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The Use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis in Couple and Family Therapy

Research

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Abstract

This article proposes a research methodology that is newer to the field of couple and family therapy research called Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Researchers exploring couple and family therapy research continue to establish the efficacy of couple and family interventions in a context that favors a positivist view of phenomena. This research continues to be critical for establishing the role of couple and family therapy in the field of mental health as well as further clarifying which interventions are best for specific clinical issues and when. IPA offers researchers the opportunity to explore how couples and families make meaning of their experiences from an intersubjective perspective. Meaning making is central to understanding couples and families as well as part of the many clinical approaches to working with couples and families. Despite the importance of meaning, few research methodologies allow for this central concept in couple and family therapy to be the focus of exploration. The following article outlines one such methodology and the possible use of IPA in couple and family therapy research.

Keywords: Family therapy research; Couple therapy research; Phenomenology; Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis; Qualitative Research.

The Use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis in Couple and Family Therapy Research

This article outlines a qualitative research approach called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and discusses the possible uses of it for couple and family therapy research. IPA has gained popularity as a qualitative approach to psychological research particularly in the United Kingdom especially in the areas of clinical, health, and counseling psychology (Smith 2004, 2011). Despite the potential relevance of this research methodology, there has been limited use of IPA in the field of couple and family therapy (CFT) research. A brief search for IPA in this journal revealed no published studies and a similar search in five other top American couple and family therapy research journals found a total of five published articles through the end of 2014 where the authors referred to the use of IPA (e.g. Lloyd & Dallos, 2008; McCandless & Eatough, 2010, 2012; Nel, 2006). There has been limited mention of it in key texts in the couple and family therapy field (e.g. Lebow & Stroud, 2012) and the majority of qualitative research found in the CFT research literature tends towards approaches such as grounded theory.

Qualitative research has the potential to add depth, complexity, and integrate both a subjective and inter-subjective stance when researching. Sprenkle (2012) noted that qualitative approaches are "especially valuable for reporting on the subjective experiences of clients in therapy" (p. 4) and the authors would add experiences of the therapist, couples and families across a wide variety of situations and contexts. Qualitative methodologies, and IPA in particular, can add mesh to the bones of a phenomenon, drill down and explore the depth of an issue for a particular group of people, further explore the nuances of the impact of context on relationships, or bring narratives to the fore that explicate clinical challenges that cannot always

be met with a singular treatment approach. Currently, there is also substantive dialogue about how research can contribute to improved clinical outcomes and evidence-based practices.

Developments in defining what constitutes an evidence-based couple or family therapy approach (Sexton, Gordon, Gurman, Lebow, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Johnson, 2011) has brought greater focus to how research can contribute to clinical outcomes. There is a sense of hope about the possibilities for evidence-based practices in the development of the CFT field, both for the people receiving a service as well as for practitioners and researchers who can increasingly feel confident that their work is supported by research. While there are short-comings of the randomised controlled trial (RCT) methodology that is required for a practice to become evidence based, RCTs are still seen as the ''gold standard'' for intervention methodology research (Sprenkle, 2012). IPA has the potential to further contribute to clinical efficacy dialogues in four key ways. First, IPA provides the opportunity to "thicken" (Geertz, 1973) the description of what is proven effective for CFTs. Second, with a focus on an identifiable phenomena and an emphasis on ideography, IPA can lead to for the identification of the actual processes that resulted in a specific outcome in a particular context (Maxwell, 2011). Third, IPA allows for the inclusion of context-specific aspects such as profession and therapeutic approach, setting, or presenting issue (Pawson, 2006). Finally, IPA seeks to incorporate different epistemological and ontological approaches to the understanding of clinical research and allows for the inclusion of meaning and values (Sayer, 1992). Given the support for couple and family interventions (e.g. Carr, 2014a, 2014b; Pinsof & Wynne, 1995; Sexton & Datchi, 2014; Sprenkle, 2012) and that clinicians tend to have a more "idiographic approach to knowledge" (Sexton & Datchi, 2014, p. 416) any opportunity to continue to bridge the research-clinician gap and convey compelling research results that can provide evidence to inform clinical work should

be welcome. While it is necessary for the field of couple and family therapy research to continue

to develop intervention-based research (Sexton & Datchi, 2014), this focus also has to be

buttressed by research that reflects the complexity of couples and families, centralizes the (inter-)

subjective voice in the research, and conveys compelling understandings of the lived realities of

the couples and families in a manner that motivates clinicians and researchers alike. Sexton and

Datchi (2014) write that a shift to specificity has "made research increasingly relevant to clinical

practice" (p. 416).

