CHAPTER 2

Reflections on the phenomenographic team research process

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Collecting the data

It was a challenging prospect. Five of us were to undertake an analysis of interview data collected from 24 RMIT researchers about their research. Of the five, I was the only one with substantial experience of phenomenographic analysis. The experience of the other four ranged from no experience at all with phenomenography to supervision of postgraduate students through reading about the method. But all had extensive experience with other forms of qualitative research. That is what made it especially interesting.

The first task was to make sure that we had adequate data to analyse and two of us embarked on that activity. I played the advisory role and the other person, Pam Green, undertook the planning and the interviewing. Some of the important issues we addressed included whom should be interviewed, how many, about what, using what kind of initial input to the interview, and using what sequence of questions subsequently. Another important issue was what should not be asked, or what kinds of comments the interviewer should not make. The answers to these questions are affected by a fundamental aspect of phenomenography – relationality – that I want to deal with first.

Relationality

What is relationality?

One aspect of phenomenography that is emphasised repeatedly is the fact that it is based on a relational view of the world. Other perspectives, such as individual constructivism or social constructivism, usually have what is called a dualist view by focusing on either an inner
or outer world as being an explanation for the other. Individual constructivism sees internal mental acts as being an explanation for external acts and behaviours. The reverse is true for social constructivism (see Marton & Booth, 1997, for more detail).

Phenomenographers are among a range of qualitative researchers who take a non-dualist stance. We do not focus on hypothetical mental structures separate from the world. There is no dividing line between the inner and the outer worlds. There are not two worlds with one held to explain the other. The world is not constructed by the individual, nor is it imposed from outside, ‘it is constituted as an internal relation between them. There is only one world, but it is a world we experience, a world in which we live, a world that is ours’ (Marton & Booth, 1997, p.13).

This is not simply a remote philosophical distinction. There are practical implications that I want to explore now. Relationality is the key idea underlying the approach that I and many others take to phenomenographic research and can be used to explain the following practices:

a) I always use an identical opening scenario for every interview within any one phenomenographic study.

b) With one exception, I never make any further substantive input into the interviews except to refer interviewees to issues they have introduced themselves, in order to get more complete explanations. The only exception is when a further input is planned for a particular stage in every interview in the set.

c) The only evidence used in developing categories of description is that contained within the transcripts.

These practices will be discussed later in this section, but I have listed them here to encourage the reader, while relationality is being explained in the coming paragraphs, to reflect on why those practices are advocated.

The object of study in phenomenographic research is not the phenomenon being discussed per se, but rather the relation between the subjects and that phenomenon (see Figure 1.1). So the focus of the research is on the researcher trying to find out about the object of study which is the relation between the subjects and the phenomenon.

Of course, there is a relation between the researcher and the phenomenon and a relation between the researcher and the subjects (also shown in Figure 1.1). The researcher has his or her own way of seeing the phenomenon and has some relationship to the subjects. One methodological question that needs to be addressed is how to ensure that the focus of the research is maintained on the object of study, the
relation between the subjects and the phenomenon, rather than on the researcher’s own relation to the phenomenon. That is, how can researchers make sure that they are not allowing their own understanding of the phenomenon to be imposed on their interpretation of the ways the subjects see the phenomenon?

Figure 1.1: Phenomenographic relationality

In addition, the researcher has a privileged position in relation to the subjects through the interview process. The relationship between the researcher and the subjects also has the potential for imposition of the researcher’s view of the phenomenon if subjects seek or receive guidance or approval from the researcher for what they say during the interview.

Methodological processes to deal with relationality issues

In any phenomenographic research situation, you have some phenomenon, a group of subjects, the researcher, and some process of communication (in this case interviews). Normally those elements are arranged by the researcher who:

- devises an interview schedule about a chosen phenomenon
- invites each subject individually to comment in various ways about the phenomenon
- encourages full disclosure by each subject of their ideas about the phenomenon by various interview techniques
- records the interviews, and
- has them transcribed.
Then the transcripts as a group are analysed so as to map out a limited number of categories of description that represent the range of ways that the group as a whole sees the phenomenon.

**Data collection**

It is imperative that the researcher’s own relation to the phenomenon and to the subjects be controlled so as to avoid distorting the research outcomes. In the interview process (the most common data collection method in phenomenography), the controls involve a planned process with certain issues being introduced by the interviewer at given stages in the interview, and the avoidance of any new inputs other than those planned (relates to dot-point (a) listed earlier). This means that all subjects receive the same information from the researcher and so their responses are to the same phenomenon. How can the researcher refrain from introducing new information and still maintain a conversation with the subject during the interview? This is done by making sure that the kinds of questions asked and comments made by the interviewer are limited to requests for further information or encouragement of explanation of ideas raised by the subject (relates to dot-point (b) listed earlier). Such requests are used constructively to encourage the subjects to reveal everything possible in relation to the phenomenon. Judgemental comments, whether positive or negative, should never be made by the interviewer.

