

Phenomenography as a research method in management research

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Abstract

In qualitative management research the researcher is sometimes confronted with questions about the use of theory, the value of the empirical findings and the relation between the researcher and his/her informants. This paper presents phenomenography as a research method and describes how the phenomenographic researcher tries to struggle with these dilemmas. At the same time it presents the argumentation for a practical use of the method also in management research.

Introduction

Phenomenography is a qualitative research method used when exploring conceptions. Ference Marton drew up the term “phenomenography” in 1981 but it was developed in the seventies in Gothenburg with the aim of describing differences in conceptions in learning situations (Dall’Alba, 1996). It is thus a quite young approach originally used in the area of pedagogy. Although the approach still today is quite unheard of in other research disciplines it has started to gain supporters and can nowadays be seen as an interdisciplinary research method (Uljens, 1989:21).

A phenomenographic researcher’s object of interest is a second order perspective –i.e. how the *individual* conceive their world.

“in order to make sense of how people *handle* problems, situations, the world, we have to understand the way in which they *experience* the problems, the situations, the world, that they are handling or in relation to which they are acting. Accordingly, a capability for *acting* in a certain way reflects a capability *experiencing* something in a certain way.”

(Marton & Booth, 1997:111)

To explore this second order perspective the researcher uses *interviews*, where the aim is to receive a *variation* of qualitative different ways to conceptualise a phenomenon.

With the *empirical findings*, central in this method, the phenomenographic researcher strives to understand the answer to the short but powerful question “how?” The *categorisation* of different ways of conceptualising a subjective reality can be seen as the main research result in the conducted study. The categories are made up of both unique and collective voices in the empirical material since the aim is, once again, to strive for variation in the material instead of to value conceptions upon frequency in the material.

To explore ways of conceptualising a subjective reality through interviews, to ask the question how instead of why, to allow variation to be present in the material and to give the empirical findings a central part of the research is the aim of many research projects within management research. Phenomenography is a practical research approach for this kind of projects, and can with advantage also be considered in management research (see for example Sandberg, 1994).

However, to present a research approach in a few pages is hard. The aim of this paper is therefore to arouse interest in the method by showing how it answers some of the methodological questions that a researcher in a qualitative research project is confronted with. For further methodological readings, phenomenographic literature as Uljens (1989), Sandberg (1994), Dall’Alba (1996) and Marton & Booth (1997) can be recommended.

How can self-evident conceptions be explored?

The main interest within the phenomenographic approach is how the individual conceptualises her reality. In order to get to these conceptions, a phenomenographer uses in-depth interviews (Alexandersson, 1994).

A conception is often seen as something self-evident, which can be difficult to talk about. The challenge is to get the informants to tell about things they many times have not even reflected upon. In other words, in order to receive a holistic access to the phenomenon the researcher has to understand the informant better than the informant does herself.

To be able to do this and since phenomenography is an interpretative method, the researcher needs a rich empirical material to work with, i.e. stories instead of structured answers.

While a phenomenographic researcher is looking for subjective truths about the reality there can be no questions of right or wrong in the interview. The reality is always subjectively true! The questions should instead be formulated as abstract as the informants are given the possibility to define, to delimit and to deal with the question from their own perspective and life situation. One aid in the phenomenographic in-depth interview is to use the silent cards-technique (Österåker, 2001) that allows the informants to formulate and answer their own questions out of cards with abstract pictures and words.

How is the voice of the informants preserved in the research?

Sometimes a qualitative researcher gets the feeling that she kills the object of interest. A vivid story is transferred to a death piece of text (see Salzer-Mörling, 1998). The informants are offering their lives (!) for a few sentences, a space which they furthermore have to share with other informants as a collective voice. How do the researcher mediate the stories of the informants to the reader? This is a question raised in every discipline that uses qualitative research methods as for instance interviews.

