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# Understanding Lived Experiences Through Inclusive lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis (NA)

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**Abstract:** The paper presents the findings of a PhD study carried out and completed in 2021. The study adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and elements of Narrative Analysis (NA) as an inclusive methodological approach to investigate and understand the experiences of educated professionals of African origin living in Finland. Through the voices of ten participants (five females and five males) in semi-structured interviews, the study provides insights into the experiences of the participants and created a basis for new hybrid epistemologies through a reconceptualisation of Western working cultures and discourses. The study makes several contributions. Within postcoloniality, it contributed to a discussion on the postcolonial interrogative space as well as postcolonial identity by proposing concepts such as 'duality of being', 'belonging ambivalence', and 'validation ambiguity'. Within social studies, the study reconceptualised the notion of positive identity validation. Regarding sensemaking, the study contested the claim that individuals change and adopt various identities according to the demands of different situations. Instead the study proposes that the sense of self, performance, and representation of identity are interrelated, and influenced by power. As the study was carried out by a culturally diverse researcher (not purely western and sharing socio-historical commonalities with the participants), it also disrupted epistemic colonisation and cultural imperialism. Methodologically, the study widened the application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis primarily used in psychology. By combining IPA with elements of interpretive poetics borrowed from NA, it showed how IPA can be combined with other methodological tools. This will hopefully encourage researchers from other fields, not only practitioners of psychology, to apply IPA in their studies.

**Keywords:** Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Interpretive Poetics, Narrative Analysis

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## 1. Introduction

The focus of my PhD research was the experiences of black, educated professionals (five females and five males) from Ghana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Nigeria, all living in Finland. In order to obtain rich data, a wide spectrum of insights, and as deep insights as possible, the only methodological approach that I considered appropriate was both qualitative and interpretative.

In this paper, I describe this methodological approach and my rationale for choosing it. I also shortly outline its theoretical underpinnings. I provide a justification for my choice of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), and selected elements of interpretive poetics, borrowed from narrative analysis (NA). Additionally, I provide examples of the analysis and my interpretation of the narratives.

## 2. Rationale for adopting a qualitative/interpretative paradigm

Apart from investigating people's life experiences in a foreign host culture, I was also interested in the extent to which the values that formed their cultural identities informed their sensemaking. I considered the positivistic conception that experience can be grounded in empirical observation of the facts of the experience as valid, but I was also aware that it does not acknowledge the context as being influential in the phenomena being studied. Therefore, I considered the qualitative commitments as the only ones that rendered themselves suitable for my study.

Moreover, as my research investigated human experience through human perceptions, it also acknowledged multiple versions of reality, truth, and knowledge. A qualitative perspective allowed me to investigate and understand the world as seen through the perceptions of individuals (Smith, 2003), and it focused on the collection and analysis of stories shared by people about their lived experiences (McLeod, 2003 in Woolfe et al. 2000), and "involved alternative conceptions of social knowledge, of meaning, reality and truth" (Kvale, 1996, p. 11). I concurred with Morrow's (2007) argument that qualitative research is the most appropriate methodological approach to understand the sense and meanings that people make of their experiences. I was not interested in gathering empirical facts, proving a hypothesis, or testing an existing theory. Rather, I was interested in performative recreations of lived experiences as expressed by the participants through their personal narratives and stories. I viewed the participants as relational, subjective, and embedded in their

contexts. The empirical inquiry I was interested in was dialogic where the truths were incomplete, subjective, and relational. I wanted to hear the narratives not only with an open mind, but also with an open heart. This called for a shift towards a “concentration on horizons of human meanings” (Gadamer, 1975 in Bochner, 2018) and a more hermeneutic approach, which would provide room for subjective meanings, moral reflections, contextual embodiment, compassion, and empathy. I found Jovanovic’s (2011, p. 3) description of qualitative inquiry as “a rich, heterogenous field comprising various techniques, methods, concepts, theories, interpretive patterns, values, orientations, ontological, anthropological, epistemological assumptions, ethical principles and social and political views” especially appropriate to my study. It embraces the participatory role of people as part of the research process, thus acknowledging their voices as knowledge creators. It empowers rather than controls, it includes rather than excludes.

