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## **A practical guide to using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has become a popular methodological framework in qualitative psychology. Studies based in IPA focus on examining how individuals make meaning of their life experiences. A detailed analysis of personal accounts followed by presenting and discussing the generic experiential themes is typically paired with researcher's own interpretation, which is an expression of double hermeneutics in practice. IPA relies draws upon phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. This paper presents fundamental principles behind IPA and offers guidelines for doing a study based on this framework.

### **Qualitative methodology frameworks in psychology**

For many decades, the mainstream experimental psychology relied on quantitative methodology based on a model, which involved testing theories by deriving hypotheses from them, which could then be checked in practice via an experiment or observation. The researcher was looking for disconfirmation (falsification) of theory, and by eliminating claims which were not true he or she was believed to move closer to the truth. In contrast to this approach, we have observed a growing development of qualitative research methodologies<sup>2</sup>, based on a different epistemological view. Qualitative researchers are mainly concerned with meaning (e.g., how individuals make sense of the world, how they experience events, what meaning they attribute to phenomena). In other words, they are more preoccupied with the quality of experience, rather than causal relationships. While quantitative studies are generally more concerned with counting occurrences, volumes, or the size of associations between entities (which requires the reduction of phenomena to numerical values in order to carry out statistical analyses), a great deal of qualitative research aims to provide rich descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. In qualitative research, data is usually collected in naturalistic settings (at home, school, hospital). Both participants' and researchers' interpretation of phenomena is taken into account in the process of analysis. An important part of qualitative methodology is *epistemological reflexivity*, which refers to questions such as: How does the research question define and limit what can be found? How does study design and method of analysis affect

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in English by the two authors and then translated into Polish by the first author.

<sup>2</sup> Silverman (1993:1) explains the difference between "methodology" and "method": whereas the former refers to 'a general approach to studying research topics', the later denotes 'a specific research technique' (e.g., an in-depth interview, focus group, participatory observation, etc.).

data and its analysis? If the research problem were defined differently, how would affect the understanding of phenomenon under investigation? (Willig, 2008).

Handbooks in qualitative methodology in psychology usually describe a number of major methodological approaches, such as the Grounded Theory, Phenomenology, Discourse analysis, Narrative Psychology, Participatory Action Research (Smith 2008; Willig 2008; Camic, Rhodes & Yardley 2003). Each type constitutes a comprehensive framework which includes theoretical underpinnings behind it and guidelines for research design (sampling, methods of data collection and analysis). When producing the final report (or a research paper), it is especially convenient to use an established methodological framework. This is valuable, as most journals impose limitations on paper lengths. The researcher can make reference to standardized methods and methodologies, instead of giving detailed descriptions of analytical procedures. This allows more space to present abundant qualitative material. In this paper, we shall describe one of such methodological frameworks, which has become increasingly popular in European and American psychology, namely Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). After a short outline of its theoretical orientation, we shall describe the specifics of research problems suitable for IPA, methods of sampling and data collection, and present guidelines for analysis using examples, and final comments on how to produce a final paper. For the reader who is interested, a much fuller treatment of these issues can be found in the book on IPA (Smith, Flowers, Larkin 2009).

### **IPA theoretical orientation**

The primary goal of IPA researchers is to investigate, how individuals make sense of their experiences. It is assumed that people are as 'self-interpreting beings' (Taylor, 1985), which means that they are actively engaged in interpreting the events, objects, and people in their lives. To examine this process, IPA draws upon the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography.

Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl, as an eidetic method, is concerned with attending to the way things appear to individuals in experience. In other words, it aims at identifying the essential components of phenomena or experiences which make them unique or distinguishable from others. By the use of eidetic reduction, phenomenologists try to recognize what essential components make a given phenomenon special (or unique). Phenomenological studies will thus focus on how people perceive and talk about objects and events, rather than describing phenomena according to a predetermined categorical system, conceptual and scientific criteria. This involves 'bracketing' one's preconceptions and allowing phenomena to speak for themselves.

