

Phenomenography Approach in Marketing

Sivakumari Supramaniam^{a*}, Richard J Varey^b, Mary FitzPatrick^b

^a*Sunway University Business School, Sunway University, Malaysia*

^b*Department of Marketing, University of Waikato, New Zealand*

Abstract

The paper aims to introduce a qualitative research approach, phenomenography which has the potential for researchers who intend to understand individuals' ways of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon. Phenomenographic approach enables researchers to represent the variations in individuals' realities as experienced and not confined to a degree of commonality of a single essence of as in phenomenology. The approach rests firmly on a non-dualist ontology and the epistemological standpoint of understanding people's perspective of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon enabling researchers to gain a holistic understanding of people's experiences.

Keywords: Phenomenography, qualitative, variations, experience, phenomenon

1. INTRODUCTION

Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that is little known in marketing. The approach was initially developed within the education discipline but has gained popularity in health services research. The approach describes the variations in ways people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of phenomena (Marton, 1988). The distinctive aspect of phenomenography is that it describes the variations of people's realities as experienced, and thus enabled understanding of people's perspective of the phenomenon within their individual contexts.

Many marketing scholars (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Schembri & Sandberg, 2002; Schembri, 2006; Heinonen, Strandvik, Mickelsson, Edvardsson, Sundstrom & Andersson, 2010; Gronroos & Voima, 2013) view taking people's perspective of experiencing provides a holistic way of understanding people's experiences. Here, phenomenography can be a useful approach as it emphasises the structure of meanings that distinguish qualitative ways of experiencing a phenomenon and not a researcher's perspective of what is the phenomenon for others (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Arnould & Price, 1993).

In this paper, we introduce phenomenography which has the potential for researchers who aim to understand individuals' ways of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon. In the following section, we discuss the theoretical underpinning for the qualitative methodology, the ontological and epistemological stances for selecting a phenomenographic approach. Thereafter, we discuss the distinctive aspects of phenomenographic approach that enables a researcher to gain a holistic understanding of people's experiences.

2. ONTOLOGICAL POSITION

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and what can be known about it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are ontological assumptions about how reality is known. For example, a dualist ontology is based on the notion of two realms where there is a separation between the knower (subject) and known (object). There are two worlds, a subject and an independent world (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000).

According to Sandberg (2005), a dualist ontology implies understanding the two entities independently: a subject on its own and the object in itself. Based on a dualist assumption, our experience is viewed as a separate entity (object) that can be perceived by another entity, our mind (subject). Thus, experience is based on the knowledge

*Corresponding author. Tel. +000-00000000; Fax. +000-00000000
E-mail: norradiahmatnor@gmail.com

of what happened in the past, which is referred as precedent (Dewey, Moore, Brown, Mead, Bode, Stuart...& Kallen, 1917).

In a non-dualist ontology, the knower (subject) and known (object) are not isolated entities, but internally related to one another. In non-dualist ontology, the person and the world are considered to be in one relationship (Marton & Booth, 1997). According to Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber (1999, p. 217), there is “a link, a relationship, a tension, an equilibrium” between the subject and object. It is claimed that there is no independent meaning to the subject and object without relating to one for the other (Barnard et al., 1999). Thus, our experience is viewed neither separately in the person nor the world, but in an internal relationship between the two. It is a process of coming to know that precedes our knowledge (Dewey et al., 1917).

This ontological stance helps to enable the research process access direct views of people’s realities as experienced (Schembri & Sandberg, 2002). It provides a more holistic sense of understanding individuals’ experiences in their environment. Instead of taking the reductionist’s view of understanding people’s experience as objective and existing as separate entities, it is important to have a holistic sense of people and the world as one relation.

2.1 Epistemological position

Epistemology reflects how one gets to know reality or “who can be a knower” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 4). A non-dualist ontology entails the assumption that the subject (the person) and object (the world) are inseparable, and people are actively involved in making sense of what they are experiencing (Schembri & Sandberg, 2002). People’s meanings stem from their own lived experiences.

