

Conceptions of Value as Family Resemblances: A Theoretical Model and Methodology

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Abstract

This paper discusses actors' conceptions of the nature of value. Value is an important facet in contemporary management paradigms and an integral part of business and education. Yet research over many years has failed to discover an essence or necessary condition of value. Consequently, the nature of value remains unclear. Recent research suggests that value is individual and experiential, and is more appropriately conceptualised in terms of family resemblances. Conceptualising value as a family supports a proposition that the nature of value may differ between people, time and place, though some aspects of it may be the same. In the context of a UK university, we combine a new theoretical approach to understanding value with an adapted *phenomenographic* methodology and method. Thus, we are able to discover different conceptions of value while retaining the ability to build common understanding in a given context. Data are collected by means of interviews and narrative reports from actors at strategic and operational levels of a UK university, postgraduate students and prospective employers. Analysis is by means of computer-aided lexical analysis and template analysis.

Keywords: Value, family resemblances, phenomenography, conceptions, computer-aided lexical analysis, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Value has been studied extensively for more than two thousand years, yet there is still no agreement over its meaning (Francis *et al.*, 2014; Zeithaml, 1988). In attempting to understand the nature of value there does not appear to be an essence, something that is common to all instances of it. Instead, what is evident is that conceptions of value differ between people and places. Since Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article proposing an evolution towards a new service dominant logic of marketing (SD logic) the concept of value has achieved new prominence. The importance of value has also been identified by Ostrom *et al.* (2010) who suggest that measuring and optimizing value is a key area for research. However, their focus is on measurement and metrics rather than on understanding what value actually means. In other research Holbrook (1996) argues for an understanding of the interactive and relativistic characteristics of the customer. It is the theme of *experience* in understanding value and the value creation process that is proposed by Ojasalo (2010), who suggests that customer experiences result from situations where the customer defines and creates value. Other researchers (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2012; Helkkula *et al.*, 2012; Mele & Polese, 2011) also discuss the importance of experience in value creation and co-creation, while arguing that value is phenomenologically based. Attempting to understand value phenomenologically implies that there is some property that is common to all instances of it. In counterpoint is the notion that value is experienced individually by actors depending on context, where conceptions of value may contain no common feature. Using a phenomenological approach to understand individuals' conceptions of value leads to methodological tension, which our research aims to address.

The studies of a number of researchers (e.g. Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013; Kohli, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2006) reinforce the timeliness and importance of our research, suggesting the need for a new approach to understanding the nature of value. Payne *et al.* (2008) also call for research into understanding what customers actually do when they co-create value. While much research effort has focused on the creation and co-creation of

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value, and the actions of producers and consumers, there is little research directed towards understanding the underlying nature of value itself (Grönroos, 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The objectives of this study are to investigate actors' conceptions of value in a UK university. In conducting the research we aim to discover what actors conceive value to be, and what similarities and differences in conceptions occur within the educational supply chain. Our investigation encompasses four groups of actors in higher education: 1) strategic level - actors in the higher echelons of university management (e.g. DVC, PVC, Dean); 2) operational level - actors engaged in delivering educational programs; 3) postgraduate business students; and 4) potential business employers. In this research we aim to provide a means of understanding the nature of value based on the notion of family resemblances rather than continuing a seemingly fruitless search for an essence of value.

Considering value in terms of family resemblances is a new approach that provides clarity in understanding the nature of value. In proposing this we argue that there is no essence or necessary condition present in all instances of value. Instead value should be regarded as belonging to a family. This is the gap in academic literature and theory that this research aims to address. In doing this our contributions to theory and practice are fourfold: First, we provide an overview of the extensive literature on the topic of value. Second, through the lens of family resemblances, we address the issues present in previous research where value is conceptualized as being both phenomenologically (i.e. expressed in terms of a necessary condition or essence) and experientially based (i.e. expressed through actors' different conceptions of value). In this stage we provide a theoretical model to guide future research into the nature of value. Third, we propose an innovative application of developmental *phenomenography* as an approach to guide future research. The approach usually used in developmental phenomenography is adapted by the use of different methods of data collection and analysis from those traditionally used in studies of this kind. Our use of the *phenomenographic* method enables the study to be conducted parsimoniously yet rigorously, and provides a model for future studies. Finally, we provide a research outline for investigating actors' conceptions of value in Higher Education (HE) using the theoretical model, methodology and method. The research is important as it provides a new basis for understanding the nature of value, thus resolving a long standing research issue.

