

Specific design features of an interpretative phenomenological analysis study

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Abstract

Aim Report of an innovative use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to enable an in-depth study of the experiences of disengagement from mental health services of black men with diagnoses of severe and enduring mental illness.

Background The aim of IPA is to explore the sense that participants make of their personal and social worlds, while recognising the contribution of the researcher in interpreting the participants' interpretations of their experiences.

Review methods Seven black male research participants were recruited to the study. The components of the study that contribute to the body of literature on IPA research design include: an engagement stage in the research; a second clarifying interview; discussion of clarifying questions and emergent themes with two academic service-users; and a post-interview meeting to discuss the themes emerging from the research study.

Discussion The paper focuses on the contribution of the four specific design features of the study and how these enabled the researcher to engage with a population that is often deemed 'hard to reach'.

Conclusion The four distinctive methodological developments in the study emphasise the flexibility of IPA. These innovations assisted the researcher in developing a broader double hermeneutic that enabled reporting of the experiences of disengagement from mental health services of black men with diagnoses of severe and enduring mental illness.

Implications for research/practice The distinctive design of this study further emphasises the flexibility of IPA, while simultaneously showing fidelity to the core principles underlying the research methodology.

Keywords Interpretative phenomenological analysis, black men, disengagement, research design, severe mental health problems

Introduction

THE FOLLOWING paper discusses the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in research with black men diagnosed with severe mental health problems who have a history of disengagement from mental health services. Experiences of health and health care depend on people's ethnic backgrounds, and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds experience inequality and social exclusion against a number of different indicators (Gill *et al* 2007, Nazroo *et al* 2007, Robinson *et al* 2011, Mir *et al* 2013). 'Race' and ethnicities are mediated by geographic, spiritual,

social and cultural rather than biological differences (Bhopal 1997).

The term 'black', as opposed to 'Afro-Caribbean' or 'black and minority ethnic', is used in this paper because, although some of the research participants described themselves as 'Afro-Caribbean', all of them used the word 'black' to describe their ethnic identity.

The components of the study that contribute to the literature regarding IPA are a period of engagement with participants before research, the use of a second clarifying interview, discussion with two academic service-users and a post-interview meeting with

the participants. The combination of these features enabled the researcher to develop a broader and more dynamic double hermeneutic.

Research study design

The aim of IPA is to explore the sense that participants make of their personal and social world, while simultaneously acknowledging that the researcher's interpretation of the text is an important part of the development of a coherent research study (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008, Brooke and Horn 2010). IPA is an approach to qualitative research with an idiographic focus, intended to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Cohen *et al* 2007). IPA enables the identification of shared and unique experiences in a small group of research participants (Smith 1996, Fade 2004). IPA also enables the researcher to be reflexive and creative in their methodological approach. Reflexivity and creativity allow the researcher to have a greater understanding of how the populations under investigation make sense of their experiences (Smith *et al* 2009). A central idea of IPA is the 'double hermeneutic', which is described by Smith and Osborn (2004) as 'trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world'.

The methodological issues covered in this paper arose from a qualitative, phenomenological study that used semi-structured interviews to access participants' views and experiences. Potential research participants were approached by the researcher, who was accompanied by a clinician that the participants knew and trusted. These initial contacts were followed by up to three meetings between the researcher and the participants before the research interviews. There were two rounds of interviews, with the main interview being followed by a second 'clarifying' interview.

The first few interviews followed a semi-structured format informed by the aims of the study. As the fieldwork developed, this research interview was also informed by ideas expressed by the previous participants. The second 'clarifying' interviews were based on questions arising from the participants' first interviews and were intended to obtain more detailed, more descriptive accounts of participants' experiences of disengagement. Both rounds of interviews and the post-interview meeting were digitally recorded.

