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Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality

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Existing guidance on evaluating the quality of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research has provided criteria to assess work as good, acceptable or unacceptable. Given that IPA has become a well-established member of the qualitative methods repertoire, we think it is valuable now to focus in much more detail on the particular qualities that are the hallmark of high quality IPA research. Here we present four such qualities which are discussed in detail and illustrated through the use of exemplars from excellent IPA work. The qualities are: constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative; developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account; close analytic reading of participants' words; attending to convergence and divergence. Finally, the four qualities are briefly considered in relation to the theoretical underpinnings of IPA.

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Introduction

The merits of evaluating the quality or validity of qualitative research are now widely acknowledged within qualitative psychology and this can be seen as one of the stimuli for this timely special issue of *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. In this paper we intend to contribute to this debate by offering detailed guidance on how to write good interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an established qualitative method of inquiry concerned with the detailed exploration of personal lived experience, examined on its own terms and with a focus on participants' meaning making (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The first guide to assessing the quality of IPA was published in 2011 by Jonathan Smith in a review of IPA studies that sets out the criteria for different levels of quality (Smith, 2011a, 2011b). At the time, generic guidelines were becoming available to assist with the assessment of qualitative research (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Yardley, 2000), but no quality criteria existed solely for IPA. Smith's (2011a) review was therefore a response to the need for guidelines with a level of specificity that could assist reviewers in making a judgement on the quality of a paper reporting an IPA study, while at the same time supporting researchers to achieve high quality IPA.

The criteria were developed by focusing on the quality of the corpus of IPA papers that had been published between 1996 and 2008 and identified in a literature search of three data bases (Web of Science; Medline and Psychinfo). The initial set of guidelines was developed through an inductive exercise that involved reading sets of papers taken randomly from the complete corpus and identifying quality categories and indicators. Once formulated, the criteria were tested on other papers and further refined to produce a final assessment device.

The guide described three quality levels: Good, Acceptable, Unacceptable, along with criteria for each. A key objective was to articulate pointers for distinguishing between acceptable and non-acceptable papers for the purposes of assessing acceptability for publication. The criteria encompass a range of qualities that contribute to overall trustworthiness, including whether the paper subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA, the degree of transparency, coherence, plausibility and interest, the sufficiency of sampling and the density of evidence (see Smith, 2011a). Some of this was discussed further in a reply to commentaries on the first paper (Smith, 2011b).

An equally important objective of these papers was to help researchers achieve high quality IPA. To that end, three additional criteria for a *good* IPA paper were identified: i) Keeping focused and offering depth; ii) Presenting strong data and interpretation; iii) Engaging and enlightening the reader.

In this paper we take this a stage further. Smith's 2011 papers covered a lot of ground but were therefore unable to offer much detail on how to meet the nominated criteria. Here we have set ourselves the much more specific aim of helping researchers write good IPA papers and reviewers assess good IPA papers. In this article, we will therefore expand on the features particular to good IPA studies and demonstrate how they are executed in practice through close examination of, and detailed illustrative exemplars from, two excellent IPA papers. We will also later in the article briefly consider the aspects of a good IPA paper we are presenting in relation to some of the theoretical principles that have inspired the development of IPA.

Key quality indicators in IPA research publications

We will now introduce four quality indicators which can be exhibited in good IPA studies and we illustrate how they can be achieved in practice, drawing on two examples of very good IPA papers: Dwyer, Heary, Ward, and MacNeela (2019) and Conroy and de Visser (2015). Box 1 summarises the four qualities.

Quality indicator	Brief description
Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative	The analysis tells a persuasive and coherent story. The narrative is built cumulatively through an unfolding analytic dialogue between carefully selected and interpreted extracts from participants.
Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account	Focus on the important experiential and/or existential meaning of participants' accounts gives depth to the analysis.
Close analytic reading of participants' words	Thorough analysis and interpretation of quoted material within the narrative helps give meaning to the data and the experience it describes.
Attending to convergence and divergence	Idiographic depth and systematic comparison between participants creates a dynamic interweaving of patterns of similarity and individual idiosyncrasy.

Box 1. The four quality indicators of good IPA

We now offer a more detailed description of each quality and, in each case, we illustrate it with an example from our first selected good IPA paper.

Constructing a compelling unfolding narrative

Findings should convey a 'story,' a sense of progression over a narrative. Narrative development provides a sense of coherence to the analysis and is an expression of the hermeneutic circle linking part and whole which is characteristic of IPA (Smith, 2007). This operates at two levels: within and across themes. Within each theme, an alternation of carefully selected participant quotes with analytic interpretation of the quotes generates the narrative. If the researcher is presenting the theme in terms of subthemes, then this

organisation occurs at subtheme level. What helps in developing that narrative is that each quote illustrates a specific point and additional quotes are used to take the narrative a step further, add something new, offer a different perspective. Across themes the sense of coherence can be achieved by ensuring that each theme contributes to the narrative of the overall findings in an interconnected manner.

