

# Phenomenography's contribution to organizational studies based on a practice perspective

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to propose the phenomenography as an approach that may contribute to the organizational studies based on the practice perspective, considering that it analyzes the phenomenon through the practitioner's view and experience.

**Design/methodology/approach** – It is a theoretical essay about phenomenography as a theoretical-methodological perspective, considering its concept, its relation with practice theories and how its theoretical-methodological approach is capable of bringing a new perspective over the organizations, in the practice perspective.

**Findings** – The phenomenographic method, together with the practice perspective, enables mapping, identifying, describing and relating all the different ways by which an organization, in each one of its structuring dimensions, is effectively experienced. It argues that aspects such as the phenomenographic interview, the second-order perspective, the collective conceptions stated in the outcome space and their relations, the complexity of hierarchy and the abductive theorization about the emerging concepts of



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collective perceptions form, all together, an alternative and promising theoretical approach to analyze the entanglement between action and the material dimension that constitutes the organizational practices.

**Practical implications** – The phenomenographic outcome space may become a catalyst of a theorization about practices, which is capable to modify them or modify the way they are understood.

**Originality/value** – It discusses the possibility of phenomenography to theorize from the agents' collective consciousness.

**Keywords** Phenomenography, Organizational studies, Practice perspective

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

In a study with engineers specialized in car engine optimization, [Sandberg \(2000\)](#) uses phenomenography to analyze and create a theory on professional competence, an important topic in the field of organizational studies. This was the first time the approach was observed in the literature. Since then, the use of phenomenography has increased in business research, as it offers a unique perspective of understanding organizational phenomena and practices. Some studies worth mentioning are [Lamb, Sandberg, and Liesch \(2011\)](#), who use the approach to analyze companies' internationalization processes; [Cherman and Rocha-Pinto \(2013\)](#), studying the valuation of knowledge based on phenomenography; and [Koskela and Schuyler \(2016\)](#), who adopt the approach to study sustainability leadership.

Phenomenography is based on interpretations and qualitative field analysis. It allows understanding of the practice from a set of perceptions of individuals about experienced phenomena, rather than limited to the researcher's observation and interpretation ([Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013](#); [Marton, 1986](#)). This set of perceptions is the so-called "second-order" perspective ([Marton, 1981](#); [Marton & Booth, 1997](#)), which [Marton \(1981\)](#) argues is a significant distinction of phenomenography in comparison to phenomenology. The outcome of a phenomenographic study is a theoretical map of the practitioners' collective consciousness, a map that presents and explains the structure of the phenomenon, based exclusively on the perceptions of those who experience it in various ways ([Marton & Booth, 1997](#)).

The use of phenomenography in research in the field of administration has increased ([O'Leary & Sandberg, 2016](#)). It is possible to observe, however, that the studies emphasize the approach's methodological dimension, whereas phenomenography is more than a method. The approach is grounded in a solid theoretical foundation, which strengthens its potential to contribute when it comes to proposing theories in organizational studies ([Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009](#); [Marton, 1986](#)).

This article argues that these and other aspects of phenomenography such as the interest in varying the perception about a phenomenon at the collective level; the hierarchy of complexity between the conceptions regarding the phenomenon; and the outcome space, constitute a theoretical and, mainly, methodological framework. It is a framework that can contribute as an alternative to problematize and analyze organizational practices, expanding the possibilities of creating theories from findings in the field ([Reed, 2006](#); [Akerlind, 2005](#)). This article contributes to the literature on the subject, which is insufficiently explored in organizational studies.

It is important to emphasize that the starting point of phenomenography is always relational because it is based on the relationships between individuals and aspects of reality ([Marton, 1986](#)). Therefore, it is possible to align the approach with the so-called epistemological aspects of practice theory, as highlighted by [Gherardi \(2015\)](#). The phenomenography starts from a non-dualist ontology, in which the phenomena are

understood based on human-world relations (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013). In this sense, the approach can be seen as an alternative to understanding the way practices are effectively constituted and perceived, and to analyzing the entwinement between people and things in the organization (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Sandberg & Dall'Alba, 2010). Similarly, in studies based on the practice, the social world is understood as a vast set of performance that connects humans, objects and texts. Such relationships are not static or inert but dynamic, procedural and continuous (Feldman, Pentland, D'Adderio, & Lazaric, 2016; Langlely & Tsoukas, 2010).

