Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Theory, Method and Research

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THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF IPA

INTRODUCTION

As we have seen in Chapter 1, interpretative phenomenological analysis is an approach to qualitative, experiential research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. This chapter will introduce each of them, and discuss their connections to IPA. In order to be clear and do justice to the existing ideas themselves, the first part of the chapter presents an introduction to these major intellectual movements in their own terms, and hopefully in a way which is reasonably accessible. Within each section, brief consideration will be given to the implications for research in psychology, and for IPA in particular. The latter part of the chapter will more explicitly and fully show how IPA draws on key concepts from the outlined approaches in order to fashion its own particular way of working.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience. There are many different emphases and interests among phenomenologists, but they have all tended to share a particular interest in thinking about what the experience of being human is *like*, in all of its various aspects, but especially in terms of the things which matter to us, and which constitute our lived world. Many phenomenologists have also been committed to thinking about how we might come to understand what our experiences of the world are like. For psychologists, one key value of phenomenological philosophy is that it provides us with a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience.

We will be considering the work of four of the major phenomenological philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre. Each can be seen as working in a way which is consistent with a core phenomenology, but each also took the project on in a distinctive way. This then will illustrate phenomenology as a singular but also pluralist endeavour.

Husserl

The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms. Husserl first argued for this as the basis of a programmatic system in philosophy but the principle has since been further developed, both in philosophy and in empirical human science research.

For Husserl, phenomenology involves the careful examination of human experience. He was particularly interested in finding a means by which someone might come to accurately know their *own* experience of a given phenomenon, and would do so with a depth and rigour which might allow them to identify the *essential* qualities of that experience. If this could be done, then Husserl reasoned that these essential features of an experience would *transcend* the particular circumstances of their appearance, and might then illuminate a given experience for others too.

Famously, Husserl argued that we should 'go back to the things themselves'. The 'thing' he is referring to, then, is the experiential content of consciousness, and he is alluding to the various obstacles that can get in the way of its pursuit. Our predilection for order can mean that we can too quickly look to fit 'things' within our pre-existing categorization system. Instead, Husserl suggests that we should endeavour to focus on each and every particular thing in its own right.

Husserl's phenomenology involved stepping outside of our everyday experience, our *natural attitude* as he called it, in order to be able to examine that everyday experience. Instead, adopting a *phenomenological attitude* involves and requires a reflexive move, as we turn our gaze from, for example, objects in the world, and direct it inward, towards our perception of those objects. It is worth looking at an extended quote from Husserl (1927) which describes this neatly:

> Focusing our experiencing gaze on our own psychic life necessarily takes place as reflection, as a turning about of a glance which had previously been directed elsewhere. Every experience can be subject to such reflection, as can indeed every manner in which we occupy ourselves with any real or ideal objects – for instance, thinking, or in the modes of feeling and will, valuing and striving. So when we are fully engaged in conscious activity, we focus exclusively on the specific thing, thoughts, values, goals, or means involved, but not on the psychical experience as such, in which these things are known as such. Only reflection reveals this to us. Through reflection, instead of grasping simply the matter straight-out – the values, goals, and instrumentalities – we grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become 'conscious' of them, in which (in the broadest sense) they 'appear.' For this reason, they are called 'phenomena,' and their most general essential character is to exist as the 'consciousness-of' or 'appearance-of' the specific things, thoughts (judged states of affairs, grounds, conclusions), plans, decisions, hopes, and so forth. (para. 2)

Thus, in our everyday life we are busily engaged in activities in the world and we take for granted our experience of the world. In order to be phenomenological, we need to disengage from the activity and attend to the taken-for-granted experience of it. So for example, take an incident that might happen: a car drives past my window. Seeing the car passing by outside, thinking about who might be driving it, wishing we could have a car like it, later remembering the car going by, even wishing that a car would go by when it had not done so – these are all activities happening in the everyday, natural attitude. Once we stop

to self-consciously *reflect on* any of this seeing, thinking, remembering and wishing, we are being phenomenological. See Chapter 12 for more discussion of this reflective dimension.

For Husserl, phenomenological inquiry focuses on that which is experienced in the consciousness of the individual. He invokes the technical term *intentionality* to describe the relationship between the process occurring in consciousness, and the object of attention for that process. So in phenomenological terms, experience or consciousness is always consciousness *of* something – seeing is seeing of something, remembering is remembering of something, judging is judging of something. That something – the object of which we are conscious – may have been stimulated by a perception of a 'real' object in the world, or through an act of memory or imagination. Thus, there is an *intentional* relationship between the car and my awareness of it. Note that the term intentionality is being used in a different way from its everyday meaning in English. If I say that my memory has an intentional relation to a car, I mean that my memory is oriented towards the car; that is, I am remembering it. I do not mean that I am mentally striving for the car to come into existence. A helpful way of thinking about intentionality in qualitative work is to keep this idea of orientation in mind. For the interdisciplinary researcher Sara Ahmed (2006), the idea that meanings arise, and become clear for us, when we understand our *orientation towards* an object is the most important characteristic of a phenomenological approach:

> The radical claim that phenomenology inherits from Franz Brentano's psychology is that consciousness is intentional; it is directed towards something. This claim immediately links the question of the object with that of orientation. … We are turned towards things. Such things make an impression upon us. … Perception hence involves orientation; what is percieved depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things. (Ahmed, 2006: 27)

In this sense, then, the task of approaching something phenomenologically involves a willingness and capacity to understand a perspective upon it, an orientation towards it. In IPA, we characterize this perspectival quality of orientation in terms of the *meaning which something* has for someone. For example, a research participant may describe a health professional in terms which evoke the warmth and gratitude which they feel *towards* that person, and then in our work, *warmth* and *gratitude* may become meanings associated with the receipt of good care. Ahmed takes this same approach to her reading of Husserl: she develops her account by considering Husserl's orientation to the world around him, as he writes about the development of his ideas, and uses objects in his study and home to exemplify his thinking.

In order to achieve the phenomenological attitude, Husserl developed a 'phenomenological method' which was intended to identify the core structures and features of human experience. First, he suggested that we need to consider the consequences of our taken-for-granted ways of living in the familiar, everyday world of objects. We need to 'bracket', or put to one side, the taken-for-granted world in order to concentrate on our perception of that world. This idea of bracketing has mathematical roots. It relates to the idea of separating out, or treating separately, the contents of the brackets within equations: 'Putting it in brackets shuts out from the phenomenological field the world as it exists for the subject in simple absoluteness; its place, however, is taken by the world as given in *consciousness* (perceived, remembered, judged, thought, valued, etc.)' (Husserl, 1927: para. 3).

However, it is important to realize that bracketing does not mean that we are making the taken-for-granted world disappear:

> The specific experience of this house, this body, of a world as such, is and remains, however, according to its own essential content and thus inseparably, experience 'of this house,' this body, this world; this is so for every mode of consciousness which is directed towards an object. It is, after all, quite impossible to describe an intentional experience – even if illusionary, an invalid judgment, or the like – without at the same time describing the object of that consciousness *as* such. (Husserl, 1927: para. 3)

The method which Husserl described proceeds through a series of 'reductions'. Each reduction offers a different lens or prism, a different way of thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand. Together, the sequence of reductions is intended to lead the inquirer away from the distraction and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of their experience of a given phenomenon.

As will be evident from the quotation above, Husserl intended that such an examination should include a description of and reflection upon every salient particularity of a given phenomenon. However, the description of the phenomenological experience of, for example, this particular house was for Husserl just the first step. What he really wanted to do was to get at the experience of 'houseness' more generally. While we have unique perceptual experiences of different individual houses, these experiences also have something in common. The task for Husserl therefore was to try and establish what is at the core of the subjective experience of a house, what is the 'essence' or 'eidos' or 'idea' of house.