Let us see how a powerful narrative can be constructed by examining our first example. To help orient the reader, a summary introduction to this study is provided in Box 2.

**Box 2: The experience of adults with acquired brain injury living in a care home
(Dwyer et al., 2019)**

The researchers interviewed six people in middle adulthood (38-53) who, a few years after an acquired brain injury (ABI), were residing in nursing homes in Ireland. Nursing homes are considered unsuitable for conditions that require rehabilitation, such as ABI, but are often used for lack of better alternatives. The authors wanted to gain insight into participants' experience of living in such an environment. This article describes in detail the superordinate theme: "Existential prison of the nursing home: stagnated lives".

Narrative development appears to have driven many choices in this paper. Each subtheme has its own story which develops through an alternation of description, quotes and interpretation. The alternation provides the narrative with rhythm, nuance and sense of progression. We invite you to read through the extract in Box 3 which shows one subtheme from Dwyer et al. (2019) and then we will discuss its narrative strengths.

Box 3: I don't belong here: living in God's waiting room

1 This subordinate theme illustrates the participant's sense of not belonging in the nursing home
2 environment, which was "not natural for a young person" (Sean, 2403). They described this
3 setting as a place for older adults who are dying and often suffering from dementia, resulting in
4 a "fear of ending up like them" (Conor, 656). The nursing home was "for people who are older
5 than me and people who are behaving like children" (Liam, 1754–1756). This shared
6 misplacement was vividly captured by Sarah.

7
8 *It is terrible. It is terrible. It is just degrading really. It is not for me, not for*
9 *a young person. Young people shouldn't have to live in a place like this. It is*
10 *grand and all that but it is not for young people, it is for old people and it is*
11 *for old people to end their day, you know...Just, I don't think I am old. I am,*
12 *you know, I know I have disabilities but I am not old. I am still young, I am*
13 *not senile, I don't have dementia. (Sarah, 1200–1212)*
14

15 Although Sarah describes the nursing home itself as a fine for the purpose of caring for older
16 people, her repeated use of "I" asserts her own identity within an aged population she does not
17 identify with. Besides the linkage to ageing and dementia, the participants also saw the nursing
18 home as being a place to die. All participants with the exception of Jack spoke of elderly
19 residents continually dying within the nursing homes, including David and Sean, who had
20 moved on to alternative accommodation. Sean referred to his nursing home experience as living
21 in "God's waiting room" (2528). The repetition of death instigated a questioning of their own
22 mortality and heightened their death anxiety. The impact of death and dying in the nursing home
23 dominated Liam's transcript, as he repeatedly conveyed the toll it was taking on him.

24
25 *In the company of so many people dying it is just too much like. Really,*
26 *really too much...If somebody dies there is no movement in them [the older*
27 *residents]. Whereas it really blows me when somebody dies like you know.*
28 *Like, so many people have died there, I'm in their company and helping*
29 *people here and there and next thing you know they are after dying. (Liam,*
30 *178–189)*
31

32 Like the other participants, Liam depicts feeling overwhelmed surrounded by prolific death. His
33 reference to "no movement in them" draws a comparison between himself and the elderly
34 residents, who don't appear fazed by the frequent losses that leave him feeling knocked. This
35 may be interpreted as a consequence of his life stage, in which death is not the norm. There is
36 also a sense of suddenness in "next thing you know", capturing the persistent abrupt and startling
37 nature of the deaths in spite of their frequency.

38
39 Liam also drew contrast between himself and the staff's reaction to loss. He described staff as
40 having a life outside the nursing home and could therefore escape, while he feels trapped with
41 the relentless reality of death; "you're not sitting in that room until they move somebody else
42 into the room. You go out, you have your normal life outside the door, your house. Some guy
43 died and you know...for me it is completely different" (480–487).

44
45 David also commented on the distressing ability of staff to be casual about death.

46
47 *The person that I used to have dinner with all the time ... he disappeared for*
48 *around three to four weeks and then I asked one of the staff "what happened*
49 *to [him]?" and she said "sorry he died a few weeks ago". I said "why didn't*
50 *you tell me?", she said "you didn't ask". I was...what's the word I'm*
51 *looking for here...I was horrified. (David, 1453–1462)*
52

