

Applying interpretive phenomenological analysis to library and information science research on blended librarianship: A case study

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Abstract

Although interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) has value in library and information science (LIS), it has low uptake in Africa. Readers are guided in how to apply IPA in LIS research using an example of a blended librarianship thesis conducted in Zimbabwe. The illustration narrates how IPA was implemented within the context of phenomenology to analyse the complexity of academic librarians' views, taking into consideration social and historical environments. The methodological and theoretical approaches to using IPA in LIS and other disciplines are outlined, including a critical analysis of applying double hermeneutics and horizontalization to construct a hermeneutic interpretation. The blended librarianship thesis is compared with LIS-based IPA studies and blended librarianship research to reflect the value of IPA methods. The weaknesses of the study are discussed, including the use of quality criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability. The guided analysis of the study encourages the use of IPA in LIS as it can solve research problems and generate new theories to inform practice, services, philosophy, theory, and institutions.

Introduction

Worldwide, Library and Information Science (LIS) practitioners are occupying non-traditional roles within developing academic, social, and research institutions. Rapid technological advances and academic librarians' need to remain the *de facto* information centre influence this expansion of roles (Bell & Shank, 2007, p.504). These roles are investigated using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methods in Northern America (i.e., VanScoy, 2013). Yet, there are fewer African practitioner-based studies that use IPA methods in blended librarianship research (BLR).

Blended librarians are part of either information technologists or instructional designer functions (Bell & Shank, 2007, p.3). As information technologists, blended librarians work with faculty to match technologies for teaching. Then, as instructional designers, blended librarians assist faculty in bridging learning and teaching gaps. This paper assumes blended librarianship to be a pragmatic philosophy rather than a teaching method (Gall, 2014, pp.113-114). As a practical philosophy, both instructional design and information technologist roles are tools to engage communities with traditional library services (e.g., References and Information Services). As a teaching method, the scope narrows down to library services that focus on teaching (e.g., online learning and flipped classrooms).

Blended librarianship is attracting increasing attention because it is a new practice that is changing Zimbabwean librarians' service delivery. The practice of blended librarianship and its perceptions among librarians are under-researched within African LIS research. That is why this paper puts IPA into the context of a professional masters' thesis exploring 20 (twenty) Zimbabwean academic librarians' experiences of blended librarianship (Dabengwa, 2018). This exploratory study is also reported in (Dabengwa, Raju, & Matingwina, 2019). An exploratory study is ideal because little is known about blended librarianship in Zimbabwe, since there is a scarcity of literature and research in Africa.

This paper: (a) guides on the use of the IPA research method within the context of a professional master's thesis on blended librarianship, (b) compares the dissertation with LIS practitioner-based research applying IPA methods, (c) examines the accuracy of the theses' interpretation with selected, blended librarianship studies, and, (d) discusses the value of IPA methods.

1.1 Background of the study

The primary study was conducted by the first author and supervised by the co-authors.

IPA requires an investigator to function as a research instrument when interacting with participants. On this note, the investigator is a practicing librarian, and this created safety and trust among the participants. As a result, the first authors' insider view made it possible to delve deeply into the processes of blended librarianship among Zimbabwean librarians at universities.

The librarians work at 6 (six) state-run universities, and their selection accounts for variations in institutional resources and activities. The librarians' experiences of blended librarianship are interpreted as a collective meaning vis-à-vis individual and group narratives. Dabengwa (2018), collected data on the identity, image, meaning, and role of blended librarianship. The findings to these minute parts lead back to the hermeneutic interpretation of the study and other contexts. Moreover, Lave and Wenger's (1991) Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) theory was used to interpret both individual and group practices of blended librarianship. LPP is a useful theory of comprehending librarians' participation in work processes and negotiation of identities and roles. In this manner, IPA draws out the interplay of personalities and negotiations of power from various practical experiences at each university.

1.2 Statement of the problem

IPA made its first appearance in LIS research through the studies of VanScoy (2012; 2013). Despite the potential use of IPA studies in practitioner-based LIS research, there is a preference for alternative research methods and other phenomenological schools (Jamali, 2018; Ullah & Ameen, 2018). To our knowledge, no studies show the motives behind African researchers' low adoption of IPA in LIS practitioner-based research (i.e., blended librarianship). There is a reported preference for case study or survey designs among African LIS researchers (Mutula & Majinge, 2018). Perhaps, we can assume that phenomenological studies are not preferred because of difficulty to understand the underlying philosophical issues (Creswell, 2013, p.94; Vagle, 2018, p.45). For example, Ngulube and Ukwoma (2019) found that some published African LIS research does not report philosophical issues (e.g., epistemology and ontology).