Why take these precautions? Well, since the object of study is the relation between the interviewee and the phenomenon, it is imperative that the transcripts of the interview reflect that relation as it exists at the time of the interview. Normal conversations involve interchanges during which each person’s relation to any phenomenon under discussion shifts. Comments or inputs by one person cause the other to rethink and perhaps re-conceive the phenomenon. It is inevitable that such shifts will occur. The idea in phenomenographic interviewing is to limit inputs by the researcher to planned sequences that are primarily designed to introduce the phenomenon to the interviewee whose relation to it is being investigated. The interview can then proceed with the interviewee defining what is relevant and the researcher encouraging the interviewee to be as complete and as explicit as possible.

If, for instance, care is not taken to open the interview with the same scenario each time, then it is difficult to be sure what phenomenon the research results refer to. The same ambiguity arises if the researcher introduces new and different issues into some but not other interviews or if the researcher were to occasionally praise or
criticise any views being expressed. In such situations, there will be a
set of transcripts, some of which represent the relation between some
interviewees and a particular phenomenon but others that concern
the relation to a slightly different phenomenon. In such circum-
stances, the research outcomes are of diminished value. So, to max-
imise the power of the research outcomes, there should be enough
pilot interviewing to ensure that all interviews are conducted with the
same planned inputs by the researcher.

Analysis

In the analysis stage, the controls involve:

- the use of no other evidence except the interview transcripts
- the bracketing of the researcher’s own relation to the phe-
nomenon
- the use of group analysis in order to ensure the first two con-
trols are effective, and
- the analysis of the structural relation between the categories of
description being postponed until after the categories have
been finalised.

The relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon
and the influence of that relationship on the research outcomes need
to be minimised in the analysis phase as well as in the data collection
phase. The object of study is the relation between the group of sub-
jects and the phenomenon and, as discussed above, the interviews are
conducted so as to ensure that the transcripts contain data that are
focused on that relation. The next step is to analyse those transcripts
in a way that allows the mapping of the different ways the subjects
relate to the phenomenon, without that mapping being distorted by
the researcher’s relation to the phenomenon (referred to as ‘bracket-
ing’ of the researcher’s perspective). The primary way of minimising
such distortion is to base all analysis on the transcripts: if it is not in
the transcript, then it is not evidence (relates to dot-point (c) listed
earlier in this chapter). Just because the researcher can ‘imagine’ a dif-
ferent way of looking at the phenomenon or a better way of constitu-
tuting it, it is not an acceptable category if such descriptions cannot be
derived from the transcript evidence.

For the same reason, I argue that the structural links between the
different categories should be investigated after the categories have
been determined. Investigation of the structural links explicitly
involves the researcher perspective. The researcher examines the categories of description and tries to ‘see’ the relations between them. That seeing is affected by the researcher’s own relation to the phenomenon. If development of the structural relationships is undertaken simultaneously with the development of the categories of description, there is potential to distort the categories by including the relation of the researcher to the phenomenon in addition to the true focus of study, the relation between the subjects and the phenomenon.

A further step that I take to ensure that the researcher’s perspective is bracketed and that the categories are derived only from transcript evidence is to engage in group analysis. Other members of the team act as devil’s advocates at every stage and demand evidence in the transcript before any aspect of the analysis is accepted. In regard to most of these analytical practices, my approach is different from some other phenomenographers and my position is derived from my interpretation of the fundamental, relationality perspective. But now, back to the questions that Pam Green and I faced regarding the interviews in this project.

The interviews

Whom to interview?

In order to maximise the variation in ways of seeing research, we tried to ensure that the interviewees included both men and women, researchers from a variety of fields and across a range of research experience. Further, we decided, since a major reason for doing this research was to feed back the results into RMIT’s research development programme, that the researchers interviewed should all be RMIT academics. We know that if we were to interview researchers from different universities, we’d be likely to get a lot of overlap in their ways of seeing research, but we would also get differences. Phenomenography is a creature of the particular people from whom the data are drawn. We had to make a choice, and we did. We anticipated that we would not be able to conclude from our research that university researchers in general see research in particular ways. We never intended that. Phenomenography does not provide that kind of outcome. What we wanted to be able to say is that when you interview an appropriate cross-section of RMIT researchers, these are the ways of seeing research that emerge. We anticipated that you could talk to any RMIT researcher and, while you would find that that person’s way of seeing research would to a large measure be idiosyncratic, it would be
likely you could make sense of their way of seeing it in relation to our findings. However, no outcomes from phenomenographic research can be regarded as generalisations or universal statements.

