

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Smith, Jonathan A. (2018) Participants and researchers searching for meaning: interpretative phenomenological analysis and the experience of pain. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 16 (2), pp. 166-181. ISSN 1478-0887.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/24904/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively

**Participants and researchers searching for meaning:
Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the experience of pain**

Jonathan A Smith

In this paper, I describe an extended theoretical positioning for IPA's inherent concern with meaning-making on the part of both participant and researcher. It arises from thinking I have done as part of giving a set of keynote presentations in 2017-18 (in London, UK; Florida, USA; Poitiers, Franceⁱ). The paper presents a composite of the ideas outlined in the keynotes and stays close to the oral voice of the talks. I am grateful to the conference organizers for inviting me and so helping me to develop this piece. In it, I draw on a range of writings on meaning and use them to elaborate on what is meant by IPA's concern with the search for meaning. In order to illustrate how this works in practice, I then take some examples from studies I have conducted on the experience of pain and link the theoretical ideas to the studies' findings.

Participants searching for meaning

While IPA can be applied to a wide range of issues, it comes into its own when examining people's perceptions of major experiences that are happening to them and which engage hot cognition. It is in these circumstances in particular that the participant is forced to reflect on what has happened and attempts to make sense of its meaning. As a consequence, the event engenders a lot of cerebral activity and that cognition is emotionally laden.

Such experiences can either be relatively current and discrete, for example a major decision or major turning point in somebody's life, or it can be ongoing. What makes an ongoing situation apposite for IPA is the presence of the hot cognition. So while somebody may have had a chronic illness for a number of years, it may still be something they are wrestling with. They're still doing a lot of cerebral and emotional activity about it as they attempt to find the meaning in what has happened.

Inherent to this model is the notion of a person as intrinsically a self-reflexive, sense making agent who is interpreting their engagement with the world. Social philosopher, Charles Taylor, describes us as *self-interpreting animals* (Taylor 1985a, p45). Being human involves endeavoring to find meaning in what's happening to us. IPA's position also echoes the hermeneutic psychology of Martin and Sugarman (2001):

Events as experienced by human agents carry significance. They matter, and humans are consequently not indifferent to, but interactive with, them. (p193)

Indeed what turns an event into an experience is the significance bestowed on it by the human participating in, and potentially changed by, what is happening.

Thus human beings are sense making creatures and that sense making is reflected in the meaning of what is being made sense of. Let's think a little more about what we mean by meaning. In Box 1, I offer a typology of levels of meaning. I'm not reifying this, this is just suggestive, but I think it's quite helpful in terms of thinking about the centre of gravity for an IPA study.

<i>Type of question</i>	<i>Level of Analysis</i>	<i>Density of IPA focus</i>
1. What does <i>that</i> mean?	Literal	I
2. What does <i>he</i> mean?	Pragmatic/textual (puzzle)	III
3. What does it <i>mean</i> ?	Experiential (significance)	IIII
4. What does it <i>mean</i> for my identity?	Existential (significance)	III
5. What does my life <i>mean</i> ?	Existential (purpose)	II

Box 1: A typology of meaning

The typology is established by the type of question a person might ask; this reflects the level of sense making they are engaged in. So in terms of this series of levels of searching for

meaning, we can start with the literal. At that first level, when someone asks ‘what does that mean?’ they are seeking a literal answer; ‘what is the linguistic definition of the word being considered?’ That’s in a sense the most basic level of a search for meaning.

The second level of searching for meaning, that we as humans are almost always concerned with, is the more pragmatic question of what does a piece of text or an utterance actually mean. So if we’re reading a text, it’s not just about what the literal meaning of the text is but rather ‘what does it *actually* mean?’ And that involves a textual puzzling with, or unravelling of, what’s going on. ‘What does this poem mean?’ Or more pragmatically, ‘what did he mean when he said that in our conversation?’

