Phenomenography – A Research Method with a (Focus on) Difference
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What is phenomenography?
“the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world are experienced, conceptualized, understood, perceived and apprehended” (Marton 1994 4424). “Subject and object are not independent… [they] are what they are in relation to each other” (Marton 1994 4426).

The focus is on variations of experience, not variations of individuals. At an early stage of investigation, evidence of experience is broken down, and becomes part of a ‘pool of meanings’ but then later may be reassembled to show how variation can occur within the experience of an individual. Therefore – some researchers say it may not be useful to validate conclusions with participants.

It is understood that during the process of gathering data – through interview or through the completion of a task, the subject may reflect on knowledge in new ways and this reflection may change their knowledge.

There is an emphasis on gathering data authentically, either in the context of actual assignments or tasks that mirror actual assignments. While interviews are most common, other artifacts, assignments, questionnaires etc. may be analysed.

Where/how is it used?
It was first developed in the 1970’s in Sweden in Educational Research. Since then, it has been used fairly frequently in information literacy, various studies of education at both K-12 and postsecondary levels, and in studies of the workplace, particularly the work of academics.

Where does it fit in qualitative research?

Phenomenography  Phenomenology  Constant Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Phenomenography</th>
<th>Phenomenology</th>
<th>Constant Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variation in experience – understanding of categories of experience and the relationships if any between those categories</td>
<td>Individual experience – understanding of meanings experienced by the subject.</td>
<td>Theory as a result of iterative analysis of themes emerging from data set</td>
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<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Analyses data for patterns in variation</td>
<td>Analyses data for in-depth description of experience</td>
<td>Iterative identification and comparison of themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological/Ontological Perspectives</td>
<td>Empirical, Interpretivist, Constructivist</td>
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</tbody>
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Marton (1981): “By investigating people’s experience of political power, for instance, the phenomenologist would aim at learning about political power, the psychologist would aim at learning about how people experience things, taking “phenomenography” as a point of departure we would aim at learning about people’s experience of political power”(180).
How did we use it?

Victoria Guglietti - Study of value making

- Asked students to write ten reflections where they were asked to evaluate different social research literacy skills
- Out of a data set of 260 reflections, 80 reflections were processes in a first stage of analysis.
- Statements were read and reread until themes and categories emerged.
- Themes were the basis of a preliminary description of content; categories revealed the structure of the value making process.
- Two broad categories were identified; no hierarchical relationship was established so far.

Margy MacMillan - Study of connections while reading

- Asked students to note connections they made while reading part of a scholarly article
- The 30 students who consented to participate generated 132 connections
- Connections entered into a spreadsheet, cut into separate statements
- Statements read and reread until categories emerged
- Categories defined their own boundaries – BUT boundaries are ‘fuzzy’ – experience is actually a gradient over which we impose a grid.

Advantages/disadvantages of using Phenomenography

Victoria Guglietti

- Allowed for description of process, structure of experience and qualitative generalization (collective experience vs. aggregation of individual experiences)
- Needed to add a more descriptive step (content analysis) to account for content (without a reflection on content categorization would have been difficult)
- Emphasis on generalization obscured change within the process (how did value making develop throughout the semester?)

Margy MacMillan

- Allowed for variation within an individual’s experience, as well as across the group’s experience (Dislike of labelling students)
- Results surprised me – categories were not along the lines I thought they would be (types of connection)
- Issues of performativity – how natural or not the connections might be

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Resources on Phenomenography


Studies using phenomenography


