

An introduction to phenomenographic research

Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston

(a) Information School, University of Sheffield, UK

(b) University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Abstract

This article describes the structure of the workshop on phenomenography which was presented at the EAHIL+ICAHIS+ICLC workshop in Edinburgh, in June 2015. Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach, used to discover variation in peoples conceptions of a phenomenon. After introducing this research approach, there was a discussion of a phenomenographic study and the workshop finished with participants coding an example transcript as practice for data analysis.

Key words: phenomenography; research; data analysis.

In this workshop the facilitators (Webber and Johnston) started by giving a brief overview of what phenomenography was, and some examples of phenomenographic research. Marton (1) defined phenomenography as: “the empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, conceptualise various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us”. Thus it is a qualitative research approach which provides insights into the variation of conceptions or experiences that people have of a phenomenon. The phenomenon might be, for example, learning (as in Marton’s original studies), information literacy, or, in the medical context, a specific illness, or (2) operating room efficiency. Data is normally gathered via interviews, in which you are aiming to find out how the person you are interviewing conceives of the phenomenon you are investigating. You pool all the interview transcripts and analyse them together, so you can describe concisely the different ways in which your interviewees, between them, think about or experience the phenomenon. Some examples of phenomenographic studies carried out by researchers in the information and library field are: Wheeler’s (3) study of librarians’ conceptions of themselves as teachers; the facilitators’ own research into academics’

conceptions of information literacy, and pedagogy for information literacy (4, 5); Yates et al.’s (6) investigation into older Australians’ experiences of health information literacy and Hornung’s (7) research into Irish solo librarians’ conceptions of Continuing Professional Development.

In the next section of the workshop, participants discussed an article which they had been asked to read in advance, a Swedish study (8) investigating nurses’ conceptions of caring. The article provided a description of the context and rationale for the study, the methods, and the results. The authors discovered four conceptions of caring (caring as person-centredness, caring as safeguarding the patient’s best interests, caring as nursing interventions and caring as contextually intertwined). The researchers also discussed practical implications: this flagged up the fact that phenomenographic results can be used to inform policy, professional development and practice.

After this exercise, the facilitators worked through some key aspects of phenomenography (e.g. shaping the research question, identifying the sample and carrying out the interview). A phenomenographic study should result, firstly, in categories of description (identifying each of the different ways in which people conceive of the phenomenon) and,

Address for correspondence: Sheila Webber, Centre for Information Literacy Research, Information School, The University of Sheffield, 211 Portobello Street, Sheffield, S1 4DP, UK. E-mail: s.webber@sheffield.ac.uk

secondly, an outcome space that shows how the categories are related. In this workshop, the facilitators concentrated on the first type of analysis. The participants were given an example interview transcript, and asked to identify quotations which they thought exemplified some aspect of the interviewee's conception(s) of information literacy. Following on from this, they were asked to share and compare their insights, and then there was a whole-group discussion.

Points that were raised included the importance (and sometimes, difficulty) of "bracketing" (putting to one side) your own opinions about the phenomenon you were investigating when you were interviewing and analysing (9). The value of the interview itself was also highlighted. Just asking someone to talk about the phenomenon could raise their awareness of it, and provide insights that might enable you to collaborate more effectively with the interviewee.

The slides for the workshop presentation are on the conference website and also at <http://www.slideshare.net/sheilawebber/an-introduction-to-phenomenographic-research>

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