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## Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Phenomenological Approach

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# Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: A Contemporary Phenomenological Approach

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## Abstract

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a contemporary qualitative research method grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The philosophical principles and rigorous methodology make this approach well suited for research in counselor education and supervision. This primer introduces counselor educators to IPA theory and methodology and discusses considerations for implementation.

**Keywords:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, qualitative research, idiography, hermeneutics, phenomenology

Qualitative methodologies are widely recognized as valuable and credible approaches for conducting empirical research in counselor education (Hays & Wood, 2011; Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a contemporary qualitative approach that is becoming more widely employed to explore questions related to counselor training (Dawson & Akhurst, 2015; Dickens, Ebrahim, & Herlihy, 2016; Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016; Osborn, West, & Nance, 2017). Grounded in principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, researchers using IPA aim to explore individuals' meaning-making related to certain significant experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The flexibility embedded throughout the approach bolsters the expansion of phenomena and prioritizes (a) diversity attached to lived experience; (b) freedom to explore context; and (c) relationship to life narratives (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Its utility operates broadly in the scope of professional counseling's prioritization of developmental, contextual, and diverse approaches to applications of counseling (Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014).

Specifically, IPA has documented research utility and application for a variety of research studies across counseling, counselor education, and supervision, including LGBTGEQ+ communities (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Farmer & Byrd, 2015), counselor education (Dickens et al., 2016; Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016), supervision (Dawson & Akhurst, 2015), and culture (Kastrani, Deliyanni, & Athanasiades, 2015). For example, Dickens et al. (2016) conducted an in-depth IPA analysis of counselor education doctoral students' experiences engaging in multiple roles and relationships, resulting in the identification of themes related to power dynamics, role confusion, and transformation. The authors' detailed analysis provided considerations for ways counselor educators can prepare and provide support for doctoral students.

Despite increasing numbers of counselor educators and doctoral students considering IPA for their studies, there are no reviews of the approach or its application within counselor education literature specifically. The aim of this article is to provide one such resource for individuals teaching qualitative methods, considering IPA as a methodological approach for studies, or reviewing IPA articles for publication.

## Theoretical Foundations

The origins of IPA are credited to Jonathan Smith, a health psychologist in the United Kingdom (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2004) sought to develop an experiential qualitative approach that honored the pluralistic roots of psychological disciplines at a time when more reductionist research methods dominated. The philosophical roots of IPA are most closely aligned with traditional phenomenology (Oxley, 2016). Broadly, phenomenological researchers seek to assess rich details of participants' ways of making meaning of particular experiences by focusing more intentionally on aspects of lived experience that frequently go unobserved or unexamined in daily life (Finlay, 2011). Phenomenology

is the most widely used qualitative approach in counselor education (Hays, et al., 2016). Thus, readers will likely be familiar with many of the core concepts and be aware that many scholars have contributed to the development and application of phenomenological thought in research (Finlay, 2011).

Finlay (2011) identified Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology as the two broadest categories of phenomenological research. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) observed that IPA integrates ideas from both traditions "resulting in a method which is descriptive because it is concerned with how things appear and letting things speak for themselves, and interpretative because it recognizes there is no such thing as an uninterpreted phenomenon" (p. 8). IPA also draws from other phenomenological frameworks, infusing the philosophical tenets of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Schleiermacher, and Gadamer to focus on (a) existential meaning; (b) the constant interaction between participant and context; and (c) the emphasis on historical, contextual, and political forces on participants (Smith et al., 2009). Involving the contributions of multiple philosophical luminaries represents an evolutionary shift, layering further depth and meaning to the hermeneutic, or interpretative lens, of phenomenological inquiry. A summary of comparisons between IPA and traditional phenomenological approaches can be found in Table 1.

