

IPA as a Research Tool in the Writing Center

Bonnie Devet
College of Charleston



Writing Center scholars have often called for directors to conduct empirical research. Such work is, indeed, beneficial. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney explains, it contributes to the field of rhetoric/composition, examines writing center practices, helps directors “make better decisions” as well as “strong arguments” to administrators, evaluates the lore handed down from centers to centers, generates academic standing, and just lets directors “enjoy our work more (or again)” (xix-xx). As a director, I have found one research method valuable both for its ease of use and for developing the consultants themselves: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Harrington et al.). While carrying out any research may sound intimidating, directors and their consultants should be reassured about employing IPA because it lets researchers tap into their existing strengths of reading and analysis, leading to empirical research that provides insight into writing center work.

IPA’S THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Since the 1990’s, IPA has been used extensively in health psychology, especially in Europe and the United Kingdom. It is not quantitative but qualitative research. For example, in health care studies, participants, such as male stroke victims who rely on wheelchairs (Larkin and Thompson 106-07), talk about their lives so researchers may determine how participants make sense of their worlds, both personal and social (Smith and Osborn 53). In fact, IPA assumes people’s talk, thinking, and emotions are connected (Smith and Osborn 54), and from this talk arises subjective knowledge (Eatough and Smith 8). Seeing the participant as an “experiential expert” (Eatough and Smith 8), IPA researchers assume the individual’s experience is seminal to making meaning. Accordingly, IPA is a very humanistic process.

While RAD research starts with a hypothesis to be proven, such as how consultants use their writing center experiences in their ca-

reers, IPA does not; it proceeds inductively, locating the meanings consultants assign to their experiences (Reid et al. 20; Larkin and Thompson 103). Also, instead of a random sampling, IPA examines a fairly homogeneous group based on key factors, like consultants working in a center during the same years. Because IPA is attempting to reveal a detailed, in-depth analysis focused on each person's talk, it usually works best with a small sample (Pietkiewicz and Smith 9), such as several consultants from one center.

In face-to-face interviews, a researcher usually begins by asking participants questions and letting them speak, while tape-recording the responses; in this semi-structured process, the researcher asks questions in any order, depending on the perspectives or ideas that arise (Pietkiewicz and Smith 10). Data can also be collected through diaries, letters, focus groups, dialogues, (Pietkiewicz and Smith 10) or, in centers, from online message boards or consultant surveys. Then, the data are transcribed, not using the symbols from conversational analysis, but by writing down exactly what was said before analyzing it (Smith and Osborn 65).

Next, the researcher analyzes the transcripts. In the margins, they note what was said, what is interesting or significant about the participants' responses, or what is important to the participants (Larkin and Thompson 105). These comprise the subject matter or "topics." On the other side of the page, the researcher registers what those events imply, or the "emerging themes." Then, they look for clusters among the themes, pointing to larger ideas called "superordinate concepts" (Smith and Osborn 70). For example, a consultant describes how her work helped her as a student:

After spending hours in the writing center, assisting students and sometimes receiving help for my own writing from my fellow consultants, I began to develop stronger writing skills: my grammar improved, I was able to write and edit my own papers more easily and quickly, and I began to see notable improvement in my classes. I went from an above-average student to a student who thrives on excelling in each and every class at college.

Based on what the researcher reads in the excerpt, they create categories, such as here, the topics seem to be "writing," "grammar," and "better grades." The emerging themes, then, are "improved writing" and "self-confidence"; these themes may be clustered under the superordinate concepts of "knowledge about the writing process" and "self-efficacy." Each researcher determines the topics, themes, superordinate concepts for their participants. The IPA researcher analyzes one interview at a time (Smith and Osborn 75); then, the researchers get together to coordinate their readings of the interviews. It is also always best if the results

can be validated, with participants' responses being encoded by a second group of readers.