The two service-user reviewers, acting in an advisory capacity (Johnson 2012), reviewed the transcripts after both rounds of interviews. The purpose of the meeting with the service-user reviewers was to assist the researcher in thinking about the participants' experiences from as informed a position as possible. The participants were seen for a post-interview meeting, after all the interviews and

transcriptions were complete, and development of the themes was at an advanced stage. The purpose of this meeting was not to check the accuracy of the emergent research themes, or to provide further clarification of the ideas expressed, but to present the major themes from the research and discuss them.

The two service-user reviewers who were recruited had worked as academics at different universities, and therefore had the experience to offer meaningful feedback and insights into the transcripts. By virtue of their experiences as mental health service users, they were conversant with some of the issues discussed in the research. One reviewer was a white woman, the other a black man; both were over 50 years old.

Qualitative research of this kind does not seek to create a representative sample (Abrams 2010). In purposive sampling, the researcher recruits participants who have expertise with the phenomenon being studied by virtue of its being an integral part of their life experiences (Cohen *et al* 2007). Smith *et al* (2009) argued that most IPA studies involve small groups of homogenous participants. In this study, the sampling was of a group of highly marginalised, socially excluded black men. Small sample sizes are the norm in IPA (Brocki and Wearden 2006). Detailed, case-by-case analysis of the individual transcripts only enables the researcher to comment on the perceptions and understandings of a particular group, rather than to make any more general claims. Furthermore, IPA thrives on detailed analysis of the research data and if the researcher was to attempt to phenomenologically interpret large quantities of data, subtleties of meaning could be lost (Collins and Nicolson 2002).

The inclusion criteria for this study were:

- Users of a specific NHS trust in a West Midlands city in the UK.
- 'Black' ethnic origins.
- Male.
- Aged 18 years or over.
- English-speaking.
- Despite having a history of disengagement from mental health services, participants needed to have some level of engagement with the team treating them.

A total of 14 men were approached to take part in the research, seven of whom were interviewed. All seven were included in the data analysis. One man agreed to be interviewed and then withdrew his consent; another agreed to be interviewed but the researcher felt he was too unwell so did not interview him. One participant declined to be interviewed but then approached the researcher a few days later, asking to participate. One interview had to be repeated as the researcher believed after reading the transcript that the participant was too mentally unwell to have

given reliable evidence. The six people who declined to participate in the study did not have to provide reasons for so doing.

Sampling, access and recruitment Participants were recruited from the assertive outreach teams (AOT) in a city in the West Midlands, UK. AOTs were used because one of the criteria for recruiting clients to such teams is that they have established histories of disengagement from mental health services. The role of AOTs is to engage and maintain engagement with this client group (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 1998).

Just as members of this client group are clinically difficult to engage, they may also be hard to engage as research participants. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to work with the AOTs to be introduced to potential research participants and to help develop a working relationship with the participants. Engaging with the clinical teams before the participants echoed Wilson's (2006) and Abrams' (2010) successful work on building connections with gatekeepers to access 'hard to reach' populations. As Rooney *et al* (2012) highlighted, there are barriers, including participants' concerns about being labelled, when white British researchers recruit black research participants. All the participants in this study used drugs and this could have further compounded barriers to recruitment (Taylor and Kearney 2005). However, these barriers were surmountable using personalised approaches.

Ethical issues Both NHS and university ethical approval were attained before proceeding with the study. Participants were given a verbal and written explanation of what the research entailed and signed a consent form. There was a gap of about a week between the signing of the consent form and the first interview taking place. McIlpatrick *et al* (2006) suggested that one of the ethical considerations in qualitative research is that interviews can stimulate reflection, appraisal, catharsis and considerable self-disclosure. Researchers therefore need to take these into consideration and judge what provisions should be made for the participants' wellbeing.

The researcher was a clinical nurse specialist in mental health, with 14 years' clinical experience, so felt confident about identifying appropriate sources of help, if necessary. Additionally, the interview took place in a venue of the participant's choice and there was always someone else in the building, though not necessarily in the same room. That the researcher was white was not raised as an issue by any of the participants or by any of the people who declined to participate. It remains unknown whether the

participants would have given different responses to the researcher's questions had he been black.