53	The word “ <i>horrified</i> ” can be interpreted as David's acute shock upon realizing that not only had
54	his friend died, but also that he was not informed. By contrast, the casual tone in “ <i>you didn't</i>
55	<i>ask</i> ” appears to portray staff as indifferent.
56	
57	Living with death led all participants to detail concerns for their own mortality. While Conor
58	stated “ <i>it makes you feel a little bit vulnerable at 53</i> ” (684), Sarah recounted her death anxiety
59	with greater intensity.
60	
61	<i>You are always saying are you going to be next like, you know? You feel is it</i>
62	<i>your turn now? ... You are looking at people dying, people that you have met</i>
63	<i>and you care about and then they are gone in a flash...and you see that</i>
64	<i>empty chair where they used to sit and slowly, one by one, they are</i>
65	<i>disappearing...you say, “is it coming around to me?” (Sarah, 1450–1460)</i>
66	
67	Sarah’s use of the word “ <i>always</i> ” suggests the perpetual nature of the dwelling over her own
68	mortality in the nursing home. The imagery of the “ <i>empty chair</i> ” and residents “ <i>disappearing</i> ”
69	conjures existential notions of nonbeing, which lead Sarah to contemplate her own existence.
70	
71	Sean also used metaphors of death to illustrate his distress while living in the nursing home,
72	stating “I felt like I was buried alive” (2039). He returned to this metaphor to describe his
73	transition out of the home into a more appropriate living environment: “ <i>I felt like I'd come out</i>
74	<i>of the crypt. That I was Lazarus, awoken from the dead...It was like I was brought back to life</i> ”
75	<i>(2904–2910).</i>
	<i>Extract from Dwyer et al. (2019, p. 37)</i>

So how does the narrative unfold in this extract? In the first paragraph (lines 1-6), very short participant quotes are woven into the text to explain the overall sense of the theme: that participants feel out of place here. This is developed further with a quote by Sarah who talks about feeling young and not senile compared to other nursing home residents (lines 8-13), followed by an in-depth interpretation of her words (lines 15-18) that introduces the idea of nursing homes as places where people go to die.

Consequently, on line 18, the narrative shifts to how other nursing home residents continually dying increases death anxiety in participants, as illustrated by Liam’s quote (lines 25-30). The interpretation of Liam’s quote introduces a comparison between his response to the deaths and the response of elderly residents (lines 32-37) and staff (lines 39-43), which then, through David’s quote (lines 47-51), extends to consider the staff’s indifference to death.

Discussing death in such terms paves the way to present participants' anxieties concerning their own death, through Conor's words (line 58) and Sarah's second quote (lines 61-65). This crescendo of anguishing thoughts, culminates with Sarah's question "*is it coming around to me?*" on line 65. Sean's words about resurrection in the last quote (lines 73-75), are a ray of hope which comes as a release to the reader but also highlight the starkness of the current plight, in pointing to the huge distance that renewal would represent, being "*awoken from the dead*".

Overall, the narrative develops as a tightly woven story of increasing anguish in which, through ever more dramatic reports of the sequence of what is happening to other residents (being old > dying > not existing), the authors use participants' words to convey how challenging living in the unsuitable nursing home environment is for people with ABI and how what is happening to the elderly people around them has psychological consequences for the participants themselves.

Admittedly, this is a very resonant example, from the contents and the tone of the data, but the same principle would apply to any IPA study. Researchers can develop a compelling narrative by choosing the right quotes and the right order to put them in and by then offering an insightful analytic commentary on those quotes and connecting them with each other so that together they tell a story which is rich, cohesive and has momentum.

Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account

Good IPA is almost always about things of importance to people and those circumstances where they are prompted or forced to reflect on what has happened in an attempt to make sense of its meaning (Smith et al., 2009). What turns an event into an experience is the degree

of significance bestowed on it by a person, whose sense-making of it imbues it with different levels of experiential or existential meaning (Smith, 2019). Therefore, a good IPA paper is likely to invoke strong experiential or existential themes. The quality of IPA will be increased when the analysis explicitly engages with the experiential and existential significance of what participants are reporting and pays particular attention to their meaning-making around them.

The existential significance of living in a nursing home as a young person following ABI resounds through the findings of Dwyer et al. (2019) and is made manifest through strong data and interpretation. As the narrative unfolds in Box 3, we see how the incongruity of the nursing home environment for the participants becomes ever more apparent as the experience of living with an aged population, surrounded by death and indifference, creates several existential threats that undermine their sense of belonging in the world.

The sense of threat is revealed through the authors' interpretative analysis of the participants' experiences that goes beyond the immediacy of what is happening to the participants and their comments on it. The analysis brings to light how these experiences have consequences for their sense of humanity in terms of selfhood, mortality and feelings about their own existence. This reflects a concern within IPA for a person's sense-making of major experiences and the level of significance they bestow on those experiences which, in turn, can elicit new meanings and questions that challenge their existential world (Smith, 2019).