**How many to interview?**

The smug answer from a phenomenographer when asked this question is that you need to interview enough people to ensure sufficient variation in ways of seeing, but not so many that make it difficult to manage the data. Two people would be too few and two hundred would be too many. In practice, most phenomenographers find that between 20 and 30 subjects meet the two criteria. You have sufficient variation and you can manage the data. In this case, we focused on that range and interviewed 24 RMIT researchers.

**Interviews about what?**

It is possible to ask people in an interview the direct question – What is X? We might have asked – What is research? or What is research success? But we didn’t.

There is an alternative. You can ask people to describe a recent experience that concerns the issues under consideration. That is what we did. Pam Green asked each RMIT researcher to think of recent experiences of research that were successful and to describe one of them in detail. At the same time, each interviewee was told that later they’d be asked to describe an example of research they had done that was not so successful.

This was not an arbitrary decision; rather it is based on experience. When ‘what is X?’ questions are asked in such phenomenographic interviews, the outcomes tend to be less varied and they more or less reflect the standard, espoused theories available in the literature. On the other hand, when people are asked to describe their own direct experiences, their immersion in that detail often reveals a much greater variation across the interviews in ways of seeing than with the more narrowing ‘what is X?’ approach.

There is a second reason as well. It is easier to get people to describe something they’ve experienced than to get them to philosophise about an issue to which they might not have given much thought before. So you get a much deeper insight into how the interviewees actually see the concept in practice as well as having a better opportunity to explore and probe in a comfortable and non-threatening way – given that you are asking for more information about their
actual experiences rather than appearing to be ‘testing’ their theoretical knowledge.

So Pam Green and I agreed that the interview would begin with a brief statement that we were interested to find out about RMIT academics’ experience with research and that participants would be asked to choose and describe an example of research they had undertaken that had been successful and another that had been less successful. In her story to follow in chapter 3, Green elaborates this in more detail.

**What kinds of questions to ask and what comments to make?**

It was also agreed that following this common beginning to each interview, all subsequent questions would be directed at getting the interviewees to reveal everything they could about the examples they had chosen. Questions would be of various kinds:

1. **Neutral questions aimed at getting the interviewee to say more.**
   
   *Example:* Can you tell me more about that? Could you explain that again using different words? Why did you say that?

2. **Specific questions that ask for more information about issues raised by the interviewee earlier in the interview.**
   
   *Example:* You have talked about X and also about Y, but what do X and Y mean? Why did you talk about Y in that way?

3. **Specific questions that invite reflection by the interviewee about things they have said.**
   
   *Example:* You said A, and then you said B; how do those two perspectives relate to each other?

The central purpose is to encourage the interviewees to reveal as much as possible about their ideas and their experience. However, the limitation is that beyond the planned inputs such as the opening part of the interview, all other questions should not introduce new ideas (for a more complete explanation of why this is so, see the earlier section on relationality). Only the interviewees should be introducing new ideas because the purpose of the interview is to find out what issues people see as relevant as well as what their views are on those relevant issues. It is not about getting people’s comments on issues that occur to the interviewer from time to time along the way. So the opening input from the interviewer is effectively to establish the topic and then all subsequent non-directive questions are aimed at finding out what the interviewees think about that topic.

It should go without saying that no judgemental comment should be made about anything the interviewees say. All comments should be related to the intention to explore further.
Why should there be pilot interviews?

In most conversations we are well used to exchanging points of view and so, when someone undertakes a phenomenographic interview for the first time, some practice is needed to maintain an appropriate interviewing approach. In early pilot interviews, novice interviewers (in a phenomenographic sense) often find themselves making comment and sometimes discussing or debating something said by the interviewee. They need to learn not to do that. Pilot interviews are important to enable the interviewers to perfect their phenomenographic interviewing skills.

More than that, it is also crucial to test whether the planned inputs, such as the opening scene-setting, actually do elicit comment on the intended topic. In this case we had all of the input at the beginning of the interview, but in some phenomenographic interviews a number of inputs may be made in a planned way at various points of the interview. Pilot interviews are always essential to ensure that the topic that interviewees are encouraged by the planned inputs to discuss is the topic that is the subject of the research. Otherwise the planned inputs have to be modified until they do catalyse response on the research topic.

