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What about the method of data collection? The vast majority of IPA studies have been conducted on data obtained from **semi-structured interviews** and this form of data collection might be considered the exemplary one for this type of research. The advantage of semi-structured interviewing for IPA is that the researcher is, in real time, in a position to follow up interesting and important issues that come up during the interview. However, it is important not to be doctrinaire about this. It is possible to collect rich verbal accounts by other means. For example, participants can be asked to write autobiographical or other personal accounts or to keep diaries for a period of time. The first author used all these forms of data collection during a study of the transition to motherhood and the diaries in particular were an important source for the analysis (Smith, 1999).

Semi-structured interviewing

The continuum of interviewing styles

Given that most IPA studies at present use one-to-one semi-structured interviewing, we will concentrate on the practicalities of this form of data collection here. However, it is also possible to conduct interviews with groups of participants, although this 'focus group' approach tends not to be used in IPA work because of the difficulty in tracking individual meaning-making in group interviews (for more on focus group interviewing, see Cronin, 2001; Millward, 2006). While it is probably obvious that semi-structured interviewing lies on a continuum from unstructured to structured, just what people mean by these terms can vary considerably. Therefore to assist in understanding the particular features of what IPA means by 'semi-structured', we will contrast it with structured interviewing.

The structured interview shares much of the rationale of the psychological experiment. Generally the investigator decides in advance exactly what constitutes the required data. Sometimes the investigator will provide the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from and the questions are constructed in such a way as to elicit answers corresponding to and easily contained within predetermined categories which can then be numerically analysed. In other cases the respondent is allowed a free response which can then be categorized subsequently. In order to enhance reliability, the interviewer is

supposed to stick closely to the interview schedule and behave with as little variation as possible between interviews. While the structured interview offers maximal control to the investigator, the format clearly puts considerable constraints on the encounter between researcher and participant.

With semi-structured interviews, the investigator will have a set of questions on a schedule but the interview will be *guided* by the schedule rather than dictated by it, so the order of asking questions is less important. The interviewer is freer to probe interesting areas that arise and can follow the participant's interests or concerns.

These differences follow from the basic concerns of IPA. The investigator has an idea of the area of interest and some questions to pursue. At the same time, there is a wish to try and enter the psychological and social world of the participant as far as is possible. Therefore the participant is an active agent in shaping how the interview goes. The participant can be seen as the experiential expert and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell his/her own story. Of course, this form of interviewing reduces the control the investigator has over the situation.

Constructing the interview schedule

Although a researcher conducting a semi-structured interview is likely to see it as a co-determined interaction in its own right, it is still important when working in this way to produce an interview schedule in advance. Why? Producing a schedule beforehand forces you to think explicitly about what you think/hope the interview might cover. It also enables you to think of difficulties that might be encountered – for example, in terms of question wording or addressing sensitive issues – and to give some thought to how these difficulties might be handled. When it comes to the interview itself, having thought in advance about the different ways the interview may proceed allows you to concentrate more thoroughly and more confidently on what the participant is actually saying. As an example, Box 3.2 presents the first half of a schedule from a project of the authors on women's experience of anger and aggression.

Box 3.2 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (ABRIDGED)

- 1 Can you tell me about what your life was like as a child and when you were growing up?
 Prompt: Might want focus on particular age points (child/teenager/young adult) and contexts (family/school/college/work/relationships).
 What about more recently?
- 2 Can you tell me about times when you have been involved in a conflictual situation when you were growing up?

(Continued)

Prompt: Maybe focus on particular age points/contexts (family/school, etc.) description/cause/protagonist/actions/affect/cognitive response, then What about more recently?

3 Can you tell me what the word 'anger' means to you?

4 Can you tell me about times when you've been angry when you were growing up?

Prompt: Maybe focus on particular age points/contexts (family/school, etc.) description/cause/protagonist/actions/affect/cognitive response, then What about more recently?

5 Can you tell me how you have acted on that anger?

Prompt: age points/contexts.

In this type of interviewing, you as the interviewer are trying to encourage the person to speak about the topic with as little prompting as possible from you. Good interview technique therefore often involves a gentle nudge from the interviewer rather than being too explicit. You may well find that, in the course of constructing your schedule, your first draft questions are too explicit (for example, 'How bad did you feel when you were made redundant?'). With redrafting, these become gentler and less loaded but sufficient to let the participant know what the area of interest is and to recognize that they have something to say about it (e.g., 'Can you describe the day you were made redundant, starting with when you first became aware it might happen?'). The intention is to assure the participant of the value of what they have to say about the topic in the context of their lives in order to facilitate the giving of rich experiential accounts.