Husserl's thought was further developed by his follower - Martin Heidegger (1962) into existential philosophy and hermeneutics. Heidegger was concerned with the ontological question of existence itself. According to hermeneutics (from the Greek word '*to interpret*' or '*to make clear*') one needs to comprehend the mind-set of a person and language which mediates one's experiences of the world, in order to translate his or her message (Freeman, 2008). Thus, IPA researchers attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of subject (although recognising this is never completely possible) and through interpretative activity make meaning comprehensible by translating it (just like the mythological Hermes translated the gods' messages to humans). This means, that the IPA study is a dynamic process with an active role of the researcher which will influence the extent to which they get access to the participant's experience and how, through interpretative activity, they will make sense of the subject's personal world. The analytical process in IPA is often described in terms of a *double hermeneutic* or dual interpretation process, because firstly, the participants make meaning of their world and secondly, the researcher tries to decode that meaning - make sense of the participants' meaning making (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In other words, IPA researchers try to understand what an experience (object or an event) is like from the participant's perspective. Yet, at

the same time, they try to formulate critical questions referring to the material, such as: What is the person trying to achieve here? Is there anything meaningful being said here, which was not intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that the person himself or herself is perhaps less aware of? IPA studies may thus contain elements of both types of interpretation, making the analysis richer and more comprehensive.

To sum up, IPA synthesizes ideas from phenomenology and hermeneutics resulting in a method which is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon.

The third theoretical orientation which IPA relies upon is idiography. It refers to an in-depth analysis of single cases and examining individual perspectives of study participants, in their unique contexts. The fundamental principle behind the idiographic approach is to explore every single case, before producing any general statements. This contrasts with the nomothetic principles which underlie most empirical work in psychology, in which groups and populations are studied to establish the probability that certain phenomena will occur under specific conditions. IPA relies on idiography, meaning that researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). The researcher can make specific statements about study participants because the analysis is based upon a detailed case exploration. IPA researcher will thus start with examining an individual and producing a case study or will move to an equally attentive exploration of the second case, and so on. This idiographic commitment is unusual even among qualitative methodologies. Be it the case, that the researcher wants to study a group of individuals, he or she will move between important themes generated in the analysis and exemplify them with individual narratives (how particular individuals told their stories), comparing and contrasting them (i.e., showing similarities and differences).

### **Formulating research questions**

Most qualitative methodology rejects formulating hypotheses prior to research conduct. Instead, it promotes an open inductive approach to data collection and analysis. IPA emphasises studying people idiographically. It aims at generating rich and detailed descriptions of how individuals are experiencing phenomena under investigation. Its concern with the in-depth exploration of their lived experiences and which how they are making sense of those experiences helps define the type of question which is suitable for an IPA study. Example research problems might be:

- What does jealousy feel like?
- How do young people experience the transition from school to college or university ?
- How do people make the decision whether or not undergo chemotherapy?

There are interesting examples of using IPA in psychological research to explore a variety of problems, such as: the relationship between body image, gender and sexual orientation (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009), how people with multiple sclerosis think about the experience of exercise (Borkoles et al., 2008), how being HIV positive impacts personal relationships (Jarman, Walsh & de Lacey, 2005), what influences the decision to stop psychotherapy (Wilson & Sperlinger, 2004), how individual's sense of identity is affected by being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease (Clare, 2003), by homelessness (Riggs & Coyle, 2002) or how it changes during the transition to motherhood (Smith, 1999), how people come to terms with the death of a partner (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999), or how gay men think about sex and sexuality (Flowers, Smith, Sheeran & Beail, 1997).

