

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to examine the aspirations of young people living in Low Participation Neighbourhoods

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Introduction

In March 2016, The Higher Education Funding Council for England announced that from academic year 2016-17 a new national collaborative outreach programme will be rolled out, specifically focusing activity in areas of the country where higher education (HE) participation is particularly low. This has re-emphasised the need for Higher Education Institutions to provide effective, targeted outreach programmes to raise the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged areas and under-represented groups to aspire to HE.

Much existing research into the aspirations of young people who participate in these outreach programmes has tended to be short term and focused on educational and career trajectories. This has been underpinned by a generally positivist theoretical stance. This PhD seeks to look at aspiration from a fresh perspective, one that sees aspiration as a construct of everyday experience.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) can be seen as a novel approach to widening participation (WP) research, which will allow aspiration to be viewed from an individual perspective, one that moves away from more traditional, generic and nomothetic studies. By examining the lived experience of a group of young 'WP' students and by understanding what meanings and perceptions they place on these everyday experiences will help to understand their aspirations and how they are shaped as they begin their transition into adulthood.

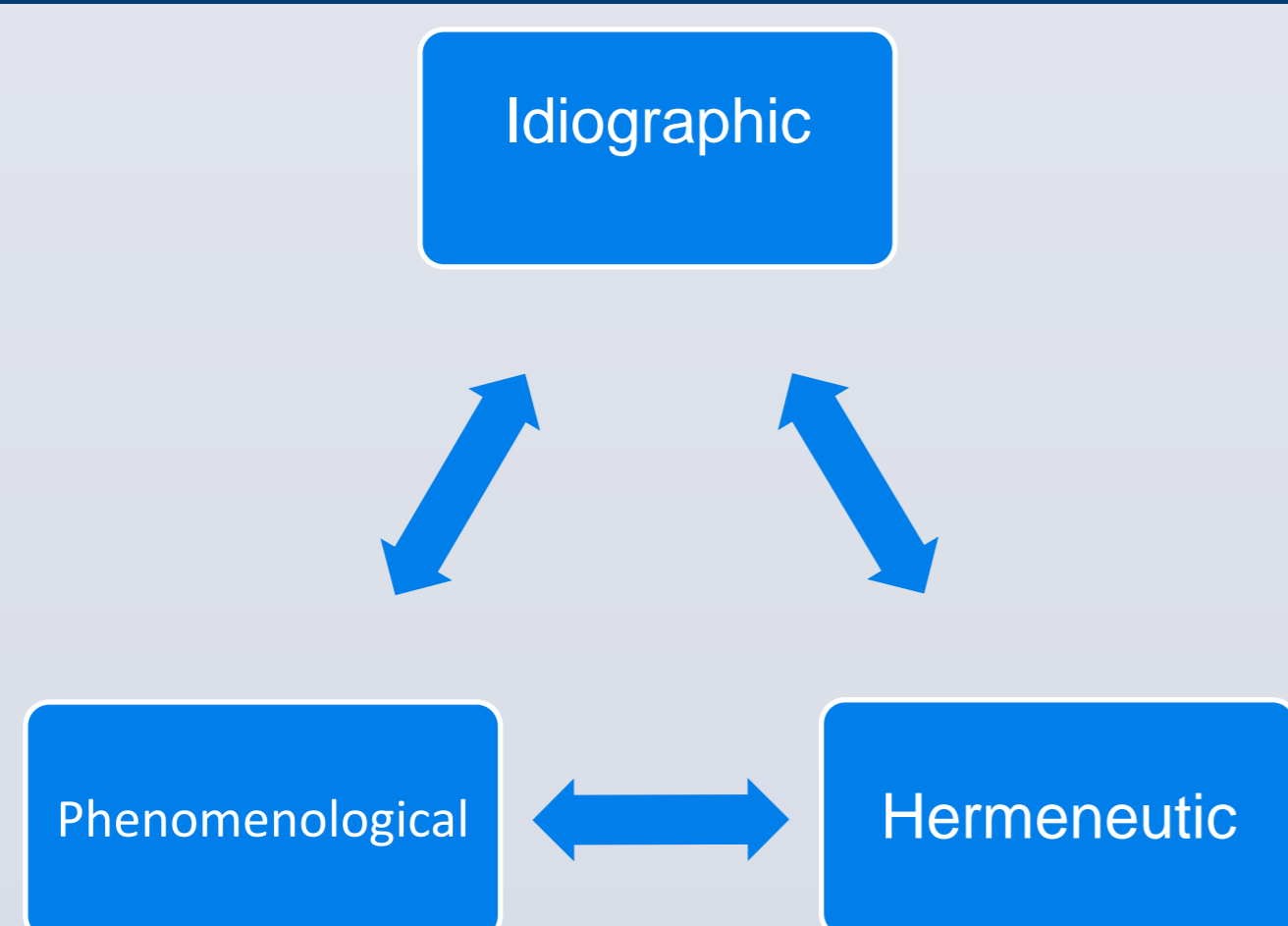
The overall aim of this research is therefore to explore, through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, the aspirations of young people living in Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN). The two key research questions are:

- What are the aspirations of young people living in LPNs?
- How are these aspirations shaped by their lived experience?

IPA explores how participants make sense of their own worlds by examining the meanings particular experiences and events hold for these participants (Smith 2011).

Although IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with the lived experience, the highly interpretative nature of IPA means that it is more suitable for gaining deep insights into participants' experiences (Barr and van Nieuwerburgh 2015).

Theoretical foundations of IPA



Recruitment and data collection

- Ten participants recruited from two local schools
- All live in LPNs
- Current Year 9
- Initial focus group in each school
- Three individual semi-structured interviews with each participant over Years 9 and 10
- Data collection expected to be completed in early 2017

The use of projective techniques

Smith (2004) suggests that when using IPA with children, the approach may need to be adapted to give the researcher a stronger role in guiding participants. One of the ways in which this can be done is with the use of projective techniques, which can be described as 'a category of exercises that provoke imagination and creativity' (Mariampolski 2001, p.206).

Of particular benefit to this research has been the use of completion techniques. In the second individual interviews, participants were presented with a number of picture cards (such as those displayed below) which all contained the start of a sentence. Participants selected a card of their choice and completed the sentence. This then formed a basis for further discussion. This approach is particularly useful in allowing participants to take greater ownership of the discussions whilst at the same time enabling aspects of their everyday lived experiences to emerge.

- I get frustrated...
- This weekend...
- In the summer holiday...
- I am happy when...

Initial observations

- The lives and experiences of each young person vary greatly and thus their hopes and expectations for the future vary considerably
- Some appear to be quite pragmatic and realistic about their hopes and closely match them to their expectations. For others, their hopes and their expectations appear to be quite far apart
- Aspirations are tentative and developing
- The self as a key determinant of future life chances
- Emerging contexts in which aspirations are constructed through everyday experiences

Conclusion

In uncertain times within the HE sector there is a growing need for more evidence-based practice, particularly within outreach where there is an increased emphasis on institutions to provide effective targeted programmes to raise the aspirations of young people to aspire to HE.

This study will contribute to the evidence base by using a fresh approach to looking at aspiration. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study examines aspiration as a construct of lived experience. This is opposed to much existing research in this field that sees aspiration as a variable, something that can be measured and is subject to change by external manipulation. Using IPA provides an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the lived world of a group of WP students and how they make sense of their personal world as they are faced with choices about their future.

References

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