Naming Themes in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): Recommendations and Examples

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Abstract

In qualitative research, *theme* typically refers to an identified trend running through the data. Themes play a prominent role in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and may serve as a framework for presentation. Although comprehensive resources are available to guide researchers through stages of IPA analysis, there is far less information on specific strategies for associating a theme with a name or label for IPA, or for other qualitative approaches. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present strategies for thoughtful development of IPA theme names. To this end, we present and summarize available theme-naming guidance associated with multiple methods including IPA and thematic analysis. We supplement this with examples from prior IPA research studies we believe illustrate effective theme names, organized in three broad categories of theme focus, phrasing, and structure. Within these categories we provide guidelines for researchers to consider to best address the research purpose and most effectively communicate the key findings.

Keywords

interpretative phenomenological analysis, themes, research methods

Themes are primary expressions of the outcomes of data analysis from interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). In formal research reports, themes appear in the form of subheadings, a table or diagram of themes, or both. In shorter formats of presentation, such as abstracts or conference slides, it is common to see themes serve as a summary of the whole analysis. Themes are a prominent representation of qualitative research findings, often the first and sometimes the only representation that a reader will see. Therefore, they are also highly likely to be what a reader will remember best about the write-up.

Themes are assigned names or titles as part of the analysis, but we identified limited explicit guidance about theme naming conventions, either for IPA or other qualitative methods which utilize themes. The purpose of this paper is to explore potential strategies for theme naming, primarily through annotated presentation of a range of examples from published IPA works. We begin with a summary of theme naming recommendations from existing methods sources. We then present a range of examples and use them to suggest some strategies for IPA scholars to consider as they develop themes

from their own research. Our conclusion explains some caveats and the intended contribution of the paper.

Available guidance with respect to theme names can be found both in general qualitative texts and approach-specific works. Boyatzis (1998), writing broadly about qualitative data analysis, divided themes into two types: manifest, meaning concrete or explicit, and latent, meaning abstract. Boyatzis provided general guidance with respect to naming, and suggested theme titles be clear, reflect the data, and make a conceptual contribution. Saldaña (2021) expanded this work by providing a structure for distinguishing the two types.

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Manifest themes may be indicated by the initial phrase: "X is…" while latent themes begin with: "X means…" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 268). Saldaña also recommended theme names resemble sentences in terms of length. This indicates the wealth of information that a good theme name conveys – a one-word label would often be unable to capture what is important about the theme it represents.

Approach-specific guidance is provided in works on thematic analysis and phenomenological research methods. Braun and Clarke (2006), the authors most often associated with thematic analysis, recommended theme names be "concise, punchy, and immediately give the readers a sense of what the theme is about" (p. 93). Braun and Clarke (2013) further recommended authors employ creativity to encourage reader engagement by drawing from clichés, well-known phrases, and familiar stories or characters – classic and contemporary. Lochmiller (2021), also writing about thematic analysis, suggested effective thematic statements might inspire readers' connectedness, similarly to the experience of hearing familiar music. These recommendations suggest that theme names should be expressive and sometimes evocative.

Multiple phenomenological methods feature themes as outcomes of analysis, but the difficulty of theme naming is widely acknowledged. For instance, van Manen (2016) provided twelve statements about the nature and role of themes, but characterized theme development as a complex, multi-faced process, not "a skill … that can be described and then learned or trained" (p. 88). Spinelli (2005) described the challenge of transforming co-researcher (participant) expressions to higher-order outcomes as "the most precarious interpretative part of the phenomenological research process" (p.136), because it challenges the researcher to be simultaneously accurate and interpretive. Guidance for naming themes in these phenomenological methods, as with thematic analysis, tends to emphasize qualities and readers' responses over structural or semantic guidance. For example, Finlay (2011) suggested theme names prioritize relatability, expressiveness, and liveliness. Bazeley (2013) emphasized contrast when describing outcomes from phenomenological research, and suggested researchers should report "the qualitatively different categories of conception of the phenomenon" (p. 248) in a way that balances distinction with parsimony.

