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# Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to Advance Critical Adult Education Research through Social Movement Learning

Will Frankenberger

## Abstract

This paper aims to explore how the interpretative phenomenological analysis can support the advancement of qualitative research within the field of critical adult education and social movement learning.

*Keywords:* social movement learning, critical adult education, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative research

## What is the purpose of this exploration or application?

Within the field of adult education, emerging scholarly work continues to ground research through various qualitative methodologies. Scholars have used phenomenology to examine diverse aspects and principles, theories and contexts including andragogy (Dunkle, 2022; Tezcan, 2022), transformative learning (Lawson, 2023; Lehner, 2022) and human resource development (Kuchinke, 2023). However, until recently, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology holds a noticeable gap within adult education literature. This paper aims to explore how the IPA methodology can support the advancement of qualitative research within the field of critical adult education and social movement learning (SML). SML research continues to emerge within adult education research showing both the impact and learning process of social movements (Hall & Clover, 2005; Walker & Butterwick, 2021). Adult education researchers who wish to interrogate systems through critical lenses potentially developing social movements, can sharpen their analysis and research through the compelling qualitative analysis method of IPA.

Adult education and human resource development research continue to interrogate issues of social justice and inequity driving social movements (Hall & Tandon, 2017; Johnson-Bailey & Cerveo, 2000; Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). Additionally, there is continued growth of qualitative research in providing rich and detailed accounts of narratives and experience-based examples of social inequity and unbalanced systemic design (Butterwick & Elfert, 2014; Curnow, 2013; Langdon & Larweh, 2015). Research informed through critical theoretical frames aims to examine the structures in which inequity exists (Fay, 1987; Marrow & Brown, 1994). Interpretivist critical research studies can inform various methodologies but when systems and ecosystems are to be interrogated, a focus examination of the phenomenon at the center of inequity may deepen our analysis and thus creating social movement and change for good compared to narrative inquiry or case study approaches (Lavendar, 2005; Lincoln et al., 2011). IPA as a methodological tool when examining SML can provide adult education researchers a means to focus of their dissection and examination of the societal systems.

## What fields of study, disciplinary perspectives, or bodies of literature are being analyzed?

This paper highlights two major literature bodies and fields to ground the positionality. First, I will explore interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) as a qualitative methodology (Smith et al., 2022). Secondly, I will explore critical adult education research as a means to change the world through social movement learning (Freire, 1972; Habermas, 1975; Hall & Clover, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Walker & Butterwick, 2021).

IPA is a qualitative methodology housed under the broader phenomenology umbrella within qualitative research. Just as the field of adult education is rooted within interdisciplinary frameworks, so is IPA. IPA is grounded within three major foundations including phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. At its core, IPA aims to examine how individuals

make sense of major life experiences or other experiences in their own terms (Smith et al., 2022). However, IPA's distinction compared to general phenomenological approaches, is IPA allows the researcher's own identity and experiences shape the analysis process. Also, IPA uniquely positions itself as a scalable research tool for both small studies and larger studies, such as dissertations, due to the detailed analysis process.

Social Movement Learning (SML) occurs from gleaned outcomes of learning and educating through social movements. Adult education has long been established as a potential catalyst for social movement learning (Coady, 1939; Cunningham; 1989; Freire, 1970). Social movements are defined as the "networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts on the bases of shared collective identities" (Diani, 1992, p. 1). While SML itself holds its own unique learning outcomes and pedagogies, the theory is frequently accompanied by other adult education topics such as Mezirow's transformative learning theory and Freire's consciousness raising concept. As previously mentioned, SML its own outlined learning objects. This objectives were highlighted in the 2020 *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Walker & Butterwick, 2021). In this chapter, the authors highlight several learning outcomes of SML including the development of new knowledge and theories given the increasing research collection (Choudry, 2015; hooks, 1984), structures of how the world works for interrogation for change (Lavendar, 2005), critical consciousness of identities (Curnow, 2013), and learning about democratic processes through civil discourse (Larrabure et al., 2011).

Therefore researchers who blend critical adult education research studies informed by SML as a conceptual or theoretical framework may better focus their studies when examining the phenomenon at the center of the social movement in question by using the IPA methodology. While other forms of qualitative inquiry can examine the same social movements, because the IPA methodology takes not only the lived experiences of individuals into account and the researchers own experiences, it more centrally links the transformative movement within the phenomenon being explore to a more likely SML experience.

### **What are the implications for the development of adult education theory and practice?**

IPA methodology can be an effective methodology for critical adult education researchers. When the identity of the researcher is connected to the population of study, the ability to remove oneself becomes increasingly challenging and may impact the analysis process. IPA allows the participants to be the center of the analysis but does also consider the researchers experiences and identity as part of the interpretative process rather than suppressing the identity and experiences of the researcher. Qualitative research within the field of adult education continues to provide rich evidence for impact of the discipline. In particular, one qualitative researcher has supported the position that the identity of the researcher being acknowledged and considered as part of analysis can be a strong part of illuminating social action (Madison, 2011).

Many adult learning theorists have postulated a purpose of adult learning is to create societal and world change (Brookfield, 2010; Freire, 1972; Horton & Freire, 1990). By centering SML through critical adult education research, the IPA methodology can sharpen the process in which researchers report findings showcasing inequities within systems, societies, structures and the need for critical societal change (Walker & Butterwick, 2021). Critical interrogations are needed to create meaningful impacts on individuals and societies so that prolonged inequities become more and more eradicated thought group efforts as noted through SML literature. By engaging the IPA methodology critical adult education researchers may achieve a more focused and targeted analysis of findings by using an often overlooked option of phenomenological inquiry.