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# Student nurses' conceptions of internationalization: a phenomenographic study

Monne Wihlborg

A phenomenographic approach was used when analysing and interpreting interviews with 25 student nurses in order to describe their conceptions of internationalization. The results are presented in five categories and various subcategories, forming an outcome space. The categories describe forms of understanding, or ways of thinking about internationalization, which, in relation to internationalization as a whole, were either atomistic or holistic in character.

The data revealed that nursing students shared some aspects of meaning when thinking of internationalization. These aspects seemed to be understood in a similar way by all students, whereas, when students thought about internationalization as a whole, they assigned it different meanings. In two of the categories aspects of meaning were fragmentarily related to each other, and represented only one perspective. These two categories are to be compared to the other three categories which were more complex and holistic in character, since they contained more than one perspective as well as more aspects of meaning, and related in several different ways.

From a pedagogical point of view, the findings point to the importance of teachers trying, in an active way, to confront students with as many existing variations of conceptualized wholes related to internationalization as possible, by using forms of understanding originating from a holistic approach. © 1999 Harcourt Publishers Ltd

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## Introduction

Internationalization is becoming a highly focused concept worldwide in many different ways. Different educational programmes are trying to intertwine different intentions, related to internationalization.

This study was concerned with the internationalization of nurse education in Sweden. Since no previous research on Swedish student nurses' conceptions related to internationalization had been undertaken, it seemed important to conduct such research.

Twenty-five nurse students were interviewed for the study. The interviews were analysed and

interpreted using a phenomenographic approach, and five final categories, forming the outcome space in phenomenographic terms, emerged from the data. These are presented as the outcome or findings of the study.

## Background and aim

Internationalization is a highly focused concept in nurse education in Sweden today. In 1990–1991 the Ministry of Education decided, on the basis of the results from a one-person investigation initiated by the Government, that the nurse education and training program in the future was to be extended to encompass 120 credits in higher

education. This increased the previous 2 years of full-time study to 3 years (SFS 1993:100).

Nurse education in its present form became official in 1992–1993 and included strong recommendations aimed at making Swedish nurse education conform to international demands. An EES agreement (EES DS 1992:34, European Economic Area) directed that Swedish nurse education was to follow the qualification rules within the European Union (EU).

In Sweden internationalization has been a topic of discussion since 1968 in various documents related to nurse education (U68, SOU 1973:2, UKÅ74, §2 SFS 1977:218, SOU 1978:50 VÅRD 77). The present Higher Education Act, which is the foundation and guiding principle in Swedish nurse education, includes such primary goals as an increased understanding of other countries and of international conditions in general (SFS 1992:1434; revised 1994:267, 1995:96,817). Guidelines for all college of health sciences' nurse education programmes give some direction concerning internationalization. It is often cited as a general educational goal intended to run as a guiding thread through the entire nurse education process. The main purpose is to prepare the students for their future profession as nurses and to enable them to interact with diverse ethnic groups in Sweden and to work in international and multicultural environments.

Another general recommendation in nurse education is that consideration be given to the students' experiences in relation to learning. The main purpose of such an approach is to increase personal growth by developing creative thinking within a holistic framework. Students are, thereby, expected to develop flexibility in relation to their decision-making and actions in nursing-related situations.

Starting from the premise that knowledge is relational and created through human thinking about external reality, students' experiences are assumed to be the main foundation for learning:

Phenomenographers do not make statements about the world as such, but about people's conceptions of the world. (Marton 1986, p 32)

It is also a part of the phenomenographic approach that all of the expressed conceptions are described in an outcome space:

However, phenomenography is also interested in mistaken conceptions of reality.

Thus phenomenography occupies a space somewhere between natural science (disciplines that deal with what to be true about the world) and traditional social sciences (which seek to discover laws of mental operations and social existence). (Marton 1986, p 32)

The only reality that is investigated, is the one that is experienced by the individuals. It is assumed that individual experiences are presented in human thinking in different ways:

The way in which a person experiences a phenomenon constitutes one facet of the phenomenon, seen from that person's perspective, with that person's biography as background. When the researcher describes differing ways of experiencing a phenomenon he is describing the phenomenon partially from the reports or inferences of the subjects, and it is this partial constitution of the phenomenon which is the researchers' descriptions. (Marton 1993, p126)

The study aimed to describe variations in ways to conceptualize internationalization as represented in a group of nursing students. This paper shows that student nurses shared some parts or aspects of meaning related to internationalization, whereas they did not share the same conceptions of internationalization as a whole. This means that corresponding parts have different meanings, within the context of the whole conception of internationalization, depending on how students relate parts to each other.

