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Missing people and fragmented stories: painting holistic pictures through Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA)

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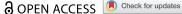
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ABSTRACT

A pen portrait is an analytical technique for analysing, condensing, and depicting qualitative data from participants that can also incorporate themes or patterns. A review of the use of pen portraits indicates that researchers have employed them in different ways across a variety of disciplines. The scarcity of methodological detail in these articles makes it difficult to engage with pen portraits as a trustworthy form of qualitative analysis. This paper outlines the authors' approach called Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA). SPPA was used by both authors, to overcome the issue of fragmented people or experience during their initial analysis. This paper describes ways that researchers could identify SPPA as a useful approach for answering their research question, and then details a step-by-step guide. This guide is provided alongside two worked examples from the authors' doctoral research projects. A tentative critical analysis of SPPA is also offered. .

Introduction

A pen portrait is an analytical technique for analysing, condensing, and depicting qualitative data from participants that can also incorporate themes or patterns (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). Pen portraits are a useful technique for qualitative analysis (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 2013; Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson 2012; Pleschberger et al. 2011; Sheard et al. 2017; Sheard and Marsh 2019; Taylor and Taylor 2004; Tod et al. 2012). Despite this, the literature on the use of pen portraits is scarce. Furthermore, literature often fails to outline either the philosophical underpinnings of this analytical technique, or the practical parameters within which it operates. Researchers who may wish to use pen portraits must turn to qualitative papers reporting on this type of research. However, these studies often focus on the research itself and the findings rather than the pen portrait technique; therefore, articles commonly offer incomplete accounts of how pen

portrait data analysis and presentation has been used (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 2013; Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson 2012; Pleschberger et al. 2011; Sharif et al. 2014; Sheard et al. 2017; Taylor and Taylor 2004; Tod et al. 2012). This gap within the literature leaves the pen portrait, in our view, as an underused qualitative analytical technique, yet one which could be potentially rewarding for a variety of research questions. In a similar way to how Braun and Clarke's (2006) paper aimed to comprehensibly consider how the 'theory, application and evaluation of thematic analysis' (p. 77) is understood and practised by qualitative researchers, this paper critically evaluates the potential benefits and difficulties of using pen portraits. This paper is split into two sections. Section one reviews the pen portrait literature, including a comparative analysis of relevant research studies using pen portraits. The second section argues that pen portraits can be used as an analytical technique to resolve the issue of data fragmentation in qualitative research, this specific approach to pen portraits is labelled Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA). This paper offers a practical guide to completing SPPA and is based on the first and second authors' use of pen portraits in their own research studies exploring counsellors' understanding and experience of boundaries in counselling (Blundell 2017) and experiences of spiritual abuse in the Christian faith context (Oakley 2009). It is envisioned that this guide could be useful for students and experienced researchers alike.

What is a pen portrait?

Pen portraits are broadly defined in the literature as a method for analysing, summarising, and representing qualitative data (usually from participant accounts but not exclusively), which may also consider temporal dimensions, patterns, or themes within data (Hollway and Jefferson 2013). There is minimal discussion in literature to date about pen portrait as a method or analytical technique, furthermore terminology lacks clarity, for example detailed definitions of what constitutes a pen portrait are missing. At a minimal level it is said to offer a descriptive account of a participant's narrative, however it may ultimately involve different levels of interpretation as a way of answering specific research questions.

Pen portraits are not extensively used within qualitative research. However, studies that have used them, as a form of analysis, offer a very broad interpretation of how they can be carried out (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 2013; Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson 2012; Pleschberger et al. 2011; Sharif et al. 2014; Sheard and Marsh 2019; Sheard et al. 2017; Taylor and Taylor 2004; Tod et al. 2012). As Sheard et al. (2017) put it '[t]here is a lack of methodological literature pertaining to the construction of a pen portrait and this has been left to the discretion of individual research

teams' (p. 3). In addition to this insufficient methodological base, there is a paucity of clear and tangible definitions of what a pen portrait is. Where definitions do exist, they need to be considered within their broader research context to be more easily understood, due to the fact they are often vague or incomplete (some of these definitions and uses of pen portraits are explored in the 'Different Types of Pen Portrait' section). Therefore, the literature does not clearly define or explain pen portrait usage, and this presents challenges to any researchers seeking to use these in their studies as the absence of a detailed protocol leaves those conducting research needing to make their own decisions about what steps to engage in and present their own rationale as to why. This could raise questions about the trustworthiness of the findings presented. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap by offering a definition and protocol for a specific type of pen portrait analysis used within both authors' doctoral studies.

How a pen portrait can be used

Pen portraits have been used across different disciplines. Most studies have been in health research (e.g., Louch et al. 2018; Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Sheard and Marsh 2019; Sheard et al. 2017). However, the use of pen portraits has not only been consigned to health researchers. Taylor and Taylor (2004) used pen portraits to investigate small business owners' experiences of food safety management systems. Whereas Sharif et al. (2014) used them to better understand how multi-generational households in Malaysia adapted Malay food knowledge. Many of these studies used them as a secondary form on analysis to help answer their research questions (e.g., Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Sheard and Marsh 2019; Sheard et al. 2017); or at least in conjunction with other research methods (e.g., Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson 2012; Pleschberger et al. 2011; Sharif et al. 2014). There were limited studies found that used pen portraits as the sole form of data analysis (e.g., Taylor and Taylor 2004).

Different types of portraits

The authors have identified different types of pen portrait within the research literature and attempted to group these into four different categories (or types) based on their overarching purpose and focus, these are summarised in Table 1. There are insufficient details about the philosophical underpinnings or methodological process in most of these studies, therefore these labels are offered cautiously founded on the limited information made available, to distinguish between the different forms of analysis and data representation described within the research literature. The authors hope, and expect, that

Table 1. Types of pen portrait.

Individual Participant Pen Portrait	Representative Pen Portrait of a Group or Process	Individual Participant Pen Portrait to Represent a Group or Process	Research/Reflective Tool (RT)
A descriptive and/or interpretative summary which represents the qualitative data held for one specific participant	A descriptive and/or interpretative summary to represent a group of people (or processes), using multiple themes found within data.	A descriptive and/or interpretative summary which represents the qualitative data for one specific participant, but is also a good representation of the broader themes found in qualitative data across multiple participants	A descriptive and/or interpretative summary of participant(s) account(s) used as a research tool rather than a research output
• Hollway and Jefferson (2013) • Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully (2006) • Taylor and Taylor (2004) • Sharif et al. (2014)	• People – Tod et al. (2012) Multiple Data Sources • Sheard et al. (2017) and Sheard and Marsh (2019) • Louch et al. (2018)	• Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson (2012)	• Pleschberger et al. (2011)

these initial conceptualisations will develop further and therefore become more detailed, as researchers refine their use of pen portraits.

