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Navigating Challenges in Using Interpretative Phenomenological Approach with Photovoice: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and photovoice are two qualitative research methods commonly employed in social and health research. While both are used independently to understand lived experiences, their integration is increasingly being explored to capture both narrative depth and visual expression. However, integrating these two approaches poses unique methodological challenges. A systematic review was conducted to review the methodological challenges encountered when integrating IPA with photovoice in social and health research. The study utilized a comprehensive search strategy across multiple electronic databases to identify and synthesize findings from relevant peer-reviewed articles. The review adhered to the PRISMA guidelines and focused on studies published from inception to 2024. The review identified 18 studies that addressed the methodological challenges of integrating IPA and photovoice. Combining IPA and photovoice presents several intricate methodological challenges, including participant vulnerability, recruitment and retention difficulties, interpretive complexity, the emotional and psychological impact on researchers, and the need for support systems. Strategies used to address these challenges include diverse recruitment strategies, participant training, flexibility in data collection, triangulation for methodological rigor, emotional and psychological support for researchers, cultural competence and sensitivity, community collaboration, innovative use of technology, and ensuring confidentiality and ethical considerations. This review reveals that integrating IPA with photovoice, while promising for capturing nuanced lived experiences and advancing culturally sensitive, participatory research, is accompanied by significant methodological challenges. Addressing the methodological challenges identified in this study through innovative strategies and robust ethical frameworks is essential to fully harness the potential benefits of this integrated approach in social and health research.

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Introduction

The integrated use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the photovoice method has been successfully adopted in social and health research. Together, they offer an innovative approach to data collection that is particularly well-suited to exploring lived experiences that may not be effectively addressed by a single method (Plunkett et al., 2013; Tsang, 2020). IPA emphasizes understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds, making it a fitting approach for studies exploring deep emotional and cognitive experiences (Tindall et al., 2009). Photovoice allows participants to document their realities through visual representations, which can complement and enrich the data obtained through traditional narrative techniques, thereby promoting a more holistic understanding of the subject that is being researched (Castleden et al., 2008; Latz, 2017).

According to Sutton-Brown (2014), photography in research allows participants to externalize emotions and reveal aspects of their experiences that language alone often cannot capture. This approach fosters what Denzin and Lincoln (2018) describe as "thick descriptions," enabling researchers to document not only observable behaviours and verbal statements but also the underlying emotions and meanings that shape those experiences.

Furthermore, photovoice addresses a key issue within the IPA framework: many traditional research methods can create an imbalanced power dynamic between researchers and participants (Burton et al., 2017). These approaches often prioritize what researchers deem important, resulting in participants' voices being inadequately represented. This risks violating IPA's core aims and principles to explore how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. Researchers have therefore adopted alternative methods to "give voice" to participants, and photovoice is one such method (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice diverges significantly from traditional methods like interviews and focus groups, particularly in terms of participant engagement, time commitment, and the ethical considerations required to protect participants' well-being and identities. While a traditional interview might span only one or 2 h, photovoice is a prolonged and immersive process that requires participants to take a more active role in documenting their lives over an extended period (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants are encouraged to take photos that capture aspects of their daily experiences, which demands not only time but also sustained attention to what they consider meaningful to the study. This might involve participants investing time and energy in weekly meetings, which could span months or even years, with participants finding ways to integrate photovoice into their everyday schedule amidst competing responsibilities and commitments, which may hinder their participation (Budig et al., 2018). Similarly, this can place participants in situations where they may unintentionally expose parts of their lives that carry stigma or are sensitive in nature, highlighting a need for careful ethical consideration. Beyond facilitating data collection, researchers must also prepare participants with training on ethical aspects, such as obtaining consent and respecting privacy (Hannes & Parylo, 2014).

Furthermore, a previous review on this subject revealed that the researchers experienced challenges such as the refusal of the participants to sign consent forms, reluctance to participate in the photo-taking task, vision problems, and unavailability of time and money (Mysyuk & Huisman, 2019). Similarly, a review by Anderson et al. (2023) stated that one of the challenges that came with the photovoice method was getting participants and researchers to engage, photography problems and complex ethical questions. The nature of photovoice allows for a level of exposure that is often not present in verbal data. Visual images can capture not only personal expressions but also contextual details, such as an individual's surroundings or identifiable features that might not emerge in a verbal narrative. While this can enrich the data by providing a fuller picture of participants' lives, it also complicates adherence to ethical principles like confidentiality, privacy, and informed consent. This increased exposure may inadvertently reveal sensitive information, potentially leading to discrimination or stigmatization among individuals or communities, depending on the study's focus.

The use of IPA is detail-oriented, time-intensive and mentally demanding, requiring line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, complete focus of the researcher and expertise in the method. A major challenge of IPA is its inherent subjectivity, meaning that the researcher's perspective can influence the analysis. While reflexivity helps mitigate this bias, combining IPA with photovoice introduces additional complexity by requiring the interpretation of both narrative and visual data. This dual-method approach necessitates rigorous, ongoing reflexivity and continuous participant validation to ensure that the analysis accurately reflects the participants' perspectives (Smith et al., 2022).

The integration of visual data in photovoice serves as a valuable triangulation tool that complements narrative data, deepening analysis and broadening the representation of diverse perspectives (Burton et al., 2017; Plunkett et al., 2013). This approach enhances the robustness of qualitative findings by mitigating biases associated with relying solely on verbal accounts (Carter et al., 2014). Moreover, imagery offers an accessible means for participants to express complex or sensitive experiences when verbal articulation is challenging. Tsang (2020) proposes a four-stage data analysis strategy to balance the perspectives from the researcher's side as a phenomenological method, and the participant's side as a critical approach in photovoice, integrating visual and narrative data. It involves initial separate interpretations followed by cross-comparison and theorization. This approach systematically analyzes photographs from both viewpoints.

Although the integration of photovoice and IPA significantly enhances qualitative research by capturing both visual and narrative dimensions of lived experiences, researchers must navigate the complexities of combining these methods. Despite their growing use, there has been limited synthesis of the specific methodological hurdles associated with their integration, highlighting the need for this review. This study addresses that gap by identifying key challenges and proposing practical solutions. The findings provide valuable guidance for researchers seeking to effectively merge IPA and photovoice, particularly in studies involving similar populations.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology to comprehensively examine the existing literature on integrating the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) and photovoice in social and health research. The review followed the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and aimed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize findings from relevant peer-reviewed articles. We utilized a pre-defined search strategy across multiple electronic databases, focusing on studies that employed IPA with photovoice, emphasizing methodological challenges and participant experiences. This review has been registered on PROSPERO with the number: CRD42024621473.

Research Questions

The study employed the following research questions:

1. What are the key methodological challenges researchers encounter when integrating the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) with photovoice?
2. What strategies have been identified in the literature for overcoming challenges when using photovoice with IPA?
3. How do researchers using IPA and photovoice address ethical concerns?