The '*eidetic reduction*' therefore involves the techniques required in order to get at the essence – the set of invariant properties lying underneath the subjective perception of individual manifestations of that type of object. For Husserl, one such technique is 'free imaginative variation', where one carefully considers different possible instances of house. This will of course involve drawing on one's past experience of houses, but will also involve imagining new examples, and checking the boundaries – 'what is it that makes this a house and not a shop?' and so on. The aim of this process is to help one establish the essential features of *houseness* – that is, to establish its essence. This process is likely to attend to what houses mean to us in lived experience – the practical and emotional features of housing.

In his grandest vision, Husserl wanted to go even further, to try to look at the nature of consciousness *per se* – the thing that underlies and makes possible our consciousness of anything at all. Husserl called this the '*transcendental reduction*'. Thus, in one sense, what we have been describing until now are Husserl's attempts to get at the *content* of conscious experience – by focusing upon experience itself and describing it in terms of its particular and essential features. These first aspects of Husserl's work are the ones which have most influenced phenomenological psychology, including IPA. It will be evident that Husserl had further, more esoteric aims in mind, which exceed the aims of most phenomenological psychologists – notably the pursuit of an additional reduction, to bracket the *content* of consciousness, in order to gaze in wonder at consciousness itself.

There is disagreement between writers as to what Husserl's main project was, and whether this remained consistent over time. Indeed, in different writings by Husserl one finds different emphases, so that sometimes the eidetic reduction seemed the priority

while at other times the main project seemed to be to tackle pure consciousness itself. Whether this transcendental phenomenology is even possible is a moot point, and most subsequent phenomenologists have turned away from it.

Husserl had an interesting relationship with science. He was critical of science's privileged knowledge claims, reminding us that the *lifeworld* (the taken-for-granted, everyday life that we lead) provides the experiential grounding for what we might call the objective or scientific world:

> It is of course itself a highly important task, for the scientific opening-up of the life-world, to bring to recognition the primal validity of these self-evidences and indeed their higher dignity in the grounding of knowledge compared to that of the objective logical self-evidences. … From objective-logical self-evidence (mathematical 'insight,' natural-scientific, positive-scientific 'insight,' as it is being accomplished by the inquiring and grounding mathematician, etc.), the path leads back, here, to the primal self-evidence in which the life-world is ever pregiven. (Husserl, 1970: 128)

Thus, Husserl saw science as a second-order knowledge system, which depends ultimately upon first-order personal experience. For Husserl, an extensive and rigorous phenomenological account of the world as it is experienced would be an essential precursor to any further scientific account. Equally, when conducting phenomenological inquiry, scientific constructs need to be bracketed, because they act as a screen from experience *per se*. For these reasons, Husserl was critical of the way in which psychology was beginning to identify itself as a natural rather than a phenomenological science. However, Husserl was also a trained scientist. While critical of existing approaches to science, he also hoped that phenomenology could lay the firm conceptual foundations for a different and more authentic science – another very ambitious project.

Two final caveats. First, remember that Husserl was a philosopher and not a psychologist. Most of his writing about the process of phenomenology is conceptual. For example, he doesn't describe in detail the steps involved in an eidetic reduction. While Husserl does provide concrete examples of what the results of the phenomenological method would look like, they are scattered through his writing and can be difficult to locate.

Second, as a philosopher, Husserl was mainly engaged in thinking about generic processes, and when it came to particularities he was mainly concerned with first-person processes – that is, what he had to do himself to conduct phenomenological inquiry on his own experience. Psychologists and other empirical researchers are more usually concerned with analysing other people's experiences. Husserl knew this and recognized it as important, but again it is underdeveloped in his own writing. Therefore, his thinking has to be adapted when it comes to empirical experiential inquiry. This point is picked up later in the chapter.

Husserl's work has helped IPA researchers to focus centrally on the process of reflection. He sets the agenda for the attentive and systematic examination of the content of consciousness, our lived experience, which is the very stuff of life. Bracketing, or the *attempt* at bracketing found in reflexive practices, has been taken up by many qualitative research approaches and is seen by IPA as offering an important part of the research process, as we will see later. While Husserl was concerned to find the essence of experience, IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people.

Heidegger

Heidegger began his philosophical career as a student of Husserl's. He acknowledged an intellectual debt to Husserl, but also emphasized his divergence from him. Heidegger's approach to phenomenology is often taken to mark the move away from the transcendental project, and to set out the beginnings of the hermeneutic and existential emphases in phenomenological philosophy. For this reason, we have written about Heidegger in both the *Phenomenology* and the *Hermeneutics* sections of this chapter.

It is important to note that Heidegger's move away from Husserl was not initially a move away from phenomenology. Rather, he thought that his work was actually more phenomenological than Husserl's! For Heidegger, Husserl's phenomenology was too theoretical, too abstract: 'The Being-question, unfolded in Being and Time, parted company with this philosophical position, and that on the basis of what to this day I still consider a more faithful adherence to the principle of phenomenology' (Heidegger, Preface in Richardson, 1963: xiv).

Heidegger questioned the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretative stance, while grounding this stance in the lived world – the world of things, people, relationships and language. Meaning is thus of fundamental importance here, because for phenomenologists, consciousness: 'makes possible the world as such, not in the sense that it makes possible the existence of the world, but in the sense that it makes possible a *significant* world' (Drummond, 2007: 61, our emphasis).

In his major work, *Being and Time* (1962 [1927]), Heidegger's subject is Dasein (literally, 'there-being'). This word, Dasein, is Heidegger's preferred term for the uniquely situated quality of 'human *being*' (the state rather than the noun). In *Being and Time*, he is concerned with establishing the fundamental nature of Dasein, which he argued had been neglected in Western philosophy, either because it was taken for granted, or because it was inaccessible. Thus we might characterize Husserl as primarily concerned with what can be broadly classified as individual psychological processes, such as perception, awareness and consciousness. In contrast, Heidegger is more concerned with the ontological question of existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in, and through which the world appears to us, and is made meaningful. It is worth noting that Heidegger's writing style is also very different from Husserl's. Heidegger seems to be attempting his own poetics, inventing his own vocabulary, and eschewing almost entirely Husserl's more technical terminology.

So what is Heidegger's central interest? While he is concerned with the conceptual basis of existence, this is from a deliberately *worldly* perspective. The Heideggerian concept of 'worldliness' affords the embodied, intentional actor a range of physically-grounded (what is possible) and intersubjectively-grounded (what is meaningful) options. Thus, much of the early part of *Being and Time* is taken up with an extended description of the world as one which is ready to be used by the individual, with objects 'ready to hand' for the person to exploit: 'Such entities are not thereby objects for knowing the world theoretically, they are simply what gets used, what gets produced, and so forth' (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 95). For Heidegger, Dasein is 'always already' *thrown* into this pre-existing world of people and objects, language and culture, and cannot be meaningfully detached from it.

Dasein also implies and necessitates a degree of reflexive awareness: 'Dasein is an entity which is in each case I myself: its being is in each case mine' (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 150). However, this selfhood also requires the existence of others. Even being alone is only further proof of the existential requirement for others:

> Dasein is essentially being-with. … Even Dasein's being alone is being with in the world. The other can be missing only in and for a being with. Being alone is a deficient mode of being with; its very possibility is the proof of this. (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 156–157)

Heidegger's view of the person as always and indelibly a worldly 'person-in-context', and the phenomenological concept of *intersubjectivity*, are both central here. The term *intersubjectivity* refers to the shared, overlapping and relational nature of our engagement in the world. From Heidegger's perspective, we are mistaken if we believe that we can occasionally choose to move outwards from some inner world to take up a relationship with the various somatic and semantic objects that make up our world, because relatedness-*to*-the-world is a fundamental part of our constitution (see Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Intersubjectivity is the concept which aims to describe this relatedness and to account for our ability to communicate with, and make sense of, each other.