For example, we see Sarah's life among an aged population take on existential levels of meaning as the authors highlight her struggle for selfhood (lines 15-16). In her second quote (lines 61-65), her feelings of fear and horror at seeing people in the nursing home continually disappearing are revealed by the authors as something that leads her to dwell on her

mortality, as well as bringing into question her own sense of being. In both instances, the choice of Sarah's quote and the authors' interpretation of it work together to bring to light the existential significance of events. Notably, the existential level of meaning is more latent in Sarah's first quote (lines 15-16) than the second (lines 61-65), in the first instance relying on the authors' interpretative work to bring it to light. In contrast, Sarah's exclamation in her second quote – "*Is it coming round to me?*" leaves little doubt over her fear of mortality and requires far less explanation.

These examples demonstrate how the quality of IPA, the levels of insight and depth it can offer, can be developed through the authors' consideration of the different levels of experiential significance in the data and the way it can shift towards existential concerns.

Close analytic reading of participant's words

IPA researchers' commitment to interpretation and idiographic depth requires that they engage in a close analytic reading of the participant quotes. Quotes should not be left to speak for themselves but require further analysis on the part of the researcher to explore their significance. By analysing and interpreting quotes, the authors can reveal the fuller meaning of the data and the way each participant is making sense of the experience under scrutiny. This is achieved by focusing on both what is going on in the immediate quote and also thinking of it in the context of the wider transcript.

Throughout the Dwyer et al. (2019) paper, close analytic reading of quotes is used to develop both an illuminating and convincing interpretation of participant experiences. Not only does this draw out the meaning of the quotes, but it also offers a level of detail that brings transparency to the authors' interpretative claims.

In Box 3, the deeper significance of the participants' experiences of the nursing home environment becomes apparent and is revealed through the authors' close reading of the quoted extracts. What is striking is the range of features they describe in order to achieve this, including: choice of particular words and phrases, linguistic tone, ambiguity, repetition and emphasis, imagery and metaphor.

For example, Sarah's first quote (lines 8-13) expresses her view of the nursing home as a place for old people who are expected to die which she feels is incompatible with her age and life-stage. However, it is only through the authors' examination of Sarah's use of repetition that the reader's attention is drawn to how this experience makes her consider her identity (lines 15-16).

A similar dynamic is apparent in the case of Liam (lines 25-30) who describes his struggle to cope with the prevalence of death in the nursing home. Here, a close analytic reading of Liam's ambiguous comments "*no movement in them*" and colloquial remarks "*the next thing you know*" reveals that the crux of his difficulty lies in his sense of difference from the other residents which leaves him feeling shocked and confused (lines 32-37).

Towards the end of the extract, we see a dramatic change in Sean's experience after he leaves the nursing home, brought to the fore by the authors' focus on metaphor. By linking two separate metaphors together (lines 71-75) the authors illustrate Sean's transition from feeling "*buried alive*" in the nursing home to being "*awoken from the dead*" when moving to an appropriate living environment.

Taken together, these examples illustrate how a close reading of participant quotes can reveal the deeper significance of the particular relationship between the participant and the experience. As the different examples imply, there is no single way of accomplishing this and it relies on the researcher's engagement with the quotes and the dataset as a whole. Indeed, this reflects IPA's hermeneutic process of moving back and forth between the meaning of the language in the quotes and the knowledge displayed in the wider transcript (Smith, 2007). Moreover, it is through a close reading of the quotes that the researcher can bring together and communicate their interpretation.

Attending to convergence and divergence

While case studies of single individuals are possible, IPA research usually involves analysis of data from more than one participant. And in this case, convergence and divergence are used to illustrate the similarities and differences between participants, to show both the patterning of connection as well as to highlight what makes a particular participant's experience unique (Smith, 2011a). This also allows researchers to illustrate representation, prevalence and variability within the analysis.

The best IPA studies aim to strike a balance between commonality and individuality: they show how participants share higher order qualities, without losing sight of participants' unique idiosyncratic characteristics (Smith et al., 2009). Thus convergence and divergence between accounts are sought during the analytic process and then conveyed in the results, with information on prevalence, similarities and differences and idiographical details enriching the study themes.

A good example of how convergence and divergence can add texture to an interpretation can be found in a second extract from Dwyer et al. (2019) in Box 4 taken from their third theme on institutional life. The authors are discussing the experience of structured mealtimes in the nursing home.

