Ontology to Outcome: A critical analysis of psychological research methodologies

Abstract

This paper explores fundamental tenets that underpin knowledge production in clinical psychology with a specific critical focus on interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Citation

Full-Text

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SUMMARY: This paper explores fundamental tenets that underpin knowledge production in clinical psychology with a specific critical focus on interpretative phenomenological analysis.

KEY WORDS: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, knowledge production, clinical psychology

Although clinical psychologists are chiefly concerned with the application of psychological research in the workplace, they also learn doctoral level research skills. They are therefore in a rare position, as many non-clinical psychologists are involved purely in research. Clinical psychologists witness the gap between theory and application on a daily basis. Theoretical models occupy every place on a spectrum ranging from the beauty of simplicity to the deeply complex. What they all share is a tendency to be seriously tested in the workplace. In effect, it is perhaps paradoxical that psychology is relatively straightforward until you bring a human being into the mix. The types of knowledge that are constructed in psychological research are all reliant on some type of ontology and episteme. The validity claimed for that knowledge is restricted by the axioms of its constitution. This paper addresses these issues by paying particular attention to critical reflexion in the qualitative research process.

An exploration of the ontology and epistemology that informs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) helps illustrate how fundamental postulates at a theoretical level are operationalised to

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produce 'real world' research for clinical application. An example of the processes involved is provided alongside a critique of IPA. Consequently, recommendations for alterations to the analytical process are offered.

Model development

Just as psychiatry was influenced in its conceptualisation of mental illness by a motivation to be accepted by the medical fraternity, so clinical psychology focused its attentions on positivist research processes that resulted in clinical application dominated by Behaviourist and Cognitive psychology (Bentall, 2010). Consequently, the early development of the identity of clinical psychologists can be conceptualised as situated within a context of positivist scientific understanding. The credence afforded to Random Controlled Trials (RCTs) was strongly associated with positivism and for many years had relegated the value of qualitative research. This situation continues e.g., the British Journal of Clinical Psychology's publication of qualitative research in the last decade was less than that found in a sample of key medical and social science databases – 2-3% compared to 6-7%.

What constitutes a psychological process is open to definition, and is really determined by research aims and the episteme that informs its methodology. For example, on one side of a psychological research/episteme continuum neuropsychological research could be placed, as it is generally concerned with cognitive explanations of psychological processes and possible neural correlates (Valencia and Delgado, 2013). Critical social psychological research could be placed opposite as it adopts the view of individuals primarily determined through interaction with their environment and context (Hepburn, 2003). Somewhere in the middle of the continuum would lie social cognitive psychology – a quantitative approach that targets the impact of social factors on individual psychology. Neuropsychology develops its knowledge through primarily statistical methodology and a neo-positivist paradigm; critical social psychology utilises primarily qualitative methodologies and interpretative models of understanding.

The hierarchy of evidence is primarily informed by the perceived validity of research articles. Historically, qualitative research has not been given the same weight as quantitative research as it is thought to lack objectivity – which it does within a dominant positivist narrative. Most qualitative approaches do not lay claim to objectivity (Grounded theory may be an exception), but are specifically designed to explore subjectivity. In fact it could be argued that qualitative approaches are more valid than quantitative as they address subjectivity through a research lens defined by its reflexivity. The validity of a paper is itself judged through a specific episteme and so the extent of its validity is determined by the process of its construction and the value attributed to specific qualities. Perhaps

most telling is that qualitative approaches openly recognise and address this, but very often quantitative approaches do not. Quantitative approaches in psychology, rather ironically, lose claims to validity through their adherence to a positivist paradigm, albeit neo-positivist. Consequently, non-material 'objects' inadvertently become reified, and psychological constructs (i.e., social constructs) become concrete. 'Mind' is constructed as a scientific object through the observation of people's behavior and self-reports communicated through language; from this inferences are made about the phenomenon of mind. Parallels can be drawn from the natural sciences: the qualities of gravity and strong and weak nuclear forces are inferred from the observation of objects and particles. The observation of behavior from which mental processes are inferred is deemed objective and the theory of knowledge that states 'percepts without concepts are blind' is conveniently overlooked (Harre, 2005 p. 15). This claim for an empirical objectivity is invalid because there has been no direct experience of the phenomena in question. Consequently, claims for causal links and the laws that are established as a result, are also invalid.