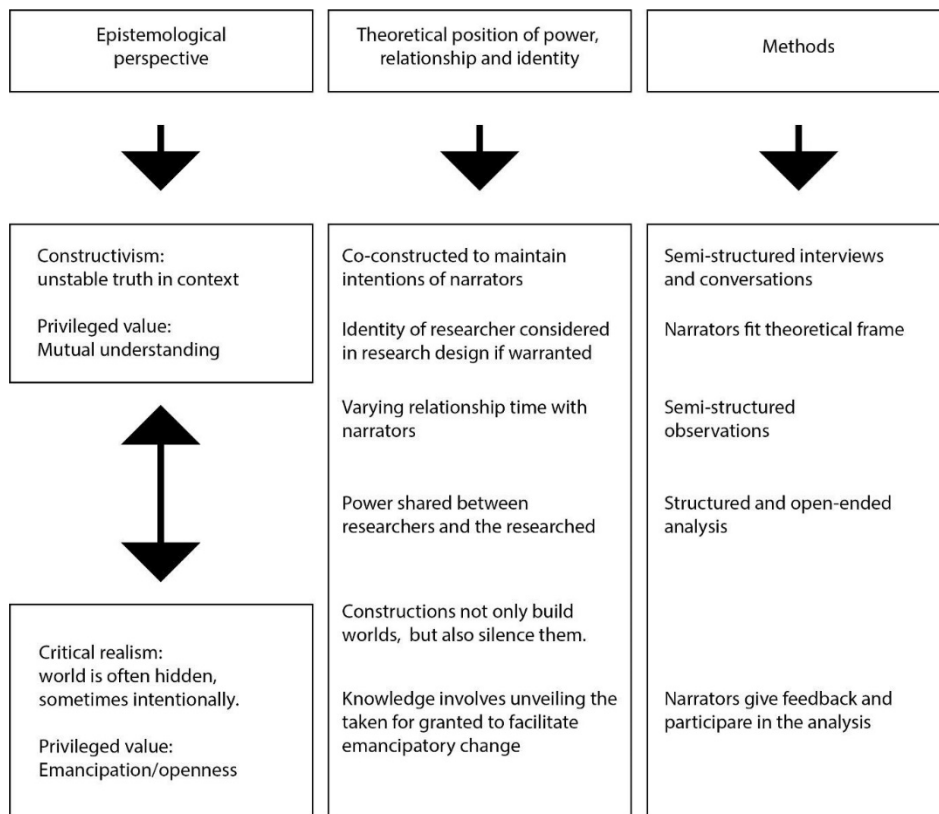
### **3. Theoretical underpinnings**

The critical epistemologies and theoretical perspectives of my study stemmed from Vygotsky’s theory of learning (1978), which implies that personally meaningful learning and knowledge are socially constructed through the process of sharing understandings. I adopted a constructivist perspective, assuming that knowledge is co-constructed in specific social interactions (Gadamer, 1996, in Bochner, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978), and truth is constructed by social processes and that it is historically and culturally specific (Taylor, 2008). Human perception and social experience are the basis for human learning. The learning process builds on prior existing knowledge, but an individual can interpret this knowledge in new ways. Although social constructivism does not reject the existence of an objective world, it focuses on the perceptions, experiences, and the process of learning that people have developed about the world they live in. This approach creates less separation between me as a researcher and the participants.

At the other end of the spectrum, I considered critical realism, which considers an objective reality as one that exists independently of individual perception but also recognises the role that individual subjective interpretation plays in defining that reality. It occupies the middle ground between the two opposites: positivism and subjectivism. Subjective observers create a variety of interpretations and a hierarchy of meanings emerges to justify and form an objective standpoint and understanding, perceived and theorised by subjective observers. The primary function of critical realism thus lies in determining what is objectively real and what is subjectively accepted (Taylor 2018). This connection and distinction between reality and subjectivity as not mutually exclusive sits well with my understanding of the way knowledge is produced: shaped and influenced by the objective reality *out there*, but also internalised by individuals and their reality *in here*.