	<p>Box 4: Prescribed meal-times</p>
1	Five participants were distressed at lack of choice or control over their meals, experiencing them
2	as excessively disciplined, restrictive and governing their day. The feeling of being trapped
3	within a predetermined process with no flexibility was particularly prominent in Conor’s
4	interview: “ <i>It’s very regimental. You are kind of watching the clock the whole time, so that you</i>
5	<i>can be ready for lunch and then we have to be ready for our 5 pm meal, for the tea</i> ” (467–471).
6	
7	Jack echoed Conor’s sense of disempowerment and loss of self-determination. “ <i>Well I don’t</i>
8	<i>really have choices. I am limited to what I can do you know, that’s number one. Number two is I</i>
9	<i>get my meals at a certain time so everything is mapped out for you</i> ” (Jack, 853–856). David
10	described his obligation to eat even when full:
11	
12	<i>I couldn’t have the dinner at any other time, unless I got a job as a cook or</i>
13	<i>something [laughs]. It was a bit...distressing, because I wasn’t really</i>
14	<i>hungry. But if I wasn’t hungry, like for the dinner, I’d have to eat anyway</i>
15	<i>because I wouldn’t get it later on. So I just had to deal with it so...but it was</i>
16	<i>a bit distressing ... I had to eat it at the time because they couldn’t reheat it</i>
17	<i>like, you know. (David, 950–965)</i>
18	
19	David’s repeated use of “I had to” illustrates his lack of control over a fundamental aspect of his
20	daily life. This was at odds with his formidable drive to regain independence following his brain
21	injury. Yet his innate positive demeanor and resilience are evident in his use of humor and
22	radical acceptance to cope with the distress.
23	
24	In contrast, Sean stated that he found the meal structure consoling.
25	
26	<i>Well I found having a well-structured life again, that was OK. To get used to</i>
27	<i>there being [meal]times, I didn’t mind that, I found that comforting really. I</i>
28	<i>knew what was happening, when it was happening. That was good. (Sean,</i>
29	<i>1572–1576)</i>
30	
31	This extract can be understood in the context of Sean’s personality and life pre-injury. He
32	described himself as extremely organized and thriving on structure and routine. Thus the meal
33	schedule in the nursing home may have provided him with a sense of his old life; a predictable,
34	habitual and reassuring rhythm.
	<p style="text-align: right;"><i>Extract from Dwyer et al. (2019, p. 38)</i></p>

The paragraph opens with an indication of prevalence, by highlighting that five participants were distressed by the lack of choice or control over their meals (lines 1-2). Three convergent

quotes are presented, from Conor (lines 4-5), Jack (lines 7-9) and David (lines 12-17). David's longer quote is followed by an interpretation of his distress, which is partly warranted by material in the wider transcript in which he had shown a strong drive towards regaining independence. This idiographic focus on David's motivations provides additional depth to the analysis by putting it in context. Then Sean is presented as a divergent case (lines 26-29): he finds mealtime structure consoling and, again idiographically, his position is interpreted in the light of his personality and previous life structure. This cleverly ties the divergence and convergence together. Sean is different from the others in liking having a routine mealtime but this makes him similar to the others in wishing for a pattern which is consistent with his previous normal life.

Convergence and divergence entail a hermeneutic cycling between the part and the whole in the analysis: a personal quote is considered in the context of a wider personal narrative and the experience of one or more participants is considered in the context of the whole group's experience. Thus convergence and divergence can occur between one participant and the group, as seen with Sean above, but could equally be between different groups of participants. The convergence and divergence focus can be woven together more or less explicitly to show how different people might interpret the same experience in similar or different ways, depending on their individual context.

Moving to a second exemplar

Having described each of the quality indicators and illustrated them with detailed examples from our first instance of a good IPA study, we will now introduce a second paper, by Conroy and de Visser (2015) which is summarized in Box 5. It is valuable to see how different authors working on a different topic are also able to make manifest the same set of

core qualities. Again we will walk you through how it demonstrates each of the hallmarks of good IPA.

Box 5. Authentic non-drinking (Conroy & de Visser, 2015)

Conroy and de Visser (2015) interviewed five UK university students (aged 19-22) who, for reasons unrelated to their culture, had chosen not to drink alcohol. The researchers wanted to understand why they had made this choice and what kind of social experiences they were having at university. The authors found authenticity to be central to the non-drinking experience and structured their findings around four related themes: (1) retaining authenticity by not drinking; (2) tainting the self by drinking alcohol; (3) feeling trapped by superimposition and self-exposition and (4) doing what you want to do with your life.

Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative

The four themes in the Conroy and de Visser (2015) article are tightly connected and present an exploration of how non-drinking links to issues of selfhood and authenticity. Participants described not drinking so that their experiences and their sense of themselves could remain authentic, because they perceived alcohol consumption as affecting who they wanted to be. Despite feeling judged by others, they felt that not drinking enabled them to reclaim an agency that alcohol undermined. The narrative develops across themes through an argument in which the authors conclude that participants' quest for authenticity was linked to issues of agency.

We will now look at how Conroy and de Visser (2015) construct a compelling narrative within one of their four themes. Again we invite the reader to read through the extract from this paper presented in Box 6 and we will then discuss how it shows good narrative skills.