IPA does overlap with the better known Grounded Theory (GT) approach to qualitative research. As psychologist Jonathan Smith explains, "Qualitative research forms a fuzzy set—there are overlaps and distinctions between IPA and GT" (email). IPA and GT "ground" the research in real-world data, letting a hypothesis bubble up from the readings. Both also use coding to examine individuals' lived experiences. However, IPA describes the experience for one participant at a time before moving on to the next ("Frequently"), while GT researchers may carry over what they have collected to the next analysis, often letting the findings cross-fertilize.

It might even be argued IPA is more empathetic than GT because of IPA's hermeneutics applied to the responses. In IPA, researchers look for the "whole to parts, parts to whole, and [the]context for both parts and whole" (Eatough and Smith 12). To mine the responses for such meaning (Eatough and Smith 13), IPA researchers ask, "What is the person trying to achieve here?" (Smith and Osborn 53), "What matters to the participant?" and what meanings do these concerns have for the participant? (Larkin and Thompson 106). The IPA researcher, then, compares how the "nuggets" (Eatough and Smith 13) discovered fit with others or with the whole of the participants' talk. Because many consultants are trained in the humanities, the IPA process can be compared to interpreting literature. Readers of Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy look for topics and what these topics reveal about Hamlet's view of life (themes). After analyzing one participant, IPA researchers talk to additional participants, eventually looking for themes and superordinate concepts across the cases (Larkin and Thompson 107).

For centers, IPA is a very doable method, especially when directors want to involve consultants in research. After all, consultants are familiar with the close reading IPA demands and with noting themes, as they do when reading scholarly articles for their own research assignments. In fact, one consultant said IPA reminded her of how her composition professors taught her "to comb a scholarly paper and analyze it for its most significant contributions."

HOW IPA WORKS FOR A CENTER RESEARCH QUESTION

To see how IPA works for a research question, consider the IRB-approved survey four consultants¹ and I conducted with our center's

former consultants. Although inspired by Bradley Hughes, Paula Gillespie, and Harvey Kail’s Peer Writing Tutors Alumni Research Project (PWTARP), the consultants and I decided our survey would investigate a topic the PWTARP had not covered: how the consultants’ experiences benefited them while still in college. Following IPA, the consultants and I did not start with any hypothesis about the center’s impact on the graduated consultants. In fact, the survey asked just one simple, direct question, as open-ended as possible to elicit full responses: “In what ways did working in the center help you while you were a student in college?” Unlike long, structured questionnaires, this one question allowed researchers to look for “unanticipated topics” (Smith and Osborn 58). From fifty-four former undergraduate consultants at a mid-sized (10,000 students) liberal arts college, I was able to locate thirty-one of their post-college emails (no easy task since graduated students vanish like a morning mist). These alumni, with varying majors, were trained through monthly meetings stressing non-directive tutoring. Most had tutored at least two years, some even three. Sixty-seven percent (21/31) responded, often with single-spaced, one-to-two-page answers. Because all had graduated between 2014 and 2016, face-to-face interviews were not possible, so consultants used IPA on the written responses.

To model how to identify IPA’s topics and themes, we practiced by examining an excerpt from one alumnus’ comments. Table 1 shows the consultant’s response, including topics (in italics), emerging themes, and superordinate concepts:

TABLE 1: A Researcher’s Analysis of a Consultant’s Comments

Consultant’s Response	Topics	Emerging Themes	Superordinate Concepts
When I first started work, <i>I was living at home with my parents and did not socialize much. I am an introvert by nature and working as a consultant was the first job that took me out of my comfort zone.</i> I am grateful the center gave me the opportunity to overcome my shyness.	Living conditions; Shyness Leaving one’s comfort zone	Personal growth	Acquiring interpersonal skills

After the practice session, current consultants and I independently read the survey’s responses, asking IPA’s hermeneutic question, “What is the graduated [consultant] trying to achieve here?” (Smith and Osborn 53). As we analyzed, each of us filled in a chart with the graduated consultant’s name, topics raised, quotations

as evidence for topics, emerging themes (issues, ideas), and possible superordinate concepts. Each consultant charted seven or eight responses. Next, we coordinated our charts. For instance, when charts contained the themes “building confidence,” “overcoming shyness/making friends,” and “contributing to the academy,” we classified these under the superordinate concept of “self-efficacy.”