2. BACKGROUND

Value theory is of fundamental importance to our current conceptions of both the production system and supply chain as value delivery mechanisms. The notion of value delivery is likewise fundamental to numerous contemporary operations and management paradigms (COMPs) that have presented themselves as business improvement methodologies over the last three decades – such as Lean Thinking (Womack & Jones, 1996; Womack *et al.*, 1990), Total Quality Management (Fiegenbaum, 1983), Six Sigma (Harry, 1988; Pande *et al.*, 2001) and Agility (Christopher *et al.*, 1999; Goldman & Nagel, 1993). Lean techniques have also diffused into HE in recent years (Jones *et al.*, 2014). While improvement in HE is desirable, we argue that Lean University Programs (LUPs) suffer from three inherent fallacies. First, there has been a failure to recognise the complex, networked nature of value domains. Second, Lean is an approach that aims to eliminate craftsmanship, yet higher education is characterised by craft work, resulting in paradox. Third, the uncritical acceptance by LUPs of claims made by institutional elites that they desire to maximise or enhance value for stakeholders (Jones *et al.*, 2014). Actors' conceptions of value underpin each of the three fallacies. Therefore, understanding the nature of value as conceived by stakeholders in HE is the starting point in any discussion of effective LUPs.

In other research Ramsay (2005, p. 563) argues that the words 'value' and 'value-chain' are "...currently used with a bewildering variety of disparate meanings..." Elsewhere, the nature of value has been conceptualized as "...the quality or fact of being excellent, useful or desirable..." (Baier & Rescher, 1969, p. 1). What is clear is that there is no agreement over the nature of value. There does not appear to be an essence, something that is common to all instances of value. Instead, it is evident that the nature of value means different things to different people, making a single wholly satisfactory answer to its meaning unlikely (Najder, 1975).

What people value has a direct impact on attitudes, and an indirect influence on behaviors. Personally held values suggest that it is not possible to determine *a priori* which global values will be aligned with which domain specific values, with linkages only being determined by empirical research (Xie *et al.*, 2008). Also, personal values have not often been considered in previous research (Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). Since Vargo and Lusch's (2004) seminal article proposing an evolution towards a new service dominant logic of marketing, value has achieved new prominence in business research. Within an extensive literature discussions of value in the service domain are most relevant for our research and this is the basis for their selection.

Lindgreen and Wynstra (2005) suggest that the concept of value has long been a fundamental part of business. Value creation and co-creation have also been recognized as key elements (Woodruff & Flint, 2006), with customer value being regarded as fundamental (Holbrook, 1996). Despite the primacy of value in business markets it is surprising how poorly the characteristics or properties of value, especially its nature, are understood by both academic and practitioner alike. Tracing the development of research on value Lindgreen and Wynstra (2005) argue the need for increased research effort to develop theory about value, highlighting what it is that consumers' value and how this can be delivered. Their research suggests that value may vary with time, place and the use to which goods or services are put. In proposing research priorities Ostrom *et al.* (2010) identify measuring and optimizing the value of service as key areas, although the focus is on measurement and metrics rather than on understanding what value actually means. In other research Ojasalo (2010) suggests that customers' experiences in understanding value and the value creation process result from situations where the customer defines and creates value.

The need for research into how customers engage in the co-creation of value is a theme articulated by Payne *et al.* (2008), where the authors develop a framework for understanding value co-creation. In their research the authors discuss value creation and co-creation and claim to provide new insights into managing the processes of value creation. However, the nature of value again is not clear. Payne *et al.* (2008) argue that customers create value through activities that achieve goals using processes that are dynamic, non-linear and often unconscious. Payne *et al.* (2008) also call for research into understanding what customers actually do when they create value. However, we argue that understanding what customers actually do is different from understanding the qualitatively different ways in which actors experience value.

