CHAPTER 1

In search of detailed instances

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Introduction

As outlined in the Series Preface, this monograph is the sixth in a series on qualitative research methods. While the other five monographs provide descriptions from a wide range of perspectives by more than 30 researchers on different qualitative research methods, this monograph takes one of those methods and provides an in-depth description of the experiences of just five researchers on two projects. One of those earlier five monographs is titled Phenomenography (Bowden & Walsh, 2000) and readers should examine that text to get a basic understanding of what phenomenography is about, from the perspective of a variety of phenomenographic researchers. The present text will be exploring some issues to a depth never written about before, rather than providing an authoritative account of phenomenography in general.

The series as a whole seeks to provide an explicit and critical take on a variety of theoretical positions, approaches and practices around a range of research methodologies using qualitative methods. The present text contributes to the search for detailed instances of qualitative research. It focuses explicitly on phenomenography and aims to bring into sharper focus the different ways in which phenomenographic research might proceed, the situated issues that warrant attention, and the ways in which findings might be portrayed. The monographs in this series provide a close-up look at attitudes, practices and experiences that most other books on qualitative research do not. This book serves as a resource for researchers, supervisors and research students, not only for those interested in phenomenography but also for others wanting to understand ‘what qualitative researchers actually do’.

Two major studies, one focusing on ‘researchers’ conceptions of success in research’, and the other centred on ‘ways of experiencing being a university researcher’, provide the detailed instances from which phenomenographic practices may be viewed. Both studies use developmental phenomenography (Bowden, 1994a; 2000a) rather than pure phenomenography (Marton, 1986b). Thus, they provide instances of applied research where the implications for the field, in this case research...
in higher education, are deemed as being a vital part of the justification for, and planning of, the study (apart from genuine curiosity). Hence the title *Doing Developmental Phenomenography*. The two studies, methodologically linked but differing in specificities, enable the reader to follow the choices available and the subsequent decisions made by researchers along their respective phenomenographic journeys. The major difference between the two studies is that the ‘success in research’ project was a team endeavour, while the ‘being a researcher’ project was an individual task. As explained in the Series Preface, this issue of team vs. individual is a central theme for the reader concerned with decisions about how to conduct phenomenographic analysis. Other issues discussed within the two projects include sampling decisions; interview strategies; the role and nature of piloting; appropriate forms for questions or scenarios; data analysis processes, including further exploration of the emergent categories of description and their structural relationships; presentation of findings, and the implications for practice. The studies afford both methodological and substantive detail, but the focus of this text rests unapologetically with the former. However, to get a more general view of the research method, readers would do well to peruse the earlier monograph in the QRM series – *Phenomenography* (Bowden & Walsh, 2000) – before continuing to read this current text.

Findings about the nature of success in research and about the experience of being a researcher are included in this monograph as well primarily because they provide examples of how results may be presented and insights may be made into the ways that research goals influence method. They may also be relevant to readers interested in the research topics per se. Further, such findings may be of interest to those engaged in mentoring supervisors informally or through formal means such as supervisor development programmes.

**How the book works**

The text begins with the presentation of five stories from researchers engaged in the above-mentioned studies. The initial four stories are derived from the collaborative project on conceptions of success in research. This project involved four academics (and one other) interested in phenomenography, of whom only one was experienced in the approach. The researchers each came to the project with their own methodological backgrounds, biases, hopes and concerns.

Bowden, the experienced phenomenographer, tells his story first in chapter 2. The shift from the world of science to that of education in the 1970s meant that old ways of researching were questioned and he built
his own ways of working within a phenomenographic paradigm across several decades (see Bowden, 1994a; 2000a). He highlights what underpins his approach to phenomenographic research, with the concept of relationality providing the key theme which he explores in detail. Bowden tells of his experience of working within the ‘success in research’ team in terms of the tension between offering guidance (much sought after by the team, especially in the beginning) and encouraging the other researchers to take control of the research processes for themselves. The experience of working in the team, as in all of the first four stories, is reflected upon. Such reflections provide food for thought for those considering the use of collaborative effort, even if only at the analysis phase.