In this case, I interviewed Pam Green first of all to give her some insight into the phenomenographic interview. She then interviewed me and subsequently several other RMIT academics as part of the pilot phase. It is important (1) that the pilot interviews be with people similar to the intended interview sample, and (2) that those pilot interviews are then discarded and not used as part of the research study. Clearly, any data from pilot interviews are tainted by potential errors in questioning by the interviewer and by the shifting focus of the planned inputs as they become refined. In chapter 3, Pam Green describes the pilot process in more detail.

When do you begin the analysis?

I take the strong position that no analysis should begin before all interviews have been conducted. Already I have referred to the abnormality and difficulty of conducting a warm and supportive conversation with someone without making any comment on the content of the conversation. Even experienced interviewers sometimes find that they have to discard half an interview transcript because they have lapsed by inadvertently introducing new, unplanned content halfway through the particular interview or by making a judgemental observation about
something said during the interview. If the researcher has already begun to analyse the early interviews before the rest are complete, there is a real danger that the later interviews will be altered, either explicitly or perhaps unconsciously. It is much safer to wait until the interviews are complete before beginning the analysis. Analysis in this project did not begin until all interviews had been completed. It should be noted that not all phenomenographers are so concerned with this issue. Reproducibility is important to me so that I can clearly claim that the categories of description finally developed are related to a particular set of inputs across all of the interviews. It would be difficult to define just what the categories refer to if the interviews had varying content inputs from the interviewer.

My experience of the analysis in a team situation

The early meetings

MY SELF-PERCEIVED ROLE

As the first meeting approached, I had mixed feelings. I knew that, as the one member of the team of five with substantial experience of phenomenographic research, there would be some pressure on me to lead. Yet my educational philosophy is at odds with a ‘tell them what to do’ approach. I wanted my colleagues to move creatively towards a way of seeing this research method that reflected their own experiences, rather than emanating from my instructions. So I deliberately lobbied for another member of the team to take the lead role and I tried in the first meeting to withhold my own point of view until everyone else had expressed their views on any particular issue. Some people who don’t know me might consider that action heroic; others who know me might not believe it at all. I have never asked my colleagues whether they noticed that I was doing that and I realise of course that they might not have noticed.

However, I became sensitive to situations during the early meetings when one or more of my colleagues would look to me for my judgement on what had been said. I realise that I may have been reading my own concerns into the situation, but it certainly felt like there was an expectation that I should take a more leading role than I had envisaged.

ACTUAL ROLE

It turned out that I did take a more leading role after all. Eventually I agreed to become the lead researcher on the first analysis (one person
as leader, the others taking a devil’s advocate role – this was already mentioned in the section on relationality and will be discussed in more detail later).

**MY ‘NATURAL ATTITUDE’**

I have found it interesting to reflect on my own attitudes and behaviour. In some ways my behaviour and my beliefs were at odds with each other. Phenomenography, along with many other qualitative approaches, has an underpinning philosophy that values variation. We expect there to be a number of perspectives on any issue among a range of people, and the focus of much of qualitative research is to find out about that variation. Qualitative researchers, therefore, try to look at any issue from multiple perspectives. Indeed, within phenomenography, there is the explicit practice of bracketing mentioned earlier. The researchers attempt to the best of their ability to bracket their own views as they put themselves into other people’s positions and try to understand what it is that they see. They reject the natural attitude, which sees the world as an object separate from the observer. The natural attitude is that how I see something is the way it is. As Marton & Booth (1997) put it:

> Reality, as a rule, has a taken-for-granted character. We tacitly believe that the world is what we see, the same world that always was and always will be seen, and the same world that others see. Reality and experience of the world are taken to be the one. (p.148).

If you have the natural attitude, you can’t understand ‘multiple perspectives’. Surely everyone else is not looking at the object properly. You can see it clearly and it isn’t the way they are describing it. You can see ‘it’ and they are wrong.

In everyday life many of us operate through the natural attitude. Indeed most community disputes, most civil court cases, most arguments in the home, most news analysis, and probably most social interactions, emerge through the natural attitude. All of those activities are characterised by several different people dealing with the same issue, seeing it differently and being unable to understand how the other person can be so wrong. Either they are stupid or they are lying. Perhaps the most extreme example is the umpire’s or referee’s decision at a football match (probably of any kind). When a clash of players occurs, you often hear a roar emanating immediately from the
whole crowd. Yet half the crowd are quite sure that a free kick should be given to one of the players while the other half are equally sure it should be given to the opposing player. And as they yell at each other, neither can understand how the other supporter was obviously unable to see what happened right before their eyes. Imagine if, instead, thousands of football supporters began to say to each other – ‘Well, I can see from one perspective that you could imagine your player was infringed, but if you look at it using different criteria perhaps you would agree that my player was infringed instead’. No, it doesn’t happen like that. The natural attitude rules and the opposition supporters are clearly both blind and biased.

