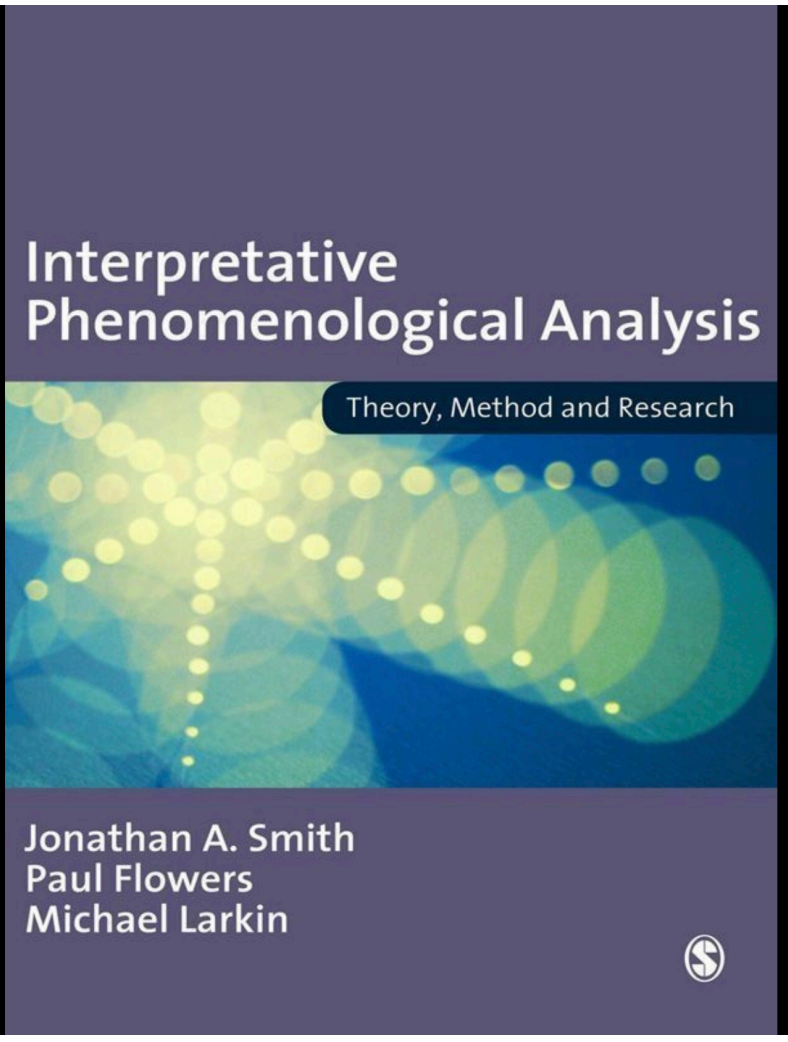
Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis
Theory, Method and Research
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First published 2009

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

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2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
33 Pekin Street #02-01
Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Library of Congress Control Number 2009924133

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4129-0833-7
ISBN 978-1-4129-0834-4(pbk)

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Group, Bodmin, Cornwall
Printed on paper from sustainable resources

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Analysis

Introduction

This chapter illustrates the analytic process in IPA in considerable detail – but it is not intended to provide a definitive account. The existing literature on analysis in IPA has not prescribed a single 'method' for working with data. Indeed, many methods chapters and published papers have been characterized by a healthy flexibility in matters of analytic development. As with many other approaches in qualitative psychology, the essence of IPA lies in its analytic *focus*. In IPA's case, that focus directs our analytic attention towards our participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences.

As a result, IPA can be characterized by a set of common processes (e.g. moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative) and principles (e.g. a commitment to an understanding of the participant's point of view, and a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts) which are applied flexibly, according to the analytic task (see Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Typically, analysis has been described as an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007), which proceeds by drawing upon the following strategies:

- The close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant (e.g. see Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).
- The identification of the emergent patterns (i.e. themes) within this experiential material, emphasizing both convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance (e.g. see Eatough & Smith, 2008), usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases.
- The development of a 'dialogue' between the researchers, their coded data, and their psychological knowledge, about what it might mean for participants to have these concerns, in this context (e.g. see Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2004), leading in turn to the development of a more interpretative account.
- The development of a structure, frame or gestalt which illustrates the relationships between themes.
- The organization of all of this material in a format which allows for analysed data to be traced right through the process, from initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.
- The use of supervision, collaboration, or audit to help test and develop the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation.
- The development of a full narrative, evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through this interpretation, usually theme-by-theme, and is often supported by some form of visual guide (a simple structure, diagram or table).
- Reflection on one's own perceptions, conceptions and processes (e.g. see Smith, 2007).

Within this repertoire of strategies, there is considerable room for manoeuvre. The route through them will not be a linear one, and the experience will be challenging. At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that 'doing' such analysis is inevitably a complex process. It may be an experience which is collaborative, personal, intuitive, difficult, creative, intense, and conceptually-demanding. Our own commitment to IPA stems from the fact that it can often be a uniquely interesting, insightful, and rewarding process.

There is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this sort of analysis, and we encourage IPA researchers to be innovative in the ways that they approach it. However, we are also aware that readers encountering IPA for the first time will need more than general principles. This chapter sets out to provide a heuristic framework for analysis, which draws on many of the processes, principles and strategies typically employed by IPA researchers. It draws them together in a structure which is intended to be flexible, but which is nonetheless sufficiently clear to enable first-time IPA researchers to find their way through the process. We also hope that it will provide more experienced analysts with some food for thought. In the latter part of the chapter we discuss levels of interpretation and how to take the analysis deeper and we also discuss working with larger samples.

In this chapter, we have maintained a practical focus on processes and strategies for analysing data, and for organizing and developing that analysis. But more experienced researchers may wish to move back and forth between this

chapter and the material in Chapter 2, as a prompt for further developing the focus of these processes and strategies, within the conceptual framework of IPA.

The processes outlined below are designed to encourage a reflective engagement with the participant's account. Inevitably, the analysis is a joint product of the participant and the analyst. Although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking – this is the double hermeneutic described in Chapter 2. Thus the truth claims of an IPA analysis are always tentative and analysis is subjective. At the same time that subjectivity is dialogical, systematic and rigorous in its application and the results of it are available for the reader to check subsequently.

