The Construct of Phenomenological Analysis: A case study of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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Abstract

Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that questions whether perception mirrors reality or not to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon. This phenomenological approach investigates the everyday experiences of human beings while holding the researchers’ preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon (practicing époché). Phenomenological research designs have different types and purposes to use in the research that offer unique perspectives and theoretical frameworks for understanding lived experiences. By learning about various approaches, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study and explore different dimensions of the lived experience. For novice researchers in academia and/or beginners in qualitative research, understanding these approaches and validating when to use what, are challenging tasks. This study addresses and identifies four aspects of phenomenological research. Also, the study showcases one type of phenomenological study which is the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) including its applied method, challenges and opportunities. The study recruited 20 participants to interview and analyze the scripts using IPA approach. The study informs qualitative researchers who conduct their study around human experience and the perception about this experience, to help them gaining a broader range of tools and methods to draw upon in their research, allowing them to tailor their approach to the specific needs of their study.

Keywords: Qualitative Analysis, Phenomenology, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Phenomenological Research

According to Husserl (1970), the principal reason for selecting phenomenological method is when the main concern of the research is to identify a phenomenon through its perception by people who live and practice. Regarding phenomenology’s affordance as a research method to answer the research question(s), Husserl (1970), explained that phenomenology seeks essentially to describe the phenomenon rather than to explain it. Stanley and Wise (1993) added the interpretive dimension to phenomenology enabling it to be used as the basis theory rooted from the lived experience of people. More recently, Finlay (2009) explained that the main concern of phenomenological researchers is to end up with live, complex and rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is lived. In other words, it does not separate theory from practice and lived experience, but they are joined together. Furthermore, Van Manen (1990) added that phenomenological research can highlight the self-reflection and critical thinking of people who practice the studied phenomenon. Moreover, according to Fellows (2008), a phenomenological strategy helps with the development of new theories and adjusting to new ideas as they emerge. In qualitative research, it is important to differentiate between two main strands when conducting phenomenological research. Firstly, descriptive phenomenology, in the sense of aiming to describe rather than explain, following Husserl (1970).

Secondly, the interpretive phenomenology, following Heidegger (1962), who considered interpretation to be basic in our daily life, as when we comprise knowledge or skills of an event gained through involvement or exposure to that event, interpretation as a communication process helps us to make sense of and understand more about this experience. In other words, in order to answer the research equation(s), description and interpretation as a continuum, as the research narrative starts with descriptions of lived experience, followed by reflection and analysis of these descriptions.

Approaches of Phenomenological Analysis

Based on the above two strands in phenomenological studies, Husserl (1970) and Moustakas (1994) addressed 4 different approaches to direct the research. They are as follows;

➢ Existential Phenomenological Analysis (EPA)
➢ Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (HPA)
➢ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
➢ Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis (TPA)

Each of these four types of phenomenological research approaches offers a unique perspective on understanding the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings. Worth mentioning that when choosing one of the phenomenological approaches, practicing epoché, also known as phenomenological reduction, is recommended. Practicing epoché is a method used in phenomenological approaches to suspend one's preconceptions and biases in order to observe and describe phenomena as they appear to the consciousness and to attend its essential qualities (Husserl, 1989; Van Manen, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). It is to note that for novel research, this practice might be challenging to alignate personal and professional views and experiences. Further training and practice are needed to be free from the influence of any preconceived notions or assumptions. By setting aside one’s biases and assumptions, the observer can better understand the phenomenon and its meaning. In this method, one is asked to put aside
any preconceived notions or assumptions about the phenomenon being observed and instead focus on the phenomena itself. This involves bracketing or setting aside one's preconceptions, biases, beliefs, and expectations in order to approach the phenomenon with a fresh and open-minded perspective. Table 1 below outlines the above-mentioned approaches and exemplifies each approach.

**Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the analytical approach to analyze qualitative data in this project. IPA has a dual focus on the unique characteristics of individual participants (such as the work experience of health practitioner) and patterning of meaning across participants (Husserl, 1970). Anything experienced by an individual or a group of people could be researched using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1994). Data is usually collected (through interviews and focus groups) from people who have experienced the phenomenon you plan to study. Moreover, data can also be collected (through observations) as people are experiencing a phenomenon.