Sometimes participants may have difficulties in understanding or responding to questions. For example, for some, a particular question may be too open. To prepare for this, you can construct prompts which are framed more explicitly. Indeed some of your first draft questions may be able to act as these prompts. You do not have to prepare prompts for every question – only those where you anticipate there may be some difficulty and where this cannot be easily addressed by rewording the question. So, for example, in Box 3.2, question 1 has prompts relating to areas the participant may wish to consider. Questions 2 and 4 have a set of reminders to the interviewer of domains that it may be useful to ask the participant about.

Thus the interviewer starts with the most general possible question and hopes that this will be sufficient to enable the participant to talk about the subject. If the participant has difficulty, says he/she does not understand or gives a short or tangential reply, then the interviewer can move to the prompt which is more specific. Hopefully this will be enough to get the participant talking. The more specific level questions are there to deal with more difficult

cases where the participant is more hesitant. It is likely that a successful interview will include questions and answers at both general and more specific levels and will move between the two fairly seamlessly.

Having constructed your schedule, you should learn it by heart – like a play script – before beginning to interview so, when it comes to the interview, the schedule acts as a mental prompt, if needed, and not something to which you are constantly referring.

Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews generally last for an hour or more and can become intense and involved, depending on the particular topic. It is therefore advisable to try to ensure that the interview can proceed without interruption as far as possible, so it is usually better to conduct the interview with the participant on their own. Of course there will be exceptions to this. For example, this may not be advisable or possible with young children. Where the interview takes place can also affect the ambience. People usually feel most comfortable in a setting they are familiar with – for example, in their own home – but again there may be times where this is not practicable or appropriate.

At the beginning of the interview, you need to put the participant at ease, to enable her/him to feel comfortable talking to you before any of the substantive areas of the schedule are introduced. Hopefully then, this positive and responsive ‘set’ will continue through the interview.

The interview does not have to follow the sequence on the schedule nor does every question have to be asked or asked in exactly the same way of each participant. Thus the interviewer may decide that it would be appropriate to ask a question earlier than it appears on the schedule because it follows on from something the participant has just said. Similarly how a question is phrased and how explicit it is will partly depend on how the interviewer feels the participant is responding.

The interview may well move away from the questions on the schedule. It is quite possible that the interview may enter an area that had not been predicted by the investigator but which is extremely pertinent to and enlightening of the project’s overall question. Indeed these novel avenues are often the most valuable, precisely because they have come unprompted from the participant and therefore are likely to be of particular importance for him/her. On the other hand, of course, the interviewer needs to ensure the conversation does not move too far away from the agreed topic.

It is important to try to establish a slow and comfortable pace to the interview. Try not to rush in too quickly. Give the participant time to finish answering a question before moving on. Often the most interesting questions need some time to respond to and fuller answers may be missed if the interviewer jumps in too quickly. Also ask one question at a time. Multiple questions can be difficult for the participant to unpick.

Finally you need to monitor how the interview is affecting the participant. It may be that the participant feels uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning and this may be expressed in their non-verbal behaviour or in how they reply. You need to be ready to respond to this, for example, by backing off and trying again more gently or deciding it would be inappropriate to pursue this area with this participant. For more on interviewing, see Burgess (1984), Kvale (1996) and Taylor and Bogdan (1998).

For IPA, it is necessary to record (on audio tape or by using digital recording equipment which gives a much clearer recording) and transcribe the whole interview, including the talk of the interviewer. Leave a wide enough margin on both sides of the transcript to make your analytic comments. However, for IPA, you do not need the more detailed transcription of prosodic features of the talk which are required in conversation analysis (Drew, 2003) and in some forms of discourse analysis. Transcription of tapes takes a long time, depending on the clarity of the recording and one's typing proficiency. As a rough guide, you need to allow at least seven hours of transcription time per hour of interview.

Analysis

IPA is not a prescriptive approach; rather it provides a set of flexible guidelines which can be adapted by individual researchers in light of their research aims. This is particularly true when it comes to analysis. This section describes the analytic steps we went through in the anger and aggression study in order to help the reader to see how the analysis unfolds but this should not be treated as the 'correct recipe' for doing IPA. Rather it should simply be seen as an illustration of *one* way of doing it.