The later part of *Being and Time* becomes increasingly existential in focus, as Heidegger engages in an extended contemplation of the significance of death; discussing how it gives a temporal dimension to our being-in-the-world, and how it is, unlike life, something which is to be faced essentially alone. Being itself only lasts for a finite time, and we do not know in advance how long that time will be. By the end of *Being and Time*, one gets a sense of how our being-in-the-world can be understood to be multi-modal. As well as a practical engagement with the world, it involves self-reflection and sociality, affective concern, and a temporal existential location.

The key ideas for IPA researchers to take from Heidegger at this stage are, first, that human beings can be conceived of as 'thrown into' a world of objects, relationships and language; second, that our being-in-the-world is always perspectival, always temporal and always 'in-relation-to' something – and consequently, that the interpretation of people's meaning-making activities is central to phenomenological inquiry in psychology. A crucial feature of *Being and Time* is Heidegger's reading of phenomenology through a hermeneutic lens – this is picked up further in the section on hermeneutics below.

Merleau-Ponty

As with Heidegger, when reading Merleau-Ponty, one has a sense of the continuities and discontinuities in the phenomenological project. Merleau-Ponty engages with, and owes an intellectual debt to, Husserl. He shares Husserl's and Heidegger's commitments to understanding our being-in-the-world, but he also echoes some of Heidegger's wish for a more contextualized phenomenology. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both emphasized the situated and interpretative quality of our knowledge about the world. Whereas Heidegger addressed this issue by emphasizing the *worldliness* of our existence, Merleau-Ponty developed it in a

different direction, by describing the *embodied* nature of our relationship to that world and how that led to the primacy of our own individual situated perspective on the world.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty gives a nice description of the primacy of the situated viewpoint – the one we can never escape:

> I am not the outcome or the meeting-point of numerous causal agencies which determine my bodily or psychological make-up. I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation. I cannot shut myself up within the realm of science. All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. (p. ix)

Thus Merleau-Ponty suggests that, as humans, we see ourselves as different from everything else in the world. This is because our sense of self is holistic and is engaged in looking at the world, rather than being subsumed within it. Merleau-Ponty also echoes Husserl's view of science as offering second-order knowledge derived from a first-order experiential base. However, for Merleau-Ponty, empirical science failed to conceptualize the mechanisms of perception and judgement adequately. As a result, Merleau-Ponty focuses much of his work on the embodied nature of our relationship to the world, as *body-subjects*: 'The body no longer conceived as an object in the world, but as our means of communication with it' (1962: 106). For example, my hand, if it reaches out to touch the desk, represents the meeting point of the self and the world. It draws my self to the world in the act of touching.

Merleau-Ponty's concerns with subjectivity and embodiment come together when we think about how we see another. My perception of 'other' always develops from my own embodied perspective. This means that my relations to others begin from a position of difference:

> I perceive the other as a piece of behavior, for example, I perceive the grief or the anger of the other in his conduct, in his face or his hands, without recourse to any 'inner' experience of suffering or anger … But then, the behavior of another, and even his words, are not that other. The grief and the anger of another have never quite the same significance for him as they have for me. For him these situations are lived through, for me they are displayed. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 414–415)

Thus, while we can observe and experience empathy for another, ultimately we can never share entirely the other's experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world. The intentional quality and meaning of the 'mineness' and 'aboutness' of an experience are always personal to the body-subject.

For qualitative researchers in general, and IPA researchers in particular, Merleau-Ponty's view, that the body shapes the fundamental character of our knowing about the world, is critical. For Merleau-Ponty, practical activities and relations – the physical and perceptual affordances of the body-in-the-world – are thus more significant than abstract or logical ones (Anderson, 2003). While different phenomenologists will give different degrees of priority to the role of, for example, sensation and the physiological as opposed to more cerebral concerns, the place of the body as a central element in experience must be considered. For many, the pivotal role of embodiment is closely aligned with the importance of emotional experience. For example, the contemporary phenomenological philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe argues that

'it is *through our feeling bodies* that we experience things emotionally, in a manner analogous to tactual perception of entities that are external to one's body and sometimes at a distance from it' (Ratcliffe, 2019: 251, original emphasis). He goes on to argue that affective experiences play a crucial rule in our evaluative sense-making of the world, particularly when the structure of the world has been disturbed in some way. Ratcliffe discusses examples related to grief and pain; another contemporary phenomenologist, Havi Carel (2021), has written about the role of 'bodily doubt' and 'bodily breakdown' in shaping the meaning that we give to our experiences, when physical illness is the source of disturbance in our world. Carel (2021: 208) goes so far as to say that these kinds of existential, embodied disruptions force each of us to act as if we were phenomonologists: 'What one ordinarily takes for granted becomes salient when it is lost or changed through illness. Illness involves a phenomenological reduction because it compels us to suspend' that taken for granted way of viewing the world.

The implications for IPA researchers are, first, that the lived experience of being a body-in-the-world is an important part of understanding someone else's perspective. This might be evoked when people describe feelings or sensations, or when they use emotion words or embodied language to indicate what they care about, or – particularly – what is changed or threatened. Second, while these experiences can never be entirely captured or absorbed, we must attend closely to these meanings in analysis, in order that they are not ignored or overlooked.

Sartre

Sartre (1956 [1943]) extends the project of existential phenomenology. As with Heidegger, Sartre emphasized that we are caught up in projects in the world. While we have self-consciousness and seek after meaning, this is an action-oriented, meaning-making, self-consciousness which engages with the world we inhabit.

Sartre stresses the developmental, processual aspect of human being. His famous expression 'existence comes before essence' (1948: 26) indicates that we are always becoming ourselves, and that the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled. As Kierkegaard (1974: 79) puts it: 'An existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming.'

This concern with what we will be, rather than what we are, connects with another important concept for Sartre, *nothingness*. For Sartre, things that are absent are as important as those that are present in defining who we are and how we see the world. This is beautifully captured in a vignette in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre describes how he approaches a café for an appointment with Pierre. He enters the café, expecting to see Pierre. All that is there is mere background to the anticipated meeting. When Pierre is not there, Sartre's relation to the café is altered – things fight for attention, but quickly fall back – all is unsettled, and cannot become fixed and focused because the *raison d'être* of the café (for Sartre, on this occasion) is missing:

> I myself expected to see Pierre and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. It is an objective fact at present that I have discovered this absence, and it presents itself as a synthetic relation between Pierre and the setting in which I am looking for him. Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground. (Sartre, 1956 [1943]: 42)

If Pierre was there, the rest of the café would fit into place around him, and give texture to him. Instead, Pierre *not* being there, his nothingness, fixes the meaning of the café for Sartre at this point in time.

Of course, our projects in the world inevitably lead us to encounters with others. For Sartre this is often a tensile relationship. The world is not mine alone, and furthermore my perception of the world is shaped largely by the presence of others and others have their own projects they are engaged in. This is illustrated in two more vivid passages, in the section called 'The Look' in *Being and Nothingness*. First, Sartre describes entering a park and being aware of someone else in the grounds. As a result, perceptually, all the features of the park shift into place around the other person, who takes centre stage. The presence of the other man means that Sartre cannot experience the park in its own terms and for himself.

The direction of perception can work the other way too. In the second passage in 'The Look', Sartre describes looking through a keyhole at events in another room and then becoming aware of someone else who is watching him, watching. His self-consciousness only becomes apparent on being aware of being the object of the gaze of the other. The consequent emotion, shame, only makes sense when seen within its interpersonal context.