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was developed to ensure the inclusion of all relevant studies. We searched PubMed, APA PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Ovid Medline, CINAHL, Global Health and Embase. The search included studies published from the earliest available records to 2024. The search terms were based on key concepts relevant to the study's objectives, including photovoice, IPA, and methodological challenges.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they were peer-reviewed articles published in English from the earliest available records to 2024 and explicitly employed both IPA and photovoice in their research methodology. This dual criterion was adopted to capture the unique interplay between participant-driven visual data—central to photovoice—and the researcher-led interpretative analysis intrinsic to IPA. Eligible studies also needed to address specific methodological challenges, strategies for addressing these issues alongside ethical considerations. These criteria enable us to examine how researchers navigate these challenges and adopt strategies to guarantee ethical rigor and methodological quality in their integrated use of IPA and photovoice.
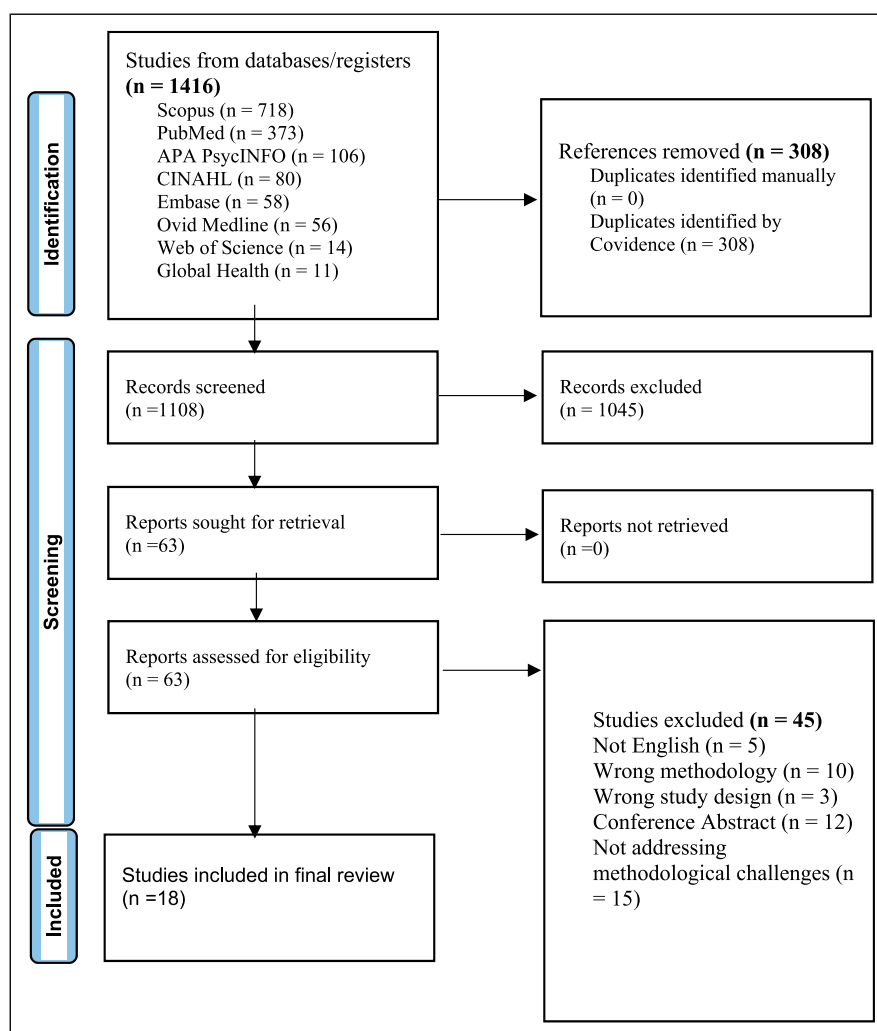
Keywords and Search Terms

The search strategy employed a variety of keywords and search terms to identify relevant studies. These included "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis" or "IPA," as well as terms related to Photovoice such as "Photovoice," "Visual methods," or "Participatory visual methods." Additionally, the search incorporated terms associated with qualitative research, like "Qualitative research," "Lived experiences," or "Participant experiences," as well as "Methodological challenges" or "Ethical issues." The search string was tailored to each database, adjusting for syntax differences.

Study Selection

Two reviewers independently screened the titles and abstracts of the studies, followed by a full-text review to assess them against the predetermined inclusion criteria. Any disagreements between the reviewers were resolved by consulting a third reviewer. While a manual search of the included studies was conducted to identify any potentially overlooked articles, no additional studies were found. The selection process for data inclusion and exclusion was documented using the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was developed and piloted to ensure consistency. Two reviewers independently applied the form to three initial articles. Since no adjustments were needed, the form remained unchanged. The extracted information included details such as the author(s), year of publication, study location, study objective(s), participant demographics, data collection method, key methodological challenges, strategies to overcome challenges, ethical concerns and the theoretical framework. Two independent reviewers were involved in the data extraction process to ensure accuracy and consistency. Any discrepancies between the

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart.

reviewers were addressed through discussion, with a third reviewer consulted if necessary.

Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal of the included qualitative studies was done using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research, and the included methodological paper, which used a narrative review methodology, was assessed using the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles (SANRA) tool. The CASP checklist consists of 10 items across three sections, evaluating the validity of study results, rigour of findings, and their applicability. This includes assessing the clarity of research aims, appropriateness of the methodology and recruitment strategies, data collection methods, consideration of ethical issues, and the overall contribution of the research to practice and policy. Each item was rated as "Yes," "No," or "Can't Tell". The

SANRA tool was used for appraisal across six dimensions: importance of the topic, clarity of stated aims, transparency of literature search strategies, accuracy of referencing, scientific reasoning, and adequacy of end-point data presentation. Each item was scored on a scale of 0–2. Two independent reviewers appraised each study using these tools to ensure reliability, resolving any discrepancies through discussion or a third reviewer's input.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

The extracted data were thematically analyzed to uncover common methodological challenges and strategies employed to address these issues and ethical concerns within IPA and photovoice research. A narrative synthesis was used to summarize and interpret the findings in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the trends and patterns across the studies.

Results

Search Results

The initial database search identified 1,416 records. After removing 308 duplicates, 1,108 records remained for title and abstract screening. We subsequently excluded 1,045 articles for irrelevance, leading to a thorough full-text screening of 63 articles. Of these, 45 were excluded for various reasons, including wrong methodology, not addressing methodological challenges and wrong study design. Ultimately, 18 studies were included (Figure 1), each addressing the methodological challenges of integrating IPA with photovoice, ethical concerns and/or strategies to overcome the obstacles encountered during the research.

Study Characteristics

The 18 studies were conducted between 2010 and 2024. Most of the studies were conducted in the United States (Akers et al., 2021a, 2021b; Filter, 2011; Spangler, 2021; Tanhan & Strack, 2020), Turkey (Subasi et al., 2023; Tanhan et al., 2023a, 2023b) and the United Kingdom, (Capewell, 2015; Eodanable et al., 2024) with others conducted in Canada (Borisov & Reid, 2010; Plunkett et al., 2013), Denmark (Bukhave & Huniche, 2014) Germany (Fahsold et al., 2024), New Zealand (McKenzie et al. (2024), Sweden (Olausson et al. (2013), Singapore (Sumner et al. (2023) and Australia (Oster et al. (2022). All the studies reviewed were qualitative, except Plunkett et al. (2013), a methodological paper employing a narrative review approach. Details of the study characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Study Focus

Studies included in this review utilised IPA and photovoice methodologies and collectively illuminated participants' lived experiences across various social and cultural contexts. Each study captured the participants' personal experiences visually, while IPA allowed for a deep interpretation of the emotional and psychological dimensions underlying those experiences. The studies focus on several critical areas, including identity formation, chronic illness management, mental health, and the influence of social environments on personal narratives.

A prominent area of exploration centres on identity dynamics within same-gender relationships. Akers et al. (2021a) investigated how individuals in same-gender couples navigate and find meaning in their "outness," focusing on how visual representations can shape their understanding of identity and societal acceptance. This exploration was further developed in Akers et al. (2021b), which examined the impact of "outness" on relationship satisfaction among these couples.

