



# Accounting for the context in phenomenography-variation theory: Evidence of English graduates' conceptions of price



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## ABSTRACT

In describing peoples' conceptions of phenomena, most phenomenography/variation theory research does not distinguish between generalised aspects of conceptions and contextualised aspects. This study suggests this approach may have limitations. The concepts of the external and internal horizon are used to provide evidence that graduates' conceptions of price consist of a combination of generalised and contextualised elements, where each horizon can be described in terms of qualitative differences. This way of approaching conceptions allows for a crisp delimitation of a phenomenon from its context, captures their relationship, and is consistent with the principles of phenomenography/variation theory. Findings raise questions about connections between internal and external horizons and the 'correct' way to sequence variation in order to trigger conceptual change.

## 1. Introduction

Phenomenography is an approach to theorising and researching peoples' conceptions of phenomena in the world. It has been applied in a wide variety of educational settings, including schools and universities, as well to healthcare and information systems professionals. Phenomenographers develop descriptions of qualitatively different conceptions of any given phenomenon that are a very useful basis for instructional design. One approach, known as variation theory, involves highlighting differences between conceptions of a phenomenon in order to trigger conceptual change.

Phenomenography/variation theory (PVT) is most commonly enacted through 'Learning Study' (Pang & Marton, 2003, 2005) – a collaborative approach to the preparation of school lessons that has gained significant international prominence (Lo, 2009).

PVT emphasises the importance of incorporating the context of a phenomenon in descriptions of peoples' conceptions (Lo & Marton, 2012). In order to do this one of the things that it must account for is the way in which people experience different instances of the same phenomenon. For example, people can experience a mountain in Slovakia and a mountain in Austria, even though one person may be looking at the mountain as a physical barrier between countries and another may be looking at it in terms of its natural beauty. In this case, contextual factors are a part of peoples' conceptions of a mountain, but there is also a part that is separate (although related), to do with the nature of mountains. This suggests that to fully capture people's conceptions, phenomenographers should be able to describe: i) qualitatively different aspects of conceptions that are generalizable in any context *and*, ii) how those aspects are embedded in a particular context (Marton & Pong, 2005).

This study has two main objectives: i) to argue that PVT research could benefit from more clearly distinguishing between generalised and contextualised elements of conceptions both in the approach to the conduct of research and in the way in which conceptions are described and, ii) to provide evidence of an approach to describing conceptions that accounts for the separate but related nature of these aspects. In examining the way in which conceptions are described, this study contributes more to

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phenomenography than variation theory. It therefore goes some way to addressing the bias towards variation theory noted in recent years (Rovio-Johansson & Ingerman, 2016).

The study could also contribute to a more effective application of PVT to instructional design by increasing teachers' knowledge of students' conceptions. If teachers have better knowledge of generalised and contextualised elements of conceptions they will be better placed to: i) help students transfer their understanding to new contexts and, ii) avoid inadvertently capping the development of students' understanding by choosing a context in which to present a phenomenon that restricts that development.

The next section examines how previous PVT research has used the concepts of the 'internal horizon' and 'external horizon' (Marton & Booth, 1997) to account for the context of a phenomenon. Following this, evidence of 118 good quality English graduates' conceptions of price is presented. This indicates that conceptions of price consist of a combination of generalised and contextualised elements where each can be described in terms of qualitative differences. This structure allows for a crisp delimitation of a phenomenon from its context, whilst capturing the relationship between the two. Price was chosen as the phenomenon to study because of its prominence in previous PVT research.

## 2. Phenomenography/variation theory and context

PVT offers a theoretical framework for analysing the context of a phenomenon in terms of an 'internal' and an 'external' horizon (Marton & Booth, 1997). Based on Gurwitsch's (1964) structure of awareness model, this proposes that a person can be simultaneously aware of a particular set of aspects of a phenomenon within a 'thematic field'. At any moment within the thematic field, awareness forms into a 'theme' that consists of: i) relationships between a sub-set of aspects of the phenomenon and, ii) relationships between these and the phenomenon as a whole. This 'structural aspect' (which might vary in terms of the number of aspects, the relationships between them or the strength of those relationships), along with a 'referential aspect' denoting the meaning inherent in the structure, make up a 'conception' in phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997). Outside of the thematic field, in the 'margin', are aspects of the world that are not related to the phenomenon in question, but can nevertheless be part of peoples' awareness. Marton and Booth (1997) refer to the 'theme' as the internal horizon and the 'thematic field' and the 'margin of awareness' as the external horizon. This is summarised in Fig. 1 below.

PVT researchers have interpreted this model in different ways and this has affected how they have described conceptions. For some, the more sophisticated conceptions are, the more aspects of the external horizon they incorporate. There are those who see this in terms of the inclusion of more aspects of the external horizon (e.g. Cope & Prosser, 2005; Lo & Chik, 2016), and there are those that see it in terms of increasing the number of aspects but also reconfiguring the relationships between the aspects (e.g. Dahlgren et al., 2006; Markauskaite & Wardak, 2015). Since these interpretations assume an expanding boundary between the internal and external horizon, they are unlikely to result in descriptions of conceptions that include an explicit reference to either the internal or the external horizons. This was confirmed by a reviewing of a random selection of three recently published PVT studies where there was no mention of the terms internal horizon, external horizon or context (Abreu Novais, Ruhanen, & Arcodia, 2018; Arveklev et al., 2018; Morrison & Secker, 2017). The same applies to a number of important studies of the phenomenon of price (Marton, 2003, 2005; Pang, Linder, & Fraser, 2006; Marton & Pang, 2008).

On this view of the external horizon, the success of PVT research relies on approaching a phenomenon from different angles until the researcher is as convinced as they can be that they have captured all possible aspects of conceptions (Åkerlind, 2005). If the phenomenon has been 'saturated' (Taylor & Booth, 2015, p.1305), then it could be assumed that this has involved the context.

To illustrate this, consider an example drawn from a previous study that is typical of PVT research into price. The conceptions in Table 1 below are arranged in order of increasing sophistication (where 2A and 2B are of equal complexity). On the expanding boundary view of conceptions, Conception 3 contains a greater number of aspects (possibly configured in a different way) and is more sophisticated because it includes more of the aspects in the external horizon. This interpretation implies that Conception 3 will be visible in all possible situations in which a product has a price.

One of the challenges for this approach is making sure that important aspects of the external horizon are identified and incorporated into descriptions of conceptions. This could be a function of PVT researchers' awareness of the external horizon. Marton and Pong (2005) found that apparent inconsistencies in the conceptions people expressed may have resulted from the way in which researchers interpreted evidence. They suggest that researchers took evidence to be related to generalised conceptions of a

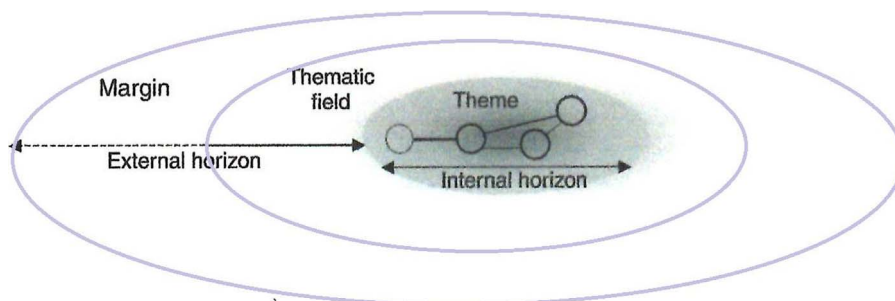


Fig. 1. 'A structure of awareness' (from Cope & Prosser, 2005, p. 349).

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