The alternatives of IPA research have failed to provide experiential knowledge, intentions of the firsthand actors, and motivations of behaviours regarding blended librarianship. For instance, Held (2010) and Perini (2015; 2016) apply the case study research design. Cherinet (2018) uses the Delphi technique, content analysis of job adverts, and qualitative interviewing.

At the same time, Shank (2006) and Raju (2017) conduct content analyses of job adverts. Typically, case study research designs use "how" and "why" questions regarding a phenomenon (Yin, 2016). The case

study method makes use of various information sources that may not have direct experience with blended librarianship (e.g., reports from onlookers). The Delphi technique solicits consensus from a panel of experts with knowledge of a phenomenon, without seeking their direct experience (Cherinet, 2018, p.94). Whereas, researchers using content analysis study documents instead of people. Albeit, these research designs offer fewer possibilities to seek relationships to behaviours or underlying conditions of first-hand actors.

Because of a dearth of studies applying IPA, LIS researchers may face challenges when discovering alternative theories on blended librarianship and other practitioner-based topics. The paucity of examples from LIS studies may lead to a view that IPA is suitable for research problems in other social science disciplines. If there is a paucity of LIS studies using IPA, and if IPA has the potential to study practitioners' first-hand experiences, this paper uses a real-world experience of BLR to infer the value of IPA methods.

Literature Review

2 What is phenomenology?

The term "*phenomenology*" has several descriptions, perceptions, and purposes, depending on its theoretical and practical contexts (Adams & Van Manen, 2008, p.614). Phenomenology studies the meaning of life experiences (e.g., blended librarianship) using first-hand accounts (e.g., librarians). This way, phenomenology focuses on experiences that are significant enough for a person to feel, reflect, and think their meanings (Creswell, 2013, p.83).

2.2 Phenomenological approaches aligned to IPA

The study considered descriptive and interpretive phenomenology (i.e., hermeneutics) schools. These variations of phenomenology explore the lived experiences of people as part of the shared human consciousness (Creswell, 2013, p.80). The distinctions lie in what they explain as interpretations rather than their reporting of experiences. For example, both schools develop the essence (the end product of a phenomenological study) from grouping significant events from one or more individuals (Creswell, 2013, p.83).

The descriptive phenomenologist seeks an unbiased description of experiences reflecting Edmund Husserl's bracketing rule. Descriptive phenomenologists report cases with no prior assumptions (bracketing the context) to form a phenomenological explanation (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.53). However, there is doubt whether it is achievable to perform qualitative research without presuppositions or attention to the context of a study (Patton, 2015, p.191). That is why bracketing means a "*phenomenological attitude*" (i.e., reflexively questioning one's presuppositions to open up to alternative possibilities) (Patton, 2015, p.191). Likewise, descriptive phenomenologists aim to get an essence of the study, that is, an invariant structure of the phenomenon which is transferable to various contexts (Vagle, 2018, p.36). The essence is taken as a snapshot of reality (i.e., aiming to account for the past, present, and predict future behaviour).

Conversely, interpretive phenomenology explores participants' accounts on objects alongside an investigator's position following Martin Heidegger's axioms (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.53). Interpretive phenomenology describes objects beyond words in conversation. It (interpretive phenomenology) puts an ongoing opinion into the significance of words (i.e., interpretive hermeneutics), within an ongoing circle of the phenomenon's context and researchers' presuppositions (i.e., the hermeneutical circle). Hence, the researcher "*mediates*" the interpretation from diverse meanings (Creswell, 2013, p.81). Instead of seeking an essence (generalisability), the interpretive phenomenologist looks for an interpretation or understanding of a phenomena among participants (Vagle, 2018, p.36). Accordingly, there is a close alignment between interpretive phenomenology and IPA. They both discern people's experiences using an author's assumptions while disclosing the procedures taken to interpret and understand a phenomena. This form of reporting is called "*reflexivity*."

For illustration, there is a contrast between a description of blended librarianship as compared to interpreting opinions about it. The descriptive phenomenologist studies the roles and functions of blended librarianship without preconceptions, looking for insights from the data. Whereas, an interpretive phenomenologist seeks to explain the librarian's opinions using assumptions, literature, and theory.