The research abided by the principle of deductionism (Jenkins 2002), which is that readers should not be able to deduce who participants are from reading transcripts. All the research participants had their names changed in the transcripts to ones of their own choice. Any identifying features of their bibliographic information were altered to ensure that confidentiality was maintained throughout. Additionally, place names were changed and written in italics to highlight that they had been altered.

Participants were provided with nominal gift vouchers as compensation for expenses such as travel and the time they gave to the project.

Qualitative data analysis The existing literature does not provide a definitive account of how analysis should be undertaken (Smith *et al* 2009), and the guides to generating emergent research themes (Smith and Osborn 2004, Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008, Smith *et al* 2009, Pringle *et al* 2011) all share similar principles. The data analysis in this study was as reflexive and as participatory as possible, and included a level of interpretation from the researcher that was partly informed by the input from the service-user reviewers. The use of the clarifying interview also provided greater opportunity to reflect the experiences of the participants in the emergent themes.

As part of the interpretative process, it was essential that the researcher was critically reflexive about issues of power in the research relationship (Glynn 2012); in particular, examination of power dynamics involved in research led by a man who is white, male, a nurse, an academic and middle class. Such enabling features are in contrast to the research participants in this case, who regularly experience isolation, disadvantage, exclusion and powerlessness. A future paper will examine issues of power, ethnicities and research in greater depth.

Listening and re-listening to audio recordings and repeated readings of the transcripts were essential in stimulating reflection on the possible emergent themes and issues that needed clarification. Simultaneously, the in-depth discussion with the service-user reviewers further stimulated reflection about themes and issues.

While the clarifying interviews were being transcribed, notes were made about potential emergent themes, followed by phenomenological coding of the transcripts for both interviews. The phenomenological codes were grouped to enable identification and labelling of emerging themes and meanings in the text. This ongoing analysis was accompanied by further meetings with the service-user reviewers. Diagrams were created to assist with

the identification of themes with related sub-themes from the texts. Dialectically relating themes to excerpts of the text continued cyclically.

A summary table of themes for all the participants was produced, and helped to synthesise and integrate themes from the seven texts, leading to superordinate and subordinate themes being identified. Detailed, interpretative, reflexive, idiographic statements – the researcher's interpretations of what each participant was saying – were also written for each participant.

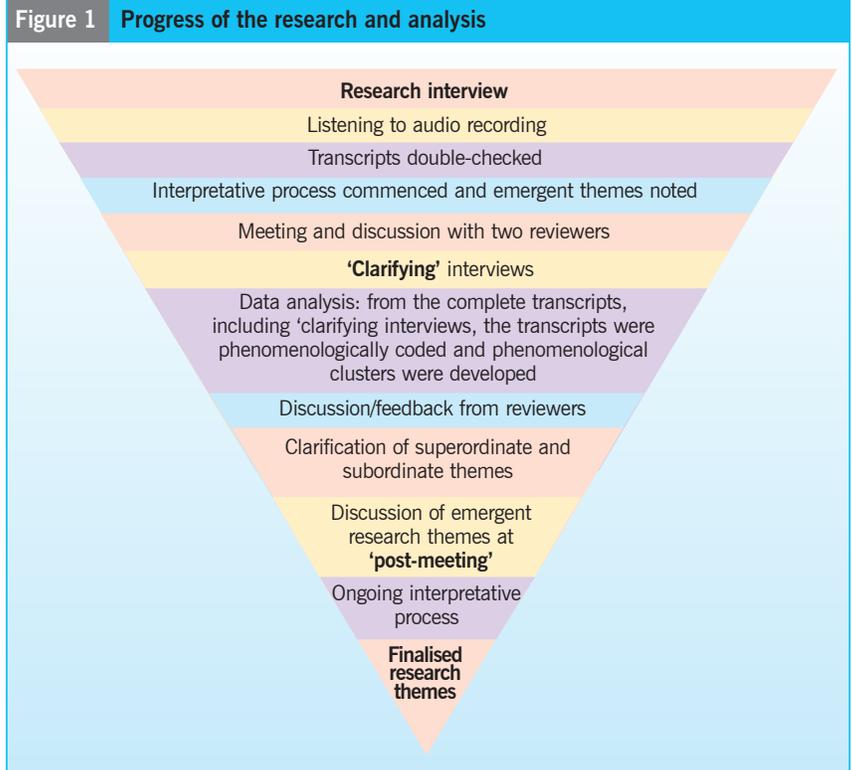
Figure 1 demonstrates the progress of the research and analysis.