And if we turn to television news analysis, any guest who attempts to look at the particular issue from several perspectives is quickly dismissed as being someone who either (a) has no real opinion, (b) wants to be liked by everyone, and/or (c) is an academic.

Now why have I gone off on this tangent about the natural attitude? Well, in my work, dismissal of the natural attitude is at the core. Yet, at the beginning of this project, I felt myself slipping into the natural attitude, and it worried me.

What happened was this: as much as possible, I tried to get my colleagues to work through methodological and analytical issues themselves. That was a conscious decision that I followed for a short time. Yet I was often asked to be the arbiter of disagreements about the method. The early meetings focused on discussion of process without actually carrying out the processes. I found myself taking an almost positivist perspective and defending my way of seeing phenomenography as if it were ‘truth’. It is reasonable, even desirable, for everyone to argue for the way they see the situation. That is what I am doing throughout this chapter. But there is a need to be open to contrary argument and to be willing to change if the argument is strong enough. I feared I was taking the natural attitude towards phenomenography; I could see where everyone was going wrong and I was drawn into correcting them. At first I think my colleagues were happy about that because as novices to the phenomenographic experience it provided some stability. But it soon led to disputes and I think we really only made progress when different people began to take responsibility from one meeting to the next for different aspects of the analysis. Then we were all in the business of seeking evidence to support or dismiss various perspectives.
COMPARISON WITH OTHER METHODS AT A META LEVEL

Another aspect that made the early meetings complex was that most of my colleagues were trying to understand phenomenographic processes as a variant on the qualitative research method with which they were most familiar. Comparisons, at least at a meta level, were being made and each person’s view of phenomenography was coloured by the lens through which they were looking. Hence, conversations about how certain processes are undertaken within phenomenography focused more on why it was different from their own methods than on why that approach was internally consistent within phenomenography. The learning about phenomenography in the early stages was very much linked to the other methods.

Later analysis meetings

MORE DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

As I indicated earlier, later meetings became more shared and different people took the lead. I felt personally that this diminished pressure on me. No longer was I the lead analyst and defender of process. Other people were taking the lead and, in doing so, engaging in process themselves. Thus, they had an experiential base from which to discuss process and the meetings were more functional as a consequence.

THE ISSUE OF DEVIL’S ADVOCACY

In other places (Bowden, 2000a, for example), I have argued strongly for team analysis in phenomenography and the importance of the devil’s advocacy role. This study was a team effort and all of us played the devil’s advocate role most of the time. The way we worked was this. One person prepared the next set of categories of description based on discussions we had had. Often there was a focus on, say, just one category that was puzzling us at the time. The person responsible went back and re-read the transcripts and produced the new version. At the next meeting, the rest of us had the role of questioning the reformulation of the category.

To show how this was done, let me take category B in version 3 (see Table 3 in Appendix A). The following is what category B looked like at that stage:
Research is successful if participation in it or the outcomes produced from it are satisfying to the researcher. These may be because of the inherent interest of the activity and the various feelings of being thrilled, challenged or exhilarated by successfully tackling complex issues efficiently and with high standards. The satisfaction may be linked to a number of achievements including being able to meet clients’ needs, being able to confirm one’s own prior hypotheses and participating in the act of discovery. The researcher may feel proud of what has been produced.

In the second part of Table 3 in Appendix A, you will see the following:

2 (9); 3 (23); 5 (6,8); 6 (4); 7 (7, 11); 9 (5,6); 11 (13); 13 (7, 10); 14 (7); 15 (13); 16 (11); 17 (1,3,4,6); 18 (7, 8); 19 (3); 20 (3,4); 22 (11); 23 (9)

These are the page references to parts of various transcripts that seem to refer particularly to the way of seeing success represented by category B. The number in bold refers to the transcript and the numbers in brackets to pages within the particular transcript. For example, transcript 5 contains the following quote:

‘One thing that made it successful for me personally was what I found interesting … it was complex, there were lots of twists in it, there were lots of different categories, people make interesting decisions, so it’s inherently intellectually stimulating.’

