# The Accordion and the Deep Bowl of Spaghetti:
# Eight Researchers' Experiences of Using IPA as a Methodology

Chris Wagstaff
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom
Hyeseung Jeong
University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand
Maeve Nolan
National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dublin, Ireland
Tony Wilson
Sunway University, Jeffrey Cheah Educational Foundation, Malaysia
Julie Tweedlie
Northumbria University, Newcastle, United Kingdom
Elly Phillips
University of Derby, Derby, United Kingdom
Halia Senu
University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
Fiona Holland
University of Derby, Derby, United Kingdom

*Since 1996 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has grown rapidly and been applied in areas outside its initial "home" of health psychology. However, explorations of its application from a researcher's perspective are scarce. This paper provides reflections on the experiences of eight individual researchers using IPA in diverse disciplinary fields and cultures. The research studies were conducted in the USA, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and the UK by researchers with backgrounds in business management, consumer behaviour, mental health nursing, nurse education, applied linguistics, clinical psychology, health and education. They variously explored media awareness, employee commitment, disengagement from mental health services, in-vitro fertilisation treatment, student nurses' experience of child protection, second language acquisition in a university context, the male experience of spinal cord injury and academics experience of working in higher education and women's experiences of body size and health practices. By bringing together intercultural, interdisciplinary experiences of using IPA, the paper discusses perceived strengths and weaknesses of IPA. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Researcher's Experience, Traditional Boundaries, Research Methodology*

## Introduction

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach to psychological qualitative research which has grown rapidly since its first emergence in 1996 (Smith, 1996). While it is now widely applied outside its initial "home" of health psychology, descriptions of the application of IPA from a researcher's perspective, beyond that described in textbooks, are scarce. Hence it was the aim of the researchers to fill this gap by presenting the idiosyncratic experiences and personal reflections of eight individual researchers who have used IPA as a methodological approach in a variety of research projects. The authors reflect

on the strengths and challenges that emerged in using IPA, and describe personal solutions to dilemmas encountered in the research process.  The title refers to metaphors used by two of the authors to capture the experience of data analysis using IPA. Prolonged, extensive conversation via email and an online IPA discussion group facilitated a sharing of experiences with this still relatively new methodology.

The first section presents a theoretical overview of IPA and a table providing a brief summary of contributors to the paper, research topics, participants, and key features of each study. In subsequent sections, the focus shifts to the experience of using IPA and describes specific research dilemmas and attempts at resolving them made by individual authors. The discussion section reflects on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of IPA as a methodology while the final section outlines implications and limitations of the paper.

## Theoretical overview of IPA

IPA is probably the most widely known qualitative approach to phenomenological psychology in the UK today (Langdridge, 2007). It explores how people make sense of lived experience and is particularly concerned with "significant existential issues of considerable moment to the participants and the researchers" (Smith, 2004, p. 49).  Smith (2004) defines IPA as:

> part of a stable of closely connected approaches which share a commitment to the exploration of personal lived experience, but which have different emphases or suggested techniques to engage in this project.  (p. 41)

Theoretically, IPA is based on three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.  Husserl is considered to be the father of phenomenology, and his work is the basis for the focus in IPA on reflection and the attentive and systematic examination of experience. However, Husserl's pursuit of the essence of experience is too abstract to be useful when researching actual experiences. Thus, IPA also draws on the more contextualised, existential phenomenology of Heidegger and the work of Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer and Schleiermacher (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenological research seeks "to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 41).  Since IPA is a phenomenological approach which derives research themes from in-depth accounts of personal experience, it is easily mistaken for a simple descriptive methodology and is consequently "easy to do badly and difficult to do well" (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 53). In IPA, while the centrality of the participants' own perspective is emphasised, the researcher's interpretation of the text is also considered a crucial element in the development of a coherent, themed investigation (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Distinguished therefore from descriptive phenomenology, IPA seeks to "give voice" to a phenomenon and to then make sense of that initial description in relation to wider social, cultural and theoretical contexts (Larkin et al., 2006). The IPA researcher employs an empathic but critical hermeneutic process to produce an interrogative account based on experience.  Hermeneutics involves "the restoration of meaning" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 8) and IPA draws on interpretation to make manifest what is normally hidden and to look for meanings embedded in human experience.