Marton & Booth (1997) explain this in relation to a learner,

There is not a real world “out there” and a subjective world “in here”. The world is not constructed by the learner, not it is imposed upon her; it is constituted as an internal relation between them. There is only one world, but it is a world that we experience. (p. 13)

A non-dualist ontology takes neither the positivist view that external reality exists independently as facts nor the subjectivist view that knowledge is based purely on mental constructions (Svensson, 1997). Rather a non-dualist ontology positions knowledge as relational, “created through thinking about external reality” (Svensson, 1997, p. 165). Therefore, knowledge is created in relation to the subject (the person) experiencing and the object (the world) as experienced (Saljo, 1997). In other words, people’s conception is in relation to the part of reality as it is experienced and understood (Marton & Booth, 1997). As such, different individuals have different ways of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon, depending on the context of experience. Knowledge understood as relational can be described best as “a qualitative change in a person’s way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world” (Marton & Ramsden, 1988, p. 271).

People’s conceptions describe knowledge (Svensson, 1997) and can be accessed through their experiences (Marton, 1981). As such, investigating individuals’ experiences potentially enables a study to understand their conception of reality as they experience it. A qualitative methodology offers an opportunity to design a study to understand the people’s ways of experiencing a phenomenon.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The choice of methodology for a study depends on both considerations of ontology and epistemological assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The theoretical underpinning for this qualitative methodology is a non-dualistic ontological stance and a holistic view of the ways individual experience a phenomenon. It is also based on the epistemological standpoint of understanding individuals’ conceptions.

Qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Qualitative research helps to manifest a phenomenon that is less known to others. Therefore, qualitative researchers study a phenomenon in people’s natural setting, making an effort to make sense or interpret the phenomenon based on meanings people give to them. Correspondingly, the decision to use a qualitative research is appropriate as the study aims to manifest people’s ways of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon. Individuals’ experiences and understandings of a phenomenon are subjective knowledge for others to understand without interpretations. Thus, an interpretive approach enables to gain understanding of the individuals’ ways of experiencing and understanding a phenomenon.

3.1 An interpretive approach

An interpretive approach enables an understanding of individuals' subjective meaning process (Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001). Many interpretive researchers align their research approach with phenomenology to support a holistic understanding of people's subjective experiences (Markula et al., 2001). However, I regard phenomenography, an alternative interpretive approach to phenomenology.

Phenomenography is an empirical qualitative approach that identifies "different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (Marton, 1988, p. 144). It was developed within the educational context in Sweden by Ference Marton and his colleagues to understand the different ways that students experience learning.

Phenomenography was not developed based on a phenomenological philosophy as such, but the approach does have important similarities to phenomenology (Svensson, 1997) as both the approaches focus on describing a phenomenon but for different purposes. Etymologically, the term 'phenomenon' is derived from Greek 'phainomenon', 'that which appears or is seen' (Etymology Dictionary Online, 2016). Phenomenography, with the suffix 'graph', aims to describe the variations in ways people experience and understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). It "becomes the act of representing an object of study as qualitatively distinct phenomena" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 110). In contrast, phenomenology, with the suffix 'logos' acknowledges the variations in people's experiences but aims to identify intersubjective commonality in order to clarify the structure and meaning that constitutes the "singular essence" (Barnard et al., 1999, p. 214) of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1999; Goulding, 2005).

Like other qualitative research approaches, phenomenography takes the view that subjective knowledge is the object of research, but phenomenography holds that within the subjective knowledge there is "meaning and understanding that reflects various views of the phenomena" (Barnard et al., 1999, p. 215). Phenomenography aims to reveal this variation in the ways people experience and understand a phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). In these ways, phenomenography both builds on and differs from previous research by marketing scholars (e.g., Belk et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1989; and Arnould & Price, 1993) that emphasizes consumers' lived experiences but typically presented the findings as a singular essence of a phenomenon from the researcher's perspective.

Phenomenographic results remain purposefully at a descriptive level of the individuals' understanding and the outcomes are presented as categories of description and outcome space. Categories of description refer to the collective meanings of the individuals' understandings, which describe the different ways a phenomenon can be understood (Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007). An outcome space is a representation of these categories of description in a logical manner to show the ways people experience a phenomenon. Thus, the study aims not to reach for a singular essence of a phenomenon (as in phenomenology) but to reveal the variations in ways individuals' experience and understand a phenomenon. The subsequent section explains the aspects of a phenomenographic approach that justify the selection of the approach for a study.