Of specific note, the IPA approach extends beyond traditional phenomenology in its distinct commitment to idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Idiography can be most succinctly defined as concerned with the particular versus the general (Smith et al., 2009). Whereas traditional phenomenological approaches often emphasize the essence of a given phenomenon for a group of people, IPA is more concerned with individual perspectives by examining convergence and divergence within and across cases of participants (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the intentionality with idiography is to equally highlight and give value to each case and, subsequently, each participant. Traditional phenomenological approaches prioritize the similarities in the phenomena of interest over individual accounts, analyzing and generalizing across cases concurrently (Finlay, 2011). In IPA, researchers conduct a detailed single-case analysis for each participant before considering comparing patterns across cases. Thematically, participants can experience components of the phenomenon of interest similarly, but with radically different interpretations of a component of the phenomena. For example, two out of five participants may refer to a connection of safety in triadic supervision, but one participant relays positive notions of safety while the other participants convey negative notions or lack of safety. Participants' quotes, metaphors, and other contextualized expressions are always included in the written reports of IPA studies, which illustrate and honor the individual voices of participants. The philosophical assumptions will be further illustrated as we move to discussing IPA methodology.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Scholars have provided specific guidelines and structure for conducting IPA studies (Finlay, 2011; Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Storey, 2007). However, these guidelines are not prescriptive. Researchers are encouraged to bring their diverse perspectives and content applications to the research process while utilizing IPA principles as a launching point to coincide with the research question, research purpose, and research paradigm (e.g., critical, postmodern, feminist, social constructionist). To illustrate the application of IPA methodology within counselor education, examples from a study by Chan (2018) will be used throughout this section. The purpose of the study was to understand how queer men of color make sense of privilege and oppression in Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral programs.

### **Design**

As with all research, researchers utilizing IPA as a research method should select a topic of interest, identify a gap in the literature, and begin formulating research question(s) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that researchers should select IPA based on the epistemological nature of their research questions. Researchers should select IPA when research questions are open and exploratory and directed primarily at how participants make sense of particular experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Finlay (2011) noted that IPA questions often encourage reflection on the full experience of a phenomenon, including affective, cognitive, bodily, and behavioral components. Researchers can accomplish this task by including questions such as "How did you feel when that experience occurred?", "As you think of that experience now, what are you noticing in your body?", or "What did that experience mean to you?" in interview schedules.

Compared to traditional phenomenology, IPA questions are often more concerned with the *how* than the *what* of a given phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). For example, Dawson & Akhurst (2015) asked “How do supervisees experience the ‘news’ of an ending to supervision? How did they process this?” Additional IPA questions relevant to counselor education and supervision might be “How do counselors-in-training with trauma histories make sense of and use their own experiences when helping others?” or “How do counselor educators experience highly charged diverse identity discussions in the classroom?” The guiding research question in our case example (Chan, 2018) was “How do Queer Men of Color make sense of their experiences of privilege and oppression in counselor education doctoral programs?”

Once appropriate research questions have been identified, the next step is finding research participants that can meaningfully relate to and give insight into the experience of interest to the researchers (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The more the experience matters to the participants, the more likely they will provide rich data. Consistent with the idiographic nature of IPA, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) recommended small sample sizes of relatively homogeneous participants, on average 5-10 participants. Researchers should consider the depth of individual cases and pragmatic limitations, such as time and resources when deciding on sample size (Rubel & Okech, 2017). In the case of Chan’s (2018) study, potential participants had to identify as being (1) a doctoral student in a Counselor Education and Supervision program, (2) male, (3) a member of historically marginalized or minority group, and (4) as having, at least, one experience of privilege and, at least, one experience of oppression in the doctoral program. A total of 3 individuals participated in the study.

The most common form of data collection in IPA is the semi-structured individual interview (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, 2009). This approach is generally preferred because it allows researchers to engage in real-time in-depth conversations with participants and remains consistent with the idiographic commitments of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Semi-structured interviews also allow the opportunity to build rapport with research participants and provide encouragement for meaningful reflection and sharing (Rubel & Okech, 2017). There is not a prescriptive number of interviews recommended in IPA, but multiple interviews are sometimes necessary to build a relationship between the researcher and research participant when the topic is sensitive or personal in nature (Finlay, 2011). For instance, a research study related to supervisors’ lived experiences of vicarious trauma from supervisees entails a complexity that may require two 60-minute interviews with each participant.