The most common use of pen portraits, within the research literature, was to represent the data of a specific participant within a qualitative study (Hollway and Jefferson 2013; Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully 2006; Sharif et al. 2014; Taylor and Taylor 2004) the authors have labelled this an *individual participant pen portrait*. Researchers who used this type of pen portrait aimed to present a holistic representation of the participant's account i.e., meaningful to, and representative of, the original account. However, this type of pen portrait does not aim to represent anything of the cross-participant themes.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) used a variety of research methods when investigating the fear of crime with their participants. Pen portraits were used to counteract the negative effects of the 'fragmentation' (p. 68) of data that can occur in qualitative research. Fragmentation, in this sense, refers to a disjointed or patchy portrayal of the participant that does not fully represent the participant's answer to the research question; ultimately, this means that the meaning attached to the data, by the participant, has become separated or disconnected from the research question itself (Mishler 1991). This issue of data fragmentation is explored and addressed more thoroughly later in this paper.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) offer one of the more detailed explorations of the aims of using this type of pen portrait in qualitative research. They state

The pen portrait aimed to write something which made the person come alive for a reader. It would be largely descriptive and provide enough information against which subsequent interpretations could be assessed. In a way, a pen portrait serves as

a substitute 'whole' for a reader who will not have access to the raw data but who needs to have a grasp of the person who figures in a case study if anything said about him or her is going to be meaningful" (p. 70)

Hollway and Jefferson used them as a secondary form of analysis in conjunction with other methods to help generate a Gestalt or holistic picture of participants; this meant not trying to erase 'inconsistencies, contradictions and puzzles' (p. 70). However, despite being one of the more helpful and detailed descriptions of pen portraits within the literature their description of this technique contains insufficient details for qualitative researchers to be able to follow and therefore undertake it themselves.

Morecroft, Cantrill, and Tully (2006) investigated whether patients evaluated their hypertension management, in part, to find out what attributes were involved in this evaluation. Similar to Hollway and Jefferson they used computer software to analyse their data but used pen portraits, in conjunction with mind-maps, to overcome data fragmentation. They argue that '[a] pen portrait is a descriptive account of what is considered by the researcher to be meaningful' (p. 194). Morecroft et al argue that taking a holistic look at each participant gave them greater opportunities to 'understand the interrelationship of the data and the possible meaning that the data had for each patient. This gave a more in-depth picture of the feelings, concerns, and motivations of each participant' (p. 194). Despite these assertions there is limited exploration in this paper about how their pen portrait analysis was completed. However, Morecroft et al. do offer an example of a pen portrait for one of their participants, this presents five main themes, with supporting notes underneath. This description is brief, offering its analysis in less than one page.

If Hollway and Jefferson's is one of the most detailed descriptions of pen portraits, then Sharif et al. (2014) offers one of the briefest, they say that '[i]n a simple way, pen portrait is like a story book which tells the story from the very beginning to its climax' (p. 396). Combining both thematic analysis and pen portraits Sharif et al. (2014) aim to examine the adaptation of Malay food knowledge by their participants, but they offer no detailed description of how this type of analysis was completed in their paper. Arguably, Sharif et al's description of pen portrait analysis indicates a transcription of the data rather than a detailed form of analysis; this offers an indication of how rudimentary many studies describe and detail the use of pen portraits.

Taylor and Taylor (2004) explored small business owners' experience of food safety management systems; they offer no specific definition of what they mean by pen portraits. They used a 'narrative interview' approach to their research; with each pen portrait providing a 'concise description' (p. 55) of the four interviews that were completed. The authors do offer description of their process, but this is very brief and relates to listening to the completed interviews and making notes.

Each of these four studies used pen portraits to represent individual participant's experiences but does not necessarily speak to any shared meanings or understandings.

The second type of pen portrait found in the literature aims to represent broader themes within the research data in an individual (or multiple but summarised) account(s). This has been labelled as a *representative pen portrait of a group or process*. However, there are different subtypes of this type of pen portrait.

Tod's et al. (2012) study aimed to understand what factors influenced older people keeping warm during the winter. Pen portraits were used to collectively represent multiple participant accounts, and the associated themes, through fictional depictions of individuals. The authors describe using 'segmentation' to analyse their data which they state, *'is a way of looking at the population of concern and identifying distinct subgroups or segments with similar characteristics, situations, needs, attitudes or behaviour'* (p. 4). In a similar way to other studies, this study does not offer enough methodological detail to understand how to carry out this form of analysis.

Conversely, some pen portrait research attempted to represent multiple sources of data of groups of people or processes in short descriptive and interpretative summaries. Sheard et al. (2017) used pen portraits to represent the 'journey' of hospital wards through a specific intervention. This study aimed to move away from the traditional focus of using pen portraits to represent individual people and consider broader organisational systems and processes.

This use of pen portraits is detailed in a separate methodological paper (Sheard and Marsh 2019). This paper describes their pen portrait analytical technique on long term qualitative data in health research; the authors argue that this framework can provide strong analysis of multiple qualitative data sources gathered over extended periods of time, with the main purpose being 'to document the journey, story or trajectory of the focus of enquiry in a more or less linear, narrative fashion over the life course of the study' (Sheard and Marsh 2019, 4). For Sheard and Marsh (2019) this is a secondary form of analysis that draws on data from all the other methods used in this type of research with the aim of describing change in a 'well-rounded, holistic account' (p. 4). The authors identify and explain in detail the four stages for undertaking this type of analysis, these are: 1) understanding and defining what to focus on 2) designing a basic structure 3) populating the content and 4) interpretation. Interestingly, the original research paper inspired others to use this method to explore and represent other processes and interventions, Louch et al. (2018) used pen portraits to explore the perspectives of stakeholders in the implementation of a patient reporting and safety intervention delivered in collaboration with hospital volunteers.

The third type of pen portrait, found in one paper, was Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson (2012) qualitative study exploring the experiences of homeless people who stay in emergency hostels and shelters, who also used drugs. They also used pen portraits to represent multiple participants' accounts, and their associated themes, in a singular description. However, in this study one participant was chosen, by the researchers, as a representation of *all* the other participants' accounts (Nettleton, Neale, and Stevenson 2012). Their description of this is brief. 'Jane's story' aims to represent the overarching themes found across the 40 participants' accounts, with the authors making links between the participant, the broader research themes, and relevant literature. This type of pen portrait has been labelled as an *individual participant pen portrait to represent group or process*.

Finally, Pleschberger et al. (2011) study exploring the ethical and methodological issues in end-of-life care with older people used pen portraits as a *research tool*, rather than as a form of analysis that provided a direct research output. Whilst the pen portraits they created did influence the findings of the study; this process used them to help researchers summarise important issues from different studies, and then communicate these to each other to inform the research procedure and ultimately the findings. Again, however, this paper offers little detail about exactly what this entailed in practice.

