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Authentic Care in Health and Social Care, and Education Conference abstract

Title: Introducing a holistic model for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in social work practice and research.

Authors:

Gillian Ferguson, Lecturer in Social Work, The Open University (presenting author)

Sarah Vicary, Professor of Social Work and Mental Health, The Open University

Background

Using our own experiences of undertaking qualitative research to provide evidence for social work practice we provide a holistic framework for designing, undertaking, supervising and reviewing a study using IPA as a methodological fit for social work practice and research.

Design

IPA is the exploration of the lived experience from the perspective of the person who is deemed an expert in their own experience (Reid et al. 2005). IPA now boasts two textbooks, (Smith et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2022) and attracts much reflection as to its use and the way in which it is developing, including in social work (Vicary and Ferguson 2024). While there are critiques of IPA as a methodology (e.g. Paley 2017), we argue that attention to the essential elements of the approach, and the connection between these can lead to robust studies that offer extraordinary insights that inform authentic care. IPA and other forms of hermeneutic phenomenology get to the heart of lived experience and making sense of this. Conceptualising IPA using the holistic framework can support those working on the ground to see tangible connections between research and how this translates to effective responses to people who are in receipt of care.

Questions

The purpose of research for social work has attracted much commentary in which it is increasingly argued it requires an evidence base. It is suggested that evidence based on scientific sources alone is difficult to translate into the social work context in which decisions are “contaminated by complexities” (Webb 2002:49) Webb refers, for example, to the findings of a study of social work practitioner views on research in which it is reported that participants acknowledged evidence and its complexity but are also mindful of the impact of knowing and feeling in practice (Shaw and Shaw in Webb 2001:50). In short, significant inquiry into social work or social work research which aims to underpin social work practice should, as with all applied research, be relevant to and for its practice. Ethical drivers and this practice-related imperative can be at the fore of IPA (Vicary and Ferguson 2024). It is these questions that this talk will discuss.

What it means

Research using IPA that explores the lived experience of a person in receipt of social work services is less intrusive and has less ethical challenges for the participant. We propose that the role of the researcher, the dynamics of the research along with the ontological positioning is fundamental and perhaps more readily fits with IPA. As such it is a good methodological fit since it explores experience and specifically the sense made of it from the viewpoint of an individual or homogenous group. The holistic model considers how ethical foundations and integrated elements within the research approach are encapsulated as one system. Ultimately, this holistic approach leads to new understandings that can have significant impact and influence on direct practice and strategic policy.

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