study site and participant access, consent for study and limitation of study scope thus serving an essential 'Gatekeeper' who impacts the study design (Marshall, 2014; Patton, 2015; Rossman, 2016). The researcher's role as 'gatekeeper' defines the phenomenon to be studied, the literature to be reviewed, essential research questions, and sampling limitations in the study, the scope of analysis as well as the scope restrictions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Marshall and Rossman, 2016)

The researcher's significant interest in the research topic emphasizes researcher and phenomena compatibility (Taylor et al. 2016). Conducting research in a common environment renders a certain advantage to the researcher. It's comparatively easy to acquire research permissions, data might be a slightly easy to acquire, and participants may be more comfortable and willing to speak to a faculty member.

To understand and appreciate personal phenomena in totality is never easy for an outsider, thus to experience the process of investigative phenomenological inquiry both the participant and the researcher require between them considerable rapport and cooperation (Hepworth, Grunewald, & Walton, 2014; Marshall, & Rossman, 2016) Participants' willingness to develop trust, collaboration and sincerity with the researcher is important. Phenomenological methodologists emphasize the researcher and study participant relationship in spite of the difficulty of voicing and developing a rapport between them. (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Marshall and Rossman, 2016)

Constructivist research assumes that each individually experienced phenomenon is unique and a personal interpretation and construction (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998). The researcher interpreted the data of the shared experiences by the participants which is a construction in and of it. In the present study the acknowledgement of the OCA experience lived by the researcher like all individuals, is inherent in phenomenological methodology. (Bodie, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) However the researcher mitigated its effects on the study in two ways; reflexivity was used by the researcher to recognize personal and empirical bias and bracket it. The background and the role of the researcher were also documented. (Creswell, 2014) Next, during the study the researchers developed a personal journal to record and investigate the narratives of personal OCA experience. This step considered a range of ethical issues on; how researchers' experiences affected the study assumptions, interview process, data analysis and presentation in the study design (Creswell, 2014; Sarantakos, 2005)

Criticisms of IPA

Lack of standardization and ambiguities are considered as main criticisms of IPA. Some philosophers point out the conceptual and practical limitations of IPA as a research methodology while many question the accuracy of the meanings and experiences as captured using this methodology. Communicative experience is also often questioned as eloquence is often an underlying criterion. However the research approach of phenomenology depends greatly on experiences as narrated by participants. Therefore phenomenological research endeavours to unravel lived experiences. However it generally does not explain the causation of the

occurrence. While IPA focuses on perceptions like other phenomenological approaches, the circumstances behind the experiences also need to be understood in any authentic research.

According to Smith et.al, IPA is hermeneutic; it uses constructional analysis as well as ideographic features which help to comprehend the cultural background of the lived experiences. Finally, certain aspects of phenomenology are not properly understood as they are not attuned with the role of cognition in phenomenology.

IPA being a subjective research analysis, researchers conduct experiment by taking care to create meaning from participants' experiences by integrating narratives. Different researchers working on similar data are quite likely to reveal different interpretations as Interpretive Phenomenology is essentially a subjective approach.

III. Conclusion

Qualitative phenomenological researchers are allowed a certain autonomy and fluidity level in the design analysis and interview protocol (Saldaña, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Analysis is done to organize the data so that it is a manageable and comprehensible description of the phenomenon. Each research analysis is unique and often personal due to the lack of specific directions and regulatory guidelines and for researchers to follow. It is also specified that the researcher “must offer a description of the skeletal frame for analysis that leads to interpretation” (Patton, 2015. p.606). As a matter of fact interpretive analysis has no specific method or correct approach (Punch, 2006) the researcher “must endeavor to locate patterns within the data and to seek out information that help explain in the first place why those patterns are there” (Bernard, 2011, p. 338)

Integrative phenomenological analysis assumes that people experience and apprehend external realities of a system in which they exist. As people function and actively engage in their own world, they are able to understand and explain their feelings and actions. While every individual goes through this unique phenomenon, it can also be communicated to others as it creates an inter-subjective meaning. Therefore the work of a researcher is to allow the participants' experiences to emerge closely. This requires a rich, thick description that enables the reader to understand the experience in the context. One must not forget that such an attempt can also result in a secondary interpretation of the phenomena.

IPA places the researcher at the centre of the research process as the whole process is very interpretive and analytical in nature. Therefore the researcher's reduced flexibility is one of the major issues of IPA. The researcher is guided by the purpose and assumption that the particular research has a particular intention and his purpose guides the whole research process. Thus at each step of the research process the researcher is to be carefully reflexive about their interpretation.

IPA is considered generally idiographic as the interpreter's research expectations is to provide rich, think contextual understanding of meaning and not to discover general understanding; highlighting a specific stand from a more general phenomenon. Careful generalizations are made possible only by means of explicit reference to the participants narratives. As a result of which the study becomes transferable based on the common aspects of the phenomenon under study

Interpretive Phenomenological Approach uses theoretical foundations which make it appropriate to explore phenomena that are of significance to the participant. “These matters are often transformative, bringing change and demanding reflection and re-interpretation for the individuals concerned” (Eatough and Smith, 2017 p.205) The Interpretive Phenomenological Approach has been useful to study a range of issues from HIV studies, to lower back pain, cancer to drug used in sports etc.(Osborn & Smith, 2015), demonstrating the broad functionality and suitability of the approach for investigating significant experiences of participants (J. A. Smith, 2011).

This paper explores interpretive phenomenological analysis as a versatile and flexible approach in qualitative research. Future researchers may endeavor to use this design for detailed insight into participants' subjective experiences.

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