The challenge of chronic illness management is another critical focus. Bukhave and Huniche (2014) explored the experiences of individuals living with hand osteoarthritis,

highlighting how the condition affects their ability to maintain a sense of normalcy in daily life. Through photovoice, participants were able to visually articulate the emotional and practical challenges they face, allowing for an enriched understanding of their struggles. Similarly, Sumner et al. (2023) employed photovoice to investigate how Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) impacts daily activities within a multicultural Asian population and revealed how health conditions can deeply affect quality of life across diverse cultural contexts. Studies also explored mental health, for example, McKenzie et al. (2024) examined men's communication of mental distress through metaphors, aiming to enhance mental health services for this population.

Furthermore, several studies focused on the impact of social and educational contexts. Borisov and Reid (2010) investigated the lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities who served as tutors or teacher assistants in physical education and explored how these roles intersect with societal perceptions and internal experiences. Filter (2011) offered insights into the socio-economic challenges faced by 13 pregnant African American teenagers, emphasizing how cultural perceptions influence their well-being and life choices. Oster et al. (2022) highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed Australian university students' physical activity experiences, illustrating the profound impact of external circumstances on personal health and lifestyle. Furthermore, studies during the pandemic, such as those by Subasi et al., 2023; Tanhan et al., 2023a, 2023b, examined barriers and facilitators to online education, reflecting the broader socio-economic and technological challenges faced by students. These studies emphasized the need for inclusive educational practices and the significance of understanding the diverse barriers that college students encountered during this period.

The diversity of participants across the studies adds depth to the findings and underscores challenges in maintaining methodological rigor. For example, Akers et al. (2021b) engaged with same-gender couples and faced challenges in recruitment due to the sociopolitical environment and participant hesitancy around disclosing sexual orientation. Similarly, Borisov and Reid (2010) focused on students with intellectual disabilities and emphasized the ethical concerns of involving vulnerable populations in research. In Fahsold et al. (2024), participants were individuals with dementia, posing additional challenges in ensuring that participants fully understood the research process and provided informed consent throughout the study. Olausson et al. (2013) examined the lived experiences of patients in intensive care units, emphasizing the intersection of vulnerability and power dynamics in health-related research.

Methodological Quality of Included Studies

The methodological quality appraisal of the included qualitative studies revealed a strong commitment to qualitative

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies.

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Akers et al. (2021a)	United States	To explore how individuals in same-gender couples understand and find meaning in visual representations of "outness" within their relationships	Nine individuals involved in same-gender romantic relationships	Four-stage photovoice methodology	Participant Vulnerability: The level of participant visibility and, consequently, vulnerability could have been enhanced by employing photographs to illustrate levels of outness. Researcher Bias: Significant attrition accounted for sample bias.	Diverse Recruitment Strategies: Researchers employed online resources, social media, listservs, and outreach to LGBTQ + organizations for diverse recruitment. Participant Training: Participants were trained on photovoice methodology, informed consent, and camera techniques. Bracketing: The team used bracketing to address biases related to LGBTQ+ identities.	Confidentiality and Anonymity: Researchers ensured participant privacy through online discussions, pseudonyms, and consent for photographs. Potential for Distress or Harm: Discussing "outness" could trigger distress, so researchers prioritized a safe environment. Impact of Researcher Identities: The team's diverse backgrounds were acknowledged, and reflexivity was practiced to assess biases in interpretations.	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Akers et al. (2021b)	United States	To examine the impact of outness on relationship satisfaction within the diverse lived experiences of same-gender couples	Nine participants in same-gender couples	Photograph taking followed by individual reflection and online group discussions about the photographs and their meaning	Recruitment and Attrition: Recruiting diverse participants was difficult due to sociopolitical risks, resulting in high attrition and a bias toward those more out. Sample Diversity: The sample lacked diversity, limiting generalizability to the broader LGBTQ+ community. Absence of Transgender Voices: The study did not retain transgender participants, missing insights on gender-related outness. Visual Methodology Limitations: Photographs heightened visibility and vulnerability, while online discussions lacked nonverbal cues despite ensuring anonymity.	Expanded Recruitment: Researchers broadened recruitment beyond North Carolina to reduce attrition and seek more diverse participants. Online Discussion Groups: Transitioning from in-person focus groups to online discussions via WebEx enhanced participant anonymity and reduced discomfort in sharing experiences.	Participant vulnerability and risks in sharing outness experiences, particularly due to the sociopolitical context and the visual aspects of the photovoice methodology.	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Borisov and Reid (2010)	Canada	To investigate the lived experiences of students with intellectual disabilities acting as tutors or teacher assistants in physical education.	Five students with intellectual disabilities, referred to as "young leaders,"	Field observations, video recordings, photographs, semi-structured interviews	Participant Vulnerability: Researchers prioritized comfort and safety, given communication challenges for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Data Collection Challenges: Interviewing individuals with intellectual disabilities posed issues with comprehension and response accuracy. Researcher Bias: The primary researcher's experience as a physical education teacher may have influenced data collection and interpretation.	Methodological Coherence: Researchers used a journal to ensure alignment between the research question and methodology. Appropriate Sampling: Criteria included individuals with relevant experiences and communication skills. Pilot Study: A pilot study was done to refine the interview process. Triangulation: Multiple data sources enhanced validity. Reflexivity: The researcher reflected on biases throughout the process. Adapted Interview Techniques: Interview methods were tailored to participants' communication styles using varied question formats.	Informed Consent: Researchers obtained consent from participants and their parents or guardians. Confidentiality: Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities. Potential for Distress: Researchers recognized the need for a supportive interview environment due to the sensitivity of personal experiences.	Hellison's Model of Personal and Social Responsibility Role Theory

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Bukhave and Huniche (2014)	Denmark	To explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals with hand osteoarthritis (OA)	A total of 31 individuals with hand OA	Semi-structured interviews and participant-generated photographs	Recruitment Challenges: Accessing individuals with hand OA was difficult due to their limited interaction with healthcare settings. Capturing Tacit Knowledge: People may struggle to express routine activities and challenges, as they see them as mundane.	Multi-Faceted Recruitment: The participants published an article in a rheumatics magazine, which attracted participants. Participant Validation: Member checking confirmed findings by involving participants' feedback.	None	Critical psychology Social practice theory
Capewell (2015)	United Kingdom	To explore how glue ear impacted learning and interaction with teachers and peers among those with the condition	Three young people and their mothers		Limited photographic skill Despite attempts, no fathers participated in the study, which may have skewed the results Copyright issues due to photos downloaded from the internet	Using internet images allowed participants to maintain anonymity and bypass limitations in photography skills. With participants' consent, the images in this paper were recreated to prevent copyright concerns. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to safeguard their identities. Seeking informed consent from parents.	Anonymity issues Informed consent from young people and their parents.	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Eodanable et al. (2024)	United Kingdom	To explore the lived experiences of adolescents with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in the UK	Eight adolescents	Online photovoice and semi-structured interviews	Recruitment Issues: Low FASD diagnoses and COVID-19 hindered participation. Online Format Challenges: While broadening UK reach, online sessions were lengthened by technical issues and platform training.	Community Collaboration: Partnered with FASD communities across the UK for recruitment and various channels to distribute recruitment materials. Flexible Approach: Adapted the research process to individual needs and technology.	Informed Consent: Secured and reaffirmed consent from participants and parents, covering photos and findings. Emotional Wellbeing: Ensured well-being with check-ins, breaks, distress plans, and support resources. Confidentiality: Used pseudonyms and ensured confidentiality throughout the process.	International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) framework developed by the World Health Organization (WHO).