In summary, the literature using pen portraits as a qualitative method has been considered. Through this search four different types of pen portrait used for qualitative analysis has been identified: (1) an individual participant pen portrait; (2) a representative pen portrait of a group or process; (3) an individual participant pen portrait to represent group or process; and (4) pen portraits as research tools. Each of these pen portrait types has been defined (by us) by considering: the focus of the pen portrait (i.e., individual, or collective representation of data); the purpose (i.e., as a research output or another part of the research process); and the type of representation it uses (e.g., description or interpretation of data). However, there are considerable gaps within the descriptions of pen portraits as a form of analysis of qualitative data across these studies. For example, the level of interpretation of the data and the role of the researcher in this part of the analysis is rarely detailed or described. The form a pen portrait takes is likely to be shaped by the researcher's epistemology, but this is not commonly explicated in describing them. Therefore, this leaves a considerable gap within the methodological literature making it difficult for researchers to confidently use them as a form of qualitative data analysis.

Why develop a guide to completing Pen Portraits?

The methodological literature on undertaking pen portraits as a form of qualitative analysis is extremely sparse, with only a handful of studies

explaining their approach in any detail. Currently qualitative researchers may consider analysis undertaken by pen portraits as a form of generic qualitative research because it is 'not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions in the form of one of the known qualitative methodologies' (Caelli, Ray, and Mill 2003, 2). However, even generic forms of qualitative research need to consider issues of quality and credibility if they are to be taken seriously as a valid form of qualitative inquiry (Caelli et al., 2003). Furthermore, the authors of this study have had difficulty in publishing their research when they include references to their pen portrait analysis. Reviewers have reported a lack of knowledge or understanding about what a pen portrait is, and even challenged whether it is a valid form of qualitative analysis. This is unsurprising when there is a lack of peer reviewed research. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap, in part, by detailing the authors' use of pen portraits in their doctoral studies – this analytical technique has been labelled Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA).

Qualitative data analysis includes a process of abstraction during which the researcher identifies key issues and meanings. To arrive at the findings some of the nuances, uniqueness and contextualisation of the experience are inevitably lost in order to be able to present the core themes. This could be described as fragmentation of the data. This has previously been argued to be problematic in qualitative research due to the risk of developing an incomplete picture of the participant's answer to the research question and disconnecting their meaning from the data (Mishler 1991). There has been a lack of exploration of this issue in the research literature to date. We argue that there is a higher level of risk of fragmentation in qualitative data analysis, specifically in the presentation of findings, for some specific research studies (for example those with broad research questions, extensive data sets or when the holistic story is essential to understand the topic being investigated). This fragmentation might only be noticed after initial data analysis has taken place. This was the case in both of our doctoral studies.

The risk is that the presentation of themes leads to the lived holistic story becoming fragmented and therefore ultimately lost or the person becomes missing or absent from their own story. We would refer to this as fragmented people or experience, which indicates a part produced account or patchy retelling of a participant's story. This misses the holistic picture because the unique emphasis and aspects of the account are lost, displaced, or shattered through the process of analysis. Using the example of a jigsaw puzzle, traditional qualitative analysis cuts the picture up into pieces, and the focus may then be on those individual pieces or the patterns of the puzzle and how the researcher puts them back together to answer the research question. Inevitably, the researcher will not use all the pieces to tell that story and so there will gaps, for example only the edges of the jigsaw may be put back together. Further, with multiple jigsaws (or participants) the choice of pieces

becomes even more difficult as the researcher aims to abstract common meaning between different jigsaw pieces from different puzzles. This analysis can be at the expense of the overall picture of each participant. Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) has been developed to address the issue of fragmentation of people or experience in qualitative data analysis and effectively aims to present the holistic picture of the participant, to continue with the picture metaphor, it aims to present the reference picture on the front of the jig-saw box.

What is SPPA?

Single Pen Portrait Analysis is an analytical technique that addresses the issue of fragmented people or experience, it is a secondary form of qualitative data analysis that aims to develop an illustrative picture of the participant's holistic lived experience that the initial data analysis has been unable to represent due to the account becoming segmented or fragmented through the process of analysis. The intention to address fragmentation is not a function of all pen portraits as currently described in the literature, for example a representative pen portrait of a group or process as described earlier aims to summarise key abstracted findings from multiple participant accounts rather than individual accounts. Therefore, Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) is an individual participant pen portrait, as defined earlier, which represents a specific participant within a qualitative research study. SPPA is a way of re-examining your participant data to answer your research question more fully and aims to present the unique elements of the participant's lived experience.

In the following section the authors outline their approach to using pen portraits as a secondary analytical qualitative technique to represent individual participant's accounts. This technique could be used when initial data analysis has been able to present important themes but in doing so fragments the holistic and unique experience of the participants. Fragmentation of people or experience may be recognised at different stages of the research process by researchers. Where researchers are embedded in their data, they may feel the data is fragmented but a framework such as IPA gives no method by which to find and present the missing pieces. SPPA addresses this issue. At the QMIP conference there was resonance with other qualitative researchers of the discomfort encountered in some qualitative research studies when seeking to present findings but feeling that important aspects of the data could not be included, especially in traditional qualitative approaches (Blundell and Oakley 2022).

This paper details each step that the authors took in deciding whether they should undertake this analysis, and then the actions taken to complete it. These steps and actions are then presented as a 'how to' guide which other

researchers could use to (a) establish whether they could use pen portraits as a form of secondary qualitative analysis; and (b) a step-by-step guide to undertaking their own analysis.

The authors have labelled this Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) to acknowledge and establish it as a distinct analytical technique and separate it from other types of pen portrait analysis which may have different aims, for example to represent broader themes across multiple participant accounts. Labelling it in this way also enables a distinction between SPPA as an analytical technique and the use of the term 'pen portraits' in various other fields, such as its use in marketing to represent the demographics of different customers. This label also reflects the focus of SPPA as capturing the holistic lived experience of the individual and the meaning and emphasis they place on different aspects of this experience. This paper approaches SPPA as an analytical technique; therefore, as per any type of analysis, it will be informed by the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of your study. The authors will detail their own ontological and epistemological positions which are relatively similar to each other despite their research topic and questions being quite different. However, researchers would need to establish and be transparent about their ontological and epistemological positions and how they inform the use of SPPA.

Summary of the authors' studies using SPPA

To contextualise the worked examples, a summary of each of the author's doctoral studies from which the examples are drawn is shared.