Against this backdrop, the objective of this article is to present phenomenography as a methodological alternative that can contribute to organizational studies built on practice, by analyzing the phenomena from the practitioners' point of view.

## 2. An introduction to phenomenography

The phenomenography originates in the field of education. Its roots are in the notion that individuals experience and perceive the same phenomenon in different ways (Akerlind, 2005; Marton, 1986). In group learning, for example, people will perceive a phenomenon differently. Because of these differences, individuals will use the lessons learned within the same occasion in a variety of forms (Marton & Booth, 1997). However, Marton, Saljo, Svensson and Dahlgren, the authors that developed and disseminated phenomenography in the 1970s and 1980s, advocate that the variation in the way a phenomenon is perceived is not individual. The authors say that people share a limited set of perceptions. In other words, there is neither a single way nor an infinite number of ways of experiencing the same phenomenon (Marton, 1981). When the researchers look at everyone's perceptions about a common phenomenon, grouping concordances and separating divergences, they observe a restricted number of different ways of experiencing it. This limited set of the so-called "conceptions" of the phenomenon can then be mapped, structured and analyzed (Akerlind, 2005; Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997).

The central study object of phenomenography is the variation in how people experience and conceive the same phenomenon (Akerlind, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997). Therefore, the idea of a univocal interpretation of the phenomenon is abandoned to construct a scheme in which it is represented by the set of existing interpretations (Marton, 1981). Also, the second premise of phenomenography states that there is always a hierarchical structure – regarding complexity or extension – that interrelates the conceptions arising from the researcher's analysis (Marton, 1986).

Thus, defining and delimiting each conception identified in a phenomenographic study means describing the structural elements of the conceptions and how these elements vary in each one of the conceptions. These elements are called "explanatory dimensions" (Akerlind, 2005). The findings of phenomenographic study are embodied in a theoretical scheme called "outcome space" (Akerlind, 2005; Bowden & Walsh, 2000), where the relationship between each of the conceptions and the dimensions about a phenomenon is consubstantiated.

To illustrate how "conceptions" and "explanatory dimensions" shape the "outcome space", Table I shows the outcome space of a phenomenographic study about learning in job rotation (Guimarães, Lucena, & Rocha-Pinto, 2018).

Conceptions, or descriptive categories, represent the different ways of experiencing (practicing) and conceiving the phenomenon. Guimarães *et al.* (2018) found three different ways of experiencing and conceiving the phenomenon, i.e. to experience and to conceive learning in job rotation: learning process that results in individual change, learning process that results in collective practice (routine) change and learning process that results in innovation. What explains the variation between the three conceptions are the six

Explanatory dimensions	Learning process that results in individual change	Descriptive categories   conceptions Learning process that results in collective practice (routine) change	Learning process that results in innovation
Learning concept	Knowledge acquisition Adaptive learning Epistemology of possession	<i>Knowing</i> in the experience of new practices Generative learning – internal – routines change Epistemology of practice	Generation of new practices, products or services – new solutions Generative Learning – external – innovation Epistemology of practice
What drives learning	Ignorance – related to know-what, know-how (ostensive aspect of the routines) and know-who	Ignorance – related to how to interact with new teams, how to act in the routines (performative aspect of the routines)	Ignorance – related to the new context (market), to the client’s demands, and to the emerging complex problems
What he/she learns	<i>Learning to be</i> [self-knowledge, to deal with ignorance, fear and challenge] <i>Learning to know</i> [know-what – technical knowledge, conceptual knowledge; know-how – new routines (ostensive aspect); and know-who – who knows what]	<i>Learning to live together</i> [empathy, learning to listen, learning to bond in the team] <i>Learning to do</i> [new routines (performative aspect) and improvements implementations]	<i>Learning to live together</i> [empathy, learning to listen, learning to bond – with a client] <i>Learning to know</i> [know-what – the inner context (in case of an internal client) or the market (in case of an external client); and know-who – who is the client] <i>Learning to do</i> [new solutions generation and implementation]
How he/she learns	Through inquiry – about the know-what and the ostensive aspect of new routines Through manuals, procedures (artifacts) Through other people	Through inquiry – about the performative aspect of new routines Through performing in the routines Through reflection after mistakes Through exercise and tasks repetition Through the interaction with other people and with artifacts	Through inquiry – about the client’s problems – creating empathy, listening Through problem solving Through the interaction with clients
What hinders learning	Lack of interest in the activity Rigid mental model Lack of formal training Unavailability of colleagues to help	Deficiency in interaction and in communication “Gabriela Syndrome” – It’s always been done this way	Dysfunctions in bureaucracy – “chains” Excessive instability (provoked by the state of ignorance imposed by job rotation) New results Better performance Higher level of client satisfaction
What learning represents	Perceived value focused on the individual Personal and professional growth	Productivity gains Collective experience acquisition Security increase Achievement capacity	

