Understanding lived experience and the structure of its discursive context: A dual focus methodological approach

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In this paper we discuss the methodological framework of the first author's PhD thesis in order to expose the thinking underpinning a dual focus methodology for a research programme which sets out to explore both the lived experience, and the socially constructed nature of 'satisfaction' in long-term, heterosexual relationships. The proposal is that these two distinct exploratory foci can be addressed by conducting two distinct qualitative analyses on a single body of narrative data generated via interviews with twelve people from the general population; using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and then using Focauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). This approach presents a theoretical challenge as the two methodologies are grounded within different epistemologies. We propose that by adopting a critical realist position at the thesis level, rather than at the individual empirical level of the research, the epistemological assumptions of both methodologies can be maintained and the two foci can yield analytic insights alongside one another. By drawing on established hermeneutic theory, we propose that the interpretative stories generated from this dual focus approach can come together in potentially complementary ways and "bridg[e] the classical dichotomy between distanced explanation and close understanding" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.130) associated with FDA and IPA respectively. The current paper will present and discuss the proposed dual focus approach, addressing the benefits and challenges of conducting both an IPA and an FDA on the same data set. It will conclude by outlining pragmatic suggestions for undertaking a dual focus analysis, including managing the interview structure and process, and the phases of analysis. The intention is to contribute to the growing preoccupation within the field of qualitative research about the limitations of an exclusive focus on the role of language in shaping realities and experience (e.g., Willig, 2007).

Why a dual focus?

Whilst other researches have drawn on ideas from both IPA and FDA in their work (e.g. Chadwick, Liao, & Boyle, 2005; Flowers, Duncan, & Francis, 2000; Johnson, Burrows, & Williamson, 2004), in general, the connection between the two methodologies remains implicit. However as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) point out, since IPA and FDA "appear to come to the social world in *potentially* complementary forms [there may be] value in a more explicit articulation of the relationship between them" (p.196). IPA and FDA are

delineated by distinct analytic foci and, as such, are able to shed light on the topic of relationship satisfaction in different ways. In IPA, for example, the emphasis would rest with mapping participants' understandings, and gaining a sense of their internal life worlds in terms of their subjective experiences of relationship satisfaction. By contrast, in FDA the emphasis would be on mapping patterns of discursive resources, how these are mobilised by participants to construct relationship satisfaction in certain ways, and how certain constructions come to warrant certain social practices but not others.

Whilst FDA does attempt to theorise subjective experience, it does so by accounting for it in terms of "subject positions" – vantage points, and their associated rights, duties, and power, made available when the speaker occupies a discourse. Discourses are understood as forms of structured language that are available to a linguistic community in a historical time, which shape and limit what we can think, say, and do, and also what can be done to us. As cultural formulations, discourses about romantic relationships construct its subjects as certain types of people and not others (e.g. good enough partner, 'normal', 'abnormal'), and open up subject positions which cannot be avoided (e.g., 'the care taker of my lover's needs'), although we can become aware of these, recycle or try to resist them. Once one accepts, or is unable to resist a particular subject position, they are "locked into the system of rights, speaking rights and obligations that are carried with that position" (Burr, 2003, p.111). In FDA, subjective experience is thus investigated and understood through discursive concepts and expands our knowledge about the close relationship between discourse, culture and subjectivity. It shows how discursive constructions and practices play a central, formative role in the ways in which we experience ourselves (e.g. as 'partner', 'lover', 'satisfied', 'dissatisfied' etc.). However more can be explored about the subjective richness of experiencing oneself as a dis/ satisfied 'romantic' partner, beyond the reifying role of language or the tyranny of discourse, to get a closer look into the humanness of experiencing these phenomena. There are further nuances and dimensions of psychological experience, say of experiencing satisfaction in one's intimate relationship, that are difficult to articulate and, as Willig notes, "seem to involve [one's] entire being, in a pre-reflective kind of way [and] seem to be about more than the use of language" (2007, p.210).