The third level is the more experiential one. This is concerned with the meaning of major things happening in one’s life. ‘What does it mean that I’ve been told I have a positive diagnosis for a serious illness? What does it mean to me that I have been offered a promotion at work?’ So the third level is concerned with the experiential significance of the thing that’s happening. And indeed that’s the centre of gravity for IPA. It is the type of quest after meaning that is almost always present in an IPA study.

The next level becomes existential. ‘Well, what does this mean for my identity?’ So it’s an experience that’s got more resonance, it’s got some meaning for my identity, for who I am.

And, finally, meaning at the highest level in the typology is of heightened existential import where the question may become one of life purpose: ‘what does my life mean anyway?’ or ‘does my life have any meaning?’

This typology is one which reflects my own sense of the different ways in which we conceive of the meaning of meaning, both as humans and as researchers. After compiling it, out of curiosity, I looked up the entry for ‘meaning’ in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Interestingly it’s three fold presentation reflects the typology outlined: (i) literal definition; (ii) significance; (iii) purpose.

The final column in box 1 shows the density of interest IPA has in each level and shows the intricate interweaving of the levels. The core concern of IPA is at level 3 'what is the experiential significance of what is unfolding?' However an inevitable and intrinsic requirement of that endeavor is an engagement with the prior literal and pragmatic components of meaning. I need to understand what the person meant when they said something in order to understand what this thing means for their life.

And then looking in the other direction, the experiential significance of an event considered in an IPA study often slips over into a concern with the significance for the person's identity. And finally sometimes, though not typically in an IPA study, we find that the things happening to someone are of such an order that they can lead to a questioning about the meaning of life itself.

Having articulated more explicitly IPA's conception with meaning at a significant experiential level, and having positioned it in relation to other forms of meaning, it is now useful to elaborate on it by drawing on some other theoretical writing. The following quote from Charles Taylor (1985b) encapsulates his definition of what experiential meaning is and this resonates very closely with the central concerns of IPA:

On the phenomenological level or that of ordinary speech (and the two converge for the purposes of this argument) a certain notion of meaning has an essential place in the characterization of human behavior. This is the sense in which we speak of a situation, an action, a demand, a prospect having a certain meaning for a person... When we speak of the 'meaning' of a given predicament, we are using a concept which has the following articulation.

(1) Meaning is for a subject: it is not the meaning of the situation *in vacuo*, but its meaning for a subject, a specific subject, a group of subjects...

(2) Meaning is of something; that is, we can distinguish between a given element-situation, action, or whatever- and its meaning. But this is not to say that they are physically separable. Rather we are dealing with two descriptions of the element, in one of which it is characterized in terms of its meaning for the subject...

(3) Things only have meaning in a field, that is, in relation to the meanings of other things. This means that there is no such thing as a single, unrelated meaningful element; and it means changes in the other meanings in the field can involve changes in the given element...

Meaning in this sense-let us call it experiential meaning- thus is for a subject, of something, in a field. (p21-23)

This is a clear and useful partitioning of the different elements in an experience which make it meaningful which can be directly applied to the analysis performed in IPA, as we will see later in this paper. The articulation of meaning as being of a particular thing, for a particular person, within a particular context also speaks to IPA's idiographic commitment.

I'd like to link IPA's conception of experiential meaning to another significant intellectual figure: Jerome Bruner. This is especially pertinent given Bruner's position as one of the leading figures in psychology's turn, in the middle of the 20th Century, from a behaviourist to a cognitive paradigm. In 1990 Bruner laments what he saw as cognitive psychology's rather rapid move then from the science of meaning making to the science of information-processing. Here he eloquently describes what the project was supposed to be and what it became:

It was, we thought, an all-out effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology- not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behaviour, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning... Its aim was to discover and to describe formally the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated. It focused upon the symbolic activities human beings employed in constructing and making sense not only of the world, but of themselves... The cognitive revolution... became fractionated and technicalized ... Emphasis began shifting from "meaning" to "information" from the *construction* of meaning to the *processing* of information. These are profoundly different matters. The key factor in

the shift was the introduction of computation as the ruling metaphor and of computability as a necessary criterion of a good theoretical model. (p2-4)

