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The Open University - Social Work and IPA (SWIPA) Research Network Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), social work education, continuing professional learning and development (CPLD)

This resource is prepared by Dr Gillian Ferguson and Professor Sarah Vicary for the SWIPA research network with the following aims:

- to discuss IPA in the UK social work education and continuing learning context
- to explore the alignment of IPA with professional and regulatory standards in education and training
- to confirm IPA as an excellent source of research that informs social work practice
- to explore the potential of IPA as active enquiry methodology for social workers across their career

What is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)?

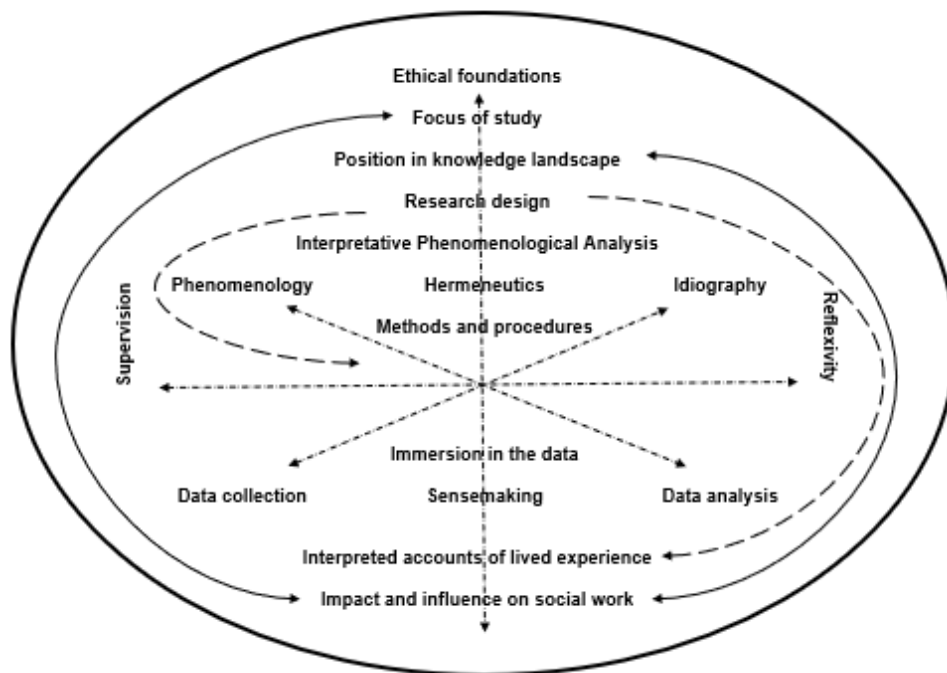
IPA is a relatively new research methodology first introduced in a seminal paper in the 1990s (Smith 1996). IPA is guided by three theoretical influences: phenomenology; hermeneutics; and idiography (Shinebourne 2011). In short, as a methodological approach in the qualitative research tradition, IPA claims to understand, give voice and make meaning of a phenomenon or person in context (Larkin et al. 2006).

Fundamental to 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).

Smith et al. have now produced a first and second edition of a full textbook on the methodology (Smith et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2022) and we published a book specifically focusing on IPA for social work practice and research (Vicary and Ferguson 2024). Readers of this resource who are unfamiliar with IPA methodology will find these texts an ideal grounding of further information.

A comprehensive holistic model for IPA social work research is introduced in Vicary and Ferguson (2024) which shows the different elements that are encapsulated in an effective study, Figure 1.

Figure 1: Holistic model of IPA for social work research and practice



(Vicary and Ferguson 2024: p20)

What is this resource for?

In this resource we consider IPA in the context of social work education and continuing professional learning and development. Connections between the underpinning philosophy and core skills of IPA and this contextual landscape are discussed.

We explore central themes in social work professional and regulatory standards for education and practice, the position of research in these and how core aspects of IPA align. Conceptions of learning are also examined to reflect on what is valued and promoted in social work across the career. Although using the United Kingdom (UK) landscape as an example, the discussion will be relevant to readers from other countries.

The landscape of social work education, continuing professional learning and development

Within the UK alone, each of its four nations has a different overarching regulatory system for social work education and CPLD. UK regulators are responsible for the approval of qualifying programmes in social work, CPLD requirements and the professional registration of social workers. This has been a continually changing context since the legislation establishing regulation of the profession came into being in 2000, recognising the terms social work and social worker as protected titles (QAA 2019).