FDA permits us to say something important about the contours of experiences that might be made available, or limited, by certain discourses and subject positions, but it cannot tell us (and does not aim to) about the phenomenologically grounded awareness of an encounter; in other words, about the felt *actuality* experienced by individuals within a given context and time (Willig, 2001; 2007). Several researchers have explored alternatives or extensions to discursive work, which allow for the study of embodiment and subjectivity (e.g. Hollway &

Jefferson, 2000; Radley & Taylor, 2003; Gillies *et al.,* 2005). IPA also offers a potent way forward. Through the research process IPA allows the interpretative theorising of extra-discursive qualities of subjective meaning making activities. IPA treats participants' accounts as expressions of their experience as it appears and signifies to them, and therefore goes beyond seeing the structure and nature of participants' talk in terms of discursive resources. While FDA points out that the discourses we use have direct implications for what we can experience (Henriques *et al.,* 1984); IPA can offer a more direct, albeit interpretative, approach to articulating these implications from the point of view of the experiencing participant. This is the purpose of the dual analytic focus proposed here.

Epistemological Challenges

Whilst the dual focus approach has the benefit of allowing the exploration of the interplay between language, culture and experience, using both methodological frameworks within the one research programme (here a PhD thesis) poses epistemological challenges which need to, and can be addressed. These challenges stem from the fact that whilst IPA and FDA both concern themselves with the role of meanings, collective meaning (patterns of commonality), and individualised meaning (patterns of variability) in constituting subjective realities, they do so in different ways. FDA has a stronger and more direct empirical commitment to social constructionism than IPA typically has (Smith *et al.*, 2009). Amongst other things, FDA represents the speaker's narratives and associated realities as constructed through discourse, and seeks to map dominant patterns of collectively shared meanings deeply indebted to a local culture. IPA draws more on ideas from the symbolic interactionsim of George Meade and so aims to articulate themes representing the speakers as individuals with hermeneutic agency and, importantly, with individualised, psychological life-worlds. The empirical interest of a researcher to gain insight into these psychological life-worlds will necessarily encounter the conditions of the "double hermeneutics" (Smith, 1996); namely, that IPA knowledge-claims are provisionary, relative and always a contextualised function of the researcher's interpretations of the participants' own interpretations as they reflect and try to make sense of their experiences within research settings.

Commonly, empirical applications of IPA principles tend to be sympathetic to social constructionism in that there is acknowledgment that meaning-making processes involve the speaker taking-up and mobilising certain discursive resources. There is an appreciation that participants' narratives are always already situated within, and therefore shaped, limited and enabled, by language and practices (Smith *et al.,* 2009). The linguistic and social fabric of any given community acts as a framework for potentially individualised production of meanings and offers socially valued formulations, which, when taken up, are subject to

becoming taken-for-granted "habits of thought" (Parker & Shotter, 1990). In turn, such psychologically generated habits of thought contribute to the very system where they were created; namely to the system of dominant discourses, associated practices, gendered injunctions, and so on. Recycled by speakers within daily interactions, internalised habits of thought prop up reified cultural expectations about, for example, the right and responsibility to have a 'good romantic', 'satisfying' relationship (see also Tunariu & Reavey, 2003). The discourse analysis of narratives about relationship satisfaction would involve a critical mapping of the "bodies-of-knowledge that *constitute* [relationship satisfaction] in a wider cultural environment [that] might be accessed" (Larkin, 2006, p.109). On the other hand IPA subscribes to a less singular empirical translation of social constructionism than FDA, and does not invest in the same critical, deconstructive aims.