Figure 1 below illustrates the interrelatedness and intersections among epistemology, theory, and methods according to Hollingsworth and Dybdahl’s (2000, in Clandinin, 2018) classification. I adopted it incorporating Willmott’s (2016) additional parts.

The epistemological implications of the above ontological approaches meant to me that the purpose of my inquiry was NOT to create a faithful representation of the reality which is independent of the knower. On the contrary, my purpose was to investigate the phenomena and generate my interpretation and a new understanding of the phenomena based on the relation between a human being and his/her environment (life, community, and world).



**Figure 1.** Intersections of Epistemology, Theory, and Methods. Based on Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2000); Willmott (2016).

#### 4. Epistemological Stance

Whilst investigating the experiences of the participants in a foreign host culture, I saw cultural values as motivators and driving forces behind their cognition, understanding, and sensemaking, as well as being integral elements of their cultural identity. I formulated my understanding of cultural identity as a temporal sense of self, derived from and driven by social values dominant in a given culture at a given point in time. This understanding of cultural identity, as well as its formation, guided me towards the path of my investigation. If one's cultural identity was temporal, context, and culture-bound, I considered it important to gain insights into what, over time, might have influenced it. Moreover, if it was based on the values learned in one's native culture (e.g. during childhood), I needed to investigate the early memories of the participants to find out what values they learned during that time in their home cultures. I did this by listening to their narratives. The value of narratives as a source of knowledge was advocated by Jerome Bruner (1986), who called it a "narrative approach to knowing". Inspired by Ricour's (1983) concept of narrative identity, expressed through being parts of the plot in the stories people tell about themselves, I adopted an open and semi-structured interview as my method. I designed my interview protocol and questions based on identity formation models borrowed from Erikson (1980) and McAdams and Cox (2010, in Lerner et al. 2010).

#### 5. Rationale for adopting Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA, with its phenomenological approach, focuses on people's perceptions and experiences of the world in which they live, which also gives them meaning. It acknowledges human experience as a topic in its own right. Moreover, IPA draws its philosophical underpinnings from hermeneutics and phenomenology (Smith and Shinebourne, 2012).

IPA is a relatively young research methodology, predominantly used within 'applied' psychology (Larkin et al., 2006e), and sometimes described as an approach to qualitative data analysis. I saw it as a suitable methodology for my study for several reasons. IPA is committed to the exploration of personal lived experiences. According to Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p. 116), IPA does not claim a specific epistemological position and has been described to have epistemological "openness" and "eclecticism", distinguished in its ability to encompass "the

real and the constructed". IPA also draws from a foundation of phenomenology, social constructionism, and symbolic interactionism (Smith, 2004).

Furthermore, IPA aims to explore how participants make sense of the way they experience their personal and social world, and its focus is on the study of the meanings of particular experiences or events. Essentially, IPA is interested in people-in-context and the way they make sense of their experiences. IPA pays attention to the life worlds of the participants, and it does not concern itself with the production of objective statements. On the contrary, it is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an event or experience (Smith and Osborne, 2008). This was the focus of my study.

IPA is characterised by its reflexive component. As IPA acknowledges both my participation as a researcher and my own conceptions, it required the application of a double hermeneutic perspective. This meant a two-stage interpretation process. On the one hand, the participants made sense and created interpretations of their experiences, and on the other, through my analysis, I attempted to interpret the participants' accounts. In this sense, IPA also has a theoretical commitment to a person as a cognitive, active, and physical being whose emotional state, talk, as well as thinking process remain in constant connection with one another.

In my analysis, my aim was to interpret the meanings of the narratives, but I also considered the wider contexts in which they were produced. Therefore, Schleiermacher's (1998, in Smith et al. 2012) approach, which provided a holistic view of the interpretative process, was well suited. For Schleiermacher, interpretation involves two levels: the grammatical and psychological. The grammatical level investigated the objective textual meaning, and the psychological level considered the role of the author of the narrative. The narrative analysis approach allowed me to investigate the grammatical level (interpretive poetics), while the phenomenological interpretative analysis provided insights into the psychological level.