Across the UK there are differences in the four nations as to who is responsible for the registration of social workers and the rules and requirements for social work education. In England there have been several changes in the regulator since the establishment of Care Councils; the responsibility in England sits with Social Work England at the time of writing. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales the responsibility currently lies with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC); The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC); and Social Care Wales (SCW) respectively. An independent review of inspection, scrutiny and regulation was undertaken in 2023 in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023), highlighting the ever-changing context that faces the social work profession.

Despite different regulators, there are set expectations across career stages in each of the four nations from point of entry to social work training; qualifying degree education; the first stages of qualified practice and post-qualifying. The UK frameworks are different in style, language and emphasis but share important themes. They are all based on the Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA 2019) and associated National Occupational Standards (NOS) which outline academic standards spanning the knowledge and skills integral to professional training and development (SCW 2021). Although published by Social Care Wales, the NOS span all four UK nations and were agreed in partnership.

The objectives and expectations of social work fluctuate according to political trends, associated evolving social policy and legislation both of which invariably influences what appears in educational frameworks across career stages. At any one time there are over thirty distinct standards or guidance applicable to social work education and CPLD alone, beyond which, a plethora of practice-specific guidance also steers specialist topics or skills. Standards and guidance apply to multiple

stakeholders including students, education providers, social workers, practice educators and employers and therefore guidance abounds.

A further complexity is that some standards or guidance are not owned by the regulators, for example, the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in England which is owned by the professional body British Association of Social Workers (BASW 2018). BASW covers all UK nations, but it is only in England that it oversees the respective standards (the PCF). It is therefore no surprise that there can be confusion about the expectations of standards and guidance. There are also polarised views about the regulation of social workers and relationships with regulators including debates about who controls or owns the educational curriculum and frameworks (e.g., Simpson, Daly and Smith 2020). Often perceived as either restrictive or separate to practice, the integrated knowledge, skills and values which are consolidated in educational frameworks are in fact aligned with both the global definition of social work (IFSW 2014) and fundamental ethics of the profession in the UK (BASW 2021).

Despite this complexity, expectations are usually explicit in social work regulatory and professional standards about use of research and evidence in terms of informing practice. These expectations cover the use of and active engagement in research across career stages. The ways in which research is positioned within the standards and guidance most often links with the use of up-to-date knowledge for practice. In fact, use of relevant evidence underpins and is essential in every aspect of social work skills in practice, tied in with fundamental elements such as ethics, use of self and person-centred approaches. Beyond any simple mapping to standards and guidance, we will now consider how they link with research in general but also with the skills and philosophy associated with IPA.

Engagement in and with research

The concept of research mindedness has emerged in social work and other professions over time. Students and practitioners are encouraged to be orientated and inclined to effective use of research to inform practice in rhetoric, if not reality. The Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA 2019) explicitly outlines the central role of research in problem solving skills along with analysis and synthesis of knowledge. This expectation is linked to making decisions, managing change and sustaining reasoned arguments (QAA 2019). Aligned with this, the NOS position use of research within professional accountability, citing that social workers need to

‘maintain an up-to-date knowledge and evidence base’ and ‘continually equip themselves with a body of knowledge and evidence’ (SCW 2021: Key Role 1). Further to this it is expected that there is a clear individual strategy for both maintaining this and integrating such research mindedness into practice.

Research explicitly features in the expectations for social workers in terms of their use of up-to-date knowledge to inform practice across all professional standards and guidance in Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales, but also increasingly in promoting active engagement in research enquiry. These overarching expectations have fed into the requirements for social work students, newly qualified social workers and those undertaking continuing professional learning and development and often sits as an individual responsibility. For example, in Social Work England the Professional Standards for all registered social workers states: ‘keep my practice up to date and record how I use research, theories and frameworks to inform my practice and my professional judgement’ (Social Work England 2019: Section 4.3). Similarly, Scotland’s draft benchmark standards for newly qualified social workers states: ‘use of knowledge, research and evidence in practice’ (SSSC 2022, Standard Six). Meanwhile, the BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work includes a clear emphasis on ‘contributing to evaluation and research’ (BASW 2021: 12). Within the Codes of Practice in Northern Ireland the link to use of research is clear (NISCC 2019: 2.1–2.4) and respectively in Wales (SCW 2022: 7.1–7.2).