2.3 IPA research methods

IPA is a qualitative method that emerged from phenomenologists in psychological research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin., 2009). It (IPA) is an inductive approach that aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of participants' sense-making of personal and social worlds. Sense-making is preferred instead of unbiased statements. Under the circumstances, IPA assumes a connection between participants' narratives and their emotional, mental, and situated contexts (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.54).

The IPA method is a middle ground between the descriptive and interpretive phenomenological schools (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p.364). For example, IPA correctly represents participants' interpretations of experiences and adds to the researcher's assumptions of these interpretations. It (IPA) realises that objectivity is not possible because a researchers' context may weave into the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.53). Hence, IPA borrows axioms from ideography, hermeneutics, and phenomenology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p.364). We discuss the relationship between these concepts in more detail below.

Table 1: The influence of phenomenology in the blended librarianship thesis

| Steps in phenomenological research | Values | Analysis | Why it was important |
|---|-----------|--|---|
| 1. <i>Examinable research problem using phenomenology</i> | High | Experiencing blended librarianship in academic libraries | Guided the framing of the complete study |
| 2. <i>Identification and description of the phenomenon of interest</i> | High | Discussed throughout the study | Theoretical and topical issues on the problem |
| 3. <i>Specifying the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology</i> | High | Identified in the methods section | Guiding the methods for data collection and interpretation |
| 4. <i>Collecting data from the individuals who experienced the phenomenon</i> | Medium | The specified target group had experienced the phenomena | The target group had to experience blended librarianship |
| 5. <i>Generating themes from the analysis of significant statements</i> | High | The case developed themes in the data presentation chapter | Sorting data into significant statements |
| 6. <i>Developing textual and structural descriptions</i> | High | Data presented in the visual and textual description in the findings chapter | Explaining what data found and the researcher's interpretations |
| 7. <i>Reporting the interpretation using a composite description</i> | High | The discussion is developed using the findings and literature on the phenomena | Interpreting the collected data vis-à-vis literature and the theoretical framework for uniqueness or contradictions |
| 8. <i>Presenting an understanding of the interpretation of the experience in written form</i> | Very high | The study developed a model to explain blended librarianship on a case-by-case basis | Phenomenological interpretation |

2.3.1 Hermeneutics in IPA research

IPA interrelates hermeneutics and interpretive phenomenology methods (Budd, 1995, p.308).

Hermeneutics assumes that the participant's experience relies on an investigator's understanding (Budd, 1995, pp.308-309). Similarly, interpretive phenomenology uses knowledge of participants' experiences (Budd, 1995, pp.308-309). For the above reasons, phenomenologists refer to IPA as "*double hermeneutics*." This reference is because of the two-stage process for analysing people's knowledge (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.53). These are the steps of double hermeneutics:

1. First, participants make an understanding of their practices in narratives (i.e, expressing their social context in interviews);
2. Second, the researcher sums these narratives to make sense of the experiences as one common meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p.362). The researchers' sensemaking includes pre-

understanding of the phenomena (i.e., blended librarianship and the participants' context), obtaining a textual meaning from the interview transcripts, and interpreting the experiences in line with the research

Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009, p.3) urge IPA researchers to immerse into participants' life-world to understand subjective contexts, but with higher self-informed and systematic steps. These self-informed procedures include cautions to safeguard the researcher's worldviews from overlapping that of the participants in the hermeneutical circle. Here, the hermeneutic interpretation should show examples from the data and outside the participants' background. In this way, assumptions from the literature or the public may explain behaviours from the data (Allan & Eatough, 2016, p.348).

2.3.2 Using ideography in IPA research

Ideography is the analysis of transcriptions on a case-by-case basis, searching for patterns across the cases, while meticulously describing specific events and situations. It (ideography) entails identifying distinct parts of each case and then balancing with what is typical or different from other facts (Allan & Eatough, 2016, p.348). Therefore, ideography differs from making generalisations about groups to populations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p.364). In this way, ideography applies to subjective generalisations (within the data or setting) instead of external generalisations (Maxwell, 1992, p.294).