This is a very articulate manifesto and statement of regret. It feels as though there was this quite small window for mainstream cognitive psychology where it was engaged in what Bruner saw as the new cognitive project of meaning making before it pretty quickly slipped into becoming something else. Interestingly then, what IPA is concerned with and what it does are consonant with what Bruner saw as the central purpose of cognitive psychology. Therefore IPA is, in part, carrying on the legacy of Jerome Bruner's cognitive psychology- the science of meaning and meaning making.

The hermeneutic researcher and the double hermeneutic

So far I have given an extended treatment of what I mean when I say IPA is concerned with how participants are engaged in a search for the meaning of their experiences. What is already more familiar in the literature of IPA is the way in which researchers are also meaning making agents who, in their analysis, are trying, through interpretative engagement with the participant, to make sense of the phenomena they're presented with. While this is more familiar terrain, I think it is helpful to go over it again briefly in order to see the full picture.

To do this I would like to revisit Heidegger's outlining of a hermeneutic phenomenology in *Being and Time* (1962). Heidegger stated that the word phenomenology comes from the Greek and is actually made up of two components, *phenomenon* and *logos*, each of which is important. So phenomenon is primarily to do with appearance, with appearing and showing whereby something that is previously hidden comes into light:

It is something that proximally for the most part does *not* show itself at all; something that lies *hidden* in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself; but at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself, and

belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground. (Heidegger, 1962, p59)

So the phenomenon lies hidden. It's tantalising, it's underneath but it's also connected with, what is already visible. And there are clues in what is visible to help access the phenomenon underneath.

Logos is more analytical, involving reason and sense making. So yes, the thing appears. But the phenomenologist helps bring that into play. It's the phenomenologist who helps set the scene that allows the participant to talk and therefore give us access to the phenomena. And then critically, the phenomenologist makes sense of the appearing. And this takes Heidegger to hermeneutics as Moran (2000), a leading writer on phenomenology, says:

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. (p229)

So for Heidegger and IPA, unlike some other phenomenologies, in order to do the phenomenology, you need to do the hermeneutics, you need to do the interpretation. The thing is there ready to shine forth, but detective work is needed to enable that to happen. And for Heidegger, and IPA therefore, phenomenology is about discovering or uncovering meanings. How much digging or uncovering is needed to get at those meanings depends on the particular circumstance (Smith, 2011).

Therefore we have seen that participants are attempting to search for the meaning in what is happening to them and it is this very meaning making that turns an event into an experience. And we can see, in turn, that researchers can be said to be doing a similar thing. It is important conceptually therefore to bring these two things together.

Martin, Sugarman and Thompson (2003) do this by completing the circle and, aligning with Dilthey, in coupling the hermeneutics of the person and the hermeneutics of the researcher:

The phenomena of the human sciences, especially psychological phenomena, not only require interpretation in their study... but also are constituted by human interpretive practices. (p73)

So, neatly, both the process and the content of human science inquiry are interpretation. The researcher is doing interpretation but what they're doing interpretation of is their participants' interpretive work. And for both, the interpretation is of the experiential meaning of the phenomenon under consideration.

I have myself articulated this relationship in a similar but slightly different way, as *a double hermeneutic* (Smith & Osborn, 2003):

The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. (p51)

I think that's helpful because it makes the researcher both like and unlike the participant: like because they are doing interpretative work; like because this is a demystification of what qualitative experiential analysis is. In one way it's merely doing what human beings do. OK, it's doing it in more detail, it's doing it more steadfastly, but none the less, it's an essentially human process that is happening in that research endeavor.

But the researcher is also different from the participant because their interpretation is second order. They don't have direct access to the experience of the participant; rather what they've got access to is the account from the participant, the participant's own sense making of what's happening to them.