For IPA specifically, guidance provided by Smith et al. (2022) and Smith and Nizza (2022) regarding theme naming is implied, not explicit. Characteristically, IPA researchers initially analyze each case separately, and compile their impressions of a case in reflective notes. It is during the next step, where these reflective comments are transformed into personal experiential statements, that what will eventually become themes are first articulated. Experiential statements are characterized by including "enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87). Smith and Nizza (2022) recommended experiential statements be sentence or phrase-length and

described the content as a combination of the experience and the analyst's description or initial interpretation of the participant's response. This is in line with Smith's (2019) explanation of participants and researchers as both being involved in the making of meaning in IPA, via its characteristic double hermeneutic. The event and the participant's attachment of meaning to it together constitute the subjective experience that the experiential statement seeks to capture.

Personal experiential statements are then condensed into a smaller number of personal experiential themes, or PETs. This is typically accomplished by grouping the experiential statements based on some type of commonality. Smith et al. (2022, p. 101) wrote that researchers will want to find "the best way to present the instances from the individual participants to tell the clearest story about the understanding of the experience". Because PETs reflect an aggregation or integration of multiple statements, Smith and Nizza (2022) recommended researchers develop a theme name that is "an expression of the convergence" (p. 46) of the multiple statements. Once PETs are developed for each case in a study, similar processes of comparison and condensation are used to identify group experiential themes or GETs. Importantly, both convergence and divergence between case studies may yield insights into the nature of these themes, which raises a challenge for theme names to capture these insights.

Neither Smith et al. (2022) nor Smith and Nizza (2022) provide extensive theme structure or naming guidance, perhaps because of the difficulty of accommodating the potential range of research aims, differences in data, and variation among author, funder, and journal reporting preferences. Our response to these challenges is to follow the lead of Smith et al. (2022) and Smith and Nizza (2022) and use existing examples as the primary method of illustrating our more general recommendations.

To identify suitable examples, we first referred to a list of high-quality IPA studies from health psychology described by Smith (2011) in a paper written to provide criteria for well-written IPA studies. We then added what we consider good examples from more recent sources and other sub-disciplines. We annotated these examples with our interpretation of how these theme names help readers. Additionally, given the lack of explicit guidance on semantic and structural aspects, we tried to address this practical aspect of theme development.

Our recommendations are intended to inspire IPA researchers to create theme names that achieve the best possible representation of their findings. They are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. But, based on the idea that theme names are a common and prominent summary of an analysis, we suggest that researchers can guide their readers towards the essential meaning of a theme with carefully chosen theme names … no more and no less. Perhaps these recommendations will prompt researchers to develop additional or alternative ideas.

We present our suggestions and examples in three sections, each covering a different aspect of theme naming:

theme focus (which covers the content of theme names), theme phrasing (which covers the wording of theme names), and theme structure (which covers the relationship between themes). These aspects and recommendations are visualized in Figure 1. Like Smith (2011), we will focus on good examples and not "name and shame" bad examples. Sometimes, though, it may be instructive to imagine how much less effective a good example would have been if phrased differently.

Aspect 1: Theme Focus

A defining characteristic of IPA is its mandatory focus on subjective lived experience – its phenomenological commitment. Inevitably, the primary research questions of IPA studies will concern subjective lived experience, including people's understanding and sense-making of the phenomenon or phenomena under investigation (Smith et al., 2022, p. 42). It therefore seems likely that the best way to capture a completed data analysis – that is, the answer to such a research question – in a set of theme names will also involve a focus on subjective lived experience. This leads us to our first recommendation:

Recommendation 1: Let the Theme Names Answer the Experiential Research Question

For IPA, the research question is necessarily about participants' experience (the phenomenological commitment). Consider themes, singly or in combination, as a way to tell the reader a story about experience. Essentially, the themes respond to the question "What's it like to live this experience?" or "What lies at the heart of this experience?" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100).