Much of the current couple and family therapy research agenda is shaped by scientific

paradigms that seek to determine the best interventions for specific clinical issues and are

sometimes specific to context or populations (e.g. Sexton & Datchi, 2014; Sexton, Datchi,

Evans, LaFollette, & Wright, 2013). This research approach plays an important role in

continuing to legitimize couple and family therapy, developing funding sources for both research

and intervention programs, providing a means to communicate with other sectors of the mental

health system, and further the practice in general. The opportunity to explore the role of IPA in

CFT research is not suggested as a replacement or in opposition to this research but as a means to

focus more on how couples and families make sense of their experiences and develop meaning.

The role of meaning is central to a number of approaches in couple and family therapy and as

Lebow and Stroud (2012) note, couples and families "phenomenologically have a sense of their

own being and what matters to them" (p. 520).

Falicov (1998, 2012) provides an example of how exploring meaning is central to

working with couples and families. She builds on the work of urban ecologist Peter Marris

(1980) who describes the systems of meaning that families develop which provide knowledge of

social, emotional, physical and cultural realities. Falicov (2012) noted that for families who

immigrate "what is distinctive and most dramatic about migration is the uprooting of entire systems of meanings: physical, social, and cultural" (p. 303). Systems of meaning are central for all couples and families and an important element to research. CFT strategies also seek to determine meaning. One example is the Social Ecological Approach (Ungar, 2011) where an intervention includes a therapist exploring with a couple or family "which resources are the most meaningful given the client's context and culture" (Allan & Ungar, 2014, p. 198). Whether it be as a means for framing an understanding couples and families have or part of a specific intervention, exploring meaning is central to the clinical work of CFT and there is great potential for related CFT research to explore meaning.

The field of CFT research is no stranger to experiential approaches that focus on the importance of meaning and experience. During the 1990s, Dahl and Boss (2005) noted that CFT researchers became increasingly interested in the everyday experiences of couples and families and how they made meaning of those experiences. What follows is an outline of IPA including the theoretical underpinnings, how to conduct a research project using IPA, examples of how the authors used this methodology and possible applications of IPA in the field of CFT research.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) offers a set of guidelines for conducting research that are rooted in an epistemological position (Smith, 2004). IPA was first identified as a distinctive method in the mid-1990s in an article that appeared in *Psychology and Health* (Smith, 1996). In the article, Smith argued for an approach to psychology that could capture the experiential and qualitative elements of research while maintaining a dialogue with more mainstream understanding of research in psychology. Smith (1996) drew on the work of a phenomenological psychology (Giorgi, 1985), on hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969), and on an

engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts (Smith, Harre, & Van

Langenhove, 1995).

The key elements of IPA are that: it is an inductive approach; participants are experts on

their own experience and are recruited because of their expertise in the phenomenon being

explored; researchers analyze data to identify what is distinct (idiographic study of persons)

while balancing that with what is shared in the sample; and the analysis is interpretative,

grounded in examples from the data, and plausible to the participants, readers, and general

public. Much of the early research using IPA was in the health psychology field (Smith, 2011)

and the introduction of IPA has made phenomenological research more accessible for those who

do not have a philosophical background (Willig, 2008). Yet, that does not negate the relevance

of the philosophical traditions of phenomenological research and the onus on the researcher to be

authentic to aspects of these traditions.

IPA is particularly suitable for research in the field of couple and family therapy. Shaw

(2001) explains that the focus on individuals' experiences in IPA and the exploration of meaning

making processes that are situated in participants' many cultural roles provides rich and diverse

data that can be explored in depth. Table 1 below is an adaptation of one developed by Smith,

Flowers, and Larkin (2009, p. 45) and reflects research undertaken by the first author while

supervised by the second author. In this table, IPA is contrasted with other qualitative

approaches as a means to further delineate this research methodology and clarify the focus of

study. Those new to qualitative research approaches can sometimes fail to see the distinction

between different methodologies on a broad scale and those newer to phenomenological research

approaches sometimes get lost in understanding the focus of each phenomenological research

methodology.