There is freedom for data collection creativity with IPA, moving it beyond semi-structured interviews. This freedom should still, however, provide an opportunity to obtain in-depth personal accounts of phenomena (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Some researchers conducting IPA studies have used diaries and focus groups to collect data (Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Oxley, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Palmer, Larkin, deVisser, and Fadden (2010) published a guide to integrating focus group data in IPA studies. They noted that although focus groups may not be the most common data collection method in IPA, they can be useful and carried out in a manner that remains true to IPA’s core epistemological principles. Researchers using focus groups may find it challenging, however, to exemplify convergence and divergence across a sample, thus staying consistent with idiographic principles.

Chan (2018) integrated the Seidman (2013) 90-minute three-interview series to explore three different areas of lived experience, including (a) preliminary understandings and past life with the phenomenon; (b) current life and experience with the phenomenon; and (c) interpretations and meaning-making. Chan (2018) chose this approach to semi-structured interviewing because of the complex nature of the phenomena under investigation (e.g., identification and interpretation of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality) and the need to unpack these interrelated experiences in an intentional way over time and within the context of the researcher-research participant relationship. This example represents one of the many ways IPA researchers can creatively and flexibly approach data collection.

### **Analysis**

Although there is no one “right” way to conduct data analysis within the IPA framework, all IPA studies share the same analytic focus, namely attention to patterns in participants’ experiences, the ways in which they make meaning of those experiences, and interpreting those experiences within social and theoretical contexts (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). To align fully with IPA’s idiographic nature, each case is examined independently and thoroughly for themes before moving on to explore patterns between cases. As already indicated, IPA studies also prioritize an examination of convergence and divergence, illuminating ways in which participants’ perceptions of the experience are similar and different (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For example, Chan (2018) found that all participants referenced and reflected on their experiences of maleness (convergence), but that the degree to which maleness was

experienced as a privilege differed (divergence). Further, all participants discussed ways in which their past and current experiences were motivating future action (convergence), but the nature of that action varied from choosing to not go into an academic career in counselor education because of their experiences to choosing to go into an academic career in counselor education with the specific intent of being different and providing more validating and positive experiences for students who identify in similar ways (divergence).

Analysis in IPA can be divided into two levels or phases (Finlay, 2011). Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) stated that the aim in the initial phase of IPA analysis, referred to as first-order analysis, is to develop a descriptive account of phenomena through the eyes of participants. The focus at this stage is to understand what matters to the participants, with attention to specific events, particular relationships, core values, and so forth (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Researchers record exploratory comments, identifying participants' objective comments, emotional expressions, and any notable linguistic patterns (e.g., pauses, metaphors, tone, etc.). If researchers were to stop at this point in the analysis phase, the outcome might look very similar to a transcendental phenomenal research product.

In second-order analysis, researchers move beyond pure description toward interpretation, exploring the meaning participants give to aspects of their stories (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Researchers aim to take a wider lens, considering the initial description within societal, cultural, and theoretical frameworks. It is during this stage of the analysis that IPA researchers conduct a double hermeneutic, attempting to make sense of participants making sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Smith and Osborn (2008) suggested researchers ask themselves "What is the person trying to achieve here," "Is there something leaking out here that wasn't intended," and "Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?" as examples of ways researchers can explore the interpretative component of participants' expressions. Smith (2004) stressed that such interpretations are always speculative and should be presented in such a manner. The following excerpt from Chan's (2018) study exemplifies the interweaving of first and second-order analysis. Note that the first part of the paragraph focuses on descriptive aspects of the participants' stories, whereas the second part of the paragraph extends the descriptions to include the researchers' interpretative theoretical lens (p.157):