Examples from Research by Arroll and Senior (2008) Exploring the Experience of Living with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- "Am I really ill? Interference with daily and working life" (p. 449)
- "Light at the end of the tunnel? The struggle for a diagnosis" (p. 452)

These themes (Arroll & Senior, 2008) use a thought-provoking question, which invites the reader into the participants' life-worlds and places the focus firmly on subjective lived experience. The subtitle in both instances contextualizes the theme question while speaking to the research question of how people experience and make sense of living with chronic fatigue syndrome and reaching a diagnosis.

Structurally, these themes each have two components. The question represents participants' voices while the theme subtitle is not a response but instead a summary of the experiences that led to the question. The presentation as a repeating pattern helps readers navigate and absorb the findings.

Examples From Research by Reynolds and Lim (2007) Exploring the Experience of Visual Art-Making While Living With a Cancer Diagnosis
- "Art making focused attention on life experiences other than cancer" (p. 5)
- "Art making preserved an 'able' social identity" (p. 6)

These themes (Reynolds & Lim, 2007) are context-specific enough to be clearly about lived experience, but general enough to create an insight rather than just paraphrasing. The second in particular expresses the dynamic relationship
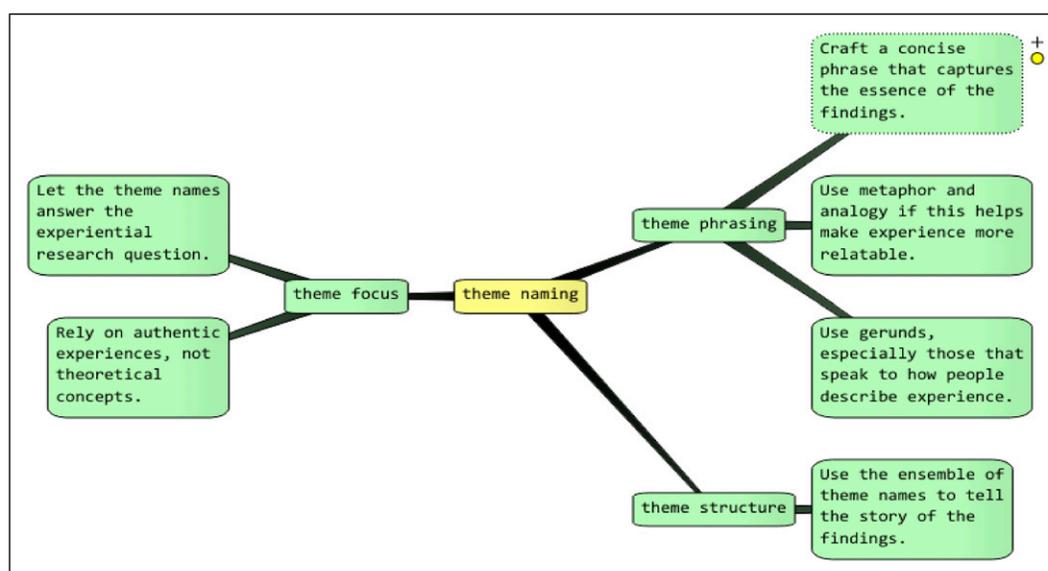

Figure 1. Diagram of recommendations sorted by aspects of theme naming in IPA. Created with Semantik software.

between the value of an 'able' self-image, the threat to it caused by illness, and the protective benefits of art making. Either serves as an apt response to "What is the experience of visual art-making while living with cancer?"

The themes are phrased as statements (and not just labels) which use the experience of interest as the beginning and as the actor or subject. In contrast to the "is" and "means" structure described earlier (Saldaña, 2021), these both speak to what something "does." Like the prior example, the repeating pattern improves navigability and unites the themes.

Examples From Research by Huff et al. (2019) Exploring the Experience of Engineers Transitioning From Academic to Professional Settings

- "Embracing the career identity of an engineer – feeling the distinct shift to adulthood as engineers" (p. 455)
- "After 5 o'clock, it gets to be me – developing identities in and out of the engineering context" (p. 457)

Each theme name tells a brief story (Huff et al., 2019). There is clear focus on experience and the associated sense-making: embracing a career, feeling a shift, developing, being "me". This addresses the research question and illustrates what this feels like.