One way to navigate contrasting epistemological commitments within the same thesis is by adopting a position which moves away from the more relativistic (radical) forms of social constructionism, and moves towards a position that can accommodate a notion of reality that can be arrived at by "differentiating between the 'real' and the 'actual' " (Willig, 1998 p.102). Such a position would accept that the experience of relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction is always grounded within prevailing cultural understandings about intimate relationships, and these are always already prescribing, but the experience does not become less *real* to an individual once its social construction has been established through theory (e.g., Tunariu, 2003). This position also acknowledges that a series of distinct actual conditions are required for 'relationship satisfaction' to possibly unfold in meaning and experience in certain ways. For example, these could include material (embodied), cognitive (inchoate anxiety which an individual is attempting to articulate), or social (linguistic access to certain communal views but not others) conditions (e.g., Harré, 1998). This position shares, therefore, common epistemological ideas with critical realism. Critical realism theorises "a structural reality to the world [...] which in some way underpins, generates or 'affords' our ways of understanding and talking about it" (Burr, 2003, p.96). Social and physical arrangements can be involved in providing the conditions-of-possibility for the emergence of discourses without determining them. As Willig (1999) puts it, "[c]onditions of life, as experienced by the individual through discourses, provide reasons for the individual's actions. It follows that from a non-relativist social constructionist point of view, meanings are afforded by discourses, accommodated by social structures and changed by human actors" (p.44). Other theorists have also proposed bridges across the material-discursive divide. For example, Nightingale and Cromby (2002) argue for "the 'co-constitution' of personal experience by both the nature of material reality and the constructive force of language" (Burr, 2003, p.100). In summary, the epistemological features argued as necessary for the dual focus approach proposed in this

paper are as follows: that when spoken about, the experience does not become less real to the speaker once we notice the workings of discourse-use (IPA can capture this); and that the actuality and conditions-of-possibility point to materiality and their affordability of meanings (again IPA can capture this).

The proposed dual focus methodological approach encounters the task of co-joining epistemological interests as outlined above, and then of integrating findings to serve both sets of analytic foci (IPA and FDA), as well as the thesis' overall research questions. Two separate analyses of the same body of textual data can meet the first challenge and accommodate the epistemic criteria of both IPA and FDA. In order to meet the second challenge (that of integrating the findings of both analyses), current discussions on the role of hermeneutic theory in research methods need to be drawn upon to guide the treatment of the text, such that the ways in which the text is treated under the FDA and IPA paradigms will generate two complementary interpretative stories.

Hermeneutics of Empathy and Suspicion

Hermeneutics refers to the process of interpretation. Whilst the original focus was on the interpretation of biblical texts, hermeneutic theory has broadened to encompass a much wider range of texts. Today, social theorists have argued that hermeneutic theory is at the heart of the qualitative research process (Rennie, 2007) and can offer much to contemporary psychology (Smith, 2007). Ricoeur (1970 cited in Langdridge, 2007) outlined two broad interpretative positions: the hermeneutics of empathy, and the hermeneutics of suspicion. The former tends to focus on the content of talk, and aims to reconstruct the speaker/author's experience in their own terms. In contrast, the latter takes a more critical view of language and the role of the speaker/author, and draws on external theoretical perspectives to deconstruct the social-structure of their talk (Smith *et al.,* 2009; Sullivan, 2010). Recently there have been arguments in favour of incorporating both hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion (see Langdridge, 2007; Rennie, 2007). Broadly speaking, IPA operates from within a hermeneutics of empathy, whilst FDA tends towards a hermeneutics of suspicion, although this distinction is neither as rigid, nor as simple as stated.

Smith *et al.,* (2009) state that IPA can take a centre-ground position in relation to the hermeneutics of empathy and suspicion (see also Smith, 2004; Larkin *et al.,* 2006) as long as the focus remains on elucidating the meaning of experience. This does not involve adopting the critical, deconstructive aim of the hermeneutics of suspicion; but rather, incorporating what Smith *et al.,* (2009) call a hermeneutics of 'questioning'. So whilst the IPA researcher wants to empathise with the participant's experience, and to 'put themselves in their shoes',

they also want to examine the experience from other angles and ponder the meaning-making of the participant. The IPA research process starts with a hermeneutics of empathy, but may become more questioning. However, this questioning is always driven by the content of the text itself, rather than an external theoretical framework (see also Langdridge's 2007 work on Critical Narrative Analysis). Thus, whilst IPA may involve a hermeneutics of questioning, it is clearly a different interpretative process to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion (Smith *et al.,* 2009).