**Table I.**  
Outcome space – relationship between descriptive categories (or conceptions) and explanatory dimensions

Source: Guimarães *et al.* (2018, p. 45)

explanatory dimensions: the learning concept, what drives learning, what he/she learns, how he/she learns, what hinders learning and what learning represents. The three conceptions together represent the holistic way of living and conceiving the phenomenon.

Akerlind (2005) understands that the role of the outcome space is to represent the whole range of existing conceptions about the phenomenon. Bowden and Walsh (2000), consider that the outcome space is the most faithful representation of what the phenomenon actually is. Thus, the generation of theory based on phenomenography is rooted in the establishment of the outcome space, the possible interpretations arising from it, and the theoretical and practical implications resulting from both the hierarchy of conceptions and the variation in each one of their dimensions.

In this sense, the onto-epistemological structure that supports the phenomenography is mostly adherent to the practical rationality (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) or the so-called “life-world perspective” (Sandberg & Dall’Alba, 2010). Akerlind (2005), for example, states that one of the fundamental underlying premises of phenomenography is that the individual’s experience of the phenomenon is “context-sensitive” (p. 331) and the individual’s perception may change depending on the aspect of the phenomenon that is emphasized in each particular moment.

### 3. A brief introduction to practice theory

There is a relational ontology at the base of both the phenomenography and the practice theory. Different authors use several expressions to refer to approaches based on an epistemology of practice, such as “language of practice”, “perspective of practice”, “the lens of practice” (Nicolini, 2013). Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011) identify the practice theory as part of a more significant movement within the social sciences, emphasizing materiality, embodiment, emotions and the practice itself. For the authors, the practice theory emerges as a response to the focus on cognition (in its various forms) to explain people action and social order. Thus, in practice theory and perspectives of organizational studies that come from this theory, the aspects that constitute the work are always situational and dependent on the context (Sandberg, 2000).

Nicolini (2013) defines practice-based approaches as those that describe the essential features of the world as something that occur routinely in practice. Although it is not possible to delimit a unified practice theory (Gherardi, 2015), several authors over the past two decades have referred to a “practice turn” in organizational studies (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Schatzki, 2001). Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow (2009), for example, suggest that this current “turn of practice” would be the time for a new generation of practice-based theories. For the authors, the study of practices has a long theoretical history and encompasses a wide range of methods. The first generation of theorization about practice can be identified in the late nineteenth century, rooted in the Hegelian and Marxist tradition of objective activity and pragmatism by authors such as John Dewey and Charles Pierce. Later works by Wittgenstein (with the concept of rule-following concept) and Heidegger (with the idea of entwinement) also play a significant role of philosophical support of current practice theories in demonstrating how practices provide the necessary background against which interpretations (or representations) are formed and declared (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In the field of sociology, the works by Giddens (with his theory of structuration and the concept of “duality of structure”) and Bourdieu (with the notion of habitus), in different ways, constitute the theoretical basis upon which this new generation of practice theories in organizational studies often recurs (Gherardi, 2011; Nicolini, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

Practice, for [Schatzki \(2006\)](#), refers to a “structured spatial-temporal manifolds of action.” To illustrate this definition, the author cites examples such as political, culinary and religious practices. For the author, an academic department encompasses various practices, including teaching, advising, researching and ceremonial practices. Thus, if practices are “manifolds of structured actions”, they have two primary components: actions and structures.