Box 6. Theme 2: Tainting the self by drinking alcohol

1 In addition to preserving authenticity, participants experienced threats to well-being through historical
2 or imagined experiences of alcohol's potential for misrepresenting either the self or other people.
3 Michelle, a former drinker, expressed this in her interview:

4
5 *I realised that I don't like the way I am when I am drunk. There've been occasions*
6 *where I've done things that I've regretted or maybe said something to a friend that*
7 *I wouldn't dream of saying otherwise. I just kind of buried my head in the sand*
8 *about the fact that I didn't like who I was when I was drunk. The less and less I*
9 *drank the more I realised that I didn't like who I was when I was drunk, so the less*
10 *I drank still.*

11
12 When drunk, Michelle had experienced 'selves' which she did not feel represented her ('*wouldn't*
13 *dream of saying otherwise*') and that clashed with enduring self-interest ('*done things that I've*
14 *regretted*'). Interplay between her experiences of 'drunken' and 'sober' self gradually led to a state of
15 reassessment where she drank progressively less as the distinction between drunk and sober
16 experiences of herself grew. Features of her struggle seemed to be built into the language of her
17 account, with the repeated '*who I was when I was drunk*' tangled up with her actions ('*the less I*
18 *drank*') to regain the person whom she recognises as herself (her authentic self).

19
20 Katie, another former drinker, had developed a similar view in relation to alcohol's person- changing
21 effects on others, as well as herself:

22
23 *People are different, on alcohol you're not the same person, you're just different,*
24 *you're tainting yourself, changing who you are with a bit of alcohol.*

25
26 Katie seemed to experience contempt, both of her peers' willingness to cede possession of their
27 authentic identities and of the cheap medium ('*a bit of alcohol*') through which this was accomplished.
28 Her alcohol consuming peers could not be readily equated with the individuals she knew when they
29 were sober and as a consequence were less recognisable, respectable or trustable.

30
31 For Paul, a lifelong non-drinker, the 'tainted self' of Katie's account seemed to represent a feared
32 imagined state and consisted part of the reason why he did not drink alcohol:

33
34 *The reason I don't drink might be because I am afraid of what I might say or do, if*
35 *I drink, saying things that might be permanent. Words that can't be healed.*

36
37 Paul fears uncharacteristic behaviour under alcohol's influence expressed as physical and verbal acts
38 holding severe consequences. This seemed to speak to experienced or anticipated risks involved in
39 drinking alcohol among our participants. Despite alcohol's advantages in removing social inhibitions,
40 its influence was experienced as (or perceived to be) untrustworthy, given its association with
41 enduring, hurtful behavioural consequences, which serve ultimately to undermine personal well-being.

Extract from Conroy and de Visser (2015, p. 1487)

In contrast with Dwyer et al. (2019) who chose depth over breadth by developing only one theme, Conroy and de Visser (2015) presented four separate themes. They achieved a

comparable level of depth by using a concise narrative style, in which only a selection of participants is presented for each theme. Also, rather than opening their findings section with a detailed description of how the themes fit together, they created a sense of continuity between themes by consistently linking each new theme to the preceding one. For example, in Box 6, the paper's second theme on alcohol's effects on the self, starts with "*In addition to preserving authenticity*" (line 1), which is a direct reference to the first theme concerning authenticity. In the Discussion, the threads connecting the themes are brought together and developed further through the dialogue with existing literature (Smith, 2004).

Within themes, the narrative develops incrementally so that each new participant quote adds a new conceptual element to the overall argument. For example, the theme presented in Box 6 describes how alcohol taints the actual or imagined sense of self of participants and those around them. In lines 5-10, Michelle talks of her direct experience of not being herself when drunk, Katie's quote (lines 23-24) discusses how other people are not themselves when they consume alcohol, while Paul's quote (lines 34-35) refers to his fears of the self that drinking might reveal. The interpretation tying the quotes together is consistently close to the participants' words, yet also conceptual because it points to alcohol's actual or imagined effects on identity.

Some of the quotes are presented as stories, so, for instance, Michelle's first quote (lines 5-10) is interpreted as a trajectory through which her non-drinking identity progressively developed. From experiencing selves and actions that did not represent her, she became increasingly aware of the distinction between her drunk and sober selves and gradually began to drink less as a way of recovering her authentic self.

This paper exemplifies how narratives can develop at different levels and be driven by different rationales, depending on which approach the authors think is most suited to communicate specific aspects of their findings. For instance, the two exemplar papers we are discussing utilise two different approaches: Dwyer et al. (2019) explore the experiential process of confronting death, while in Conroy and de Visser (2015) experience is more conceptualised around the psychological construct of authenticity. Other authors may choose other narrative approaches. What is required is that the paper shows a coherent, unfolding narrative development founded on a systematic combination of participant quotes and interpretation.

Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account

The existential significance of participants' experiences and perspectives is a key feature in the findings in the Conroy and de Visser (2015) paper which explore the participants' experience of selfhood and authenticity in the context of being a non-drinker. Compared to Dwyer et al. (2019), the narrative development within the themes is more closely intertwined with, and shaped by, the existential significance of participant perspectives. Added to this, each theme focuses on one aspect of authenticity and selfhood in the context of non-drinkers and together the themes develop an in-depth exploration of this experience.