Distinctive features of the study

Engagement before the interviews was an important factor in recruiting participants and potentially affected the richness of data gathered. It provided the opportunity for a relationship and rapport to develop between the researcher and the potential participants. As Flowers (2008) found, meeting a participant more than once enhanced the relationship between the researcher and the participant. Moreover, given the sensitive and personal nature of the subject matter being investigated, developing a relationship may also have helped participants share their private experiences (Parker *et al* 1991). It is of note that the one participant who refused to be involved in a second, clarifying interview did not have an engagement phase with the researcher.

Another distinctive feature of this IPA study was review of transcripts by two service-users, acting in an advisory capacity (Johnson 2012). Brocki and Wearden (2006) highlighted one of the limiting aspects of an IPA study as being the researcher's ability to reflect on and analyse the material that the interviews provide. Any help that the researcher receives with his or her reflection and analysis adds further depth to the study's findings. The role of the reviewers was different from the role of the study supervisors. The reviewers read the original transcripts and were encouraged to share their interpretations of the research data with the researcher. The study supervisors only heard and read the researcher's interpretation of the data, which was informed by the transcripts, his previous knowledge and the input from the reviewers.

With one exception, the participants were interviewed twice, the two interviews being conducted up to five months apart. Smith *et al* (2009) argued that most IPA studies involve small groups of homogenous participants who are interviewed once, but bolder research designs, as reported here, are optional. The precedent for interviewing participants twice in an IPA approach has been demonstrated by Clare (2003), Ashby (2007), and Barr and McConkey



(2007). Flowers (2008) highlighted the advantages of using multiple interviews with each participant in IPA studies: the researcher can become aware of lost opportunities and a second interview enables the researcher to gain greater clarity and richness from the interviewee.

When all the interviews and transcriptions were complete, all participants were invited to a post-interview meeting to enable them to hear and respond to a presentation regarding the emergent themes. Five participants attended. Undoubtedly, these discussions had an effect on the researcher's subsequent interpretation of the themes, for example regarding the ambivalent relationships that all participants had towards mental health services.

The combination of these design features enabled the researcher to complete a study with a population that is often deemed 'hard to reach'. Engagement enabled the researcher to recruit participants and helped them to open up during the interviews. The service-user reviewers broadened the researcher's thinking and provided much-needed perspectives. The clarifying interview allowed the researcher the opportunity to gain greater clarity and richness from the participants. The post-interview meeting enabled the participants to hear and discuss the emergent research themes, and these discussions affected the researcher's subsequent interpretations. It is of note that some of the participants thanked the researcher for taking the time to listen to them.

Conclusion

This paper reports a study design that addressed methodological challenges in undertaking a study on an important public health issue and exploring the experiences of a population often deemed by practitioners and researchers to be 'hard to reach'. The components of the study that contribute to the body of literature on IPA research design include: an engagement stage; working with

two service-user reviewers; a second, clarifying interview; and a post-interview meeting in which participants were invited to discuss the themes emerging from the study.

These developments all combined to assist the primary researcher to develop a more dynamic, double hermeneutic when reporting on experiences of black men who are disengaged from mental health services and experience severe mental health problems.

Online archive

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Conflict of interest

None declared

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