

DOCUMENT SUMMARY This document is a book review of "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research" by Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin. The reviewer, Victoria Clarke, praises the book as a definitive and accessible guide to

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a popular qualitative research method focused on understanding people's **lived experiences**. The review explains that

IPA is a cognitivist approach that serves as an alternative to more anti-cognitivist methods like Discursive Psychology, and highlights the book's excellent practical guidance on research design, data collection, analysis, and writing.

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METADATA Category: CLINICAL Type: guide Relevance: Supporting Update Frequency: Static Tags: #ipa, #qualitative_research, #phenomenology, #lived_experience, #thematic_analysis, #research_methods, #counseling_psychology, #smith_flowthers_larkin Related Docs: This guide to a qualitative method should be linked with documents on client-centered therapy and the philosophy of understanding lived experience. It provides a methodological contrast to the quantitative papers [wattacheril_2023](#), [quach_2017](#), and [speelman_2020](#). Supersedes: N/A

FORMATTED CONTENT

Review

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research By Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin

Reviewed by Victoria Clarke, University of the West of England, Bristol.

In many ways,

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research is the closest thing to having an experienced qualitative researcher guide you through the process of doing qualitative research in the classroom.

This book answers many of the practical questions students have that are rarely addressed in books on qualitative research: What's the difference between a code and a theme? How many codes should I have? Is ten themes too many?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the newest entry to the cannon of qualitative approaches, introduced by Jonathan Smith and colleagues in the mid-1990s. It has become an increasingly popular qualitative approach, particularly in applied areas like health and counselling psychology.

IPA can be seen as an alternative to discursive approaches, which gained ascendancy in the 1990s.

- Whereas discursive approaches aim to provide an alternative to mainstream psychology and are strictly anti-cognitivist (seeking to deconstruct core cognitive constructs),

IPA aims to 'dialogue with mainstream psychology' (p. 4) and is unashamedly cognitivist in orientation.

- Furthermore, whereas discursive psychology questions the value of 'experience' and emphasizes text over people, understanding people's **lived experiences**, and the meanings they attach to their experiences is the central focus of **IPA**.

IPA, alongside Thematic Analysis and Grounded Theory, is an effective gateway into the often mystifying world of qualitative analysis, particularly for undergraduate students.

This is the first book-length introduction to

IPA. The book is divided into three sections:

1. **Part One:** Outlines the theoretical foundations and provides detailed discussions of planning, conducting and writing up an **IPA** study.
2. **Part Two:** Provides four examples of **IPA** studies from the authors' own research on topics like kidney failure, the transition to motherhood, gay men's sexuality, and psychosis.
3. **Part Three:** Explores issues around interpretative validity, the relationship between **IPA** and other qualitative approaches (like Discourse Analysis and Grounded Theory), and reflections on the future of **IPA**.

The chapters on designing an

IPA study, collecting and analysing data, and writing up an **IPA** study in particular are excellent. They provide detailed guidance on:

- **Research Questions:** The book gives lots of examples of suitable research questions and compares them to questions asked in other qualitative approaches.
- **Sampling:** The authors recommend between three and six participants for a student project, noting that their own practice "is now to treat $n=3$ as the default size for an undergraduate or Masters-level **IPA** study" (p. 52).
- **Data Collection:** The in-depth, semi-structured interview is highlighted as the ideal method for **IPA** studies. The chapter provides an insightful introduction to qualitative interviewing in general, with clear examples of different question types, schedules, and probes.
- **Data Analysis:** The chapter serves as a lucid introduction to **IPA** and experiential qualitative analysis more broadly. The authors provide a very useful discussion of coding (or in **IPA**-language, 'initial commenting'), which stands as one of the most accessible descriptions of qualitative coding available. The chapter contains excellent examples of initial comments and the development of emergent themes from a transcript.
- **Writing Up:** The writing chapter is also very practically oriented, providing clear advice on everything from developing a title to connecting data extracts to the analytic narrative.

Although the detailed guidance is very useful for students, it is unclear how prescriptive it is intended to be. The reviewer notes that they encourage students to collect larger samples than the book recommends (e.g., more than 3 interviews). This is because a student project is part of research training, and completing only 3 interviews is unlikely to give students enough opportunity to reflect on and develop their interviewing skills or refine an interview schedule.

However, this book remains an invaluable addition to the toolkit of resources for teachers and students of qualitative research.