The concept of structures is, for [Schatzki \(2006\)](#), equivalent to that of organizations. Four main phenomena constitute these structures:

- (1) the comprehension of the actions that constitute the practice;
- (2) the rules – direct or explicit, the constraints or instructions that participants should consider;
- (3) the teleological-affective structuring – which encompasses the chain of purposes, projects, actions, perhaps emotions recommended to practitioners; and
- (4) general understandings – that is, general understandings of the nature of the aspects that form each practice.

More recently, [Gherardi \(2015\)](#) advocated for a conception of practice that allows observation of social relations without distinguishing between doing and knowing. The author’s concepts of “agencement” and “formativeness” would be useful to expose the texture of practice and the formation of practices in socio-material relations.

#### 4. Organizational studies and practice perspective

In a study on the elements that support a practice-based theorization, [Feldman and Orlikowski \(2011\)](#) argue that the space occupied by practice perspective has been increasing.

The authors evidence this advance by citing studies on strategy, organizational knowledge and institutionalism, explaining that researchers adopt a perspective that looks at phenomena in a “non-static” way: strategy making and knowing in practice (p. 1243).

More recently, [Feldman and Worline \(2016\)](#) advocated for the use of practice theories for management. According to the authors, practice theory focuses on the dynamics of acting, and the relationship among actions and objects, at a given moment and over time. It is in this process that their meanings emerge. The authors say that it is possible to ask new questions about the relationships among objects, actions and people. Practical rationality, therefore, is obtained through emphasizing the complexity of the context, better understanding the practice and facilitating its development ([Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011](#)).

[Langley and Tsoukas \(2010, p. 9\)](#) illustrate the perspective of organizational studies using a performative view, based on the “umbrella” practice theory. The authors suggest theoretical fields in which key aspects of practice theory can be identified. Part of this set of theories is listed and commented below.

##### 4.1 Organizational routines

As for studying the topic of organizational routines, the practice perspective helps to understand how individuals create, modify or maintain routines ([Howard-Grenville & Rerup, 2017](#)). According to [Feldman \(2016\)](#), the practice perspective of organizational routine is addressed by three key questions about actions:

- (1) develop intra- and inter-organization consecutively;
- (2) transcend dualistic views on excluding parts of a phenomenon; and
- (3) are relational so that they interconnect agents and elements.

Routines are performed by people who think, act and even have an “improvisational” nature (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011).

#### *4.2 Organizational learning and organizational knowledge*

Gherardi (2011) explains that from the late 1990s, studies on organizational learning and knowledge adopted the concepts of practice, emphasizing the fact that these concepts are connected to things that people do together. Thus, the concept of practice is seen in the adaptation of the term “knowledge” to “knowing”, since knowledge is understood as a process and, thus, as a practical activity. The author explains that it is possible to identify the reference to Bourdieu’s concepts and highlight the role that agents play in their organizational practice, being socialized organisms, in which this practice is orchestrated collectively, without a conductor – as in a jazz band. Thus, “practice” may be an emerging phenomenon: knowing and doing intertwined.

#### *4.3 Studies on strategy in organizations*

Studies on strategizing, in the relational and performative view, seek to understand the dynamics of “making strategy” in the daily actions of the organization. These studies focus their analysis on the relationship between stability and change (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). The study by Jarzabkowski (2008), for example, adopts the lens of Giddens’s (1984) structuring theory, which emphasizes agency and shows that managing actors take a structuring action. Even if there are institutionalized guides, agents are well informed, reflective and able to choose between sustaining or modifying, through their action, “what is institutionalized”.