Green, previously a naturalistic inquiry devotee, tells in chapter 3 of her journey into phenomenography, focusing firstly on what counts as basic tenets of research, given her theoretical position. As Green conducted all of the interviews for the project, this chapter details issues, strategies, and reflections on phenomenographic interviewing. Rigour is a key issue in all research. Green considers strategies that give the research credibility, drawing on her prior work with naturalistic inquiry and contrasting it with her experience of the collaborative phenomenographic project.

Barnacle, a phenomenologist, highlights in chapter 4 the experience of team analysis processes from her position on the crisis of interpretation as derived from Gadamer. She reflects on her initial concerns with the analysis processes (specifically the development of categories of description) and how these were resolved. Further, Barnacle draws attention to the seductive nature of the text, the potential wildcard that may emerge (things hinted at but not made explicit in the text), and ponders the role of the researcher in such situations. Similarly, she explores the role of the question and the issue of not just what is being said, but also what is not being made explicit. Her story ends with questions for researchers to pose when engaged in phenomenographic inquiry and the need to struggle with ambiguity.

Cherry’s story in chapter 5 comes from a researcher with a history of action research. She recalls the journey into phenomenography, and the questions that arose and shifted as she grew more familiar with the approach. Cherry considers what she perceives to be key assumptions underpinning the approach as well as the issues of rigour. The search for clarity about how to do phenomenographic research, as in the stories by Green and Barnacle, is discussed and addressed, at least in part, in this story.

Those are the four stories on success in research. What follows in chapter 6 is a story by Åkerlind which tells of an analysis of interview
data collected during her PhD research some years before about ways of experiencing being a university researcher. Åkerlind describes the journey into phenomenography as an individual process. Unlike the previous stories which emerged from a team investigation, Åkerlind’s story reveals her individual shift from positivistic, experimental psychology to phenomenography. Like the other stories, she explores initial misgivings or hesitations, and then moves on to describe the ways in which phenomenography worked for her project. Her discussion of interviewing and analysis are central to her story and readers will find this most practical. The theoretical stance taken by Åkerlind is made clear and well justified. Åkerlind’s story is a must for those weighing up the pros and cons of working on phenomenographic analysis as an individual or as part of a team process.

The next chapter provides a reflective analysis of the five perspectives described above. In order to probe further our understandings and reflections on our own experiences of phenomenography as a team endeavour, Åkerlind conducted a focus group interview with the four researchers – Bowden, Green, Barnacle and Cherry. What flowed from that session, which was over three hours in duration, was a discussion of what troubled us, what we assumed, what worked, what convinced us with respect to rigour, and what value we derived from the overall experience of conducting phenomenography. Åkerlind, Bowden and Green analysed the four stories and the transcript of the focus group interview and drew out the different perspectives on a number of common themes which provide the basis for chapter 7.

Moving on from the five research stories of phenomenography and their analysis, the book provides explicit details of the inherent methods. In chapter 8, Åkerlind provides a comprehensive, coherent analysis of phenomenographic research methods, leaving few questions unanswered about the practicalities or their theoretical justification. Derived from the methods chapter of her doctoral thesis, chapter 8 in this monograph describes in detail the methods employed in her study of the development of academics and looks at sampling, interview design and conduct, analysis, and presentation of research findings. Further, she explores relationality between phenomena as well as validity and reliability checks.