The second theme name uses a participant's own words, which brings the reader particularly close to the participant's lived experience. This can be appropriate when these words adequately reflect the experience of all participants on which the theme is based, or can be elaborated (as done here) to fulfill that purpose.

Like the examples from Arroll and Senior (2008), these theme names are relatively long and have two components. Here, the format involves a pithily phrased idea followed by an elaboration of that idea. These additional words make a clear contribution to telling a story about experience.

IPA's phenomenological commitment is one of three key commitments. The others concern idiography (trying to understand each case on its own terms and in its own right) and hermeneutics (using interpretation to understand meaning). These principles create a demand for the IPA researcher not only to focus on a particular kind of question (about subjective lived experience), but also to approach the answer in a particular way. For example, the idiographic commitment to complete a case study of each participant before attempting a cross-case analysis distinguishes IPA from other methods that may be used to answer similar research questions (see Smith et al., 2022, p. 40). Both idiography and hermeneutics stand in deliberate contrast to hypothetico-deductive approaches to psychological research. Consequently, our second recommendation is to create theme names that reflect this unique approach, where this helps in answering the research question:

Recommendation 2: Rely on Authentic Experiences, not Theoretical Concepts

To achieve this, we recommend you avoid abstract logical categories or broad topics (e.g., "challenges" or "facilitators"), which also means to avoid theme names that look as if they might have been invented before any data collection and analysis (e.g., "positive effects" and "negative effects"). Instead, make the data talk and create theme names that reflect your careful listening to the participants and their first-person perspectives. Create themes that are informative about the underlying concrete experiences and stay clearly grounded in them. This serves the idiographic and hermeneutic commitments of IPA, which imply a process of induction starting from the data. It also maximizes the likelihood of creating themes that go beyond existing theoretical concepts, thus playing to the strengths of IPA and making a contribution.

Example From Research by Murphy, Jones, and Nigbur (2022) Exploring the Worldview of British Persons Practicing Hinduism

- "Everybody has their own way" (p. 4)

To us as readers, this example (Murphy, Jones & Nigbur, 2022) says everyone is a seeker on a journey, but everyone's path is different. Along with this, "way" can also mean a manner of doing things; in the research, participants talked about the diversity of practice among Hindus and their tolerance towards other faiths and worldviews.

This simple sentence can be interpreted in both a concrete and an abstract way. Both capture the participants' own sense-making.

On this occasion, the theme name is a direct quotation from a participant's speech. This offers a very direct connection between the reader and the participant's authentic perspective but is only appropriate if the quotation captures the whole theme (including, in cross-case analysis, the perspectives of other participants).

Example From Research by Marriott and Thompson (2008) Exploring Women's Life With Vulval Pain

- "The loss of femininity / sexual identity" (p. 248)

This theme name (Marriott & Thompson, 2008) shows effectively that a whole identity/self is experienced as lost. The word "loss" itself is powerful and characterizes the emotional experience to the reader. Everyone who has experienced loss can relate to this.

This theme name is expressed as a brief phrase which communicates a consequence of the experience. It is a concrete statement close to the participants' words, but refers to more abstract concepts.

Example From Research by Murray and Rhodes (2005) Exploring the Experience of Adults With Acne

- "Powerlessness and the variable nature of acne" (p. 189)

The linking of thoughts in this example (Murray & Rhodes, 2005) serves as a "double whammy": Powerlessness is itself very resonant, and the unpredictability of the condition only adds to the powerlessness. The words convey how the experience feels.

This theme name is a phrase with aspects of a title, and the structure "X and the…" (e.g., "Indiana Jones and the…") will feel familiar to many English language readers. Just seven words are used effectively to show two elements of the experience and the existence of a relationship between them.