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Fahsold et al. (2024)	Germany	To explore how residents living with dementia experience the built environment of their nursing homes.	Fourteen residents (nine women and five men) living with dementia	Walking interviews	Participant Vulnerability: Researchers acknowledged the ethical concerns regarding the vulnerability of residents with dementia in institutional settings. Communication Barriers: Cognitive impairments in dementia posed challenges for conducting interviews and interpreting responses. Fluctuating Abilities: Researchers needed to be adaptable due to residents' varying cognitive and physical abilities during data collection. Defining the Built Environment: Discrepancies may exist between residents' definitions of their environment and standardized assessments.	Relationship Building: The researchers built rapport by engaging in social activities with residents before data collection. Ongoing Consent: Ongoing consent procedures ensured residents understood the study and could withdraw at any time. Flexible Interview Approach: Walking interviews were adapted to residents' preferences regarding pace, routes, and mobility aids. Augmentative Data Sources: Photographs, field notes, and nonverbal cues enhanced understanding of residents' experiences despite communication barriers.	Informed Consent: Researchers carefully obtained consent from residents with cognitive impairments, involving legal guardians when necessary. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Protecting identities using pseudonymization and avoiding identifiable data. Potential for Distress: To minimize emotional distress from sensitive topics, researchers fostered a supportive environment and allowed residents to pause or stop interviews.	Social constructivist paradigm

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Filter (2011)	United States	To explore the lived experiences and perceptions of assets among pregnant African American teenagers.	Thirteen pregnant African American teens aged 16 to 19 years old	Semi-structured interviews, asset maps, and photovoice.	Participant Recruitment and Attrition: Recruiting and retaining participants was challenging. Obtaining Informed Consent: For minors, tailored consent forms and parental involvement were necessary to meet legal and ethical requirements. Ensuring Participant Confidentiality and Privacy: Protecting identities in visual data collection. Building Trust with Participants: Adolescents' mistrust of healthcare providers could hinder sharing.	Staff Referrals and Clear Communication: The researchers collaborated with clinic staff to identify participants and provided clear study explanations through letters and consent forms. Age-Specific Consent Procedures: Parental consent was obtained for participants aged 16 or 17 using age-appropriate procedures. Multiple Communication Methods and Flexibility: Including reminders via in-person visits, calls, emails, and texts to ensure engagement and return of materials.	Vulnerability of Adolescent Participants: Need for informed consent and confidentiality due to adolescents' sensitivities. Potential for Distress or Harm: Discussing sensitive topics could cause distress. The researcher provided counseling referrals and allowed interview pauses. Photovoice and Privacy: The researcher ensured consent for photos and excluded images of illegal activities.	Human Ecology and Multicultural Feminist Theories

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
McKenzie et al. (2024)	New Zealand	To explore how men communicate their experiences of mental distress using metaphors to improve men's mental health services.	21 men	Telephone, Zoom, digital photographs	Influence of Interviewer Gender: The authors recognize that the presence of both a female and male interviewer may have affected the data.	Participant Recruitment: Participants were recruited via online advertisements on social media and community newsletters. Safety Protocol for Suicidality: The study implemented a safety protocol for managing suicidality, with interviewers ready to refer participants to mental health services if active suicidality was disclosed.	Participant Support: Participants were emailed a list of mental health resources after the initial meeting, providing support if needed. Data Anonymization: Identifying information was removed from the data, and pseudonyms were used to protect participant confidentiality.	Social constructivist gender framework
Olausson et al. (2013)	Sweden	To explore and understand the meaning of the ICU patient room as a place of care from the perspective of critically ill patients.	Nine patients from three ICUs in Sweden	Interviews and photovoice	Participant Recruitment: The study faced challenges in recruiting enough participants. Delirium Presence: Participants under sedation may have experienced delirium, affecting their experiences and memories.	Recruitment: Researchers partnered with ICU staff to identify participants, using head nurses for sedated patients and nurses for non-sedated patients. Delirium Assessment: Non-sedated patients were screened for delirium with the OBS scale to exclude those unable to consent.	None	None

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Oster et al. (2022)	Australia	To explore how the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed Australian university students' lived experiences of physical activity (PA)	Nine university students	Online focus groups, online and online focus groups	Online Adaptation of Photovoice: Adapting photovoice for online use hindered in-person dynamics, potentially affecting data depth. Focus Group Attendance: Scheduling conflicts and logistical issues during the pandemic impacted focus group attendance and data richness.	Online Platform Utilization: Researchers employed online platforms, such as the university's learning management system, for data collection during the pandemic. Flexible Data Collection: Researchers offered multiple participation options, including online focus groups and asynchronous photo submissions, to accommodate students' schedules.	None	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Plunkett et al. (2013)	Canada	A methodological paper to present a case for utilizing the photovoice method as a means to enhance data collection in phenomenological research.	None	None	Paradigmatic Differences: IPA focuses on individual experiences, while photovoice emphasizes social structures, complicating alignment of research aims. Rigor and Congruency: Balancing the differing goals of IPA and photovoice can challenge methodological rigor. Authenticity and Representation: Misrepresentation risks arise when interpreting photographs, which capture only limited contexts. Interpretive Complexity: Navigating the meanings of both verbal and visual data requires careful consideration to ensure participant perspectives are prioritized.	Clarifying Research Aims: Clearly define research objectives to align IPA and photovoice effectively. Engaging Participants in Analysis: Involve participants in titling and discussing their photographs to enhance authenticity. Iterative Feedback Loops: Create regular feedback sessions with participants to validate findings and interpretations. Contextualizing Visual Data: Provide detailed context for photographs to address representation limitations.	Potential for Misinterpretation of Images: Allow participants explain their photos and clarify misunderstandings Ensuring Informed Consent and Protecting Anonymity: Safeguarding participants' identities is crucia when using visual data.	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Spangler (2021)	United States of America	To explore how personal grief experiences influence the identity of practicing counsellors.	Eight participants	Individual in-depth interviews	Lack of research regarding counselor grief experiences and the influence on counselor identity. Limited guidance on implementing and analyzing data in photovoice studies. The abstract nature of grief, meaning-making, and identity	A photovoice instruction video covered key topics: photovoice, consent forms, photography tips, and an overview of the study. Participants were taught how to obtain consent from individuals they photographed. For the online exhibition, participants specified which photos should be masked or unmasked.	Participants experiencing emotional distress. The researcher's personal experiences with grief influencing the study. Maintaining participant confidentiality given the sensitive nature of the study and the use of photography.	The Meaning Reconstruction model of grief
Subasi et al. (2023)	Turkey	Explore the factors that served as facilitators and barriers to online/distance education for social studies teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Identify methods for enhancing facilitators and reducing barriers.	119 University students	Online photovoice,	Limited active advocacy and participant engagement in an online format Limited participant diversity Unfamiliarity with the online photovoice (OPV) method	Accessibility and Inclusion: Study information and materials were presented in various formats: video, audio, and written documents. CBPR Team: The study involved a community-based participatory research (CBPR) group comprising the authors and six student partners.	None	Ecological systems theory