IPA was initially applied to problems in health psychology but became more and more popular in other fields. It can be a suitable approach in clinical psychology and psychotherapy to examine

cases. Its strengths can also be utilized in cultural or indigenous psychology, which focus on the *emic* perspective of participants. It can also support psychologists of religion to analyse spiritual experiences or religious rituals and meaning attributed to them. Community psychologists, as well as psychologists of migration and acculturation can find it handy to examine how various groups construct their ethnic (or group) identity, what meaning they attribute to social roles, and how they perceive phenomena. These are just a few examples of how this methodological framework can be used to design qualitative psychological research.

### **Sampling in IPA**

The main concern in IPA is give full appreciation to each participant's account (case). For this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small, which enables a detailed and very time consuming case-by-case analysis. At an early stage, the researcher must decide whether he or she wants to give a comprehensive and in-depth analysis about a particular participant's experiences or present a more general account on a group or specific population. Doing both is rarely possible, so the final goal will determine the subsequent methodology and research design. It is inappropriate to use a large sample size just because that is more common in psychological studies. With IPA, we aim at producing an in-depth examination of certain phenomena, and not generating a theory to be generalised over the whole population. (However, comparing multiple IPA studies on a particular problem may provide insights into universal patterns or mechanisms.)

There is no rule regarding how many participants should be included. It generally depends on: 1. the depth of analysis of a single case study, 2. the richness of the individual cases, 3. how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases, and 4. the pragmatic restrictions one is working under. The last category includes time constraints or access to participants. For example, one of us participated in a study to investigate the experiences of parents who had a child with a Juvenile Huntington's disease - a seemingly rare condition (Smith et al., 2006). The total number of people for whom this is a relevant experience is small and therefore this immediately determines the boundaries for a possible sample. More commonly the potential participant pool is wider and a process of sample selection will need to be undertaken.

IPA studies have been published with, for example one, four, nine, fifteen participants. Larger sample sizes are possible but less common. According to Turpin *et al.* (1997) the clinical psychology doctoral programmes in Britain recommend that having six to eight participants is appropriate for an IPA study. Having a sample as such gives an opportunity to examine similarities and differences between individuals. At the same time, the amount of qualitative data gathered is not overwhelming. In general, IPA researchers should concentrate more on the depth, rather than breadth of the study. A detailed analysis of a single case may be well justified if rich and meaningful data has been collected, which allows the researcher to present original problems, mechanism, or experiences. This will offer an opportunity to learn a lot about the individual, his or her response to a specific situation, and consider connections between different aspects of the person's account (Smith, 2004). In most studies, however, IPA researchers rely on a small sample rather than a single individual.

Typically, IPA researchers aim for a fairly homogeneous sample (contrary to grounded theorists, for example, who engage in constant comparisons and seek exceptions or odd cases which helps them produce a multidimensional dynamic theory of how different factors affect human behaviours). In IPA, psychological similarities and differences are usually analysed within a group that has been defined as similar according to important variables. Obviously, it is inappropriate to think in terms of random or representative sampling when one is interviewing so few participants. In line with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, participants are selected purposively. This allows one to find a defined group for whom the research problem has relevance and personal significance. How

homogeneous the group will be depends on two factors: 1. interpretative concerns (degree of similarity or variation that can be contained in the analysis of the phenomenon), and 2. pragmatic considerations (ease or difficulty of contacting potential participants, relative rarity of the phenomenon). The subject matter can itself define the boundaries of the relevant sample (e.g., if the topic is rare and few representatives are available, such as the Juvenile Huntington Disease mentioned earlier). In other cases, when the topic is more commonplace, the sample may include individuals with similar demographic or socio-economic status profiles (e.g., elderly, female members of a specific religious community or young, male patients diagnosed with a particular illness, etc.). In this respect, IPA can be compared to ethnographic studies in which small communities are closely investigated to produce detailed descriptions and commentaries about their culture, where claims are bound to that culture or only cautiously suggested at a broader level. Nevertheless, through a steady accumulation of similar studies on other groups, generalizations may become possible over time (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995).

### **Collecting data**

The primary concern of IPA researchers is to elicit rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena under investigation. Semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews are the most popular method to achieve that, although other alternatives of data collection can also be used (e.g., diaries, focus groups, letters or chat dialogues). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time. They also give enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher may investigate in more detail with further questions.