Because human nature is, for Sartre, more about becoming than being, the individual has freedom to choose and is, in that sense, responsible for their actions. However, Sartre stresses that these are always complex issues, which need also to be seen within the context of the individual life, the biographical history and the social climate in which the individual acts.

For phenomenological researchers the reiteration of Heidegger's emphasis on the world-liness of our experience is significant. Sartre extends this, developing the point in the context of personal and social relationships, so that we are better able to conceive of our experiences as contingent upon the presence – and absence – of our relationships to other people. What Sartre also offers is perhaps the clearest glimpse of what a phenomenological analysis of the human condition can look like. While IPA analyses will usually be of different topics than those which were presented so vividly by Sartre, his portraits show a penetrating analysis of people engaged in projects in the world and the embodied, inter-personal, affective and moral nature of those encounters.

Summary

Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are leading figures in phenomenological philosophy, and, in describing some of their ideas here, we have been able to chart some of the main developments in phenomenology and to point out those which are likely to be most relevant to IPA researchers. Husserl's work establishes for us, first of all, the importance and relevance of a focus on experience and its perception. In developing Husserl's work further, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre each contribute to a view of the person as embedded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns. They move us away from the descriptive commit-ments and transcendental interests of Husserl, towards a more interpretative and worldly position with a focus on understanding the perspectival directedness of our involvement

in the lived world – something which is personal to each of us, but which is a property of our relationships to the world and others, rather than to us as creatures in isolation.

Thus, through the work of all of these writers, we have come to see that the complex understanding of 'experience' invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world. In this complex and enriched sense, 'experience' for IPA is not simply a 'thing that happened to someone' or merely an intrepsychic state, as it might be in everyday usage. Instead, in IPA research we are attempting to understand other people's relationship to the world and we are usually focusing on a particular event, relationship or process in that person's world when doing so. Our attempts are necessarily *interpretative*, and will focus upon participants' efforts to make *meanings* out of their activities and of the things happening to them. For this reason, we need to move on now to discuss a second body of writing, hermeneutics, which has focused upon the matter of interpretation itself.

HERMENEUTICS

The second major theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. It enters our story as a much older and entirely separate body of thought from phenomenology, but the reader will already have noted that the two strands are due to meet, in the work of hermeneutic phenomenologists – notably Heidegger.

Originally, hermeneutics represented an attempt to provide surer foundations for the interpretation of biblical texts. Subsequently, it developed as a philosophical underpinning for the interpretation of an increasingly wider range of texts, such as historical documents and literary works. The sorts of things which concern hermeneutic theorists are: What are the methods and purposes of interpretation itself? Is it possible to uncover the intentions or original meanings of an author? What is the relation between the context of a text's production (e.g. its historical genesis in the distant past) and the context of a text's interpretation (e.g. its relevance to life in the present day)?

In this section, we will discuss the ideas of three of the most important hermeneutic theorists: Schleiermacher, Heidegger and Gadamer. As with phenomenology, when we read these sources from our positions as psychologists or researchers, we need to remember that hermeneutics has been engaged with, and informed by, other concerns, and take care in drawing out its resonance for our current practices.

Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was one of the first to write systematically about hermeneutics as a generic form. For him, interpretation involved what he called *grammatical* and *psychological* interpretation. The former is concerned with exact and objective textual meaning, while the latter refers to the individuality of the author or speaker:

> Every person is on the one hand a location in which a given language forms itself in an individual manner, on the other their discourse can only be understood via the totality of language. But then the person is also a spirit which continually develops, and their discourse is only one act of this spirit of connection with the other acts. (Schleiermacher, 1998: 8–9)

This sounds very contemporary. Schleiermacher is offering a holistic view of the interpretative process. A text is not only shaped by the conventions and expectations of a writer's own linguistic community, but also by the individual work that she does with that language. Thus Schleiermacher bridges the essentialist and discursive divide: he suggests that there is something unique about the techniques and intentions of a given writer, which will impress a very particular form of meaning upon the text which they produce. This meaning is available for the interpretations of a reader, but those interpretations must also be accommodated to the wider context in which the text was originally produced. This seems like a very helpful position for those of us who are interpreting qualitative research data from a phenomenological perspective.

For Schleiermacher, interpretation is not a matter of following mechanical rules. Rather it is a craft or art, involving the combination of a range of skills, including intuition. Part of the aim of the interpretative process is to understand the writer, as well as the text, and Schleiermacher believes that if one has engaged in a detailed, comprehensive and holistic analysis, one can end up with 'an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself' (Schleiermacher, 1998: 266).

Readers will notice that this opens up a very different position from the interpretative stances which are offered by post-modern literary theory (where the author may be irrelevant or inaccessible) and by the social constructionist strand of qualitative psychology (where analysis focuses on the effects of the language used by a person, rather than on the meanings of that language for the person herself). From an IPA perspective, we should not view this as a licence to claim that our analyses are more 'true' than the claims of our research participants, but it does allow us to see how our analyses might offer meaningful insights which exceed and subsume the *explicit* claims of our participants. How might such an interpretative position be justified? Schleiermacher views the relationship between the interpreter and author of a text as follows:

> Partly because it is in fact an analysis of his procedure which brings to consciousness what was unconscious to himself, partly because it also conceives of his relationship to language via the necessary duplication which he himself does not distinguish in it. In the same way he also does not distinguish what emerges from the essence of his individuality or his level of education from what coincidentally occurs as abnormality, and what he would not have produced if he had distinguished it. (1998: 266)

Thus, the interpretative analyst is able to offer a perspective on the text which the author is not. In the context of IPA research, some of this 'added value' is likely to be a product of systematic and detailed analysis of the text itself; some of it will come from connections which emerge through having oversight of a larger data set, and some of it may come from dialogue with psychological or other theory.

The possibility of such an interpretation depends on sharing some ground with the person being interpreted:

[Interpretation] depends on the fact that every person, besides being an individual themself, has a receptivity for all other people. But this itself seems only to rest on the fact that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themself, and divination is consequently excited by comparison with oneself. (1998: 92–93)

Here we might read Schleiermacher as anticipating the intersubjective dimension of the phenomenological philosophy which was to follow.

Heidegger

As we have already seen, one of Heidegger's aims was to articulate the case for a herme-neutic phenomenology. Lived time and engagement with the world are primary features of Heidegger's account of Dasein, but he points out that our access to such things is always through interpretation.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962 [1927]) looked to an etymological definition of phenomenology and observed that the word is made up of two parts, derived from the Greek *phenomenon* and *logos*. *Phenomenon* can be translated as 'show' or 'appear'. Heidegger carefully dissects the various meanings which can appertain to appearance, in order to outline the way he interprets the 'appearance' of our being. In the verb form particularly, to say something appears suggests that it is entering a new state, as it is coming forth, presenting itself to us – and in contrast to a previous state, where it was not present.

Appearance has a dual quality for Heidegger – things have certain visible meanings for us (which may or may not be deceptive), but they can also have concealed or hidden meanings. This is central to his reading of what phenomenology *is* – a discipline which is concerned with understanding the thing as it shows itself, as it is brought to light:

Manifestly it is something that proximally and for the most part does not show itself at all; it is some-thing that lies hidden in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself but at the same time it is something that belongs to what this shows itself and it belongs to it so essentially as to constitute its meaning and its ground. (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 59)

Thus for Heidegger, phenomenology is concerned in part with examining something which may be latent, or disguised, as it emerges into the light. But it is also interested in examining the manifest thing as it appears at the surface because this is integrally connected with the deeper latent form – which it is both a part of, and apart from.