What the devil’s advocates do – the rest of us – is to ask the originator the basis for the particular way of writing the category of description. Why did you focus attention on success being related to outcomes satisfying to the researcher? Why did you choose those particular words? Where in the transcripts can we see evidence that this is the best way to describe this particular category? Of course each of us would read the pages listed as relevant and we would reflect on whether a better description could be found. There would be discussion and argument. It should be noted here that the emphasis in reading is to discern the fundamental meaning. The category descriptions should be faithful to the meanings in the transcripts. This may mean using particular words present in the transcript, but that would be a frequent consequence and not a goal of searching for meaning.
One thing we often found we needed to do was to go back a few pages earlier than the designated page in the transcript and, as well, read forward a few extra pages, if we were to really capture the meaning. This contrasts with the cut and paste approaches that some people use in which they extract particular sentences and paragraphs and pool them. We did not do that and to my mind it was for good reason. In this particular case we found that the meaning that came through in this category was much stronger than had been originally represented, and we found that out by going backwards and forwards in the transcript – by continually using the whole transcript.

That phrase ‘whole transcript’ needs explanation because in a sense we only ever read every single page of the transcript in one sitting during the first or second readings. But using the whole transcript means always having the whole transcript at your disposal all the time – never separating any particular utterance from its context. In this case we found that the stronger meaning that came through was a sense of excitement in undertaking the research rather than mere satisfaction with its outcomes. Part of that change was also related to the need to differentiate between categories. We found that this new focus meant that category B was tighter in that all the aspects were concerned with the effect on researchers of participating in the research, with category A being the one focused on outcomes. Thus, we were getting greater coherence within the categories and clearer differences between categories. The shift in emphasis meant that some other consequential changes were made and these appear below, with the changes highlighted.

Research is successful if the researcher finds it exciting to do. This may be because of the inherent interest of the activity and the various feelings of being thrilled, challenged or exhilarated by successfully tackling complex issues. The excitement may be linked to a number of achievements including being able to meet clients’ needs, being able to confirm one’s own prior hypotheses and participating in the act of discovery. The researchers may feel proud of what has been produced and excited by the attention they receive.

The next week someone else might take the lead role with a particular category and the rest of us became devil’s advocates for that discussion. It should be noted that at all times the only evidence that can be relied on is what is in the transcripts. If the evidence does not exist, then any category description has to be adjusted so that it rep-
resents what is in the transcripts. This means that while there might be some ambiguous hints in some transcripts that there is some other issue, such ambiguities would not emerge in the categories due to the lack of explicit evidence in the transcripts. Phenomenographic outcomes don’t provide all the detail that is present in the transcripts, they only map the range of ways of seeing for which there is clear evidence. It is not acceptable to infer what else might have been said in the interviews if it wasn’t actually said. Again, this points to the importance of getting the interviews right in the first place.

**THE ISSUE OF MAPPING VERSUS CATALOGUING**

One of the tendencies in the early part of a phenomenographic analysis is to focus on differences. Often a researcher may have 20 or 30 candidates for categories after the first reading. That first reading overwhelms you with variation. The goal has to be to extract the main holistic meanings that are there in relation to the focus – in this case the meaning of success in research. Some researchers can be led astray by focusing on the multitude of details to the exclusion of establishing a smaller number of more holistic meanings. The former can lead to a kind of content analysis in which you can list the large number of issues that are talked about and demonstrate how many people talk about each one – a kind of cataloguing process.

The development of a smaller number of holistic meanings is more of a mapping process. The whole map from a content analysis perspective may look like a mass of details – highly populated urban centres, small towns, regional centres, rivers, hills, lakes, farms, industrial complexes, parks, etc, and a cataloguing process would alert us to how many of each of those there are. In contrast, the phenomenographic process would look for more holistic meanings in which the patterns of such detail vary and give us different meanings. The presence of a highly populated urban centre along with industrial complexes and location on a river or the seaboard might indicate a state capital. A smaller urbanised area, perhaps on a river that connects to the state capital with some industrial activity around, but significant farming land as well, might indicate a regional centre. And so on. Both kinds of analysis are accurate, but the second provides greater insights for me. You can get a sense of the whole from the analysis for holistic meaning. The detail of the content analysis crosses those meanings, but provides fewer insights. Of course, if you had a particular quest that was about providing supplies to citizens depending on where and in what conditions they live, the content analysis approach
might be very appropriate. But if you want to use the data to get a picture of the different types of environments that exist, then the holistic mapping process is to be preferred. For better or worse, phenomenography is concerned with the latter. That may be a disappointment for some people who would like to get outcomes that enable detailed comparisons of individual cases. My only answer can be that phenomenography is not the right method to use for those purposes. If you really want individual descriptions then you need to use a different method.