Table 1

Comparison of IPA with other qualitative approaches

Example research question	Key features	Suitable approach
What are the main experiential features of learning and using an evidence-based CFT practice?	*Note the focus on the common structure of 'learning and using an EBP' as an experience.*	Phenomenology
How do couple and family therapists make sense of learning and using a couple or family therapy EBP?	*Note the focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience.*	Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
What sorts of story structures do CFTs use to describe events that are part of learning and using an evidence-based CFT practice?	*Note the focus on how narrative relates to sense-making (e.g. via genre or structure).*	Narrative psychology
What factors influence couple/family therapists learning and using an evidence-based CFT practice in therapy?	*Note the willingness to develop an explanatory level account (factors, impacts, influences, etc.).*	Grounded theory
How do CFTs talk about using an EBP in practice?	*Note the focus on interaction over and above content, and caution about inferring anything about the EBP itself.*	Discursive psychology
How is an 'evidence-based practice' constructed by CFTs?	*Note the willingness to use a range of data sources, and the focus on how things 'must be understood' according to the conventions of a particular setting.*	Foucauldian discourse analysis

The table is another means to describe IPA by placing it in the context of other research

approaches; more specific to IPA are the underpinnings of this research methodology. Smith et

al. (2009) identify three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge that IPA draws on: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. What follows is an exploration of each in turn, beginning with phenomenology.

Phenomenology

In terms of its theoretical position, IPA is phenomenological in that it aims to explore participants' lived experience and how they make sense, or make meaning, of these experiences. Phenomenology draws on the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and those who expanded on his views, such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982). Husserl encouraged researchers to go to the things themselves, describe phenomena as accurately as possible, and repeat analyses to sharpen the interpretation.

Heidegger expanded on Husserl's work and diverged by emphasizing that people are part of a world of objects and relationships and that our being in the world is always in relation to something or someone, so that the interpretation of people's meaning-making activities is central to phenomenological inquiry (Krell, 1993). In IPA, researchers make an effort to bracket or set aside their assumptions while understanding this is not always possible to do so. The process of bracketing can be assisted by the use of personal and epistemological journaling as noted further in this article is important (Willig, 2008). Smith et al. (2009) propose that Husserl was primarily concerned with individual psychological processes while Heidegger "is more concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in" (p. 16-17). The Heideggerian concept of being-in-the-world suggests human existence as situated in a particular historical, social, and cultural context.

Merleau-Ponty (2005), like Heidegger, wrote about the situated and interpretive quality of our knowledge about the world. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty saw a role for

bracketing, not solely as a means to remove oneself from the world but as a means of further understanding how we are in the world in relation to the data as is suggested in IPA. Both Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger saw human existence as inextricably linked with others. Merleau-Ponty (2005) described this intersubjectivity as follows:

> The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity. (p. xxii)

It is how people engage each other that is central to most couple and family therapies and is of interest in some CFT research. Merleau-Ponty builds on the notion of intersubjectivity as not only isolated to interactions with others or to our experience of those interactions but also situated in and between our bodies.

Sartre extends the understanding of the situated nature of our experience. That is, experiences are always understood by the presence and absence of our relationships to other people. Sartre described intersubjectivity in terms of antagonism and conflict. Zahavi (2001) points out that Sartre's account of intersubjectivity "rejects any attempt to bridge or downplay the difference between self and other" (p. 157). Sartre shares with Heidegger that we are caught in projects in the world, seek after meaning, and have a self-consciousness that engages with our world. The various approaches to phenomenology reviewed here are foundational for researchers using IPA and another area of influence was hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, a method and theory for interpreting text and meaning, is another major theoretical underpinning of IPA. The practice of hermeneutics began with the interpretation of

biblical texts and later, Enlightenment thinkers set about systematizing a practice into a method of understanding (Moran, 2000). Schleiermacher (1998) described hermeneutic practice as including two inseparable parts, a grammatical interpretation and a psychological interpretation (Smith, 2007). So one understanding of hermeneutics is as an individually located and evolving notion driven by language as a central location.