Methods

3.1. Homogeneous characteristics of participants

The interviewees had various job titles and experiences of blended librarianship because of cognitive processes and practical opportunities. Participants in IPA research are experts of their experience and are recruited because of this expertise (Allan & Eatough, 2016, p.408). As a result, the sample is ideal because it represents blended librarianship practice from science and technology universities. To recruit this group of interviewees, the main researcher conducted a qualitative survey of 101 (one hundred and one) librarians to screen for blended librarianship experiences. In the thesis, librarians report their practice within specific contextual parameters, for example, at the high, middle, and lower levels and more context-bound levels (*see Table 2*). The case then followed up librarians with top scores to take part in in-depth interviews Dabengwa (2018). Later, he applied data saturation rules, without the criterion of a sample size to continue data collection, but "*case contrasts*" (differences between cases). As such, the author narrowed the sample to 20 (twenty) participants.

Table 2: Key for the ordinal scores used in the thesis under review

| None of the time (0) | Sometimes (1) | Most of the time (2) | All the time (3) |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Behaviour was not observed | Exhibiting some of the characteristics of the behaviour | Intermittent periods where the behaviour is practiced | The behaviour is pervasive and becomes the primary task. It may be compromised if attention to other tasks |

3.2 Steps in generating a hermeneutic interpretation

Fig.1 and Table 3 show “horizontalization” (i.e., listing significant accounts of the subject and analysing each account with corresponding value during the analysis) (Creswell, 2013, p.237). The contrasts between the participants’ experiences reconstruct a composite report.

The study outlines horizontalization below:

1. **Significant statements** – The Findings section of the dissertation explores what determines the “real” experiences of blended librarianship and how these experiences emerge in the definite work contexts. To explain these questions, the investigator established: (a) an awareness of what blended librarianship is; (b) its reason(s) for existence in libraries; (c) the relationship to other library functions; and (d) how it signifies the suggested roles of
2. **Meaning Units** – Clustering similar comments on blended librarianship into the central themes displayed in the Findings section.
3. **Structural descriptions/ general themes** – An interpretation of the situations where blended librarianship occurred (presented in the theses’ Discussion section). The main author develops structural descriptions from considering the literature, theoretical framework, and textual
4. **General summary or interpretation** – This is an interplay between meaningful comments and structural descriptions of blended librarianship. The hermeneutic interpretation produces the Conclusions section of the dissertation. This section incorporates the researcher’s analytic interpretations supported by word-for-word excerpts from participants’ significant

3.3 Credibility, dependability, and transferability

The quality criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability criteria assess reliability and validity in the case. These measures connect and overlap each other (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.67).

3.2.1 Credibility

Credibility measures the extent to which participants' views match the researcher's portrayal of them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.77). The researcher identified peculiarities of blended librarianship in the narratives. These peculiarities were assumed to be experiences of blended librarianship. In expansion, the investigator took notice of diverse backgrounds among librarians to seek the possibilities for rich and unique cases (*see Table 3*).

Table 3. Summary of the interviewees' justifications for blended librarianship

| General Statements | Central Themes | General Structure | General Summary |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p><i>Information Technology Roles</i></p> <p>"I have learnt technologies that apply to the classroom. Yet, what I am current role is basic"</p> <p>"I am trying to improve my delivery of technology services"</p> <p>"Systems librarianship is still a grey area for me"</p> | <p>The participants express blended librarianship through ILS and technology tutorials which rely on faculty liaisons.</p> <p>Academic librarians have different levels of information technology competencies. The primary searching skills are easy to master and do not require any specialised professional qualification.</p> | <p>Academic librarians implement what other academic libraries have done without adequate training. Then, additional training is required for professional development to master the skills of blended librarianship. LPP is appropriate to show the different levels of mastery and contextual resources needed.</p> | <p>The study shows different levels of blended librarianship using a taxonomy to highlight different levels of mastery of blended librarianship (see Fig.1).</p> |
| <p><i>Instructional Design Roles</i></p> <p>"I'm a blended librarian because of the response that I get from faculty regarding my teaching roles"</p> <p>"I need more background knowledge in my faculty's subject area"</p> <p>"There is still room for development. For example, I need more training on instructional design"</p> | <p>Academic librarians have different levels of information technology competencies. The primary searching skills are easy to master and do not require any specialised professional qualification.</p> | | |
| <i>Undefined Roles</i> | | | |
| <p>"There is still a lot that I need to learn"</p> <p>"There are duties that I may not do at the moment"</p> | <p>Academic libraries that lack requisite facilities are understaffed and have not trained staff for blended librarianship.</p> | | |

3.2.2 Dependability

The key features of dependability include transparency in the data collection procedures and when interpreting the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.78). These qualities are essential because differences

in research contexts cannot be determined in advance. So, the dissertation applies an inquiry audit to assess the consistency of responses from various librarians to reduce bias.