It is crucial, that researchers have developed their interviewing skills. Apart from mastering active listening<sup>3</sup> and the ability to ask open-ended questions free from hidden presumptions, the interviewer should know to build rapport and gain trust of the participant. A kind of ‘warm-up discussion may be necessary to reduce the interviewee’s tension and get him or her ready to discuss more sensitive or personal issues. With semi-structured interviews, it is helpful to prepare an interview plan in advance. It is merely a guide to facilitate a natural flow of conversation. It can include key questions or areas the researcher wants to discuss (see an example in Frame 1). Formulating specific questions (e.g., relating to sensitive issues) may be helpful for less experienced interviewers. Apart from open and expansive questions which encourage participants to talk at length, it may be also be convenient to think about prompts. These may be helpful if participants find some questions too general or abstract. Questions suitable for an IPA study may concentrate on exploring sensory perceptions, mental phenomena (thoughts, memories, associations, fantasies), and specifically individual interpretations. During an interview, the researcher should also feel comfortable with moments of silence, to allow both oneself and the participant reflect issues being discussed. Furthermore, an experienced interviewer is also sensitive to and tries to be aware of all verbal, non-verbal, and non-behavioural communication.

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<sup>3</sup> It involves listening attentively, trying to understand what is being said, negotiating meaning when things seem unclear, ambiguous or abstract, and constructing appropriate questions which helps explore what is being said.

Frame 1: Example interview questions for a study on illness behaviours in an ethnic minority group. The researcher's goal was to examine how the indigenous culture and acculturation in northern India affected Tibetan patients' explanatory models and reactions to becoming ill.

**1. Can you tell me about your illness experiences when living in exile?**

Prompts: *What kind of health problems did you have? How did that feel in your body? How did you interpret symptoms? Why do you think symptoms appeared at that time of your life? What was going on in your mind then? (thoughts/ associations/ fantasies)*

**2. What did you think could help you feel better at that time?**

Prompts: *What kind of treatment did you think was most appropriate? Why? What did you think should be done to help you overcome your problem(s)? How did you think your condition would change if had done nothing about it?*

**3. What was your first / subsequent reaction(s)?**

Prompts: *How did you decide to go about your health problems? Where did you seek help? / What stopped you from seeking help? If sought medical / non-medical treatment: What did you think about recommendations you received? What was similar or different in what you thought about your problem and how the person you referred to assessed it?*

For ethical reasons, and because IPA studies are frequently concerned with significant existential issues, it is crucial that the interviewer monitors how the interview is affecting the participant. Experienced interviewers can easily determine when the participants avoid talking about certain issues, start feeling awkward, ashamed or become very emotional. Using counseling skills may then be useful and if the interviewer has not developed such competence, he or she should follow specific ethical procedures (e.g., stop the interview and refer the person to a professional in mental care). Even though such situations are rare, the researchers should consider all possible risks.

The duration of most IPA interviews is one hour or longer. The semi-structured form of interviews allows the interviewer to ask questions in a convenient order, which may differ from one interview to another. Novel perspectives or topics, which have not been anticipated, may also arise and the researcher is free to develop them. In IPA it is necessary to audio record the interviews and produce a verbatim transcription of it.

### **Analysis of the qualitative material**

Analysing qualitative material using the IPA framework can be an inspiring activity, although complex and time-consuming. It is recommended that the researchers totally immerse themselves in the data or in other words, try step into the participants' shoes as far as possible. IPA aims at giving evidence of the participants' making sense of phenomena under investigation, and at the same time document the researcher's sense making. The researcher is thus moving between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives. The latter is achieved by looking at the data through psychological lens and interpreting it with the application of psychological concepts and theories which the researcher finds helpful to illuminate the understanding of research problems. Showing the emic perspective protects researchers from psychological or psychiatric reductionism. On the other hand, by looking at data from the outsider's perspective, we have a chance to develop higher level theories and insights (which the respondent himself or herself may have no access to). The researcher should be careful, however, when applying theories developed in one setting (e.g. western culture) to explain phenomena from a different one. Indigenous psychologists stipulate, that such theories might be irrelevant.

