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IPA: The black swan of qualitative research

Melissa Dennison

Critics of IPA suggest that it is unscientific, lacking a complex subjectivity and displaying a promiscuous epistemology. This article aims to explore these criticisms, offering a response that is inspired by the language of fertility and ideas adapted from evolutionary science. As the swan is often seen as a symbol of fidelity, this article draws an analogy between the promiscuous behaviour of Australian Black Swans and IPA research. Within this frame, flirtations with other methodologies are described as being advantageous in that they encourage gene flow and a productive cross fertilisation of ideas. An intermingling of genes can open up new avenues of research, enhance reflexive awareness and allow the voice of others to be heard. Finally as IPA is happy to engage in flirtations and dalliances with diverse theoretical frames to enhance its longevity, this article suggests that a good match could be made between IPA and dialogical methods.

Introduction

This article draws inspiration from the language of evolution and is the product of a cross fertilisation of ideas. This seems apt for a piece that explores Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA, a methodology that revels in the language and symbolism of fertility (Sullivan, 2014).

IPA has been increasing in popularity in the past decade (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011) with a plethora of both theoretical and empirical texts. There is also a vast body of research emerging particularly within the fields of psychology and other cognate disciplines (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that IPA is now a well-established methodology within the realm of qualitative research (Smith, 2010). However, IPA has its critics, including Sousa (2008) who claims that it lacks both a clear, coherent theoretical and methodological foundation. Similar concerns are articulated by Giorgi (2011) who argues that IPA fails to satisfy recognised scientific criteria as it lacks fidelity to recognisable fixed steps. This has led to a sense of unease that an “anything goes” (Sousa, 2008, p.148) research culture may be emerging where the credibility and trustworthiness of research is increasingly diminished (Sousa, 2014).

Other criticisms are that IPA has an uncomplicated subjectivity and a promiscuous epistemology that plays fast and loose with research methods (Sullivan, 2014). Whilst these are legitimate concerns (Giorgi, 2011), this article will be seeking to both address and allay these by suggesting that a dalliance with other methodologies can be beneficial. Fresh blood is needed to enable new and novel forms of qualitative research to be developed (Parker, 2004). Therefore, a cross fertilisation of ideas could have benefits for IPA and qualitative research in general.

The symbolism of swan and the myth of fidelity

To begin cross fertilising, this article looks briefly at the love life of swans, a bird that has often been used as a symbol of love and sexual desire across many cultures. From ancient Greece and Rome to Celtic folklore, the symbol of the swan is often associated with meanings connected with fidelity. A quick search on the internet reveals a plethora of cultural artefacts from visual art to poems, which articulate this message. However, as iconoclastic as it may seem, this fidelity may be a romantic myth since many bird species ‘cheat’ (Hewitt, 2015). From song birds to fair or waterfowl, many species enjoy trysts, dalliances and dangerous liaisons when the opportunity presents itself. They do so as infidelity introduces new genetic material that enriches the gene pool, increasing the variety and diversity of the next generation.

Returning to human art and culture, swans can also symbolise the darker and messier side of sexual love expressing duplicity, deception and deceit. From the mythical tale of Leda and the Swan to Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake, the relationship between seduction and deception is ever present (Thomas, 2015). This reveals that the symbolism of the swan is both complex and multifaceted. The seductive nature of the black swan in particular has resonance for this article, as IPA is likened to the

Australian Black Swan. This is in response to Sullivan (2014) who described IPA as being promiscuous. Australian Black Swans are a species where the females are known to be notorious flirts who will cuckold their mate and convince them that any progeny are products of their union alone. Moreover, an analogy between the avian world and the world of academic research may be useful, particularly when exploring the dialogue that is currently unfolding around IPA. It may also be worth reflecting upon whether, just as in the avian world, a promiscuous approach to research methods could be advantageous.

This argument is compelling since qualitative research has not evolved from a single theoretical frame, but embraces pluralism and diversity (Flick, 2014). Now and then methods may mix unabashed, suggesting that promiscuity, gene flow and cross fertilisation are quite commonplace. This is significant as far as IPA is concerned as such commixing can be fruitful, enriching understandings that lead to the development of new insights. This is reflected in research by Spiers and Riley (2019) where IPA fraternised with thematic analysis in order to marry pragmatic with existential concerns, thus creating research with depth and breadth. Pluralism is becoming increasingly popular as indicated by recent research by Madill, Flowers, Frost, and Locke (2018). In this study, IPA dallied with a variety of methods including psychosocial narrative analysis, dialogical analysis and critical discursive psychology. It illustrated an intermingling between inductive and theoretical analytical approaches which enabled diverse and contrasting facets of the data to be brought to light (Madill et al., 2018). This cross fertilisation helped strengthen the research and bolster its impact.