In other words, I regarded the interpretative process as my understanding not only of the text of the narrative, but also the narrators. This holistic approach created possibilities of "an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself" (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 266). This also meant that my analysis offered a perspective on the narrative which the narrator was not aware of creating. What I also found enriching, albeit time consuming, was the iterative manner of analysis. I moved back and forth whilst looking at the data, and I interpreted the meanings within the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2012). This meant that, as I approached the narratives from different levels, not necessarily in a linear fashion, I discovered new meanings and nuances.

## **6. Rationale for adopting elements of Narrative Analysis**

Apart from complementing IPA's intellectual commitments, NA's 'pragmatic ontology of experience' was particularly suitable as it encompasses several ontological features that are also features of the methodology itself. Dewey (1934, in Connelly and Clandinin, 2006), Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identified three features of NA: temporality, sociality, and place, all of which I considered crucial to the sensemaking of experiences.

As *temporality* refers to knowledge generation, following Dewey, all inquiry proceeds from experience, and knowledge is obtained from experience. Therefore, it is attached to a specific point in time.

The *sociality* in my study meant to me that the participants in my study always and simultaneously found themselves in both personal and social conditions. The personal conditions could be feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, as well as their moral dispositions. The *sociality* of the pragmatic ontology is the emphasis on the social dimension of inquiry and understanding. The stories being studied were products of a confluence of the social influences on a person's inner life, environment, as well as their unique social history.

The third feature of NA draws attention to the centrality of *place* and acknowledges the fact that all events happen in a concrete, physical place. The location of a place and its impact on the way people experience the world was crucial in my study. Following Basso's (1996, 107 in Clandinin, 2007) concept of the physical landscape being "wedded to the landscape of the mind", I was aware that what the participants experienced in their native countries in Africa might have an informative influence on their understanding of what they experienced in the host culture in Finland.

## 7. Inclusive methodology

As mentioned earlier, I saw IPA and NA as complementary and therefore I adopted relevant parts from NA in order to compose an inclusive and richer methodology that ensured both rigorous data collection and analysis, while allowing for openness. Sharing intellectual commitments and complementary qualities, both IPA and NA gave voices to individuals and acknowledged these voices as valuable data. The narratives of the participants were both subjects of scrutiny as well as media through which the participants transmitted their reality. The marriage of IPA and NA made my analysis deeper and more detailed, not to mention more interesting.

Figure 2 below shows the connections and complementary elements of both IPA and NA. IPA allows for an understanding of the meaning and interpretations of the lived embodied experiences, through the voices of the participants. NA allows for an analysis of the lived experience expressed through personal narratives embedded in and influenced by social, cultural and institutional narratives.