3.2.3 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which similar processes of research work in other communities and settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p.78). The thesis includes thick, rich, and detailed descriptions of interpretations elaborating both present and transferable contexts of the phenomenon. Thick reports refer to describing an event in sufficient detail to “permit a reader to test a personal construction in other non-local settings” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p.79).

Results

The librarians identified with the blended librarianship role because of reliance on faculty liaisons, teaching information literacy skills (ILS), and low-threshold technology applications (LTAs). However, the librarians lack supportive resources (e.g., classrooms and eLearning Management Systems) and autonomy to teach in classrooms. They (librarians) adopted blended librarianship within the periphery of faculty and students, hoping to attract faculty and students. For instance, librarians taught credit-bearing ILS courses, but the teaching does not guarantee a librarian cooperation from the faculty and students. The traditional subservient role of the academic library may cause this lack of cooperation.

Also, librarians’ lack of critical competences and resources deters them from becoming “*fully blended librarians*,” as suggested by (Held, 2010, p.158). He argues that the practice of blended librarianship found in the literature differs from real-world contexts. Sometimes faculty and students work without librarians, ILS lacks grading, and there are negative attitudes among communities. A two-by-two matrix results from the findings, the assumption that there is a fully blended librarian, and the application of LPP (see Fig.2).

The matrix attempts to account for negative and positive applications of blended librarianship, librarians’ competence, and institutional resources. The librarians reported a need for additional training to match lecturing staffs’ competencies and legitimately take part in the learning, teaching, and research process. When librarians increase their presence in instructional design and or information technologist roles, they move into another quadrant of mastery until they become fully blended librarians. However, each level of the librarian’s transition is fraught with a unique set of problems. Hence, the theses’ matrix shows that periphery participation leads to mastery (fully blended librarianship), consistent with Held's (2010, p.162-166) findings.

Discussion

This paper aims to verify the application of IPA within LIS research, using an example of a blended librarianship master’s thesis. The authors argue that IPA is useful to consider both individual and social conceptions of practice-related problems. The discussion compares the case with LIS-based IPA studies

and BLR to reflect the value of IPA methods. The paucity of concrete illustrations of studies applying IPA in BLR justifies this comparative analysis.

5.1 Application of IPA to get the interpretation and understanding of blended librarianship

The writer aligns IPA towards Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology. Other practitioner-based IPA studies also align towards Heidegger. See the following examples: VanScoy (2012; 2013), and VanScoy and Evenstad (2015). There is no probable harm in aligning IPA with interpretive phenomenology because IPA offers flexibility in applying its methods (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). However, some critics may claim that IPA is flawed because of this integration of phenomenological schools (Giorgi, 2011). The mixing of phenomenological schools is an ongoing philosophical debate. Perhaps more emphasis should be placed on *methodological congruence* to evaluate each study's interpretation using the research objectives set out.

5.2 The use of the theory

Critics against the use of theoretical frameworks in IPA research must refer to Maxwell's (1992, p.291-293) criteria of theoretical validity in qualitative research. Theoretical validity looks beyond the internal relationships of a theory to its legitimate application within a context. On these grounds, the investigation applied a theoretical framework to influence the research questions, literature review, and analysis (Dabengwa, 2018). The use of theory in IPA is a rare but useful justification used in practitioner-based IPA studies such as Vanscoy and Bright (2019). Dabengwa (2018) makes use of LPP theory to explain the differences between various librarian's practices. LPP seems to be consistent with the precepts of ideography. It (LPP) highlights variations of mastery between cases to present the hermeneutical interpretation. In this way, engaging with the literature and theory falls into imaginative variation (i.e., when a researcher seeks meanings of an object to develop case contrasts) (Creswell, 2013, p.237).

5.3 The commitment to quality

Smith, Flowers & Larkins (2009) recommended the framework from Yardley (2000) to ensure quality in IPA studies (sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance). Studies such as VanScoy (2012; 2013) apply Yardley's (2000) quality check. The dissertation uses a different criterion altogether (i.e., credibility, dependability, and transferability). This paper finds no difference between these quality criteria as their concepts mirror and overlap each other. For example, credibility mirrors transparency, and coherence. We may pair dependability with commitment and rigour. Transferability covers both sensitivity to the context and impact and importance. If readers use a different framework, they should show that it does not compromise the inquisition's quality.