The existential significance of the participants' experiences is also a key part of the narrative development within themes. The issue of authenticity and selfhood comes to the fore through the in-depth idiographic analysis and is developed through the different perspectives of participants. For example, in Box 6, Michelle's undesirable description of herself when drunk (lines 13-14) and her related decision to stop drinking is revealed by the authors as a personal struggle for authenticity. By highlighting the conflict between Michelle's drunken and sober

self and its relationship with her decreasing drinking (lines 14-16), the analysis reveals the importance of authenticity to Michelle's decisions around alcohol use. The notion of tainted authenticity is then extended through the analysis of Katie's quote (lines 26-29), to consider the perception of others as inauthentic and untrustworthy due to alcohol use. The existential narrative around inauthenticity and alcohol then culminates in the analysis of Paul's account (lines 37-41). Here, the authors highlight Paul's fear of the influence of alcohol on himself and his behaviour that is potentially risky or harmful and an imagined threat to personal wellbeing.

We highly recommend the reader to look up the whole paper where the way in which the narrative around authenticity can be seen to be developed across the complete thematic structure taking in, for example: authenticity as the key motivator behind the participants' decision not to drink; participants' struggle to maintain authenticity in different social contexts; and the disinhibiting and restricting relationship between alcohol, agency and authenticity.

Close analytic reading of participant's words

The close analytic reading of quotes in Conroy and de Visser (2015) is consistently detailed throughout the findings, giving them a strongly idiographic quality. Compared to Dwyer et al. (2019), fewer quotes are presented, thus allowing the space for a more in-depth exploration of the participants' language and expression in the context of the wider transcript. The detailed analysis together with the small sample size (N=5) bring to bear the idiographic quality of IPA (Smith, 2004) and enable the reader to follow the different perspectives of each participant through the themes. Added to this, the authors' close reading of quotes is highly interpretative and quick to make connections between the meaning of the data and the wider

psychological notions of selfhood and authenticity which together give the findings a distinctive conceptual quality.

In the extract we have been examining, we see how the authors' close analytic reading of Michelle's quote (lines 5-18) reveals a conflict between her drunk and sober self. By examining colloquialisms and off-the-cuff remarks, such as "*wouldn't dream of saying otherwise*" and "*done things that I've regretted*", and connecting them with psychological notions of authenticity and conflicting selves, the authors reveal the deeper significance of Michelle's words. This highly interpretative approach makes the analysis psychologically enlightening, while at the same time grounding the interpretation and conceptual claims firmly in the participants' data.

Towards the end of the extract, the authors highlight Michelle's struggle to regain her authentic self by highlighting a close interplay between her changing self-perceptions – "*didn't like who I was when I was drunk*" – and her actions – "*the less I drank*" – that lead to her progressive decrease in drinking.

Conroy and de Visser (2015), therefore, offers a fine example of how the authors' close analytic reading of quotes can not only deepen our understanding of the existential significance of participant experiences, but also help develop the psychological and conceptual pertinence of the analysis.

Attending to convergence and divergence

The Conroy and de Visser (2015) article is particular among IPA studies because it is essentially concerned with attitudes, building on multiple experiences to obtain individual

perspectives on the self-defining characteristic that all participants share, namely not drinking. Idiographic focus is predominant as the narrative develops through a series of comparisons between individual participants, rather than groups of participants. Information on prevalence is provided throughout the themes, with mentions of “*all participants*” or “*some participants*.” Individual participants are then introduced as representatives of a point of view and convergence and divergence develops between them and their perspectives, which are grounded in the personal context of participants through idiographical details.

For example, in the extract we have been looking at, the different ways in which alcohol consumption affects identity are explored through three participants. Michelle, a former drinker, is presented first and, through her, the reader understands how having first-hand experiences of being drunk has impacted her view of alcohol as negatively affecting one’s sense of self (lines 3-18). Katie, also a former drinker, has views derived from her experience of observing others becoming drunk (lines 20-29). Finally, Paul has never had the experience of drinking, but imagines what it would be like and expresses fears about how it would affect him (lines 31-38).

There is convergence between these accounts in the common view of alcohol’s effects on the self as a reason for not drinking, but also divergence in the genesis of participants’ views. Thus, Michelle and Katie base their perspectives on the experience of having been drunk or in the company of drunk others, while Paul’s view is grounded in his imagination of an experience that he has not actually had. In Conroy and de Visser (2015), convergence and divergence are more closely interlinked compared to Dwyer et al. (2019) because comparisons are between individuals and their personal circumstances and stories are used to contextualise their viewpoints.

Linking the four qualities with IPA's theoretical underpinnings

Having pursued a very close reading of two IPA studies in order to highlight how the authors of those studies are able to generate work of high quality, it is worth now zooming back out again and considering how the particular qualities of excellence we have expostulated can be seen as expressions of the underlying theoretical principles of IPA.