In other research Mele and Polese (2011) argue that value creation refers to value-in-experience, as resources to be shared and exchanged by all actors to achieve certain aims. The notion of shared value is also discussed by Chen *et al.* (2012) where value is embedded within experience through shared experiences. The importance of the social world in understanding value is proposed by Edvardsson *et al.* (2011), suggesting that value is embedded in social systems and therefore is socially constructed. Helkkula *et al.* (2012) argue that the role of experience in the way value is conceptualized is extended to customers' lived experiences, with customers making sense of value through their experiences of phenomena in their life world. We extend this notion of experience in our consideration of the nature of value.

Vargo and Lusch (2008, p. 7) discuss the need to recognize the networked nature of value. They argue that value is phenomenologically determined. They propose a new foundational premise (Fp10) of SD logic whereby '...value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary', further explaining value as being '...idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning laden.' The use of terms such as 'idiosyncratic', 'phenomenological' and 'experience' interchangeably by Vargo and Lusch (2008) is in our view problematic. The individualistic natures of idiosyncratic and experiential behaviors are at odds with the search for an essence or necessary condition implied by phenomenology, which results in an inappropriate methodological approach.

In summary, value has been extensively researched, particularly in recent times since Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article proposing SD logic. While much research effort has focused on attempting to explain how value is created and co-created, most research (with the notable exception of Grönroos 2008, 2011, and Grönroos and Voima 2013) has failed to advance understanding of the properties or characteristics (i.e. the nature) of value. The current study aims to provide an approach to understanding the nature of value and to operationalize this through an appropriate methodology and method.

2.1 Conceptions of value and phenomenology

As discussed above many previous studies (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2012; Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011; Grönroos, 2011, 2012; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Heinonen *et al.*, 2013; Helkkula *et al.*, 2012; Lusch *et al.*, 2008; Ojasalo, 2010) have described value creation as a phenomenon arising from a phenomenological process. They also argue for the importance of both experience, and sense making through experience, in value creation. In reviewing SD logic Grönroos and Voima (2013, p. 146) suggest that a foundational premise is flawed, arguing that value is cumulative and based on the experiences and perceptions of customers. Grönroos and Voima's (2013) proposal highlights, but fails to resolve, the tension between a phenomenon (value) that is argued as being phenomenologically based, yet is uniquely experienced by the customer in a particular context. Following Grönroos and Voima's (2013) line of thought, customers experience the characteristics and properties of value (i.e. its nature) in qualitatively different ways. If this is so, and in response to the call for research methods that have been applied less frequently in service research (e.g. Grönroos & Voima, 2013), a ground breaking alternative to phenomenology is needed.

The alternative requires a focus on the qualitatively different ways people make sense of phenomena in their lifeworld rather than the search for an essence. Regarding value as belonging to a 'family' is the first step in the process (Fisher *et al.*, 2015).

Wittgenstein (1969, 2000, 2006) challenges the notion that a concept must be expressed in terms of necessary conditions, or essences. Wittgenstein (2000, p. 65) argues that phenomena may have no single thing in common, no essence that 'makes us use one word for all'. However, despite the absence of an essence, phenomena may be related in 'many different ways'. He provides an explanation by showing that there is no common factor or essence of what we call a 'game', instead what we see is a complicated network of overlapping similarities.

As Wittgenstein suggests there is no characteristic common to all games, only resemblances between members of the family of games. In the same way that Wittgenstein expresses a game as a belonging to a family, with no common factor, we argue that value also cannot be expressed in terms of necessary conditions. There is no essence of value; instead it should be understood as forming a family. Thinking of value as forming a family is consistent with Najder's (1975) contention that there is not likely to be a single wholly satisfactory answer (i.e. essence) that explains the nature of value.

In discussing family resemblances Wittgenstein (2000) advocates that in investigating a phenomenon we should first *look and see*, as seeing demands consideration of what is open to view. Seeing is grounded in the shared world connecting people and other aspects of the world, an activity that involves differences (Genova 1995, p.57). Second, we should *think*, as thinking tends to focus on identities and essences (Genova, 1995, p. 57). Finally, we should *do*, or take action. Wittgenstein is advocating an experiential way of understanding based on *look-think-do* and linking it with consideration of family resemblances.