## Research approach

### Phenomenography as a research orientation

A qualitative approach, using phenomenography as a research orientation, was taken for this study. The phenomenographic view used in this study is based on ontological and epistemological principles advocated by several authors (Marton 1981, 1986, 1992a, 1992b, Svensson 1976, 1984a, 1984b, 1989, 1994, 1997, Marton & Booth 1997, Marton & Svensson 1978).

This study proposes that reality presents itself in human minds in different ways. Conceptions described are related to language and a social and

cultural context, and are, therefore, closely related to the empirical lifeworld, experienced by the participants. The concept of 'lifeworld', such as used in the phenomenographic research tradition, is closely related to the tradition of phenomenology (Husserl 1976, 1977, Merleau-Ponty 1962) and linked to Gestalt psychologists' (Wertheimer 1945) view on whole qualities, and, thus, differ from a strict social constructionist approach since the phenomenographic approach claims a non-dualistic ontological view:

What we deal with are people experiencing aspects of that world—neither bearers of mental structures nor behaviourist actors ... the dividing line between 'the outer' and 'the inner' disappears. There are not two things, and one is not held to explain the other. There is not a real world 'out there' and a subjective world 'in here'. (Marton & Booth 1997, p13)

The phenomenographic approach assumes that:

the world is not constructed by the learner nor is it imposed upon her, but it is constituted as an internal relation between them. There is only one world, but it is a world we experience, a world in which we live, a world that is ours. (Marton & Booth 1997, p 13)

The phenomenographic view of knowledge is, that it is the constituted internal relation between the inner and the outer, which is of interest as a research object:

Thus the view of knowledge is that it is relational, not only empirical or rational, but created through thinking about external reality. (Svensson 1997, p 165)

Phenomenographic research results are described in categories presented in a complex called the outcome space. Each category through analysis and interpretation describes and represents a conception of internationalization as expressed by the students in the interviews.

The categories are separated through analysis and interpretation based on delimitation, differentiation, abstraction, and comparison of meanings. Each category is a delimited whole and is qualitatively different in characteristics or qualities when compared to the other categories.

The aim of phenomenography is to describe people's conceptions in order to reveal how

humans experience various phenomena in qualitatively different ways. Ways of experiencing, thinking, and relating to phenomena in the lifeworld differ qualitatively according to the phenomenographic view, and may represent a holistic or an atomistic approach (Svensson 1985, 1994, 1997).

In this study a holistic approach was characterized by students' use of specific principles to organize different parts into a whole. This use was identified through the process of discriminating the responses into meaning units and thereafter categorizing them into wholes concerning internationalization. When analysing data, the focus was directed towards discerning structurally significant differences to describe how the students defined and thought about internationalization.

An atomistic approach is the opposite of a holistic approach; content is viewed in a more general and fragmentary way and the parts are not organized or integrated into a whole. In conceptualizing phenomena (in this case, internationalization) different parts or aspects may be partly shared or not shared within a group or culture. In this study, the variations in conceptions related to internationalization were seen as a matter of differences in meaning within student nurses' thinking.

## The interviews

The qualitative interview, used in this study is advocated by a number of authors (Donmoyer 1990, Kvale 1987, 1996, Schofield 1990, Seidman 1991, Stake 1994). It is described as a tool and as a way of providing the investigator with relevant descriptions of participants' lifeworld reality, as experienced, thought of, and expressed by the participants.

The phenomenographic interview is to be analysed and interpreted with the purpose of revealing whole qualities of meaning related to the delimited phenomena (Alexandersson 1994, Fleming 1986, Larsson 1993, Marton 1988, Marton & Dahlgren et al. 1977, Patton 1990, Marton & Svensson 1978, Svensson 1997, Taylor & Bogdan 1984).