5.4 The hermeneutical interpretation of blended librarianship

Dabengwa (2018) illuminates that the transition to becoming a fully blended librarian is not a straight path. Some levels intercede the transition from novice to expert. Previous models on the subject did not report this finding. For example, Cherinet (2018, p.95) visualises blended librarianship and other practitioner roles using an input-process-output (IPO) framework. The theses' matrix can adapt Cherinet's

(2018, p.101) conception of evolutionary and revolutionary of librarians' roles. This adaptation means that the transitions in *Fig.2* are not linear. When librarians increase their skills and participate in work tasks, they have the potential to move from one quadrant to another without going through other quadrants. The adaptation is an appreciation that some skills and work contexts do not develop incrementally, but result from the revolutionary pull and push factors. For example, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), has pushed librarians into blended roles without adequate time for training.

Finally, Perini (2015) brings to attention faculty status for blended professionals (librarians). He finds faculty status a prerequisite of creating liaisons and gaining the cooperation of faculty and students. Unlike their counterparts in Northern America, most African librarians do not have faculty status. In our case, Zimbabwean librarians do not have faculty status, and operate at the periphery of both faculty and students. The thesis reflects that librarians create strategic liaisons within their communities to bridge the lack of faculty status. Perhaps *Fig.2* applies to contexts where librarians may not enjoy faculty status, lack dedicated personnel or competence in either instructional design or information technologist roles.

The comparative analysis with prior studies on blended librarianship illuminates the interpretation of the review study, showing that the thesis would not get unique findings using other research designs. However, there is a need for a more detailed paper to compare the contexts, research design and conclusions of articles within BLR.

5.5 Developing the hermeneutic interpretation

The Zimbabwean study develops the hermeneutic interpretation through a spiral of narrative activities (*see Fig.2*). The spiralled steps in horizontalization do not differ from the data analysis precepts recommended by Smith and Osborn (2007, pp.66-75). In both cases, the methods adhere to ideography in summing up participant's accounts to develop the interpretation (Jones, 2008, pp.486-487).

Attaining a phenomenological reduction of blended librarianship is difficult. There is a lack of defined boundaries between the literature and real-life situations. Thus, both creative and interpretive processes produce the interpretation of blended librarianship without compromising individual cases. A phenomenological reduction is a fiction – it is an invention created to self-consciously interpret experiences (Zwadlo,1997). A fiction differs from a hypothesis because the latter verifies the truth from responses. At the same time, the former justifies the answers to fit into an absolute reality. Zwadlo (1997, p.110) provides a commentary on several disciplines, including the hard sciences, in which fictions resolve research problems. He illustrates this assertion with examples, such as the use of imaginary numbers in mathematics, classification schemes in LIS, and the “*average person*” in demographics.

Thus, readers must appreciate that a hermeneutic interpretation is not the entire truth about a phenomenon. To some extent, interpretations are an answer close to the truth, available for verification in different contexts. The elements of an interpretation may fit into a typical case or an average person in a particular context, variations of the person, and the setting (VanScoy and Evenstad, 2015, p.341). Raising this observation is an appreciation of the difficulties in realising a phenomenon's universal interpretation applicable to various persons and contexts. It is important to note that variations in interpretations help to

appreciate the distinct characteristics of practitioners and their situated context. In this way, practitioner-based studies such as Dabengwa (2018), offer possibilities to solve LIS problems of practice. This information is useful when planning programmes, introducing new services, or improving current ones. For example, the matrix helps to understand the mastery of blended librarianship, class various training needs, and projected outcomes in work contexts.

5.6. Limitations of the study

The thesis follows IPA in the data analysis, using the principles of hermeneutics and ideography in its reflections. However, the author does not outline IPA principles in the Methods section (e.g., hermeneutics and ideography). Novice readers seeking to understand IPA terminologies may experience difficulties extrapolating these terms from the work. Similarly, the hermeneutic interpretation is labelled as the essence. This is not a mistake, as the literature encountered seems to make no distinction between the essence (i.e., the use of the term in descriptive phenomenology) and hermeneutic interpretation (i.e., the use of the term in interpretive phenomenology). See the following examples: Creswell (2013) and Patton (2015).