There is inevitably some tension in writing about analysis. In reality, analysis is an iterative process of fluid description and engagement with the transcript. It involves flexible thinking, processes of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation. Overall, the analytic process is multi-directional; there is a constant shift between different analytic processes. As such, analysis is open to change and it is only 'fixed' through the act of writing up. This dynamism is at the heart of good qualitative analysis and is what makes it both exhilarating but also demanding. It is also what allows for the possibility of a creative insightful and novel outcome. One important element of this involves moving between the part and the whole of the hermeneutic circle as is outlined in Chapter 2. This little bit of text is looked at in the context of the whole transcript; the whole interview is thought of from the perspective of the unfolding utterances being looked at.

All of this can seem daunting to the novice qualitative researcher. Therefore, to make the process more manageable for those new to IPA, we present a step by step, somewhat unidirectional guide to conducting IPA analysis. In this way we hope to minimize the potential for the novice analyst's anxiety and confusion and reduce the risk of feeling overwhelmed by the process of analysis. These steps are not analogous to steps in a recipe – each offers a different vantage point on, or way of thinking about, the data that we are interested in. However, one of the main roles in supervizing IPA studies involves fostering a sense of manageability in the analytic process and it is this sense of 'order' which these steps hope to engender. We have found that this set of steps, or something like it, has worked for students we are supervizing, gives them a sense of confidence and competence, and is likely to facilitate the development of an analysis which is 'good enough'. And in our view this is important while we are still in the early stages of introducing qualitative research within psychology. So we would advise the novice embarking on an IPA study for the first time to begin by working closely with the suggested set of steps, and then to adapt them when and where they feel comfortable to do so, and the data require it. And remember – the process of analysis gets easier with experience. The first analysis attempted will probably seem the most difficult.

For those more experienced? Someone said to us recently that it was only now that he had completed an IPA study by following the steps suggested in an IPA chapter that he realized that IPA wasn't about following a set of steps! What he meant was that you need to follow guidelines when you are doing IPA for the first time. At this stage confidence is gained by having a set of procedures mapped out quite closely. But the process of following the steps also helps you to realize what underlies those steps. Thus, once one has mastered those steps and seen the finished product, one is more able to recognize that IPA is an approach and sensibility, as much a way of thinking about and seeing, as of doing something. And so for your next study you may develop a way of working which is true to the principles of IPA and yet moves considerably away from the steps given here. This is the spirit in which we present these 'steps to analysis'.

We start with a description of the process of analysis for a single case. Given IPA's idiographic commitment, we almost always work in this way – analysing the first case in detail, moving to the second case and doing the same, then moving to the third case, and so on. It can be helpful to start with the interview that you found to be most detailed, complex and engaging.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading

The first step of an IPA analysis involves immersing oneself in some of the original data. In most IPA studies this would be in the form of the first written transcript and this stage of the process would involve reading and re-reading the data. If the transcript is from an interview, it is helpful to listen to the audio-recording at least once while first reading the transcript. Imagining the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript assists with a more complete analysis.

This first stage is conducted to ensure that the participant becomes the focus of analysis. Because most people are used to reading and summarizing complex information often in very short periods of time, this part of the process is about slowing down our habitual propensity for 'quick and dirty' reduction and synopsis. Part of this might actually involve recording some of your most own powerful recollections of the interview experience itself, or some of your own initial, and most striking, observations about the transcript in a notebook,

in order to help you to bracket them off for a while. Sometimes the process of beginning analysis is accompanied by a feeling of being overwhelmed by ideas and possible connections – it can help to reduce the level of this 'noise' by recording it somewhere, thus allowing your focus to remain with the data. You can always come back to these notes later, safe in the knowledge that your first impressions have been captured.

To begin the process of entering the participant's world it is important to enter a phase of active engagement with the data. Repeated reading also allows a model of the overall interview structure to develop, and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of an interview together. Chronological accounts, for example, may provide an overall structure for the interview. Yet, embedded within these 'life stories' there may be a pattern of shifting from generic explanations to the specificities of particular events (e.g. someone explaining their experiences of being in a wheelchair may move from their overall life history to talking about specific thoughts and feelings concerning recent events which occurred in the days preceding the interview). This reading also facilitates an appreciation of how rapport and trust may build across an interview and thus highlight the location of richer and more detailed sections, or indeed contradictions and paradoxes. As discussed in the previous chapter, the general flow, or rhythm, of an interview tends to shape the tone of a transcript from the broad and general (in the beginning) to the specific micro-details of events (towards the middle of the interview), to some kind of synthesis or 'wrapping up' at the end of the interview.

Step 2: Initial noting

This initial level of analysis is the most detailed and time consuming. This step examines semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level. The analyst maintains an open mind and notes anything of interest within the transcript. This process ensures a growing familiarity with the transcript, and, moreover, it begins to identify specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue. In fact Steps 1 and 2 merge as you will, in practice, start writing notes on the transcript as you start reading, and further exploratory notes or comments can be added with subsequent readings.

This is close to being a free textual analysis. There are no rules about what is commented upon and there is no requirement, for example, to divide the text into meaning units and assign a comment to each unit. Your aim is to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data. Some parts of the interview will be richer than others and so will warrant more commentary. It is important to conduct a close analysis in order to avoid the sort of superficial reading which we engage in so often (leading to commenting only on what we expect to see in the text). The analyst should be concerned as much with the process of engaging with the transcript as with the outcome (i.e. legible comments to be used for the next step of analysis). At the centre of the account you develop through initial notes, there is likely to be a descriptive core of comments, which have a clear phenomenological focus, and stay close to the participant's explicit meaning. This is likely to describe the things which matter to them (key objects of concern such as relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles) and the meaning of those things for the participant (what those relationships, processes, places, etc. are *like* for the participant). Developing from this, and alongside it, you will find that more interpretative noting helps you to understand how and why your participant has these concerns. This involves looking at the language that they use, thinking about the context of their concerns (their lived world), and identifying more abstract concepts which can help you to make sense of the patterns of meaning in their account.

We illustrate this process here in Box 5.1, which contains a short extract from an interview with Jack (name changed), a gay man, talking about his experiences of living with HIV. Jack was diagnosed in his early twenties and was in his mid-twenties at the time of interview. The extract is used to illustrate the multiple ways in which exploratory commenting can be conducted. These are broken down into three discrete processes with different focuses, for the sake of illustration:

- *Descriptive* comments focused on describing the content of what the participant has said, the subject of the talk within the transcript (normal text).
- *Linguistic* comments focused upon exploring the specific use of language by the participant (italic).
- *Conceptual* comments focused on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level (underlined).