Two different colleges of health sciences were included in the study. Each interview took between 30 and 90 minutes. The participating student nurses were interviewed at their

respective schools in an environment with which they were familiar. The students were at first informed in a general way about the purpose of the study; the purpose of the study was again described immediately before every individual interview in order to create a relaxed, trusting, and natural situation during the actual interview. An interview theme guide was used so that each student received the same type of information before and during the interview. The theme guide provided a similarly structured interview experience even though responses were explored through follow-up questions:

For instance in an interview this means that it is not necessarily explorative in the sense of asking and talking about a lot of different things forming part of the experience of an interviewee. The interview becomes focused on specific parts of the interview expressing conceptions of objects or phenomena and the exploration concerns the interviewees delimitation and experienced meaning of these objects (Svensson 1994, p18).

### Participants

Twenty-five student nurses, 20 women and 5 men, were interviewed in 1991. The age group represented in the study ranged from students born in the 1940s to those born in the 1970s. They all participated in the new nurse programme. This programme was initiated to correspond in quality with nurse education in other countries within the EU, and, therefore, to be equal in demands concerning international admission requirements. The participants were in their first and second years of study in the department of nursing at the College of Health Science, in Lund-Helsingborg.

Students who were of the opinion that they had something to contribute or discuss concerning internationalization were included. A wide range of students were targeted in order to increase the variation in life and work experiences. In the group as many men as possible were included, since these were otherwise in the minority. Some students with experiences of different cultures (such as those of immigrants and practical experience or studies abroad) were also included.

The phenomenographic analysis aims to examine statements (utterances in the interviews

related to internationalization) representing different perspectives as well as to analyse different statements within the same perspective, so that these statements can be compared to each other. Therefore, an effort has been made in this study, through the selection of participants, to include as many perspectives as possible.

### Analysis of interview data using HyperQual

The data, 25 interviews, were all tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher word by word into a computer software program named HyperQual, a software program designed specifically for qualitative analysis of data (Raymond V. Padilla 1991, 1993, Miles & Huberman 1984, 1994, Tesch 1990). The interviews were analysed and interpreted using a phenomenographic research approach.

Five main themes concerning issues about Internationalization were used as a startingpoint for the interviews, these themes were the same for all of the students involved in the study. The themes purpose was to turn the focus of the conversation on to internationalization. Since the study's purpose was to explore as many various ways of thinking about internationalization as possible no categories were defined 'a priori'. The interview themes were constructed by the researcher to insure that many variations in meaning would occur in the data and at the same time assure that the participants focused on the phenomenon of internationalization.

The first theme opened up the participants possibility to talk about everything they could relate to Internationalization and, therefore, answered the question about student nurses 'general conceptions of internationalization'. The other four themes focused on more specific pedagogical issues, but were also analysed in purpose to reveal everything that was related, in a more general way, to internationalization. This means, that the qualitative interview approach used in this study includes one analytical part: the similarity in starting the five themes which were the same for all students; one explorative part: the follow-up questions generated through the respondents answers. The first part was (the foundation) connected to the analytical part in the analysis of data conducted in this study (because of the similarity in all the main

**Table 1** Partly shared meaning units by students

Category	Student frequency	Main category
1	a	3 students
	b	prototype 12 6
2	a	4 students
	b	prototype 10 5
	c	1
	d	7
3	a	9 students
	b	6
	c	3
	d	prototype 13 7
4	a	3 students
	b	8
5	a	6 students
	b	11
	c	4
	d	prototype 13 6

questions asked of the participants). The second part was (the foundation) connected to the explorative part in the analysis (because of the differences in the follow-up questions).

The data analysis in this study proceeded from the principle of maintaining an open and reflexive approach in categorizing the students' statements about internationalization. All statements related to internationalization, in any way, were, at the outset, seen as equally important in revealing students' conceptions.

A differentiation and delimitation of parts, revealed through similarities and differences of their referential meaning in relation to the phenomena of internationalization as these appeared to the students, was carried out.

It happened in a single interview that there were statements about internationalization that belonged to more than one category. However, in all cases the main focus of the interview was allocated to one main category (Table 1).