Gadamer (1990) and Ricoeur & Thompson (1981) have critiqued Schleiermacher's concept of psychological interpretation as an ahistorical reconstruction emphasizing the author's intentions. Smith et al. (2009) agree that it is not possible to recreate the original meaning; however, Schleiermacher's psychological interpretation makes sense in relation to contemporary research interviews. In the context of IPA research, there is a role for a systematic and detailed analysis of the text itself, some of it will come from connections which emerge through having an overview of a larger data set, and some of it may come from dialogue with theory. The hermeneutic circle resonates with different hermeneutic writers and is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the parts and the whole. There is a dance between understanding any given part by looking at the whole of a single interview for example and understanding the whole by looking at the parts (Finlay, 2008). It is these moments of disclosure from the research data that engages the researcher in a dance with the hermeneutic circle.

Hermeneutics offers crucial insights for IPA. As an interpretative approach, IPA is concerned with how a phenomenon appears and Heidegger's explicit understanding of phenomenology as a hermeneutic exercise is central. Heidegger and Gadamer offer rich and dynamic understandings of the dialogue between fore-structures and the new phenomenon emerging. Schleiermacher's attention to historical texts and both a textual and psychological interpretation are important for IPA. Finally, the hermeneutic circle "provides a useful way of

thinking about 'method' for IPA researchers" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). Another way of knowing central to the method of IPA is idiography.

Idiography

A third major influence in IPA is idiography, which is concerned with the particular. IPA is idiographic, starting with a detailed analysis of a single interview until some degree of understanding or gestalt has been achieved. While idiography suggests an emphasis on the particular, this is not the same as an emphasis on an individual. As we have seen, the phenomenological view of experience is complex. On the one hand, experience is embodied and situated. On the other hand, it is relational and offers a concept of the individual that is worldly and not so discrete and contained. Either way, individuals can offer a unique perspective on their engagement with the phenomenon and become the unit of study themselves. As such, a commitment to a idiography is closely linked to the rationale for case-studies (Smith et al., 1995).

The case can be seen as the unique example of a type and collected together with other cases, can lead to more general claims. Smith et al. (2009) suggest two approaches for moving from a single case to more general claims: analytical induction and the quasi-judicial approach. The former involves attempting to develop theoretical explanations from a set of cases by proposing an initial hypothesis that is then tested against each case in turn. Bromley (1986) advocates a quasi-judicial approach which parallels case law development. In this approach, single cases are written up and considered in relation to other cases. The intent is to produce detailed accounts of persons in situations within relatively narrow areas of scientific and professional interest.

An idiographic approach highlights the particular, detail, context, and texture of lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). While a single case study can highlight the shared commonality of lived experience, the study of several participants can also bring a focus to shared themes and experiences. The focus on an individual case affords a ground up approach to theme development by building to more general claims by drawing together additional cases. What follows is a description of the methods used in IPA.

IPA in Practice

Data Collection

From a phenomenological perspective, it is possible to include multiple methods of data collection to hear the voices of research participants for the purpose of understanding the meaning within their lived experience and to make visible those lived experiences. These methods include: interviews, an iterative review of related theoretical and philosophical literature, and reflexive journaling. This combination of qualitative research methods enhances rigor and improves credibility and transferability of data (Cresswell, 2007; Finlay, 2003; Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2000).

Interviews and sampling strategy.

Purposeful sampling, consistent with qualitative research (Creswell, 2007), is often used to select participants on the basis that they can speak to the phenomena being researched. Given the idiographic nature of IPA research, sample sizes are small. For example, Smith et al. (2009) describe n=3 as the default size for a Masters level IPA study, while they write of the varied demands of different doctoral programs. In some cases, Smith et al. (2009) recommend three self-contained but related studies for doctoral students. The first being a single case study, the second a detailed examination of three cases, and the third a larger sample of eight participants

from different locations. The demands of the research question will have an impact on the

number of participants and design of the project however there are a number of benefits to the

three self-contained studies approach for graduate students and those new to IPA.

The first benefit is that they will learn more about IPA, the interview process, their own

analytical process and habits, and what questions they need to further explore with supervisors.