The participants observed the challenges and difficulties inherent in making sense of privilege and identifying how privilege emerges in complex systems. In particular examples, participants observed that privilege fostered a position and culture of safety and power. As participants observed other individuals' actions and their own personal experiences, they noted the challenges of discerning privilege and how it affects their relationships with other individuals and communities. In recognition of this pattern, participants also identified the problematic mechanism of conforming to the system defined by power—both by individuals and groups historically governing power. Participants felt forced to "fake" and conform to power in order to succeed and achieve in systems that historically marginalized their intersections of social identities. Broadening the scope of this interpretation, participants recognized the issue of conformity ascribed to standards established and maintained by historically privileged identities and majority groups.

Finlay (2011) synthesized common strategies and steps in IPA (p. 142):

1. Reading and re-reading – immersing oneself in the original data. Initial noting – free association and exploring semantic content (e.g., writing notes in the margin)
2. Developing emergent themes – focus on chunks of transcript and analysis of notes made into themes
3. Searching for connections across emergent themes – abstracting and integrating themes
4. Moving to the next case – trying to bracket previous themes and keep open-minded in order to do justice to the individuality of each new case
5. Looking for patterns across cases – finding patterns of shared higher order qualities across cases, noting idiosyncratic instances

6. Taking interpretations to deeper levels – deepening the analysis by utilizing metaphors and temporal referents, and by importing other theories as a lens through which to view the analysis.

Attention to researcher reflexivity is important throughout the analysis process (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Researchers should reflect on their emotional reactions as they read participants' stories by taking notes and talking with research team members. Researchers should also document ideas about potential themes and initial connections to theoretical principles or constructs (Oxley, 2016). Larkin and Thompson (2011) stressed the value of being open to and acknowledging preconceptions, as well as documenting them in an intentional and consistent manner. A researcher may strategize this process by utilizing analytic memos or a reflexive journal to analyze biases, personal reactions, and influence on the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). For example, as a first step to approaching data, researchers may engage in a reflexivity read of the data utilizing free coding, giving voice to assumptions and automatic responses (Farmer, 2015). Chan (2018) engaged in reflexive journaling and consultation throughout the research process to reflect on positionality, as well as emotional and intellectual reactions to participants' experiences.

Researchers using IPA illustrate the descriptive and interpretative findings in a final research report or scholarly article (Smith et al., 2009). Reports of IPA studies often include charts, tables, and diagrams illustrating themes and processes. Consistent with IPA's idiographic intention, researchers should include extensive raw data (e.g., excerpts and quotes) from participants within article texts as examples of themes or interpretative frameworks (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Expanding with more extensive excerpts further aids researchers in more effectively meeting the principle of exemplifying the interpretative component (Smith, 2011).

In the case of Chan's (2018), six super-ordinate themes were described and exemplified through participants' quotes and theoretical literature: (1) Multiple Dimensions of Privilege; (2) Multiple Dimensions of Oppression; (3) Context/System; (4) Complexities of Intersections; (5) Critical Incidents/Conflict; and (6) Congruity/Change for the Future.

### **Assessing Quality**

Smith (2011) developed an IPA-specific tool for assessing trustworthiness in IPA studies, titled the *IPA Quality Evaluation Guide*. In this guide, Smith labeled IPA work as either acceptable, unacceptable, or good and detailed criteria specific to each category. To summarize, high quality IPA research must first adhere to the three theoretical principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2011). The focus of the research should be clear and align with IPA values. Smith et al. (2009) indicated that participants should be selected for their ability to richly describe the given phenomenon under investigation and analysis of participants' experiences should be detailed, nuanced, and include both descriptive and interpretative levels of analysis. Researchers should not select participants based on an effort to reach a pre-determined sample size or for the purposes of generalizability; the idea of less is more predominates in IPA work (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Smith et al. (2009) also discussed the importance of researchers developing rapport with participants and engaging in skillful and respectful interviewing. In adherence with these guidelines, researchers should ensure that interviewers are sufficiently trained and demonstrate competence in their skills before progressing to direct interactions with research participants. We recommend interviewers record pilot interviews using the interview schedule and receive feedback on their practice before conducting real interviews in the field.