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Sumner et al. (2023)	Singapore	To employ the photovoice methodology to gain a deeper understanding of how Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) affects the activities of daily living (ADLs) in a multicultural Asian population	Eight male patients diagnosed with COPD	Semi-structured interviews and photovoice	Sampling Bias: The focus on photography may exclude those less comfortable or skilled, limiting diverse perspectives. Limited Scope of Photos: Photos capture single moments, risking oversimplification of complex situations. Generalizability: Results from a small, localized sample may not translate to wider populations. Resource Intensiveness: Photovoice requires significant resources, including camera access, training, and time for collection and analysis.	Participant Recruitment: Participants were identified through physician referrals during outpatient visits, streamlining recruitment. Participant Training: A baseline interview built rapport and educated participants on photo-taking, with carer support included. Data Collection: Participants sent photos to a dedicated mobile number, making data collection efficient. Confidentiality and Data Management: Informed consent was obtained, interviews were recorded and transcribed, and ethical guidelines were followed. Language Barriers: Interviews were conducted in English or Chinese, with transcripts translated and verified for accuracy.	None	None

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Tanhan and Strack (2020)	United States	To examine and acknowledge the most common biopsychosocial spiritual concerns and strengths of Muslims affiliated with colleges in the southeastern U.S.	131 Muslims	Online photovoice	None	Participant Recruitment and Data Collection: The online format enabled quick recruitment of a diverse sample through email, social media, and Muslim organizations. Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity: An anonymous survey platform protected identities, removing identifiable information from photos. Participants could submit hard copies for privacy, but none opted for this. Cross-Cultural Considerations and Language Barriers: Visuals helped participants express themselves beyond language. Captions in other languages were accepted and professionally translated.	Informed Consent: Participants gave verbal consent by clicking "yes" to an online statement, considering cultural sensitivities. Confidentiality and Anonymity: The study ensured confidentiality by not requiring names and excluding identifiable photos. Potential for Distress: Researchers acknowledged potential distress from sensitive discussions and offered community events for sharing experiences and support.	Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) Ally Development Model

Table 1. (continued)

Study citation	Study location	Study objective(s)	Participants	Data collection method	Key methodological challenges	Strategies to overcome practical challenges	Ethical concerns	Theoretical framework
Tanhan et al. (2023a)	Turkey	To identify facilitators and barriers to online distance education for college students during COVID-19.	College students from four universities in Turkey	Online photovoice	Ensuring the participation of students with varying levels of internet access and technological proficiency. Maintaining the anonymity and protecting the voices of participants in an online environment.	Use of Technology: Using online platforms like WhatsApp to facilitate communication and collaboration among the research team.	None	Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)
Tanhan et al. (2023b)	Turkey	To understand the primary biopsychosocial, spiritual, and economic facilitators and complications of online education for students studying in the department of psychological counselling and guidance within the context of COVID-19	Undergraduate students from four universities	Online photovoice	None	Diverse Participation Options: Researchers provided multiple survey formats (written, video, audio) to enhance accessibility and inclusivity for Team Collaboration: WhatsApp facilitated effective communication and collaboration among researchers from multiple universities.	None	Ecological Systems Theory, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Active Interdisciplinary Social Advocacy

research principles across most sources. Based on the CASP assessment, the qualitative studies consistently demonstrated the appropriateness of qualitative methodologies, aligning research methods with their respective paradigms to explore subjective experiences. Rigorous data collection and analysis procedures were a notable strength across the included studies. Most provided detailed descriptions of participant recruitment processes, data collection methods, and analysis techniques, with many utilizing triangulation of data sources, such as interviews, photographs, and field notes. Strategies to enhance trustworthiness were frequently reported, including member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. Ethical considerations were widely acknowledged. Reflexivity was another important element, with researchers frequently reflecting on their biases and assumptions. While the qualitative studies exhibited strong methodological rigor, they also acknowledged sampling limitations, particularly related to small sample sizes and the lack of diversity in some cases. Based on the SANRA assessment, Plunkett et al. (2013) exhibits a high level of quality. It effectively establishes the importance of the topic, clearly states its aims, demonstrates strong referencing practices, presents well-reasoned arguments, and provides supporting evidence. The study robustly grounds its approach in established theories, which strengthens its theoretical foundation. Similarly, claims in the study were supported with empirical evidence from diverse contexts. The primary area for improvement lies in providing a more comprehensive and transparent description of the literature search strategy. Overall, the appraisal highlights that the included studies employed robust methodologies supported by strategies to enhance trustworthiness.

Methodological Challenges

The integration of IPA with photovoice presents several intricate methodological challenges, many of which are amplified by the vulnerability of participants, interpretive complexities, and researcher emotional fatigue. These challenges demand rigorous attention to research design, and ethical considerations. Below, we explore these methodological issues in depth to offer a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties researchers face in this dual-methodological approach (See Table 2).

Participant Vulnerability. One of the most prominent methodological challenges when integrating IPA with photovoice is the vulnerability of participants, especially within marginalized groups (Akers et al., 2021a) and individuals with cognitive impairments, such as those with dementia (Fahsold et al., 2024). This increased vulnerability arises from the dual demands of sharing in-depth personal narratives as required by IPA and revealing intimate visual data through photovoice, which together can expose sensitive details about participants' identities, relationships, and emotional states. Participants may experience emotional distress when revealing personal information, such as their sexual orientation, family relationships, or struggles with cognitive decline. As highlighted by Fahsold et al. (2024), participants with dementia faced unique vulnerabilities in photovoice, as cognitive impairments hindered their ability to fully participate and accurately express their lived experiences through images. Researchers must employ strategies to mitigate these risks, such as creating supportive environments, providing tailored guidance on visual storytelling, and ensuring ethical safeguards, including clear consent and confidentiality measures. Additionally, researchers should practice reflexivity to avoid imposing their own interpretations on participants' visual narratives, ensuring that the data remains an authentic representation of participants' lived experiences (Akers et al., 2021a; Filter, 2011).

Recruitment and Retention Difficulties. Integrating IPA with photovoice introduces unique recruitment and retention challenges, as participants are required to provide both in-depth narratives and personal visual data. This dual requirement can intensify concerns about exposure, stigma, and privacy, particularly among marginalized populations. For example, Akers et al. (2021b) encountered high attrition rates in LGBTQ+ studies due to sociopolitical risks, highlighting the need for anonymized participation and sensitive handling of visual materials. Similarly, Filter (2011) noted recruitment challenges in adolescent populations, where mistrust in healthcare providers and confidentiality concerns became barriers, particularly with visual data collection.

In studies involving individuals with cognitive impairments, such as those conducted by Fahsold et al. (2024), the fluctuating cognitive and physical abilities of participants added complexity to maintaining engagement over time, particularly in tasks requiring sustained attention and creativity, like photography. Thus, the integration of IPA and photovoice amplifies the need for sensitive and tailored recruitment strategies that address both the narrative and visual dimensions of data collection.

Interpretive Complexity. The integration of IPA and photovoice presents significant interpretive challenges. While IPA focuses on deeply personal, subjective experiences (Smith et al., 2022), photovoice introduces visual data that may reflect both personal and communal realities (Wang & Burris, 1997), complicating analysis, particularly when exploring abstract concepts such as grief (Plunkett et al., 2013). Researchers must navigate this interplay carefully to ensure that the rich, detailed narratives of IPA are complemented rather than overshadowed by the contextual layers provided by photovoice. Spangler (2021) highlighted how grief narratives are challenging to capture through both visual and verbal data, as they often involve complex, evolving emotions that may be difficult for participants to fully articulate or externalize. Deeply personal experiences, such as grief, can be hard to express because they are often fluid, multidimensional, and tied to subjective meaning-making processes that may not lend

Table 2. Methodological Challenges and Strategies for Resolution.