Wittgenstein's argument is that thinking about a phenomenon or phenomena tends to produce essences, or result in a fruitless search for an essence. When we think about a phenomenon as the first step we instinctively search for essences and logic that we believe exists. Wittgenstein (2000) argues that in thinking we convince ourselves that the ideal must be found in reality, yet we have not yet seen how it occurs. Thinking means we lose sight of the 'disorder of things' (Genova, 1995, p. 58). On the other hand looking and seeing shows the family resemblances between concepts based on the experiences of actors, discovering differences not essences. Seeing resists the temptation to get involved with theoretical possibilities and enables us to see particulars, based on differences (Genova, 1995, p. 57).

Regarding value as a family is the first step in addressing the tension that arises from considering value as being phenomenologically determined yet qualitatively different based on the experiences of actors. The implications of applying Wittgenstein's philosophy of family resemblances to questions about the nature of value, and how it is created, are that value can now be conceived as wholly experiential. This allows that the nature of value may differ between people, time and place, or some aspects of it may be the same. To support understanding value in terms of family resemblances an appropriate methodology is needed to guide research.

3. METHODOLOGY

Previous research into the nature of value has either taken its meaning as a given or in attempting to understand it has mainly followed a positivistic approach based on measurement. Yet despite extensive research no essence or necessary condition of value has been established. Other research in recent years (e.g. Grönroos, 2012; Grönroos & Voima, 2013) suggests that the nature of value is not likely to be discovered through a dualistic ontology and positivistic epistemology (i.e. through positivism), and an interpretive approach may be more appropriate. In many studies phenomenology is suggested as a suitable methodology, although we argue that its use is not consistent with an idiosyncratic and experiential view of the nature of value. Indeed, most interpretive methodologies (e.g. phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory) have minimal focus on, and consequently fail to account adequately for, variation in people's experiences (Sandberg, 1995; Tesch, 1990).

3.1 Applying family resemblances to conceptions of value

Using Wittgenstein's philosophy of family resemblances to understand how value may be conceived requires a different research approach. As we identified when we were reviewing recent research into value the primary purpose of phenomenological research is to identify the essence of individual experiences as described by research participants, a first-order perspective based on characteristics of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As an extensive body of research has failed to identify an essence of value we rejected phenomenology as a research

approach, looking instead for one that can accommodate the *different* ways in which actors experience phenomena. In order to identify all possible ways of experiencing value from the viewpoint of actors in the HE service supply chain an innovative methodology based on *phenomenography* was selected (Marton 1981, 1986).

Phenomenography goes beyond the approach of phenomenology by mapping the qualitative variations people encounter in experiencing phenomena in their lifeworld. Larsson and Holmström (2007) explain the methodological differences of *phenomenographic* research from those of phenomenology. They suggest that the primary difference is that *phenomenographic* research focuses on variation within human experience whereas phenomenological studies emphasize the meaning structure of human experience (Kobayashi, 2009; Larsson & Holmström, 2007). In *phenomenography* the focus is on the *relationships* between the phenomenon under investigation and the actors experiencing it, the link between the conceiving act (the mind) and the object of conception, rather than on the phenomenon and actors themselves (Marton, 1981). *Phenomenography* uses a second-order perspective by seeing the world through the eyes of people experiencing it, as opposed to the first-person perspective of phenomenology. A second-order perspective allows the researcher to reach new understandings within the context in which the study is being conducted (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Phenomenography provides an approach for understanding actors' conceptions of value based on family membership by accommodating the different ways in which the nature of value may be conceived. It is a qualitative approach in which data are usually collected by means of interviews, though other methods such as observation and verbal and/or written reports may also be used (Sandberg, 1995, 2000). Once data collection has been completed data are analyzed *en bloc* rather than on an individual basis as in other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Analysis mainly consists of answering *what* and *how* questions (Sandberg, 2000). Previous phenomenographic research suggests that phenomena are experienced in a limited number of ways (Bowden, 2000; Kobayashi, 2009; Sandberg, 2000). Establishing the limited conceptions of value as experienced by actors suggests that its nature may be established in different contexts, leading to a holistic picture of conceptions of value experienced by actors in that context. Phenomenography is increasingly being used in business research, for example in a study of human competence at work (Sandberg, 2000), in tourism studies (Govers *et al.*, 2007; Ryan, 2000), in understanding quality improvement processes (Kobayashi, 2009) and in service research (Di Mascio, 2010). Phenomenography has also been used as a means of understanding student learning in HE (Prosser, 1993; Trigwell, 2000; Trigwell & Prosser, 1997).