The central point then is that ordinary human activity and less ordinary human science research can be seen as intimately connected. Being human involves seeking after the

meaning of significant experiences happening in one's life. Being an IPA researcher involves searching for the meaning in the rich personal accounts about their lives provided by participants.

The meaning of pain

I would now like to draw on some of the empirical research I have conducted on the experience of chronic pain to illustrate both:

- The way in which this shows the participants attempting to make sense of, find the meaning in, what is happening to them.
- How the theoretical ideas on meaning can be seen to be manifest in, or resonate with, this research on pain.

Pain is in itself a very interesting phenomenon because it's so difficult to pin down and it's hard to capture in quantitative scales. Within mainstream health research, a biopsychosocial model is invoked whereby pain represents the outcome of the meeting of those three components. There is, therefore, a recognition by many of the value in detailed qualitative experiential studies aiming to get at the meaning of pain.

I've been involved in a number of studies in this area. Each has been done with a clinician as a co-researcher which means there's a useful triangulation or dialogue between me as an experiential researcher and somebody who's got clinical experience of the topic. I'm going to show a small number of extracts from three studies to show how IPA works with meaning.

The first study (Smith & Osborn, 2007) is an examination of the impact of chronic pain on self and identity. The participants are in mid-adulthood with chronic low back pain so severe that they're off work. They're also at the end of the road in terms of medical interventions and they've stopped pain killers because they don't really work for them. All participants have been referred to a pain clinic but, importantly, they're interviewed before the

intervention. We wanted them to be, as far as possible, raw and naïve to the psychological discourse that would happen during the intervention.

Here's a fairly extended passage from Helen which shows how she is so centrally engaged with trying to make sense of her pain:

It's not who I am, it's just who I am if you know what I mean. It's not really me, I get like that and I know like, you're being mean now but I can't help it. It's the pain, it's me, but it is me, me doing it but not me do you understand what I'm saying? If I was to describe myself like you said, I'm a nice person, but then I'm not am I? And there's other stuff, stuff I haven't told you, if you knew you'd be disgusted, I just get so hateful... It's the mean me, my mean head all sour and horrible. I can't cope with that bit, I cope with the pain better. [Tearful] Look do you mind if we stop now, I didn't think it would be like this, I don't want to talk any more.

This seems a very clear example of the participant attempting to make sense of their predicament and stands as a brilliant testament to the way in which participants try to find meaning in what is happening to them.

Helen's attributional wrestle at the beginning is both relational and personal. It is a form of dialogical hermeneutics: *'Do you understand what I'm saying?'* (Or: Do we understand each other?) But it seems likely she is also trying to work things out herself: *'I'm a nice person, but then I'm not am I?'* There is a battle between two different selves: the nice person that she's grown up seeing herself as (and still wants to see herself as) and this other self that is emerging- the mean and miserable self. And, dramatically, she tells us that we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg. There is other stuff but it is so shameful that she can't tell us all of it.

Finally, this is also a clear piece of hot cognition. It's not a reported narrative of a concern in the past. The sense making is clearly happening now. She is engaged with this problem, trying to make sense of it, trying to deal with it now. And as clear marker of the affective

cognition that is happening in the here and now, she gets upset and asks for the interview to stop.

Lets' look at Helen's statement in the light of Taylor's definition of experiential meaning, outlined earlier in the paper. The phenomenon or experience being talked about is clearly *meaning for a subject*. We are not in this passage being told about some abstract or generalized sense of pain, we are witnessing this particular person Helen trying to make sense of her pain. As we read the passage we are hearing, at one and the same time, the content of an attempt at finding meaning and an assertion of the selfhood of the *subject* attempting that meaning making.

Second the meaning is *of something*. Taylor's differentiation between an objective element and the subjective meaning of that element for the participant is brilliantly captured in Helen's claim that '*It's the mean me, my mean head all sour and horrible. I can't cope with that bit, I cope with the pain better*'. Yes there is something objectively, medically defined as pain but what we are learning about here is the personal significance and impact of the pain for Helen and it is that non-biomedical, experiential pain which constitutes its meaning.