The context in which psychological research grew was dominated by a positivist episteme and this domination is still clear. Psychology was concerned with patterns of behaviour, causal relationships, objectivity and prediction. The fact that objectivity in psychology was usually based on inference and not on direct observation did not seem to be an issue for many. Furthermore, unlike psychology, units of analysis in the natural sciences are often not affected by context – a brick is a brick in Japan or Brazil. Therefore *empirical* claims in mainstream psychology were made about 'objects' that have no discernible material substance, are context dependent, and are not directly observed. The value placed on objectivity can be directly linked to the historical dominance of the natural sciences and psychology's attempt to be accepted in to that fraternity (Bentall, 2010). However, there is a school of thought that believes the hierarchy of evidence should be determined by methodologies that best answer a research question (Avyard, 2007).

A claim of many qualitative authors in psychology is that qualitative designs better address the position and concerns of service users (Banister, Burman, Parker, Maye & Tindall, 1994). It could be argued from this that the choice of methodology is an ethical issue as the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) states that respect for the knowledge and opinion of service users is a central tenet of clinical practice. Also, the Department of Health (DH, 2007) highlights the importance of service user (and carer) inclusion in service development. The humanistic element of psychological research may be reduced if systems of control, management and ultimately risk aversion continue to develop that reflect a social context of increasing health and safety controls, which in turn are influenced by the prospect of accountability and litigation.

Epistemological Reflexivity

In order to understand the some of the links between ontology and outcome in research IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) is now considered. IPA is a qualitative research method that takes data, usually from semi-structured interviews, and identifies what is shared and what is particular to the participants about a meaningful experience. As the name suggests, the processes of interpretation for the participant *and* the researcher are key to this approach. Research outcomes are conceptualised as the product of a double hermeneutic circle with the interpretation of the participants' experience being interpreted by the researcher. Therefore the *processes* (the 'how') of interpretation are essential to the method. The epistemology that underpins IPA is Critical Realism. Strictly speaking, Critical Realism is a philosophy of ontology, but also informs how a theoretical view of reality can be actualised, and so takes an epistemological position that is useful in research (Bhaskar, 2008). Critical Realism's position is that the material world does exist, but the processes by which we understand it –perception and language – are more like mapping tools than direct representations and so are subject to variation. Therefore the meanings ascribed to material objects of experience are an interpretation of that experience. It follows from this that IPA simultaneously adopts a relativist ontology and a Critical Realist epistemology (Willig, 2008). Relativist because it recognises the varied and idiographic nature of existence; realist because it accepts that there is an external reality. Bhaskar posited that structures may exist that cannot be realised, therefore cause/effect relationships, particularly in the study of humans – in the social sciences – are insufficient as social events are too multi-directional and fluid to be understood so simply. This focus on how experience is interpreted is integral to interpretative phenomenological analysis – its importance reflected in the name.

IPA has been heavily critiqued by some leading phenomenologists. Giorgi (2010) challenged the scientific credentials of IPA. This was chiefly concerned with IPA's claims to be phenomenological. Giorgi outlines in detail how IPA fails to address key concepts in phenomenological philosophy. He also contends that IPA fails to provide a coherent and systematic method of enquiry, and so fails to provide a methodology that is replicable. Smith (2010) defends IPA by highlighting that it is a qualitative approach and so replicability is not a key criterion. A lengthy response from Giorgi (2011) follows in which he painstakingly lays out the philosophical phenomenological method, particularly the phenomenological reduction. In doing so he somewhat misses the point of what Smith et al. are trying to do. There is no claim for phenomenological reduction by IPA authors. In operationalising an interpretative phenomenological approach the philosophical elements of phenomenology cannot be fully adhered to.

Giorgi (2010; 2011) does make some valid points that address some of the difficulties in operationalising the philosophical foundations of IPA. Most pertinent is the issue of data gathering and analysis. To what extent authors should try to adopt some version of a phenomenological reduction is still not clear. Smith et al (2009) provide theoretical background and procedures for IPA method, but the finer details of reflexive analytical process are not considered. Also, the word count for many journals does not allow for a detailed consideration of the processes involved in research method. Consequently many IPA papers contain only a brief paragraph outlining reflexive processes.