### **5. Organizations in a phenomenographic approach**

The subject of work competence is a pioneer in the use of the phenomenographic approach in organizational studies (Sandberg, 2000). The view of competence related to the relationship of the professional with their work was called the conception-based perspective. This view brought a different approach from the rationalist proposition that hitherto considered competencies as attributes independent of context. In the rationalist approach, competence is represented by a specific set of predefined and universal characteristics (knowledge, skills and attitudes, for example) that would be similarly reflected in different contexts. The interpretative approach, in the light of a relational ontology, understands it to be formed by the meaning of the work for the worker, based on their experience (Sandberg, 2000). In this sense, the practice approach understands the competences happening while the work is performed, without dualisms, where people, their actions and objects come to be a unit that produces outcomes.

Thus, phenomenography is not necessarily restricted to the search for “understandings”, as described by Sandberg and Pinnington (2009). The phenomenography’s outcome space, as detailed below, makes explicit how the one lives the experiences, the relationships among people, objects and their contextualized actions – the entwinement – which brings it closer to practical rationality and, consequently, to studies based on practice.

O’Leary and Sandberg (2016), when dealing with the daily performance of professionals at work, suggest phenomenography as an approach that facilitates the understanding of differences in particular ways individuals experience work. Thus, phenomenography enables researchers to theorize about how the phenomenon is experienced and understood by members of organizations (Lupson & Partington, 2011).

It is possible to observe, in phenomenographic studies on organizations, the arguments about the possibility of approaching the collective of professionals, rather than the analysis

of isolated or individual cases (Shahvazian, Mortazavi, Lagzian, & Rahimnia, 2016; Lupson & Partington, 2011). This possibility of understanding that conception is related to a group of professionals can contribute to the debate about the meaning attributed to the phenomenon focusing on the individual or the collective. Therefore, if each conception can represent a “collective” of professionals, the phenomenographic approach is related to other approaches of practice-based studies (adopting ethnography, for example). According to Bispo and Amaro (2013), what distanced these approaches in their discussion about competence development is the fact that phenomenography focuses on understanding how the individual attributes meaning to their work (and the fact that competence development is related to individual’s degree of experience), while other methodologies adopted in the practice approach include collective acting.

The case advocated in this article is that the use of phenomenography in the aforementioned works makes it possible to understand that each conception is able to encompass the “collective thinking” of professionals from specific groups (without a focus limited on the individual), while the phenomenon is composed of a set of conceptions about the various ways of experiencing a phenomenon. This new approach of theoretical and methodological approaches to practice-based organizational research is inspired by the suggestion of Bispo and Amaro (2013). The authors suggest the development of new discussions and questions about the combination of these two approaches.

The application of in-depth interviews in phenomenographic research enables the interviewee to talk openly about their experiences (meta-awareness), as they are always encouraged to present examples of these experiences. As phenomenography deals with variations of perceptions to view a phenomenon holistically, there is no judgment of right or wrong (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, it is understood that open-ended questions are constructed to bring to light the interviewee’s focal awareness regarding their professional practice. The interview script of the work of Shahvazian *et al.* (2016) on talent retention in the organization; the one by Chen and Partington (2006) on project management competencies; and the one by Lupson and Partington (2011) on accountability are examples of how the phenomenographic approach is applied to the field to encourage respondents to narrate examples of their professional experiences. It should be noted that the interview, like all other research methods, has virtues and limitations. In the case of phenomenography, the semi-structured script should encourage respondents to bring their practice to focal awareness within the interview. In all these examples, it was evident that certain perceptions about the phenomenon might have been unspoken if interviews were conducted solely from direct questions.

When observing the arguments of the authors who apply phenomenography in the field of organizational studies, it is possible to understand how this approach differs substantially from other qualitative methods that also use semi-structured interviews to collect data. The next section presents the main aspects that characterize these differences.

## **6. The contributions of phenomenography to the study of practices in organizations – articulating the lens of practice in organizational studies with the phenomenographic methods of data collection and analysis**

Some particularities, when seen together, contribute to the understanding of phenomenography as an appropriate methodological approach to organizational studies that analyze the entwinement between action and the material dimension that constitute organizational practices. The phenomenographic interview has the potential to capture the logic of practice. According to Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), this task is crucial in research conducted from the perspective of practical rationality and is performed from a second-order

perspective, based on the collection of distributed data. This procedure allows the construction of conceptions about the phenomenon from a collective level of focal awareness and the construction of an outcome space that presents the phenomenon holistically. The phenomenography approach, as well as proposing the construction of theory based on the practice, facilitates the transformation of the practice under analysis. The items below explain the main specificities of phenomenography, relating them to the issues that are advocated in practice-based studies.