The idiographic focus of IPA explores how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007).   It assumes a worldview in which the individual is not a passive recipient but an active interpreter of his or her subjective world.  In such a world, there is no objective reality or objective truth (Lyons & Coyle, 2007), and the researcher plays an integral and dynamic part in the generation and interpretation of data

(Smith & Eatough, 2007). Given its idiographic emphasis, IPA is cautious of claiming the transferability of results to wider populations (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A theoretical rather than empirical generalisability is produced whereby readers can make links between the findings, their personal and professional experiences and the extant literature (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Readers are encouraged to reflect on the personal applicability of research findings as, if studies are insightful enough; they capture "what it is to be human at its most essential" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 38).

## Background

The authors of this paper come from a variety of backgrounds such as health, mental health nursing, nurse education, audience and consumer practices, engineering, psychology and linguistics. Members of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) forum (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ipanalysis/) engaged in several online discussions in which they debated sample size, method, interpretation, homogeneity, reflexivity etc. Senu, a contributor to the online discussion suggested that writing a paper collating the practicalities of undertaking IPA studies worldwide would be a useful tool for sharing and disseminating personal experiences of IPA. Twenty five people initially expressed an interest in being involved following the post by Senu but this rapidly reduced to a stable group of eight, all of whom contributed to the collaborative writing process. The vast majority of communication was done by email though there were some telephone conversations. Whilst there were differences of opinion around content these were resolved by negotiation, discussion and, occasionally, by majority decision.

**Table1.** Summary of research studies

| Author | Research Topic | Participants |
|---|---|---|
| Halia Senu Business Management, Australia | Workplace commitment | Seventeen males in Aerospace and IT located in Sydney and Melbourne |
| Tony Wilson Consumer research Malaysia | Audience and consumer experiences | Malaysian ethnic groups |
| Chris Wagstaff Mental health nursing, UK | The experience of disengagement from mental health service | Seven black men with severe mental health problems |
| Elly Phillips, Health, USA | Men's and women's experience as they started in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment. | Three childless couples from US and UK, were interviewed individually two or three times over six months |
| Julie Tweedlie Nurse Education, UK | Adult student nurses experiences of the practice of safeguarding children during their first planned community placement as part of their pre-registration programme | Student nurses from a wide age range 18-50 years were interviewed whilst they were still in practice |
| Hyeseung Jeong Applied Linguistics, New Zealand | The experience of second language acquisition (SLA) in an academic context | 8 international students in a New Zealand university |
| Maeve Nolan Clinical Psychology, Ireland | Experience of living with spinal cord injury in the early months following discharge from rehabilitation | Five men with spinal cord injury (SCI) |
| Fiona Holland Education/Health UK | 1. Experiences of working in higher education<br><br>2. Health and body image messages and supportive practices. | 1. 13 university lecturers from a new university in the UK<br><br>2. 4 non- dieting, healthy women over the "ideal" BMI |

It quickly became apparent, particularly as the authors did not know each other, that one individual needed to be responsible for overall co-ordination of the material and one of the authors (Wagstaff) therefore volunteered to take this responsibility. The group was invited to share their experiences of using IPA and members of the group subsequently took various components of the paper to make into a coherent discussion paper. Whilst we debated the value of coding, clustering and thematically analysing the collective outcome of our experiential reflections, we did not pursue this possibility. We considered that, as the focus of the paper was on the reflexive response to IPA, a discursive style was more appropriate. This paper represents the efforts to reflect both the idiographic experiences of the individual authors whilst simultaneously making generalizations about those experiences.

Table 1 presents an overview of the studies contributing to this paper and outlines subject areas, research contexts, topics and participants.

## Challenges and struggles encountered in using IPA

Despite the presence of a comprehensive textbook on IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) and a growing body of published articles, IPA is still a relatively new methodology. Most of the researchers participating in this article identified the lack of methodological support and understanding from their immediate academic communities as a troubling issue. This factor may have contributed to some of the individual struggles experienced by researchers outlined in this article including; seeking approval for and deciding on sample size, grappling with ethical issues arising from the research focus, appropriately implementing the double hermeneutic to resolve differences between researcher and participant perspectives, resisting the focus on common themes and the development of general patterns from idiographic data, understanding theoretical and philosophical positioning of IPA, and deciding to make use of non-standard approaches to data collection and management.