Third there is a *field* in which the meaning of this pain is located. The passage implicitly invokes a social realm of other people who are being treated differently by Helen as a result of the changes caused by the pain. And the pain engenders both implicated judgements from those others and a sense of shame on the part of Helen.

So we can clearly see how this passage works as a powerful warrant for an IPA analysis of experiential meaning and how it can be parsed in terms of Taylor's conceptual components of that experiential meaning.

The relational field is fundamental to participants' experience of the meaning of pain. So we see an added layer of significance away from the objective entity. For Helen what is worse than the pain was what it is doing to her sense of who she is. In parallel, for participants,

having pain on your own is bad but having it within a relational nexus makes it more difficult. Kevin introduces the complex nature of this:

This pain, it hurts but its evil gives me a nasty head and makes me hateful, irrational. I hate it when they all leave in the morning and I'm left on my own and I hate it when they all come back in the evening... If something sad happens to someone, I'm not sad, sometimes I'm pleased... I'm just glad someone else is miserable and you have these stupid rows about nothing and you know they're stupid but you have them anyway because you get to spray a bit of hate about.

It is a lose-lose situation. When he is on his own, Kevin will be lonely, with no distractions. When he is with others, the distraction allows for negative relational affect and cognition. And that itself is complicated. On the one hand, being with other people allows some catharsis. On the other hand, it makes him feel badly towards others. And the imagery in the final sentence speaks clearly to the toxic interpersonal consequence of his pain. He feels he is contaminating others with the thing that has invaded him.

And what is the consequence of this process? Kevin continues:

I need to be careful about people and a bit worried about what's going to happen to me. Are we all going to get rounded up and taken to a camp somewhere?

What an extraordinary thing for Kevin to say. What does he mean and why does he think it? While he just says *camp*, it's pretty clear he doesn't mean a holiday camp but rather a prison camp or a detention camp. So why on earth would he be thinking that? Here's somebody whose pain is so great that you would expect it would invoke compassion, empathy on the part of people outside. But Kevin's worried that actually he's going to be rounded up and punished for having this pain.

Well let's look at the phenomenological logic. A summary of the story Kevin, like the others, presents is: 'I was a good person, this pain has invaded me, and it's changing me, and

turning me into a bad person. And now as a bad person, I'm contaminating other people. And so I am scared that I will be held to account and punished for this'.

Seen this way, Kevin's concern makes sense. So I think this is a strong illustration of the way in which medicine, by concentrating on the physical pain is, to a certain extent, missing the point. The psychological impact on the person is potentially greater and this clearly has implications for therapeutic interventions.

The strength of Kevin's plight is enhanced when seen in the light of Taylor's components of experiential meaning. His statement is clearly demonstrating meaning for a subject. The first person presentation gives clear personal ownership to the experience. Kevin needs to be careful and is concerned about what is going to happen to him. And second, there is a strong affective subjective object here which can be distinguished from, but is also umbilically tied to, the objective pain object.

I think our analysis of Kevin's statement also usefully demonstrates the other side of the double hermeneutic, illustrating Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological description of the experiential researcher engaged in the search for the latent meaning beyond the manifest.

First, here is the *manifest*, the thing Kevin actually said:

Are we all going to get rounded up and taken to a camp somewhere?

And through a process of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis we get to the *latent*:

Are we all going to get rounded up and taken to a prison camp somewhere?

I should note here that I have given an abbreviated set of extracts from participants in order to illustrate the theoretical argument being proposed. The original study is much more heavily evidenced with material from a number of participants, illustrating the steps in the

sequence. And it's the power of the hermeneutic circle, the scale of the cumulative and iterative evidence, picking up other things Kevin's said, and things other participants said, that gives us confidence with our interpretation of Kevin's statement about the camp.