### 6.1 *The phenomenographic interview and practical rationality*

The practical rationality proposed by [Sandberg and Tsoukas \(2011\)](#) is a research approach that seeks to understand the logic underlying the studied practices. The authors suggest five actions that help the researcher capture this logic:

- (1) “focusing on the entwinement of practitioners and tools in socio-material practices” (p. 346);
- (2) “the focus is not on people alone but on what people actually do [. . .], focusing on activities reveals patterns of sociality, tool use, and empowerment” (p. 346);
- (3) “zooming in on how the activity is accomplished through the body and the use of various tools, reveals the sense in which the practice is enacted” (p. 346);
- (4) “exploring the standards of excellence that underlie a practice by focusing on what is regarded as success and failure, normatively binding or not [. . .] what matters to those involved in a practice and, therefore, what is the distinctive way for the practice to be that provides it with its identity” (p. 346); and
- (5) “zooming out on the relationships between various practices shows what makes practice under study possible. Exploring the resources required for a practice to be what it is and how those resources are acquired from other practices enables one to understand connections and possibilities” (p. 346).

### 6.2 *Second-order perspective, collective focal awareness and distributed data collection*

An important particularity of phenomenography is the possibility of understanding the practice based on the set of perceptions that individuals have about the phenomena they experience, and not from the researcher’s observation and interpretation ([Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013](#); [Marton, 1986](#)) – which identifies a second-order perspective. From a first-order perspective, the researcher’s orientation is to make statements about the world. From a second-order perspective, as proposed in phenomenography, the researcher is oriented to make statements about people’s experiences or ideas about the world ([Marton, 1981](#)).

“The unit of phenomenographic research is a way of experiencing something [. . .] and the object of the research is the *variation* in ways of experiencing phenomenon” ([Marton & Booth, 1997](#), p. 111, author’s emphasis). This variation could not be accessed from a first-order perspective or the experience of a single individual. To understand individual experience through the lens of phenomenography, the researcher must understand the anatomy of awareness. However, that is not enough. Since the focus of phenomenography is variation in ways of experiencing, the researcher must go further and understand the collective anatomy of awareness. “This is a shift from individual awareness that varies as to focus and simultaneous awareness of aspects of a phenomenon to a collective awareness in which all such variation can be spied” ([Marton & Booth, 1997](#), p. 109).

One way to facilitate the understanding of the variation on the experience with the phenomenon is the collection of distributed data, possible (but not mandatory) using

phenomenography. The procedure involves forming a group of interviewees with people from different organizational contexts in which the studied phenomenon is in place. This distributed way of collecting data meets recommendation from [Howard-Grenville and Rerup \(2017\)](#) for alternative methods to ethnography to be used in the study of organizational practices or routines.

### 6.3 The outcome space

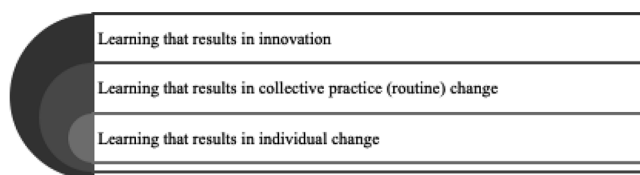
The anatomy of the collective awareness is arranged in the outcome space, where the different conceptions – presented as descriptive categories – are organized hierarchically, indicating the difference in the level of complexity, as well as the relationship of inclusion between them. The variation between conceptions is explained by explanatory dimensions, i.e. the attributes that indicate the differences among them ([Akerlind, 2005](#); [Marton & Booth, 1997](#)).

