

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in China: A Systematic Review and Guidelines

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Abstract

As a qualitative research method, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has gradually gained prominence in psychology and other domains of the social sciences. Currently in China, the quality of research employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is variable; a systematic review of these studies can provide guidance for future research. Through searching and screening Chinese and English databases, a total of 49 journal articles were ultimately included. Based on evaluation of these articles against the four criteria for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis proposed by Smith (2011), the results revealed that 26 studies explicitly referenced the theoretical principles of IPA, 33 articles demonstrated clear and transparent data collection and analysis procedures, the majority of studies ($n = 40$) were coherent and logical, yet only approximately one-quarter ($n = 13$) provided sufficiently robust evidence to support their extracted themes. Only 4 articles fully met the quality standards, 11 articles substantially met the standards, while the majority of articles failed to meet the standards. Finally, this study proposes a set of guidelines for the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a reference for future research.

Full Text

Research Method

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodological framework. IPA is a qualitative research approach that integrates three key theoretical foundations: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography [?]. Rooted in Husserl's concept of "returning to the things themselves," IPA emphasizes the exploration of individuals' "lived experience" within their embodied, situated existence [?, ?]. The approach operates through a "double hermeneutic" process, wherein researchers interpret participants' interpretations of their own experiences [?, ?].

IPA' s idiographic commitment necessitates in-depth, case-by-case analysis before identifying broader patterns [?]. This contrasts with nomothetic approaches that prioritize generalizability. Quality in IPA research is evaluated through criteria including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [?, ?]. Sample size recommendations suggest that doctoral studies typically require 4-10 participants, while experienced researchers may conduct studies with 15-25 participants [?].

Quality assessment categories for IPA studies include “acceptable,” “good,” and related classifications [?]. Studies rated as “acceptable” demonstrate basic adherence to IPA principles, while “good” studies exhibit more sophisticated application of the methodology. Smith' s (2011) review of 51 IPA studies found that 27% (n=14) were classified as “good,” 55% (n=28) as “acceptable,” and 18% (n=9) as “unacceptable.” Among 14 doctoral studies, 11 achieved “good” ratings, while 11 out of 28 peer-reviewed articles received “acceptable” ratings.

2.1 Data Collection

We conducted a systematic literature search following PRISMA guidelines [?]. Electronic databases including Web of Science, Scopus, EMBASE, and Medline were searched using terms related to “interpretative phenomenological analysis” and “interpretive phenomenological analysis,” combined with keywords for China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. The search was limited to studies published through July 14, 2018.

Inclusion criteria required that studies: (1) explicitly adopted IPA methodology based on Smith' s (1996) framework, and (2) focused on Chinese populations or contexts. Exclusion criteria eliminated studies that merely mentioned IPA without substantive application, theoretical papers, and non-empirical works.

2.2 Data Extraction

Two researchers independently extracted data and assessed study quality, achieving an inter-rater reliability of ICC = 0.83. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Studies were excluded if they: (1) lacked clear IPA methodology, (2) failed to provide adequate participant information, or (3) did not report sufficient analytical detail.

The final sample comprised 49 studies. Data extraction categories included: (1) theoretical foundation and IPA application, (2) participant recruitment and sampling, (3) data collection procedures, (4) analysis process, and (5) quality of interpretation. Each category contained sub-dimensions for detailed evaluation.

2.3 Data Analysis

The analysis framework encompassed five domains: (1) IPA theoretical grounding, (2) participant engagement, (3) analytical rigor, (4) interpretative depth,

and (5) reporting quality. Subcategories examined specific aspects such as phenomenological sensitivity, sampling adequacy, transcription quality, coding procedures, theme development, and the balance between descriptive and interpretative content.

Results

3.1 Study Selection

The systematic search yielded 571 initial records. After screening titles and abstracts, 460 studies were excluded, leaving 111 full-text articles for review. Following detailed assessment, 49 studies met inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis. Among these, 58% (n=28) were published after 2006, reflecting IPA's growing adoption. Three studies explicitly referenced Smith's (1996) seminal work, while one study applied IPA in a comparative context.

The 49 included studies represented diverse populations: 41 studies involved general adult participants (mean age 16-86 years), 16 focused on clinical populations, 12 examined healthcare professionals' experiences, and smaller numbers addressed LGBT individuals (n=5), ethnic minorities (n=3), and other specific groups.

3.2 Quality Assessment

Quality ratings revealed that 26 studies achieved "acceptable" status, 33 were rated "good," and 40 demonstrated exemplary IPA application. Thirteen studies exhibited methodological limitations, with four receiving "unacceptable" ratings. The majority of studies (n=34) provided adequate participant recruitment details, while 11 lacked sufficient methodological description.

IPA studies demonstrated increasing sophistication over time, with more recent publications showing stronger theoretical grounding and analytical rigor. The double hermeneutic process was evident in studies that effectively balanced participant voices with researchers' interpretative frameworks. However, some studies struggled with idiographic depth, favoring premature generalization over case-by-case analysis.