## Deciding sample sizes

IPA allows participants "to think, talk and be heard" by typically using small homogenous samples (Reid et al., 2005, p. 25). The value of the IPA focus on small samples was recognised and welcomed by all contributors. Holland (2014) initially intended to use thematic analysis in her preliminary study of 13 academics, a large sample by IPA standards (Smith et al., 2009). While 13 transcripts created data overload, Holland considered that she was nevertheless able to produce a richer account than would have been possible using thematic coding. Despite the eventual satisfactory outcome, this initial experience with a large number of participants led Holland to anticipate that smaller samples would reap more manageable, yet still rich data.

A second collaborative study benefited from a smaller number of participants (Holland & Peterson, 2014). Holland interviewed four women, and was struck by the amount and richness of the data that emerged from this smaller sample. Several authors of this paper described a renewed appreciation of the IPA emphasis on individual experience as the data elicited in small samples was poignant, emotive and interesting.

Holland experienced IPA methodology as an excellent fit for her work, as it allowed a naturalistic approach to interviewing and a flexibility that enabled lived experience to be highlighted and interpreted based on a close exploration of each participant's words. The qualitative methodology was considered to be respectful to participants who were very much in charge of the interview process. Active listening on the part of the interviewer facilitated appropriate probing. As Smith (personal communication, 2012) stated, the experience of

interviewing someone can feel like creating a "sacred space." As someone with a therapeutic background, Holland found the style of active listening and gentle probing with a small number of individuals to be natural and supportive.  However, many contributors commented that the small sample size in IPA is often queried by non-qualitative researchers, and poorly understood by research approval committees who may even consider the research to be a pilot study that will later be expanded.

**Grappling with ethical issues**

The intensely personal nature of the experiences often explored in IPA studies can create dilemmas for researchers seeking ethical approval for research proposals. Tweedlie (2013) described an additional ethical challenge arising from her concern about the potential vulnerability of participants in her study of the experience of child protection amongst nursing students:

> *I am finding it difficult to accept that I wanted students to witness child protection in practice as this is in opposition with the normal view of not wanting people to have these experiences. To witness child protection reinforces that child abuse is happening.*

This comment captures the realisation that exploring safeguarding issues regarding child abuse was at odds with a working career dedicated to the protection of others from the emotional trauma caused by witnessing the consequences of such abuse. However, Tweedlie (2013) also agrees with Stanton et al. (2012) who believe that nurses, as professionals, must acknowledge their own feelings towards abuse and know how to deal appropriately with the disclosure of abuse. Although no longer practising as a nurse, Tweedlie was aware that, as a lecturer, she needed to listen to students recounting their experiences. While it was difficult at times to listen to these stories, she was glad the students had the opportunity to speak as a result of her research. Her experience highlights the ethical sensitivity surrounding real world research.

In addition, Tweedlie also sensed a potential risk of abuse of power within her study, stemming from her position as lecturer, and the potential therefore for exploitation of participants for the purpose of eliciting rich meaningful data as required by IPA. In an attempt to minimise the possibility of such exploitation, the issue of consent was continually discussed with participants, and professional boundaries maintained by the cultivation of an approachable, non-critical, unthreatening attitude during the data collection process. Nolan (2011) also commented on the temptation to revert to a clinician/therapist stance during the interview process as potentially ethically problematic.

**Implementing the double hermeneutic**

The tension between participant and researcher perspectives was a central concern for both Senu and Jeong.  A constraint experienced by Senu stemmed from the reliance on workplace employees memories in response to reflective interviews. Senu's study of workplace commitment and project completion used Meyer & Allen's (1991) commitment framework as a theoretical model.  However, she considered that the findings emerged from the personal constructs of each participant in a manner that was designed to reconcile the situation with emotions or actions as opposed to a deeper exploration of workplace commitment and project completion.  Recall of experiences, thoughts, reactions, emotions or

conflicts was not always fluid for participants, but as the interviews progressed, recall became clearer and aligned more with the "commitment" construct underlying the research.

Jeong was initially intrigued by IPA because of its way of conceptualising cognition, one of the most central constructs in second language acquisition (SLA). The experience of second language acquisition (SLA) and of completing the literature reviews in an academic context provided the context for her study. However, the IPA concept of cognition as centrally involving a person's sense and meaning making process accessed via storytelling (Smith et al., 2009) led Jeong to face challenges in the early stages of her field research. Although the participants used English as a second language, most were not concerned with improving their level of English. For the participants, English was simply the research language, in which they had sufficient competency to complete their academic work. Their main concern was developing knowledge of the (extra-linguistic) subject matter relevant to their research projects, and their accounts of the experience of doing a literature review did not seem to address the researcher's exploration of SLA.