Social work espouses that knowledge from lived experiences of people is fundamental to education and practice at all levels. This is embedded as a core principle of the global definition of social work (IFSW 2014) in terms of knowledge for practice. IPA explores and delivers knowledge from lived experience. Of course, IPA is not explicitly mentioned within any of the overarching standards and guidance but there are multiple connections with which we explored in Vicary and Ferguson (2024).

Connections between IPA and elements of professional and regulatory standards.

Although standards are usually presented in sections or lists, they are a holistic and integrated picture of what is expected in practice and not a fragmented set of things to do or think about. The following summary shows themes that are drawn from standards, guidance and Codes of Practice to consider synergy with IPA. Table 1 shows a mapping of these themes to regulatory and professional standards.

Table 1 Mapping of UK standards in social work education and codes of practice to elements of IPA research

	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales	England
<p>→</p> <p>Codes of practice and social work education standards</p> <p>→</p>	Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers and Employers (2024)	Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers (2019)	Practice guidance for social workers registered with Social Care Wales (2022)	Professional Standards (PS) 2019
	Standards in Social Work Education, SiSWE (2019)	Northern Ireland framework specification for the degree in social work (2015)	National Occupational Standards Social Work (2011)	Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) 2018
Use of up-to-date knowledge and research	6.9 (Workers)	2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4	7.1, 7.2	4.3, 4.4
	Standard 4.1	Key Role 1 SW1	Key Role 1 SW1	PCF 5
Communication, relationships and person-centred approaches	2.2 (Workers)	2.2	4.2	2.5
	Standard 2.3	Key Role 3 SW9	Key Role 3 SW9	PCF 7
Sense-making and analysis	Not explicit	1.2, 1.4	5.1, 5.6	3.2, 3.5, 3.11
	Standard 4.2, 4.3	Key Role 2 SW4	Key Role 2 SW4	PCF 2, 4, 6, 7
Reflexivity and self-awareness	5.5, 5.11, 5.12 (Workers)	3.1, 3.2	7.3	3.2, 4.2
	Standard 4.4	Key Role 1 SW2	Key Role 1 SW2	PCF 1, 2, 6
Leadership and impact	Not explicit	4.5, 4.6, 8.4	8.3	4.5
	Standard 4.4	Key Role 1 SW2	Key Role 1 SW2	PCF 1, 5, 8, 9
Continuing professional learning	5.6 (Workers)	4.5, 8.2, 8.3	8.3	4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8
	Standard 5.2	Key Role 1 SW2	Key Role 1 SW2	PCF 1, 5, 8, 9

Communication, relationships and person-centred approaches

Qualitative research relies on effective communication skills which are essential in all social work practice. There is a risk of over-simplifying the micro-skills involved. Effective communication can only take place within relationships, and this is noted in Codes of Practice across all four nations. Social Care Wales highlight that 'good communication underpins effective social work practice' detailing a list of essential requirements for registered workers (SCW 2021: Section 7).

The need for effective communication is mirrored in the Codes of Practice in England: 'actively listen to understand people, using a range of appropriate communication methods to build relationships' (SWE 2019: Section 2.5). Meanwhile, the same wording is used in Scotland and Northern Ireland 'be truthful, open, honest and trustworthy' and 'communicate in a [respectful], open, accurate and straightforward way' (SSSC 2024: 19 and NISCC 2019: 9). We have explored how IPA uses skilful questioning and listening in Vicary and Ferguson (2024). The skills involved in listening and responding are vital during the IPA research process. Tuning into meaning through language, tone, verbal and non-verbal cues requires practitioners and researchers to sustain their focus. Use of empathy to develop and communicate understanding is another important parallel between the necessities of social work practice and IPA. Conscious use of and reflection on communication skills is important for both practice and research. The NOS integrate the importance of communication throughout key roles (SCW 2021). Language, whether spoken or signed is of course a powerful element of communication which reveals the detail and meaning of human experience.