These ways of exploratory commenting are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive but are presented as useful analytic tools which the analyst may wish to employ. In conducting this first and most detailed level of analysis, these discrete ways of doing exploratory commenting should be combined on the same transcript because the links and connections between them are critical to attempting to immerse yourself in the participant's lifeworld and en-

gaging in deep data analysis. You may find it useful to use different coloured pens for the three task areas.

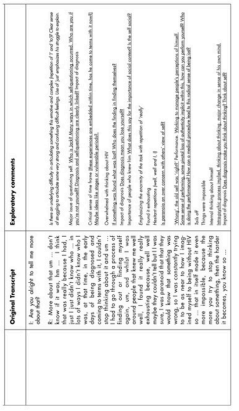
Overall, as you move through the transcript, you are likely to comment on similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications and contradictions in what the person is saying. It is important to engage in analytic dialogue with each line of transcript, asking questions of what the word, phrase, sentence means to you, and attempting to check what it means for the participant.

In practice we find the best way to do analysis is with a hard copy of the transcript with wide margins. We use one margin to document the initial comments, leaving the other margin for the next stage – emergent themes (see Box 5.2, pp. 93–95). Conventionally, we have written of this process as moving from the left margin (comments/notes) to the right margin (themes). Firstly, this is just a convention, it doesn't have to be followed in that way and, second, we recently realized that that order had actually come about because Jonathan is left handed and so most naturally moves from left to right! Given that most people are right handed, we are now presenting the sequence the other way round, moving from right margin (initial comments) to left margin (emergent themes).

Descriptive comments

One basic element of exploratory commenting is analysing the transcript to describe content. In general, key words, phrases or explanations which the respondent used are recorded. These understandings of things which matter to the participant (the key objects, events, experiences in the participant's lifeworld) are often highlighted by descriptions, assumptions, sound bites, acronyms, idiosyncratic figures of speech, and emotional responses (for the participant, or for the analyst). This level of initial notes is very much about taking things at face value, about highlighting the objects which structure the participant's thoughts and experiences. As we have seen in Chapter 2, this involves thinking about the participant's experiences in terms of their relationship to the important things which make up their world. These descriptive exploratory comments could be as simple as 'story of negative experience', or indeed 'wheelchair' (i.e. just identifying something that matters). As your analysis develops, you are likely to be able to develop richer accounts of the meaning of these objects. For example, 'wheelchair' may become 'wheelchair meaning sustained independence vs wheelchair meaning visibly unwell'. From the interview with Jack we see how the comment 'Major issues of questioning self' is generated from the development of comments in the sequence of text around 'in lots of ways I didn't know who I was, at that time'.

Box 5.1 Initial comments



Linguistic comments

Another key element of exploratory noting is concerned with language use. The analyst focuses upon how the transcript reflects the ways in which the content and meaning were presented. At times the language use and the content seem clearly interrelated and this is worth highlighting in the process of writing initial notes. Among things the analyst can attend to are: pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone, degree of fluency (articulate or hesitant). Metaphor can be a particularly powerful component of the analysis here because it is a linguistic device which links descriptive notes (such as 'wheelchair') to conceptual notes (such as 'independence vs illness'). Jack's use of 'shell shock' as a metaphor for describing the impact of his HIV diagnosis is a good example of this. It's an explicit claim which he makes, but it opens out the potential for discussion of a range of more conceptual meanings – horror, trauma and shock on a massive scale, for example.

Conceptual comments

The third level of annotation, illustrated in Box 5.1, is more interpretative. It deals with the transcript data at a conceptual level. Conceptual coding may often take an interrogative form. This is particularly the case during the earlier stages of analysis, when one does not yet have a detailed overview of the data, and where each interesting feature of a participant's account may prompt further questions. Try not to worry about this. Ultimately, some questions may lead nowhere. Others may lead you back to the data, where re-analysing the data, or reflecting on what the codes might mean, may well furnish you with some tentative answers. Other questions still will lead you to work at a more abstract level.

As the comments underlined in Box 5.1 would suggest, this often represents a move away from the explicit claims of the participant. Conceptual annotating will usually involve a shift in your focus, towards the participant's overarching understanding of the matters that they are discussing. This stage asks a lot of the analyst. It takes time – for discussion, reflection, trial-and-error, and refinement of your ideas. An example of this sort of conceptual development might be the movement away from focusing on the particular meanings of specific instances of difficulties with relationships (with friends, partners, or employers), which have stemmed from Jack's HIV status, and moving towards an account of the increasing feeling of isolation which may be common to them all.

There is often an element of personal reflection to conceptual coding, too. The interpretations which you develop at this stage will inevitably draw on your own experiential and/or professional knowledge. You might usefully think of this as a Gadamerian dialogue (of the kind discussed in Chapter 2), between your own pre-understandings, and your newly emerging understandings of the participant's world. At times, it may be helpful to draw upon your own perceptions and understandings, in order to sound out the meaning of key events and processes for your participants.

So, for example, where the text has been annotated with 'Major issue of questioning self,' in Box 5.1, we may consider times when we have asked ourselves questions about who we are. Is it within the realm of our own experience to have doubted this, and to have said something like, 'In lots of ways I didn't know who I was'? If we have experienced anything like this, then we might usefully dwell upon it for a moment, and think about the life events that led us there. If this is beyond our experience, then we might ask what it tells us about the magnitude of such an expression, for the participant. In these ways, conceptual annotation is often not about finding answers or pinning down understandings; it is about the opening up of a range of provisional meanings.

On another level, the analyst may think logically about the construction of such an expression. Thus, a reasonable question to ask is 'Who was the participant if they weren't 'themselves?'. This may lead the analyst to think about the role of agency and identity, to think about the multiplicity of 'selves' that such a tiny but powerful expression implies. Similarly, broader interrogation may lead to questioning the relationship between diagnosis and this potential sense of fragmentation of self.

Other notes, for example, refer to a critical sense of time frame. For example, the phrase 'at that time, in the early days of being diagnosed and coming to terms with it', is annotated with '(these experiences are embedded within time, has he come to terms with it now?) Maybe ideas like stages or vulnerable periods?'