Admittedly, IPA often focuses on a small number of respondents. It can also be said the results, while interesting, may seem applicable to only one center. By and large, though, centers are similar across institutions with recurrent situations, especially for their consultants (Griffin et al. 7), and consultants respond to those similarities, resonating with other centers’ experiences. Our IPA work, for instance, reveals three superordinate concepts that likely resonate with other centers’ experiences. With consultants working daily with students’ writing, it is not surprising that 61% (n=13) felt their writing knowledge had improved: being “submerged” in a community of writers (both with clients and with fellow consultants) helped them understand that writing is forged by interacting with other writers. Because of the cornucopia of personalities passing through a center’s doors, another superordinate concept arose: 42% (n=9) improved in their development of interpersonal skills. One alumna specifically reported how her work helped with that perennial college problem of handling roommates, while another stressed she learned how to talk to her professors: “Before I worked in the center, I did not know how to talk about my writing to a professor.” A third superordinate concept also emerged: 66% (n=14) of the former consultants developed self-efficacy, meaning if you think you can do something, you will try to do so. If an athlete believes she can complete a marathon, she does the work necessary to run the race. When a consultant recalled how she was invited to speak to an incoming group of freshmen about writing term papers, she confessed to being nervous: “But I took a step back and I said to myself, ‘I have had experience with clients so I know what I am doing.’ Working in the center builds confidence.”

HOW CONSULTANTS FELT ABOUT CONDUCTING IPA RESEARCH

Because IPA stresses finding topics and themes, it can be especially useful for analyzing written responses. As a consultant noted, “The responders were past writing center employees, so naturally the quality of the writing was very high . . . so that main ideas and topic sentences were easy to find.” Another consultant com-

pared IPA to conducting research for her own term papers: “I do exercises quite like [IPA] whenever I sit down to read dense scholarly work that I might need to utilize for a research assignment.” IPA offers another advantage. Daily, consultants deal with writing center issues, so analyzing the statements was not hard. As a consultant explained, “I am familiar with the subject and purpose of the writing, so it was easy to find the topics and themes.” Consultants also believed conducting IPA led to a greater perspective on their own work. For instance, a consultant identified with her graduated colleague who had described the role empathy plays for successful tutorials:

[A]s this former consultant said, to display “a desperate need to understand our students, recognize their fears, and to humbly admit to the student that we have all shared similar academic struggles” is often all that stands in the way of a student unwilling to learn and a student excited about their potential. So, while I may have noticed I was growing my empathizing powers, I hadn’t necessarily realized this possible “function.”

So, using IPA encouraged a consultant to crystallize her feelings about her writing center work.

CONCLUSION

As with any survey relying on self-reporting, like IPA, it is hard to determine how much the responders truly do what they say they do. It may also be argued IPA runs counter to current theories of language and experience. Social construction stresses that language controls experience, while culture shapes participants as they recount their experiences. Although IPA acknowledges respondents describe their world views only through the language their culture provides, IPA also emphasizes the worth of the individual’s experience, the “expressive ontology” (Eatough and Smith 21), where humans are seen to shape, even create their own worlds, “despite the limitations imposed by material and biological conditions” (Eatough and Smith 22). IPA, indeed, seeks these private perspectives or “personal constructs” (Smith and Osborn 15), as revealed in the participants’ stories. From these stories arise portraits of centers, portraits useful to directors who, like all writing program administrators, must explain their program’s vital purposes to the academy. IPA, with its methodology so familiar to humanities-trained students, can be valuable for such reports.

NOTES

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