In general, IPA provides a set of flexible guidelines which can be adapted by individual researchers, according to their research objectives. However, these guidelines are merely an illustration of one possible way of analysing the qualitative material. They should not be treated as a recipe and the researcher is advised to be flexible and creative in his or her thinking. To demonstrate how the analysis unfolds, we shall describe the analytic stages of an example study on how Tibetans acculturating in northern India make meaning of their medical conditions.

### *Multiple reading and making notes*

The initial stage involves close reading of the transcript a number of times. If an audio recording is available, it is also recommended to listen to it a few times. This helps researchers immerse themselves in the data, recall the atmosphere of the interview, and the setting in which it was conducted. Each reading and listening to the recording may provide some new insights. At this stage, the researcher can make notes about his or her observations and reflections about the interview experience or any other thoughts and comments of potential significance. They may focus on content (what is actually being discussed), language use (features such as metaphors, symbols, repetitions, pauses), context, and initial interpretative comments. Some comments associated with personal reflexivity may also be generated (e.g., how might personal characteristics of the interviewer, such as gender, age, social status, etc. affect the rapport with the participant). It is useful to highlight distinctive phrases and emotional responses. An example of making notes has been demonstrated in Frame 2.

<b>Original transcript</b>	<b>Exploratory comments</b>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Can you tell me about the situation you were ill last time?</i> Oh, it was long ago. By the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama I haven't had any problems recently. When I arrived here ten years ago... well... even I had a small, like... spirit harm. My [points out to his genitals], you know, my organ got swollen and it was itching. I did not pay attention to it at first, but after a few days it got worse. I had... sort of pain when I was trying to pee, and I was really worried.</p>	<p><i>Attributes good fortune to the Dalai Lama. A cliché or reflects his beliefs? Attributes illness to spirits; does not know the word "penis" or ashamed to use it? Grew worried about his symptoms as they got worse Finds different explanations for his problem Sees symptoms as punishment by nagas</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Why do you think that symptom appeared?</i> Well, you know, many reasons possible. What I thought at that time and what I think now – two different reasons. I mean, you know, we used to piss everywhere, you see. In a spring, on a tree... we used to pee near that and sometimes my organ [penis] swells. And when I go to lama, he say: "This is harm of <i>nagas</i> because you did something wrong." So, they would tell me to do this prayer and I do.</p>	<p><i>Holds folk beliefs about the serpent deities (nagas), ways of offending them (peeing, cutting a tree), and being cursed. Associating skin problems with nagas' activity</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Can you tell me how you interpreted your health problem?</i> Well, at that time, I thought that it was the curse of <i>nagas</i>. These serpent deities, are very powerful beings, you know, so you have to... you know, be careful not to offend them. Sometimes, they... you can see them in a form of a frog or snake. They live in forests, in streams or in a tree. So, you know... when you pee into the stream or on that tree... or cut this tree, you can make them angry and they curse you. Then, you know... skin problems.</p>	<p><i>Smiled and seemed embarrassed to talk about sleeping with a woman. What is embarrassing for him – talking about sexual activity, prostitutes?</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>What else might have caused your problem? You mentioned another reason.</i> Well... it is like... you know, I may have slept with another woman, who may have some problems. Like a prostitute for instance. I think, if that is the cause, then I should go to a doctor. It depends. Maybe <i>nagas</i> or maybe... you know... bacteria. Sometimes we have these talks, you know... a nurse or a doctor comes... and they talk about bacteria. "Wash your hands" – you know, after using toilet or "Use condoms."</p>	<p><i>Referring to the germs theory to explain his symptoms. How does he go about conflicting explanations?</i></p>

Frame 2: An extract from an interview with Lobsang (a Tibetan from Dharamsala) about making meaning of his symptoms, with researcher's notes.