This project was a detailed, idiographic examination of participants' experience of anger and aggression, its interpersonal context and models of etiology. In brief, the analytic stages involved (a) several close and detailed readings of the data to obtain a holistic perspective so that future interpretations remained grounded within the participants' accounts; (b) initial themes were identified and organized into clusters and checked against the data; (c) themes were then refined, condensed and examined for connections between them; (d) a narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participants' account of their experiences in their own words was produced (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

The stages used throughout the analysis were as follows and were applied to the transcript of each participant. First, during transcription, the interviewer kept a record of initial thoughts, comments and points of potential significance. It was felt that these might be useful to return to and check against later interpretations during analysis. Second, each transcript was read several times and the left hand margin was used to make notes on anything that appeared significant and of interest. With each reading, the researcher should expect to feel more immersed

in the data, becoming more responsive to what is being said. This stage is like a free textual analysis; notes may take the form of comments on the use of particular language styles or forms, initial attempts to spell out what the participant means and identification of convergences and contradictions in his/her talk.

The following extract demonstrates this stage of analysis for a small section of the interview with Debbie (a pseudonym) who was the first woman interviewed. The interviewer ('Int.') is responding to a topic introduced by the participant:

	Int.	Can you tell me about an argument with your sister?
	Debbie:	I've got a system, I mean I do it now, I always wash glasses first and my sister just came along with cups full of tea and coffee and poured them straight into the sink and I just lost my temper. I just remember I was so angry with her I wasn't going to let her push me around any more that I just did a role reversal with her. And I just sort of pinned her against the wall and started slamming her head against the wall to see how she felt like, to see what it felt like to her.
Lost my temper – instant Anger		
Switched roles – Debbie the aggressor		
Physical aggression		
Wants her sister to feel the same	Int.	What happened next?
	Debbie:	I don't know whether it was because I'd done it to my sister but I just broke up into tears and I just had to get out. I mean, I've never had a fight with my sister like that since. We have like verbal fights but I just felt like, I had a lot of mixed emotions after I'd done that. I felt happy that I'd stuck up to myself with her but I also felt annoyed with myself because I'd hurt her and then I felt happy again because she'd got a taste of her own medicine and knew how I felt. It's dead weird. I'd so many emotions in one go that I'd never felt so many at the same time before. It was a really strange feeling. But I broke down into tears and I knew then I had to get out. And I just went for a walk.
Broke into tears		
Get out – desire to escape		
Verbal aggression		
Felt happy		
Felt annoyed		
Felt happy again		
Wants sister to feel like her		
Multiple emotions		
Strange, unusual experience		
Tears		
Left the situation		

The next stage involved returning to the transcript and using the right hand margin to transform initial notes and ideas into more specific **themes** or phrases. This stage calls upon psychological concepts and abstractions. The researcher is attempting to capture more concisely the psychological quality inherent in the initial notes and in the participant's own words. Caution is essential at this point so that the connection between the participant's own words and the researcher's interpretations is not lost:

Int.	Can you tell me about an argument with your sister?	
Debbie:	I've got a system, I mean I do it now, I always wash glasses first and my sister just came along with cups full of tea and coffee and poured them straight into	Rapid emotional

	the sink and I just lost my temper. I just remember	<i>shift into anger</i>
	I was so angry with her I wasn't going to let her push	
	me around any more that I just did a role reversal with her.	<i>Power dynamics</i>
	And I just sort of pinned her against the wall and started	
	slamming her head against the wall to see how she felt like,	<i>Physical aggression</i>
	to see what it felt like to her.	
<i>Int.</i>	What happened next?	
<i>Debbie:</i>	I don't know whether it was because I'd done it to my	
	sister but I just broke up into tears and I just had to <i>get out</i> .	<i>Crying</i>
	I mean, I've never had a fight with my sister like that since.	<i>Desire for escape</i>
	We have like verbal fights but I just felt like, I had a lot of	<i>Verbal aggression</i>
	mixed emotions after I'd done that. I felt happy that I'd	
	stuck up to myself with her but I also felt annoyed with	<i>Conflicting emotions</i>
	myself because I'd hurt her and then I felt happy again	<i>Projection of self-</i>
	because she'd got a taste of her own medicine and knew	<i>feelings</i>
	how I felt. It's dead weird. I'd so many emotions in one go	
	that I'd never felt so many at the same time before. It was a	<i>Multiple emotions</i>
	really strange feeling. But I broke down into tears and I	<i>Crying</i>
	knew then I had to get out. And I just went for a walk.	<i>Avoidance</i>

The next stage consists of further 'reducing' the data by establishing connections between the preliminary themes and clustering them appropriately (see Box 3.3). As part of this process, you can 'imagine a magnet with some of the themes pulling others in and helping to make sense of them' (Smith, 2004: 71). This process is inevitably selective so that some of the themes may be dropped either because they do not fit well with the emerging structure or because, within the emerging analysis, they do not have a strong enough evidence base.