Next I would like to give an extract from an earlier study (Osborn & Smith 1998) which was a broader reconnaissance of the pain experience. I have used this passage in exemplifying the analysis of IPA before. Here however I am employing it to make three separate and new points in relation to meaning making. I am using the passage to:

- (i) Illustrate further partitioning of experiential meaning, in relation to Taylor's model;
- (ii) Connect with a reflexive definition of identity;
- (iii) Expand the notion of the hermeneutic circle of inquiry.

Talking about the impact of pain on her, Linda says:

I'm only 50 and I should be doing this and that and the other cos they say life begins at 40 but I can't and I suppose it does bother me. It's frustrating that people of my own age, you can see them flying their kite and you feel as if you can't, which is so stupid, I just think I'm the fittest because there are 3 girls (she and her sisters) and I'm the middle one and I thought well I'm the fittest and I used to work like a horse and I thought I was the strongest and then all of a sudden it's just been cut down and I can't do half of what I used to do.

So what's going on here? As part of making sense of her predicament and her pain, Linda engages in a comparison with a whole set of others:

- An ought self, manifesting what she should be doing;
- What other people she meets are actually doing;
- What members of her family are doing;
- What she was doing in the past.

And the stark thing is, that on all comparisons, she's failing. As a reflection of how contracted and reduced her current life/self is, she is comparing herself with each of these other lives/selves and she is failing in comparison to them all.

It is also useful to look at Linda's account in terms of Taylor's three components of phenomenological meaning. First, again, we are under no illusion that Linda is talking about her particular experience- the meaning of pain to her. Second, quite separate from, but equally connected to a physical pain, is the psychological, relational and temporal experience of the pain for her. So, finally, the meaning of experiential pain exists in a field, a social nexus of surveillance, of other people: imagined, familial, remembered.

Let's look at the temporal dimension a little further. Linda begins in the present by saying: 'I just think I'm the fittest'. And then she slips to somewhere between the present and the past: 'I thought well I'm the fittest'. And then there is a more clearly past tense: 'I thought I was the strongest'. So she appears at one and the same time to be saying:

- I am the fittest
- I used to be the fittest and strongest
- Now I am the weakest

So what's going on? If you tried to capture that in a single rating scale, it would be very difficult because there's a contradiction. How can she be, at one and the same time, the strongest and the weakest? In fact, we would say that actually goes to the heart of the matter because where is the real Linda located? We would suggest that what this passage illustrates is Linda's attempt to hang on to a familiar self at the same time as she realizes it is threatened, under attack.

So while an objective assessment would point to a diminished physical self as a result of the pain, we would posit that if asked where her real self is located, Linda might well say it is in the super strong person she remembers from the past. She might say 'that is the real me, right there'. She's not denying the actual decline but one way of preserving herself against

the difficulties that she's facing is to remember an exaggerated positive form of the self in the past. And I think that connects quite neatly to Anthony Giddens' (1991) conceptualization of identity:

Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent. (p53-4)

So biography is not an objective, detached record of the life. Rather it is the life as constructed by the person in the present. It is particularly pertinent for Linda to emphasise the continuity of herself between the present and the past because in so doing she is helping to preserve her sense of self against the ravages of the pain.

This paper also for the first time allows us to engage in a more historical hermeneutic circle. The two studies we have looked at were conducted and reported separately at different times and when we bring them together we can see how they first and foremost offer their distinct and particular accounts of the experience of each group of participants. But then we have the added advantage of being able to look at the two together and we find they offer mutual illumination of each other and the analysis of each helps strengthen the basis of the analysis of the other.

So we can see that in both cases the participants, under the onslaught of pain, are striving to hang onto an original virtuous self. In each case, we bear witness to that ongoing battle for the self: a good me versus a not good me; pain as me versus pain as not me. Of course the analysis recognizes the particularity of the predicament for each participant as each person has their own personal position in relation to that battle. But it then also allows us to see convergence as well as idiosyncrasy. And indeed the convergence with what we find in the first study presented above can give us even more conviction in the validity of our interpretation of Linda attempting to preserve the mental record of the superhuman self of the past as a resource to help deal with the physical degradation being faced now.