The reader might well anticipate a similar methods chapter on the collaborative study focusing on success in research. However, given that the initial four stories describe the methods and also that there is a detailed findings chapter, the explication of the methods used in that collaborative study was seen to exist within the book already.
The outcomes of the study on ways of seeing success in research by active researchers are described by Bowden, Green, Barnacle, Cherry and Usher in chapter 9. The final outcomes were developed by an iterative process in which various versions were produced, criticised, re-analysed and modified to yield the next version. In all, eight versions formed the chain of analysis and the initial draft of the categories of description is presented here, alongside versions 2 and 3. Note that all of the eight iterations are provided in full in Appendix A. The differences between the first three iterations are explored here (as well as in some of the team stories) and the importance of time, reflexivity, discussion, and also fidelity to the transcripts are emphasised. A detailed presentation of the final categories of description is made using relevant excerpts from the 24 transcripts upon which the findings are based. Note that the categories of description fall across transcripts. What the findings reveal is a pool of meanings across individuals that, in this case, have yielded five categories. The relationality between the categories is explored and presented. Dimensions are depicted in matrix table form to illustrate structure, enabling a further way of seeing or interpreting the data.

Chapter 10 describes the outcomes from Åkerlind’s analysis of data collected but not dealt with during her doctoral study on ways of experiencing being a university researcher. The chapter presents the categories of description, each with illustrative quotes. Moving into a discussion of the structural relationships between the categories, Åkerlind considers critical patterns of variation and what they mean in terms of hierarchy. Having examined patterns of variation between categories, she then moves to discuss patterns within categories. Åkerlind also examines the change process as the analysis proceeds and the different versions of the categories of description are provided in Appendix B.

The decision to include the appendices in this monograph is a conscious one that is in keeping with the spirit of the whole monograph. Not unexpectedly, most editors and publishers encourage authors to be efficient and economical in terms of the number of words used. As a consequence, most journal articles and book chapters highlight the essence of the research method used and present the final research outcomes in succinct form. Readers may well perceive a very neat process and outcome that belie the complex and often haphazard pathways that most research actually follows. Simple presentation of the beginning and end points mask that tortuous pathway. We wanted to communicate to readers a range of aspects of the research experience that includes the curiosity and commitment that
drive it on the one hand, and the doubts, the confusion, the pain, the false starts and the joy of making a breakthrough on the other. Hence, the focus in many of the stories is on the feelings each researcher experienced, the difficulties they faced, and the experiences that helped them move forward. We believe that researchers who are new to phenomenography or to qualitative research in general will be advantaged by reading such ‘warts-and-all’ accounts. We also believe that such readers would find it interesting to examine the ‘research outcomes’ in their various interim forms as the process of iteration transforms earlier drafts until eventually some closure is reached. Hence, the appendices have been included.

Thus, the monograph presents two major research projects based on phenomenographic ways of working from a variety of viewpoints. It seeks to present variation rather than ‘pretend’ that there is one agreed way of doing phenomenography. We aim to encourage the reader to consider phenomenography as a way of researching. Whether or not this is appropriate depends on the nature of the question and the methodological leanings and personal preferences of the researcher.

Ways of reading this monograph

There are numerous ways to read this monograph. We give a few options, but encourage readers to make their own way. Given the content and structure of the book, the reader is presented with a range of options in terms of how to proceed. While we do not want to be seen as pedantic or overly methodical, we do feel the need to make suggestions. Of course, the reader might choose to dip in and out of the chapters randomly, but we would suggest one or more of the following ways into the text.

i) Read from cover to cover as it is sequenced. Then reread the stories (chapters 2–6) again with respect to the discussion (chapter 7) or the method by Åkerlind (chapter 8).

OR

ii) Skip the stories, read about the methods (chapter 8), and then the findings or outcomes (chapters 9 and 10), followed by the stories for reflection (chapters 2–6). Other chapters are optional at this stage.

OR

iii) Read for each study. For example, read Åkerlind’s chapters on method (chapter 8), outcomes (chapter 10) and her story (chapter 6). Similarly, read about the collaborative project
through the stories by Bowden (chapter 2), Green (chapter 3), Barnacle (chapter 4), and Cherry (chapter 5), and the outcomes chapter by Bowden et al (chapter 9). If you want a contrast between two approaches to phenomenography (the team effort and the individual), then read both strands finishing with the discussion (chapter 7).

The reader will also note that, for ease of flow and to avoid repetition, the references for all chapters have been collated into one list at the end of the book rather than at the end of each chapter.