Thus, by beginning with the face value of the participant's words, the analyst can see that there are clear differences for the participant between 'the early days' and the present, or maybe even an imagined future. The analyst can question the implication that the participant has now 'come to terms with it', and indeed wonder how this may have been achieved. At times this kind of exploratory comment may feel like stretching the interpretation pretty far. However, these provisional conceptual questions can really add depth and sophistication to the analytic process. As long as the interpretation is stimulated by, and tied to, the text, it is legitimate. And as long as everything is documented, the stronger interpretative claims can be checked later at various points in the analytic procedure. This more questioning and abstract style of thinking is critical in moving the analysis beyond the superficial and purely descriptive. As we stated in Chapter 2, IPA is avowedly interpretative, and the interpretation may well move away from the original text of the participant. What is important is that the interpretation was inspired by, and arose from, attending to the participant's words, rather than being imported from outside.

The potential for this type of reflexive engagement will differ from analyst to analyst and from project to project. Although we suggest here that the analyst uses themselves and their own thoughts, feelings and experiences as a touchstone, this is complex. It is important to remember that the analysis is primarily about the participant, not oneself. One is using oneself to help make sense of the participant, not the other way around. If you start becoming more fascinated by yourself than the participant, then stop, take a break – and try again!

Deconstruction

It may be helpful, occasionally, to employ strategies of de-contextualization to bring into detailed focus the participant's words and meanings. For example, one possibility is to fracture the narrative flow of the interview by taking a paragraph and reading it backwards, a sentence at a time, to get a feel for the

use of particular words. In this way, you are attempting to avoid focusing upon simplistic readings of what you think the participant is saying, or following traditional explanatory scripts, and so getting closer to what the participant is actually saying. Paradoxically such de-contextualization helps to develop an appreciation of the embedded nature of much of the participant's report and can emphasize the importance of context within the interview as a whole, thus helping one to see the interrelationships between one experience and another.

Overview of writing initial notes

The example from Jack's interview provides a sense of both the complexity and open-ended nature of exploratory commenting. The approach presented here is not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive; many other ways of doing initial noting are also possible. Critically, the *process* of engaging with the data is almost as important as the actual physical task of writing on the transcript itself. We have presented the different elements of writing initial notes as occurring in parallel. Alternatively you can first try working on a section of the transcript with descriptive comments, and then go back and examine it with a linguistic focus. Finally, you could annotate the section with conceptual comments.

Here are two other ways of doing exploratory noting which could be used alongside the strategy we have already explored:

- Going through the transcript and underlining text which seems important. Then for each piece of underlined text, attempt to write in the margin an account of why you think it was underlined and therefore important.
- Free associating from the participant's text, writing down whatever comes into your mind when reading certain sentences and words.

These differing approaches share the fluid process of engaging with the text in detail, exploring different avenues of meaning which arise, and pushing the analyses to a more interpretative level.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes

Although the interview transcript retains its central place in terms of data, it will be clear that through comprehensive exploratory commenting, the data set will have grown substantially. Not only does the analyst have, by now, a very familiar model of the interview itself, but also has an additional level of potentially important, yet still provisional, notes. It is this larger data set that forms the focus of the next stage of analysis – developing emergent themes.

In looking for emergent themes, the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and the initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes. This involves an analytic shift to working primarily with the initial notes rather than the transcript itself. However, if exploratory commenting has been done comprehensively it will be very closely tied to the original transcript.

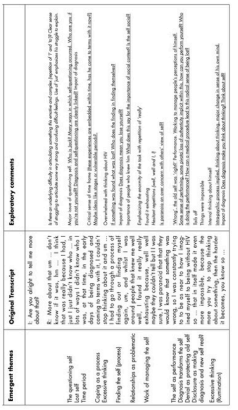
Analysing exploratory comments to identify emergent themes involves a focus, at the local level, on discrete chunks of transcript. However, it also involves a recall of what was learned through the whole process of initial noting. Because the process of identifying emergent themes involves breaking up the narrative flow of the interview, the analyst may at first feel uncomfortable about seeming to fragment the participant's experiences through this re-organization of the data. This process represents one manifestation of the hermeneutic circle. The original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts as you conduct your analysis, but these then come together in another new whole at the end of the analysis in the write-up. Relatedly, since the data collection and exploratory comments were very much participant-led or participant-oriented, you may find it difficult to give yourself a more central role in organizing and interpreting the analysis at this stage. Remember, however, the importance of both the I and the P in IPA. At each stage the analysis does indeed take you further away from the participant and includes more of you. However, 'the you' is closely involved with the lived experiences of the participant – and the resulting analysis will be a product of both of your collaborative efforts.

The main task in turning notes into themes involves an attempt to produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important in the various comments attached to a piece of transcript. Themes are usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual. The focus is on capturing what is crucial at this point in the text but inevitably you will also be influenced by the whole text. Remember again the hermeneutic circle where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part. See Box 5.2 which presents the emergent themes for the piece of transcript in Box 5.1.

As we can see, the themes reflect not only the participant's original words and thoughts but also the analyst's interpretation. They reflect a synergistic process of description and interpretation. Whilst initial notes feel very loose, open and contingent, emergent themes should feel like they have captured and reflect an understanding.

For example, the first emergent theme, *the questioning self*, captures the initial exploratory notes relating to language use and Jack's inability to articulate his struggle to come to terms with his diagnosis, a struggle still perhaps apparent within the interview as Jack attempted to articulate what is going on at this particular time in his life. Similarly, the theme title relates directly to the very content of Jack's talk; his own struggle to understand the changes in himself and his identity following diagnosis. Moreover, within the theme title, the use of 'self' reflects the analyst's interest in what can be called the 'psychological' construct of self. It is not something which Jack explicitly alludes to, but at the same time it is intimately connected to what he does say. Thus the theme brings together a range of understandings relating directly to both participant and analyst.

Along the same lines, *lost self* suggests the disassociation of self implicit in Jack's talk. *Time period* reflects a more abstract, or conceptual way of understanding Jack's talk, relating to the notion of temporality and echoing theoretical models which are often based around 'stages' – note that at this stage it is non-committal about the meaning of time for Jack. It merely notes that time is important, and so this is a good example of a theme which might develop further still through later stages of the analysis. Similarly, note that *coping as a process* and *excessive thinking (rumination)* are theme titles that relate to concepts evident within the psychological literature.



Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

So far you have established a set of themes within the transcript and the themes are ordered chronologically, that is, in the order they came up. The next step involves the development of a charting, or mapping, of how the analyst thinks the themes fit together.

Box 5.2 Developing emergent themes

Once more, this level of analysis is not prescriptive and the analyst is encouraged to explore and innovate in terms of organizing the analysis. Not all emergent themes must be incorporated into this stage of analysis; some may be discarded. This in part depends upon the overall research question and its scope. It is as well to keep an open mind at this stage – in the light of work done on subsequent transcripts, you may come back to an earlier transcript to re-evaluate the importance of some themes. Effectively, however, you are looking for a means of drawing together the emergent themes and producing a structure which allows you to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of your participant's account.

Here are two basic ways to look for connections:

- Type all the themes in chronological order into a list. Eyeball the list and move themes around to form clusters of related themes. Some themes will act as magnets, pulling other themes towards them.
- Print out the typed list of themes. Cut up the list so each theme is on a separate piece of paper. Then use a large space (e.g. the floor, a large piece of card or a notice board) to move the themes around. This enables one to ex-

plore spatial representations of how emergent themes relate to each other. Those themes which represent parallel or similar understandings should be placed together. Those themes which are in opposition to each other would be positioned at opposite poles of a spectrum, or opposite ends of a piece of paper. Like everything else to do with qualitative analysis, this approach will work well for some people and some projects; it will work less well for others.

We will now go through some more specific ways of looking for patterns and connections between emergent themes. Again, just to reiterate, we do not intend to be prescriptive. If these ideas inspire researchers to think of related ways that help the IPA analytic process, we will be happy.

Abstraction

Abstraction is a basic form of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of what can be called a 'super-ordinate' theme. It involves putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster. If we think about Jack's extract, there are a series of emergent themes around the impact of diagnosis: 'excessive thinking', 'mourning and grief', 'depression', 'shock', and 'loss of self esteem'. These can be grouped together under the super-ordinate theme title: 'The psychological consequences of HIV diagnosis'. The super-ordinate theme emerges at a higher level as a result of putting the themes together – see Box 5.3.

Box 5.3 Abstraction leading to the development of a super-ordinate theme

Psychological consequences of HIV diagnosis
Excessive thinking
Mourning and grief
Depression
Shock
Loss of self esteem

Subsumption

This analytic process is similar to abstraction but it operates where an emergent theme itself acquires a super-ordinate status as it helps bring together a series of related themes. Box 5.4 shows how 'Diagnosis as transforming the self' becomes a superordinate theme and brings together a series of clearly related other themes.

Box 5.4 Subsumption leading to the development of a super-ordinate theme

Diagnosis as transforming the self
Loss of self
Mourning and grief (of self?)
The questioning self
The self as performance
Work of managing the self
Denial as protecting old self
Disclosure as making diagnosis and new self real?
Loss of future/expected self

Polarization

It may be worth examining transcripts for the oppositional relationships between emergent themes by focusing upon difference instead of similarity. So, for example, set against the largely negative aspects of 'Diagnosis transforming the self', was another set of related themes elsewhere, which all detailed the positive aspects of self-transformation associated with HIV diagnois. For example, 're-affirmation of self', 'the constant self', 'rebuilding the self', 'being a better person', 'learning to live fully'. This oppositional relationship may itself then offer a higher level organizing device for the analysis.

Contextualization

A useful way of looking at the connections between emergent themes is to identify the contextual or narrative elements within an analysis. Attending to temporal, cultural and narrative themes in a proactive manner is useful as they frame many of the more local understandings presented within an interview. Because a transcript is shaped by the participant's narrative, it may be useful to highlight constellations of emergent themes which relate to particular narrative moments, or key life events. These may be dispersed across the transcript.

For example, within the interview with Jack there is a series of critical 'events': the moment of diagnosis, his retrospective accounts of the moment of infection, his first disclosure of his status to a friend, his first visit to a support group, his first sexual interaction as an HIV-positive man, his disclosure to his family. Therefore it would be possible to organize the emergent themes in terms of the temporal moment where they are located.

Numeration

Sometimes we might be interested in taking account of the frequency with which a theme is supported. This is definitely not the only indicator of its importance, and should not be over-emphasized – after all, a very important theme, which clearly unlocks a further set of meanings for a participant, may sometimes be evidenced only once (e.g. perhaps *shell shock* could be one of these for Jack). However, numeration can be one way of indicating the relative importance of some emergent themes. Put simply, it reflects the frequency with which emergent themes appear throughout the transcript. Although at first this may appear unusually quantitative, it can also be thought of as a patterning within the emergent themes. If the interview style was particularly open-ended and unstructured, it makes sense to think of the frequency with which emergent themes appear as one (though not the only) indication of their relative importance and relevance to the participant.

Function

Emergent themes can be examined for their specific function within the transcript. For example, the interplay of meanings illustrated by organizing themes by their positive and negative presentation may be interpreted beyond what the participant presents in terms of their meaning, and rather as a distinct way of presenting the self within the interview. Thus, negative aspects of self-transformation following diagnosis can be seen as serving to position Jack as a 'victim' of circumstance (eliciting sympathy and care from the listener), while positive themes relating to 're-assertion of self' can be seen as a means of positioning himself as a 'survivor', or 'hero', within the narrative (eliciting praise and positive affect from the listener).

Although, at face value, this kind of analysis seems again to pull away from the focus upon the participant and their thinking, it also enables a deeper interpretation of the data. The function of the language use is inevitably deeply intertwined with the meaning and thoughts of the participant. Clearly this type of analysis is drawing on ideas from discourse and narrative analysis but here they are coupled with a commitment to the experiential. For us, these narrative positionings represent a part of the nexus of the self for Jack and in one sense he can be said to own them as opposed to them owning him. In reality of course the relationship is more complex – both/and rather than either/or.

Bringing it together

The above strategies are clearly not mutually exclusive. Use ones that work for you and the material you have. Organizing themes in more than one way can itself be creative and push the analysis to a higher level. Once the process of exploring patterns and connections has ceased and the analyst feels comfortable with the outcome, it is important to make notes about how this key stage of analysis was conducted. Indeed you may find it helpful to keep a research diary along the way, regularly recording descriptions of the analysis process and commentaries on your analytic work.