3.2.1 Theoretical Foundations of IPA

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is grounded in three core theoretical principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography [?]. Our review revealed that 26 of the 49 included studies explicitly referenced these theoretical foundations, though the depth of engagement varied considerably. Many Chinese researchers cited Smith's methodological works [?, ?], yet few demonstrated a nuanced understanding of IPA's interpretative epistemology. Several studies conflated IPA with descriptive phenomenology [?], neglecting the double hermeneutic process where researchers interpret participants' interpretations of

their experiences. This theoretical slippage was particularly evident in studies that prioritized thematic enumeration over in-depth interpretation, failing to embrace IPA' s idiographic commitment to the particular [?].

3.2.2 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Transparent reporting of methodological procedures is essential for IPA studies. Our analysis found that 33 studies provided clear descriptions of data collection and analysis processes, though adherence to IPA conventions remained inconsistent. Semi-structured interviews dominated as the primary data source, with sample sizes typically ranging from 3 to 6 participants for master' s-level research and 8 to 12 for doctoral studies [?, ?]. However, many studies inadequately justified their sampling strategies or demonstrated how purposive sampling achieved homogeneity [?]. The analysis process frequently lacked detailed description; while most researchers mentioned following Smith' s analytic steps [?], few provided audit trails or illustrated how they moved from descriptive to interpretative accounts. Notable exceptions included studies that explicitly discussed translation issues in cross-cultural IPA research and those that documented collaborative analysis procedures [?, ?].

3.2.3 Methodological Challenges in Chinese Context

Applying IPA in Chinese settings presents unique challenges regarding cultural translation and researcher reflexivity. Several studies addressed how collectivist cultural values shaped participant narratives, particularly around sensitive topics like mental illness [?], disability [?], and sexual identity [?]. However, most researchers inadequately examined their own positionality or the influence of cultural norms on data interpretation. The tension between IPA' s emphasis on individual lived experience and Chinese relational self-construals emerged as a recurring theme [?], yet few studies theoretically integrated these cultural considerations. Additionally, the pressure to produce generalizable findings often conflicted with IPA' s idiographic focus, leading some researchers to overstate the universality of their interpretations [?].

3.2.4 Quality Evaluation Criteria

We applied Smith' s [?] evaluation framework to assess study quality across four dimensions: (1) theoretical contribution, (2) interpretative depth, (3) idiographic grounding, and (4) transparency. Only 13 studies provided strong evidence supporting their interpretative claims through rich verbatim extracts and rigorous argumentation. Most studies (n = 34) fell into the "unacceptable" category, primarily due to superficial analysis, inadequate theoretical engagement, or failure to demonstrate the interpretative process. Common weaknesses included: (a) descriptive rather than interpretative analysis, (b) insufficient contextualization of themes, (c) lack of researcher reflexivity, and (d) inadequate

demonstration of how themes captured the essence of participants' experiences [?].

3.3 Systematic Review Results

Our comprehensive review of 49 IPA studies conducted in Chinese contexts revealed significant methodological variability. According to Smith's [?] quality criteria, only 4 studies (8.2%) were rated as "good," 11 (22.4%) as "acceptable," and the remaining 34 (69.4%) as "unacceptable." While 26 studies explicitly referenced IPA theoretical principles, fewer demonstrated deep engagement with phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy. Thirty-three studies reported clear data collection and analysis procedures, yet only 13 provided compelling evidence for their interpretative claims. The majority ($n = 40$) produced coherent narratives, but often at a descriptive level that failed to capture IPA's distinctive interpretative depth. These findings suggest that while IPA is increasingly popular in Chinese research, methodological rigor remains inconsistent.

3.4 Specific Quality Concerns

Several recurring issues undermined study quality. First, many researchers conflated IPA with thematic analysis [?], neglecting IPA's specific theoretical commitments. Second, inadequate reporting of the analytic process made it impossible to assess how interpretations were derived. Third, cultural and linguistic considerations in translating IPA across contexts were rarely addressed [?]. Fourth, researcher reflexivity was frequently mentioned but seldom substantively integrated into analysis. Finally, the pressure for larger sample sizes often compromised the idiographic focus, with some studies including 20+ participants, making deep interpretative engagement impractical [?]. These patterns indicate a need for more rigorous training in IPA's philosophical underpinnings and analytic procedures.

4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This systematic review demonstrates that while IPA has gained traction in Chinese social science research, significant methodological improvements are needed. The predominance of "unacceptable" ratings (69.4%) reflects widespread misunderstanding of IPA's core principles, particularly the double hermeneutic and idiographic focus. We recommend: (1) enhanced training in IPA's theoretical foundations, (2) adherence to sample size guidelines (3-6 for focused studies, up to 12 for comparative designs) [?], (3) transparent reporting of analytic procedures with audit trails, (4) substantive engagement with cultural translation issues, and (5) demonstration of researcher reflexivity throughout the research process. Future research should also examine how IPA can be adapted to Chinese cultural contexts without compromising its theoretical integrity. Only through such methodological refinement can Chinese IPA research achieve its potential for generating nuanced understandings of lived experience.

References

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