Heidegger states that *Logos* has been variously translated as, for example, discourse, rea-son and judgement. Heidegger settles on 'to make manifest what one is "talking about" in one's discourse' (1962 [1927]: 56). Whatever the particularities, it seems fair to say that the difference between the two source words suggests that while *phenomenon* is primarily per-ceptual, *logos* is primarily analytical, and this is useful in illuminating the complementary activities which are involved in phenomenology. The primary aim is to examine 'the thing itself' as it appears to show itself to us. Heidegger writes about this as though this happens almost spontaneously. However, the analytical thinking required by the *logos* aspect then

helps us to facilitate, and grasp, this showing. So the phenomenon appears, but the phenomenologist can facilitate this, and then help to make sense of that appearing.

It is this micro-analysis and synthesis which take Heidegger down the road of defining phenomenology as hermeneutic. As Moran (2000: 229) points out:

> Phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which is perhaps hidden by the entity's mode of appearing. In that case the proper model for seeking meaning is the interpretation of a text and for this reason Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics. How things appear or are covered up must be explicitly studied. The things themselves always present themselves in a manner which is at the same time self-concealing.

In a later part of *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses interpretation explicitly, and this section has been used by commentators as the basis for arguing against a pre-suppositionless descriptive phenomenology, thus setting Heidegger in opposition to Husserl: 'Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon the … fore-conception. An interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us' (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]: 191–192). Thus, the reader, analyst or listener brings their fore-conception (prior experiences, assumptions, preconceptions) to the encounter, and cannot help but look at any new stimulus in the light of their own prior experience. However, it is important to look closely at what Heidegger (1962 [1927]: 195) goes on to say:

> Our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our … fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out the fore-structures in terms of the things themselves.

The fore-structure is always there, and it is in danger of presenting an obstacle to interpretation. In interpretation, priority should be given to the new object, rather than to one's preconceptions. And note the sequence – here the suggestion seems to be that one makes sense of these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. In other words, while the existence of fore-structures may precede our encounters with new things, understanding may actually work the other way, from the thing to the fore-structure. For example, when encountering a text, I don't necessarily know which part of my fore-structure is relevant. Having engaged with the text, I may be in a better position to know what my preconceptions were. This is an important and neglected way of considering what happens in interpretation.

From the perspective of IPA work, there are two key points here. First, Heidegger's formulation of phenomenology as an explicitly interpretative activity, and the connections which he makes to hermeneutics, are clearly important – IPA *is* an interpretative phenomenological approach, after all. Second, the manner in which Heidegger unpacks the relationship between interpretative work and the fore-structure of our understanding should cause us to re-evaluate the role of bracketing in the interpretation of qualitative data. Indeed, a consideration of Heidegger's complex and dynamic notion of fore-understanding helps us see a more enlivened form of bracketing as both a cyclical process and something which can only be partially achieved. In fact, this connects bracketing with reflexive practices in qualitative psychology more generally (see Finlay & Gough, 2003).

Gadamer

Like previous writers on hermeneutics, Gadamer (1990 [1960]), in his primary work *Truth and Method*, is concerned with the analysis of historical and literary texts. Gadamer tends to emphasize the importance of history and the effect of tradition on the interpretative process. He engages in a detailed intellectual dialogue with both Schleiermacher and Heidegger.

First, Gadamer picks up on Heidegger's hermeneutics, and the relation between the fore-structure and the new object. His analysis echoes our reading of Heidegger above, where we pointed to the complex relationship between the interpreter and the interpreted:

> It is necessary to keep one's gazes fixed on the things throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself. A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. … Working out this fore-projection which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. (Gadamer, 1990 [1960]: 267)

This is very much in line with our reading of Heidegger above. Rather than putting one's preconceptions up front before doing interpretation, one may only really get to know what the preconceptions are once the interpretation is underway. Indeed, the process is even more multi-faceted and dynamic:

> Every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation. (1990 [1960]: 267)

Thus, the phenomenon, the thing itself, influences the interpretation which in turn can influence the fore-structure, which can then itself influence the interpretation. One can hold a number of conceptions and these are compared, contrasted and modified as part of the sense-making process.

In more everyday terms, when we read a text, our reading and understanding are forms of engaging in a dialogue between something that is old (a fore-understanding) and something which is new (the text itself):

> A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be. Rather a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. … But this kind of sensitivity involves neither neutrality with respect to content not the extinction of one's self but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (1990 [1960]: 269)

This passage emphasizes that the aim is to allow the new stimulus to speak in its own voice, and that one's preconceptions can hinder this process. However, our preconceptions are inevitably present. Hence the dialogue between what we bring to the text, and what the text

brings to us. Sometimes we can identify our preconceptions in advance; sometimes they will emerge during the process of engaging with the new object presented. Either way, this requires a spirit of openness:

> Only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning which involves being able to preserve his orientation towards openness. ... It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. ... Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength. (1990 [1960]: 367)

This is helpful when it comes to thinking about the interview process. We will pick this up again later in this chapter and in Chapter 4.

Gadamer also engages in an intellectual dialogue with Schleiermacher – though here of course the dialogue spans a longer historical time than that with Heidegger. Gadamer has a mixed reaction to Schleiermacher's claim that the interpreter can know the author better than he/she knows themselves. Gadamer agrees that the author does not automatically have interpretative authority over the meaning of a text. However, Gadamer makes a distinction between understanding the meaning of the text and understanding the person, and he argues that the former is the priority: 'Understanding means primarily to understand the content of what is being said and only secondarily to isolate and understand another's meaning as such' (1990 [1960]: 294). Gadamer is also sceptical of the possibility of recreating the intention of the author because of the historical gap. Thus, interpretation is a dialogue between past and present: 'The essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in thoughtful meditation with contemporary life' (1990 [1960]: 168–169). The aim should not be to relive the past but rather to learn anew from it, in the light of the present. This represents a very interesting debate which we will pick up again later in the chapter. For now, we will state that we think Gadamer is astute about what is involved in making sense of texts which originated in the historical past. Interpretation will focus on the meaning of the text and that meaning will be strongly influenced by the moment at which the interpretation is made. Of course, with qualitative psychology research projects, we are usually more engaged with conversations conducted in real time and texts produced contemporaneously. Under these circumstances, we think that Schleiermacher, rather than sounding old-fashioned beside Gadamer's modern voice, actually sounds remarkably fresh and insightful. Thus, as we will see later in the chapter, we think IPA can learn from both Schleiermacher and Gadamer.

The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is perhaps the most resonant idea in hermeneutic theory and is picked up by most hermeneutic writers, rather than being identified with one in particular. It is concerned with the dynamic relationship between the part and the whole, at a series of levels. To understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts. This has been criticized from a logical perspective, because of its inherent

circularity. In analytical terms, however, it describes the processes of interpretation very effectively and speaks to a dynamic, non-linear, style of thinking.

The concept of the hermeneutic circle operates at a number of levels. 'The part' and 'the whole' can thus be understood to describe a number of relationships. For example:

The part	*The whole*
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

So, for example, the meaning of the word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. At the same time, the meaning of the sentence depends upon the cumulative meanings of the individual words. We have already seen facets of the hermeneutic circle at work above. Indeed, the interpretation of this piece of text is seen within the context of the reader's history of textual interpretation (what you have previously read), and that history is changed by the encounter with this new piece of text.

The hermeneutic circle provides a useful way of thinking about 'method' for IPA researchers. Approaches to qualitative analysis tend to be described in linear, step-by-step fashions, and IPA is no exception. But it is a key tenet of IPA that the process of analysis is iterative – we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step, one after the other. As one moves back and forth through the analytic process, it may help to think of one's relationship to the data as shifting according to the hermeneutic circle, too. The idea is that our entry into the meaning of a text can be made at a number of different levels, all of which relate to one another, and many of which will offer different perspectives on the part–whole coherence of the text.