The hermeneutics of suspicion share common aspects with Foucault's work which, inspired by Nietzche's genealogical method, attempted to "search for the shameful, fragmented origin behind societal phenomena, whose origins have become mythologised, with the passing of time, as noble rationality and unambiguous clarity" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.130). The hermeneutics of suspicion looks beyond participants' subjective meaning-making to consider the social structures through which and for which their meaning-making is made possible. Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) articulate this as the injection of "critical social theory into the hermeneutical circle to facilitate an understanding of the hidden structures and tacit cultural dynamics that insidiously inscribe social meanings and values" (p.288). With the upshot that "[w]hat seems natural and self-evident should be problematised via insight (the hermeneutics of suspicion) and critique" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p.167). As outlined earlier, FDA can provide this sceptical, critical view of the broader social context, and prevent the researcher from falling into the trap of culturally-shared 'common-sense' meanings (Tunariu & Reavey, 2007). Smith *et al.*, (2009) have argued that "it makes sense to present the two readings separately so that the reader can see the different analytic leverage [that] is going on" (p.106). The dual focus analysis presented here represents a way of operationalising this theoretical call.

Pragmatic considerations for a dual focus approach
In applying the dual focus approach, pragmatic considerations and decisions have to be made at every milestone typical of deconstructing the exploratory nature of the qualitative research process. These pragmatic considerations require the researcher to acknowledge possible points of tension between the two methodologies of IPA and FDA, and make decisions about the best way forward to ensure that the epistemological assumptions of both are maintained, and that the research questions and interests remain protected. The initial milestone, once the topic is decided (see also Coyle, 2010), is to formulate the research questions from within the epistemological and theoretical frameworks of the respective methodologies. In the case of the first author's PhD the research questions included, for example, "How do participants experience satisfaction in their relationships?" and "How do participants know when they are

'satisfied'?" for the IPA focus. For the FDA, research questions included "How do people construct relationship satisfaction? What dominant discourses get mobilised?"; "When does it make sense for participants to talk about relationship satisfaction in a certain ways?" and "What subject-positions are being created, and what modes of experiencing relationship satisfaction (including distribution of power) do these make available?"

Overlapping with the process of articulating the two strands of research questions for the empirical project are considerations and articulations at the level of epistemology. Here, the researcher needs to remain acutely aware of the epistemological assumptions of IPA and FDA and how these inform their respective analytic foci (see earlier discussions for outline). A third procedural milestone requires the researcher to establish the direction in which they wish to go in preparing to collect data. As with any qualitative work, the epistemological position and theoretical framework adopted influences the formulation of the interview questions as well as the interview style. In terms of interview structure, in the case of the first author's PhD, the selection of questions emerged from a commitment to remain open and curious towards the participants' voice and aware of the researcher's own intellectual and personal assumptions, and, as much as is possible, keeping these bracketed. The set of questions devised to guide but not restrict the interview conversations thus featured open-ended questions which tried to tap into the analytic foci of both FDA and IPA. For example questions such as *'What do you understand by the term relationship satisfaction?'* were followed by *'How do you know when you're satisfied? What does it feel like?'*. The aim was to encourage as much narrative, and as much reflection as possible, and to prompt the participants to describe their internal life-world, whilst noting points of tension in their accounts. This process required active engagement with the interview process and was challenging because of the simultaneous needs to be relaxed enough to allow free narrative, whilst also remaining curious and aware of potential moments of segueing into novel areas, or contradiction with what had already been said, as these moments hold high potential for both IPA and FDA interests. It required constant reflection by the interviewer on what had been covered, and the extent to which the analytic foci and questions had been addressed.

The first author found it useful adopting what can be called a 'relaxed awareness' style during the interviews with the participants; relaxed in the sense of being receptive to and engaging with the participants' subjective accounts, whilst being aware of points of tension in their narratives as these often delineate boundaries between dominant discourses employed in the same conversation. Likewise, on the one hand paying attention to participants' descriptive narratives and phenomenological accounts as much as possible, and on the other hand remaining aware of contradictions in their talk as a gateway into exploring the simultaneous

mobilisation of multiple discourses and/or as gateways exposing interpretation and experience arising together. Other researchers interested in taking the dual focus approach might take an alternative approach. For example, one might develop an interview style that is active in highlighting contradictions and tensions in language and try to invite the participants to take a position in relation to this in preparation for the hermeneutics of suspicion later on.