Theoretical Plurality and Reflexive Analysis

The author's empirical research process was a position taken during the gathering of data for an IPA study of the experience of being assessed and detained under the Mental Health Act. This process incorporated theory from Phenomenology, Attachment therapy, Mindfulness and Psychoanalysis. The phenomenological attitude (Finlay, 2008) adopted during the interview process was also informed by the concept of the Mindful Self (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), and countertransference from psychoanalysis (Lemma, 2003). What these approaches all have in common is a development of awareness – either of emotions, unconscious processes, thoughts, or presuppositions, or the Self; the focus of the approach being dependent on the philosophy that informs it. For instance, the Buddhist teaching that informs Mindfulness posits a universal self that can be conceptualised as the attention that manifests when the author tries to identify who/what it is that is thinking about thinking about thinking: consciousness. This takes the author one step beyond meta-cognition and is a useful position to consider when attempting the phenomenological attitude. Therefore, multiple psychotherapeutic techniques as outlined by Wallin (2007) – utilised in order to be more present for the client – can also be adopted in the research interviews as tools that enable greater reflexivity. Reflexivity, a difficult concept to apply in the interview setting, becomes through practice a process that is more automatic in function – analogous to driving a car where the higher functions of the conscious mind and attention are initially employed to achieve a novel task. Through practice the conscious focus is replaced by more automatic processes that enable the author to practice reflexion in action.

Fortuitously, Mindfulness had been practised by the author for three years prior to the research taking place. The practice of focusing attention, and exploring thoughts and feelings that interrupt focus in a non-judgemental way, promotes the ability to take an outsider view of the self. In effect consciousness interrogates consciousness. This enables an extra level of reflexivity that moves beyond thinking about thinking (reflection), or even beyond the awareness of meta-cognition as contextual and reciprocal (reflexion).

The Analysis

IPA research demands a reflexive approach but does not provide a clear account of how to be reflexive. Research outcomes are presented as participant interpretations of specific experiences, which in turn are interpreted by the author: the double hermeneutic circle (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Therefore, a degree of latitude is afforded to the IPA researcher regarding their approach to adopting a reflexive attitude. The analysis presented below primarily adopted a phenomenological psychological attitude (Finlay, 2008) mediated by the practice of Mindfulness. The purpose of this was to ensure a sincere attempt was made to address reflexive issues and so increase the depth of analyses. This paper contends that IPA cannot make claims for uncovering elements of phenomena – the subtle difference from phenomenological psychology being that the elements are recognised as a shared interpretation within a social cognition framework rather than the essence of the phenomenon itself – without providing clearer guidance on how the uncovering is to be achieved.

The examples given below are not presented as an account of how to ensure reflexivity. Rather, they are illustrative of the *processes* involved in an attempt to attain an element of reflexivity. By providing this account the author aimed to address some of Giorgi's (2010; 2011) critique of IPA regarding a lack of method exposition.

Participants

Seven participants were interviewed. The account below provides a sample of some of the more salient issues regarding reflexivity for two participants: Callum and Mark.

Pre-reflexion

Prior to the interview external pressures, expectations, hopes, belief systems and possible biases were all considered in order to pre-empt reflexive issues. The demands of the doctorate were experienced as exerting pressure on the need to recruit participants for research. The expectation was that the participant – Callum – would attend though there was considerable anxiety that he may cancel. It was hoped that he would provide rich data for analysis. The author believed that there were some existing problems with detaining people. These were chiefly concerned with balancing issues of managing risk and ensuring appropriate liberty. Reflecting on this it was realised, perhaps for the first time, that the ethical issues associated with detaining people under the Mental Health Act could never be fully resolved. This informed a more balanced approach to understanding what might be conveyed during the interview. The issue that had existed was concerned

with the use of detention as a tool - one that exerted power through seemingly benevolent systems, which were ultimately structured through the dominant narrative of reason and normality (Foucault, 1961/2006).