Second is that it will point to what literature a researcher needs to further explore to get a better

understanding of the phenomenon being researched. Third, a graduate student will learn about

what their supervisor(s) ideas are about IPA, their epistemological leanings, and their ability to

support their development as an IPA researcher as opposed to accommodating the supervisor's

ideas about what they want done. One more benefit of doing three self-contained studies for

graduate students is that it will help them clarify their own and their supervisor(s) philosophical

commitments. This latter benefit is best explored as a dialogical process between the data, the

philosophy literature and supportive supervisors. One has to be "in it" to best develop these

commitments, it cannot be explored at a distance.

Researchers aim for homogeneity in a sample not aiming for a representative sample in

terms of large populations nor seeking probability. Sampling is not about repeatedly returning to

gather more experiences but a researcher does need to properly contextualize their account of

those experiences by describing how, when, and where the sample was drawn. This will enable

readers to make links to their own experiences, the theory literature, and the IPA accounts, and

explore transferability to their own contexts. Interview questions in IPA research are prepared so

that they are open, expansive and participants are encouraged to talk at length. Examples of

research questions used by the first author for a study exploring CFT's experiences with learning

an evidence-based practice included: Can you tell me about how you became a couple/family

therapist?; Can you tell me about a CFT evidence-based approach that you have learned about?;

What influenced your decision to learn about that CFT approach?; Can you tell me about what

you enjoyed/ found challenging about learning that new CFT approach?; Who supported you?;

How did you deal with challenges in learning that new approach?; Did your work place provide

support?; Are there clients with whom the EBP does not work?; and How does culture, context,

and resources play a role in the effectiveness of an EBP?

      Journaling.

      Finlay (2005) calls for researchers to incorporate into their methods a process that

involves reflexively engaging "with the embodied intersubjective relationship researchers have

with participants" (p. 271). Of note for research using IPA methodology is a similar process for

an epistemological reflexive engagement. One method that helps with the process of reflexivity

is journaling. Willig (2008) suggests that when journaling, a student should write as if writing to

their supervisor and there are two types of reflexivity to engage in journaling: personal

reflexivity and epistemological reflexivity. The first involves "reflecting upon the ways in which

our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and

social identities have shaped the research" (Willig, 2008, p.10). It also involves thinking about

what impact the research may have and how it may change us, as people and as researchers.

Epistemological reflexivity, Willig (2008) suggests:

> requires us to engage with questions such as: How has the research question defined and
>
> limited what can be 'found'? How has the design of the study and the method of analysis
>
> 'constructed' the data and the findings? How could the research question have been
>
> investigated differently? To what extent would this have given rise to a different
>
> understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? (p. 10).

Thus, epistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions about the research, about the related literature, and about the world that we have made in the course of the research. This helps a researcher think about the implications of these assumptions for the research and its findings.

One example of how journaling was done for an IPA research project is the first author's (RA) process while completing a PhD dissertation. RA did not formalise his reflections into a single journal; however, the constant reflection about and engagement with the research topic by RA took place in a number of ways. A note book was a constant presence where notes were made about what was read, when in discussion with a member of the PhD committee, while at conferences or workshops, and thoughts that came up in relation to the research. RA also started to carry a small notebook in his jacket pocket where he could take notes about the research as ideas came to him while he was going about his daily business. As the analysis evolved, he started to keep notes in an MS Word document in a file on his computer that had articles and related material to the theme that he was exploring. Throughout this research project, he assisted others in the training of an evidence-based approach to working with couples and families, supervised therapists learning an EBP, and saw couples and families in his private practice. At times, each of these provided moments of intensity in his reflexivity as he recognised something that a research participant mentioned or was mentioned in the research literature, as trainees and supervisees struggled and celebrated in their learning, and as he experienced his own sense of competence and struggle in his work with couples and families. A few of these reflections are included in the analysis he wrote up but, primarily, they functioned as a background in his analysis and a reminder of the importance to focus on the experiences of the research participants.

Levels of Data Ana lysis

The inductive procedures of IPA are "intended to help the researcher to develop an initial insider's perspective on the topic" (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005, p. 22). This flexible technique allows the researcher to identify unanticipated topics or themes during analyses. The balance of emic and etic positions in IPA is achieved first with the idiographic nature of the inquiry and then by the researcher's attempts to make sense of the participants' experiences and articulate them in a way that addresses a particular research question. IPA is grounded in the text but moves beyond it to a more interpretive and psychological level. IPA also recognizes that different levels of interpretation are possible.