As a process, IPA coding starts with a process of ‘initial commenting’ or ‘initial noting,’ in which the researcher writes their initial analytic observations or brief commentaries about the data (using “Memo” feature in NVivo). Then, the researcher codes their first data item and then progresses to developing themes for that data item. In other words, IPA focuses on developing each stage of the analysis for each data item, before moving to the next. In terms of procedures for theme development, there are two levels of theme development in IPA referred to as ‘emergent’ and ‘superordinate’ themes. Emergent themes are noted on the data item, while superordinate themes are developed from emergent themes. Once coding and theme development are complete for each data item, the researcher develops superordinate themes across the dataset to end with an organizing framework for the analysis.

As a researcher reflecting on data analysis, IPA helps the researcher to keep close to the data through developing codes and themes on the actual data item, aligned with focusing on the unique characteristics of each participant.

**Using IPA in a Research Case Study**

This study aims to investigate teachers’ perceptions to Student-Centered Learning (SCL) in the Egyptian Higher Education (HE). Participants were 20 online tutors in the Egyptian Higher Education who have experience in teaching in the online environment. Data collection tool is one-to-one interview with those tutors. In the beginning of the study, the researcher needed to make a clear and concise decision about using which phenomenological approach. The below diagram visualize the logical flow chart the researchers’ thinking approach went through.

![Figure 1: Choosing the appropriate phenomenological approach.](image-url)
Table 1: Approaches of phenomenological analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenological Approach</th>
<th>What is it?</th>
<th>Study Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Existential Phenomenological Analysis (EPA)        | - EPA describes participants’ perception of experience.  
- Brings to light participants’ description of their reality  
- What they have conceptualized, in terms of their lived experience  
- Proponents of existential phenomenology question the relevance of (practicing epoché is impossible to be fully achieved) (van Manen, 1997). | Research question: “What is the lived experience of adults who have been diagnosed with a chronic illness?”  
- This research question could be explored using EPA by conducting in-depth interviews with adults who have been diagnosed with a chronic illness, and then analyzing the data to identify common themes and patterns in their experiences. |
| Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (HPA)        | - HPA interprets participants’ experience.  
- Examines participants’ experience with the purpose of gaining understanding and presenting your interpretation  
- Practicing epoché, is not encouraged because it is not feasible (Smith et al., 2009). | Research question: “What is the experience of motherhood for women who have experienced trauma in their lives?”  
- This research question could be explored using HPA by conducting in-depth interviews with women who have experienced trauma and are also mothers, and then analyzing the data using a hermeneutic approach to interpretation. |
| Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)     | - IPA interprets participants’ understanding of experience.  
- Examines participants’ interpretation of their experience with the purpose of gaining understanding and presenting your interpretation  
- Practicing epoché is encouraged (Husserl, 2012). | Research question: “What is the experience of living with a loved one with Alzheimer’s disease from the perspective of family caregivers?”  
- This research question could be explored using IPA by conducting in-depth interviews with family caregivers of individuals with Alzheimer’s disease, and then analyzing the data to identify themes and patterns in their subjective experiences. |
| Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis (TPA)      | - TPA Describes participants’ experience.  
- It seeks for the core features of participants’ experience (Moustakas, 1994). | Research question: “What is the nature of the experience of flow in expert athletes during peak performance?”  
- This research question could be explored using TPA by conducting in-depth interviews with expert athletes who have experienced flow during peak performance, and then analyzing the data to identify the underlying structures of this experience. |
In the context of this study, in researching SCL, one could explore the tutors who adopt it as an implemented approach in their learning strategies; another could aim to explore the general structure of the lived experience of tutors’ guidance of learners within SCL implementation; yet another could explore the tutors’ feedback explaining their experience with SCL. Therefore, in this stage, each tutor will reflect and think critically of SCL. In the context of this study, we identified general themes about the essence of the phenomenon (misinformation). Examples of these themes such as: online learning affordances/challenges and teaching strategies/resources in online learning. Worth mentioning, to interpret, it may require to go deeper in each theme than reading the explicit text.

In this regard, it is important to highlight a challenge that may confront the researcher. As according to Giorgi (1994) phenomenological research needs a phenomenological researcher to engage in a phenomenological attitude. Finley (2008) explained this attitude for the phenomenological researcher as being flexible, open-minded and free from bias, to accept others’ attitudes and experiences. Moreover, researchers in some cases may need to change their existing attitudes to accept others’ attitudes. In other cases, researchers may need to bring part of their experience to the foreground.