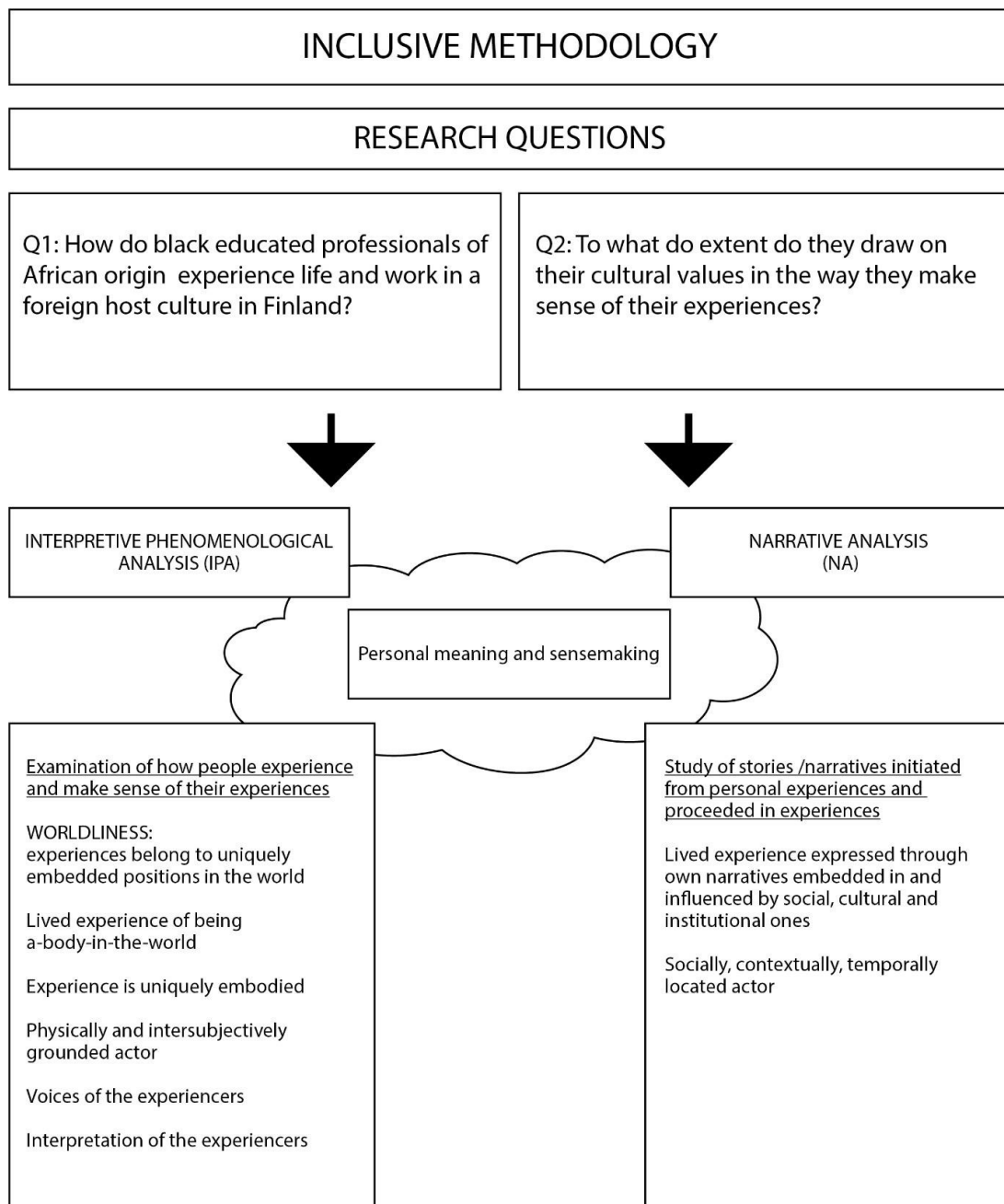


Figure 2: Inclusivity of NA and IPA

I selected an inclusive methodology because I believe that knowledge and people's understanding of lived experiences are contextual. Therefore, I adopted the "contextual constructionist" epistemological position. According to Madill et al. (2000), all knowledge is local, provisional, and situation dependent (Madill et al., 2000). I reject the realist epistemology that assumes that one reality can be revealed by using one methodology.

As the participants in my research made sense of their experiences in two very distinct cultural environments, they were and are exposed to different cultural meanings (Giorgi, 2010). This implied that their interpretations and understandings were altered as a result of encounters and observation whilst embedded in different environments, which Stiles (1993, p. 602) coins as "permeability". Stiles suggests that when adopting a constructionist epistemology, an objective way of looking at a phenomenon can be substituted by permeability. The lived experiences which the participants expressed through their own narratives were embedded in and influenced by social, cultural, and institutional narratives both in their native cultures and in the host culture. The narratives that they shared with me were expressions of the "filters of permeability" or the outcomes of the double hermeneutic within their sensemaking.

## **7.1 Analytical approaches**

### *7.1.1 Interpretive poetics*

Interpretive poetics (Rogers, 2007), as part of Narrative Analysis (NA), provided an additional, albeit different analytical perspective. The focus of NA is located not only in the individual's experience, but also in the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which the individual's experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted.

I was aware of the five interpretive layers of reading a narrative, as suggested by Rogers (1999): story threads, the divided "I", the address, languages of the unsayable, and signifiers of the unconscious. However, I decided to apply only the first three in my analysis. As I was neither equipped nor qualified to tap into the participants' unconscious minds, I decided not to include the languages of the unsayable and signifiers of the unconscious in my analysis. Notwithstanding, as I listened to the recordings and reread the transcripts, I noticed broken utterances, stops in the narratives, and seeming contradictions. This provoked my curiosity and, in turn, called for analytical tools that would render a different perspective of the analysis, yet still allow me to remain at the textual level without attempting psychoanalysis. The first three levels of interpretive poetics: story threads, the divided "I", and the address were just the tools to accomplish that.