In the next phases of the research, analyzing the data, researchers must demonstrate "interpretative flair" (Smith, 2011, p. 23), as evidenced by the inclusion of interpretative comments in the discussion of each theme. Researchers should select themes based on prevalence and relevance and should be transparent about decision making throughout the analytic process. As already discussed and exemplified, a balance of convergence and divergence should be represented in the findings. Data should be presented in an organized and transparent manner, with attention to detail and credibility (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). Poor quality IPA research is often deemed inadequate because the themes are too superficial and/or are not adequately supported through participant accounts (Smith, 2011). Perhaps least objective but still important, Smith (2011) emphasized that good IPA research should present interesting and enlightening findings.

## Implementing IPA in Counselor Education

With an emphasis on personal meaning making and opportunities for dynamic engagement between the researcher and research participant, the methodology seems well-suited for research in counselor education. IPA methods are pragmatic and flexible, making it relevant for researchers of varying levels of experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Finlay, 2011). Novice researchers, such as doctoral students conducting dissertation studies, can use detailed data collection guidelines and data analysis steps (e.g., Smith et al., 2009) to structure their work. Experienced scholars can use IPA in a more creative fashion, pushing the boundaries of current applications of the approach. Additionally, Larkin and Thompson (2011) remarked on the usefulness of IPA for re-evaluating and opening up dialogue around existing theories. Consistent with social justice praxis, IPA garners possibilities for explicating social context and systemic influences impacting students and supervisees. Integrating an IPA approach can provide extended latitude for investigating a variety of barriers influencing student and supervisee success with their own clients and students.

The reality of such experiential research, however, is that it can be difficult to do well. The first trial researchers may face when wanting to use IPA is the challenge of time (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers new to IPA, such as doctoral students, must spend time learning the assumptions, vocabulary, and processes that underlie the approach. Unfortunately, in-person training opportunities are not yet readily available in the United States. There are print (textbooks, journal articles) and web-based resources (e.g., listservers, blogs) available to individuals interested in learning more about the approach, although these resources are not situated within counselor education and thus the ideas and procedures must be translated to fit the unique perspectives and needs of our discipline. We hope this article, with counselor education and supervision-specific examples, will help readers get a sense of that translation process. There are also communication networks among IPA researchers in the United States that individuals can connect with for mentoring and support. The leading IPA website, <http://www.ipa.bbk.ac.uk/>, is the best place to start when searching for IPA resources.

Within counselor education specifically, qualitative approaches are often not as valued in practice or represented in publication or curriculum offerings (Hansen, 2012). Hays et al (2016) reviewed articles published in the American Counseling Association flagship journal, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, between 1999-2014 and found only 63 published qualitative articles compared to 251 quantitative articles. Hansen (2012) attributed the imbalance to a general trend away from humanistic principles that honor human complexity and multiplicity of perspectives toward nomothetic principles that strive for reductionist explanations and singular truths. Based on our review of select program offerings, when qualitative courses are included in the curriculum, they are most frequently survey courses, providing an overview of major theoretical frameworks (e.g., queer, critical race theory, postmodern, postpositivist) and methodologies (e.g., phenomenology, grounded theory), but not covering any single approach in great depth. As such, students wishing to learn IPA in their counseling programs and/or possibly conduct an IPA study for dissertation research, will likely have to devote extra time to an independent study or to seeking out extracurricular experiences.