A major feature of *phenomenography* that distinguishes it from other interpretive methodologies is illustrated by the observation that students in the same learning environment learn in different ways (Marton, 1981; Säljö, 1981). These observations were also noted in other educational studies (e.g. Prosser, 1993; Trigwell & Prosser, 1997). Based on his findings Marton (1986, pp. 30-31) concluded that 'when investigating people's understanding of various phenomena, concepts, and principles, we repeatedly found that each phenomenon, concept, or principle can be understood in a limited number of qualitative ways'. The limited number of ways in which conceptions may be understood is important for this study as it suggests that in addition to identifying differences in conceptions of value it may be possible to identify similarities within a particular context.

Phenomenography promises to resolve the tension created by phenomenology's search for an essence or necessary condition of value, while simultaneously regarding it as experiential and idiosyncratic, though it does have its detractors. One significant critique concerns the small sample sizes often used in *phenomenographic* studies, which researchers with a positivistic mind-set tend to reject it as not meeting measures of statistical generalizability (Åkerlind, 2005). Åkerlind (2005) goes on to argue that in qualitative research each individual response is meaningful, the corollary being that in qualitative research positivistic measures are not applicable. Another critique arising from quantitative research traditions is that of scientific rigor, in particular validity and reliability (Kobayashi, 2009). Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose an alternative to positivistic judgments of validity and reliability, which they call trustworthiness. In this study we achieve trustworthiness in data collection by using mixed methods and in analysis by using multiple methods (e.g. template analysis, computer-aided lexical analysis and manual analysis). Our study also addresses a criticism raised by Green (2005) who argues that trustworthiness has little relevance in *phenomenography* as it relies heavily a single data type, namely interviews. We address the issue raised by Green (2005) by collecting data using multiple methods, namely face-to-face interviews and qualitative narrative reports (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Opiyo *et al.*, 2013). Different methods of data collection and analysis enhance trustworthiness through credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability (McCann & Clark, 2003; Silverman, 2010).

Our research in this study is guided by Bowden's (1994) schema for conducting *phenomenographic* research (see Table 1 below). The steps that guide the research are discussed further below.

Table 1: Phenomenographic research processes

Function	Activity
PLAN	Purpose Strategies
DATA COLLECTION	From Whom? Why? How? Relation to purpose
ANALYSIS	How is it carried out? (Detail?) Who does it? How many? Expertise? Roles?
INTERPRETATION	Relation to purpose? Context of study Context of application Departure(s) from phenomenography

Source: Bowden (1994)

3.2 Planning

In the planning stage we consider the purpose of the research and strategies for conducting it. As discussed above the purpose is to discover what actors in four groups in HE conceive value to be, and what similarities and differences in conceptions occur within and between groups. As foreshadowed above we aim to collect data from senior managers, academic staff delivering L&T, postgraduate business students and potential business employers. We now consider a range of issues connected with the study, including: how to identify the HE enterprise on which to base the study; how to classify and organize strategic decision makers and operational actors; how to align actors with strategic and operational groups; what form data collection should take in order to achieve and maintain parsimony and rigor; how to analyze data; and how to interpret the results. We first consider how to identify the enterprise and the actors within it.

3.3 Identifying the enterprise

Identifying an appropriate business on which to base the study is a key aspect of research of this nature and one that is susceptible to error. However, the challenges of identifying a business on which to base this study did not present an issue as members of the research team were associated with a UK university, which was selected for the research. In the normal course of events we would follow a series of steps, which for completeness are outlined as follows. We neither wish to interview persons from businesses that are not salient to the research, nor fail to interview persons who should be included. In order to provide an efficient means of identifying enterprises we have adapted Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) conditional matrix framework to facilitate a systematic questioning of context. The matrix is a spiral that operates by asking a series of questions at each node (e.g. what enterprises exist at this level, what is their importance in the supply chain) while moving from a global to individual basis. As an added safeguard against an inappropriate selection being made, that is either inappropriate inclusion or exclusion, we complement the matrix with Mitchell's saliency framework (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). The saliency framework provides a means of identifying stakeholders and their relationship to the organization. Having identified the participating businesses we now consider how to establish strategic and operational actors prior to data collection.