A resolution for Jeong's dilemma came through a fuller appreciation of the double hermeneutic principle of IPA. Realising that participants were engaging in their own sense making about undertaking the literature review, she was also able to focus on making her own interpretations of those experiences. Later, the reader, presented with both the participants' experiences and the researcher's interpretation of those experiences, would be provided with a more complete understanding. This realisation enabled Jeong to see patterns of SLA emerging from participants' narratives, which they themselves were not aware of. The value of the double hermeneutic, so central to IPA, lies in acknowledging that the researcher and participants can look at the same phenomena (the participants' experiences) from different angles. As Smith et al. (2009) propose, since the researcher's theoretical knowledge allows her to see what the participant does not, it is sometimes necessary to "disagree" with the surface meaning of the participants' account, to "agree" with the deeper meaning.

**Resistance to generating common themes**

Nolan (2011) described the process of identifying super-ordinate themes as akin to "drowning in a deep bowl of spaghetti," but considered this sense of being overwhelmed by participant data to be a defining experience for phenomenological researchers. However, a specific methodological dilemma emerged for Nolan (2011) when developing general patterns from idiographic data and she identified a personal resistance against moving from the particular to the shared, and a reluctance to abandon the focus on the individual, in the way she considered was required by IPA. Having chosen IPA because it appeared to offer structure, she felt hampered by that very structure during the process of analysis. While IPA allows for variation within a theme, the emphasis on commonality of experience seemed inconsistent with the idiographic thrust of IPA and led Nolan to believe that fundamental individual differences were being obscured by the focus on common experiences. These stories "left behind" while pursuing what was deemed by the researcher and supervisor to be a "correct" IPA analysis, were considered a valuable loss. This dilemma was resolved by identifying a unique super-ordinate theme for each participant in addition to common, group themes. Despite the persistent iteration of the idiographic nature of IPA, Nolan believes that it loses much of that focus in its pursuit of common themes.

In the process of doing IPA, Nolan felt she was moving further and further away from the words and phrases used by participants in order to "herd" these words into broader categories. She felt something important about the rhythm, cadence or nuance of the way the words were spoken or the story was told became overwhelmed by the necessity of creating

shared common themes. She came to appreciate therefore why the use of single case studies might be encouraged as a fruitful implementation of IPA.

> *I felt myself to be pushing and shoving themes into boxes in order to produce the "correct" number of super-ordinate themes under nice pithy titles. There was something contrived about the creation of super-ordinate themes which are then taken as representative of an experience. How do I know that the themes that get "dropped" are not crucial for the participant? How do I choose to drop them anyway – is it because they inconveniently don't fit it or because they appear less often or are less elaborated?*

Nolan's background is in psychoanalysis and she believes that, despite a body of protestations to the contrary, psychoanalysis comes less from "without" and IPA comes less from "within" than is popularly portrayed in IPA textbooks. While acknowledging the danger of using pre-formed psychoanalytic concepts, she also became aware of the danger involved in definitively applying any constructs after just a single interview with each individual.

Wagstaff also identified the tension between an idiographic focus and the development of general themes. He identified one of the most enjoyable components of the study as understanding the complex identities of the participants. He met most participants at least three times, and one person nine times, and was surprised at how willing people were to talk. For example, "Arthur," a very taciturn man, delivered an eleven minute monologue in the "clarifying interview" about his complex relationship with mental health services. Similarly, "Josh" spoke for an hour and twenty minutes, following which he thanked the researcher saying he wished that his mental health team would allow him to talk. The participants appeared not to be guarded and gave the impression that they were speaking openly and honestly about their experiences. As a consequence, it was easy to develop idiographic portraits of individual participants and this also demonstrates the beneficence of this research methodology.

While the process of illustrating each theme with a verbatim quote was easy for each person, the process became harder across participants. Wagstaff became particularly aware of the fragility of themes across participants when cross-referencing between participants. For example "transience" was identified as a strong main theme for a prolonged period but eventually became subsumed into another theme. Wagstaff used the analogy of an accordion to describe the ongoing process of expansion and reduction involved in developing robust themes across participants.