Methodological challenges	Strategies for resolution
Participant vulnerability	Implementing ethical safeguards such as pseudonyms, explicit consent, trauma-informed approaches, and customized data collection (Akers et al., 2021b; Borisov & Reid, 2010; Fahsold et al., 2024; Filter, 2011).
Recruitment and retention difficulties	Expanding outreach through online platforms, collaborating with community organizations, ensuring accessibility through varied materials, and fostering participant anonymity to reduce discomfort (Akers et al., 2021a, 2021b; Subasi et al., 2023).
Interpretive complexity	Using multiple coding techniques, integrating participant feedback, validating themes through triangulation, and incorporating theoretical frameworks to enhance analysis (Akers et al., 2021a, 2021b; Bukhave & Huniche, 2014; Fahsold et al., 2024).
Emotional and psychological impact on researchers	Providing debriefing sessions, reflection spaces, peer support groups, and mental health protocols to manage researcher distress and ethical sensitivity (McKenzie et al., 2024; Spangler, 2021).
Impact of environmental factors	Extending recruitment timelines, adapting research methods to participant settings, integrating mobility aids, and using sensitive data collection approaches (Eodanable et al., 2024; Fahsold et al., 2024).
Navigating cultural norms	Accepting native-language captions, engaging cultural mediators, offering multiple participation formats, and integrating culturally responsive methodologies (Subasi et al., 2023; Tanhan and Strack, 2020).

themselves easily to structured narratives or visual representations (Neimeyer et al., 2014). This necessitates the development of a dynamic and reflexive analytical framework that continuously engages with multiple layers of meaning, recognizing the fluid, evolving, and co-constructed nature of participants' experiences and the interplay between individual meaning-making and broader social contexts (Plunkett et al., 2013).

Emotional and Psychological Impact on Researchers. The integration of IPA and photovoice can intensify the emotional and psychological demands placed on researchers, as both methodologies require deep immersion in participants' personal narratives and visual expressions. This dual engagement often involves confronting profoundly sensitive and distressing material, such as experiences of grief, trauma, or identity struggles, which may evoke strong emotional reactions and lead to emotional fatigue or even vicarious trauma (McKenzie et al., 2024; Spangler, 2021). Researchers may become emotionally entangled while interpreting the deeply personal narratives explored in IPA and the intimate visual representations captured through photovoice, which can influence their interpretative lens. Researchers must remain reflexive to ensure that their emotional engagement enhances, rather than distorts, the depth and nuance of participants' experiences. The cumulative effect of repeatedly engaging with distressing content highlights the need for robust support mechanisms, reflective practices, and strategies to safeguard researchers' emotional well-being while maintaining analytical rigor.

Impact of Environmental Factors. The impact of environmental factors is particularly critical when integrating IPA and photovoice. The physical and emotional environments of participants, such as their homes, communities, or workspaces, can profoundly shape their willingness and ability to reflect on and document their lives. For instance, precarious living conditions, socio-economic challenges, or safety concerns may inhibit participants from fully engaging in the reflective and participatory processes required by these methodologies (Eodanable et al., 2024). In the context of photovoice, these challenges may not only affect participants' capacity to take photographs but also influence the kinds of images they choose to capture, shaping the meanings that emerge from their visual narratives. The interpretation of these images is also layered, as what is meaningful to participants may differ from how researchers or broader audiences perceive them. Researchers must be attuned to these environmental factors and consider strategies such as offering flexible participation options, ensuring safety and confidentiality, and tailoring approaches to individual contexts to foster engagement that is both ethically sound and methodologically robust.

Navigating Cultural Norms. Cultural considerations are important in applying IPA and photovoice, especially when engaging with diverse populations, as both methodologies rely heavily on participants' ability to express their lived experiences, which are deeply influenced by their cultural contexts. Tanhan and Strack (2020) emphasized that cultural attitudes toward issues such as mental health, disability, and identity can shape how participants interpret, articulate, and visually represent their experiences. Cultural norms may influence the choice of images participants capture and these norms may affect the way participants frame their narratives. Researchers working with marginalized or Indigenous communities must develop cultural competence to ensure that their methodologies are respectful and reflective of participants' values and traditions. Ignoring cultural nuances risks misinterpreting or oversimplifying participants' experiences, potentially perpetuating stereotypes. This highlights the importance of

adopting culturally sensitive practices, such as incorporating local knowledge, engaging community stakeholders, and co-creating research designs that honor the unique cultural frameworks of participants.

Strategies to Resolve Challenges Encountered in IPA and Photovoice

The challenges faced during the integration of IPA and photovoice in research have prompted researchers to develop a range of strategies to address these issues. These strategies include:

1. Addressing participant vulnerability: Researchers employed strategies to support the vulnerable participants. Akers et al. (2021b) reinforced ethical standards and prioritized privacy by utilizing pseudonyms and obtaining explicit consent. Borisov and Reid (2010) emphasized creating a safe and supportive environment, particularly for participants with communication difficulties, by addressing their unique needs. Filter (2011) ensured parental consent was obtained from minors in their study and Fahsold et al. (2024) adopted customized data collection approaches, such as integrating mobility aids and recognizing non-verbal cues, to effectively address communication barriers and enhance inclusivity for participants with specific needs. These measures collectively ensured that participant vulnerability was ethically and effectively managed across diverse research contexts.

2. Diverse Recruitment Strategies: Researchers have implemented innovative recruitment strategies to enhance retention in studies employing photovoice and IPA. Akers et al. (2021a) expanded their recruitment efforts by utilizing online platforms and collaborating with LGBTQ+ organizations, which enabled them to reach a wider, more diverse participant pool while fostering a sense of community support. In a similar vein, Akers et al. (2021b) extended their recruitment efforts beyond North Carolina to combat high attrition rates and mitigate sociopolitical risks. By utilizing online discussion groups, they provided participants with anonymity, which reduced discomfort during sensitive disclosures, thereby enhancing engagement in the research process. Additionally, Subasi et al. (2023) focused on accessibility by offering study materials in multiple formats—video, audio, and written—to ensure inclusivity and accommodate various participant needs, thus facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences through the photovoice methodology within an IPA framework.

3. Navigating Interpretive Complexities: Researchers navigated interpretive challenges by adopting strategies to ensure that methodologies captured the full range of participant experiences. Akers et al. (2021a) recognized the potential bias in their study, where participants with high levels of outness in LGBTQ+ communities might not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the broader population. To mitigate this, they carefully analyzed participant demographics to ensure that the findings accounted for varying levels of outness, thereby producing a more nuanced interpretation of experiences. Similarly, Fahsold et al. (2024) addressed discrepancies between environmental assessments and lived experiences by incorporating participant feedback to contextualize findings, ensuring that environmental influences were accurately represented in the analysis. Akers et al. (2021b) validated emerging themes through direct participant engagement, reinforcing the trustworthiness of the interpretative process. Additionally, Bukhave and Huniche (2014) integrated social practice theory into IPA to provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' actions within their social and cultural contexts. These approaches collectively demonstrate how researchers actively refined their interpretive processes to align with the complexities of participant experiences, ensuring a more accurate and contextually grounded analysis.