Study 1 – Lisa's doctoral project – understanding the experience of spiritual abuse in the Christian Faith in the UK

The study explored 10 individual lived experiences of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse can be defined as 'a form of emotional and psychological abuse characterised by a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour in a religious context or with a religious rationale. This context includes religious or spiritual institutions, places of education and homes in which there is a religious, spiritual or faith belief. Spiritual abuse can have a deeply damaging impact on those who experience it and can be experienced in a variety of different relationships' (Oakley 2023). It employed a critical realist epistemology to explore the individual's construction of meaning of their experience of spiritual abuse within their social world, capturing their social reality whilst accepting this reality can develop and change (Stainton-Rogers 2003). It employed a phenomenological approach to explore the meaning of the experience to each individual participant. The study used the biographic narrative interpretative method (Jones 2004) to collect participants' accounts of their own experiences of spiritual abuse. The narrative data provided was analysed

initially using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) because of its basis in phenomenology and its operation within the critical realist approach accepting that individuals provide an authentic insight to experience through a presentation of their thoughts and feelings (Camic, Rhodes, and Yardley 2001). However, reflection on the initial draft of the findings section illustrated the fragmented and impersonal nature of the themes identified through the IPA and led to reflection that the personal story and meaning had been lost. This led to the search for a secondary form of data analysis and presentation and the use of pen portraits.

Study 2 – Peter's doctoral project – the concept of boundaries in counselling practice

This study explored how boundaries are understood and experienced by counsellors in the UK. Similar to Lisa's study, this research utilised a critical realist epistemology to investigate participants' perceptions and encounters of the research topic – for this study, boundaries in counselling practice. Seven counsellors were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to gather their experiences of boundaries; questions were designed to be open and exploratory. The transcribed interview data was then analysed using IPA (Smith and Nizza 2022). IPA was chosen because this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of participants and therefore a phenomenological perspective was key. However, IPA was also chosen because it has an interpretative element; it acknowledges that whilst the overarching focus is participants' lived experience, the final reporting will always be 'an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 80). Initial analysis found a broad array of themes; however, these were thinly spread throughout the transcripts (Blundell 2017). This left the participant accounts 'scattered' or 'diluted' across the superordinate and subordinate themes. Participants' stories felt like that had been splintered or fractured, in some ways unnecessarily, which left an incomplete picture. This led Peter to explore alternative ways of analysing the data and the eventual use of pen portraits.

Doing Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) – a step by step guide

Is SPPA right for me?

For both authors, SPPA had not formed part of their original research design; it was only through completing their initial data analysis that both authors became aware of the limitations of their research method in answering their specific research questions (Lisa and Peter had both initially used IPA to analyse their data); therefore, the authors became aware that an additional analytical technique could be needed. For researchers reading this it is suggested that the following questions should be considered after they have

completed their original data analysis to identify whether an additional or secondary form of analysis and data presentation is needed for their specific research studies.

There are three questions for qualitative researchers to ask themselves to determine whether SPPA is the right type of analysis for them to employ.

> 1. **The missing answer** – The first question is - *Have you been able to answer the research question/s?* The answer to this is determined, in part, by your original positioning, emphasis and choice of method. Ask yourself what you started out intending to answer, what your epistemological and ontological positioning was. If you have answered your research question, then you don't need to go any further.

If the answer to this question is no – then go on to question two.

> 2. **The missing person** - The second question to ask is - *Have you lost the person in the data analysis presented?* If you were seeking to capture the individual's story, their meaning and emphasis but the data analysis presented does not capture this or it appears *segmented* or *fragmented* and therefore a sense of the individual has been lost then you can answer **yes** to this question. If, however, your review of your data analysis shows that it *has* captured the personal and unique elements of the participants' story and narrative, or you were not intending to capture these in your research then you don't need to go any further with this analysis.

If you answer yes to this question, go to question three.

> 3. **Framing the person** – The final question is – *Do you need to put the person back at the centre of their story, to answer your research question?* This really collates the answers to question two and three together. If you were seeking to capture the holistic lived experience of the person (or participants) to address your research question; and your data analysis has given insight into some of the key aspects of this but lost the person in the analysis, then you can answer **yes** to this question. SPPA could be an appropriate secondary form of analysis to use.

Implementing the questions in practice

To illustrate how to operationalise these questions in practice, examples are used (see Table 2) from the authors' doctoral studies, to illustrate the decision-making process.

How to conduct SPPA

Having answered the initial three questions and determined that secondary data analysis through SPPA is suitable and appropriate for your research study you then need to follow a set of stages to complete the analysis. Again, you will see in the worked example some variations in the approach to this in our two studies and some guidance when making choices about analysing the data.

Table 2.

Question	Lisa's Process	Peter's Process
Research Question	Lisa's original research question was – what is the lived experience of spiritual abuse within Christianity in the UK? Lisa was seeking to explore the meaning of the experience of spiritual abuse for Christian participants from the UK. There was no prior academic research published in the UK in this area at the time – this was therefore an exploratory piece.	Peter's original research question was – how do counsellors in the UK understand and experience the concept of boundary in their practice? Whilst there was existing research that had explored counsellors' and psychotherapists' experiences of various boundary issues, such as self-disclosure, there was no research which explored the broader concept of boundaries with counsellors.
Have you been able to answer the research question/s?	Lisa employed a critical realist epistemology and a phenomenological approach because of the emphasis of capturing the meaning of the experience for the individual. In line with a phenomenological approach, she used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Lisa was able to identify the key messages in the participants' accounts, but the IPA did not enable her to answer the research question as participants' personal experience was missing in the presentation of the findings. Additionally, one of the main reasons for her choice of narrative was to actively represent the voice of the participant. In her PhD she wrote the following "One of the purposes for the choice of narrative as method was to actively give voice to each participant (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) allowing for the telling of the individual story of S.A. and a 'wider exploration of contextual issues. Narrative provides a route by which the individual's reality can be given voice". Thus, the failure to capture the meaning of the experience and to fulfil the rationale for using narrative as method was problematic. Therefore, Lisa's answer is 'no' to question one as she had not fully answered the question in line with her initial ontological and epistemological and methodological positioning.	Peter's study was underpinned by a critical realist epistemology, with an emphasis on capturing how counsellors understood and experienced boundaries. Peter's research question was chosen specifically to be expansive because he wanted to understand boundaries in the broadest possible terms. However, exploring a concept that was understood so broadly across professional practice and that could be considered so ambiguous also created difficulties during the IPA. Whilst the superordinate and subordinate themes offered an important and interesting perspective to answering Peter's research question (Blundell, Oakley, and Kinmond 2022); ultimately, presenting the themes in this way, did not (and could not in Peter's view) fully represent the breadth of themes found. When carrying out IPA researchers are required to make decisions (interpret) about what to include or focus on, with many themes or ideas being left by the wayside, as analysis takes a specific focus (Smith and Nizza 2022). Peter's data was rich which resulted in extensive themes, many of which needed to be dropped to focus the analysis. The loss of these themes felt harsh, and as Peter became aware of this, he felt that his research question was not being fully answered. Therefore, his answer was 'no' to the first question. This answer was tied into the phenomenological underpinnings to his research.