In this regard, Finlay (2008) offered a solution in that researchers tend to separate out what belongs to the researcher rather than the researched. In this study, for example, during the collection and analyzing of data, researchers need to be aware of this presupposition and preconceived biases about SCL. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers’ possible acceptance/rejection/resistance to SCL need to be brought into awareness to separate them out from participants’ descriptions.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is the analytical approach to analyze qualitative data in this project. IPA has a dual focus on the unique characteristics of individual participants (such as work experience of health practitioner) and on patterning of meaning across participants (Husserl, 1970). As a process, IPA coding starts with a process of ‘initial commenting’ or ‘initial noting,’ in which the researcher writes their initial analytic observations or brief commentaries about the data (using "Memo" feature in NVivo). Then, researcher codes their first data item then progresses to developing themes for that data item. In other word, IPA focuses on developing each stage of the analysis for each data item, before moving to the next. In terms of procedures for theme development, there are two levels of theme development in IPA referred to as ‘emergent’ and ‘superordinate’ themes. Emergent themes are noted on the data item, while superordinate themes are developed from emergent themes. Once coding and theme development are complete for each data item, the researcher develops superordinate themes across the dataset to end with an organizing framework for the analysis.

For this research, the below steps, have been used to provide a comprehensive detailed steps overview that underpins IP. (Smith et al., 2009)

**Step 1:** Transcription Transcription of the semantic content of each individual interview based on audio recording

**Step 2:** Reading and re-reading immersion in the data, active engagement with the data, and searching for richer, detailed sections. Shifting from generic to specific in accounts and patterns.

**Step 3:** Initial Noting. Identify specific ways the participant talks about an issue. An unstructured commentary. Describe what matters to the participant and the meaning of those things.

Step 5: Searching for connections across emergent themes Mapping how the themes fit together and related to research questions.

From the above detailed steps, it can be observed that, IPA is a dynamic process where the researcher after getting to the last step to assess whether the themes are supported by sufficient evidence in the participants’ actual discourse, may get back to the first step again if there is lack of evidence. Also, it acknowledges that data interpretation can be highly subjective and interpretations need to be well-evidenced and grounded in raw data. For this study, the detailed steps applying IPA approach, see Appendix A.

Enablers and Barriers of IPA

As a researcher reflecting on data analysis, IPA helps the researcher to keep close to the data by developing codes and themes on the actual data item, aligned with focusing on the unique characteristics of each individual participant. Uncovers how human awareness is implicated in producing a social action, social situation & social world. According to (Huselr, 1997), IPA helps in raising an understanding of the relationship between states of individual consciousness and social life.

As a researcher and university tutor, IPA entails profound, detailed understanding of a single phenomenon, more than how the phenomena exists, as it showcases different angles of the phenomena that an individual cannot do solely.

For Larkin et al., (2006), IPA can provide valuable insights into individuals’ subjective experiences, it requires careful planning, attention to detail, and sensitivity to the emotional impact of the research on both participants and researchers. However, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) can be challenging (specially for novel researchers in the field) in several ways

- Subjectivity: IPA relies heavily on the researcher’s interpretation of the data (McLeod, 2011). This means that there is a risk of bias, as the researcher’s own beliefs and assumptions may influence their analysis of the data.
- Emotional impact: IPA often involves exploring sensitive or complex experiences, which can be emotionally challenging for both the participants and the researcher (McLeod, 2011). Researchers need to take steps to ensure the well-being of participants and themselves throughout the research process.
- Time-consuming: IPA involves a detailed analysis of individual cases, which can be time-consuming (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Researchers need to spend a significant amount of time on data collection, transcription, and analysis.
- Small sample size: IPA typically involves a small sample size, which can limit the generalizability of the findings. It can also be challenging to recruit participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest, particularly if it is a rare or stigmatized experience.
- Complexity: The analysis process in IPA can be complex, as it involves identifying themes and patterns across multiple levels of data (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, and entire narratives). Researchers must carefully navigate these different levels of analysis to identify meaningful themes.

Conclusion

This study concludes that phenomenological research design is one of the important areas that

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delves into human experience. However, human experience with regard to phenomenon has more than one angle to consider this experience. Therefore, phenomenological research designs introduced in this study are four approaches; (1) Existential Phenomenological Analysis (EPA); (2) Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis (HPA); (3) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); and (4) Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis (TPA). The challenging task for researchers (especially novices in this area) is to validate and justify what phenomenological research analysis design that fits into the research objective. This study informs researchers some guidelines about the above four types, with an example of a case study of an IPA research including methodological approach, challenges and opportunities. The study informs qualitative researchers to gain a broader range of tools and methods to draw upon in their research, allowing them to tailor their approach to the specific needs of their study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