Summary

Hermeneutics is an important part of intellectual history and offers important theoretical insights for IPA. IPA is an interpretative phenomenological approach and therefore Heidegger's explicit ascription of phenomenology as a hermeneutic enterprise is significant. Following Heidegger, IPA is concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears, and the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense of this appearance. Heidegger and Gadamer give insightful and dynamic descriptions of the relationship between the fore-understanding and the new phenomenon being attended to. These help to thicken our understanding of the research process. There are a number of ways in which IPA is instantiating the hermeneutic circle and this will become apparent at a number of points in the book. Finally, Schleiermacher was originally writing with historical texts in mind. His ideas come alive again when applied to contemporary texts as in IPA research – this will be picked up again later in the chapter.

IDIOGRAPHY

The third major influence upon IPA is idiography. Idiography is concerned with the particular. This is in contrast to most psychology, which is 'nomothetic', and concerned with making claims at the group or population level, and with establishing general laws of human behaviour. IPA's commitment to the particular operates at two levels. First, there is a commitment to the particular, in the sense of *detail*, and therefore the depth of analysis. As a consequence, analysis must be thorough and systematic. Second, IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context. As a consequence, IPA utilizes small, purposively-selected and carefully-situated samples, and may often make very effective use of single case analyses. Idiography can also refer to the commitment to the single case in its own right, or to a process which moves from the examination of the single case to more general claims. Thus, idiography does not eschew generalizations, but rather prescribes a different way of establishing those generalizations (Harré, 1979). It locates them in the particular, and hence develops them more cautiously.

This emphasis on the particular (and the focus on grasping the meaning of something for a given person) cannot be conflated exactly with a focus on the individual – even though this may appear to provide a convenient shorthand for what idiography does. As we have seen earlier, the phenomenological view of experience is complex. On the one hand, experience is uniquely embodied, situated and perspectival. It is therefore amenable to an idiographic approach. On the other hand, it is also a worldly and relational phenomenon, which offers us a concept of the person which is not quite so discrete and contained as the typical understanding of an 'individual'. Dasein is not the assemblage of dispersed and disparate *personae* commonly posited by social constructionism (e.g. see Gergen, 1991) – but it is thoroughly immersed and embedded in a world of things and relationships. Because Dasein's experience is understood to be an *in-relation-to* phenomenon, it is not really a *property* of the individual *per se*. However, a given person *can* offer us a personally unique perspective on their relationship to, or involvement in, various phenomena of interest.

The problem with nomothetics[1]

A number of writers have pointed to problems associated with nomothetic inquiry. A nomothetic approach is one where data are collected, transformed and analysed in a manner which prevents the retrieval or analysis of the individuals who provided the data in the first place. This is typically achieved by measurement (transforming psychological phenomena into numbers), aggregation and inferential statistics.

For example, Lamiell (1987) is particularly critical of so-called 'individual differences' research. This work typically attempts to produce typologies of personality. He argues that it is flawed, as well as being a misnomer:

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[1]The next two sections draw on material which first appeared in Smith, Harré, and Van Langenhove (1995).

> The empirical findings generated by individual differences research cannot be interpreted at the level of the individual, and consequently cannot possibly inform in an incisive manner a theory of 'individual' behaviour/psychological functioning. Moreover, and for this very reason, individual differences research cannot possibly be suited to the task of establishing general laws or nomothetic principles concerning individual behaviour/psychological functioning. That is, the empirical findings generated by such research cannot logically establish that something is the case for *each of many* individuals. (1987: 90–91, original emphasis)

The nomothetic domain can only be actuarial and probabilistic, dealing with group averages rather than particular cases. Such analyses produce what Kastenbaum describes as 'indeterministic statistical zones that construct people who never were and never could be' (quoted in Datan, Rodeheaver, & Hughes, 1987: 156).

The case for the case

There is an alternative to nomothetical analysis, and a supportive literature on the value of single case studies, in particular. Platt (1988) argues that the case study is justified when it describes something intrinsically interesting. Yin (1989) makes the related point that a case study is intended to demonstrate existence, not incidence. Thus, at one level, single case studies simply show us that (or how) something *is*, and can unfold this in an insightful manner. Platt goes on to show how a single case can also point to flaws in existing theoretical claims for a population, and may then point out ways to revise the theory. Similarly, Campbell (1975) points to Becker's belief that a good case study usually either disconfirms our expectations, or reveals things that were not expected. Thus, the additional value of the case study is that it provides a means of troubling our assumptions, preconceptions and theories.

These statements point to the scientific credibility of the case study's painstaking attention to detail. As Sloman (1976: 17) argues, science includes the study even of unique occurences, which therefore 'justifies elaborate and detailed investigation and analysis of particular cases: a task usually shirked because of the search for statistically significant correlations. Social scientists have much to learn from historians and students of literature'. Support for this comes from a perhaps surprising quarter. Francis Galton, who was a pioneer in the development of statistics, wrote:

> Acquaintance with particulars is the beginning of all knowledge – scientific or otherwise … starting too soon with analysis and classification, we run the risk of tearing mental life into fragments and beginning with false cleavages that misrepresent the salient organizations and natural integrations in personal life. (Galton, 1883, in Allport, 1951: 56)

Bromley (1986: 15) explicitly legitimates a role for the case study within mainstream psychology: 'The notion that a case-study, even an extended case-study can only be exploratory, whereas a social experiment or survey can provide definitive results, is incorrect.' A further important point is that single cases can themselves be drawn together for further analysis. A number of approaches have been developed for moving from the single case to more general claims. Here we consider two examples: analytic induction, and the quasi-judicial approach.

Analytic induction is a method for attempting to derive theoretical explanations from a set of cases (Hammersley, 1989; Robson, 1993). It involves proposing an initial tentative hypothesis which is then tested against each of one's cases in turn. With each case, one revises the hypothesis to fit the case. Thus, analytic induction is an iterative procedure, allowing one to reflect on and modify one's thinking in the light of the next piece of evidence assessed. While the ideal of analytic induction would be to produce a final theoretical statement that was true of all cases, usually it is not possible to be so definitive, and a successful outcome will be a revised hypothesis which accounts for most of the data, for most of the cases examined.

Alternatively, Bromley (1985) advocates a *quasi-judicial* approach to the conduct and assessment of case studies. Here there is a parallel with the gradual development of case law, as single cases are written up and considered in relation to each other. This will produce 'highly circumscribed accounts of persons in situations, giving rise to low level generalizations within relatively narrow areas of scientific and professional interest' (Bromley, 1985: 8).

Summary

Idiography is an argument for a focus on the particular, which also leads to a re-evaluation of the importance of the single case study. As we will see in Chapter 5, IPA can focus only on a single case. Further, the single cases remain central if we move to broader, cross-case analyses, enabling us to retrieve particular claims for any of the individuals involved. We believe this approach has an important role to play in experiential research, and that there is considerable ground for the development of phenomenologically-informed models for the synthesis of multiple analyses from small studies and single cases.

IPA AND THE THEORY

IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. And it aims to conduct this examination in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems. This is what makes IPA phenomenological and connects it to the core ideas unifying the phenomenological philosophers we have discussed. IPA concurs with Heidegger that phenomenological inquiry is from the outset an interpretative process. IPA also pursues an idiographic commitment, situating participants in their particular contexts, exploring their personal perspectives, and starting with a detailed examination of each case before moving to more general claims. Thus IPA is connected to each of the intellectual currents outlined in this chapter. Here we will describe in turn the particular relationship IPA has with each of the ideas we have presented.

Reflecting upon personal experience

When reading the philosophical literature on phenomenology, where the writing is often difficult, it is easy to forget that at its heart, the topic and approach of phenomenology does,

or should, connect with our everyday experience. While philosophy has made an enormous contribution to understanding the process of examining experience, it is important to realize that philosophy does not own phenomenology. As Halling (2008: 145) helpfully states: 'In everyday life each of us is something of a phenomenologist insofar as we genuinely listen to the stories that people tell us and insofar as we pay attention to and reflect on our own perceptions.'