Table 2. (Continued).

Question	Lisa's Process	Peter's Process
Have you have lost the person in the data analysis presented?	Lisa employed a narrative approach to gather holistic stories of personal experiences of spiritual abuse. However, during the initial presentation of her findings Lisa realised that the depth of emotion and the holistic story the participants told her was missing. In her PhD Lisa wrote the following "Initially I had proposed to present the analysis of the narratives as a detailed discussion of the themes identified and the first draft of the analysis was conducted in this manner. However, it became apparent that solely presenting and discussing the themes arising from the narrative analysis produced a segmented and impersonal view of S.A. The personal story and meaning from the participant's perspective were lost in presenting the thematic analysis in isolation." To Lisa this was the biggest driver in looking for a further form of analysis, she had set out to tell the individual story, but it had become fragmented, and the holistic lived experience was lost. Therefore, Lisa answered 'yes' to question two.	Peter's research was phenomenological at its core. However, whilst the superordinate and subordinate themes found during the IPA analysis did indicate aspects of the participants' life world, they also missed significant aspects of it. However, it did not feel necessary to return to the construction of the superordinate themes, because these were also useful in answering the research question. For example, the themes of Protection and Safety were important across the participants; however, there were other important aspects of participants' experiences of boundaries that had become hidden or lost as the data had become fragmented. Peter had lost his participants through his initial data analysis. Therefore, he answered 'yes' to question two.
Do you need to put the person back at the centre of their story to answer your research question?	The responses to question one and two show that Lisa had not been able to fully answer her research question, in line with her ontological and epistemological positioning and she had lost the holistic lived experience. The biggest issue she had with the IPA was that she had lost the person in the data analysis. Therefore, she needed to find a method that allowed her to put the person back at the centre of their story (Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Oakley and Kinmond 2013). Therefore, Lisa answered 'yes' to question three.	The participants' holistic stories were missing from the themes in Peter's research. Peter was aware of this as he considered the IPA and how they related to the participants' recordings and transcripts. Peter felt like his participants needed to be 'put back in' to his research but was unsure how to do this using IPA. Afterall, it was the IPA which had fragmented the data. Peter sought an alternative form of analysis that could help him 'find his participants' amongst the data. However, it needed to fit into his original epistemology. Peter was mindful of the flexibility of IPA but felt that something else was needed to bring the focus back onto the central aspects of his participants' experiences. Therefore, Peter answered 'yes' to question three.

Stage one – examining the canvas – asking questions about your data and your analysis

Ask these questions whilst reading each transcript individually. Complete all six questions for one participant before moving onto the next. These will help you to frame the development of your pen portrait, note down your answers to begin the construction. These questions are derived from the different stages of analysis from both author's research studies.

(1) What is missing in the analysis you have already?
(2) What is unique about this person's experience?
(3) What are the key events in this person's experience?
(4) What does the person emphasise as important?
(5) What is the context of this person's experience?
(6) Do you want to use the participant's own words or your interpretive summary of the answers to the questions above? – this will be determined in part by your approach to the research.

To answer these questions would usually require a rereading of the original transcripts, detailed immersion in and reflection on the data and a focus on the research question to inform how best to tell the story of the participant, that matches the epistemological and ontological positioning taken.

Stage two – painting an initial pen portrait

Use the answers to the questions above to construct an initial summary of the holistic lived experience of your participant. This can be in your own words or your participants' depending on your answer to question six in stage 1. There is no limit to the length of your pen portrait, this will, in part, be defined by the richness of your data and your research question. The aim at this stage is to capture the unique elements of the participant's experience as well as the missing parts from the initial data analysis. The pen portrait could be developed as a stand-alone presentation of your data analysis, or it could be presented alongside your original data analysis. These decisions will ultimately be influenced by your original question and are part of an interpretative process by the researcher.

Stage three – revisiting the composition

In this stage you should revisit the pen portrait by reviewing the participant's transcript and address the following questions

(1) Have you now answered your research question/s?
(2) Have you captured the holistic lived experience as told by the participant? (Including their emphasis).

If your answer to either question is 'no' then it is suggested that you return to the first stage and ask the questions of the data again to add the additional detail or nuance that is currently absent. If your answer is 'yes' then you can end your analysis for this specific participant and then move onto the next one, undertaking this process until your research question is answered and each participant's experiences are presented in a pen portrait.

Stage four – the gallery

A further, and potentially final stage is to develop a gallery of all the completed pen portraits. If there is sufficient space, then the pen portraits could be simply placed within the final research report, for example in a final thesis or longer report. Alternatively, if pen portraits are particularly lengthy then they could be summarised further, especially if space is an issue in the final report, for example in an academic journal or book chapter.

How researchers decide to present their pen portraits will impact on the level of contextualization that they will require in the final report. For example, researchers may want to describe how each of the portraits relate to the broader themes identified in the original analysis; thus, enabling a detailed within and in-between answer to the research question/s. Further analysis of the pen portrait's relationship with the broader themes can take a variety of forms and can be presented in a variety of ways. For example, the researcher may make additional notes about the pen portrait's relationship with the broader themes and write up these reflections separately within the final research report. These choices will form part of the researcher's own interpretative process.

In comparing the portraits, the gallery then accentuates commonalities and differences in the pictures and ways in which they are interconnected, this enables a detailed reflection. Without viewing an individual picture in detail together with its place in the wider gallery, some of the participant's story may be lost. Therefore, if you consider that the gallery stage is needed for your study it is important to consider why and how you present the gallery so that it addresses the missing pieces. In this way, galleries can be presented differently but still be a final stage of SPPA.

Two worked examples of SPPA

The authors have outlined two worked examples (Table 3) to evidence possible ways to develop an initial pen portrait using SPPA. Then, Peter's pen portrait gallery from his doctoral research is outlined.

Table 3.