> *The themes grow and grow in number with more and more sub-themes until I realise that I have spread myself too thin and so they all collapse down again to a simple two or three overarching themes. Only for the process of growth to start again.*

Wagstaff considered that in this respect his academic supervisors were unable to help. All their suggestions about the development of themes reflected personal perspectives which did not match the researcher's experience of participants' data. As with other PhD studies, supervisors can rarely be as immersed in the data as researchers themselves, and Wagstaff considers that this emphasises the key role of reflexivity in IPA. The primary researcher has to be continually reflective about the process of how themes are developed and this reflection is one of the processes whereby a novice researcher stamps their identity upon a study. The importance of reflexivity was also emphasised at Nolan's (2011) viva when she was asked to

insert reflexive passages into the body of the text to better illustrate the process of analysis and of grappling with IPA as a methodology.

Expressing a similar concern, and as already noted, Holland (2012) found that, although her original sample size of 13 added vibrancy to her project, it led to data overload and resulted in a greater focus on common themes and a consequent loss of idiographic detail.

## Theoretical and philosophical positioning of IPA

IPA has integrated diverse philosophical perspectives that are not always easily reconciled with one another. With different emphases on different intellectual roots of IPA, the paradigmatic appropriation of the methodology can vary, and this is exemplified by both Wilson and Jeong.

For Wilson it is essential that IPA practice is shaped by phenomenology following its articulation by Heidegger, arguably the twentieth century's most significant philosopher. From this phenomenological perspective, the researcher's theme is the implicit/ tacit/ ready-to-hand use by focus group members or interviewees of thematic narrative equipment (or tools) to make sense of experience (from pain to pleasure, visiting shopping malls or using social media). In the context of cultural diversity in Malaysia, Wilson and colleagues employ phenomenology in this spatial model of understanding and enabling narrative equipment to further elaborate discursive analyses of multi-cultural audience and consumer responses to a range of traditional and ubiquitous media, marketing and malls (1993, 2008, 2011).

Thus, for instance, Wilson and colleagues developed research participants' thematic, storied understanding of a local Malaysian mall as a "home from home." In a focus group, participants were enabled to articulate or "voice out," in their own terms their ready-to-hand, thematic awareness of the shopping mall. They can present-at-hand for reflection details of their narrative understanding as equipment which has enabled them - mostly coherently - to visit. Thus, they talk in diverse ways about their ludic, immersive experiencing of the shopping mall as a "home from home," quite at odds with the media marketing of this massive urban space and time as a visitor's "adventure." Narrative understanding can be articulated in behaviour as well as talk. A Chinese student, for instance, engaged in multiple modes of ludic activity by reflectively presenting her account of "belonging" in this "familiar" place functioning as a "second home" and bestowing meaning on it, eloquently embodied in terms of a "comfortable" walk, and experiences of feeling welcomed by "warm colours" and "suitable" sounds.

Jeong expected that her PhD research on second language acquisition using IPA as its methodological framework would provide an alternative ontological perspective on human cognition. The definition of cognition within the field of second language acquisition is controversial. *Cognitivism*, one of two main SLA schools of thought conceptualises the mind as a computer and cognition as information processing, while the second, *social constructionist approach*, insists that the mind and cognition are the products of discourses. These two notions of cognition reflect those of the two mainstream paradigms in the field of psychology, although IPA challenged such conceptualisations (Smith, 1996), suggesting that cognition is "a complex, nuanced process of sense- and meaning-making" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 191).

## Doing IPA beyond standard IPA conventions

While researcher creativity and flexibility are possible within an IPA framework, a standard application of methods typifies most published accounts. This section describes the

use of less standard additional features to IPA studies, particularly the use of software, writing as an analysis tool, and carrying out multiple related interviews, thereby illustrating the capacity of IPA to be usefully adapted to suit researcher preferences and abilities.

We debated the use of software with IPA, a debate which reflects concerns that IPA cannot be satisfactorily implemented with software, and that software use cannot replace active analysis with automatic coding in qualitative research generally (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). However, using software was a personal decision for some contributors, based largely on comfort and familiarity with working electronically. Software packages were considered useful in managing comparatively large data sets (Phillips), coding transcripts in multiple dimensions (Phillips, Jeong), creating and manipulating "trees" of codes (Phillips) and rapidly searching large amounts of text (Phillips). Disadvantages of using software were also described, including the inability to create tables of themes (Phillips), having to run on a Windows emulator (Phillips) and having to improvise the dual level IPA coding (Phillips). Some contributors used software mainly to check relevant extracts, using the coding system to sort extracts and the different tools for retrieving key nodes and words according to main themes (Phillips). "Mind mapping" software was cited by one contributor (Holland) as helpful for both data organization and coding while others (Holland) used voice recognition software to assist in the management and transcription of lengthy interviews. Other contributors did not make use of software packages but relied on working with word processing software, "pen, paper & highlighters" (Wagstaff & Holland) and the creation of large diagrams using "string and post-its" (Wagstaff) or movable index cards (Holland).