Conclusions

IPA enables researchers to identify different environmental and mental experiences of the same object, situation, or concept (i.e., blended librarianship). Understanding these meanings opens the possibility to adjust or realise more consistent perceptions of practice-related problems. This understanding could improve library processes and service quality. With pure research, understanding these differences may lead researchers to new theories related to blended librarianship, technology in libraries, or library management. IPA studies require a firm adherence to rigour and quality to interpret phenomena and reduce challenges in methods. The case met this criterion, guarding against pitfalls unique to it. Thus, documenting the shortfalls of the study is necessary to guide LIS research and other disciplines in refining the IPA method.

The outcome of this study is to encourage both novices and experienced researchers to apply IPA to solve problems and generate alternative theories that inform LIS practice and theory.

Declarations

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethics clearance was sought from the University of Cape Town (UCT), before conducting the study. With the clearance from UCT, the researcher also sought permission from the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education in Zimbabwe to conduct research in the selected universities for this study. Permission was also sought from the selected universities to collect data from the academic librarians and library boards.

Consent for publication

The academic librarians were informed about the nature of the research in writing or in verbal form before any data collection. The participants and the ethics approval letter give consent for publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Figures

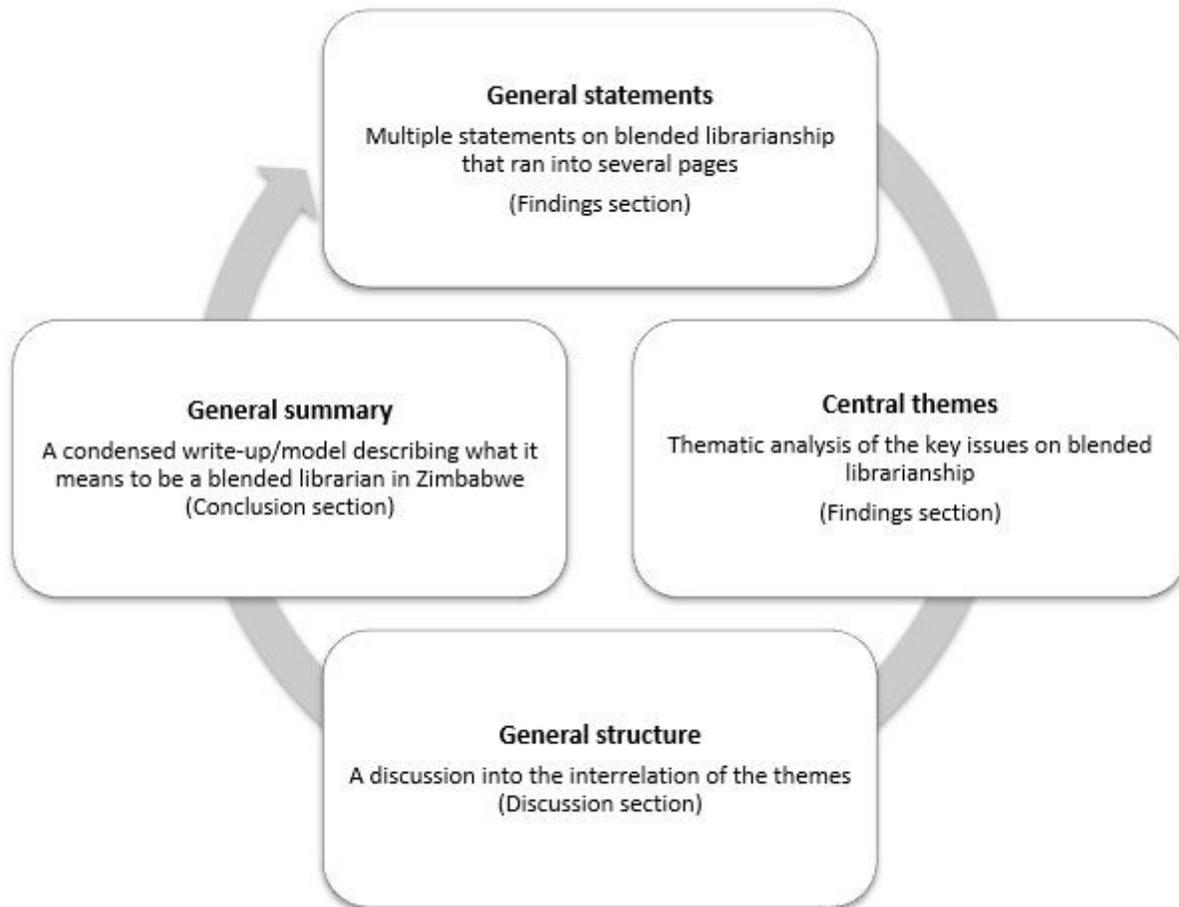


Figure 1

The steps of horizontalization leading to the phenomenological reduction

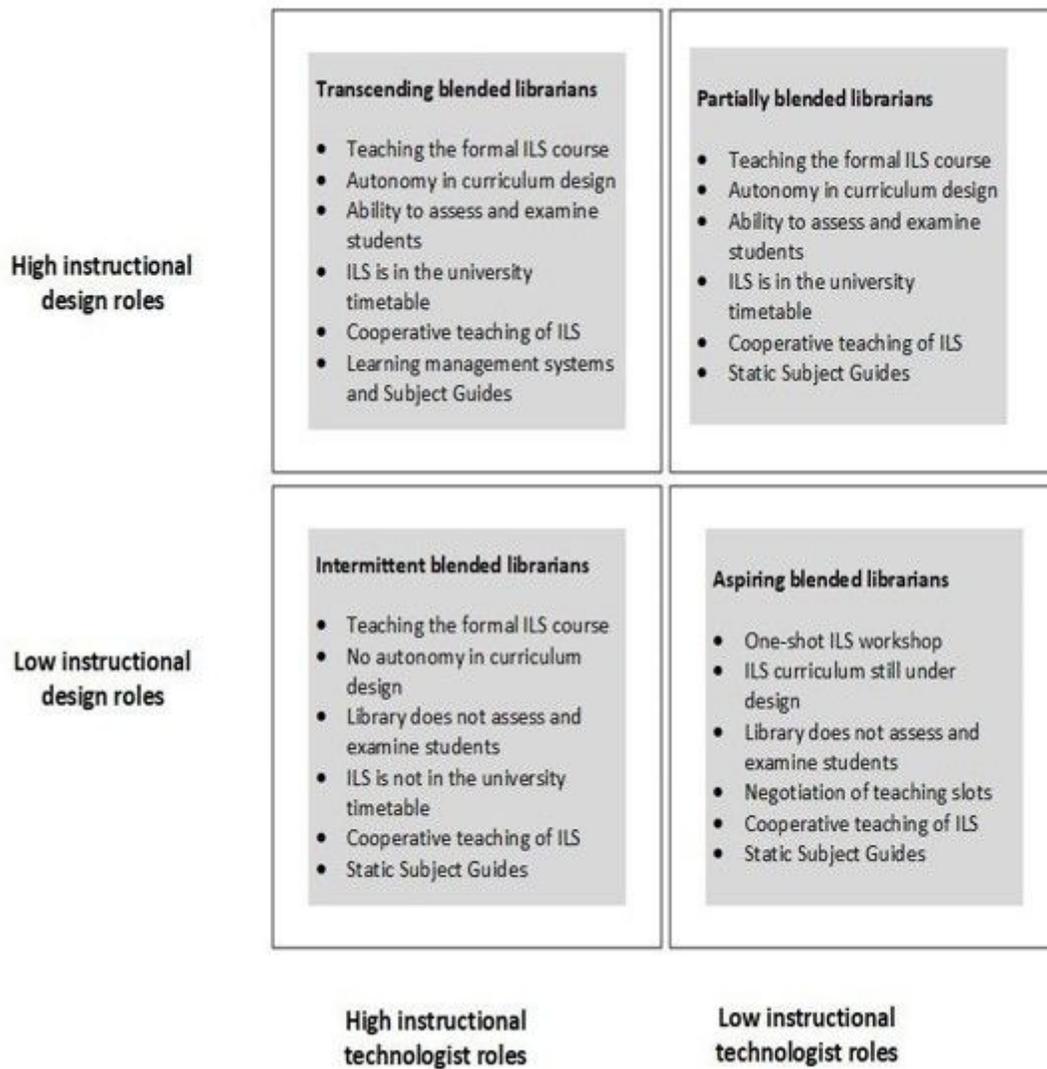


Figure 2

Two-by-two matrix developed in the case study