**THE VALUE OF AVOIDING LABELS UNTIL THE END OF THE ANALYSIS**

You will see from earlier pages (and by reading Appendix A) that as you proceed through the analysis, the category descriptions change as you try to maximise differences between categories and maximise coherence within categories. If, in version 3, we had called Category B ‘Researcher satisfaction’ rather than simply Category B, there would have been a psychological tendency to try to find evidence for this label. Giving labels early in the analysis tends to limit further development of the category description. Providing a full ‘rich’ description better facilitates adjustment of the description with each iteration. In the end, we did use the label ‘satisfaction’, but the description had by then become much richer than it might otherwise have been.

In another project some years ago, the analysis progressed through 16 versions. I compared successive versions with each other of a particular category and found small changes of the kind you can see above for category B between versions 3 and 4 in this project. However, when I compared version 16 with version 1 in that other project, I found that there was nothing left in version 16 from the first version. Fifteen small iterative changes had resulted in complete change. Early labelling would limit such changes.

**THE KEY ISSUE OF CONSTANT FOCUS**

You may have gathered already that sometimes researchers can become distracted during the project and follow paths that are in the end unproductive. There is a need to remain focused throughout and constant vigilance is required. You begin by developing a coherent notion of the purpose of the project. Just what is the phenomenon being investigated, how will it be researched, what kind of outcomes are sought, and how will they be used? These questions contribute to the project planning, but the answers to the questions provide the
framework for the conduct of the project, and focusing on that framework at all stages is essential. In the interviews, the purpose is to find out the different ways that the target group see the particular phenomenon. This demands that the interviewer communicates clearly and consistently what the interviewee is being asked to comment on, interacts in a way that elicits a full elaboration of the way the person sees the phenomenon, and refrains from introducing any new content beyond the planned introduction while making the interviewee feel comfortable and willing to reveal all their thoughts about the phenomenon. This often means referring the interviewee back to things said earlier and asking for clarification and explanation. Perhaps engagement in strategic listening is a key capability needed, as well as the ability to comfortably get the interview back on the research focus if it drifts away.

In the analysis, it is important to be reading for a particular purpose. As a general rule, I read transcripts with the following thoughts in mind. If the interviewee is saying this about X or Y, what must the phenomenon mean to them? If they are now saying Z as well, does this change my interpretation of how they are seeing the phenomenon? It is possible to become distracted and to begin to analyse the various ways of seeing X, for instance. There is a greater danger of losing focus in this way if you cut the interview transcripts into pieces and re-assemble the similar pieces from different transcripts together. I prefer to read key statements and then move backwards a few pages and read forward, going several pages beyond what was regarded as the key statement. I then ask myself about the significance of the key statement with respect both to the focus of the study and the meaning you can ascribe to the statement given the context in which it was provided.

As you will see in a moment, it is not difficult to lose focus and to avoid it requires constant vigilance. Anchoring all analysis to the transcripts alone, reading forward and backwards around key statements, and using the devil’s advocate process, all assist in maintaining focus during the analysis.

It is acknowledged, of course, that the object of study, the focus of the research, is never completely separate from the researcher. The research outcomes are not 100 per cent independent of the researcher; they are relational. However, the procedures described above are intended to maximise the extent to which the research outcomes are influenced by the subjects and to minimise the extent to which they are influenced by the researcher’s perspectives.
THE REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING SOMETHING NEW EACH TIME WHEN READING THE SAME TRANSCRIPTS AGAIN AND AGAIN WITH A DIFFERENT PURPOSE

Something that I have observed every time I have undertaken a phenomenographic analysis remains a source of joy and a motivation to continue with repeated analysis of interview transcripts. The observation is that as you proceed with the analysis, each new reading of the transcript brings new insights. What you see when you read something is affected as much by what you bring to the task as it is by what is in the transcript you are reading. I am sure literary scholars and others would be able to explain that in more enlightened ways than I can, but the observation leads me to conclude that going through five, ten or fifteen versions of the categories of description is necessary. I don’t believe you could read the transcripts once and then write the final categories of description. After the first reading, with the draft categories written, you read the transcripts again with different eyes. The draft categories guide your reading, but you are looking for evidence to undermine that draft representation – to test the coherence of a category description or to question the difference between two different draft categories. Aspects of the transcripts that were not seen as significant before become significant now. You see them afresh. Despite having read the transcripts many times, it seems like you are seeing that aspect for the first time. Every new reading of the transcripts is a new experience. Perhaps when it ceases to be like that is when you’ve reached the last version.