In the example presented in Section 2, [Table I](#), the conceptions are organized in the hierarchical form, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

[Figure 1](#) indicates that the learning conception that results in innovation is the most complex and encompasses the other two, presenting an inclusive architecture. The explanatory dimensions clarify the degree of complexity, and it is possible to differentiate the complexity based on three criteria: the level of engagement and interaction needed between people; the extent of the impact; and the degree of uncertainty of the outcome. According to [Akerlind \(2005\)](#), the outcomes should represent the full range of variations in the ways of experiencing the phenomenon, at the moment of the practice, for the population collectively represented by the sample group.

Data analysis, or the path taken to build the outcome space, is conducted in an inductive process, in which both the descriptive categories (which describe the conceptions) and the explanatory dimensions (which explain the variation of the conceptions), are organized based on empirical data, i.e. the content of the interviews. This process is started by reading more than once the interview's transcripts, seeking to diversify the researcher's focal awareness. The need for re-reading the interview's transcriptions during the process of analysis is the foundation of phenomenography. Like all people, when experiencing a phenomenon, the researcher is experiencing the process of data analysis, and they are not totally aware (panesthesia) about the situation. This way, with each reading, the focal awareness captures a certain aspect of the interview. The more readings that are taken, the higher the possibility of expanding the researcher's focal awareness ([Marton & Booth, 1997](#)), and the higher the possibility of holistically understanding the phenomenon.

From these readings, excerpts from the interview should be organized by themes, decontextualized from the individual's interview, as the context is relevant for the experience of the phenomenon, but not for data analysis ([Bowden, 2005](#)). This organization allows the formation of different meaning units ([Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013](#)), identified



Source: [Guimarães et al. \(2018, p. 53\)](#)

**Figure 1.**  
Outcome space –  
conceptions  
architecture

from the analysis of the interviews collectively. The meaning units (themes) are not predetermined, but the researcher perceives them while reading and re-reading the interviews. Within each meaning unit, it is possible to see “groups of speech” with different characteristics, which generate insights for the construction of descriptive categories. The researcher builds the conceptions about the phenomenon, described by the different categories, based on the interviewees’ experiences and perceptions, from a collective perspective. It is unlikely that a single interviewee will present all the characteristics of a conception, or even characteristics of only one conception (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Once the descriptive categories are established, the researcher works to identify the attributes that differentiate them – the explanatory dimensions. Two questions may guide this process: what is different about the nature of these categories/conceptions; and what indicates a hierarchy of complexity between them, namely why “the first” is more complex than the others, and so on. From these questions, it is possible to identify different attributes.

The organization of descriptive categories builds a logical structure that allows a holistic way of perceiving the phenomenon, starting from its practice. Therefore, in addition to the category/dimension, it is essential to elaborate the architecture of variation, which represents the hierarchical and inclusive relationship among the descriptive categories, considering the level of complexity of each conception (Akerlind, 2005; Bowden, 2005; Marton & Booth, 1997; Sandberg, 2000).

#### *6.4 Beyond outcome space*

Phenomenography seeks to go beyond the construction of the outcome space (Collier-Reed *et al.*, 2009; Marton & Booth, 1997). Descriptive categories should work as a basis for a transformation related to the analyzed phenomenon.

The identification of the hierarchy between conceptions is proposed by phenomenography to carry out an action that leads individuals to move from the least complex to the most complex conception (Marton & Booth, 1997). This can be considered one of the transformative actions.