## Appendix A

### (Step 1) Coding

**Initial coding: Extracting meaningful statement of the transcript**

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline is essential for OL students</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline is essential for OL tutors</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Time flexibility is main future in OL</td>
<td>OL flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>F2F tutor strictness and punctuality</td>
<td>F2F rigidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Rigidity of syllabus in F2F</td>
<td>F2F rigidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>F2F lessons are planned before session</td>
<td>F2F rigidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Tutor’s knowledge of the lesson is necessary (unforgettable)</td>
<td>Tutor’s knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Routinely, no lesson preparation</td>
<td>OL preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Full content is uploaded pre-session</td>
<td>OL preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Preparing lessons is normal task for students</td>
<td>OL preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Students discuss topic pre-session</td>
<td>Students’ discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Google answers any question for the tutor</td>
<td>Google helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Less chance of tutor’s embarrassment for lack of knowledge</td>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Search engines answer any question promptly</td>
<td>Google helpfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Invisibility facilitates tutor’s search for information</td>
<td>Advantage of invisibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Communication tools provide answers post-session</td>
<td>OL communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Diversity between OL learners</td>
<td>Individual differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Financial constraint</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Individual differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Irre sistibility of social network</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Distraction of surfing the internet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>OL does not meet student’s learning objective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Tutor’s lack of professional qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Tutor’s lack of academic qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Tutor’s lack of technical qualification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Inability to answer a question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Moving beyond the syllabus is a concern for the tutor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Tutor requires in-depth knowledge</td>
<td>Tutor knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Not answering a question is embarrassing</td>
<td>Embarrassment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### (Step 2) Coding

**Focused coding, re-examines step 1 codes and further focuses on the data**

- Planning and preparation
- Tutor knowledge/qualification
- Climate differences
- Helpfulness/distraction
- Coding
- Different
- Relaxed
- Friendliness
- Students’ teaching
- Maintaining deadline
- OL flexibility
- F2F rigidity
- F2F rigidity
- F2F rigidity
Overview for coding levels 1 and 2

(Step 3) Summary of focused coding for each page. It is helpful to do this for the first interview and try to recall the repeated ones in the following interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Comment</th>
<th>Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>OL and F2F are different</td>
<td>Different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tutor relaxed</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student relaxed</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>OL tutor friendliness</td>
<td>Friendliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Instructing students is the main tutor task</td>
<td>Students’ teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline is essential for OL students</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maintaining deadline is essential for OL tutors</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Step 4)
Main categories and subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Sub Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Tutor’s responsibilities in OL | • Students’ motivation  
|                  | • Guidance in discovery       
|                  | • Guiding students’ time and self-management |
|                  | • Maintaining of students’ motivation and engagement |
|                  | • What/when/to whom (content: teacher-student) is conveyed? |
| 2. Personal characteristics of online tutor | • Flexible  
|                  | • Open minded  
|                  | • Creative  
|                  | • Responsive  
|                  | • Motivated to learn  
|                  | • Self development |
| 3. Required knowledge of online tutor | • Technical knowledge  
|                  | • Soft skills knowledge  
|                  | • Pedagogical knowledge  
|                  | • Knowing learners |
| 4. Knowing learners | • Wearing students’ hat  
|                  | • Frequent online interviews  
|                  | • Face to face interviews |
| 5. Disagreement of the natural or acquired students’ ability to: | • Be connected in learning  
|                  | • Socially involved/isolated in OL  
|                  | • Motivated/engaged  
|                  | • Self and time management |
| 6. Tutor’s role: pre-course | • Knowing learners  
|                  | • Uploading resources |
| 7. Tutor’s role: following up | • Continuous students’ interviews  
|                  | • Feedback  
|                  | • Assigning tasks  
|                  | • Monitoring |
### (Step 5) Super theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super Theme</th>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Sub Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Online Tutors** | **1. Online tutor responsibilities prior the course** | Knowledge:  
- Technical knowledge  
- Soft skills knowledge  
- Pedagogical knowledge  
- Knowledge learners:  
  - Wearing students' hat  
  - Frequent online interviews  
  - Face to face interviews  
Tasks:  
- Uploading resources |
| | **2. Online tutor responsibilities within the course** | Feedback  
- Students' motivation  
- Guidance in discovery  
- Guiding students' time and self-management  
- Maintaining of students' motivation and engagement  
- What/When/To whom (contents-teacher-student) is centered?  
- Conducted students' interviews  
- Feedback  
- Assigning tasks  
- Monitoring |
| | **3. Online tutor responsibilities after the course** | **Benefits**  
- Student's knowledge assessment  
- Student's satisfaction assessment  
- Guiding tutor for the next step |
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