In addition to the time it takes to learn IPA, it also takes a substantial amount of time to conduct an IPA study (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith, 2011). Smith et al. (2009) stressed that rigorous IPA research requires researchers to plan, execute, reflect, and engage in dialogue throughout the research process. Researchers must find participants that can give a rich account of their experiences and engage in an intensive analysis that includes descriptive and interpretative levels of examination. Smith et al. (2009) suggested it should take about two months of full-time work to analyze three cases; this estimate does not include steps leading up to the analysis (e.g., planning the project, collecting the data) or the steps following analysis (e.g., writing up the report). Given external pressures to produce as much as possible, as quickly as possible, researchers may struggle with allowing themselves the necessary time to thoroughly engage in the IPA research process in a high-quality manner. Doctoral students in particular, often with objective graduation deadlines, are at risk for rushing IPA studies.

Researchers may also face challenges in publishing IPA projects. Given that IPA is relatively new to the counseling field, journal reviewers may not be familiar with the best practices in IPA research, leading to faulty assumptions or judgments. For example, a reviewer may have the idea that greater participant numbers are better and recommend rejecting the manuscript based on that belief. The idiographic nature of IPA, however, often necessitates and validates the use of a small, homogenous sample (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2011). Reviewers may also incorrectly apply validity criteria from other approaches (e.g., grounded theory, traditional phenomenological approaches) to IPA,

leading to faulty evaluations of trustworthiness. For example, a reviewer may request that the researchers provide evidence of saturation, although saturation is not part of the typical IPA data collection and analysis process (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Finally, a challenge discussed readily in literature describing and critiquing IPA research is the difficulty of extending beyond the basic descriptive level of analysis (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin et al. 2006). Applying various levels of interpretation in the IPA analysis process is one of the aspects that sets the approach apart from some other qualitative methods; however, IPA researchers still sometimes struggle to adequately apply a meaningful and contextualized interpretative lens during data analysis resulting in studies that lack depth (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Applying an interpretative lens requires researchers to adequately self-reflect on assumptions and biases and sufficiently identify and integrate relevant theory. Researchers' level of experience and the allotted time to conduct the research can significantly impact the quality of these processes and thus the quality of resulting interpretations. Smith et al. (2009) provided suggestions for applying deeper levels of interpretative analysis and Smith (2011) offered a list and description of published IPA studies that meet criteria for high quality interpretative analysis. Researchers should review both resources to ensure their studies or the studies they are reviewing adequately include interpretative commentaries in the description of themes.

Despite the many obstacles researchers may face when conducting high quality IPA studies within counselor education, there is reason for hope that the challenges can be overcome. As noted at the beginning of this article, publication of IPA articles is increasing in counseling journals, meaning that editors and reviewers are recognizing the validity of the approach. Such publications also mean that there are more researchers familiar with the approach that may be available for consultation and/or mentorship in creating and implementing IPA projects. Regarding the challenges of time and effort, counselor educators, doctoral students, and supervisors may have an advantage, just by the nature of their training as counselors. Counselors have many skills that transfer easily into IPA research work (Finlay, 2011). Smith et al. (2009) discussed the importance of organization, flexibility, and sensitivity. Counselors learn organization from the beginning of their field work, adhering to ethical and legal requirements for keeping clinical notes, writing treatment plans, and providing summaries and other treatment documentation to various parties when requested. Counselors also learn to embrace flexibility and sensitivity early in their training, responding to the often unique and unexpected needs of individuals within the counseling relationship. Finlay (2011) identified additional skills shared by counselors and IPA researchers, including interviewing, analyzing, reflecting, inferring, and communicating a sense of positive regard. Counselors know how to build trust and rapport, engage in active listening, and trust the unfolding nature of sharing one's narrative (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Counselors are also familiar with approaching experiences with open and clear attitudes, with anticipation but without expectation (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, although learning IPA and applying the approach with fidelity will still take some additional time and effort, counselor educators and supervisors likely already possess many of the skills essential in IPA.