The categorization of the constellation of meaning units is presented as the variation in

**Box 1** Category variations (1,2,3,4,5) and aspect-groups examples (a, b, c, d, e)

1. Increasing possibilities
  - a. Students relates to their own needs and wants
  - b. Students own needs and wants in focus and some inclusiveness of others.
2. An international valid swedish nurse education
  - a. International acknowledgement of (the) Swedish nurse education
  - b. Possibilities to work abroad as a nurse
  - c. Increasing prestige related to the Swedish nurse profession
  - d. Increasing understanding about other nationalities related to the future profession as a nurse.
3. A free flow between countries (open boundaries)
  - a. All countries as one is internationalization
  - b. Free flow of services, merchandize and knowledge across boundaries
  - c. Exchange between countries in general, of cultural equalities and differences
  - d. Specific integration between countries concerning: languages, customs, sciences, etc.
4. Exchange between countries constituted by common rules
  - a. Exchange of students, scientists, initiated by strictly constituted common rules
  - b. Exchange between countries in general, constituted by superior common laws.
  5. The need of a Swedish adaptation to other countries in certain fields
    - a. Focus on Swedish adaptation in general, towards other countries
    - b. An international common adaptation through a common language
    - c. Focus on equal adaptation between countries
    - d. Swedish nurse education must adapt to international standard demands.

different ways of experiencing internationalization, that is, as descriptions of students' conceptions of internationalization.

### Research findings

In this study different thoughts and meanings of internationalization are described in five categories and presented in an outcome space (Box 1). The outcome space in this study describes categories, which are atomistic (Box 1,

categories 1 & 2) or holistic in character (Box 1, categories 3–5). In this study a holistic approach or way of thinking about internationalization also means that the student included more than one perspective and many meaning units (aspects) related to internationalization.

The data revealed that student nurses shared some meaning units identified in the study (Table 1), at a basic level. On this level, the meaning of these units in relation to internationalization seemed to be understood by all of the students. However, when it came to the meaning of internationalization as a whole, the picture became quite different, since categories 3, 4 and 5 were more complex in character since these categories involved more than one perspective (way of looking at internationalization) compared to categories 1 and 2, which only involved one perspective. A perspective which was mostly 'self centred' (e.g. the students reasoned from out of their own needs and desires).

Each category encompasses various aspects that are closely linked to each other. Headings, representing subcategories or parts are presented in Box 1. These are labelled a, b, c, d, and e and represent aspects of meaning within the category.

It was possible to place statements uttered by individuals in the interview into more than one category. However, the referential meaning of each individual interview was allocated to one main category since the data showed, through analysis and interpretation, that the main direction of thought expressed about internationalization was in line with one main category (Table 1).

The relationship between the aspects of meaning within each category differed in character. The relationship between aspects of meaning was fragmentary within the first two categories (Table 1).

The five categories describe different conceptions of internationalization. Each category is an objectified abstraction representing a central meaning of internationalization. In each category one subcategory was dominant over the other sub-category within that category. Such a subcategory can be seen as a prototype (presented in Table 1 Box 1 and Table 1 as 1a, 2a, 3c, 4b, 5c) and is more likely to be an important part, as well as a more anchored and focused part, of the culture, than other subcategories. In

this study, the prototype category also turned out to be the most frequently represented subcategory within the category. Dominant is to be interpreted as a subcategory, which to a larger extent than other subcategories, was more explicitly and exhaustively described by participants in this study.

The five categories (Box 1) are presented below. Quotations (examples from the data) derived from the interviews are presented in order to substantiate and illustrate the nature of the characteristics of each of the categories.

### **Category one: increasing possibilities in general**

This category represents a meaning of internationalization that expressed personal needs and wants (wishes and desires). The parts that constituted the whole were focused on students' wishes to be able to work, study, and live abroad, in general, with no specific reference to ongoing education as a nurse.

Working possibilities of different kinds in an internationally based labour market were mainly related to the students' own needs and wishes. The possibility for people from other countries to come to Sweden to live, work, and study was not discussed at all, or at most, was discussed in terms of a minimal possibility. The parts expressed were self-centred and fragmentary in character.

In summary, and as illustrated in the following student response, internationalization became synonymous with different wishes expressed by the students concerning practical matters:

Student: I think about ... well specifically, about things that concern me as a student, maybe the possibility to be able to spend a year abroad ... to be allowed to accomplish my (note: not necessarily a nurse education) education abroad, and maybe later on be able to work abroad as well.