Next, the analyst should attempt a graphic representation of the structure of the emergent themes. This may be done through the creation of a table or figure, or the researcher may find other devices helpful. This can be useful in looking to the gestalt that has emerged from the analytic process. Box 5.5 illustrates an abridged table of emergent themes for one participant from a project looking at the psychological impact of back pain (for more details, see Smith and Osborn, 2008). It shows the development of three super-ordinate themes that emerged from the analysis, with the themes under each one. It is useful to annotate each theme with the page/line on which it is located and a few key words from the participant, to remind you later of the source of the theme.

Some other processes to help analysis

Compiling transcript extracts to make files of emergent themes. To help with local analysis, sometimes it can be useful to construct files of transcript extracts. For each emergent theme open a new Word file, name it with the theme title, and paste all the relevant transcript extracts into this file identified in some way – e.g. with the transcript line number. Obviously, depending on the frequency of each emergent theme, the length and volume of such files will vary. This process can help one look at the internal consistency, relative broadness, or specificity, of each emergent theme. It can also help develop the local analysis of particular themes.

Commenting and thematizing on the computer. So far we have been advocating working primarily with hard copy material. Some people are now moving to conducting the whole of this process on the computer. We would not necessarily recommend this to the novice researcher unless this is very close to one's normal working practices. However, if you do work this way, it is possible to set up a series of columns indicating the flow of the analysis, in one direction, from the original transcript to the final super-ordinate themes, either for sections of text or for the whole manuscript.

Box 5.5 Table of super-ordinate themes and themes from one participant in the pain project

Themes	Page/line	Key words
Living with an unwanted self		
Undesirable behaviour ascribed to pain	1.16	It's the pain
Struggle to accept self and identity	24.11	who am I?
Unwanted self rejected as true self	24.24	hateful bit
Conflict of selves	7.11	me, not me
A self that cannot be understood or controlled		
Lack of control over self	24.13	can't help
Rejection of change	1.7	still the same
Avoid implication	10.3	no different
Undesirable feelings		
Shame	5.15	disgusting
Anger and pain	24.9	snappy
Lack of compassion	6.29	don't care

Step 5: Moving to the next case

It is possible to write up a single case as case study report. However, more usually a project involves more than one case. So the next step involves moving to the next participant's transcript or account, and repeating the process. Here it is important to treat the next case on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality. This means, as far as is possible, bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case while working on the second. This is, of course, in keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment. During this process, you will inevitably be influenced by what you have already found (and in hermeneutic parlance therefore your 'fore-structures' have changed). However there is an important skill in IPA in allowing new themes to emerge with each case. The rigour of systematically following the steps outlined should ensure that there is scope for this to happen. This then continues for each subsequent case.

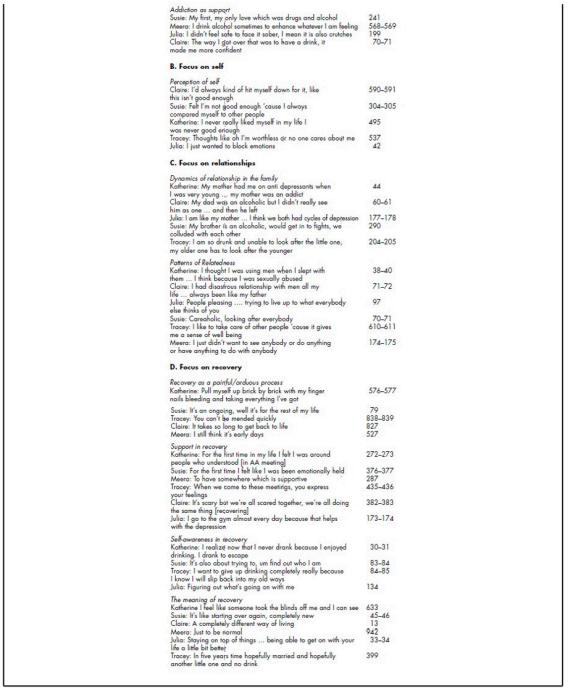
Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

The next stage involves looking for patterns across cases. This usually means laying each table or figure out on a large surface and looking across them. What connections are there across cases? How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case? Which themes are the most potent? Sometimes this will lead to a reconfiguring and relabelling of themes. This can be a particularly creative task. Often it helps the analysis to move to a more theoretical level as one recognizes, for example, that themes or super-ordinate themes which are particular to a individual cases also represent instances of higher order concepts which the cases therefore share. Some of the best IPA has this dual quality – pointing to ways in which participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also shared higher order qualities. The final result of this process can again be presented in a number of ways – for example it could be in the form of a graphic, but in this case showing connections for the group as a whole. Most usually it has been in the form of a table of themes for the group, showing how themes are nested within super-ordinate themes and illustrating the theme for each participant. See Box 5.6 for an abridged example taken from Pnina Shinebourne's project on the experience of addiction (in prep).

Box 5.6 Master table of themes for the group

A. Focus on addiction

Addiction as an affliction	
Katherine: Addiction is like you have this big boil here and it's like full of poison	line 682
Tracey: I am on the floor, pissed and throwing up and crying	178–179
Susie: The paranoia and the fear every time I wake up without knowing where I've been	284–285
Meera: Just normal everyday things like bathing, like cooking. Didn't bother to eat properly	218–219
Claire: This feeling of complete despair … The only way I can deal with this is if I could kill myself	291–292
Intensity of engagement in addictive behaviours	
Claire: I can't stop until there's nothing left or until I pass out	131–132
Meera: Was all all consuming as well, the alcohol consume me	44
Susie: I walked around with a bottle of vodka everywhere. I went. I couldn't survive	259
Tracey: All I wanted was cocaine. I didn't give a shit about friends or anything	263
Katherine: I still force it into my body. My body tried to tell me no but I still do it	33–34



Addiction as support
Susie: My first, my only love which was drugs and alcohol 241
Meera: I drink alcohol sometimes to enhance whatever I am feeling 568–569
Julia: I didn't feel safe to face it sober, I mean it is also crutches 199
Claire: The way I got over that was to have a drink, it made me more confident 70–71