In social work it is widely recognised that communication through the written or spoken word is crucial and is the subject of recent literature (Young et al. 2023). Furthermore, research focusing on lived experience can create appropriate conditions for data generation despite communication challenges; Simcock et al. (2024) provide a powerful account of inclusive and creative approaches in their study involving older deafblind people, collaborating with tactile sign language interpreters.

Closely associated with effective communication, person-centred approaches are promoted in social work and more broadly in social care and feature strongly in rhetoric, policy and standards of practice. Specific skills within person-centred practice involve careful communication through active listening, empathy and respect. These skills and attention to

the uniqueness of individual experience are all aligned with IPA's idiographic approach. A major focus on responding to the individual needs, preferences and interests of people who use social work services is at the fore of current standards, guidance and Codes of Practice. A partnership approach is often cited for the development of relationships and intervention in social work. Within partnerships, acknowledgment of power and promotion of autonomy are central in the NOS, specific nation standards and Codes.

Sense-making, analysis and human rights

Developing skills in critical analysis and decision-making has become more prominent in the recent revisions of the standards of social work education and is widely acknowledged as a core competence of current social work practice. These skills are closely associated with effective use of available information applied to complex dilemmas where decisions must be defensible and rooted in robust evidence. Standards are also clear that social workers are expected to practice through a human rights and social justice lens. The sense-making quest in IPA is explored in Vicary and Ferguson (2024), part of the process that the researcher is engaged in throughout the journey that leads to interpreted accounts of lived experience. IPA explores language within the sense-making process.

Powerful metaphors are often associated with the pearl or gem, also discussed in Vicary and Ferguson (2024). Words and phrases can reveal significant parts of the phenomena under study by listening carefully to accounts of lived experience and deconstructing the text within IPA transcripts. Whole-part-whole analysis is central to the IPA analysis process. It is essential to consider the parts of the phenomena under study to get a sense of the whole of lived experience and the phenomena under study. The whole can only be understood because of knowing the component parts. Findings must be justified as in any research project. This is a simple parallel between practice and research but one in which the practitioner or researcher needs to grapple with the complexities of the human experience in building their understanding and ultimately in coming to their conclusions.

Reflexivity and self-awareness

The holistic model in Figure 1 introduced in Vicary and Ferguson (2024) positioned reflexivity as an overarching requisite of the IPA process.

Reflexivity is of course a fundamental part of social work practice, yet often misunderstood as simple reflection. To shine a light on self, is to become aware of the intrapersonal process of the practitioner or researcher. In the professional standards and guidance, reflexivity is mainly detailed in sections that are about self-awareness and managing self. Gordon and Dunworth (2016) suggest that use of and awareness of self has fluctuated in social work practice and education. A decline in emphasis on use of self was replaced by managerial and procedural issues in social work education (Gordon and Dunworth 2016). In some cases, the position of use of self has been re-strengthened for example in a recent revision of the Scottish Standards in Social Work Education (SSSC 2019).

Development of emotional intelligence is another way in which self-awareness and management features in professional standards and guidance of education and practice. The practice of social work is a deeply human experience involving emotional and physical encounters. Learning as a social worker involves learning through the body, particularly in direct practice (Ferguson 2023). Social workers are immersed in the practice experience in their body and learn through the emotions and senses. Bringing attention to what is happening in the body is not always at the fore of social workers' awareness and their CPLD but is an important part of the reflective and reflexive process. Embodied experience is also central to phenomenological research as discussed earlier in our book (Vicary and Ferguson, 2024). The researcher needs to bring themselves into the hermeneutic process. The importance of reflexivity in IPA has been considered as part of the research journey that can be supported by effective supervision of practice and research.

Leadership and impact

The leadership agenda continues to evolve in social work and more broadly in social services charged with responding to the multiple, complex and wicked issues (Grint 2008) faced by organisations. Leadership capabilities are increasingly seen in standards for social workers with these evident in newly qualified and post-qualifying frameworks but also at qualifying programme level. BASW integrate several aspects of leadership within the Code of ethics with the following requirements of social workers: 'taking responsibility for their own practice and continuing professional development'; 'contributing to the continuous improvement of professional practice'; 'taking responsibility for the

professional development of others'; and 'facilitating and contributing to evaluation and research' (BASW 2021: 12).