Painting pain

I would now like to draw on one final study (Kirkham, Smith & Havsteen-Franklin, 2015). This study is concerned with the experiences of a similar set of patients with pain but it has an added component. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was given coloured pencils and asked to draw a picture of their pain. The drawing then acted as a stimulus for the interview. The participant talked about their picture and more generally about their experience. And the analysis was of the picture, of the patients' talk about the picture and then of the other things they said in the interview.

The pictures are extraordinary and offer quite a lot of eerie similarity. So we see a set of pictures of lurid, dangerous, destructive things: swirling dervishes, viruses going through the body, saws swinging around and cutting through the body's flesh (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Pictures of pain

In this paper I'm just going to talk about one person's drawing. Here is Zoe talking about her drawing (the right hand one in figure 1):

It's like rubber but with really sharp spikes on it and that's how I see it. It feels like that, it's like my eyeballs exploding, like you want to do that (she pulls at eye socket).

It's very graphic, it's very real, and part of what's compelling about it is this ambiguous or paradoxical combination of soft tissue, the roundness, and then the spikes. We can almost see the eyeball and the way that the spikes are then cutting through the tissue around the eye. The picture captures it brilliantly.

But part of the power of the image is how it leads Zoe into providing an extended homily on her pain:

I've got different pains...The guillotine is normally right across but from the back, through my chest, through the top of my lungs and it feels like a sharp blade right across me. I get that all the time...I've got the scaffolding pole which goes through the top of my head and feels like it comes out here somewhere... It feels like I've got a massive chain round my neck with a big gold brass ball where the chain goes round but the ball's so big it's right there on the back of my neck...heavy and it hurts.

Zoe's body is violated by an array of macabre barbaric instruments of punishment and torture: the guillotine bisects her lungs; the scaffolding pole plunges through the top of her head etc. The pictorial presentation of pain helps bring forth an equally graphic symbolic portrait of the meaning of pain to Zoe. Not surprisingly, such a distressing imaginary dwelling leads Zoe to search for an explanation:

It's dark, it's almost, it's punishment, it's torture...Sometimes it feels that I must have done something wrong, not necessarily in this life.

People search after meaning. If the experience of pain is so punitive, what can possibly explain it? Assuming that in some way she is being punished for something she has done, and finding no satisfactory cause in this life, the scale of the ensuing punishment pushes Zoe to consider attributing that wrong doing to something she did in a previous life.

Finally this passage adds another piece to the unfolding jigsaw. We have already seen a presentation of the possibility of pain leading to severe punishment, in the thoughts of Kevin. Here with Zoe we see pain manifesting as the punishment itself. So pain can lead to punishment but it can also itself be punishment.

Unhomelikeness

Here I would like to make a connection with one final source. Svenaeus (2010), from a Heideggerian perspective, describes illness in the following way:

Illness is an unhomelike being-in-the-world in which the embodied ways of being-in of the self (person) have been thwarted. In illness the body shows up as an alien being (being me, yet not me) and this obstruction attunes the entire being-in-the-world of the ill person in an unhomelike way. (p337)

This is a beautiful account of illness and the connections between Svenaeus' account and the unfolding argument of this paper are almost uncanny. Svenaeus considers the normal human state is a feeling of being at home and that this is disrupted in illness by what seems like an alien being. Well, we have seen various graphic depictions of that alien being in our participants' pictorial and linguistic representations: the spikey ball intruding in Zoe's body, the venomous spray emanating from Kevin.

Svenaeus points to a battle between being me and yet not me. And that is close to the very words that Helen used to convey what pain was doing to her: *'it's me, it's not me, do you understand what I mean?'* And we can also connect it to our presentation of Linda's conception of where the real me is located, as she might have said, 'this current weak me- it is me and it's not me'.