Example From Research by Smith and Osborn (2007) Exploring the Experience of Living With Chronic Back Pain

- "The public arena makes it worse" (p. 524)

Like the example from Murphy, Jones, and Nigbur (2022), this example (Smith & Osborn, 2007) has a concrete and an abstract aspect. It shows how being in public worsens the experience of pain (identifying a commonality or perceived causality). But the choice of mentioning an "arena" may also allude to an everyday battle for those living in, and with, pain.

This is a simple, declarative sentence, with an actor, or instigator, and action, or consequence. It captures the tone of the finding, yet there is enough ambiguity to entice readers to want to examine the details.

Aspect 2: Theme Phrasing

Having covered the focus, or subject matter, of effective and IPA-appropriate theme names, we now turn to the judicious choice of words that can make a big difference. The goal is to let the theme name tell readers something about what they are going to find in the explanation and examples of the theme. The overarching principle is that every word matters. Although theme names are often the length of a sentence (see above), they should be concise. The reader needs theme names that say enough to be expressive but are short enough to be memorable – recall that theme names are often the first and sometimes the only summary of the analysis that a reader will see. Using just the right number of just the right words is both a craft and an art, with the researcher using eloquence, creativity, wisdom and repeated double-checking against the data to create theme names that capture the essence of a theme and communicate it effectively to the reader.

In our experience, it is common for this to be a somewhat difficult, lengthy and non-linear process, although there are also moments of inspiration that present an instant and obvious solution. Crafting theme names can even be fun because it is one of the relatively rare areas of scientific writing where authors might exercise a little creativity and style, with the aims of engaging readers and providing something memorable and informative. Some researchers, including ourselves, may also feel that it demonstrates the value of in-depth, human-driven analysis over algorithms, in developing names that are both appropriate and creative. Invest the time and toil it takes to develop your themes and wear them with pride. The recommendations below reflect some principles that may be useful in this effort.

Recommendation 3: Craft a Concise Phrase that Captures the Essence of the Findings

This may not be an explicit response to the research question but rather a succinct expression of the primary important trends from the data. The "capturing" may involve both descriptive and evocative words. Engaging readers and pointing them towards the essence or meaning of a whole theme – often informed by several participants' lived experiences – is difficult, but more insightful in IPA terms than mere labels, headings, or classifications.

Example From Research by Wersig and Wilson-Smith (2021) Exploring the Experience of Humanitarian Workers Returning Home

- "Limits and borders" (p. 7)

This example (Wersig & Wilson-Smith, 2021) evocatively refers to exploring and reaching one's personal physical and mental limits, and also to crossing borders between countries. There seems to be a suggestion that the participants' humanitarian work takes place at the limits in several senses.

Effective single-phrase expressions can be very brief: This is just three words. These three words may create some impression in the reader, which is then reinforced or clarified by their close reading of the research. The phrase is effective both as an invitation to read more about the theme and as a prompt to help the reader remember it.

Example From Research by Foxwell et al. (2024) Exploring the Experience of Immigrants Living in the UK After Brexit

- "Being permanently different"

Each word matters here. European Union citizens in post-Brexit UK do not just have different feelings, but feel that they *are* different, permanently, from the indigenous population (Foxwell et al., 2024).

This is another three-word phrase that encapsulates a range of experiences. The brevity of expression strengthens the impact of the idea. Again, it leaves enough need for elaboration to invite the reader to continue reading, but it also helps the reader remember the elaboration later on.

Example From Research by de Visser and Smith (2007) Exploring Alcohol and Masculinity Among Young Men

- "Equation of drinking with masculinity" (p. 600)

This is such a common figure of speech that it may be barely noticeable (and, usefully, is easily and immediately understood), but here evoking a mathematical equation effectively shows that participants made sense of drinking as

logically, naturally and self-evidently linked with masculinity (de Visser & Smith, 2007). Using just the right words makes the meaning of the theme obvious in its title.

Notably, another theme ("No link between masculinity and drinking") shows that not all participants made that equation, and some argued the opposite. This highlights how the unproblematic link suggested by "equation" is actually problematic and controversial.