Phillips (2013, 2014) studied couples starting in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment. She incorporated three additions to conventional IPA guidelines: the use of QSR NVivo for data analysis; writing extensively to develop the analysis; and making comparisons across linked interviews. As described above, NVivo is often considered a poor tool for IPA as it does not allow two separate types of coding, as for example on each side of a physical transcript (Smith et al., 2009). Phillips found pencil and paper coding to be disorganized and to lead to inertia in relation to the formation of themes. To adapt NVivo to IPA use, Phillips used the NVivo "annotation" function to carry out preliminary (left hand column) coding, and created "nodes," (the NVivo term for codes), to create detailed (right hand column) coding. There were some disadvantages to using NVivo, including having to create IPA type tables of themes with transcript references and extracts separate from the software, and for Mac users like Phillips, using NVivo also requires use of a Windows emulator, which may be slow.

Phillips considers that IPA guidelines tend to focus on the type of coding and analysis (Smith et al., 2009), with less emphasis on how and when to write. Her use of writing to assist her to develop the analysis was taken from Van Manen (1990), who argued that it helps "sets thoughts on paper" (p. 64). After coding each interview line-by-line, Phillips created a narrative account for each interview, illustrated with generous verbatim extracts, which triggered re-coding, re-organising themes, and reference to the original transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

> *Producing a fleshed out analysis at a comparatively early stage and for each individual interview helped me think more about each theme and how they related. There was less to say about some themes, even ones that seemed promising at a code level, whereas others developed more than anticipated.*

This process is somewhat similar to the description given by Nolan (2011) of the preparation of individual narrative accounts and identification of unique over-arching themes

for each participant as a way of resolving her unease about moving away too quickly from individual accounts of experience.

The final divergence from the conventional application of IPA for Phillips (2014) was the inclusion of two interviews with each member of three couples (which became three time points for one couple). Smith and Osborn (2003) suggest that an IPA analysis looks for convergences and divergences between accounts. Phillips drew on this concept to help her incorporate the added dimension of interviewing couples over time. Consistent with the idiographic approach of IPA, each interview was analyzed separately and in detail. However, before drawing together themes across all accounts, special attention was given to convergences and divergences in linked accounts (i.e., between couples and between multiple interviews with each individual over time). Elements that may have been minimal in individual interviews were sometimes developed when observed between partners, or over separate time points. Phillips focused on how the same story emerged from two perspectives as opposed to searching for the "truth" (Hertz, 1995). As mentioned previously, Wagstaff met most participants at least three times, for an initial interview, followed by a clarifying interview and finally a meeting with participants to discuss the themes emerging from the study. Comments from this post-interview meeting were used to further develop the double hermeneutic, the researcher making sense of the participants making sense of their experience (Wagstaff & Williams, 2014).

Jeong also described supplementing standard IPA procedures in order to meet the challenge of simultaneously conforming to the demands of IPA and applied linguistics. Researchers in applied linguistics are typically required to use multiple data collection methods, and to involve diverse perspectives in order to produce an appropriate study (Barnard & Burns, 2012). Therefore, as well as interview data, Jeong collected data from multiple supplementary sources, including participants' initial and final literature review texts, supervision meeting summaries, study notes, concept maps and her own field observations and notes. She also interviewed some of the participants' colleagues. By combining participants themes and supplementary data, Jeong considered that she was able to develop a more convincing discussion.

**Discussion: Perceived strengths and weaknesses of IPA**

This paper has drawn on the experiences of eight researchers from diverse academic backgrounds to illustrate the actual implementation of IPA, and the struggles and challenges encountered in the application of IPA as a methodology. It concludes with an overview of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of IPA as experienced by contributors and a consideration of the limitations of the paper. Despite coming from diverse backgrounds, contributors to this paper identified a range of overlapping strengths and weaknesses, and encountered similar dilemmas during the process of conducting studies using IPA as a methodology.