3.4 Establishing strategic and operational levels

Having established a salient business we now need to determine how to classify actors in each of the four groups. In order to make the classification we draw on the Shivakumar's (2014) framework, which helps distinguish strategic from operational levels, based on the types of decisions made. Shivakumar (2014) suggests that decisions made at the strategic level significantly alter the scope and commitment of the organization. He describes scope as including: 1) managing markets through the use of business models, products/services and relationships; and 2) managing organizations through people, hierarchies of responsibility and authority, organizational culture and policies. Organizations make commitment through: 1) investments and disinvestments (such as building a factory,

R&D expenditure); 2) relationships (e.g. franchises; joint ventures); 3) public proclamations (e.g. rewards, advertising); and 4) policies and procedures (e.g. business models, information systems, organizational architecture) (p. 85). Strategic decisions are important as they guide decision making at lower levels in the organization. Shivakumar describes strategic decisions as difficult to make as they are often underpinned by 'wicked' problems, which may be without precedence, are difficult to understand and have grave consequences. Actors making strategic decisions that potentially alter scope and commitment, and therefore classified as strategic for this research, include people at DVC, PVC, Dean levels.

Decisions that do not significantly alter the degree of *scope and commitment* are classed as operational or residual decisions (p. 81). Operational decisions are characterised by their routine nature. Examples of operational decisions include procurement and management of inventory, maintenance of equipment, administration of payroll, review of bottlenecks and product quality (p. 86). Following Shivakumar's framework actors making decisions that do not significantly impact scope and commitment, as discussed above, are classified as operational for this research, for example staff delivering L&T. A checklist setting out the criteria for selecting actors as strategic or operational is constructed using Shivakumar's framework. Having identified the characteristics of actors at the strategic and operational levels we now consider how to commence data collection from these groups, along with postgraduate business students and prospective business employers.

3.5 Identifying actors

Using the checklist developed in the previous stage we identify a pool of prospective contacts at strategic and operational levels of the HE institution following ethical guidelines. Initial contacts are also asked to supply further contacts thus using a snowball process (Kvale, 1996) to create a larger pool of potential interviewees. Contacts are then assessed against the criteria developed to determine whether they qualify as strategic or operational. In addition to meeting the criteria for selection as strategic or operational, final selection of actors is made on the basis that they are 'key informants' for data collection. Key informants have an ability to supply trustworthy, observant and reflective information (Johnson, 1990, p. 30). As random selection of participants is not a requirement of qualitative research we select participants purposively. We propose contacting prospective participants with an information sheet and request for participation initially by email. At the student level we use a convenience sample of postgraduate business students. Prospective business employers will be selected on the basis of industry contacts of the research team, and if necessary subsequently on participants' referral.

3.6 Collecting data

As foreshadowed above, the phenomenographic method predominantly uses interviews to collect data, although other approaches such as observation and verbal and/or narrative reports are also valid means of data collection (Sandberg, 1995). In some previous phenomenographic studies (e.g. Kobayashi, 2009; Sandberg, 1995; Sandberg, 2000) between 15 and 20 interviews have been conducted from each occupational group, while Trigwell (2000) suggests between 10 and 15 interviews. Following the predominant view we collect data from 20 interviewees in each of the four groups.

Before conducting the first interview we develop a guide to assist with interview questions, as suggested by McCann and Clark (2003). In developing the guide we are mindful of the need to avoid imposing a rigid structure on interviews (Schreiber, 2001). Questions are designed to be flexible and not necessarily followed in the same order in subsequent interviews. The aim is to allow interviewees to talk freely about their experiences and conceptions of value, taking into account the first and second-order perspectives discussed above. Phenomenographic data collection involves two primary questions: 1) *what* does experiencing the nature of value mean to the interviewee; and 2) *how* did the interviewee go about the experience, often explained by the participant being asked to provide situational examples (Marton & Booth, 1997). Additional open-ended questions will be developed. Interviews are of approximately one hour's duration, are conducted at an agreed time and place, and are audio recorded with the consent of the interviewee. After transcription and checking interviews are set aside until all face-to-face interviews have been concluded (six in the first stage, see below).

