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## **Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for Organisational Research**

### **The Experience of Identity: Competing Discourses of Normality**

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## **INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS (IPA)**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is one of the best known and most commonly used qualitative methods in psychology, not only in the UK but increasingly in other parts of the world, too. Its origins are in health psychology, and most of the published IPA work is on topics related to the experience of illness, such as chronic pain, cancer and heart disease (Smith, 2011). The second largest domain for IPA work is clinical and counselling psychology, where topics include addiction and eating disorders (Smith, 2011). To date, however, there has been relatively little IPA work in the field of organisational research, and its sub-genres of work/organisational psychology, occupational psychology and organisation studies.

IPA is interested in the systematic exploration of personal experience. Like other experiential methods, it draws on the philosophy of phenomenology for both its central concerns and its approaches, both the 'what' and the 'how'. In particular, it is inspired by the strand of phenomenology concerned with hermeneutics, which is associated most closely with the philosophical work of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Hermeneutic approaches see human beings as inherently interpretative, sense-making creatures; IPA is interested in examining the nature, processes and consequences of this sense-making.

One way of understanding these two core concepts - personal experience and sense-making - is to think about the former as the 'P' in IPA, that is, the phenomenon under investigation, and the latter as the 'I', that is, the ways in which people make sense of, or interpret, that experience. Another way of thinking about this relationship is by drawing on the concept of 'attitudes'. The 'phenomenological attitude' is an idealised state in which things appear in their 'raw', pre-intellectualised being. This is contrasted with the 'natural attitude', which is the state in which we encounter things when we make sense of them, bestow meaning on them, and give them names, labels and definitions. In practical terms, this means that IPA researchers are interested in two key things: firstly, the phenomena of the life-world, or 'what is it like?'; and secondly, the interpretation of these phenomena, or 'what does it mean?'. IPA scholars design their research questions in ways that are intended to tease out both these aspects of experience.

There is an extra complexity to the 'I' of IPA's interpretation. This is because, in an IPA research encounter, there are two people doing the interpreting. The participant is trying to make sense of the phenomena of his/her experience, and the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making. In IPA, this twin-faceted interpretation is called the

'double hermeneutic' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). The participant's sense-making is considered first order, whilst the researcher's sense-making is second order.

IPA is normally used with semi-structured interviews with individual participants. This is because we need to collect rich data in order to begin to understand the complexities of human experience, and IPA participants are therefore given the opportunity to tell their own stories, develop their own ideas, and express their own concerns. Other data collection methods have been combined with IPA's analytic technique, such as focus groups and participant observations, but these need special care to ensure that they do not result in a loss of experiential richness or focus on the individual human being.

### **Using IPA**

In this section I provide an overview of the key stages in an IPA analysis. I follow the same numbering that appears in the Smith et al. (2009) textbook, so that readers can easily navigate between this chapter and the description there. IPA is not intended to be a prescriptive rule-book for how each and every analysis must be done. Rather, these are general guidelines, which relate both to the processes of research (e.g., moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative) and to the principles of research (e.g., a desire to understand the participant's point of view). Researchers using IPA are encouraged to use these guidelines to engage sensitively and open-mindedly with their topic, their participants and the context of their research.

#### ***Step 1: Reading and re-reading***

The first step involves immersing oneself in the data. Since most IPA data are in the form of transcribed interviews, this involves a close reading and re-reading of the transcripts. If the audio-tapes are in your possession, you might find it helpful to listen to these tapes whilst you are doing this reading. Hearing the participants can add texture and nuance to the written words on the page. My advice is not to underestimate the importance of step 1 (and not to be afraid to go back to step 1 even after going through the other steps). Each re-reading can throw up new and interesting things, and deepen our engagement in our participants' life-worlds.

***Step 2: Initial noting***

This step involves exploring the semantics and the use of language in an exploratory and curious way. Researchers pause to reflect on and note points of interest, what they think the participant is saying, and what associations this might trigger. It is useful to think about whether a particular point that the participant is making seems to flow with narrative coherence from what has come before, or whether there is any sense of disruption to that coherence. Whilst this is close to being a free textual analysis, it must stay close to the data. Our aim is to try to understand what the participant is saying, not use what he or she is saying as a springboard for our own personal reflections on a topic.