B. Focus on self

Perception of self
Claire: I'd always kind of hit myself down for it, like this isn't good enough 590–591
Susie: Felt I'm not good enough 'cause I always compared myself to other people 304–305
Katherine: I never really liked myself in my life I was never good enough 495
Tracey: Thoughts like oh I'm worthless or no one cares about me 537
Julia: I just wanted to block emotions 42

C. Focus on relationships

Dynamics of relationship in the family
Katherine: My mother had me on anti depressants when I was very young ... my mother was an addict 44
Claire: My dad was an alcoholic but I didn't really see him as one ... and then he left 60–61
Julia: I am like my mother ... I think we both had cycles of depression 177–178
Susie: My brother is an alcoholic, would get in to fights, we colluded with each other 290
Tracey: I am so drunk and unable to look after the little one, my older one has to look after the younger 204–205

Patterns of Relatedness
Katherine: I thought I was using men when I slept with them ... I think because I was sexually abused 38–40
Claire: I had disastrous relationship with men all my life ... always been like my father 71–72
Julia: People pleasing ... trying to live up to what everybody else thinks of you 97
Susie: Caretaholic, looking after everybody 70–71
Tracey: I like to take care of other people 'cause it gives me a sense of well being 610–611
Meera: I just didn't want to see anybody or do anything or have anything to do with anybody 174–175

D. Focus on recovery

Recovery as a painful/arduous process
Katherine: Pull myself up brick by brick with my finger nails bleeding and taking everything I've got 576–577
Susie: It's an ongoing, well it's for the rest of my life 79
Tracey: You can't be mended quickly 838–839
Claire: It takes so long to get back to life 827
Meera: I still think it's early days 527

Support in recovery
Katherine: For the first time in my life I felt I was around people who understood (in AA meeting) 272–273
Susie: For the first time I felt like I was been emotionally held 376–377
Meera: To have somewhere which is supportive 287
Tracey: When we come to these meetings, you express your feelings 435–436
Claire: It's scary but we're all scared together, we're all doing the same thing (recovering) 382–383
Julia: I go to the gym almost every day because that helps with the depression 173–174

Self-awareness in recovery
Katherine: I realize now that I never drank because I enjoyed drinking. I drank to escape 30–31
Susie: It's also about trying to, um find out who I am 83–84
Tracey: I want to give up drinking completely really because I know I will slip back into my old ways 84–85
Julia: Figuring out what's going on with me 134

The meaning of recovery
Katherine I feel like someone took the blinds off me and I can see 633
Susie: It's like starting over again, completely new 45–46
Claire: A completely different way of living 13
Meera: Just to be normal 942
Julia: Staying on top of things ... being able to get on with your life a little bit better 33–34
Tracey: In five years time hopefully married and hopefully another little one and no drink 399

Such a group table should have a satisfactory sense of completion capturing the most important things you want to say about the participants and a suitable ordering of those things.

Taking it deeper: Levels of interpretation

One of the current issues in IPA is levels of interpretation. IPA is always interpretative, but there are different levels to that interpretation. In our experience novice researchers tend to be too cautious, producing analyses that are too descriptive. To help researchers dig deeper, we here present an analysis of one short extract which illustrates the different levels which are possible in IPA. This account first appeared in Smith (2004). We can look at this process in terms of the hermeneutic circle discussed first in Chapter 2 and where we also briefly first introduced this piece of analysis.

Up to this point in this chapter we have primarily been moving from the part to the whole – a slow, step-by-step process from the particular to the more holistic. Here we move in the other direction – having analysed a whole transcript, we notice a particularly resonant passage and so move to a deeper, more detailed, reading of the part. One of the exhilarating features of this type of process comes from the realization that often the increasing depth of analysis of the part, the short extract, illuminates and can be seen as integrally related to the analysis of the whole, the complete interview.

The passage comes from a study of the personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain Jonathan conducted with Mike Osborn (Osborn & Smith, 1998). During an interview discussing this, one woman, Linda, says:

> I just think I'm the fittest because there are three girls and I'm the middle one and I thought well I'm the fittest and I used to work like a horse and I thought I was the strongest and then all of a sudden it's just *been* cut down and I can't do half of what I used to do. (Osbom & Smith, 1998: 70)

We would suggest there are (at least) three levels of interpretation consonant with IPA here. First, Linda compares herself with her sisters and this is part of a set of social comparisons Linda makes in her interview. At the next level, we can examine how she uses metaphor. Linda compares herself with a horse and we interpreted Linda as using this metaphor to exaggerate the strength she had in the past in order to emphasize how weak she feels now. Relatedly, it is possible to read 'it's just been cut down' as also having metaphorical weight, as when we read it we saw an image of grass being scythed – a symbol of how flimsy Linda now feels.

The third level of interpretation moves to an even more detailed micro-analysis of the text, and here we offer an extended quote from Jonathan's paper (Smith, 2004):

> Look at the temporal referents in the passage. Linda begins in the present tense:

> I just think I'm the fittest because there are three girls and I'm the middle one.

So initially one might assume Linda is referring to herself now – well yes there probably are still three of them and her birth order won't have changed, but 'I'm the fittest?' Surely she means 'I used to be the fittest'? And indeed she then slips into the past tense:

> And I thought well I'm the fittest and I used to work like a horse and I thought I was the strongest.

This seems to confirm that Linda is referring to a time in the past when she had such great strength and which she has now lost. So how does one explain the apparent contradiction – 'I am the fittest', 'I was the fittest'? Well this seems to go to the heart of the psychological battle for Linda, as her sense of identity is ravaged by her back pain. Thus, on the one hand, Linda acknowledges that she has lost an identity – a strong, proud and autonomous self which has been replaced by an enfeebled and vulnerable self. On the other hand, Linda still 'identifies' with the strong self – so that in part her sense of who she is is still represented by the super-fit being in the image. Thus Linda is struggling between being taken over by a new self, defined by her chronic pain, and hanging on to an old self, in spite of the pain she is suffering. This struggle is literally illustrated in the temporal changes in the passage itself. (p. 45)

Connecting the part back to the whole, this micro-analysis of a few words thickens our reading of the whole passage and the whole interview in turn. The readings presented above are consistent with and cast further light on the analysis which was emerging from the whole transcript, thus strengthening the confidence with which they are treated.