4. Emotional and Psychological Support for Researchers: As IPA and photovoice involve deeply reflective and narrative-based exploration, managing the emotional impact of sensitive topics, such as grief and mental distress, is essential for both participants and researchers. Given the emotionally intense nature of these methodologies, researchers established support systems to mitigate emotional fatigue and vicarious trauma. Spangler (2021) noted that regular reflection sessions were fundamental, allowing researchers to process their emotional responses to participants' narratives. These debriefing sessions are particularly valuable in IPA, as they enable researchers to sustain empathy and ethical sensitivity, enhancing the quality of interpretative analysis by supporting researchers' emotional resilience. McKenzie et al. (2024) integrated a safety protocol within Photovoice research to address the potential for distressing content, such as experiences of suicidality. By providing researchers with a clear protocol, the team ensured that discussions around sensitive topics were handled with care, safeguarding both participant and researcher well-being. This proactive approach is especially relevant to photovoice, where participants may visually represent or narrate traumatic experiences. Ensuring such supportive frameworks within IPA and photovoice strengthens the ethical integrity

of research and creates a safer, more empathetic space for both researchers and participants to engage with complex, emotional content.

5. Addressing Environmental Factors: Researchers adapted strategies to mitigate the impact of environmental influences on the research process. For instance, Eodonable et al. (2024) extended recruitment timelines to overcome challenges posed by the pandemic, ensuring continued participant engagement. Similarly, Fahsold et al. (2024) addressed the emotional impact of nursing home transitions by incorporating sensitive approaches in data collection, allowing residents to express their experiences more freely.

6. Cultural Competence and Sensitivity: When integrating IPA with photovoice, cultural competence and sensitivity play an important role in authentically capturing participants' experiences within their cultural contexts. Researchers noted that using photovoice facilitated participants' expression of cultural nuances visually, allowing them to convey complex cultural perspectives that might be difficult to verbalize in structured interviews. Tanhan and Strack (2020) demonstrated that accepting photo captions in participants' native languages, with subsequent professional translation, helped maintain cultural authenticity in responses. This approach aligned with IPA's aim of capturing the unique subjective experiences of participants, fostering an environment where individuals felt validated and culturally understood. Subasi et al. (2023) further highlighted that providing multiple options for participation encouraged inclusivity across diverse backgrounds, enhancing the IPA methodology's reach and depth in varied cultural settings.

7. Participant Training: Equipping participants with the necessary skills to engage with both photovoice and IPA was essential in facilitating a meaningful research experience. Akers et al. (2021a) provided training workshops for participants, which included detailed instructions on the photovoice methodology, ethical considerations, and camera techniques. Similarly, Sumner et al. (2023) conducted baseline interviews to build rapport with participants and provided training on photography, with support from carers where necessary. This preparatory step was critical in enabling participants to feel confident and competent in using photography to express their experiences. Spangler (2021) enhanced the understanding of Photovoice by creating an instructional video covering essential topics like obtaining consent and photography tips.

8. Flexibility in Data Collection: In adapting methodologies to suit participants' unique needs, researchers found that combining IPA with photovoice offered a particularly flexible and inclusive approach. Eodanable et al. (2024) integrated photovoice with IPA in their study of adolescents with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), customizing schedules, simplifying instructions, and providing ongoing support to ensure participants could engage fully. Fahsold et al. (2024) adapted IPA through walking interviews, allowing participants to express their perspectives in familiar, comfortable settings, which was especially beneficial for residents with varying mobility. Oster et al. (2022) also facilitated participation by incorporating options such as online focus groups and asynchronous photo submissions, enabling participants to select the most convenient format. This flexibility in combining IPA with photovoice underscores the importance of accessibility and responsiveness to individual participant needs.

9. Community Collaboration: Community involvement is essential for effective recruitment and participant engagement, especially in studies utilizing photovoice and IPA. Eodanable et al. (2024) collaborated with FASD communities across the UK, leveraging existing networks to effectively identify and recruit participants. This community-based approach ensured that recruitment materials were accessible and culturally relevant, enhancing the study's reach within the target population. Similarly, Filter (2011) formed partnerships with clinic staff to identify appropriate participants and facilitate clear communication between researchers and participants through well-structured letters and consent forms. These collaborative efforts fostered trust within vulnerable communities, thereby improving both recruitment and retention rates in an IPA and photovoice study, which require a deeper engagement with participants' lived experiences as captured through visual storytelling.

10. Innovative Use of Technology: The integration of technology has proven to be a valuable asset for IPA and photovoice methodologies, particularly when addressing challenges of participant recruitment and data collection in geographically dispersed populations. The use of online platforms, as described by Tanhan and Strack (2020), enabled real-time, iterative discussions with participants and research teams, facilitating the collaborative interpretation process that is central to IPA. Technology also allowed participants to submit photos and reflections remotely, preserving the immediacy and authenticity of their experiences while minimizing logistical constraints. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Oster et al. (2022) effectively utilized virtual focus groups and online submissions, which offered participants the flexibility to engage on their own schedules. This adaptation not only broadened access but also enriched the IPA

analysis by capturing a wider range of experiences, enhancing the interpretive depth of photovoice data collected in a digital format.

Addressing Ethical Concerns

As deeply personal, lived experiences are hallmarks of IPA and photovoice, rigorous ethical standards taken to protect participant identities are warranted. One primary concern across many of the studies was ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity, especially when dealing with visual data. In Akers et al. (2021a), researchers employed pseudonyms and secure online discussion forums to protect the identities of participants, particularly those from the LGBTQ+ community, where discussing sexual orientation could expose participants to sociopolitical risks. Similarly, Fahsold et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of ongoing consent, particularly in working with vulnerable groups like individuals with dementia. In this context, the researchers involved legal guardians to ensure participants could withdraw at any time if they became uncomfortable.

Emotional harm and distress were also significant ethical considerations. In Spangler (2021), which explored sensitive themes like grief and loss, participants were given the option to pause or withdraw if they found the process overwhelming. The researchers provided access to support services such as counseling to help participants navigate their emotional experiences. This approach was echoed in Bukhave and Huniche (2014), where the researchers worked with participants suffering from chronic illness and ensured emotional support was available to address distress caused by the discussions.

Privacy concerns were heightened when dealing with visual data, particularly in studies where participants submitted photographs as part of the photovoice methodology. Oster et al. (2022) addressed this issue by anonymizing images or blurring identifying details to protect participants' identities. In cases where participants' photographs involved sensitive content or potential breaches of privacy, researchers like Plunkett et al. (2013) allowed participants to explain their images and clarify any potential misunderstandings. Moreover, participants were empowered to choose which images could be shared publicly, ensuring control over their data. Similarly, it is important for researchers to be mindful of images featuring bystanders or community members, ensuring that ethical considerations extended beyond the direct participants.

Informed consent played a crucial role in all the studies. Akers et al. (2021b) emphasized the need to secure informed consent not just for participation but also for the use of visual data, particularly in potentially sensitive contexts. In Eodanable et al. (2024), consent was secured and reaffirmed at multiple stages, ensuring that participants and their guardians fully understood the implications of sharing photographs and personal narratives. Additionally, Tanhan and Strack (2020) adjusted the informed consent process to accommodate cultural sensitivities, allowing participants to give verbal consent by clicking "yes" to an online statement, rather than requiring formal written signatures, which might have been intimidating in some cultural contexts.

Researchers also addressed concerns regarding potential distress arising from discussing sensitive topics. For instance, Tanhan and Strack (2020) recognized that conversations around trauma and mental health could lead to emotional distress. To mitigate this, they offered participants opportunities to share their experiences in community events, providing support through collective sharing. Similarly, Filter (2011) addressed the vulnerability of adolescent participants by offering counseling referrals and allowing participants to pause or withdraw from interviews if the topics became too emotionally challenging.