Smith (2007) describes data analysis as an iterative and inductive cycle, which draws on a number of different strategies including: line-by-line analysis of experiential claims, concerns, and understandings (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006); identification of segment patterns or themes emphasizing both convergence and divergence first for a single case then across cases (Eatough & Smith, 2008); the development of a dialogue between the researcher, the coded data, and their CFT knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these particular concerns at this time in this context, which leads to a more interpretative account (Smith, 2004); the development of a frame, which illustrates the relationships between the themes; the use of supervision, collaboration, or audit to test and develop coherence in the interpretation; the development of a full narrative, which includes detailed commentary of data extracts and takes the reader through theme by theme; and, finally, reflection on the researcher's own perceptions, and processes (Smith, 2007).

While there are suggestions for how to proceed, IPA is not intended to be a prescribed set of steps meant to be followed like a paint-by-number kit. The guidelines are meant to be a

model for how to come to a rich and thick description of the phenomenon being researched. In

general, IPA moves from the particular to the shared, from the descriptive to the interpretive, it

maintains a commitment to understanding the participant's point of view, and has a

psychological focus on personal, couple, or family meaning making in particular contexts. Smith

et al. (2009) outline a six-step process for the analytical process which this researcher will use:

- Reading and re-reading the transcripts and other data.

- Initial noting in a column next to the transcript paying attention to the
  participant's content, linguistic interpretations, and conceptual comments.

- Develop emergent themes by mapping inter-relationships, connections, and
  patterns between the initial notes taken.

- Search for connections across emergent themes, identify and explore oppositional
  items, identify contextual or normative elements, and identify the purpose a
  theme may play in a couple's, family's or a CFT's life.

- Move to the next case and repeat same analytical process.

- Begin to look for patterns across cases and identify most important things to say
  about   participants.

Table 2 below provides a sample of how RA (first author) completed one small part of his

analysis. Using MS Word, he created a box with five columns. The first column numbered the

passages in the transcript, the second column had the transcript of the interview, the third column

had initial noting at three levels about the participant's content, linguistic interpretations, and

conceptual comments, the fourth column had the emergent themes, and the fifth column the

super-ordinate themes. The initial noting in the third column included descriptive comments in

normal text which are comments that focused on describing the content of what participant has

said or the subject of the talk within the transcript; linguistic comments were italicized and

focused on exploring the specific use of language by the participant; finally, conceptual

comments are underlined with a focus on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level.

These comments were made directly in line with the place they appear in the transcript so that

one could read across and when that was not possible, he color coded the comments to link them

with the place in the transcript that is being commented on. The passage from the transcript that

is commented on is also italicized or underlined as is relevant.

Table 2
Sample data analysis

	Transcript	Exploratory comments	Emergent themes	Super-ordinate themes
XX	P: I just really wanted to be more effective with my couples. I had taken training in Imago, I had trained with, I've done so many different things, I've done Shamanic training which I love, I've done interactive guided imagery and hypnotic imagery and hypnosis, and I'm thoroughly trained in EMDR since the mid-90s, and we've done a lot with individuals, but I consistently found that, the thing that was most helpful actually with my clients was learning Heidi Scheffler's work and she worked with something called the bridge, she sort of advanced the Imago work. And I found that was really effective in the sessions but that people wouldn't do it, they wouldn't do it at home, they didn't, they'd have these changes in the session but they had to keep coming back to see me. So my real motivation, actually it's interesting, one of my biggest motivations for learning EFT at the time was that I wanted to be able to really help clients in twelve sessions. Since then I've learned that very few	- learning EFT- want to be more effective with couples - did Imago training, Shamanic training, interactive guided imagery, hypnotic imagery and hypnosis, trained in EMDR - training in other approaches individual or couple not leading to the kinds of enduring changes she was looking for in her practice - motivation was to have an approach that would work in a set number of sessions as promised by the research literature - after become involved with learning, find out that few therapists accomplish what is outlined in the EBP	- driver to learn EFT was to be more effective with couples - how the research literature influences a therapist's decision to learn	The varied and divergent roles of research and being identified as an EBP

therapists get through EFT in twelve sessions, but that was my motivation is *I really wanted to learn a technique, well it's not a technique* which is part of this issue, but I was thinking I was going to learn a technique, an approach that was going to <u>serve my couples</u> better and that was my entire motivation.	<u>literature</u> - *a cognitive dissonance, want to learn a technique- it's not a technique* - *serving couples – a calling for her??called to serve how?? Why??* <u>- learning an EBP- want to be more effective with couples</u>	- driver to learn EFT was to better serve couple	The varied and divergent roles of research and being identified as an EBP