4.0 PHENOMENOGRAPHY

The research approach of phenomenography has distinctive aspects that help to recommend it as one of the most appropriate approach for a study. These aspects are that it adopts a non-dualist ontology, takes a second-order perspective, is categorised as a qualitative approach, focuses on variations, and provides a holistic view of a phenomenon. The following section discusses these aspects in depth.

First, phenomenography adopts a non-dualist ontology stance where people and the phenomenon are not separate entities but constituted in one relation. According to Marton (2000):

From a non-dualistic ontological perspective there are not two worlds: a real, objective world, on the one hand, and a subjective world of mental representations, on the other. There is only one world, a really existing world, which is experienced and understood in different ways by human beings. It is simultaneously objective and subjective. An experience is a relationship between object and subject, encompassing both. (p. 105)

Saljo (1997, p. 173) explains a non-dualist stance as a position where "the internal (thinking) and the external (the world out there) are not posited as isolated entities". People and the phenomenon are not separate but in interrelationship that generates meaning (Reed, 2006). Thus, experience is established in the internal relationship between the person and the phenomenon (Linder & Marshall, 2003).

Second, phenomenography takes a second-order perspective or a 'from-the-inside' approach to describe people's realities as experienced rather than the first-order perspective or 'from-the-outside' describing what the reality is (Marton, 1981). Thus, the second order perspective does not take the researcher's perspective as the base of investigation. This is central to phenomenography as it describes the world as experienced by the learner (phenomenon) rather than world as it is (noumenal) (Marton, 2000).

Third, phenomenography is a qualitative approach that focuses on people's description of their ways of experiencing a specific aspect of reality. It emphasises conceptions as a central form of knowledge constituted as a relation between a person (the learner) and the phenomenon (that which to be learned) (Marton & Booth, 1997). The meaning of something for someone at a point of time is in relation to the parts or aspects of the phenomenon that are recognized and held in focus (Marton & Booth, 1997). This process makes one person's experience of a situation qualitatively different from others.

The relation between a person (learner) and the phenomenon (what needs to be learned) can be explained using Dewey's perspective of experience. Dewey (1977, cited in Connell, 1996) emphasizes that:

knowers and knowns should not be viewed as dualistically as isolated elements, but rather as transactionally related (namely integrated and coordinated activities where thoughts, actions, and feelings transact within a context of ongoing behaviour and within a particular matrix of experience. (p. 401)

Dewey (1917, p. 59: emphasised) holds that, "the significant distinction is no longer between the knower and the world; it is between different ways of being in and of the movement of things; between the brute physical way and a purposive, intelligent way".

Fourth, phenomenography focuses on variations in ways that people experience a phenomenon. According to Marton and Booth (1997), the way a person experiences a phenomenon is not the phenomenon itself but a fragment of the phenomenon from the person's perspective. Thus, individuals are seen as "bearers of different ways of experiencing a phenomenon" (Marton & Booth, 1997, 114). Even though people might experience different aspects of a phenomenon, these variations can be described, conveyed, and understood by others (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

Finally, phenomenography provides a holistic view of the investigated phenomenon. Phenomenography reveals the variations in ways people experience a phenomenon as collective regardless of "whether the differences are differences between individuals or within individuals" (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 124). The results of a phenomenographic study are presented as categories of description and an outcome space. Categories of description show the variations and similarities in ways people experience a phenomenon. These categories of description can be logically structured in an outcome space to show the complexity of the phenomenon that can be experienced.

5.0 CONCLUSION

We regard phenomenography as the best approach as it provides a holistic understanding of human experiences, despite the fact that the nature of the phenomenon can be experienced and perceived individually. This aligns with Akerlind's work (2005, p. 72) that the phenomenographic approach provides "a way of looking at collective human experience of phenomena holistically, despite the fact that such phenomena may be perceived differently by different people and under different circumstances". As such, phenomenography sets out to provide direct descriptions of the individuals' realities as experienced and understood (Marton, 1981) rather than provide the researcher's perspective of what s/he regards as 'the reality' experienced by others (Richardson, 1999).