***Step 3: Developing emergent themes***

The basic building block of IPA work is the theme. So, step 3 involves converting the initial notes into themes which represent some sort of crystallisation - a kind of psychological gist - of what is happening in each passage of data. Our aim is to derive themes which are particular enough to be grounded, i.e., to be clearly traceable back to the raw data, whilst also being abstract enough to be conceptual, i.e., to begin to move towards the language of theory. Within a single interview transcript, you may find that the same theme suggests itself for several different passages of data.

***Step 4: Searching for connections across themes (within-participant patterning)***

Once you have crystallised the data into a list of themes within the transcript, the next step is to move from a chronological ordering (based on the order in which they emerged in the interview) to some other form of patterning which will organise and summarise your data. The aim is to come up with a structure or Gestalt which highlights what you think are the most significant aspects of the participant's experience, and begins to suggest possible theorisations of it. I will cover several common patterning techniques later in this chapter.

***Step 5: Moving to the next case***

IPA is sometimes used with just a single case, and this is perhaps the 'purest' way of honouring IPA's commitment to idiography, that is, a focus on the particular. More often, however, IPA is used with small samples. So, step 5 of the process involves moving onto the next participant's transcript and repeating steps 1 to 4 above. The aim is try to be as open-minded, curious and painstaking with subsequent cases as you were with the first

transcript. This means having to sort of forget what you heard during a previous interview and what you did with the data analytically.

### ***Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases***

Once we have a thematic Gestalt for each individual participant, the next step is to look for the structures or patterns for the group as a whole. This means looking for two things, both what the accounts seem to have in common and what makes them different. It will depend on the particular research question which of these will take priority for specific projects, but the most persuasive IPA work manages to represent both these qualities, that is, both the shared and the unique. A common theme is one which features in most - not necessarily all - of the participants' accounts (see Smith, 2011, for guidelines on thematic prevalence).

### ***Step 7: Taking it deeper: Influences on interpretation***

Interpretation is not a simple task with an obvious end-point. Instead, researchers can go to different levels or depths of interpretation, some more obvious than others, some more speculative than others. These can involve several iterations of steps 1 to 6 above, drawing on different interpretative resources and inspirations each time. This is an important part of how I use IPA for organisational research, so I see it as a core part of the method (step 7). It is at this stage that a deeper interpretative engagement can start to really make sense of the participant as a 'person-in-context' (Larkin et al., 2006). I will say more about this later in the chapter, and illustrate this step using data from my own research.

## **MY CASE EXAMPLE**

### **Introduction to the study**

I will now use an example from my own research to illustrate the use of IPA in the real world setting of organisational life. This example is taken from a project on 'working carers', a label which is often applied to those who combine paid employment with unpaid care-giving, usually for an elderly relative. With our ageing population, an increasing number of employees fall into this category. According to Carers UK<sup>1</sup>, every day another 6,000 people

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/press-releases/facts-and-figures>

take on a caring responsibility, with over three million people in the UK already combining work and care (roughly one in eight people in employment). So, if we want to understand people's experiences of organisational life, including the things that nurture or hinder their career development, this is increasingly going to mean exploring how they balance the demands of a career with those of domestic commitments other than childcare.

This project involved talking to working carers in the public sector in the UK. The organisations for which my participants work are considered progressive in that they offer special carers' leave (paid and unpaid) as part of a suite of 'family-friendly' policies. These progressive policies are extremely visible in their office buildings, in both public and private spaces and on intranet and external web-sites. My participants are involved in a range of caring relationships: most care for an ageing parent; one cares for a disabled (young adult) child; one cares for a disabled sibling; and one cares for a vulnerable friend. Despite these differences in caring relationships, I treated them as a homogenous cohort because of their *self-definitions*. All belong to a working carers' support group, and it was exclusively through this group that I recruited them for my study. This support group offers regular meetings, individual counselling and the opportunity for information-sharing, networking and getting one's voice heard.