### **Category two: an internationally valid Swedish nurse education**

In this category thoughts about internationalization were closely linked to the ongoing nurse education. Students focused on different possibilities of studying abroad within a

nursing programme and being able to work in other countries (mainly within the EU) as a nurse when their education was complete. The change in Swedish nurse education from 2 years to 3 years was seen as being related to internationalization. Most of the students' thoughts of internationalization focused on the formal validity of Swedish nurse education.

Most students thought that internationalization ought to be about learning the same facts about subjects such as physiology, medicine, pharmacology, and anatomy.

Increasing understanding about other ethnic and cultural conditions and differences, which could be of importance in relation to their future profession as nurses, was only briefly mentioned. The parts expressed were mainly self-centred and fragmentary in character.

In summary, aspects related to internationalization were closely linked to personal possibilities and were connected to a future profession as a nurse. The following student responses illustrate this category:

Student: I think ... first I think of the possibility ... to go abroad and work ... that the nurse profession is an international kind of work in a way of speaking ... that one is accepted in more or less the whole world.

Student: When participating in this education as we are ... which is a higher education including 120 academic credits ... it used to be only 80 credits ... it's easier to work abroad.

### **Category three: open boundaries between countries, or a free flow between countries**

The aspects of meaning emphasized in this category were related to matters far beyond the ongoing nurse education. They concerned an increase in everybody's understanding of the similarities and differences between people. An enhanced understanding of differences and similarities was seen to be possible if all boundaries were more or less abolished. The idea of the world as one huge common country was the underlying conception. Aspects related to students' personal growth were also noted. These were discussed in a way that included many different parts given through examples and were followed up by reasoning about consequences.

Many aspects of meaning were discussed and related to each other in different combinations giving meaning to internationalization. The perspective of this category accommodated a broad range of thought about possibilities.

In summary, internationalization was described in relation to an underlying principle which advocated that open boundaries between countries will lead to a global internationalization. The following responses illustrate the broad range of thinking included in this category:

Student: Exchange of different experiences ... we all have different experiences in different countries ... from country to country ... one does not do things the same way ... one has different cultures, manners, and ways about things ... one trades and exchanges culture ... open boundaries will make internationalisation possible.

Student: ... one will achieve more understanding about other countries' culture ... and internationalisation is when something becomes more universal ... greater ... so that everybody will have some understanding for everybody...

Student: one has to be flexible in one's personality when meeting other cultures' phenomena ... I become more conscious of broadening my horizon including different ways of thinking about things...

### **Category four: exchange between countries constituted by common rules**

The students' thoughts about internationalization derived from ideas about a common legal system agreed on equal terms among countries mainly within the EU. The category as a whole constituted significant parts, which focused on examples of possible exchanges among countries concerning students, research, scientists, research programs or projects, enterprises, merchandizing, and labour. All these exchanges were to rest on a foundation established and controlled by rules on different levels of society.

In summary, aspects within the category, illustrated in the following student responses, were linked to a common legal system's rules and regulations.



Student: Then I think about ... within one area/branch there could be many countries ... many countries which work according to one and the same pattern ... the same concept...

Student: Human rights ... within the EU for example if you take human rights ... then the EU are trying to make these equal ... the EU are trying through a common law system to make human rights the same in all countries...

#### **Category five: the need for some level of Swedish adaptation to other countries in certain fields**

The characteristic aspects of meaning that constituted this category were focused on different possibilities of adaptation between countries. Mainly the aspects were related to the idea that Sweden in the first instance ought to adapt to other countries' rules, laws, and cultural norms and customs. Swedish adaptations to the EU in relation to the nurse education program and the use of English as a common main language in Sweden were mentioned. Some participants proposed more equal adaptation between countries; however, these were in a minority. In summary, aspects revealed within the category pointed to the need for Swedish adaptation to other countries' rules, norms, and cultural and legal systems, as well as to the EU. Examples of responses in this category are as follows:

Student: We have to adapt to what is going on in the world and how things are out there. There is much that we haven't discussed or that has not even been mentioned (read, in the nurse-program/education) ... they have a very large range of experience and tradition abroad (read, about nurse-caring) ... from which we have a lot to learn.