Finally we will contrast each of the levels of analysis presented so far with a fourth type of interpretation which could be offered and which we think marks a boundary for IPA. Here we continue with a quote from the same paper from Jonathan:

> Finally, to clarify the bounds of IPA analysis, I would like to mention a fourth form of interpretation which was offered to me when I presented this analysis at a recent workshop. One participant suggested that a psychodynamic analyst could argue that the horse clearly symbolized Linda's sexual appetite, frustrated by her current condition. This to me illustrates the difference between a grounded IPA reading and an imported psychoanalytic one. I accept that it is possible to interpret the passage in the way suggested, but in order to do so, one is invoking a particular formal extant theory which is then 'read into' the passage. By contrast, I would argue that my account in terms of a struggle for identity is based on a close reading of what is already in the passage, helped by analysis of what the participant said elsewhere in the interview and informed by a general psychological interest but without being influenced by a specific pre-existing formal theoretical position. Thus the IPA and psychodynamic interpretations are coming from two different epistemological perspectives and each has its own explicit or implicit criteria for the validity of a reading. The direction looked to for authority for the reading is different – outside in the case of the psychoanalytic position, inside in the case of IPA.
>
> That distinction has been presented in quite a strong form, for clarity. However, as ever, reality is fuzzier! First, I am not claiming all psychodynamic researchers would work in the way illustrated; I am saying some do. Many psychodynamically inclined researchers do include an analysis based on a close textual reading, foregrounding the presenting account itself.
>
> Secondly, even though most IPA reading is operating close to the text, there is still a reader doing the reading and influenced by all of her/his biographical presence when doing that reading. There is a discipline, however, in staying grounded and attentive, checking one's reading again against the local text itself, and verifying it in the light of the larger text/what is said elsewhere in the interview and one's unfolding analysis.
>
> Thirdly, occasionally one may wish to draw on a more specific theoretical account to assist. With an IPA analysis, this would be clearly marked by a difference in tone and as more speculative because of the distance between text and interpretation.
>
> Fourthly, IPA does systematically make more formal theoretical connections, but this is more usually done after the close textual analysis and guided by that emerging analysis. So, for example, it is possible to connect this reading of pain engendering a struggle for identity with Charmaz' work on chronic illness as a threat to self (Charmaz,1991). (Smith, 2004: 45–46)

This connects back to Chapter 2 where we stated that IPA involves a middle position between a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of suspicion. One starts with a hermeneutics of empathy but it is fine for one's interpretation to become more questioning as long as it is prompted by close attention to the text itself, that is, that it still comes from within rather than from without. The psychoanalytic reading above is clearly coming from without and is an example of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion. One final complication! It is possible to couple an IPA analysis with one more formally adopting a hermeneutics of suspicion, for example from psychoanalysis, discourse analysis or critical

theory. However, it makes sense to present the two readings separately so that the reader can see the different analytic leverage which is going on. For further discussion of how IPA connects with other theoretical approaches, see Chapter 12.

So what makes a 'good enough' analysis? Considering the levels of interpretation offered for the back pain extract, we would expect a student new to IPA to be working at something like the first level, that is, where we were considering the woman's social comparisons. We realize that the third level of interpretation involving the micro-textual analysis of the temporal status of her verb usage is quite sophisticated and we wouldn't expect a novice IPA analyst to be working at this level, though of course it is great if they are. Yet we would hope that as researchers become more confident and experienced that they can push the interpretative side of their work further.

Working with larger samples

Having zoomed in to look at a small piece of text in detail, we now move in the other direction, panning out to consider large sample sizes. We have suggested that for most first student projects, a sample size of up to six will be sufficient for a good IPA study and indeed we would often advocate three as an optimum number for such work. With these sort of numbers, the set of steps outlined above works well. It produces a detailed analysis of each case, resulting in a table or figure capturing the pattern for that particular person. It is then quite manageable to examine the table or figure from each participant to elicit the themes across the group.

If one has a larger corpus, then almost inevitably the analysis of each case cannot be so detailed. In this case, the emphasis may shift more to assessing what were the key emergent themes for the whole group. Here it may even be the case that one identifies emergent themes at case level but holds off the search for patterns and connections until one is examining all the cases together. As you can see, great variety is possible in terms of the detail of the particular analysis and the relative weighting to group and individual. However, even where the analysis is primarily at the group level, what makes the analysis IPA is the fact that the group level themes are still illustrated with particular examples taken from individuals.

For these larger studies, measuring recurrence across cases is important. The key decision here is how, for a particular study, the status of 'recurrent' is defined. So, for example, a decision may be made that for an emergent, or super-ordinate theme to be classified as recurrent it must be present in at least a third, or a half, or, most stringently, in all of the participant interviews. Counting like this can also be considered as one way to enhance the validity of the findings of a large corpus (see Chapter 11). Box 5.7 gives an illustration of establishing recurrence. This indicates whether the super-ordinate theme is present for each participant and then calculates whether it is therefore prevalent in over half the cases.

Box 5.7 Identifying recurrent themes

Super-ordinate themes	Fred	Bill	Sam	Iain	Dave	Present in over half sample?
Diagnosis and transformation of self	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	*YES*
Re-assertion of self	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	*NO*
Psychological consequences of diagnosis	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	*YES*
HIV as catalytic in life change	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	*YES*

There is no rule for what counts as recurrence and the decision will be influenced by pragmatic concerns such as the overall end product of a research project (e.g. a PhD thesis may have different requirements from a report for a funding body intended to affect policy). Also the degree of recurrence will be influenced by the level of commenting and theming. A super-ordinate theme expressed at a broad level is likely to have more instances in the corpus than one expressed at a more specific level. It is not that one level is more right than the other; it all depends on how the analysis evolves and what one is trying to do with it.

It is also important to remember that indicating a prevalence for a super-ordinate theme in the group still allows for considerable variation. Different participants may mainfest the same super-ordinate theme in different themes. And the same theme or super-ordinate theme may look very different in how it is evidenced across different participants. Doing IPA with numbers of participants constantly involves negotiating this relationship between convergance and divergence, commonality and individuality.

Having identified a set of criteria which can be used to identify recurrent themes, you may, as a final step, be able to find a way of showing the interconnections between the recurrent group themes graphically. Some of the processes described earlier, such as abstraction and subsumption, can again be helpful here. Studies with larger samples require considerable skill in retaining

an idiographic focus on the individual voice at the same time as making claims for the larger group.