### **Why was IPA the appropriate method to use?**

There were several reasons for my choice of IPA for this project. I was specifically interested in the subjective experience of being a working carer, that is, what it is like to be a living, breathing, feeling human being in that situation, and how meaning might be derived from it. Very little research had been conducted into the experience of carers as a topic for *organisational* research (in contrast to the rich heritage of care research in nursing, e.g., Benner, 1994; and education, e.g., Noddings, 2003); so I felt it was important to pick an exploratory method, which would support my genuine curiosity about what my participants were experiencing, rather than being constrained by assumptions about what I would find.

Experiential methods are relatively uncommon in organisational research. Researchers of organisational life have tended not to have the subjective human being as their central 'unit of analysis'. Indeed, Nord and Fox (1999) consider the individual employee to be the 'great disappearing act' in organisational research, and suggest that the 'baby' of agency, subjectivity and experience may have been thrown out with the 'bathwater' of essentialism and individualism. As an exploratory experiential method, IPA provided me with an excellent way to try to encourage the individual human being to reappear.

My choice of method was also directly related to my topic of care, which led me towards phenomenological methods in the Heideggerian tradition. For Heidegger (1927/1962), the fundamental human condition is being-in-the-world. This in-the-world-ness refers to engagement and concern rather than location, that is, to our enmeshment in the social, cultural and practical fabric of life. As Cooper (1996, p.25) puts it, "I am not in-the-world as a pea in a pod, but more in the sense that someone is in the world of motor-racing or fashion". In this view, it is impossible to detach ourselves from our cultures and systems of meaning-making to see things 'as they really are'. Instead, the world is meaningful only from *within* those cultures and systems, that is, the meaning of a particular experience is inseparable from the *context* of that experience. At the heart of this vision of the contextualised, grounded, engaged human being lies Heidegger's depiction of care. Care is about *mattering* - being both of-concern and of-matter. It is fundamental to our very existence.

## **APPLYING THE IPA APPROACH**

Here I will describe how I used IPA for data collection and initial analysis (steps 1 to 6), and then began to interpret my findings within a specifically organisational framework (step 7). The interpretative framework I used for step 7 was 'critical sense-making', an approach developed by Helms Mills, Thurlow and Mills (2010). I will explain how and why I did this after I have gone through steps 1 to 6.

In saying that I used IPA for data collection and initial analysis and 'critical sense-making' for deeper interpretation, I do not want to imply a rigid divide between these phases of analysis, or to suggest that IPA cannot be used on its own for organisational research. Rather, I want to share my positive experience of IPA's procedural flexibility and hermeneutic orientation to suggest that it can be successfully combined with other theoretical frameworks to make sense of the context as well as the nature of people's experiences of their organisational worlds.

### **Data collection**

For this project, I interviewed eight women between the ages of 48 and 62, representing a range of seniorities, from administrative through to middle management. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a schedule of questions I had developed in advance. There were some questions designed to tease out the 'what is/was it like?' of their experiences (the

'P'), and other questions designed to elicit the 'what does/did this mean?' and 'how do/did you make sense of that?' (the 'I'). An example of the first type is 'what is it like - or how does it feel - when you talk about your mother?'. An example of the second type is 'how do you prioritise between doing things for your job and doing things for your mother?'.

The interviews were held in a quiet place chosen by the participants themselves. Some preferred to have the interview conducted away from the workplace and invited me to their homes; others chose to be interviewed in a meeting room at work. I was aware of the possibility that participating in these interviews might evoke strong emotions, however sensitively I tried to frame the questions. Consequently, I began each interview by outlining the availability of counselling services upon which we could draw should we need to.

As you will probably be able to gauge from the extracts below, the interviews contained much that was intimate and painful. Two of the participants cried during their interview; two others discussed suicide; two discussed assisted suicide; and all of them seemed to struggle at times to hold it together. In all cases, my instinct was to try to comfort them myself - to the best of my ability - rather than bring any external counsellor into the encounter. All the participants insisted that they wished to continue when I asked them whether they would like to take a break or stop altogether. I was mindful of the need to leave participants 'whole' by the end of the research encounter, and tried to ensure with my final questions and discussion-points that they were not left feeling too drained by the experience. I felt this especially acutely for those women I interviewed during their lunch-break, because I was conscious that they would have to go straight back to work after their interview with me.