Recently revised professional standards and guidance strengthened and clarified the leadership expectations of social workers, e.g., SSSC (2019). Meanwhile, the PCF positions professional leadership very clearly as an expectation that should develop across the career citing, 'promote the profession and good social work practice' and, 'develop personal influence and be part of collective leadership and impact of the profession' within the standard (BASW 2021: 14). Leadership through use of and engagement in research is important to consider at individual, organisational and strategic levels of the profession. This is linked with informing practice but also the broader improvement agenda and managing change.

Innovation in social work can be informed by the authentic evidence generated by IPA. This is aligned with the fundamental commitment to inclusion of lived experiences as primary evidence in practice and service design. Making a difference in social work is embedded in the research aims and outcomes of IPA as explored in discussion about impact in Chapter 6, Vicary and Ferguson (2024).

In addition to the themes identified and explored, there are other issues that align with IPA and social work professional and regulatory standards.

The practice educator and practice education

The role of the practice educator is at the heart of professional social work training. Practice educators are expected to be actively engaged in their own use of up-to-date knowledge as well as promoting that of their learners. Practice education is a core part of any qualifying training that requires assessment of students in their use of up-to-date knowledge as applied to direct practice.

Standards for the training of practice educators incorporate these responsibilities with a strong focus on how they enable social work students to be research minded, for example 'research mindedness and making good use of knowledge in practice' (BASW 2022: 12). Students might also find themselves on a qualifying programme which requires them to prepare a research proposal or undertake a small-scale study while on practice placement or in sequence to this. Notably, use of research and evidence in practice is closely related to the promotion of wider cultures of learning within organisations.

Over the recent past, practice educators have been regarded as key leaders within the profession in their potential to develop, promote and sustain learning cultures as well as taking an individual role with social work students. There is widespread pressure in this valuable practice educator resource across the four UK nations which has impacted the potential of their role. Resource issues remain at the heart of debates in social work inextricably linked to what can be and ultimately what is supported in organisations.

Regulation, professional standards, continuing professional learning, development and IPA

Career-long learning is recognised as a requirement of social workers' continuing registration but how this is articulated and enacted varies widely. Learning is a broad spectrum of activity which is acknowledged in rhetoric, standards and policy. Confidence in valuing informal and self-directed learning is important for individuals and organisations.

Engagement in research whether this is in an active enquiry or evaluation of existing literature are core activities of relevant CPLD for social workers. Use of IPA research informs social work practice with knowledge from lived experiences. Keeping learning as the focus on CPLD sounds straightforward but when recording activities social workers and organisations quickly default to formal training as the primary source of CPLD (Ferguson 2022). The SSSC now explicitly use the terminology Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) in a shift from Post-Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) requirements (SSSC 2020).

The aspiration of the learning organisation (Senge 2006) has influenced social work over many years. An organisation is seen as a living system which fosters learning within it and itself transforms. Custodians within effective learning organisations are leaders that foster personal and organisational development, in social work this would include supervisors, managers, practice educators. The reality of social workers' experiences is far from this ideal (Webster-Wright 2009; Grant et al. 2022). Evidence-informed individual, organisational and strategic developments remain a clear goal for the social work profession.

Conclusion

We have considered IPA in relation to some themes that are central to social work education and practice rather than a simplistic mapping to any one nation. We did include a rudimentary mapping in Table 1 to show

specific detail of connections with UK frameworks and Codes of Practice that were live at the time of writing and note that this is not exhaustive. As with all standards, the interpretation and holistic assessment of these are more complex than lists can provide. Readers in other countries may be able to make similar connections across the themes of their respective standards or guidance. For people who are involved in social work IPA research who are not social workers, it is sufficient to know that there are very clear connections with the professional standards that can be explored.

Summary points

- ✓ **Expectations:** Use of research is embedded in social work standards for education/practice
- ✓ **CPLD:** Use of research spans all stages of the social work career
- ✓ **Learning from lived experiences:** Important knowledge and evidence can support practice
- ✓ **Skills, knowledge and values:** IPA approaches align with core social work standards
- ✓ **Engagement:** Active engagement in research enquiry is increasingly important
- ✓ **Opportunities:** How is research supported or integrated at organisational and strategic levels?

This resource has explored the context of the current standards for social work education and practice. Key themes were identified in the standards that are aligned with the underpinning philosophy and skills of IPA. The resource has considered the potential of IPA in providing excellent evidence for supporting individual and organisational learning.

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