Example From Research by Penny et al. (2009) Exploring British Pakistani Experiences With Psychosis Intervention

- "A story of loss" (p. 974)

This example (Penny et al., 2009) summarizes concisely that the experience is not a single event, but a whole sad story about loss, involving (these are the names of sub-themes) "sudden realization", "hope disappointed", and "loss and worry". The chronology and dramaturgy are clearly visible, but there is loss and worry rather than a resolution.

Recommendation 4: Use Metaphor and Analogy if This Helps Make Experience More Relatable

In the following examples, some of the interpretation is done for readers, suggesting a particular way of imagining the participants' experience. This may be useful for complex experiences and other times when readers may need guiding towards subtler aspects of an experience. But it only works if the analogy is meaningful to readers or can be easily explained.

Examples From Research by Smith et al. (2022) Exploring the Experience of Kidney Dialysis

- "'Becoming part of this machine': The machine taking over the self" (p. 158)
- "'It's waiting to hurt me': The machine as malevolent" (p. 160)

These theme names (Smith et al., 2022) are coherent, with each sub-theme tackling an aspect of the machine. Each is centered on the meaning of dialysis to the participant's self and identity.

These two-part themes all use direct quotes in the theme names, which is arguably easier to do in a single case study, as this was, when compared to a study with multiple participants. These quotations show the participant's imaginative process of anthropomorphizing the dialysis machine.

Examples From Research by Chatfield et al. (2016) Exploring Nurses' Experiences With Hand Hygiene

- "Confession" (p. 6)
- "Extenuating circumstances" (p. 6)

The subthemes shown above were clustered under a superordinate theme: "Hygiene on trial" (Chatfield et al., 2016). The themes track with participant narratives where they described

reactions to administration investigations of the source(s) of healthcare associated infections. Evocative language (e.g., "witch hunt") used by participants helped inspire this presentation.

The theme names of one word or a brief phrase may be recognized by those familiar with dramatic depictions of criminal court scenes as several of the conventional, even cliché aspects. These theme names, therefore, are somewhat interdependent and would not necessarily be effective presented separately.

Example From Research by Marks et al. (2019) on Living With Tinnitus

- "The healthcare journey" (p. 257)

On the short and simple end of the spectrum, this theme name (Marks et al., 2019) eloquently captures how dealing with the healthcare services is reminiscent of the peaks and troughs of a long journey rather than a simple transaction.

When a participant uses a metaphor, such as "journey", this requires decoding in the interview or during analysis; when naming themes, metaphor can help signify what would otherwise take many words to explain.

Recommendation 5: Use Gerunds, especially those that
Speak to how People Describe Experience

Charmaz (2014) cites Glazer in encouraging analysts to use gerunds in grounded theory. Gerunds encourage thinking about movement and action, rather than grouping ideas under static labels. This makes gerunds well suited also for IPA. Of all of our recommendations, this one perhaps comes closest to a "formula" for theme development. It may effectively counteract the IPA equivalent of writer's block: If you feel stuck with theme naming, start with a gerund.

Example From Research by Murphy, Jones, Nigbur and Gee (2022), Exploring the Religious Experiences of Practicing Baptists in the UK

- "Seeing God's hand in events" (p. 159)

The gerund in this example (Murphy, Jones, Nigbur & Gee, 2022) is effectively used to denote action. It suggests the participant as the agent, but God's hand is another agent. It expresses how participants made sense of events as being guided or created by God.

The gerund does not have to begin the theme name but is probably most effective when it does. Because the actor is implied in the gerund, the theme name remains brief, which reinforces the active nature of the theme.

Example From French et al. (2005) Exploring the Experience of Attributing Causes of Myocardial Infarction

- "Avoiding blame whilst exerting control" (p. 1415)

This example (French et al., 2005) shows use of the gerund to evoke agency and ongoing activity. The two components

point towards what may seem like a logical contradiction but is very much part of the lived experience: not blaming oneself or others but retaining a sense of control over relapse.