## **Data analysis**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For each interview transcript, I followed the standard analytic approach of creating two columns, one each side of the participant's transcribed text. The right hand column was used to note points of semantic and linguistic interest, to log associations that the text threw up, and to start to unpack what I thought the participant was saying (step 2). I used the left hand column to develop these initial notes into the basic building block of IPA, namely themes (step 3).

The next step was to look for connections and patterns amongst the themes in order to suggest some sort of shape or Gestalt to the findings, and synthesise or crystallise them into a summary format (step 4). There are several typical ways of doing this (table 1), and each project may suggest new ones.

**Table 1: Typical patterning techniques**

<b>Abstraction</b>	This is the most common technique, involving the development of higher-level or 'superordinate' themes which serve to cluster a number of individual themes under a single heading - a bit like an umbrella.
<b>Polarization</b>	This means structuring the themes according to the ways in which they are different from one another in a binary sense of 'on the one hand x; on the other hand y'. Polarization is especially useful where there are both positive and negative aspects to an experience.
<b>Contextualisation</b>	This technique involves clustering themes around some sort of event or milestone, such as the onset or termination of a particular life experience. Such events might be concrete happenings, or they might be more subjective decision-points or moments that trigger some sort of psychological transition.
<b>Function</b>	This technique involves thinking about the role played by certain themes within the participant's account of an experience, such as how he/she is defending, accounting for, even undermining some aspect of the story.

Based on Smith et al. (2009)

Once I had developed an initial thematic Gestalt for each of the participants individually, I moved towards a cross-case analysis (steps 5 and 6). This involved looking for the patterns across all eight accounts, and developing a provisional thematic summary for the group as a whole.

### **Illustrative findings**

I do not have the space in this chapter to present all the results of this analysis. Instead, I will focus on a particular sub-set of themes that seemed to concern participants' sense-making about identity. Since the concept of identity features strongly in the IPA corpus, it is perhaps not surprising that my analytic efforts were directed this way. Using the technique of abstraction, I initially developed a superordinate theme based on the notion of 'Uncertainty about Identity'. This was designed to reflect the oscillations of my participants' identity work - how they were weaving between different versions of who they were, who they had been, and who they wanted to be. It was as if the participants were trying out a range of different identities for size; no single identity was right all the time, but all felt right on different occasions.

### ***Being a proper carer***

One aspect of participants' 'Uncertainty about Identity' was their fear that they were not proper carers. I will illustrate this using an extract from Tessa's interview. Tessa is the primary carer for her brother, who was born with hydrocephalus ('water on the brain') and has profound learning and social difficulties. I should preface this extract with a reminder that all these participants had already labelled themselves as 'working carers' insofar as they were all active members of the working carers' support group, through which they had been recruited. So, on one level, Tessa does define herself in terms of care, with all its attendant associations. On another level, however, identification with care is a source of considerable uncertainty. Because she finds her brother difficult to handle, her identification as carer becomes problematic. Her sense-making involves probing the parameters for eligibility for identification, testing the plausibility of fit between the label and her sense of herself:

***Tessa:*** *'I wish I could call myself 'carer'...'cause that sounds a caring word! But sometimes he has driven me totally crazy!...So caring is too nice...That's why I think, am I a carer? Carer for me is...a bigger...It's a different word! What do you think? [addressing me] Am I a 'carer'? You have come across all sorts of people doing this. What do you think?'*

Such ambivalence about identity has a number of psychological and material implications. If she could find a way to feel comfortable with the label, and allow herself to be classified as such by her organisation, then she would qualify for paid carers' leave, which would make it much easier for her to cope. However, there are a number of things getting in the way of identification with care. One of these - as Tessa's quote suggests - is the potency of our assumptions about what care *ought* to be, that is, what a proper carer is like. The normalised view of care involves very positive associations of kindness, gentleness, patience, etc, such as the view emerging from the care literature in nursing and education. For instance, Benner (1994) sees care as the translation of love from the private to the public domain; and Noddings (2003) considers care as the universal basis of morality. So, it is perhaps not surprising that these participants should have such a strong and positive sense of what care ought to look and feel like; and if they cannot always manage to be loving and kind and gentle, then they are not proper carers.