Fontana & Frey discuss “polyphonic interviewing” where they aim at recording the voice of the subject with minimal bias. The voices of the subjects should not be collapsed together and reported as one, through the interpretation of the researcher. Instead, the multiple perspectives of the various subjects are reported and differences and problems encountered are discussed, rather than glossed over. (1994:369)

According to Strauss & Corbin we are obliged to give life to the actors we have studied. To let them live in the research material, to give them voice albeit in the context of their own inevitable interpretations and to tell their stories, will allow this. We are obliged to show them how they are interpreted and what we have learned from our meeting with them. (1994:281)

In phenomenography the use of quotations is essential and makes the informants survive the analytic stage of a research process. This since the use of quotations shows the informants contribution to the text and transforms the role of the researcher into the role of a mouthpiece. The acceptance of variation, even the strive for it, made by phenomenographic researchers enables the different voices to be heard in the material. Since a single statement can create a category, the voice of the subject is heard although the others do not share it.

In scientific work, the primary criteria of quality is the reader's trust in the researcher and her work. The use of quotations can be seen as a tool to create this trust, since they help the reader to understand the empirical findings and judge if the researcher has made a fair interpretation of it. This way, quotations offer a choice to the reader, whether to accept the interpretation of the researcher or to question, re-interpret, reject e t c. Science should not be forced feeding...

Woodruffe-Burton (1998) points out, in order to let other researchers interpret and judge the findings, the need to reproduce the informants' stories as natural and trustworthy as possible. According to her, more insights will be yield out of a combined effort of different researchers analysing, understanding and interpreting data than those efforts made by any one individual researcher. It would be naïve of the researcher to believe that her interpretation would be the only right one to be made and it should be the readers right to judge its value.

What is the value of a single statement?

As researchers we are sometimes faced with the problem of huge variation in the informants' stories. We ask ourselves, is a single, unique, statement as good as a statement shared by many informants? The answer to the question is crucial, since it is often the single, unique statement that generates new understanding. The collective statements are often already explored and hence usually a part of the researchers pre-understanding.

In relation to this discussion, a discussion about the ability of a person to function as an informant can be made. An informant is on a higher level than the respondent, who only answers structured questions. An informant knows the culture and is able to reflect on it and in words formulate to the interviewer what is going on (Merriam, 1994:90). Let's suppose that some people are better suited than others for the role as informants, in the respect that they more easily are able to describe the phenomenon of interest. This will lead to the fact that these informants mention things that others are incapable of expressing. However, this is not the same as to claim that the later persons do not possess the same thoughts as the informants. If the ability to function as informants is personal and independent of the knowledge and conceptions possessed by the individual, a unique statement in the empirical material is not necessarily the same as a unique thought or conception in the material.

In phenomenography variations in the empirical findings are something to strive for. This since they increase the possibility to generalise the empirical findings. Within phenomenography, every statement is of equal value, independent of the number of informants sharing it. The number of categories, variation, contributes to the possibility to generalise the theory, not the numbers within the category. Considering the fact that a concept is the substance a person gives to a relation between him and his surrounding will make every conception of great value.

“If a researcher do not put equal importance into all statements, there is an obvious risk that the interpretation is more a result of the researcher's pre-understanding than a result of lived experiences by the informants as stated in the interviewing text” (Solér, 1997:109)

Already the knowledge about that variations in conceptions do exist, enables us to explore the conceptions of the individual. To realise the variety of different ways of conceptualising a phenomena that exists is to form a basis of reflection. One important thing is that this critical reflection can lead to the rejection of assumptions taken for granted. We do not see them, as objective truths anymore, something that helps us understand other people.

How can I learn something new if I only ask about things I already know?

The interest of the phenomenographic researcher is how the people see the world. If it from a theoretical view is the correct way of seeing it or not does not matter as long as their subjective opinion is received.

What something is or what something is said to be is in phenomenography described as the first and second order perspective (Marton, 1981). The first order perspective consists of facts, that can be observed from outside, while the interest from a second order perspective lays in how somebody experience something. In phenomenography the focus is on the later one. Alexandersson (1994:111) describes these perspectives as different ways of asking questions about the truth. One can whether ask what the reality looks like and why it has these characteristics (first order) or one could ask how people experience and thinks about this reality (second order). The results acquired from a second order perspective can be seen as more original, since they cannot be derived from research within a first level perspective (Uljens, 1989:14). To focus the second order perspective is hence to accept an empirical based research method.