Finally, Svenaeus argues that illness changes the person's experience from a feeling of being at home in the world to a feeling of being unsettled and unhomelike. Well remember what Kevin said about his fears of being taken away. Because Kevin is unsettled by the pain, this

can indeed be said to be, in Svenaeus' terminology, an unhomelike experience. What could be a more dramatic marking of that psychological or experiential unsettledness than for Kevin to be literally unsettled, removed from his home and put in an unhomelike place, a prison camp? I think Kevin's depiction of his fearful concern represents a very powerful symbolic illustration of Svenaeus' notion.

Conclusion

Hopefully, in this paper you've seen the way in which we've witnessed the participants' attempts to make sense of the meaning of their pain: witnessing, as in Helen's extract, their real-time struggle and discomfort; witnessing, as in Zoe's case study, the attempt to represent the pain through their drawings; witnessing as in all the cases, our subsequent attempts through the analysis process to make sense of their words and their lives.

What comes out of this witnessing is the recognition that pain is much more than a biomedical phenomenon. Pain is experienced as malevolent, punishing and shameful and as having seriously deleterious impact on the person's sense of self.

So I would say IPA helps us get close to personal experience of these elusive phenomena, in this case pain. I hope you've seen how its distinctive idiographic, micro-textural focus works, and also got a sense of the way we're engaged with trying to capture something of the hot cognition involved in making sense of experience.

I have also linked the graphic illustrations to a range of theoretical ideas on hermeneutics and meaning making. Drawing on a range of writers, I have fleshed out IPA's conception of the double hermeneutic where both participant and researcher are engaged in searching for meaning- the participant in what is happening to them, the researcher in the participant's account of what is happening to them.

Further I have attempted to demonstrate explicitly how features of the analytic extracts presented can also be seen to be illustrating elements of the theoretical conceptions

offered by some of the writers, in particular Heidegger, Taylor, Giddens and Svenaeus. I hope thereby to have illustrated a close meshing of theoretical and empirical instantiation of the search for experiential meaning.

References

- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kirkham, J., Smith, J.A., and Havsteen-Franklin, D. (2015) Painting pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of representations of living with chronic pain. *Health Psychology*, 34, 398-406.
- Martin, J. and Sugarman, J. (2001) Interpreting human kinds: beginnings of a hermeneutic psychology. *Theory & Psychology*, 11, 193-207.
- Martin J., Sugarman, J. and Thompson, J. (2003) *Psychology and the Question of Agency*. Albany NY: SUNY Press.
- Moran, D. (2000) *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge.
- Osborn, M. and Smith, J.A. (1998) The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An interpretative phenomenological analysis *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 3, 65-83.
- Smith, J.A. (2011) 'We could be diving for pearls': the value of the gem in experiential qualitative psychology. *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin*, 12, 6-15.
- Smith, J.A. and Osborn, M. (2003) Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In JA Smith (Ed) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A. and Osborn, M. (2007) Pain as an assault on the self: an interpretative phenomenological analysis *Psychology and Health*, 22, 517-534.
- Svenaeus, F. (2011) Illness as unhomelike being-in-the-world: Heidegger and the phenomenology of medicine. *Medicine, Health Care & Philosophy*, 14, 333-343.
- Taylor, C. (1985a) *Philosophical Papers: Volume 1, Human Agency and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C. (1985b) *Philosophical Papers: Volume 2, Philosophy and the Human Sciences*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ⁱ Smith, JA (2017) 'Getting at meaning and meaning making: interpretative phenomenological analysis in action,' Keynote presentation, International Conference on Meaning, Roehampton University, London, UK, June 2017.

Smith, JA (2018) 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis in action', Keynote presentation, Qualitative Report Conference, Nova South-eastern University Florida, USA, Jan 2018.

Smith, JA (2018) 'Trying to make sense of pain: the development & application of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in psychology', Keynote presentation, Narratives of Suffering & Recovery symposium, University of Poitiers, France, April 2018.