Within the familial context, there is a sense that being a proper carer is usually a daughterly role. If it cannot be daughterly, then it must be motherly. Either way, it must be asexual, that is, intimate only in the way that a medical nurse might be. For several of my participants, there are suggestions that these acceptable boundaries of intimacy are being breached; and

when this happens, anxieties about being the right sort of carer are infused with anxieties about being the right sort of woman.

This is particularly marked with Elisabeth, who cares for a son - now in his early 20s - with Myalgic Encephalopathy (ME). The fact that she is caring for a child, not a parent, makes her brand of care feel especially challenging, because it is a distortion of the normal generational cycle, but also because it creates a relationship that feels too intimate:

***Elisabeth:** 'If you're looking after an elderly parent, you can expect to outlive them, can't you? But this is the rest of my life! The rest of my life!...I don't know how I knew that word [carer], but I did...because it was just so different from what you'd normally do for a 19 year old...'*

*And he owns me. It is a symbiotic relationship...And it's wrong really, because he's my son! Sometimes I have thought about suicide...Perhaps we might have to go together, a suicide pact type of thing. The Mill on the Floss, it ends with "in their death, they were not divided", and that was a brother and sister...So, "in our deaths we will not be divided"...It might end up just me and [her son]...stuck together! Like glue! And it doesn't seem right that it should be that way round. He's my son! Not my husband!'*

Elisabeth is deviating from the proper carer role not only because she is not always kind enough (like Tessa), but also because what she is doing feels wrong. In a sense, care is turning her into a *lover* rather than a mother - '*He's my son! Not my husband!*' Indeed, her whole narrative is inflected with a strong sense of judgement and punishment, with both Elisabeth and her son serving a life sentence for some unspecified crime that has been committed. It is striking, for instance, how often his health deteriorates just when she is trying to enjoy some independence, such as going on honeymoon with her second husband. In a sense, she feels rebuked or punished for these attempts at independence, and for her confused sense of womanhood.

So, participants want to be able to identify as carers, because this would give them institutional and interpersonal recognition and help them to make sense of the ways in which their lives have been changed by care. However, the public discourses of care are so powerfully associated with goodness, purity and altruism that participants are perhaps bound to fall short of this ideal. When they do, it creates a sense of bewilderment over who they feel they are and what they feel they are doing with their lives.

### ***Being a proper employee***

But my participants' identity work is even more complex than this. It is not just the difficult relationship with discourses of care that fuels their uncertain sense of themselves. Their concerns are also linked to another version of what one ought to be, namely, what it means to be a proper employee. Indeed, their anxieties are exacerbated by the sense that the better they get as carers, the worse they will become as employees. Care is associated with the stigma of *absence*, whether literal absence or the absence of not being fully engaged ('presenteeism'). These participants all worry that people at work will think they are not pulling their weight, taking advantage of colleagues' and the organisation's good will.

For Tessa, anxieties about identification are linked to her wanting to avoid the charge of unreliability, but also specifically to the fear of the taint of mental illness, particularly if there is any hint that this might be self-inflicted. Her brother may have a physical disability, but it is exacerbated by his alcohol and drug abuse. For her, there is a pecking order for the care conditions that deserve sympathy and recognition from colleagues:

***Tessa:*** *'It depends on what you are caring for... Say you've got a disabled child... or maybe a relative with cancer or... somebody who's been in a car accident... which wasn't self-imposed... It just seems more... on a scale of things that people accept... As soon as you mention a problem with alcohol or drugs, it's not seen as accepted, maybe, as, say, spina bifida or I don't know... There's a stigma, isn't there?'*

Being a carer marks participants out as different to other people at work, and this difference is especially shameful if there is any hint of mental disorder or self-induced difficulty. So, if participants can distance themselves from identities of care, they can reconnect with identities of professionalism, reliability and sanity.

In this snapshot of my participants' data, I am trying to illustrate how multi-faceted their experiences of identity seem to be. Their uncertainties and anxieties concern both their carer-identity and their employee-identity, and the ways in which these seem bound to collide. Since much of this relates to the specific context of organisation, I wanted to explore how this context might be influencing and infusing their experience and to linger longer with the interpretative process (step 7). I will explain how and why in the next section.

