Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) looks at a meaning that a group of people (such as out-of-hours doctors) attach to a certain phenomenon.

Personal experience and views are explored in depth via interviews rather than trying to objectify an event or experience and this is the phenomenological part of the process. IPA studies aim to explore in detail the perceptions and understanding of a specific group, rather than make more general claims.

IPA also puts an emphasis on the researcher and his potential prior experience, not so much as a potential bias but as an aid to interpret and see things from an ‘insider’ perspective, and this is the interpretative part. The first author having worked in general practice out-of-hours provisions provided a unique insider perspective, which would have been more difficult to achieve for a researcher who had never worked in out-of-hours General Practice. Whilst this process is useful to deepen the understanding between interviewer and interviewee, biases and preconceptions can enter the interpretative process, so it is important that a further independent researcher is involved when analysing dialogues. IPA however recognizes that the researcher’s own conceptions are necessary for the purpose of making sense of the personal world being studied through a process of interpretative activity. IPA creates a two stage interpretation process (a double hermeneutic process): the participants are trying to make sense of their world, whilst the researcher is trying to make sense of them trying to make sense of their world.

Examples of IPA in the published literature have as little as two interviewees (see example below by Visser), highlighting the importance of the depth of the interview process, richness of emerging themes, purposive sampling and volume of individuals’ data. This is in contrast to the larger numbers of participants found in quantitative methodology, where there is more of a requirement to prove reproducibility.

Further reading:
- Visser R  "I'm not a very manly man": Qualitative Insights into Young Men’s Masculine Subjectivity  Men and Masculinities 2009; 11; 367 DOI: 10.1177/1097184X07313357