Even with a pair of gerunds, this theme name is brief. The comparison increases the sense of action by showing multiple things happening simultaneously.

Aspect 3: Theme Structure

Several of the examples above have shown already that theme names sometimes draw at least some of their effectiveness from the juxtaposition with other theme names in the analysis – a team effort, or a case of the whole being more than the sum of its parts. This makes sense because the research question is answered by the whole analysis, and the ensemble of theme names is a representation of that analysis. Evidently, some authors have taken great care not only in the creation of individual theme names, but also in how these theme names relate to each other. This last recommendation and set of examples are all about making your theme names shine, together.

Recommendation 6: Use the Ensemble of Theme Names to tell the Story of the Findings

In Recommendation 1, we emphasized the use of themes to answer the research question(s). Here, the emphasis is on letting the theme names work together to create particularly insightful answers. Repetition, contrast, progression and resolution can all be helpful in this.

Examples From Research by Darcy et al. (2022) Exploring the Experience of Nature Engagement to Support Health and Well-being During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- "COVID-19 versus nature" (p.7)
- "Nature as an extension and replacement" (p. 7)
- "Nature connectedness" (p. 11)
- "Therapeutic nature" (p. 15)

These theme names (Darcy et al., 2022) all include the word nature and describe directly or indirectly how nature engagement countered the impact of COVID-19. Structurally these vary from two-word topical labels to the comparison ("vs.") and the interpretive description of the role of nature ("as an extension and replacement"). Use of repeated language and recurring comparison emphasizes the relatedness among themes.

Examples From Research by Morrison and Williams (2020) Exploring the Experience of Being a Carer
- "Consuming the role" (p. 4)
- "Consumed by the role" (p. 4)
- "Letting go of the all-consuming" (p. 4)

The ensemble of these three theme names (Morrison & Williams, 2020) captures the directions in which carers felt pulled. In some way, it's a play on words including the slightly different meanings of "consuming". This is also an example of creative work in theme naming, which helps readers understand the interconnected nature of these themes and guides them to their various facets.

These three theme names are articulated as phrases which progress both in complexity and in length. The idea of "consuming" also moves from the beginning to the middle and finally to the end of the phrase. The semantic and structural aspects in combination work together to create a sense of movement and development across these themes.

Examples From Research by Kam and Midgley (2006) Exploring the Use of Clinical Judgment to Recommend Child Psychotherapy
- "Child psychotherapy as 'precious'" (p. 33)

Kam and Midgley (2006) explain that this is 'precious' in both senses: extremely valuable but also extremely rigid and self-centered. It frames the subsequent themes by highlighting these characteristics of child psychotherapy in the participants' sense-making.

- "What I would recognize as a child psychotherapy case" (p. 36)

This theme name evokes the crucial and active role of each individual mental health professional in making decisions about whether a child needs, or would benefit from, psychotherapy.

- "An idea about readiness" (p. 38)

This is about the concern whether the child and the child's family are judged to be "ready" for psychotherapy. The theme name makes clear that this is just an idea in the mind of the mental health professional, a notion that requires fuzzy rather than absolute judgment.

These three theme names, all expressed as phrases (two of four words each; one of nine) work together to illustrate dimensions of the decision-making process. Their ensemble fully addresses the research question, with each theme covering one aspect of the answer.

Examples from research by Baillie et al. (2000) exploring pregnant women's reactions to false diagnoses of chromosomal abnormality in the fetus
- "Expectations of routine scans" (p. 380)
- "Making sense of risk" (p. 381)
- "Informed choice?" (p. 383)
- "I had to put my pregnancy on hold" (p. 384)
- "Response to 'normal' diagnostic results: Equivocal adaptation" (p. 386)

These theme names (Baillie et al., 2000), taken together, tell a whole story about the experience, which answers the

research question of how the women experienced the false diagnosis. They also seem to follow a roughly chronological order in this instance, but that is not always the case.