### **Conclusion**

The future of IPA in counselor education research is promising. The IPA approach combines the value of rich descriptive individual accounts with the usefulness of interpretive hermeneutic thought (Smith et al., 2009). The methodology provides a structured framework and clear application guidelines that lend themselves to rigorous exploration of meaningful topics while also allowing for ample flexibility to exhaust divergent experiences and interpretations from participants. The approach can be used to expand more comprehensively on previously investigated phenomena or explore completely novel areas of inquiry. Although IPA shares many of the same philosophical foundations as traditional phenomenological approaches, it distinguishes itself most notably in its focus on idiography. Researchers desiring in-depth explorations of convergence and divergence within individual participants' meaning making may find the approach particularly useful.

In this article, we aimed to cover fundamental principles, key analytical factors, and specific considerations for implementing IPA in counselor education. We acknowledge, however, that this introduction is just skimming the surface of an approach that has deep philosophical roots and dynamic analytic processes. As a next step, researchers interested in learning more about IPA are encouraged to read Smith et al.'s (2009) seminal text on the approach and to seek consultation from experienced IPA researchers within counselor education.



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**Table 1.** Comparing Three Phenomenological Approaches to Qualitative Inquiry

	<b>IPA</b>	<b>Transcendental</b>	<b>Hermeneutic</b>
<b>History</b>	Development of an experiential qualitative approach grounded in health psychology (Smith et al., 2009); focus on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography	Application of phenomenological philosophy to the study of human consciousness (Husserl, 1970)	Understanding ancient texts; emphasis on existential philosophy (Heidegger, 1962)
<b>Philosophy</b>	Understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences is an interpretative activity best accomplished through the detailed examination of particular cases within phenomena of interest.	There exists an essential, perceived reality with common features that can be identified through the suspension of personal experience.	Suspension of a personal lens is not possible; interpretation is inevitable and even necessary to get beneath the subjective experience.
<b>Goal</b>	To make sense of the participants making sense of an experience (double hermeneutic).	To uncover and describe essences of phenomena that have not been previously conceptualized.	To describe the meaning of the lived, embodied experience of a phenomenon.
<b>Methodology</b> Formulating a RQ	"How does [a particular person] in [a particular context] experience [a particular phenomenon]?"	"What is the essential structure of [the phenomenon of interest]?"	"What is the lived experience of [the phenomenon of interest]?"
<b>Participants</b>	Individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest aimed at small and relatively homogeneous sample.	Individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest.	Individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest.
<b>Data Collection</b>	Semi-structured interviews most common; researcher may use theoretical framework and person-of-the researcher to focus the inquiry and make decisions about research process (sample, subjects, RQs).	Semi-structured interviews most common; researcher brackets personal beliefs, values, knowledge in an effort to get at descriptions of a particular phenomenon; member checks for accuracy.	Semi-structured interviews most common; researcher may use theoretical framework and person-of-the researcher to focus the inquiry and make decisions about research process (sample, subjects, RQs).

**Analytic Methods**

Process of coding, sorting, identifying themes and relationships, and drawing conclusions

In-depth single case analysis to identify emergent themes, leading to identification of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes, followed by cross-case analyses. Initial analysis descriptive; secondary level of analysis interpretative.

Identify descriptions of the phenomenon; cluster into discrete categories (meaning units); taken together, these describe the "essence" or core commonality and structure of the experience.

No identified method; focus on application of the hermeneutic circle leading to identification of themes.

Role of analyst's views

Preconceptions of the researcher are recorded via reflexive journal, reflexive memos, reflexivity read of data to illuminate and reflect upon; analyst is central to the interpretative process.

Bracket views as a way to suspend them from influencing analysis

Preconceptions of the researcher are recorded and made explicit; Meaning derived from analysis are a blend of the meanings of both the participants and researcher.

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*Note.* Table 1 explicates a comparison of three phenomenological approaches to identify nuances across history, philosophical influences, and procedures for data collection and data analysis. Chart information for transcendental phenomenology originates from Lopez and Willis (2004) and Starks and Trinidad (2007). Chart information for IPA derives from Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and Larkin and Thompson (2011). Chart information for hermeneutic phenomenology originates from Lopez and Willis (2004); Reiners (2012); and Willig and Billin (2012).