REFERENCES

- Akerlind, G. (2005). Learning about phenomenography: Interviewing, data analysis and the qualitative research paradigm. In J. A. Bowden and P. Green (Eds.), *Doing developmental phenomenography*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press.
- Arnould, E. J., & Price, L. L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1), 24-45.
- Barnard, A., McCosker, H., & Gerber, R. (1999). Phenomenography: A qualitative research approach for exploring understanding in health care. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(2), 212-226.
- Belk, R. W., Wallendorf, M., & Sherry, J. T. (1989). The sacred and the profane in consumer behaviour: Theodicy on the odyssey. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(1), 1-38.
- Connell, J. (1996). Assessing the influence of Dewey's epistemology on Rosenblatt's reader response theory. *Educational Theory*, 46(4), 395-413.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

- Dewey, J., Moore, A. W., Brown, H. C., Mead, G. H., Bode, B. H., Stuart, H. W.,... & Kallen, H.M. (1917). *Creative intelligence: Essays in the pragmatic attitude*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Etymology Dictionary, Online 2001-2016. Douglas Harper. Retrieved from: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=matural&search_mode=none
- Giorgi, A. (1999). A phenomenological perspective on some phenomenographic results on learning. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 30(2), 68-93.
- Goulding, C. (2005). Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology: A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research. *European Journal of Marketing*, 39 (3/4), 294-308.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Heinonen, K., Strandvik, T., Mickelsson, K.-J., Edvardsson, B., Sundström, E., & Andersson, P. (2010). A customer-dominant logic of service. *Journal of Service Management*, 21(4), 531-548.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research*. Thousands Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Larsson, J., & Holmström, I. (2007). Phenomenographic or phenomenological analysis: does it matter? Examples from a study on anaesthesiologists' work. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 2(1), 55-64.
- Linder, C., & Marshall, D. (2003). Reflection and phenomenography: Towards theoretical and educational development possibilities. *Learning and Instruction*, 13, 271-284.
- Packer, M. J., & Goicoechea, J. (2000). Sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning: Ontology, not just epistemology. *Educational Psychologist*, 35(4), 227-241.
- Richardson, J. T. E. (1999). The concepts and methods of phenomenographic research. *Review of Educational Research*, 69 (1), 53-82.
- Reed, B. (2006). Phenomenography as a way to research the understanding by students of technical concepts. Nucleo de Pesquisa em Tecnologia da Arquitetura e Urbanismo (NUTAU): Technological Innovation and Sustainability, Sao Paulo, Brazil. Retrieved from: <http://www.mecheng.uct.ac.za/usr/mecheng/staff/academic/brandon/Reed2006.pdf>
- Markula, P., Grant, B. C., & Denison, J. (2001). Qualitative research and aging and physical activity: Multiple ways of knowing. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 9, 245-264.
- Marton, F. (1988). Phenomenography: A research approach to investigate different understanding of reality. In Sherman, R. R., & Webb, R. B. (Eds.), *Qualitative research in education: Focus and methods* (pp. 141-161). London: Routledge Falmer.
- Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography - describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instructional Science*, 10, 177-200.
- Marton, F., & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and awareness*. Mahwah, N. J: L Erlbaum Associates.
- Marton, F., & Ramsden, P. (1988). What does it take to improve learning? In Ramsden, P. (Eds.), *Improving learning: New perspectives* (pp. 268-286). London: Kogan Page.
- Marton, F. (2000). The structure of awareness. In Bowden, J. A., & Walsh, E. (Eds.), *Phenomenography* (pp. 102- 116). Melbourne: RMIT University Press.
- Säljö, R. (1997). Talk as data and practice - a critical look at phenomenographic inquiry and the appeal to experience. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(2), 173-190.
- Sandberg, J. (2005). How do we justify knowledge produced within interpretive approaches? *Organizational Research Methods*, 8(1), 41-68.
- Schembri, S., & Sandberg, J. (2002). Service quality and the consumer's experience: Towards an interpretive approach. *Marketing Theory*, 2(2), 189-205.
- Schembri, S. (2006). Rationalizing service logic, or understanding services as experience? *Marketing Theory*, 6(3), 381-392.
- Sjostrom, B., & Dahlgren, L. O. (2002). Applying phenomenography in nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 40(3), 339-345.
- Svensson, L. (1997). Theoretical foundations of phenomenography. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(2), 159-171.
- Thompson, C. J., Locander, W. B., & Pollio, H. R. (1989). Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, 133-146.