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Guest Blog by Deborah Biggerstaff – Letting the data speak: combining interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with narrative in a pluralistic approach

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Much of my work in psychology of health services research focuses on participants' experiences of their 'being-in-the-world' informed by Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* (crudely translated as *life world*). This may more accurately be described using Kvale's term of "the lived everyday world" (Kvale, 1996, p. 54). Generally I use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for my data analysis (Smith, 2004). However, I have become increasingly intrigued to observe, when I started exploring the rich stream of data ('thick data') from my results, that sometimes more may be discovered by taking another look at what the data 'tells us'. For this I have started thinking about how best to adopt a *QUAL-quant* approach (Morse, 2009) when analysing qualitative results. Morse, researching in the United States, encourages us as researchers, to think further about how and when we might mix and combine different qualitative methods. This approach directly connects with the pluralism project of PQR.

Morse asks, for instance, under what conditions mixing qualitative methods might prove useful. She observes that, in developing a mixed methods approach in research, much work tends to focus on "various combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods in the same project" i.e. *QUANTITATIVE – qualitative (QUANT – qual)* or *qualitative – quantitative method (QUAL – quant)* (Morse, 2009, p. 1523) rather than thinking more creatively about how we might link different qualitative methodologies in the same research programme. She proposes that guidelines are needed for the development of methods i.e. for when to use a "*QUAL – qual*" mixed design and proposes that this area provides an exciting challenge for qualitative thinking, using capitalisation to signify the dominant method. Thus, a *QUANT – qual* design suggests both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in the same project (i.e. mixed-methods) with the research team assigning greater significance, or weighting, to the quantitative aspects of the study with a qualitative element also included, perhaps providing a sub-component for the main study (hence the use of the lower case).

By contrast, and probably of greater interest to the PQR project, *QUAL – qual* signifies that two qualitative methods have been used in combination: with one method forming the dominant, or main approach. In my own research, having first analysed my data using IPA (*QUAL*), I then revisited my transcripts and, as a direct result of reflecting on my analysis, noticed resonance with elements of narrative within participants' accounts. I then began exploring using narrative for a second, or subsequent analysis (*qual*).

Combining these two core approaches i.e. that of phenomenological analysis of individuals' experiences, together with narrative analysis, can help develop a unifying framework that can be used to increase our understanding behind some of the dynamic factors involved in patients' health seeking and their behaviours (Frost, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2010). Narrative serves to provide our participants with an important mechanism by which they try to make sense of their lives, the lived-experiences of particular incidents. Universal elements of story-telling are used to provide them with a framework when they attempt to describe their feelings, emotions and experiences.

Qualitative approaches can help deepen our understanding of some of the complexities involved in bio-psycho-social phenomena, especially when researching into health. Indeed, Frost and Nolas (2013) suggest that using pluralistic qualitative mixed methods have much to offer to help increase our understanding of social interventions in today's economic climate observing that,

"...as the welfare state contracts in many Western economies (the main consumer of evaluation) and localized agendas proliferate, small-scale change is likely to become the recognized norm and the need for (qualitatively driven) mixed methods evaluations will become even more important and widespread." (Frost and Nolas, 2013, p. 76).

IPA with its idiographic, inductive and interrogative approach aims to provide insight into the heart of people's lived experiences (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008; Smith, 2010, 2004). With its clear methodology and theoretical approach towards subjective experience IPA is still being shaped by the researchers who are using it as the method further evolves. Reflecting on my experiences using IPA I have become increasingly aware, when (re)examining my data, particularly in my research on women's *lived-experiences* after childbirth, how many of my interview transcripts could also be re-read for this strong sense of *narrative*. This provides a bridge to other narrative researchers working in health and exploring patients' experiences (e.g. Charon, 2001, 2005; Crossley, 2000; Elywn, 2007; Riessman, 2008). I have also observed, by adopting a pluralistic approach, further linkages and common patterns with related research areas such as social identity, biography and illness (e.g. Greenhalgh, 2000; Radley, 1993; Radley and Chamberlain, 2001). Using a pluralistic approach can therefore be helpful in exploring health (Chamberlain et al., 2011). As researchers, therefore, I propose that is important that we remain vigilant for such opportunities when we turn to any such re-examination of our data.

This reflexive engagement made me realise participants had used narrative to describe their life-history experiences, often expressing elements of these within a 'mini-narrative' contained in their larger story. Such micro-tales often provide a strong sense of plot: sometimes participants introduced obstacles into the narratives, or else interviewees had needed to reconsider events or experiences in their lives, perhaps due to others' actions. These *drama personae* would be introduced as the description of events unfolded. All this was combined with a strong sense of plot; sometimes characterisations were provided, perhaps using another dialect, or mimicking someone who had a part in their own life-drama, accompanied by the appropriate actions, or use of mime to illustrate the scene within their micro-narrative.

While such connections between 'newer' methodologies, such as IPA, and narrative approaches have not, as yet, been made very explicit, Jonathan Smith does acknowledge the potential for "fertile links" with other qualitative approaches, including narrative "through shared concerns" (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, pp. 196 -7). It is this shared concern which I am currently exploring: the fascinating journey of methodological pluralism.

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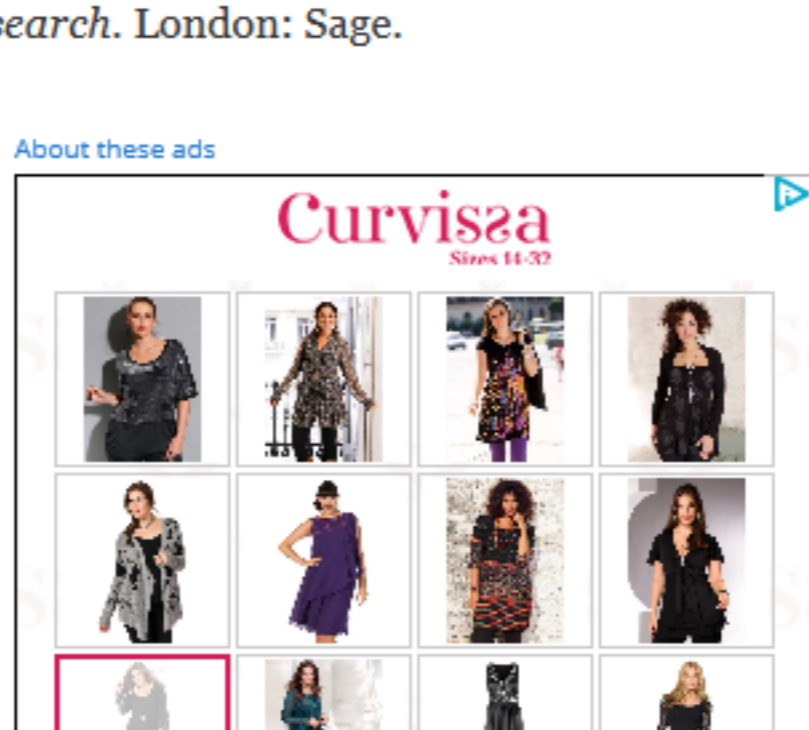
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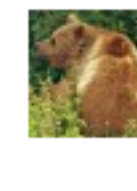
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