Thus, what the philosopher is doing is formalizing a rigorous description of an approach and ability which is elementally a human one. And remember, when Husserl says we should go back to the thing itself, the thing is lived experience, not the philosophical account of lived experience. The philosophical account can be insightful and illuminating but it should be there to serve the stuff of lived experience rather than the other way round. Of course, our propensity for this sort of thinking will vary. Doing phenomenological psychology will generally involve a more sustained and systematic analysis than is part of everyday human activity, but the connection is an important one. We are stressing this at this point to show that phenomenology is a live dynamic activity, nor just a scholarly collection of ideas. We hope to emphasize that we, as researchers and readers, should feel inspired by the philosophical writers to take the project on, and to keep phenomenology alive in our research studies.

Like Husserl, we see phenomenological research as systematically and attentively reflecting on everyday lived experience, and with Husserl we see that that everyday experience can be either first-order activity or second-order mental and affective responses to that activity – remembering, regretting, desiring, and so forth. Thus, in IPA we are concerned with examining subjective experience, but that is always the subjective experience of 'something'.

Of course, experience is a very broad term. So what type of experience is IPA particularly interested in? As we have seen in Chapter 1, IPA is usually concerned with experience which is of particular moment or significance to the person. So, for example, IPA studies have looked at how people decide whether to take a genetic test, how HIV-positive gay men think about sexual relationships, and how people have experienced moving from one country to another.

Thus, with IPA, we are concerned with where ordinary everyday experience becomes 'an experience' of importance as the person reflects on the significance of what has happened and engages in considerable 'hot cognition' in trying to make sense of it.

Experience is itself tantalizing and elusive. In a sense, pure experience is never accessible; we witness it after the event. Therefore, when we speak of doing research which aims to get at experience, what we really mean is we are trying to do research which is 'experience close'. Indeed, because IPA has a model of the person as a sense-making creature, the meaning which is bestowed by the participant on experience, as it becomes an experience, can be said to represent the experience itself.

And of course there is another way in which IPA research is separated from experience *per se*. Human and health science researchers are not usually concerned with examining their own experiences but rather with attending to the experiences of others. Thus, the challenge for empirical phenomenological researchers is to translate the insights of phenomenological philosophy into a practical but coherent approach to the collection and analysis of third-person data. The steps outlined in the book represent our way of trying to realize such a project.

While phenomenology has a core concern with the exploration of human lived experience, as Ricoeur has pointed out (see Moran, 2000), phenomenology is not a single thing, and each subsequent phenomenological philosopher added something particular to the original scheme of Husserl. Thus, while Husserl's phenomenology can be described as relatively intrapsychic, Merleau Ponty's is more centrally concerned with embodiment, and Heidegger and Sartre's accounts are more focused upon existential questions – both with practical and worldly, as well as moral and ethical issues. One can see these different emphases as either in competition with each other, or as complementary. We take the latter view, seeing their collective contributions as leading to a mature, multi-faceted and holistic phenomenology.

Thus, rather than trying to operationalize or privilege one particular phenomenology or phenomenological theorist, IPA is influenced by the core emphases of the approach, and by a number of further elements drawn from the different positions. In that sense, IPA can be seen as operating within, and attempting to further, the intellectual current of phenomenology, in the context of psychology. Thus, IPA is concerned with human lived experience, and posits that experience can be understood via an examination of the meanings which people impress upon it. These meanings, in turn, may illuminate the embodied, cognitive-affective and existential domains of psychology. People are physical and psychological entities. They do things in the world, they reflect on what they do, and those actions have meaningful, existential consequences.

A brief example might help here. One of us (Jonathan) conducted a study with Mike Osborn (see Osborn & Smith, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2008) on the experience of chronic back pain. The participants' experience was embodied, and they reflected cognitively on this embodiment. They were also concerned with how they lived their lives – with the practical everyday arrangements and with the choices they had to make. And they were worried about how they might be having detrimental effects on other people – and described in some depth the difficult and unpleasant emotional experiences which accompanied their physical pain. Thus, the participants' and the researchers' concerns were embodied, cognitive, affective and existential, in focus. This study is typical of IPA. When people are having major experiences and facing big issues, the multi-dimensional aspect of their response to that experience comes to the fore and so a holistic phenomenological analysis is particularly apposite.

The hermeneutic turn

IPA is also strongly influenced by the hermeneutic version of phenomenology. We see no conflict here. Just as phenomenology can be seen as the joint product of a number of related but distinct philosophers, so phenomenology can also be seen as either distinct from or connecting to hermeneutics. We take the latter position and consider Heidegger and Gadamer, for example, to be forging a hermeneutic phenomenology.

For IPA, analysis always involves interpretation. We think Heidegger's reading of *appearing* captures this well. There is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work is required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened. We are also very much in accord with Heidegger and Gadamer's view of

this process as outlined in the section on hermeneutics earlier in the chapter, and offer this as a helpful commentary on what happens *during* analysis. Making sense of what is being said or written involves close interpretative engagement on the part of the listener or reader. However, one will not necessarily be aware of all one's preconceptions in advance of the reading, and so reflective practices, and a cyclical approach to bracketing, are required.

We would position this view of the dynamics of preconceptions within a model of the hermeneutic circle of the research process. Here the 'whole' is the researcher's ongoing biography, and the 'part' is the encounter with a new participant, as part of a new research project. In the passage below (taken from Smith, 2007), Jonathan has described how this can help our understanding of the research process:

> I start where I am at one point on the circle, caught up in my concerns, influenced by my pre-conceptions, shaped by my experience and expertise. In moving from this position, I attempt to either bracket, or at least acknowledge my preconceptions, before I go round to an encounter with a research participant at the other side of the circle. Whatever my previous concerns or positions, I have moved from a point where I am the focus, to one where the participant is the focus as I attend closely to the participant's story, facilitate the participant uncovering his/her experience. This requires an intense attentiveness to, and engagement with, the participant as he/she speaks. Of course this is only a simplified version of what is a complex dynamic process ... see Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2001) for more on the qualities of openness required here.

> Having concluded the conversation, I continue the journey round the circle, back to where I started. So I return home to analyze the material I collected from the perspective I started from, influenced by my prior conceptions and experience. However, I am also irretrievably changed because of the encounter with the new, my participant and her/his account. Then I engage in movement round a virtual mini-circle where, in my home location, I mentally take on again a conversation with my participant, as I rehear his/her story, ask questions of it, try to make sense of it. Indeed the various actions inherent in the hermeneutic circle between part and whole ... take place in this cognitive space at home base. (Smith, 2007: 6)

Here we would emphasize the importance of the positive process of engaging with the participant more than the process of bracketing prior concerns, in the sense that the skilful attention to the former inevitably facilitates the latter. See Chapters 4 and 5 where we consider in greater detail the processes involved.

Now we need to call on another important idea in the theoretical literature. For the social philosopher Charles Taylor (1985), human beings are *self-interpreting animals* attempting to find meaning in what is happening to us. Therefore, it can be said that an event happening in a person's life becomes an experience because of the significance, and therefore meaning, given to it by the person it is happening to.

So participants and researchers are both trying to make sense of or interpret things but they have a different entry point to that. IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant, who is trying to make sense of *x*. And this usefully illustrates the dual role of the researcher as both like and unlike the participant. In one sense, the researcher is like the participant, is a human being drawing on everyday human resources in order to make sense of the world. On the other hand, the researcher is not the participant, she/he only has access

to the participant's experience through what the participant reports about it, and is also seeing this through the researcher's own, experientially-informed lens. So, in that sense, the participant's meaning-making is first-order, while the researcher's sense-making is second-order. For more discussion of this, see Smith (2019).