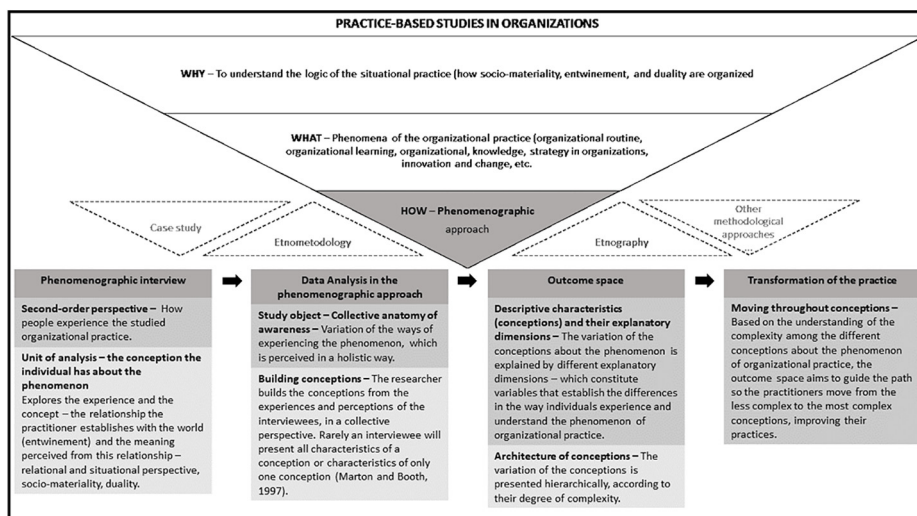
The dialogue between the outcome space and the literature of a field of study may generate practical propositions that ensure that the outcome space is valuable for organizational practice. This value is pointed by Collier-Reed *et al.* (2009) as a quality criterion for phenomenographic research.

#### *6.5 Theoretical–methodological relationships between phenomenography and practice-based theories*

As a way of consolidating the theoretical-methodological relations proposed in this study, Figure 2 shows what can be called an epistemology of practice in organizational studies (Gherardi, 2015) with the phenomenography methodological approach.

### **7. Final considerations**

In organizational studies, the past two decades have seen the dawn of two theoretical-methodological movements of common ontological nature. The practice perspective – and its variant, the procedural perspective – has been consolidated as a substantive theoretical framework for the development of different fields of organizational studies, such as strategy, learning, and routines. In parallel, the use of phenomenography has increased in organizations, accompanied by an evolution in the understanding of its theoretical-methodological principles. This signals a moment of convergence and expansion. Since the organizational practices are the “locus” of the phenomenographic study’s object, they can be



**Figure 2.** Phenomenography and practice-based studies – theoretical–methodological relations

Source: Elaborated by the authors

structured based on the perspective of the practitioners’ perception of their experience of action.

In this sense, phenomenography can make a significant contribution to practice-based studies as it allows recognizing and structuring variation in the ways of experiencing and signifying each of the constituent dimensions of practice structures. According to the theoretical premise of phenomenography, the actions, rules, causal relations and general understandings of the phenomenon, will not be the same for each practitioner. Thus, the phenomenographic method applied in practice-based studies enables mapping to identify, describe and list all the different ways in which an organization (in each of its structuring dimensions) is effectively experienced.

It is common for practice-based organizational studies to use ethnography as a research method. In general, researchers point to the shortcomings of using other methods that can capture the logic of practice from different perspectives. Phenomenography, however, can contribute to this search for theoretical and methodological alternatives to address practice theories. The second-order perspective and the capturing of the state of meta-awareness obtained by the semi-structured phenomenography interviews proved to be effective instruments in this way.

It is possible to say that phenomenography, which has as its main data collection method the in-depth interviews (this method may be combined with participant observations and other techniques), also brings to light the issue of “focal awareness”. This awareness occurs within the context of what is relevant in the experience (including structural aspects) for the individual. It is what stands out and has meaning, while the other issues are less present in the individual’s perspective about the experience (Marton & Booth, 1997). It is important to observe that, just as this “focal awareness” is a relevant factor present in the report of the subject who is interviewed in an ethnography (or participant observation), the researcher is also subject to the same limitation of “focal awareness” about the situation they are experiencing. Thus, the (ethnographic) researcher may not capture the full phenomenon due

to their own focal awareness. In this sense, the use of interviews can be endorsed by Sandberg and Pimington's (2009) argument that direct observation cannot be said to be a superior technique of data collection, as direct observation does not produce data on what is actually occurring, but involves interpretation, inference and narration about what is occurring.

Phenomenography is an approach that has paved the way for distinct problematizations about organizational practices: action and its relationship with structures, based on the perspective of agents. The practice is observed as the instance of manifestation of organizational experience, and phenomenography offers new possibilities for theorization in practice-based studies, constituting a substantive methodological alternative to analyzing the phenomenon from the collective awareness of its agents. Thus, the phenomenography's outcome space can catalyze a theorization about practices that can modify the way they are currently understood.

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