Another criticism of IPA is that it is unscientific due to a lack of a clear method (Giorgi, 2011). Nevertheless, within an IPA frame it is the interpretative processes and intuitive insights articulated by the researcher rather than adherence to fixed steps that is pivotal (Smith, 2010). Therefore notions of prescribed methods seem misplaced. In addition, as different research questions require adopting different methodologies (Parker, 2004), being overly committed to a particular methodology or way of doing research can be problematic. Attachment to a single protocol does not necessarily lead to the production of high quality research, implying that good research requires flexibility (Smith, 2010).

A one size fits all approach to research can be restrictive. Moreover, being closely attached to purist concepts of fixed or correct methodological procedures risks reifying methodological concerns at the expense of developing bold and exciting avenues of research (Chamberlain, 2000). By remaining faithful to a specific methodological approach, imagination and creativity can be stifled.

Furthermore, the practice of science is culturally defined, socially embedded and intersubjective (Giorgi, 2010; Gould, 1981; Sousa, 2014). Just as the concept of fixed, unchanging devotion in swans could be a myth, so too is the notion of a single unchanged definition of science. As science continues to evolve, it is engaged in a dialogue with the world in which it finds itself, a dialogue that involves a cross fertilisation of ideas.

As this cross fertilisation continues, an intermingling of genes between divergent methodologies can produce novel methodological combinations. Exciting new combinations are already being conceived in the form of pluralistic qualitative research which is unconcerned with issues of incommensurability (Madill & Gough, 2008). By adopting this approach, research can be produced that is multi-layered, multi-perspectival, and multi-dimensional (Bradbury Jones et al., 2017; Frost et al., 2010; Madill et al., 2018).

Research that is happy to co-mingle need not be compromised on quality and integrity as critics imply (Sousa, 2014) since embracing different perspectives produces research that is rigorous and systematic, thereby increasing its trustworthiness and credibility (Frost et al., 2010). This indicates that research can benefit through a flirtation with different theoretical frames, viewpoints and methods of analysis (Tracy, 2010). This can be understood as analogous to the unfaithful Australian Black Swan where dalliances with others adds new genetic material to the gene pool and

aids survival. Within a research context, playing the field engenders novel ideas that enrich methodologies and augments longevity.

The promiscuous black swan of qualitative research methodologies

Whilst critics may accuse IPA of promiscuity or of being “up for it” (Sullivan, 2014, p.15), IPA is also a methodology that is shaped by a distinctive epistemological frame (Shinebourne, 2011). This consists of three elements: *phenomenological philosophy*, *hermeneutics* and a faithful commitment to an *idiographic* position. IPA is described as phenomenological since it is interested in developing knowledge of personal lived experience (Smith, 2011).

IPA is idiographic in that it embraces the particular (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Within this context IPA research is interested in the detailed exploration and analysis of specific cases in order to understand what it is like for a particular individual when experiencing a distinct phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Whilst idiographic research does not only refer to examination of single cases, the in-depth exploration of a unique case can challenge expectations and reveal unseen aspects of our world (Smith et al., 2009). This produces new insights which are conducive to a fruitful dialogue with other forms of research, thus adding to current theories (Shinebourne, 2011). Crucially, adopting an idiographic approach enables researchers to seek existential understandings of how individuals create meaning. This is vital for research that is interested in the meanings and insights that are shaped by the relationship between individuals and their lifeworld (Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2018).

A dalliance with Dialogism

Whilst qualitative research has long remained faithful to the notion that methodologies are separated by their epistemological commitments (Larkin & Seymour-Smith, 2014), an exchange of ideas can be beneficial. Interestingly, a mixed methods approach has been long accepted within qualitative research, and as Madill et al. (2018) state, there is room for pluralistic approaches that embrace a range of epistemologies. Sousa (2014) also argues for epistemological and methodological pluralism as this offers new opportunities for research that is interested in the meanings of human interactions. This process might already be taking place within IPA, where liaisons with diverse frameworks are now beginning to produce exciting new fruits (Sullivan, 2014). For example, IPA has flirted with social constructionism and has dallied with narrative methods and discourse analysis. As IPA has a penchant for single cases, then a date night with autoethnography could be fun.

Nevertheless, if IPA is seeking to mix its genes with other methodologies, then a good match might be dialogical methods. This could be a happy union since dialogical methods aims to situate experiential and subjective research at the heart of qualitative research through an exploration of truth as lived or *Pravda*. This echoes IPA’s commitment to understanding the lived experience of individuals (Madill et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2012).

As IPA is interested in exploring single cases in depth, then a cross pollination from dialogical methods might encourage researchers to look at how the dynamic relationship between self and others is expressed within each case. In particular, the ways in which the voices of others may constitute and create a sense of self may offer a fresh perspective. It is through the interactions between self and other that the self gives value both to itself, and to others (Sullivan, 2012).