What primarily emerges as a unanimously agreed strength of IPA is the creation of a richly interpreted, phenomenological account of participant data, arising from the meticulous engagement between the researcher and a small number of participants. Contributors to this paper were all appreciative of an approach which comprehensively, respectfully and explicitly incorporates the perspective of both researcher and participant. The complex interplay and interweaving of the phenomenological account of the participant through the interpretative role of the researcher in giving voice to specific experiences is absent from quantitative research and not sufficiently emphasised in many qualitative approaches. Van Manen (1990) considers that if one word were to be used to characterise phenomenology it is "thoughtfulness" and that "we gather other peoples' experiences because they allow us to

become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62). The contributors to this paper all acknowledge the capacity of IPA to produce in-depth, thoughtful accounts of subjective experiences, incorporating verbatim participant quotes, illuminating metaphors and relevant literature.

The practical application, usefulness and social validity of findings derived from the studies also suggest some powerful features of IPA. For example, Holland (2014) collected her data from academics as part of a professional doctorate, and the results informed positive changes in academic support systems and mentoring practices at the university campus in question. Similarly, Nolan's (2011) study promoted alterations in staff awareness and practices in relation to the early post-discharge from rehabilitation period for men with spinal cord injury and Wagstaff's (Wagstaff et al., 2011) study sought to improve the engagement of black men with severe mental health problems with mental health services.

In addition, IPA as a methodology was seen to offer wide, cross-discipline applicability as exhibited in the diversity of contributors to this paper. The comprehensiveness of IPA as a qualitative methodology based on solid philosophical and theoretical principles, and incorporating clear data collection guidelines and procedures for analysis, seems to invite researchers from many academic arenas to seek to explore individual experiences in depth. Yet, as exemplified in this paper, many of the contributors work broadly within the health psychology field, from where IPA originated. While further evidence is needed on the wider applicability of IPA, the breadth of studies in this paper indirectly suggests that IPA is an ideal methodological framework for a wide range of disciplines, individual experiences and cultures.

While in general more strengths than weaknesses were identified by individual contributors, IPA as a research method was found to result in an uncomfortable dualism or opposition between "theme" and "idiography." The tension between the espoused idiographic focus and the development of general themes was possibly the most frequently cited dilemma, and the search for common themes was considered to reduce the idiographic focus. While there is some scope for participants to be represented on opposite ends of a single theme, there seems to be little room for the representation of unique themes, unless the research consists of a single case study. In particular, Nolan (2011) remained unconvinced about the existence of unique features of IPA, and wondered if IPA makes an exclusive contribution over and above that offered by other interpretative phenomenological approaches.

The philosophical underpinnings of IPA provided another focus for discussion amongst contributing authors. IPA draws on diverse intellectual sources which do not always compete but often complement each other (Smith et al., 2009). This enabled Wilson and Jeong to deploy IPA from contrasting philosophical positions. Whilst researchers may diverge when it comes to the fundamental epistemological and ontological standpoints underlying IPA the philosophical underpinning of IPA as a research methodology could be considered problematic. Given that ethical dilemmas need to be properly underpinned, enhanced clarity about the philosophical basis for IPA would be useful.

The creative and flexible use of IPA is reflected in the variety of published papers now available and the online discussion group provides a forum for lively discussion and debate. The very existence of this paper, written jointly by eight researchers who have never met, is a tribute to the effectiveness of this forum as a vehicle for communication between diverse researchers. The ability to use an online IPA information and support site to exchange information, ask questions, and explore common experiences creates a community of researchers, fosters the spread of IPA and provides invaluable support to researchers considering using IPA. The dialogue that developed in that process laid the groundwork, and fostered the exchange of ideas that resulted in this paper. While many options were discussed for structuring this paper, ultimately we decided to make our shared practical experiences the

core of the paper, leaving behind the many interesting philosophical discussions which took place en route. We hoped in this way to address concerns that typically receive only cursory attention in published papers.

**Limitations of study & conclusion**

IPA emphasises the importance of an idiographic focus and so too this paper is idiosyncratic in its focus; it simply reflects some of the experiences of eight people who chose to use IPA as a research tool. While all contributors self-identified as IPA researchers, no attempt was made to ascertain a shared understanding about the philosophical underpinnings, or processes involved in carrying out an IPA study. As may be expected in a paper of this nature, written by multiple authors from difference disciplines, there are likely to be inconsistencies of focus, approach and writing style. Multiple drafts and extensive e-mail communication hopefully served to reduce this potential source of incoherence.

This paper represents the experiences of eight researchers many of whom were new to IPA as a research methodology. Whilst most of us were relatively novice researchers, we found the use of IPA to be a useful research methodology that enabled us to examine our chosen research interests in the necessary close detail. The majority of us intend to conduct future research using IPA as a preferred methodology. The paper illustrates the application of IPA to a wide range of topics and identifies a number of key strengths and weaknesses of IPA as a methodology. Taken together the studies support IPA as a robust qualitative methodology, while also indicating areas of concern and potential confusion, shared by researchers from diverse backgrounds.