The fourth research milestone that has pragmatic implications for conducting a dual focus approach is data analysis. This includes the procedural sequence that the researcher decides to use to conduct the two analyses, and also how they balance the different analytic foci whilst working through the various phases of the analyses. Outlining the phases of analysis is intended for the purpose of transparency and accountability which, alongside reflexivity, are a necessary part of ensuring inductive and epistemological rigour in the process of knowledge making. The interpretative claims then presented as master themes or discourses, respectively, can stand the scrutiny of credibility, viability and transferability applicable to qualitative research. In terms of what sequence to conduct the analyses, in the case of the first author's PhD, the researcher decided to start with the IPA. This is due to the fact that the analytic focus of FDA requires a technical understanding of discourse theory, which speaks of language-use as being structured into coherent discourses i.e. linguistic packages. As such searching for these system-like linguistic 'packages' of metaphors, assumptions, and ideas yields better to a more global look at the text, yet with a technical gaze as its deconstruction unfolds as part of the encounter with the data. A panoramic view of the prevalent building blocks used to construct objects and events, and associated links or contradictions, can raise familiarity and aid the researcher navigate the text when deconstructing it through the lens of IPA. In doing IPA first, the researcher sets out with a looser, more open gaze towards the complex, initially undifferentiated thematic patterns as they emerge as units of meaning, whether these are articulated as concept-understandings, phenomenological descriptions or hermeneutic preoccupations that hold personal significance for the speaker. Therefore, the researcher may decide to engage in the IPA analysis of the data first then, armed with a detailed understanding of the text, to proceed to interrogate it from the analytic vantage point of FDA.

The dual focus approach invites the researcher to subscribe to the idea that language and experience are deeply intertwined, and therefore the sequence of the analyses could be conducted in either way. The invitation is to suspend the analytic foci and concerns of one mode of the analysis while embarking on the other. Starting with a clear outline of the phases of analysis derived through principles, and tailored to research questions, can help the researcher embrace this invitation. Commitment to engage with the text within the framework

of an IPA or FDA lens can translate in a disciplined application of de-construction and re-construction of text. However throughout the research process the dual focus approach will remain visible to the researcher; at times, these will be experience as an 'and-and' rather than a clear cut 'either–or' process. Awareness that this will happen, that the intention to suspend one set of concerns may not always necessarily be possible, increases the researcher's readiness to proceed. For instance, while conducting the FDA of a body of text, IPA related ideas, hunches, or reflexions may arise and need to be 'purged' by noting them down next to the 'parent' narrative for later use. When done with purpose and intention, this noting practice can be usefully incorporated as part of the phases of analysis step of the dual focus analysis.

The first author, once again, found the approach of 'relaxed awareness' to be a useful way of managing this challenge. A distinct outline of phases of analysis was developed for each mode of analysis. All interview transcripts were analysed individually, either via IPA or FDA respectively, and then a collective mapping of the overall body of transcripts, prepared. The first phase of analysis for both the IPA and FDA was conducted in parallel. This entailed familiarity with the data ensuring curiosity was maintained. Once familiar, the data were prepared in a three column table, with the interview transcript in the central column. The left hand column was then used for the first phase of analysis - the initial, detailed, text vs. interpretation driven analysis of the narrative. Subsequently, in the second phase of analysis, the coding from the first phase was revisited (along with the text) in light of two things: 1) a *deliberate* focus on the IPA informed research questions and analytic foci and 2) a simultaneous *relaxed awareness* about the research questions and analytic foci of the FDA. Thus, interpretative coding/structuring of units of meaning and initial themes were noted in the right hand column of the table, primarily for the IPA, but also for the FDA. These were written in two different formats to distinguish between them. From this position the process of 'relaxed awareness' allowed the researcher to attempt to suspend their attention on one analysis to allow the full unfolding of the other analysis. There was a deliberate focus on one analysis, while the second analysis was considered from a position of relaxed awareness. In this second stage the researcher did not solicit the hermeneutics of suspicion, but remained open to allow the interpretative stories to unfold. This allowed the researcher to conform to the IPA process in an inductively rigorous way whereby the themes could be interpretated, whilst also facilitating the initial stages of the FDA.