	Example 1 – Lisa's Study Painting a picture of participant 8	Example 2 – Peter's Study Painting a Picture of Evelyn
Stage One – Examining the canvas - asking questions of your data and your analysis		
(1) What is missing in the analysis you have already?	Whilst the IPA provided detail of the key themes in her narrative it failed to illustrate the holistic story, the depth of personal emotion and impact experienced, the level of control, key aspects of the experience and gradual understanding and recognition of these by participant 8. The reflective nature of the account and learning post-leaving was also missing.	The themes generated from IPA were related to themes of Protection and Safety, and the Structure of Therapy. Whilst Evelyn's interview connected with these themes in different ways, her perception of, and relationship with, boundaries in her practice were not fully represented in these themes – something had been lost.
(2) What is unique about this person's experience?	A unique aspect of this story was the link to past experiences of abuse and the realisation of similar methods of control used, including personal shame.	Evelyn's understanding of boundaries was very much focused on the client being at the centre of her decision-making process. In comparison the other participants were often focused on their experiences of boundaries rather than the client's.
(3) What are the key events in this person's experience?	Participant eight included discussion of her early experiences as important in her later story of spiritual abuse. Another key moment was when she recognised others were also being controlled, and that there was an 'inner circle' of favoured people.	Evelyn was able to use what she learnt about boundaries on her counsellor training course to influence her other roles. She also moved from a theoretical understanding of boundaries to a practical application of them in her practice.
(4) What does the person emphasise as important?	The pervasive nature of control was key to her story, her emphasis that everyone was controlled, people who were seen as special were part of the 'inner circle' but also the subject of greater demands. She also discussed the deep impact of an experience of spiritual abuse	Evelyn talked about her embodied experience of boundaries. The impact of the therapeutic relationship on her own personal boundaries. The ability of boundaries to direct the 'flow' of therapy.
(5) What is the context of this person's experience?	For participant eight her experience of abuse was an important context in this experience. The denominational context in which her abuse took place was also important in shaping the specific elements of harm	Evelyn incorporated different modalities as part of her practice and had broad experience as a counsellor.
(6) Do you want to use the participant's own words or your interpretive summary of the answers to the questions above	Lisa's focus on narrative as a method to capture the active voice of the participant led to the decision to use their words.	Peter was drawn to writing about Evelyn through his own interpretative lens, informed by his reading and IPA of the transcription.
Stage two **Painting an initial pen portrait**	An initial pen portrait was constructed using quotes which reflected the answers to the questions above, so captured the holistic experience including temporal dimensions and personal emotions experienced, included quotes referencing experiences of abuse, growing realisation of control of herself and others, the importance and destructive nature of the 'inner circle' and the impact of the experience, personal reflections and learning post leaving.	An initial pen portrait was developed through summarising the key elements of Evelyn's interview that answered the research question. Unlike Lisa, Peter did this initially without the participant's quotes and tried to write down and capture what he thought Evelyn was trying to covey. However, once he had drafted the portrait, he then revisited it looking for quotes that supported (or contradicted) what he had written. This developed this first draft further. This initial picture can be summarised as follows: Evelyn discusses boundaries in terms of how they benefit the client. Power is often assumed to be with the client rather than herself. Ultimately, Evelyn sees boundaries as useful for creating a safe space for clients. But she also acknowledges their usefulness in directing (or informing) the 'flow' of therapy. She is happy to be flexible with her boundaries if it is for the benefit of the client. Evelyn is confident in her use of boundaries but is not rigid with them.

Table 3. (Continued).

	Example 1 – Lisa's Study Painting a picture of participant 8	Example 2 – Peter's Study Painting a Picture of Evelyn
Stage One – Examining the canvas - asking questions of your data and your analysis		
Stage Three – Revisiting the composition 1. Have you now answered your research question/s? 2. Have you captured the holistic lived experience as told by the participant? (Including their emphasis)	Reflecting on the initial SPPA Lisa realised that she was much closer to answering the initial research question as the pen portrait contained much more of the personal lived experience of spiritual abuse. However, she recognised that it was still missing some of the personal emotion felt in the early stages of the experience. If Lisa had used the questions listed in stage 1 – question two would have led her to see that this key event/time period was absent from the SPPA draft Lisa edited the pen portrait to include a section on this as a key event and key emotions. A further review illustrated that Lisa could now answer 'yes' to both questions.	After completing one pen portrait, Peter felt that it had been a useful way to bring the participant's experience back into the analysis. It had added or emphasized further aspects of the participant's experience of boundaries and therefore helped answer the research question. Peter felt confident that completing them for the other participants would also be useful.
Stage Four Examining the gallery	Once the pen portrait was complete. Lisa was able to see the key themes shared with other participant accounts – these being- Coercion and control exercised through - Accountability, Censorship, Conformity, Obedience, Isolation, manipulation and exploitation and powerlessness. Also, the theme of 'attack of self' experienced through – Blame, fear, distrust, personal discredit, and vulnerability. For participant 8 coercion and control, attack on self, and personal discredit isolation were of particular importance in their account, and this was captured in the pen portrait (this is used in the next section as an example of how a pen portrait could be constructed using the participant's own words).	Each pen portrait helped Peter to focus on each participant in a new way. Peter was able to acknowledge key themes across the accounts; however, he was also able to see a similar process for participants when responding to boundary issues. This led to the development of a model which fitted across the participants' accounts (Blundell 2019). For Peter, 'the gallery referred to his completed collection of seven pen portraits. A summary of these can be seen in Table 4 below as an example of how this could be completed.

Lisa's example pen portrait for participant 8 (P8) – answering the question, 'what is the lived experience of spiritual abuse within Christianity in the UK?'

P8 begins her account reflecting on previous abuse and comments the parallels with spiritual abuse '... *that misuse of authority, power, leadership caused me to experience the same emotions that I have felt ... with sexual and physical abuse in my life*' (L8–10).

P8 '... *entered the church after a time of being away and engaging in behaviour that could be thought of as unchristian*' (L13–14). She felt '*desperately repentant*' (L17) '*ashamed*' (L18) and '*alone*' (L18). She had the feeling, '*I had let God down*' (L24–25). P8 noted a '*hard coldness*' (L29) from the leaders. She began to realise this was not '*a personal judgement*' (L31–32) on her but that '*something was very wrong indeed*' (L37). She realised '*I wasn't alone in my isolation*' (L38). She reflected that her '*past provided a weapon to hold me in place*' (L39–40). She agreed to '*accountability*' (L41), but she felt '*pressurised and pushed into action*' (L47, 48).

> 'As time went on' P8 'began to realise that my past was just what was used to keep me in a position of control' (L51–52). '... for different people different areas ... could be used to control them'. (L52–53)

P8 notes the status of some individuals as '*special people*' (L61) of the '*'inner circle*'' (L62). These people however would '*face a level of demand*' (L63, 64) if they met this level '*they likely would face greater demands*' (L65) '*disguised as greater responsibility*' (L66). If they did not meet the demands '*they were those who could not be trusted, ... dropped from favour. No longer part of the inner circle*' (L66–68). '*To stay in the circle ... keep playing the game. And don't ask questions*' (L74,75) '*silence is apparently golden*' (L79, 80).