Contribution and Concluding Thoughts

It is not our intent for these guidelines to be prescriptive or all encompassing, nor do we mean to claim that these suggestions must be followed in order for an IPA study to be considered high quality. Additionally, although we aligned each example with just one recommendation, there are inevitable instances of overlapping. For example, Baillie et al. (2000) is presented as an example of the sixth recommendation because of the story told by all theme names together, but several individual theme names also exemplify previous recommendations.

Our examples of good practice have included several instances where a participant's own words were used in the theme name. We have explained why this works well in each context, and added the caveat that this only seems like a good idea where a participant's words adequately capture the whole theme, which – in the case of cross-case themes or GETs – may involve the experiences of several participants. This caveat is one of the reasons for not making the use of participants' words part of our recommendations. Nevertheless, this strategy can work very well when there is only one participant to analyze, either in studies with only one participant, or in the idiographic case study phase of studies with several participants. Eatough and Smith (2006), for example, used particularly striking and expressive quotations from their case-study interview as theme names: "That's all hormones", "It was the alcohol", and so on. This makes sense because it exploits IPA's double hermeneutic: The participant has used these expressions to make sense of her experience, so the researcher can use them to make sense of the participant's understanding. It shows that the analysis is clearly grounded in the participant's perspective.

We suggest that the goals of theme naming are the same for PETs and GETs (i.e., theme names at the case-study and cross-case levels) and that our recommendations therefore apply to both kinds of theme. Choosing the right theme focus, theme phrasing and theme structure makes theme names recognizably IPA in nature and helps the reader (first) understand and (later) remember how the IPA answered the research question. Bringing theme naming in line with the epistemological and methodological principles of IPA is in the same spirit as the clarification, in the second edition of the IPA book (Smith et al., 2022, p. 40), that themes in IPA are always *experiential* themes. It also serves what is sometimes called the "triple hermeneutic": the reader(s) making sense of the researcher(s) making sense of the participant(s) making sense of their experience (e.g., Montague et al., 2020; Weed, 2008). By using both descriptive and evocative words, theme names can guide the reader to what is essential (a deliberately phenomenological idea) about the theme. This is an invitation to think about how theme names can best serve the aims of IPA and the study.

When we look at the papers nominated as good examples of IPA in Smith (2011), it is noticeable that many of their theme names do not correspond to the suggestions we make here. This shows two things: First, there are many aspects to a good IPA paper, and the suggestions we make here are not a distinguishing feature between strong and weak IPAs. Second, the naming of themes has not received much attention in the past. Our contribution, therefore, is to make suggestions about theme naming that can make good papers even better.

Our decision to point out good practice rather than critique bad examples stems from the same considerations. But, having read our recommendations and examples, you will easily be able to see how, for instance, Penny et al.'s (2009) "A story of loss" is better as an IPA theme name than the one-word label "Loss" would have been, or how Arroll and Senior's (2008) "Light at the end of the tunnel? The struggle for a diagnosis" captures more lived experience than a more prosaic "Getting a diagnosis" or similar. It is also possible to imagine how some of the good examples might be improved even further on occasions, for example by using more evocative words, using slightly more words to tell a fuller story, or making effective use of metaphor. To a considerable extent, these are matters of personal preference. But we hope to have shown that the goals and some possible ways towards them are much clearer than the trial-and-error as which theme naming may first appear.

In closing, we hope that our ideas will help researchers think more deeply, and perhaps differently, about theme naming in IPA and, ultimately, create excellent theme names for their own studies. There is no step-by-step system or recipe for this because such an approach would lack the flexibility and suppress the creativity required to get it "just right". Some researchers, who are used to more prescriptive methods, may find it liberating to have this license to be creative and may be energized by the prospect of developing relatable, even evocative or provocative, theme names. The ultimate aim, though, is not creativity or flair in itself, but to serve the communication with the reader and the aims and ethos of IPA. We believe our recommendations offer a starting point and a guideline to prevent the challenging and important process of theme naming from being experienced by researchers as just a stab in the dark.

Authors' Note

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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