### **Taking it deeper: Using 'critical sense-making' for interpretative framing**

Earlier I talked about the IPA research subject as a 'person-in-context'. Context in this sense is not an add-on which provides some kind of background colour. To revisit Cooper's (1996) imagery, context is not the pod from which a pea could be extracted and examined separately. Instead, context is inextricably interwoven with, and constitutive of, the experience itself; just as 'being in the world of fashion' can only be understood by reference to both the being and the fashion. So, researching the 'person-in-context' involves considering how that person is making sense of the practices, possibilities and expectations around them, including institutional and societal norms. This is a kind of context-of-ideas.

Another way of talking about this context-of-ideas is to use the notion of discourse and to connect, in particular, with the way discourse is developed by Foucault - a very influential figure in organisational scholarship. A Foucauldian definition of discourse refers to the way in which certain meanings, ideas and practices come together to produce a particular version of events or body-of-knowledge (see Burr, 2003, for alternative definitions of discourse in psychology). Within IPA research, what we are probably most interested in is the *effects* of such versions of events on participants' sense-making. This means examining experience not as something separate from its institutional setting, but rather, as something shaped by that setting and absorbed into the person's sense of self.

It may strike readers as surprising that I am talking about discourse in a chapter about IPA, given that some people map the terrain of qualitative psychology in terms of an either/or choice between experiential and discursive methods (Reicher, 2000). In the world of work and organisation, however, our experiences are profoundly infused by popular and official conceptions of how things - and people - are supposed to be. It therefore enriches our interpretative work to be open to discourse as this context-of-ideas. This is not experience *versus* discourse, but rather, experience *of* discourse; we are studying what it is like to live with several, potentially contradictory, versions of selfhood.

A set of discourses that are very familiar in organisational research relate to the concept of normality. Discourses of normality are interesting to organisational scholars, because they are seen as a form of power. This is not the kind of power that comes through positional, role-based authority such as having the job of CEO. Rather, this is a power that operates more surreptitiously, through the way that some versions of events have more sway than others, some ways of discussing things have greater traction than others, and some ways of being feel more natural and appropriate than others. Perhaps the most potent discourse of

organisational normality involves the idea of the ‘perfect employee’. Modern Western management theory has been dominated by metaphors of man and organisation as machines, so the ‘perfect employee’ is characterised by efficiency and reliability. It is no wonder that organisational scholars have remained relatively silent about feelings, bodies and any other kind of ‘imperfection’.

Returning to my study, initially I kept my analysis at the level of ‘Uncertainty about Identity’, and developed my theoretical arguments using Social Identity Theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1978). However, this theorisation did not feel as if it was capturing the oscillations, contradictions and ambivalences of my participants’ identity work. In particular, I was not doing justice to the way in which participants benchmarked their identity against perceptions of normality. So, to make sense of this identity benchmarking, I looked for a way to frame a deeper interpretation and ground it in an organisational context. The framework I used was ‘critical sense-making’, an approach developed by Helms Mills et al. (2010), based on the work of Weick (1995). Weick proposes that organisational sense-making is a dynamic process of meaning-making whereby “people create their environments as those environments create them” (Weick, 1995, p.34). At the heart of ‘critical sense-making’ is the concept of identity, which has a number of key properties (table 2).

**Table 2: Properties of ‘critical sense-making’**

The experience of identity is...
Driven by plausibility, not accuracy
Context-specific
Interwoven with power relations
Ongoing, not static or definitive
Influenced by discourses of normality

‘Critical sense-making’ directs a spotlight towards the power of discourses of normality to shape people’s interpretations of their lives and their identities. These normalisations are not static, but shift across time and place. For instance, fifty years ago, the ‘normal’ corporate employee would have been male, supported by his ‘normal’ wife at home. Twenty years ago, the ‘normal’ corporate employee would have been office-based, whereas now many people work from home. Today’s demographically ‘normal’ employee is increasingly

one who has some form of caring responsibility. But the *discourses* of normality do not seem to be keeping pace with these *demographics* of normality, partly because the notion of the ‘perfect employee’ as full-time and single-mindedly, super-humanly dedicated to work is so obdurate.