### *7.1.2 Story threads*

Rogers (2007, in Clandinin, 2007) claims that every utterance people make, everything they say to someone else is a product of unconscious censorship, an inherent process people employ when speaking to others. This unconscious censorship is a form of repression people employ when they form a piece of speech, to shape their speech in specific ways for the purpose of it being heard by others. Finding the threads allowed me to uncover these "censored" layers and tap into the contents of the narratives that their authors might not be aware of creating.

For example, the story thread that ran throughout the narrative of a female participant, who I named Ella, related to a sense of loss (also expressed with the most frequently used words). Ella's narrative began with a simple statement: "*I lost my father when I was very young*", and continued: "*...and that thing has remained with me for the rest of my life*". Ella went on to say, "*I have lived with that*". The sense of loss Ella expressed at the beginning of her narrative continued and permeated her story, and the event that had triggered it (the death of her father) cast a shadow over the trajectory of her entire life.

### *7.1.3 The divided "I"*

Rogers (2007, in Clandinin, 2007) claims that when a person speaks, he/she must become divided to represent him/herself. The way people create their divided selves in their narratives points to them being at odds with who they are and who they want to be. For example, a female participant, who I named Jane, described the values she lived by in the following way: "*Family values... marriage values, that no matter ...like my husband is away...it's... almost 20 years now. Others would have divorced, but... no... the distance doesn't stop you from being married. I don't care what he is doing, he knows he is married. Even me I know I am married. And this helps the children also, psychologically. Knowing the parents are still together. It's very healthy*".

The description shows a clear division between what she described as real, on the one hand, and ideal, on the other, thereby highlighting the contradictions in these descriptions. This description evokes her ideal self, the way she projects herself: a married woman who does not divorce her husband. Later in the same utterance she falters, and by doing so she contradicts the previous statement (*"I don't care what he is doing"*). Her contradictory voice emerged and opposed the previous image of her "I". This opposing voice defines her divided "I". These contradictions revealed tensions between the way Jane saw herself and the way she became as a result of living in the host culture in Finland. Revealing these tensions further illustrated her sensemaking when reconciling her cultural African values with the reality imposed by the host culture in Finland.

#### *7.1.4 The forms of address*

The concept of address explores to whom the narrator is talking in the narrative. This is connected to the way people position themselves. Even though the narratives in my study were not works of fiction, I found Parker's claims about narrative in the works of fiction (in DelConte, 2013) helpful. Parker argued that authors employ second person narration (an extradiegetic narrator) to distance themselves from certain events in their stories, especially the events or situations that might seem embarrassing, shameful, or difficult to deal with. Using a second person narrative also becomes a catalyst for the authors' concern that they will be associated with the events that their narrators tell, a concern that erodes the distinction between author and narrator.

For example, the more a narratee is associated with the events, the less the narrator becomes responsible for them. Grammatically, this translates into because "you" have done or are currently doing something, "I" am not. Importantly, because the events are "real" and connected to another, the narrator can maintain the exclusive function of reporting, allowing the experiencing to reside in the distinct "you".

For example, the way Ella positions herself in her narrative suggests closeness or distance, belonging or disassociation with the situations and experiences she encounters. This is also influenced by the values Ella holds dear to her.

Ella addresses an imaginary Other in her narrative. At times she uses the pronoun *you* when she addresses me the narratee, but more often than that she addresses someone else. For example, when she narrates her life in Finland and talks about her neighbours, she says:

*"But Finnish people... no you cannot even knock at their door when you are sick, to say hey, help me out. No neighbour will help you, ... as a foreigner, it is not easy. We come from a society which is open and outside, and we talk to neighbours. But here you have no neighbour"* (147-148).