Evaluation of the Research

Qualitative research approaches to couple and family therapy are best evaluated by criteria that "flow directly from the theory and purposes of the research" (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 5). A number of guidelines for assessing the quality and validity of qualitative research have been developed. Smith (2011) refers to some of these guidelines (e.g. Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000) while outlining four criteria for evaluating IPA research. The first criteria Smith (2011) notes is that a paper must clearly subscribe to the theoretical underpinning of IPA: that it is phenomenological, idiographic, and hermeneutic. The second criteria is that the research is "sufficiently transparent so reader can see what was done (p. 17). This transparency includes the clarity of how the stages of the research are written up, including how participants were selected, how the interview schedule was constructed and how the interview was conducted, and what steps were used in the analysis. The third criteria Smith noted was the need to have a "coherent, plausible, and interesting analysis" (p. 17).   Coherence refers to whether themes identified hang together logically, the write-up presents a coherent argument, and ambiguities or contradictions are clearly dealt with. The final criteria addresses the sampling required from all research participants to demonstrate the density of evidence for each theme. Smith (2011) recommends the following guidelines for sampling:

N1-3: extracts from every participant for each theme;

N4-8: extracts from at least three participants for each theme; and

N>8: extracts from at least three participants for each theme + measure of prevalence of

themes, *or* extracts from half the sample for each theme. (p. 17)

The following section focuses on the possible uses of IPA in CFT research.

Application of IPA to Couple and Family Therapy Research

The following is not meant to be an exhaustive listing of possible topics or areas of

research for CFT researchers interested in using IPA but is intended for heuristic purposes. IPA

in general is a methodology that builds on a social constructivist and subjective understanding of

people and reality. As such, IPA is conducive to exploring the research participants' viewpoints

and their relationship with the phenomena being explored. Within the field of CFT research, this

could include couples, families, therapists, researchers, policy developers, program managers,

funders, and whoever else is involved in the development, delivery, or administration of CFT

programs and research. The idiographic approach embedded in IPA allows for exploring

individual differences in relation to a phenomenon as well as building an understanding across

cases or research participants.

The first author chose IPA to explore CFT experiences with learning an evidence-based

practice. Therapists themselves are rarely the subject of research and the interest was in

discovering some of these experiences not predicting how all therapists best learn an evidence-

based practice. The thick description (Holloway, 1997) this research approach affords

contributes to building a foundation of understanding that does not reduce CFTs to cogs in a

learning wheel waiting to have evidence-based practices poured into them. Developing a thicker

description builds the number of variables other researchers may find helpful to explore with a different methodology and intent such as case study or quantitative approaches.

The emphasis on social-relatedness in IPA makes it particularly useful for exploring meaning and meaning-making. As previously noted, meaning was identified as foundational for understanding families and couples as well as an important element of different therapeutic approaches (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Despite this emphasis on meaning and for a variety of reasons, research more often looks to identify what best therapeutic approach works for which population. As a methodology, IPA lends itself to the foundations of understanding couples, families, therapists, therapeutic processes, and so on. While not intended to lead an investigator to direct cause and effect conclusions, IPA as a methodology creates an epistemological framework that questions simplistic formulations of phenomena. A final important note for CFT researchers interested in using IPA is the recognition of the intersubjective constitution of human reality (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 2005; Sartre, 1948). The fundamental understanding of people as related and socially constituted reflects a systemic understanding of CFT research issues.

Conclusion

This article reviewed IPA which is a newer research methodology that is gaining popularity particularly in the United Kingdom. Unlike intervention research where the focus is on "understanding the practices, their outcomes, and the varying moderating and mediating variables that may affect the success or failure of different clinical interventions" (Sexton, Kinser, & Hanes, 2008, p. 165), IPA offers an opportunity to explore the idiographic experiences of the people who are directly and indirectly involved in the practice and research of CFT. Developing a broader understanding of how these various parties make meaning is central to the

development of understanding the couples and families CFTs work with and the various

therapeutic approaches used in our work.

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