In phenomenographic research the analytic work is made without a certain theory in mind (Larsson, 1986:23). Instead of talking about inductive logic, which seems too rigid in everyday science, a research project by Andersen, Borum, Kristensen and Karnoe (1995) will be described. In their research theory has played an important role, but not until later in the process as a supplier of concepts and models that could capture and facilitate a sharper interpretation of significant empirical observations. Theoretical concepts function as words that facilitate and lead to a dawning understanding. Uljens, however, states that the research findings have to be discussed in relation to earlier research, whether this research has been made within the same approach or not (1989:43).

With the reference to theory and earlier research Uljens follows the fundamental principle of science that there can be no empirical findings without theory. Although we as researchers state that we are using an inductive or abductive approach the emphasis on theory is strong. If you are a researcher with a minor interest in theory you will sooner or later have problems in the beautiful world of science. The aim of

research is either to test theory (deductive logic) or to generate theory (inductive logic). Furthermore we have abductive logic that seems to offer you a choice if you find the two others too rigid.

However, sometimes we have cases where theories about the studied object already exist, as small parts ignorant of the existence of each other. The problem is that nobody has ever seen their connection to the object of interest and collected them as a single theory about the phenomenon. As they already have been generated the task of the researcher will be to find them and combine the existing theories with the purpose to generate new understanding. In these kinds of projects the phenomenographic researcher functions as a detective with the informants as trackers. The theories in point and their combination to each other are revealed by the statements of the informants present in the empirical material. Phenomenography can therefore be increased with a third order perspective, the contextual reality (see figure 1).

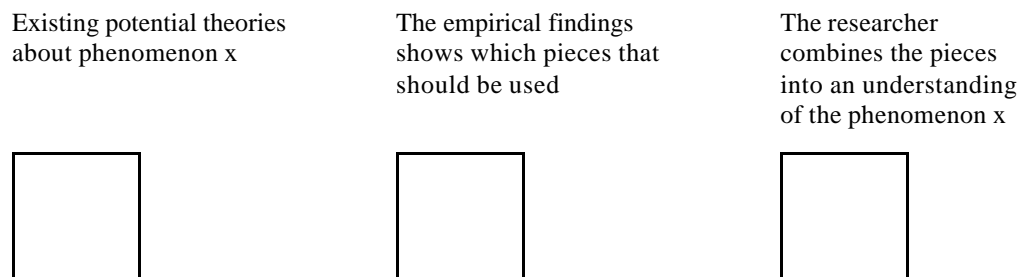


Figure 1. The third level perspective - the objective reality is combined into new understanding according to the subjects' value of it.

When the first order perspective can be seen as an objective reality, which consists of facts, that can be observed from outside, the second order perspective can be seen as a subjective reality about how somebody experience something. The third order perspective will form a contextual reality as it consists of the way the objective reality is combined according to the subjects' conceptions of it. Here the empirical findings function not as in inductive logic as a generator of theory, but as an indicator of relevant existing theories that should be combined for new understanding about a phenomenon. If the importance of an existing theory is observed in the empirical

findings it creates a new understanding in the context in which the study has been conducted. The contextual reality is hence an understanding based upon existing theories selected by the subjective value given by the informants.

Conclusions

In qualitative management research the researcher is sometimes confronted with questions about the use of theory, the value of the empirical findings and the relation between the researcher and his/her informants. This paper has described how the phenomenographic researcher tries to struggle with the dilemmas.

To accept the phenomenographic approach is also to accept the strive for variation, the participation of the informants in the research material and the focus on the empirical findings. This paper has presented the argumentation for a practical use of the method also in management research. The limitation of the paper is the insignificant philosophical background to phenomenography. The paper should instead be used to arouse interest for the method and to function as a starting-point if the reader wants to dig deeper into the subject.

For researchers already aware of the phenomenographic approach the paper has raised the question of a need for a third order perspective –the contextual reality. In some research projects the theory should not be tested or generated, but combined into new understanding. The value of existing theories should from a phenomenographic perspective be indicated by the informants' subjective conceptions.

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