Here, by addressing a constructed Other, she becomes an extradiegetic narrator, and in doing so she created a distance between herself the narrator and herself the character. She positioned herself on the outside of the situation which is different to what she is used to. Having come from a collectivist culture Ella is used to close relationships with people around her, and especially her neighbours.

## **8. Methodological contributions**

Adopting an inclusive methodology (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, IPA) and elements of Narrative Analysis (NA), allowed me to access the meaning of the narratives of the participants from a wider perspective and at a deeper level. On the one hand, I was able to investigate how the participants made sense of the way they experienced their personal and social worlds, the context, their life worlds, and their individual personal perceptions of events and experiences. On the other hand, I was able to read deeply into the text of their narratives and analyse it from a narrative perspective.

Moreover, as IPA is predominantly utilised within 'applied' psychology (Larkin et al., 2007), adopting it for my study showed that its application in fields other than psychology can render valid findings. By including elements of interpretive poetics, my study widened the narrative possibilities of IPA, thus allowing for a more holistic approach to the interpretative process (Schleiermacher, 1998, in Smith et al., 2012) where the interpretation involved two levels: the grammatical and psychological. The narrative analysis approach allowed me to investigate the grammatical level (elements of interpretative poetics), and the phenomenological interpretative analysis provided the insights into the psychological level. This deeper two-level analysis strengthened the validity of my findings.



## 9. Conclusions and Limitations

Following Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers (2019), phenomenological research, especially within psychology, focuses on the personal meanings of individuals. It considers the relationship between people and the world as operationalised at the individual level. Therefore, in IPA research projects, the most common research designs involve collecting qualitative data from a small and reasonably homogenous group of participants who share a certain contextual perspective on a given phenomenon. The fact that the accounts of their personal experiences serve as a lens for illuminating the broader meaning can be considered a limitation as it might have a bearing on the applicability of the findings.

The inductive logic and cumulative approach to knowledge creation in IPA call for a detailed and context bound analysis. In my study, the accounts of the participants were local and bound to the contexts of the African home countries and Finland. Therefore, in my findings, I reported in detail the views from and within the Finnish cultural frame, but I did not claim that my findings shed light on studies carried out, for example, in the UK. In order to achieve greater validity and applicability, other subsequent studies may be added to my study. In this way, based on these additional case studies and their detailed analyses, more general claims could be made (Smith and Osborne, 2008).

Another self-limiting aspect of IPA, entailed by a small and homogenous sample of participants, could be applied in studies where the research questions or the object of study has relational aspects. For example, my study investigated how black professionals experience life in Finland. Since their experiences are bound to specific cultural contexts and these contexts influenced their experiences, it would make sense to investigate the experiences of other parties who constituted these contexts, namely their Finnish counterparts. An analysis of data revealing multiple perspectives could generate stronger accounts and thus wider perspectives of the findings.

Nevertheless, in adopting IPA as my methodological approach, I was interested in meaning, not causality. At the same time, I was aware of the possibility of triangulating my findings by inviting the participants to read my analytical accounts of their narratives in order to enhance the persuasiveness of the findings. However, I did not receive a consensus from the participants. In my future research projects, I am interested in adopting what Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2019) describe as greater influential range in order to achieve greater persuasiveness of findings. I do not see that reaching greater persuasiveness could be achieved by designing the research process based on a model of causality, or as a shift out of phenomenological analysis and into a more empiricist frame of reference. I could still analyse the data with the focus on meaning, not causality. I could strive to obtain transparency by involving the parties who might have conflicting perspectives on the phenomenon. I could triangulate the findings by inviting the participants to partake in the analysis. This would create a wider contextual range of my analysis, where not only one specific group of people would be investigated in one specific context.

Another limiting aspect of myself as a researcher analysing and interpreting data from a phenomenological position, is the fact that I was re-interpreting the participants' individual interpretations of the meaning of their experiences. In other words, I was interpreting what the participants had already interpreted themselves, thus giving rise to a third-person interpretation. One way to overcome this somewhat compromised position could be the use of the multiplicity of evidence (the triangulation mentioned above, for example) to ensure more rigour and transparency. This approach could potentially create more "generalisability" or "abstraction" in my future phenomenological research projects, while retaining caution and context-sensitivity.

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