### *Transforming notes into Emergent Themes*

At this stage, the researcher should work more with his or her notes, rather than with the transcript. When detailed and comprehensive have been produced in the earlier stage, they should reflect the source material. The aim is to transform notes into emerging themes. The researcher tries to formulate a concise phrase at a slightly higher level of abstraction which may refer to a more psychological conceptualization. Nevertheless, this is still grounded in the particular detail of the participant's account. At this stage, we are inevitably influenced by having already annotated the transcript as a whole, which is a good example of the hermeneutic circle discussed earlier (the part is interpreted in relation to the whole and the whole is interpreted in relation to the part). Frame 3 shows examples of the emergent themes for the same interview extract with Lobsang.

Original transcript	Emerging themes
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Can you tell me about the situation you were ill last time?</i> Oh, it was long ago. By the grace of His Holiness the Dalai Lama I haven't had any problems recently. When I arrived here ten years ago... well... even I had a small, like... spirit harm. My [points out to his genitals], you know, my organ got swollen and it was itching. I did not pay attention to it at first, but after a few days it got worse. I had... sort of pain when I was trying to pee, and I was really worried.</p>	<p><i>Attributing good fortune to lama's blessing</i></p> <p><i>Attributing illness to supernatural forces</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Why do you think that symptom appeared?</i> Well, you know, many reasons possible. What I thought at that time and what I think now – two different reasons. I mean, you know, we used to piss everywhere, you see. In a spring, on a tree... we used to pee near that and sometimes my organ [penis] swells. And when I go to lama, he say: "This is harm of <i>nagas</i> because you did something wrong." So, they would tell me to do this prayer and I do.</p>	<p><i>Holding different explanatory models</i></p> <p><i>Referring to folk beliefs associated with nagas to rationalize illness</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> <i>Can you tell me how you interpreted your health problem?</i> Well, at that time, I thought that it was the curse of <i>nagas</i>. These serpent deities, are very powerful beings, you know, so you have to... you know, be careful not to offend them. Sometimes, they... you can see them in a form of a frog or snake. They live in forests, in streams or in a tree. So, you know... when you pee into the stream or on that tree... or cut this tree, you can make them angry and they curse you. Then, you know... skin problems.</p>	<p><i>Folk beliefs about nagas, ways of offending them, and being cursed.</i></p> <p><i>Referring to folk beliefs to rationalize skin problems</i></p>
<p><b>Interviewer:</b> What else might have caused your problem? You mentioned another reason. Well... it is like... you know, I may have slept with another woman, who may have some problems. Like a prostitute for instance. I think, if that is the cause, then I should go to a doctor. It depends. Maybe <i>nagas</i> or maybe... you know... bacteria. Sometimes we have these talks, you know... a nurse or a doctor comes... and they talk about bacteria. "Wash your hands" – you know, after using toilet or "Use condoms."</p>	<p><i>Using western conceptualizations to explain illness</i></p>

Frame 3: Examples of developing Emergent Themes.

### *Seeking relationships and clustering themes*

The next stage involves looking for connections between emerging themes, grouping them together according to conceptual similarities and providing each cluster with a descriptive label. In practise, it means compiling themes for the whole transcript before looking for connections and clusters. Some of the themes may be dropped at this stage, if they do not fit well with the emerging structure or because they have a weak evidential base.. A final list may comprise of numerous superordinate themes and subthemes (see: Frame 4). Researchers who use the traditional method of pen and paper, and write comments and themes in the margin, will probably like to end up with a list of major themes and subthemes, and relevant short extracts from the transcript, followed by the line number, so that it is easy to return to the transcript and check the extract in context. On the other hand, researchers who are using modern software for qualitative data administration, will feel convenient with a mere list of themes and subthemes, as they can produce short descriptions of each theme and use links to appropriate passages in the transcript. Using QDA software with IPA is another subject, however, which needs further elaboration in a separate paper.