DO YOU GO BACK AND CHECK THE OUTCOMES OF YOUR ANALYSIS WITH THE PEOPLE YOU INTERVIEWED?

My answer to that question is a qualified ‘No’. Let me take the general issue first and the qualification later. The aim of the phenomenographic interview is to help the interviewees to express as completely as possible their perspectives on the phenomenon displayed through the opening scenario. The interviewer should take care to do two things – to facilitate the exposure of as many aspects of the interviewee’s perspective as possible and to guard against influencing the nature of those aspects elicited – beyond what is catalysed by the opening scenario or any further planned interventions during the interview.

There are several reasons for this approach. The first reason is that in reporting the outcomes, it can be unambiguously stated that these results stem from the responses of these particular people to the given
scenario, with the same scenario being presented to all interviewees. This was elaborated in earlier sections. The second reason is because the analysis is of all the transcripts together; the categories are not derived from individual transcripts. You might produce five categories of description and each of these owes its meaning as much to the differences between the categories as to the common ideas within each category.

Hence, you want the transcripts all to be about the same issue since they are being analysed together. So you don’t go back to the interviewees with the analysis outcomes and undertake ‘member-checking’ as is common in other qualitative methods. First, it would not make much sense to ask an individual interviewee whether one or more categories fit their perspective since the categories were derived from a range of transcripts and not just their own. The individual interviewee is not in a position to judge. Second, once you begin any subsequent conversation about the analysis, you are introducing new material and you might expect any interviewee now to see the phenomenon differently. Learning will have taken place. Anything they say is just like the comments of an interviewee when the original interviewer accidentally introduces new material. The interviewee’s comments are now in relation to just the new input. It is possible to do this kind of member-checking, but you would need to do an extra analysis of the new material as well. However, this would not change the original analysis which is related to the responses to the original scenario.

Now there is a qualification. What some phenomenographers do is take the analysis back to groups of people familiar with the phenomenon. This may include the interviewees. What is looked for is whether or not the outcomes have face validity. Often such checking is done using focus group discussions. Note that the purpose is not for each person to recognise one category that exactly describes their perspective. The phenomenographic method is a mapping process. The aim of the focus group discussions would be to test whether the group of people see the categories as encompassing their range of perspectives. If the interviews have been carried out well, then the feedback will be positive. This means that getting the interviews right is a key aspect of doing phenomenography properly.

DEALING WITH THE EMOTIONS – THE ISSUE OF MUTUAL TRUST

The descriptions I have provided throughout this text have tended to be procedural, with some reflections about process. However, phenomenographic research is a part of life and emotions play an
important role. I think I hinted at that earlier when I spoke about the need to frame an interview in a way that is non-threatening to the interviewee. A well-conducted interview inevitably results in the person interviewed revealing something about themselves they had not expected they would. Sometimes they become aware of aspects of their own thinking or feelings that they hadn't realised themselves before. This is because the phenomenographic interview is the vacuum cleaner of data gathering. You press into every nook and cranny in an effort to find out what the interviewee’s perspective is. So it is very important to establish proper procedures both to meet ethics requirements and, perhaps more importantly, to ensure that the interviewees feel comfortable and that their willingness to cooperate is never abused. It is for this reason that no published material ever provides quotes from interviews that could identify the interviewee. This assurance should be given and should guide all writing about the project.

During the group analysis, members of the research team are also vulnerable. At all times, but especially the first time you take the lead position, being the target of devil's advocacy from (in this case) four of your colleagues is a bit scary. Their aim is to question your analysis, even to undermine it completely perhaps. Intellectually you can acknowledge the reality that this is one step towards a better outcome. But emotionally it still feels like you are being attacked. You've given it your best shot and they are pulling your analysis to pieces. It is important that, as soon as possible, the team of researchers establishes mutual trust so that these processes cease to be disturbing. Perhaps that is an unattainable goal so all members of the team need to be continually sensitive to their colleagues' feelings – not to change what the group does (that would defeat the purpose) but to change how they do it (perhaps by making the devil’s advocacy process and its progressive role more explicit) whenever one of their colleagues appears more vulnerable than usual.

Perhaps I should finish this account with a confession. I think that I sometimes do cause my team colleagues more grief than I should. I think I am the kind of person who enjoys phenomenographic analysis (in fact I know I am!). I like the process of producing something new knowing it is much better than the previous version, but also knowing that it will itself be changed by further work and improved significantly. So I engage either in the defence process or the devil’s advocacy with a great deal of energy and excitement. I think sometimes this causes my colleagues stress and it is an example of the problem of balance between academic zeal and human compassion and caring. It is a continual struggle, but I know what my goal has to be.