P8 feels the experience has '*developed in me a questioning approach to my faith*' (L108–109). She notes that '*initially this was not entirely positive*' (L109) and she questioned '*through the glasses of what I had experienced*' (L110). P8 describes spiritual abuse as '*dangerous*' (L113). She reflects that it '*attacks right at the heart and spirit of the person, in a similar way to other forms of abuse*' (L114–115). She suggests spiritual abuse can leave people '*confused and unsure of who, what or why they believe anymore*' (L120). She reveals that '*people leave churches quietly*' (L122) '*they don't want the world to think that the church that preaches love can't live it out*' (L123–124). P8 reflects the impact of this silencing '*the power of silence is what has kept the problem of spiritual abuse so strong in the church*' (L124–125). P8 comments on the '*growing number of individuals*' (L129) affected by spiritual abuse and that victims walk a '*lonely misunderstood road*' (L132). She finishes by stating '*it really is time we woke up and smelt the coffee*' (L134).

Peter's Summary Pen Portrait Gallery – answering the question, 'how do counsellors understand and experience the concept of boundaries in their practice?'

Table 4 represents a summary of Peter's pen portrait gallery from his research, it highlights the unique and idiosyncratic nature of Peter's participants' understanding and experience of boundaries.

In each of our studies the gallery was necessary because it allowed us to encapsulate the holistic experience, whilst also enabling an exploration of how that experience and key elements compared and contrasted to other participants and the broader themes and importantly gave a more detailed and nuanced picture which addressed the research question. In Lisa's research the pen portrait is presented chronologically as this was important to demonstrate the process of abuse and the cumulative impact of different experiences and factors. In Peter's research the pen portrait was presented as a summary of

Table 4.

Evelyn's Pen Portrait	Gayle's Pen Portrait
Evelyn discusses boundaries in terms of how they benefit the client. Power is often assumed to be with the client rather than herself. Ultimately, Evelyn sees boundaries as useful for creating a safe space for clients. But she also acknowledges their usefulness in directing (or informing) the 'flow' of therapy. She is happy to be flexible with her boundaries if it is for the benefit of the client. Evelyn is confident in her use of boundaries but is not rigid with them.	Gayle is anxious around those who are needy or helpless and finds it difficult to implement boundaries if it means leaving someone in need. Her attempts to reinforce her boundaries through the places she works rather than implement them herself. She acknowledges the dangers of loose boundaries for clients. Gayle was also anxious about her use of boundaries being judged by others and is apprehensive in her use of boundaries.
Amy's Pen Portrait	**Belinda's Pen Portrait**
Amy understood boundaries to be about the limits of the relationship between herself and her client. She was keen to protect herself from her clients or from the client's life becoming part of her own and used boundaries to do this. Amy had become more confident in implementing boundaries as she had developed as a counsellor and over time this had made her more relaxed in her practice. Boundaries were an integral aspect of her identity and played an important role in both her personal and professional life.	Belinda is fearful of being sued and so ensures she has the appropriate boundaries in place to protect herself from this. There is an indication that she may be more relaxed with her boundaries if this threat did not exist. Belinda is very flexible with her boundaries when it is for the benefit of the client. She will be firm with some boundaries such as confidentiality.
Claire's Pen Portrait	**David's Pen Portrait**
The dominant theme throughout Claire's interview was that of professionalism. Her experience of boundaries meant she accepted it as an aspect of her practice which evidenced her professionalism with her clients. She states that she has never had a problem with boundaries in training or with clients. Claire is confident in her use of boundaries.	For David, the boundaries that surround the counselling relationship are rigid and inflexible. However, they are there to create a space which is compassionate and forgiving for clients. He describes how boundaries are different for each person but that there are some that cannot ever be broken. David is confident in his use of boundaries.
Fiona's Pen Portrait	
For Fiona having permission to implement boundaries with others was an important aspect of her experience. This came from an experience before she had even trained as a counsellor but influenced her practice ever since. This experience was about getting permission to put in place her boundaries and was tied into her spiritual beliefs. Fiona is now confident in her use of boundaries but has been apprehensive in the past.	

the unique aspects of the participant's experience because the initial IPA themes overexaggerated the shared elements of the participants' responses to boundaries. It was only through creating the gallery that Peter was able to fully appreciate the uniqueness of each participant's account; representing them in a way that was also helpful in answering the research question. A good way to understand this is to compare Evelyn's and Gayle's summary pen portraits because they are so different, their pen portraits highlight how they both understood and experienced boundaries in very distinct ways – this was labelled their *Boundary Attitude*. It is easier to see how the participants' experiences intersected with some of the broader themes found through the initial IPA when using these summaries.

To see another example of how to present a pen portrait gallery see Blundell in press.

Critical evaluation

The methodological literature on pen portraits is in its infancy; therefore, there are many unanswered and unexplored aspects of pen portraits that cannot be sufficiently addressed within the limited space within this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge some of the pertinent issues that have arisen for us as researchers using pen portraits, and through feedback from internal peer review and from colleagues at the Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMiP) Conference (Blundell and Oakley 2022). These discussion points, in some cases, raise more questions than they do answers.

This paper has highlighted the challenge of defining what is meant by a 'pen portrait' particularly when this term is used within other fields outside of qualitative research. The literature indicates that when used in research pen portraits can take a variety of forms, from a simple representation of a participant's story or narrative, through to more complex and detailed representations. In the authors' own doctoral studies, despite similar philosophical underpinnings to their research, the length, style, and format of their pen portraits differed significantly, thus showing the flexibility of this type of approach.

This paper has tentatively delineated different uses of pen portrait that we have identified within the literature; these details are important to help advance the discussion around this analytical technique and increase trustworthiness when using it. It is our expectation that these definitions will evolve as the pen portrait literature develops. Our definition, and guide, of Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) is, in part, a response to this need for further clarity around undertaking pen portraits.

Arguably, SPPA could be considered a generic research technique, particularly if it is defined as research that 'is not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophical assumptions' (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 2). Whilst both authors

have used SPPA from a similar philosophical base, there is no requirement to include this as part of the conditions for using SPPA for future researchers. Ultimately, any researcher would need to locate and justify the use of SPPA within the philosophical underpinnings of their own research and this is particularly important for SPPA because it is used as a secondary analytical technique. However, this also means it has the potential to be approached from a variety of ontological and epistemological positionings.

It is important, when carrying out qualitative research, to critically reflect on any methodological inadequacies that impact on effectively answering the original research question. When the authors have highlighted the deficiencies of IPA to holistically answer their research questions, some researchers have questioned whether it is us (the researcher) who are deficient in our ability to carry out IPA sufficiently. Certainly, IPA is phenomenological in its focus (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) and therefore already designed to explore and represent 'how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 1). However, there are sometimes factors, beyond the researcher, when using IPA, that mean the unique and holistic aspects of the participants' accounts can be lost. Initial feedback on this paper suggested that other qualitative researchers also found this to be an issue with IPA. Additionally, the size of the research study itself can influence the richness and depth of the data, the analysis, and the final data presentation. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) state that

> In presenting larger samples, it can be more difficult for researchers to reflect as much idiographic detail, and deal with case-level divergence within the data set. As a consequence, in some larger studies, the emphasis may shift more to presentation of the shared elements.