This resonates with the concept of *Dasein* where being-in-the-world is explored through “being with others” (Horrigan-Kelly, Miller, & Dowling 2016, p.3). *Dasein* can be understood as a relational being where we exist alongside others. Within this context, the self is shaped through dialogical interactions with others in the world. As Frank (2005) claims, a voice is not unique, but embraces the words of others. Therefore an exchange of ideas between dialogical methods (Sullivan, 2012) and IPA could be beneficial. This may seem counterintuitive particularly since IPA is inductive whilst dialogical methods is described as theoretical in its approach to analysis (Madill et al., 2018). However, gene flow between these diverging frames offers new opportunities for IPA where

researchers are able to also seek out subtle, nuanced and imperceptible themes which might dwell within their research, allowing additional meanings to emerge. This can only enhance the quality of research (Madill et al., 2018).

Moreover, adopting a dialogical subjectivity may help in assuaging those who argue that IPA's subjectivity is uncomplicated and simplistic. Within a dialogical frame subjectivity is conceptualised as being socially complex, enabling the self to engage with itself and others (Sullivan, 2012). Through these interactions, individuals continuously author and re-author their own lives. A key part of this process involves the individual actively seeking to make sense of their lived experience to themselves as well as to others (Sullivan, 2012). This appears sympathetic to the aims of IPA and the double hermeneutic, where the researcher is actively engaged in making sense of how participants make sense of lived experience (Goldspink & Engward, 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

There is also a need for reflexive awareness due to the tensions that can arise from the dual role enacted by the researcher. As IPA is committed to the double hermeneutic, the researcher can be envisaged as being situated both inside and outside of their research (Goldspink & Engward, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). This implies that a researcher's prior lived experiences, taken for granted assumptions, world views and presuppositions influence their interpretations (Goldspink & Engward, 2018; Parker, 2004). Therefore, IPA research is not value free and it is vital that the researcher acknowledges this, and seeks to explore and address their fore-structures reflexively in order to create transparency (Goldspink & Engward, 2018).

A dalliance with dialogical methods may enhance reflexivity in additional ways by giving voice to the other and encouraging diverging, multiple perspectives to be heard. These varied perspectives may nourish deeper phenomenological insights which in turn increase transparency and rigour (Goldspink & Engward, 2018). This is also timely as current research by Larkin et al. (2018) aims to facilitate an exploration of more complex experiential phenomena between cases through this multiperspectival lens.

The strengths of multiperspectival IPA are that, instead of producing a one-sided account of a relationship, the voices of others are also articulated. This suggests that an intermixing of genes with dialogical methods is particularly beneficial for research that is interested in intersubjective, relational experiences. Moreover, the exploration of shared experience is vital in developing phenomenological insights (Smith & Eatough, 2019). Within this relational context, individuals can be imagined as giving shape and form to one another through words (Sullivan, 2012).

Significantly, within a dialogical frame there is no distinction between inner or outer dialogues. Words become increasingly compelling through a process whereby the meanings of others are considered, questioned and viewed from divergent perspectives (Madill et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2007). As this process unfolds, multiple dialogues may be expressed that generate meanings which are not fixed or determinate, but capable of constantly shifting and changing (Madill et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2007). Moreover, words are spoken that have complex, divergent or double meanings (Sullivan, 2007). These meanings could reveal subtle moments of hesitation, feelings of reservation or defensiveness and fear (Madill et al., 2018). Additionally, threshold moments may arise which contain meanings of special significance, for instance, when life changing decisions are made or where long held views are turned on their heads (Sullivan, 2012).

A union between IPA and dialogical research seems advantageous in producing a love child with a complex dialogical subjectivity that acknowledges the shifting boundaries and dynamic interplay between self and others (Sullivan, 2012). Furthermore, this love child may consider how, as these boundaries shift, they continue to shape the social and relational aspects of the self. These are new avenues that have particular relevance to idiographic research that is interested in how individuals experience their world. This can blend notions of depth with breadth, enabling a rich exploration of relationships between self and other to unfurl where multiple voices and pluralistic perspectives can be expressed. By embracing these multiple voices and perspectives, IPA can produce research with increased substance, impact and rigour (Larkin et al., 2018).

In conclusion, IPA is a highly adaptable methodology (Pringle et al., 2011) that is happy to flirt with different theoretical frames and viewpoints (Larkin & Seymour-Smith, 2014). As the Australian Black Swan reveals, being promiscuous can be a strength, creating opportunities for cross fertilisation that open up new avenues for research and produce novel understandings. Rich analytic insights also emerge as divergent methods are sensitive to different and distinct aspects of the data which enhances rigor (Madill et al. 2018).

Consequently, this article has suggested that dialogical methods would make a suitable match as it enables the blending of theoretical insights with the interpretative characteristics of IPA. Additionally, as researchers are in the world with others, this union inspires a process of interpretation and re-interpretation between self and others that aids reflexivity and nurtures a multiplicity of meanings (Sullivan, 2012). Finally, this liaison has the potential to create research that is both eloquent and persuasive, which increases its longevity, credibility, and impact (Larkin et al., 2018; Madill et al., 2018).

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