I used this framework to structure my findings, reflecting two interrelated senses in which participants’ versions of identity do not always gel (table 3). The first is a conflict between ‘who I am supposed to be’ and ‘who I feel I am’ (the ‘versus’ on the horizontal axis). The second is a conflict between the various different versions of ‘who I am supposed to be’ (the ‘versus’ on the vertical axis in column one).

The patterning approach I used for this was a version of the polarization technique. Whereas polarization can be applied to all sorts of oppositions (good versus bad; past versus present; mind versus body, etc), here it emerges as a useful way of capturing the polarization between what is and what ought to be. In other words, it can be used to reflect the ways in which the experience of identity is influenced by perceptions of normality. (For a more detailed discussion, see Tomkins and Eatough, 2014).

**Table 3: Competing discourses of normality**

<i>Who I am supposed to be</i>		<i>Who I feel I am</i>
<i>A proper, normal carer is:</i>	<b>versus</b>	<i>I am:</i>
Nice, kind, gentle, loving		Not always nice, kind, gentle or loving
The right kind of woman		The wrong kind of woman
<b>versus</b>		
<i>A proper, normal employee is:</i>	<b>versus</b>	<i>I am:</i>
Reliable and steady		Stigmatised by absenteeism or ‘presenteeism’
Dissociated from mental illness		Stigmatised by association with mental illness

## Creating Connections and Conversations

This polarization technique based on discourses of normality is, of course, just one possibility amongst many. It is certainly not the only way to make sense of identity data in an organisational context; indeed, researchers should not be so primed for it that they compromise IPA's inductive sensibility. However, it is an interpretative framing which facilitates both a rich engagement with the data and a connection with the ideas that have currency in organisational research. As such, it helps me to dialogue with colleagues who are more familiar with Weick's sense-making and Foucault's discourse and power than with the tenets of phenomenology. Working with common ideas and translatable frameworks generates greater potential for cross-fertilisation of ideas, whilst staying true to IPA's concern to make sense of participants' life-worlds.

If we think of experience and discourse as mutually illuminating, rather than mutually exclusive, we have a route towards understanding the 'whole person'. Leading organisational scholars are calling for just such a 'whole person' approach, suggesting something of a rapprochement between the experiential and the discursive in organisational research. In a landmark paper on professional and organisational identities, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) discuss the connection between the efficacy of identity discourses and the intensity of their subjective meaning. For me, this is what researching the 'person-in-context' of organisational experience is all about.

I see the interplay between experience and discourse as fundamental to reflexivity, drawing on Wilkinson's model of personal, functional and disciplinary reflexivities (Wilkinson, 1988; Tomkins and Eatough, 2010). Personal reflexivity refers to the influence of the researcher's biography and interests on research, and is probably the definition with which researchers are most familiar. However, her functional and disciplinary reflexivities are equally significant for experiential research. Functional reflexivity considers the influence of the researcher's professional values, assumptions and biases; and disciplinary reflexivity refers to the effects of institutional, social and cultural ideas on research. In other words, reflexivity involves attending to the ways in which ideas - particularly those that make up the popular and accepted versions of events - influence both our participants' data and our interpretations of those data.

This approach also connects with other methods in the phenomenological family. For instance, Ashworth (2003) considers discourse as one of the phenomenological structures of the life-world. Van Manen (1990) emphasises the power of language to generate meaning, and suggests we pay particular attention to ideas with taken-for-granted status. Langdrige (2007) considers the narratives with which participants construct and inhabit their life-worlds, including 'canonical narratives' of how things are supposed to be. Like IPA, all three of these approaches bear the hallmarks of Heideggerian philosophy, in which discourse is interwoven with understanding, attunement and absorption as ways of approaching the fundamental question of Being (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Ultimately, though, it is for practical rather than philosophical reasons that I get excited about using IPA to explore the experience of discourse. A huge amount of our lives is lived within the context of institutions, including schools, universities, hospitals and governments, as well as the corporations we tend to think of when we use the term 'organisation'. So it feels important to try to understand the effects of these institutions - and the discourses that animate them - on our sense of who we are, who we might become, and what constrains or liberates such projects of being.

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