It is our contention, that particularly rich, deep, and voluminous data can create difficulties when using IPA, particularly when this characterizes the data across multiple accounts, because IPA is more likely, in these cases, to fragment aspects of the participants and their experiences, as the core of participant's meaning is dissipated through the search for themes. There has been a recent amendment of language within the IPA literature which further emphasizes the need for IPA research to focus on the experiential nature of the participants' accounts (Smith and Nizza 2022; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). Whilst we agree with this focus there is still a risk of fragmented data analysis when completing IPA. Taking Peter's thesis as an example, he chose a broad research question that explored counsellors' understanding and experience of boundaries. The broadness of this question inevitably led to an extensive array of themes that, despite being underpinned by the phenomenological experiences of the participants, were ultimately missing important aspects of those participants' experience. Some would argue that research using IPA needs an overarching question

that is focused and narrow to ensure manageable data (e.g., Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022); however, this misses an opportunity for IPA to be used to explore more complex phenomena such as participants' understanding and experience of theoretical concepts, such as boundaries. Ultimately, SPPA, could be used, in these cases, as a secondary analytical technique to address the fragmentation of data issue and therefore offer a way of using IPA to answer these more complex questions, albeit supported by the SPPA of participants. This paper has focused on the issue of fragmented people or experience that SPPA could address when undertaking IPA; however, other researchers may find SPPA useful for addressing missing elements with other research methods.

An additional question that could be asked is – could SPPA be used as an initial form of data analysis rather than a secondary one? SPPA, as set out in this paper, requires some form of process where the researcher familiarises themselves with the research data. There could be a point in the future when SPPA is established as a method which guides the collection of data as well as its analysis. Early internal review of this paper suggested that qualitative researchers were already indicating ways in which they could imagine the development of pen portraits as a method in the future, post the establishment of a protocol for SPPA as an analytical technique. Similarly, to how thematic analysis has been described as flexible theoretically, inclusive of a variety of designs and is therefore a technique that can be used for different types of qualitative data analysis (Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2023) pen portraits could offer an array of possibilities when it comes to qualitative data analysis, with SPPA being just one of them.

SPPA is particularly useful when exploring research topics that are under-explored or new areas of research because it enables the researcher to identify and present some of the unique, nuanced and potentially contradictory aspects of the participants' experiences. Ultimately, this can help offer a more holistic answer to the research question. Similarly, it could also be beneficial for exploring areas which have been overly researched as it could offer deeper insights into participants' experiences that are missed in other forms of analysis that reduce their themes down to a more general level across participants' accounts.

The description of how to formulate and present a pen portrait (i.e., stage 2) has been purposefully left open. This stage of SPPA requires creativity and innovation from the researcher to ascertain how the information gathered in stage 1 will be organized and presented. Furthermore, the researcher will need to decide how that analysis will link to the ontological and epistemological positioning of the research and the original qualitative analysis undertaken. Therefore, specifying how that should be done in this guidance could limit the potential of SPPA for creatively presenting its analysis. As methodological literature grows so will the various ways of presenting a pen portrait.

The painting metaphor has been used in this paper to represent the various ways that the researcher's own positionality can interact with the research data, and the original qualitative analysis. Lisa argues that, for her, the use of SPPA was about giving her participants an active voice in the analytical process. This resulted in pen portraits that used direct participant quotes. Conversely, for Peter his use of SPPA more heavily focused on his interpretative process as a researcher, that acknowledged the influence of his previous experience as a counsellor on his data analysis. This resulted in Peter summarising what he felt were the key aspects of his participants' experiences, in relation to the research question. These two approaches to developing their pen portraits could be understood by expanding the painting metaphor further, with Lisa's portraits being described as a realist painting and Peter's as something more abstract. In both examples, the paintings were developed through close attention to the detail of the participants' accounts although the level of interpretations were different. In both examples, the SPPA was used as a way of returning the focus back to the experience of the participants and focusing on their nuances even though this was approached in different ways. In this regard we found ourselves in agreement with Sheard and Marsh (2019) when they reached their interpretation stage, in that developing 'a generic guide to interpretation is difficult to propose as this stage will depend heavily on the research questions' (p. 8), as well as the philosophical positioning of the study.

Similarly, to any other type of analysis SPPA needs to consider any ethical issues that may arise when using it. Confidentiality is particularly important to consider when writing it up because of the risk of pen portraits being too detailed or specific that they identify, or risk identifying, the research participants. For example, Lisa edited her final pen portraits for her final thesis to ensure identification of her participants was not possible (Oakley 2009). Furthermore, researchers should describe and document their methodological process when writing up SPPA, or their use of other pen portraits, to ensure transparency and rigour (Sheard and Marsh 2019). This is particularly important for developing the methodological literature for research involving pen portraits.

In addition, using SPPA could add an additional ethical touchpoint, within the qualitative research process, which allows researchers to reflect on whether their participants' voices are truly heard and represented within their data analysis and presentation. This could help in a variety of ways, for example, it could help ensure that marginalised voices are at the centre of the research process, such as the participants in Lisa's study who were survivors of spiritual abuse.

Summary

This paper began with our assertion that pen portraits are a valid analytical technique for qualitative data analysis. We have reviewed the pen portrait literature and identified four different types of pen portrait used for qualitative

research analysis, these are: an individual participant pen portrait; a representative pen portrait of a group or process; an individual participant pen portrait to represent group or process; and pen portraits as a research tool. Further arguments were made that pen portraits are an underused technique that has untapped potential within qualitative research. The reason, in our view, that pen portraits have been overlooked by researchers is because of the lack of peer reviewed research that evidences how they can be used to answer various research questions. Therefore, this paper also outlines our original approach to individual participant pen portrait research that has been labelled Single Pen Portrait Analysis (SPPA) to distinguish it from other forms of pen portrait analysis in qualitative research and other fields of study. SPPA can be defined as a secondary analytical technique for qualitative research that aims to resolve the issue of fragmented data (which could also be described as fragmented people or experience within the analysis) by creating a written account of each participant that presents a holistic and representative picture of them. In addition to defining SPPA, a guide for deciding when to use it is included, and an outline of how to undertake it, which will be useful for new and experienced qualitative researchers. So, our hope is that this paper would not only begin to fill the gap within the literature but also inspire researchers to push the possibilities of pen portrait research, including exploring both their theoretical and practical uses.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

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