<p><b>Conditions associated with good health and luck</b> Accumulation of positive karma in the past Involvement in actions to accumulate merits Attributing good fortune to lama's blessing Meaning attributed to spiritual involvement</p>
<p><b>Rationalizing symptoms of illness</b> The concept of negative karma Referring to indigenous beliefs to conceptualize illness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imbalance of humours</li> <li>• Attributing illness to supernatural forces</li> </ul> <p>Using western conceptualizations to explain illness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attributing symptoms to viruses or bacteria</li> <li>• Illness attributed to stress</li> </ul> <p>Illness attributed to poor diet Illness attributed to exhaustion</p>
<p><b>Holding conflicting explanatory models</b></p>

Frame 4: An example of clustered themes



### Writing up an IPA study

The painstaking analysis described above leads to writing a narrative account of the study. This usually involves taking the themes identified in the final table and writing them up one by one. Each of them needs to be described and exemplified with extracts from interview(s), followed by analytic comments from the authors (see an example in Frame 5). The table of themes opens up into a persuasive account that explains to the reader the important experiential things that have been found during the process of analysis. Using interviewees' own words to illustrate themes has two functions: 1. It enables the reader to assess the pertinence of the interpretations, and 2. It retains the voice of the participants' personal experience and gives a chance to present the emic perspective. The final paper will thus include both the participant's account of his or her experience in his or her own words, and interpretative commentary of the researcher. The narrative account may engage several levels of interpretation, from low-level interpretation of data to a highly detailed, interpretative and theoretical level, which may generate new insights.

In a typical IPA project, the narrative account is followed by a discussion section which relates the identified themes to existing literature. Reflection on the research can be included here, as well as comments on implications of the study, its limitations, and ideas for future development.

Trying to rationalize the onset of his illness, Lobsang initially referred to the traditional indigenous beliefs of the culture he represented:

I thought that it was the curse of *nagas*. These serpent deities, are very powerful beings, you know, so you have to... you know, be careful not to offend them. Sometimes, they... you can see them in a form of a frog or snake. They live in forests, in streams or in a tree. So, you know... when you pee into the stream or on that tree... or cut this tree, you can make them angry and they curse you.

Stories about serpent deities have been part of everyday life and social discourse in the Tibetan diaspora. They were imbedded in their cosmological system and reflected the belief in the invisible sphere of existence, inhabited by gods, demi-gods, spirits or hungry ghosts. This defined Lobsang's spirituality and his sense of identity. This also represents shared values Lobsang identified with, such as respect towards nature and all living creation. Yet, in another part of his discourse, Lobsang refers to fundamental principles of tantric Buddhism according to which all phenomena are perceived as "mere reflections of the mind." As such, serpent deities, powerful, dangerous, and potentially oppressive for those who cross the taboo, can represent inner objects which are projected and used to control the behaviour of body, speech, and mind. Peeing into the stream or cutting a tree which belongs to the *nagas* carries significant symbolic force...

Frame 5: A brief illustration of writing up an IPA study

### Conclusion

Doing an IPA study is a demanding enterprise, despite a possible illusion that using a small sample makes it easy. Obviously, the researcher needs to combine a wide repertoire of skills. To gather valuable data, some degree of interviewing experience is indispensable. Careful, systematic, and rigorous analysis, on the other hand, requires patience and openness to see the world through someone else's eyes and the ability to control a temptation to *a priori* impose conceptual categories. The inductive character of most qualitative methodologies requires that theories are derived from data, and not the other way round.

Training in qualitative research in psychology is still relatively new and underdeveloped. Students are thus likely to approach qualitative research with a mindset developed from much fuller training in quantitative methodology. Many feel challenged by the lack of appropriate skills required here. As qualitative psychology matures, we expect the general level of student work to become stronger, deeper, and richer (Smith, 2011).

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