Box 3.3 CLUSTERING OF THEMES

Physical aggression
Verbal aggression
Rapid emotional shift into anger
Crying
Conflicting/multiple emotions
Desire for escape
Power dynamics
Projection of self-feelings

Finally, a Table is produced which shows each superordinate theme and the themes which comprise it (see Box 3.4). These clusters are given a descriptive label (superordinate theme title), which conveys the conceptual nature of the themes therein. Key words from the participant are used as reminders of what prompted the themes.

This Table is the outcome of an iterative process in which the researcher has moved back and forth between the various analytic stages ensuring that the integrity of what the participant said has been preserved as far as possible. If the researcher has been successful, it should be possible for someone else to track the analytic journey from the raw data through to the end Table. This is referred to as an independent audit (Smith and Osborn, 2003). It is also the case that during this process, the analysis becomes more interpretative as the researcher is coming to a more integrated sense-making of the participant's experience. As the interpretation continues, the researcher is likely to draw on their mental set of psychological constructs to help the sense-making process. However in IPA it is important that the participant's account is always attended to carefully, always kept foregrounded and that any psychological theory is drawn on because it is triggered by the personal account (see Smith, 2004, for more on levels of interpretation in IPA). Only after we felt some measure of gestalt had been reached for each participant was a cross case analysis carried out and a final Table of superordinate themes put together which represented the whole data set. For more details of this cross case analysis, see Smith and Osborn (2003). Because IPA has an idiographic commitment, the researcher should – even when presenting an analysis from a number of participants – endeavour to convey some of the details of the individual experience of those participants.

Box 3.4 FINAL TABLE OF THEMES

Forms of aggression

Physical aggression	<i>I just sort of pinned her against the wall</i>
Verbal aggression	<i>We have like verbal fights</i>

The anger experience

Rapid emotional shift into anger	<i>I just lost my temper</i>
Crying	<i>I just broke up into tears</i>
Conflicting/multiple emotions	<i>I'd so many emotions in one go</i>

Relationship between self and other

Power dynamics	<i>I just did a role reversal with her</i>
Projection of self-feelings	<i>She'd got a taste of her own medicine</i>

Analysis continues into the formal process of writing up a narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant's account of their experience in their own words. The aim is to provide a close textual reading of the participant's account, moving between description and different levels of **interpretation**, at all times clearly differentiating between account and interpretation. Enough data should be presented for the reader to assess the usefulness of the interpretations. Box 3.5 shows

a very short piece from the final write-up; within it is the extract from Debbie which helped generate one of the themes illustrated in Box 3.4. The extract comes from the middle of the write-up and begins with some consideration of a different participant, Angela, before moving to Debbie. For a more complete *example of how an analysis might be written up*, see Report 1 in Appendix 2 in this volume.

Box 3.5 SHORT EXCERPT FROM FINAL WRITE-UP

When emotions are felt intensely, such as extreme anger and grief, they can feel unbearable:

I was thinking I want to get rid of this anger and I think what do I do so I just lay in the bed and I could feel it building up and my heart was killing me.

Angela's anger combined with her grief at the loss of her child is deeply felt. The experience is centred in her heart and she indicates that the experience is one of actual physical pain. Feeling several emotions at a single time is a tumultuous experience in itself. The effect is one of confusion, which is enhanced when the emotions are antagonistic:

I had a lot of mixed emotions after I'd done that. I felt happy that I'd stuck up to myself with her [sic] but I also felt annoyed with myself because I'd hurt her I and then I felt happy again because she got a taste of her own medicine and knew how I felt. It's dead weird. I'd so many emotions in one go that I'd never felt so many at the same time before. It was a really strange feeling.

In this extract, Debbie is describing how she felt after a fight with her sister. As with the previous episode, happiness accompanied anger but there is a lot more going on besides. Debbie has conflicting feelings, which shift from annoyance to satisfaction and it appears that some form of internal dissonance ('weird' and 'strange') further complicates the emotional confusion.