Next, a ten minute Mindfulness exercise was used prior to the interview in order to focus attention on anything that appeared to be vying for prominence e.g., an image of a blank canvas was brought into attention with a blank face representing the participant at its centre. Thoughts were then attended to as they entered consciousness, not judged or valued, but observed, explored and then allowed to dissipate. The main content of these were concerned with mental health treatment and violent offending. It is likely that the latter was associated with the author's involvement in a Mindfulness group on a forensic placement. However, Callum's care coordinator had provided some background on him, and this had included a violent past. An underlying tension was identified. By reflecting on the likelihood of any real risk, any processes to consider managing it, and the likelihood of challenging behavior at the interview, it was possible to reduce tension. This increased the probability of being able to conduct the interview in a calm, boundaried manner that would in turn reduce the probability of the participant picking up on unconscious cues, which in turn may make them more defensive. This was an example of addressing a reflexive issue associated with transference and countertransference.

Reflexion in action

Callum's description of his psychological distress was very similar to aspects of the author's personal experience of distress a decade earlier: the idea of having no knowledge or insight into what was happening and how terrifying the experience could be. By recognising this during the interview it was possible to partially bracket some of the emotions and assumptions associated with this experience in order to better enter Callum's life-world. This affected the types of questions asked, the weight given to the responses, and the amount of time spent on the issue. Therefore, reflexive awareness of presuppositions developed through the author's previous experience of psychological distress affected the interview process. This in turn affected Callum's responses; whose own presuppositions were influenced by the experience of the interview and the type of questions asked. The reflexive processes of the double-hermeneutic circle involved in the discussion were made evident, altered and ultimately employed to attempt a more 'objective' rendering of Callum's experience.

Two recurring metaphors in Callum's interview were concerned with him feeling 'like a little kid' during the Mental Health Act assessment, and the belief that he had to 'wear a mask' in front of mental health professionals in order to ensure being discharged from care. Similar metaphors had been used in a previous

interview with Mark, albeit in a slightly different way – in Mark's interview he had referred to feeling 'like a child' and also the importance of knowing the 'best way to play it' in order to expedite his discharge. Knowing that these differences may be important allowed the author to explore the metaphors to determine what their specific meaning was for Callum and Mark. This helped address the idiographic focus of IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) that aims to uncover specific detail about individual experience – in turn this added depth to the analysis that followed. For Callum, the little kid metaphor was associated with thoughts of being guilty of doing something wrong. Mark had used the metaphor primarily to communicate a sense of lost agency in his adult life. These different interpretations informed different sub-themes in the analysis. Callum's was concerned with how the emotion of guilt impacted on his interpretation of the assessment, which he viewed as a type of interrogation; Mark's was concerned with the need for a secure base. Without reflecting on this in action, the questions asked may have been based on presuppositions generated by the previous interview i.e., explored feelings of guilt. Conversely, the metaphors concerned with wearing 'masks' and knowing how to 'play it' were interpreted as different ways of expressing the same thing: the need for pretence in order to ensure discharge from a psychiatric unit.

Towards critical realism

The terms 'critical' and 'realism' were found to be appropriate to define the type of knowledge produced in an IPA. The critical elements of the analysis were defined by idiographic evidence and divergence of participant accounts. The realist elements were more descriptive parts of the analysis and defined by convergence of participant accounts. IPA was therefore able to simultaneously demonstrate the subjective nature of experience and the commonalities within that experience that provide a tantalising idea of what reality may be like. It can be concluded from this that IPA provides a true reflection of the epistemology it claims to utilise. Also, the relativist ontological position adopted by IPA is upheld, as although it is recognised that a reality exists, the idiographic focus of IPA ensures that the subjective quality of perception is never omitted and that objects are only qualified as they *appear to us* and not *as they are*.

Final Reflection

There is a need to go beyond the text, back to the preverbal, in order to best uncover the experience that has manifested in the language of the participant. Only then can there be a full engagement with the text, a rediscovering of words and context, and the multiple possible meanings they convey. The experience of being assessed and detained under the Mental Health Act was, for the participants in this study, a visceral and often life changing experience. The language that conveys

this experience must be deconstructed, stripped down to its fundamentals, and then reformed in a psychological interpretation that is always mindful of the transformative nature of interpretation. IPA, not without its limitations, provides a suitable vehicle to achieve this though the reflexive processes of analysis are not adequately addressed in its key theoretical texts.

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