In order to make data collection a manageable yet robust process we use a combination of face-to-face interviews and qualitative written reports (a technique previously used by Giorgi, (1985) in a study of people's lived experiences of learning). Both interviews and written reports will be used to discover actors' conceptions of value. Initially we conduct six face-to-face in-depth interviews of each of the four groups of actors. Kvale (1996) suggests that six to eight interviews are sufficient to get a flavor of concepts and themes as long as saturation of data is not the objective, which in our case it is not. We then analyze each group of six interviews by means of

computer-aided lexical analysis using Leximancer software (Smith, 2011). Computer-aided analysis has been shown to be a reliable and valid means of conducting phenomenographic analysis in previous research (Govers *et al.*, 2007; Penn-Edwards, 2010; Ryan, 2000).

The Leximancer output provides a concept map and written analysis, which are used to construct a template to guide further analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; King, 2012). Template analysis follows a similar process to Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) method of constant comparison analysis where phenomena are used to construct concepts, and concepts are used to construct categories. From the template and interview guide used for the face-to-face interviews a proforma for a narrative report is developed. The narrative report is used to collect data from the remaining 14 interviewees in each group. Narrative report proformas will be disseminated by email attachment and in hard copy where required. Once data are collected for a particular group of 20 analysis commences. A new analysis is conducted for all 20 items in the data set again using computer-aided lexical analysis software Leximancer. This meets the usual approach used in phenomenographic analysis of simultaneous analysis of data (Walsh, 2000). A final template is drawn up based on the Leximancer output. We now have a template for each group of actors which will facilitate comparison between groups. Template analysis allows data under analysis to be added to a template for existing concepts or to be used to create a new concept. In template analysis concepts are then grouped into categories or themes.

In order to address the issue of trustworthiness raised by Green (2005) we use a range of methods in data collection, namely face-to-face interviews and narrative reports. Also, the use of computer-aided lexical analysis and template analysis enhances trustworthiness and credibility through triangulation of methods at the data analysis stage (McCann & Clark, 2003; Silverman, 2010).

3.7 Interpretation of results

At the end of the data collection stage the data for each group comprise six face-to-face interviews and 14 qualitative written reports. The face-to-face interviews, which have been transcribed earlier in the data collection process, and written reports which are also now transcribed are analyzed using the computer-aided lexical software package Leximancer (Smith, 2011). Leximancer is used to provide qualitative analysis of inputs based on latent meaning and produces a visual concept map and written output where concepts and themes are identified. Leximancer also links outputs back to the input data. Thus the researcher is able to see clearly which phenomena link to concepts, and which concepts into higher level themes. The ability to do this provides researchers with a degree of reflexivity that is not always available with computer-aided analysis.

The concept map and written output data for each group are manually analyzed by the research team. After careful analysis by at least two research team members a final template for each group is constructed. The final template contains the conceptions of value of the members of the group. The conceptions of value for the HE service supply chain are then mapped. Once the group conceptions have been mapped the similarities and differences between conceptions of value within and between stages of the HE service supply chain will be thoroughly discussed and if necessary reviewed.

4. CONCLUSION

The first important outcome of the research is identifying the qualitatively different conceptions of actors at strategic and operational levels, postgraduate business students and prospective employers in the HE supply chain. This is new research that uses an innovative conceptual model and a novel methodology and method to discover conceptions of value based on family resemblances. Trustworthiness is achieved by the use of mixed methods of data collection and analysis. The second key outcome is determining whether the limited conceptions of value produced by the phenomenographic research show *context-based* commonality of actors conceptions of value in an important service supply chain.

The contributions of the research to academic theory are twofold: First, by proposing how the nature of value may be conceptualized in terms of family resemblances we extend previous studies of value, which have either focused on a fruitless search for an essence or have used inappropriate research methods. Second, in proposing *phenomenography* as an alternative to phenomenology we use a methodology and method that is able to accommodate the idiosyncratic and experiential nature of value. *Phenomenography* enables us to qualitatively map differences and similarities in actors' conceptions of value *within a given context*, and this is the first of a number of studies.

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