Student: ... adapt to the rest of the world and the EU ... to international conditions ... both economically and humanly ... yes on the whole ... adapt to how things are in the rest of the world.

#### **Similarities and differences when comparing wholes**

The main characteristic differences in student nurses' understanding and ways of thinking of

internationalization, were those between students' answers placed in categories 1 and 2 compared with those placed in categories 3–5. Categories 1 and 2 represented an atomistic form of thinking in relation to internationalization, compared with categories 3–5, which represented a holistic form of thinking.

When comparing categories 1 and 2, category 1 represents a more atomistic way of thinking than category 2. Both categories describe perspectives that take as their starting point students' own personal (i.e. self-centred) needs, wants, and desires in relation to internationalization.

In comparing categories 3–5, one can speak of some characteristic similarities concerning perspective, but each category has a different focus. Thoughts ranged from 'no boundaries between countries at all' to 'internationalisation will be regulated by itself' (category 3), to 'exchanging experiences between countries strictly by the rules' (category 4). There were also thoughts focusing on Swedish adaptation to the different habits of other countries (category 5). Students' own needs did not form the starting point in any of these categories. They all included examples of content from different levels of human relations, namely, individual, group, society, international, and global levels.

Categories 3 and 5 indicate a more holistic way of thinking about internationalization than category 4. Category 3 indicates the most holistic way of thinking since this conception implies thinking and reasoning over a wide area. These thoughts included a variety of perspectives relating to a number of combinations of aspects of meaning and concerned all levels of human interaction: individual, group, social, international and global.

Some aspects of meaning represented within categories 1 and 2 were also included (to a greater or lesser extent) in the other categories. However, the reverse was not so, since thoughts in categories 1 and 2 were less complex than those in categories 3–5.

#### **Discussion**

The study showed that student nurses, when thinking of internationalization, understood and shared some of the general aspects of meanings. However, when conceptualizing those aspects of

meaning together as wholes, these wholes differed in content and character, principally because of two reasons. Firstly, the results describe forms of understanding that were either atomistic or holistic in character. This implies that some students have a more atomistic and fragmentary form of understanding and thinking in relation to internationalization (categories 1 and 2), compared with other students who have a more holistic and flexible way of thinking (categories 3, 4 & 5). Secondly, responses from the latter group contained examples of different aspects of meaning, in various combinations and related to different levels of human interaction (categories 2, 3 & 4). As wholes, these indicated greater complexity since they also involved more than one perspective, compared to the other categories (categories 1 & 2) which involved only one perspective.

Within each category one of the subcategories was dominant over the other subcategories, and is to be seen as a prototype (Box 1: 1a, 2a, 3c, 4b & 5c). The prototype category, is assumed to be an important part, as well as a more anchored and focused part, of the culture.

### Pedagogical implications

Teaching about, for example, internationalization in the nurse education programme is supposed to be anchored in students' life experiences. It should also be linked to how the students relate the material to their experience when they have understood and conceptualized the educational content presented (Ahlberg 1992, Jarvis 1992, Kroksmark 1987, Marton & Neuman 1989, Marton & Dahlberg et al. 1977). Such a relational view on learning and knowledge presupposes and requires that students' have the ability to maintain and take an active and responsible role in their own personal individual process of learning. It also requires increased 'teacher awareness'. It is suggested that when internationalization is in focus in different learning situations within the nurse education programme, this study's outcome space could be considered in the teaching programme.

### Implications for future research

It would be of interest to conduct further research into student nurses' conceptions of

internationalization; particularly research more specifically related to the factual educational content presented within the nurse education programme. Such an investigation would provide an opportunity to confirm the findings in this study, and also to refine and sharpen aspects of meaning as well as to reveal new aspects of meaning more closely related to the ongoing nurse programme's educational content.

The findings from this study point to the importance of developing teaching principles to guide the students' learning process in the direction of flexible and holistic forms of thinking and learning about internationalization in nurse education. This may be done by confronting students with as many existing variations of conceptualized wholes, related to internationalization, as possible, and especially by using forms of understanding originating from a holistic approach.

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