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**Author Note**

Chris Wagstaff is a lecturer in nursing and the mental health field of practice lead at the University of Birmingham, UK. He worked clinically as a mental health nurse for 14 years before entering into academic life. He has published articles about interdisciplinary learning and is currently working on his PhD about the experience of disengagement from mental health services. He may be contacted at P52. 52 Pritchatts Rd, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, UK; Phone: 0121-415-8589; Email: c.wagstaff@bham.ac.uk.

Hyeseung Jeong is an applied linguistics PhD candidate at the University of Waikato. Her research looks at second language acquisition (SLA) in an academic context. Her central interests in SLA focus on the interface of extra-linguistic and linguistic types of knowledge, and the ways of grasping individuals' understandings of their own second language experiences and their identities. She may be contacted at jade0414@yahoo.co.kr. Maeve Nolan is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist who trained as a psychoanalyst before returning to her roots in clinical psychology. She has worked on the spinal injury programme in a rehabilitation setting for the last thirteen years. She is particularly interested in the patient experience, acquired disability, gender, pain, coping, adjustment and interdisciplinary teamwork. In 2010 Maeve completed her Doctorate at Essex University, developed an interest in qualitative methodologies and completed a thesis using IPA on which her reflections for the current article are based. She may be contacted at Maeve.Nolan@nrh.ie.

Tony Wilson (Jefffrey Cheah Institute on S.E. Asia, Sunway University, Malaysia) emigrated from exam board convening in the UK, enabling his authoring five research monographs [published by August (Malaysia), Blackwell, Hampton, Routledge, Wiley] celebrating Malaysian media consumers, underwritten philosophically by his John Logie Baird Institute, Glasgow University, Scotland PhD: *Watching Television: Hermeneutics, Reception and Popular Culture* (Polity-Blackwell, Cambridge UK and US). He may be contacted at tonywilson@yahoo.com.

Julie Tweedlie, Senior Lecturer Adult Nursing Northumbria University, RGN (Registered General Nurse)/ RM (Registered Midwife)/ ADM (Advanced Diploma In Midwifery)/ PGCEA (Post Graduate Certificate in Education of Adults)/ Bsc(Hons) Midwifery Science/Ed/ MA (Masters)  Child Protection/ Graduate Cert. Practice Development (Commendation)/ Lecturer/Practice Educator (NMC)/ Membership of Professional Bodies: Nursing and Midwifery Council, Area of Interest\Specialism: Pre-registration Nursing; Teaching and Learning; Child protection; Midwifery; Interprofessional Education; Practical Skills: Moving and Handling facilitation, Scholarly Activity:  Studying for a Professional Doctorate in Education anticipated completion September 2014. She may be contacted at julie.tweedlie@northumbria.ac.uk.

Dr. Elly Phillips is an Associate Academic in Psychology at the University of Derby, UK, although is based on the US. Her research interests are health psychology and qualitative methods. She may be contacted at e.phillips@derby.ac.uk.

Halia Senu has over 20 years' experience in both the Australian private and government sectors including telecommunications, Design & Construction, Defence and Contracts.  Halia is a Project Manager specialising in Risk Management (PhD commenced) and has implemented various Risk Tools, mentored project managers and Stream Leads through PM and Risk training. Her role with Defence Department recently included analysis of various engineering, environmental and heritage impacts to proposed changes across Victorian Military Bases. Halia has owned her own design and construction company, focusing on building projects involving environmentally friendly solutions.  Halia has university degrees in Building Design (Arch) and Masters of Applied Science in Project

Management (Eng). She holds memberships with Building Designers Association of Victoria and Master Builders Association of Victoria and is an Active member for the Planning Sub-committee. Halia is the point of contact for Australia for IPA Methods, in the Qualitative domain and coordinates monthly national Skype meetings. She may be contacted at halia.senu@wildterraindesigns.com.au.

Dr. Fiona Holland is a Senior lecturer in Psychology at the University of Derby, UK. She teaches on both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes specialising in health psychology, behavior change and qualitative research methods. Her research interests lie within health and wellbeing, with particular interest in body image/esteem and wellbeing intervention efficacy. She may be contacted at f.g.holland@derby.ac.uk.

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