Attending to convergence and divergence. This is a hallmark of IPA's distinctive commitment to an idiographic analysis (Smith, 2004). By conducting a painstaking experiential analysis of the research corpus, case by case, IPA builds a detailed picture of the personal experience of each individual participant. However, IPA does not eschew generalization. Rather it insists on that generalization being built iteratively and inductively from the careful reading of each of the analysed cases. In contrast with a nomothetic approach, where data are aggregated at the group level and therefore the connection with the original individual accounts becomes difficult to trace, an idiographic analysis retains situated and idiosyncratic details at the individual level (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Multiple cases can then be compared to identify points of similarity and difference. Good IPA writing involves a dual attention to commonality and to particularity, enabling the researcher to offer a nuanced analysis of the patterning of interconnections between individuals' experiences at the same time as highlighting the particular and different ways in which those individuals are experiencing and reporting those interconnections.

Close analytic reading of participants' words. IPA is aligned with Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology in which phenomenological enquiry is considered as inherently interpretative. IPA also subscribes to a model of the participant as an intrinsically sense

making agent (Taylor, 1985). Therefore IPA involves a double hermeneutic in which the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith, 2007). The close analytic reading of participant's words represents the detective work involved in hermeneutic phenomenology, bringing to light that which lies at least partly hidden, making manifest that which is latent. Depending on how a participant talks about their experience and the meaning they ascribe to it, different levels of interpretation are possible, revealing meanings at varying levels of depth (Smith, 2019). As we saw in some of our examples above, this occurs through a close focus on the specific words spoken by participants, on their linguistic choices and tone, and on the imagery they evoke. By ensuring the close analytic reading of participant's words is central to how findings are presented, the interpretative process becomes transparent, grounded in the data and thus more trustworthy; the reader is thus invited to join the hermeneutic circle and make sense of the participant's and researcher's sense making endeavours.

Developing a vigorous experiential and/or existential account. The primary aim of phenomenological enquiry is to explore subjective lived experience. IPA studies are designed to enable this and most IPA research is concerned with the examination of experiences of some import to the participant, where the experience represents a breach from the ongoing norm and one which therefore generates considerable reflective activity by that participant. Thus the participant tries to make sense of what is happening, to find the meaning in it. The importance of the experiential concerns examined means that, in many strong IPA papers, the powerful data provided by participants takes the analysis to an existential level and into, for example, questions of identity, personal agency, connectedness. See Smith (2019) for more on this. We have observed this very dynamic between the experiential and the existential in both the papers we have examined in detail. So, as we saw earlier in the Dwyer et al. (2019)

paper, existential aspects can emerge and bring a new dimension to the analysis, not in abstract terms, but in a tight connection to the experience itself. This in turn enables the results to acquire an even greater depth and resonance.

Constructing a compelling, unfolding narrative. This quality has a close connection to each of the others. Thus, in writing a good IPA paper, the author is marshalling close interpretative readings of strong experiential data from particular individuals. Facilitating the reader's meaning making requires constructing an orderly and yet dynamic and persuasive narrative. The alternation of quotes and interpretation communicates the researcher's interpretation of the participants' sense-making to develop a cohesive and revelatory narrative. Each quote and its interpretation takes the narrative one step further by adding something new or a different perspective, bringing about a dynamic interplay between parts of the analysis and the whole interpretation. The narrative construction, therefore, is an expression of IPA's double hermeneutic and the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009). When done well, a narrative not only constructs a compelling account of the meaning of participants' experience but also helps realise the requirement for IPA findings to offer coherence, focus and depth.

Conclusion

Our aim in this paper has been explicitly to help IPA researchers write better IPA papers and to help readers and reviewers decide which IPA papers are excellent. Here we are building on Jonathan Smith's 2011 criteria for the assessment of any IPA research. Now that there is a large and growing corpus of IPA research, much of which attains a reasonable degree of competency, we consider the most valuable contribution we can make is to show, in detail, how to do IPA research which is not just acceptable but which is good or even, hopefully,

excellent. To do this we have outlined four qualities which we believe are the hallmark of good IPA.

For the purposes of clarity and elucidation we have deliberately separated these qualities out and shown how each of them is independently manifested in our two exemplars of excellent IPA. In reality, of course, as touched on in the previous section, the qualities overlap and any particular portion of an excellent IPA analysis will be demonstrating a number of them simultaneously. The qualities are different lenses onto the thing of substance being explored and so they can be seen as different parts of the same overall gestalt.

We hope we have encouraged and inspired people doing IPA or thinking of doing IPA to want to do it well and that we have offered some practical guidance in how to do that. At the same time, we hope we have offered more general readers with an interest in qualitative research some signposts to help them better evaluate the quality of IPA studies they encounter.

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