There is another way in which IPA operates a double hermeneutic. Ricoeur (1970) distinguishes between two broad interpretative positions, a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of suspicion. The former approach attempts to reconstruct the original experience in its own terms; the latter uses theoretical perspectives from outside (e.g. as with psychoanalysis) to shed light on the phenomenon. Smith (2004) and Larkin et al. (2006) have suggested that IPA can take a centre-ground position here, where interpretative work can be judged to be appropriate so long as it serves to 'draw out' or 'disclose' the meaning of the experience.

Here we suggest that this centre-ground position combines a hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of 'questioning'. Thus, the IPA researcher is, in part, wanting to adopt an 'insider's perspective' (Conrad, 1987), see what it is like from the participant's view, and stand in their shoes. On the other hand, the IPA researcher is also wanting to stand alongside the participant, to take a look at them from a different angle, ask questions and puzzle over things they are saying. Here the analysis may move away from representing what the participant would say themselves, and become more reliant on the interpretative work of the researcher. Successful IPA research combines both stances – it is empathic *and* questioning, and the simple word 'understanding' captures this neatly. We are attempting to understand, both in the sense of 'trying to see what it is like for someone' and in the sense of 'analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something'.

Let's look at this another way. IPA is always interpretative, but there are different levels of interpretation. Typically, an analysis will move through those levels to a deeper analysis, as it progresses. Critically for IPA however, those interpretations must always be grounded in the meeting of researcher and text. For example, Smith (2004) outlines a series of levels of interpretation of a very small piece of text, taken from an interview with a woman talking about the experience of chronic back pain. The first level engaged with the main emerging substantive element, a nested set of social comparisons which pointed to how the woman was losing out in comparison with a whole set of other selves, that is, her past self, her ought self, other selves she met, and so forth. The second level involved a close look at the metaphors the woman used, and how these added weight to her particular sense of loss, as it compared to others. The third level took a detailed reading of the temporal construction of her account and argued that the way the woman moved between describing herself in the present tense and the past tense reflected a battle for the 'real self' that she was engaged in. Each analysis became more interpretative but each was based on a reading from within the text itself.

So for IPA, a successful interpretation is one which is principally based on a reading from *within* the terms of the text which the participant has produced. It is not usually based on importing a reading from without. In this sense our questioning hermeneutics is clearly different from Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. This is discussed again in more detail in Chapter 5.

Finally, we would like to revisit the Schleiermacher–Gadamer debate. Gadamer argued that when reading a text, we are trying to make sense of the text rather than the author. He suggests that, as a result, our sense-making will be strongly influenced by the time at

which we are doing the reading, and that this will get in the way of being able to recreate an original meaning of the text. This is clearly pertinent to the sort of texts that were the main concern of Schleiermacher and Gadamer. These are usually self-consciously constructed, for an expressive or functional purpose. They have usually been written in a previous historical age, and they may involve a foreign language or a quite specific vocabulary or genre. However, if one changes the territory, and considers the material faced by IPA researchers, then we think Schleiermacher has much to say. The texts examined by IPA researchers are usually contemporary or have been produced in the recent past and in response to a request by the researcher rather than a purpose driven by the author. Under these circumstances we think that the process of analysis is geared to learning both about the person providing the account and the subject matter of that account, and therefore, that Schleiermacher usefully speaks to us across the centuries. For more on the relationship between hermeneutics and human sciences, and a worked example of the application of hermeneutic ideas in qualitative psychology, see Smith (2007).

Thus, IPA requires a combination of phenomenological and hermeneutic insights. It is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavour for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen.

Focusing on the particular

IPA has an idiographic sensibility. We see the value of IPA studies, first and foremost, as offering detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience. A good case study, with an insightful analysis of data from a sensitively conducted interview, on a topic which is of considerable importance to the participant, is making a significant contribution to psychology. In our view, only through painstakingly detailed cases of this sort can we produce psychological research which matches and does justice to the complexity of human psychology itself.

We have been increasingly advocating the case study in IPA (e.g. Smith, 2004) and hope to see increasing numbers of case studies conducted. However, most IPA is, and is likely to continue to be, idiographic in focus, but with a sample size larger than one. Such studies have important and powerful contributions to make. The analytic process here begins with the detailed examination of each case, but then cautiously moves to an examination of similarities and differences across the cases, so producing fine-grained accounts of patterns of meaning for participants reflecting upon a shared experience. In a good IPA study, it should be possible to parse the account both for shared themes, and for the distinctive voices and variations on those themes.

This concern with the particular, with nuance and with variation means that IPA is working at quite a specific point in relation to Husserl's ambitious programme for phenomenology. For Husserl it was important to move from the individual instances to establish the eidetic structure or essence of experience. This is of course a noble aim. For IPA, however, a prior task of detailed analyses of particular cases of actual life and lived experience remains the priority at this time. Of course, we do not see this as the end of the story. It will

be possible with time to establish larger corpuses of cases and this may lead to the ability to consider the more general features of particular phenomena.

In the meantime, the detailed idiographic analyses which IPA offers can make a significant contribution. Through connecting the findings to the extant psychological literature, the IPA writer is helping the reader to see how the case can shed light on the existing nomothetic research. Again, we see echoes of part and whole relationships.

And the reader can in turn continue this process of theoretical transferability as they examine the case from the perspective of their own experiential knowledge base, and begin to think of the implications for their own work.

The specifics are unique, but they are hung on what is shared and communal. This in turn echoes the original insight of Schleiermacher, 'that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themself' (1998: 92–93).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this chapter we have introduced the ideas of some of the leading writers in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. We have done this in sufficient detail so that the IPA researcher can understand the theoretical underpinnings of the approach. We have emphasized the plural vision of the thinking and articulated IPA's take on the theoretical ideas offered. In the next set of chapters we move to considering how to put the ideas into practice as we offer guidance on how to conduct a piece of research using IPA.

FURTHER READING

The philosophical phenomenology literature can be pretty tough going. Moran (2000) offers a highly readable, useful and thorough introduction and Moran and Mooney (2002) provide a useful collection of readings from the main phenomenological philosophers. Perhaps the most readable and concise primary source for Husserl's position can be found in the translation of the piece he wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1927). More recently, Carel's book *Illness* (2013) provides an excellent, and very readable, example of what a phenomenological inquiry can look like.

Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) and Van Manen (1990) offer accessible and more detailed overviews of much of the theoretical terrain covered in this chapter, and Langdridge (2007) also introduces the main ideas of phenomenology in a psychological context. Ahmed (2006) provides a very clear and accessible introduction to the concepts of intentionality and orientation. Ashworth (2008) offers a very helpful account of the origins of qualitative psychology which includes a consideration of some of the concepts in this chapter. An engaging introduction to phenomenology research in psychology and the human sciences is provided by Becker (1992). Von Eckartsberg (1986) gives a useful overview of different approaches to phenomenological psychology and interesting examples of each.

A key text on hermeneutics is by Palmer (1969). A more recent entrée is offered by Vandevelde (2005). Packer and Addison (1989) present an edited collection of psychological work connected to hermeneutics. Josselson (2004) provides a detailed discussion of the relationship between empathic and critical hermeneutics. Smith (2007) introduces some key concepts in hermeneutics and illustrates their value by examining a small piece of empirical work. Larkin et al. (2006) provide further exposition on Heidegger's relevance to IPA, and to the place of interpretation in analytic work. Willig (2012) provides in-depth discussion of the role of interpretation in qualitative psychological research.

Useful accounts of the rationale and methods for an idiographic psychology can be found in Allport (1951, 1965), de Waele and Harré (1979) and Smith, Harré, and Van Langenhove (1995).

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