Once this second phase was complete, the IPA and FDA analyses became completely separate, and the IPA continued through the usual stages of analysis (e.g. Smith et al., 2009). Recurrent themes were pulled out along with illustrative extracts. These were compiled in a new document which was then analysed for higher order themes, guided by three things: i)

points that appeared relevant and significant to the participant; ii) points that appeared to be highly recurrent; iii) points that addressed the research questions. These formed the basis of a diagrammatic representation of the master themes with their associated sub-themes. The process was repeated for all participants and then the researcher looked across the entire corpus of data to arrive at an overall IPA mapping of the dominant themes. Once completed, the researcher returned to the FDA, which had been left since the second phase of the IPA. Thus the coding and other purposeful notes from the first phases were revisited through the lens of the research questions set, the FDA foci, and a relaxed awareness of the IPA findings that had just been completed. The researcher was now principally focussed on the FDA, once an orderly revisit of the IPA notes took place solely in light of FDA concerns. The analysis was now guided by an attention to i) the various ways in which the topic was constructed through discourse; ii) the associated social practices warranted by these constructions; iii) the subject positions made available by the mobilisation of these discourses. Again, this process was repeated for all interview transcripts, before an analysis of the entire body of data was conducted to arrive at an overall discursive mapping of the topic.

One of the reasons for adopting this approach in the first author's PhD is that the researcher felt he could not simply do one analysis followed by the other because the research questions and analytic foci of *both* analyses were always in his mind. Thus, the researcher suspended (within the parameters outlined above) their attention on each analysis in turn, in order to give equal attention to both, yet IPA and FDA were both constantly in their awareness: one deliberate, and the other one relaxed, and then vice versa. The assumptions of one analysis cannot be fully bracketed, and a fuller picture can only be accessed by seeing them in action together. The dual focus approach brings the researcher closer to the complexity and dynamics of this interplay and allows it to inform the integration of the findings from the two analyses. To integrate the findings the researcher returns to their initial research questions, as these serve as a rigorous structure to separate the two interplaying aspects of language and experience before 'dropping them back together'. As such the dual focus methodological approach proposed here allows an 'artificial separation' of the two aspects that are always already intertwined for the benefit of closer examination and interpretative insight.

In summary, in the procedural milestones of the dual focus research project, the IPA and FDA phases of analysis run parallel at various points and overlap during others. They are connected at the point of establishing the research topic, but separate when articulating the research questions, and remain separate in terms of epistemology. They overlap during the data collection process in some ways, but remain separate in others; together in the sense that the data for both analyses are collected at the same time, but separate in terms of what the

researcher asks and pursues during the interview process. Similarly, for the phases of analysis the two methodologies overlap in the initial, detailed, close-to-the-text analytic stage, where both happen at the same time. Then in the further 'theory neutral', or interpretation focused phases of analysis, the two analytic foci remain distinct but one set of concerns are deliberately in focus, and the other one are monitored and noted. The methodologies then run in parallel until they are fully separated for the later phases, and will come together once again in the integration of the findings.

Both IPA and FDA methodologies emphasise the relative nature of knowing and the role of context in participants' meanings and experiences. This shared emphasis offers the basis for "fertile links" between them (Smith, 2009, p.196). The dual focus methodological approach presented here allows the same phenomenon to be analysed at both the discursive, social level, and also at the psychological, sense making level. While the IPA maps out patterns across experiential accounts of individual's meaning-making activities grounded by a cultural and inter-personal discursive context, the FDA maps out the structures of the discursive context itself. In the analysis of the same set of data the dual focus approach is able to follow two strands of emerging knowledge. To achieve this in an empirical research project requires epistemological reflexivity so that the researcher has transparency and clarity in their approach to both methodologies. To allow the full unfolding of one analytic journey at a time the researcher must also temporarily suspend their other empirical interest. This requires tolerance of overlap, uncertainty, and possibly contradiction. During the process the researcher must decide how and when they intend to treat the text i.e. in terms of empathy or suspicion? They must constantly reflect on whether the text is better understood as a discourse or as a phenomenological theme. This requires them to know their interpretative story i.e. what interpretative findings do they want to present as viable knowledge? This is driven by their analytic foci, which, in turn, translate from the study's research questions.

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