Discussion

This study systematically reviewed the challenges associated with integrating Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and photovoice, analyzing eighteen studies to uncover key methodological challenges, ethical considerations, and strategies employed to address them within an integrated framework. A primary challenge arises from the combined demands of eliciting in-depth personal narratives (IPA) and collecting visual data (photovoice), which together heighten participant vulnerability. This is in line with a study by Houghton et al. (2015), which found that qualitative methodologies can amplify feelings of exposure among participants. Furthermore, the risk of retraumatization or emotional distress is particularly pronounced in research that explores personal narratives of trauma or health issues. Moreover, privacy concerns are amplified when both visual and narrative disclosures can reveal intimate personal details, potentially deterring participation (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Researchers must, therefore, take precautions to safeguard participants by creating supportive environments and offering emotional support and counseling throughout the study (Teti et al., 2012).

Furthermore, ethical concerns in studies that integrate IPA and photovoice present significant challenges beyond those associated with visual data alone. In such integrated approaches, both in-depth personal narratives and photographs carry risks of revealing identities, thereby heightening the potential for stigmatization or exploitation among vulnerable populations (Ng et al., 2023). Participants must be clearly informed about how their narratives and images will be used, with robust and ongoing consent processes that empower them to control the sharing and application of their data (Burton et al., 2017; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Consequently, researchers must adopt ethical safeguards that address the dual risks posed by both narrative and visual disclosures, ensuring that participants' rights and privacy are comprehensively protected.

Another challenge reported by this study was the difficulty in recruitment and retention of participants. Recruitment of marginalized communities often encounters barriers such as mistrust of researchers, concerns about privacy, and the emotional burden associated with sharing personal or stigmatizing information (Yancey et al., 2006). Moreover, as Pleschberger et al. (2011) noted, obtaining informed consent from older populations is particularly challenging, with several studies reporting refusals among older individuals (Bell & Menec, 2015; Kohon & Carder, 2014). When integrating IPA and photovoice, these challenges are further compounded by the dual requirement for participants to provide both detailed personal narratives and sensitive visual data, intensifying fears of exposure and further undermining trust. Evidence suggests that transparent communication, culturally sensitive recruitment practices, and ongoing participant support can improve recruitment and retention outcomes (George et al., 2014). In addition, employing diverse recruitment strategies—such as targeted outreach and community engagement—and integrating counseling services, robust support systems, and strong measures to protect participant identities can significantly mitigate these challenges and enhance retention in studies that combine IPA and photovoice (Christopher et al., 2008).

Another challenge arises in analyzing data when integrating IPA with photovoice. The distinct epistemological foundations of these methodologies require researchers to balance the empathetic, in-depth engagement of IPA with the broader socio-cultural insights provided by photovoice. This integration compels researchers to navigate between honoring the richness of personal narratives and interpreting visual data without one overshadowing the other. Such dual engagement can lead to deep immersion in the material, heightening the risk of emotional distress, as observed by Rogers-Shaw et al. (2021). To address this, robust support mechanisms and reflexivity practices are essential, enabling researchers to continuously reflect on their own experiences and maintain analytical rigor while mitigating emotional challenges.

An integrated approach combining IPA and photovoice not only enriches the research but also intensifies the emotional toll on researchers. Engaging with both in-depth narratives and sensitive visual data can lead to emotional fatigue and vicarious trauma, particularly when exploring themes such as illness, loss, or trauma (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021). This dual engagement heightens the risk of emotional distress, underscoring the need for structured debriefing sessions, robust peer support networks, and ongoing reflective practices to help researchers process their experiences and maintain their emotional well-being during and after the research process.

Another important finding in this study is that online photovoice is becoming increasingly popular (Earnshaw et al., 2023). The trend of utilizing this method saw a significant rise during the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted face-to-face interactions and prompted researchers to engage digital platforms for qualitative research (Adesuyi et al., 2023;

Akingbade et al., 2024). The shift to online formats allowed for greater accessibility and flexibility in engaging participants, particularly those who might have faced barriers to traditional research methods. Similarly, Tanhan et al., 2023b observed that WhatsApp facilitated effective communication and collaboration among the researchers from multiple universities. However, the transition to online photovoice has raised several concerns. Issues related to digital equity have emerged, as not all participants have equal access to technology or reliable internet connections, potentially limiting the inclusivity of the research (Akingbade et al., 2024). Additionally, there are concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality when sharing images online, as participants may inadvertently expose sensitive information. Tanhan and Strack (2020) observed that a strategy to deal with this is by removing identifiable information from photos. It is important to note that the nuances of in-person interactions, which can foster deeper connections and trust between researchers and participants, may be diminished in an online setting, potentially impacting the richness of the data collected (Earnshaw et al., 2023).

Another challenge identified in this study involve the technical difficulties associated with photography. A previous study by Papaloukas et al. (2017) highlighted that participants expressed concerns about the practical component of taking photographs; in other similar studies, the technicality of the camera and photography brought about a decline in the response of the study participants (Burton et.al., 2017; Boamah et al., 2022). Similarly, physiological factors such as vision problems are another challenge in research with aged people as some participants complained of eyesight issues, which stood as a barrier with the photo-taking method.

Despite the evident benefits of integrating IPA with photovoice, a significant limitation in the reviewed studies is the lack of participant diversity, with the majority of participants being predominantly white. This underscores the need for future research to include a wider range of participants with diverse characteristics to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, 17 of the studies were conducted in high-income countries, with only one study from a middle-income country and none from low-income or lower-middle-income countries, highlighting a critical gap in global representation. Additionally, our review was restricted to studies published in English, which may exclude relevant research from non-English speaking contexts. Future reviews should consider incorporating studies published in other languages to ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive assessment.

Gaps in Current Knowledge

Gaps in the current knowledge surrounding the integration of IPA and photovoice methodologies reveal several key limitations despite the valuable insights these methods have

generated. One significant gap is the underrepresentation of marginalized and vulnerable groups in research. For instance, Akers et al. (2021b) noted that while their study aimed for diversity within the LGBTQ+ community, transgender participants were notably underrepresented, restricting the ability to fully capture the nuances of transgender experiences. Similarly, Sumner et al. (2023) pointed out the difficulties in recruiting participants from low-income backgrounds, where access to necessary technology for photovoice was limited, raising concerns about the inclusivity of research in under-resourced populations.

Another major gap lies in the use of virtual platforms for conducting photovoice during the COVID-19 pandemic, as described in Oster et al. (2022). While remote engagement expanded opportunities for participation, particularly for those unable to attend in-person sessions, it introduced challenges related to the depth of participant interaction and the quality of the visual data collected. Similarly, virtual environments may have compromised the richness of discussions, limiting researchers' ability to deeply engage with participants' experiences. Furthermore, there is insufficient discourse on how to effectively adapt photovoice for populations with limited technological proficiency or access, such as older adults or those in resource-poor settings. This gap highlights the need for more innovative and inclusive approaches that account for technological disparities.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should prioritize the development of more inclusive recruitment strategies to ensure that underrepresented communities and those from low-income backgrounds are better represented in studies. Researchers should also explore new ways of adapting photovoice methodologies for virtual environments, ensuring that participants remain fully engaged and that visual data quality is maintained. Moreover, the ethical considerations surrounding the use of visual data in online spaces should be expanded to address privacy concerns unique to digital platforms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the potential of combining IPA with photovoice to capture the participants' nuanced experiences. This study highlights the potential of combining IPA with photovoice to capture the nuanced experiences of participants. This combined methodology presents challenges such as ethical concerns, participant retention, and balancing individual and collective narratives. Addressing these issues requires culturally sensitive approaches, strong ethical frameworks, and community engagement. Despite the complexities, this dual methodology holds promise for advancing inclusive and participatory social and health research.

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