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# Pedagogical Effects of Qualitative Research Methods (Focus Group and Phenomenological Interviews) in Pedagogical Training for Graduate and Postgraduate Students

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## Abstract

The article deals with the peculiarities of a dialogue between a researcher and a respondent within a focused group interview and a phenomenological interview. The distinctive cultural communicative experience allowing the solving of pedagogical problems is typical for qualitative research methods based on joint creative work of a teacher and his or her students. Research organization conditions assume solving of diagnostic as well as pedagogical problems and call for special training of the teacher-researcher. The article reviews the approaches needed for organization of such a research. The conclusion is made upon reasonability to utilize qualitative research methods in developing communicative culture during training of graduate students and postgraduate student teachers.

*Keywords:* communicative culture of a teacher; master's degree in pedagogy; qualitative research methods; focused group interview; phenomenological analysis.

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## Introduction

The interest towards the qualitative research in the 21st century in the social sciences in general and in pedagogy in particular is explained by the humanization of science and, consequently, by a certain departure from the natural science paradigms of research to a holistic view of the study of man. The science tends to comprehend a person in his or her unique experiences. It is also associated with an attempt to explain the complex and contradictory aspects of human existence through conducted research, and that is graphically manifested in view of global contradictions of the modern world. The desire to holistically embrace human existence and uphold it in the context of the paradoxes of globalization and informational chaos leads to the need of bringing that chaos to order. It is expedient to fix the chaos on the basis that is new and different from the old foundation. In other words, we are to bring to the forefront a number of top themes that were not previously given due attention. In education, for example, the themes of meaning, freedom and individualization become important as they are inextricably linked to their opposing aspects, which have indeed received much attention. In the context of the topic of individualization, it is important to revise positions regarding the communicative practices in education. Firstly, these positions have not been given due attention in the field of higher education. Secondly, the activation of students, as a defining interactive learning project, does not solve the problem relating to the lack of communicative competencies among master's students, since activation in training sessions is often aimed at using existing communicative competencies rather than developing new ones. Thus, the activity of students in the classroom does not subsequently translate into independent academic work outside the classroom, but is exhausted by an interest in informal classes. A prerequisite for updating the existing and the emergence of new communicative competencies is the obligatory reflexive position of the participants regarding their own communicative activity in the classroom.

The communicative culture of the teacher is an important foundation for professional pedagogical culture, especially in regard to the distance learning technologies, which wash direct interpersonal communication between the teacher and students out from educational practice. At the same time, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of pedagogical communications for the development of a communicative culture of future teachers, since the communicative behavioral models obtained in educational practice is afterwards directly translated by students into professional practice. The specifics of teacher training are that the very methods of organizing classes and the related methodological analysis can become the content of education for future teachers. In the process of learning, students master the theoretical material, as well as the classes themselves and the methods of their organization. These are the foundations for the development of various forms of training and methods of organizing the transfer and assimilation of educational material (Zeleeva, 2010).

Since graduate education is designed for adult students, it is built on the basis of andragogical support, which implies helping and directing those processes of the self-being that are associated with the implementation within the pedagogical profession. Andragogical support is realized in communicative practice and requires a high level of implementation of the teacher's communicative culture. Teachers are not isolated from the whole pedagogical process, in which they can act as researchers in various situations. In the practice of the teacher, qualitative research methods are more pertinent, since the features that are unique, inherent to a particular situation, a specific individual or a particular group are important for the teacher. In order to better understand and to quickly find adequate pedagogical solutions, he or she has to master the methods of qualitative research and subsequent analysis of the data obtained.

### **Purpose and objectives of the study**

The purpose of this study is to study the features of using qualitative research methods in the practice of education, which involve co-creation of a teacher and trainees, building a special cultural experience of communication, as well as the conditions for organizing research. The conditions should include the solution of both diagnostic and pedagogical tasks. Due to the peculiarities of organizing these groups, much attention is given to the potential pedagogical aspects of the dialogue between the researcher and the researched in the practice of education.

*Methodology and research methods.* Theoretical analysis of foreign and Russian literature on the methodology of qualitative research allowed us to identify the specifics of the work of the researcher with qualitative methods and features in terms of organizing the research group and individual interviews. On the basis of logical-deductive analysis, the features of qualitative research methods (focused group interviews and phenomenological interviews) are highlighted for the use of these methods to solve pedagogical problems. Comparative analysis of the methods used allowed us to identify their specificity.

### **Literature review**

Considerable amount of foreign (Bugental, 1965; Giorgi, 1984; Giorgi A. & Giorgi B., 2003, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956, 1990; Morano, 1973; Sommers-Flanagan, J. & Sommers-Flanagan, 1989; Sullivan, 1954; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 2019; Ulanovskiy, 2007) and, more recently, domestic sources (Belanovskiy, 1993, 2001, 2001; Bogomolova, Melnikova & Folomeeva, 1994; Busygina, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2013; Dmitriyeva, 1999; Kovalev & Shteinberg, 1999; Melnikova, 2003; Ulanovskiy, 2012; Folomeeva, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2011; Folomeeva & Bogomolova, 1996; Folomeeva, Bogomolova & Melnikova, 1995; Yanchuk, 2000, 2011) have been devoted to methodologies of qualitative research methods. Examples would include focused group interviews as part of focus groups and in-depth interviews.

Qualitative research methodologies have been studied by Busygina. She has dedicated many of her books to this topic and she claims, that the type of preferred methods (quantitative or qualitative) represents different research traditions, which are based on different assumptions about the objects of research, about the relationship between the researcher and the researched and about the nature of the research. More than that, it is the specificity of these assumptions that determines that preference is to be given to qualitative in qualitative studies. On the other hand, quantitative preference is noted in quantitative methods, although other combinations of their various compounds are also possible” (Belanovskiy, 1993, 2001, 2001; Bogomolova, Melnikova & Folomeeva, 1994; Busygina, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2013). In the classical phenomenological tradition, great attention is paid to the words and other verbal expressions spoken off by the respondent. The methodology of the phenomenological research involves the search for meanings in the life events of the respondent when he or she is put in a researcher position in relation to his or her own life. The “language is the house of inner-being” idea of Heidegger (1962) is an important postulate in the phenomenological methodology. This idea implies the thesis: “how a person visualise a life, so he or she acts in it”. Of course, language is an expression of the individual’s life attitudes. On the other hand, these attitudes are spoken off by the individual, that is, they are necessarily reflected in his language.

Ulanovsky (2007, 2012) notes one of the main features of a qualitative research—an appeal to the social context. He specified it as the value of the communicative context of the researcher interaction with the people who are being studied. He also lists the characteristics of qualitative research: the desire for the

integrity and wealth in the description, interest in isolated cases, an inductive approach to data, flexibility and the absence of rigid standardization, an orientation to the study of meanings of the experiences, and reliance on the researcher's reflexivity. The respondent in a qualitative study is an expert of his/her life and experiences. Moreover, his/her reflection forms the data for the study.

Sullivan (1954) analyzing a psychiatric interview also concludes that relevant data is created through the interaction within the interpersonal situation in a specific setting, where the interviewer is an included observer and influences the data received. This method of research requires special procedures for the objectification of subjectively obtained data. It is important to understand that in such an interview objectivity is understood differently. The interviewer receives subjectively presented data about the inner-world of the human being for whom this world is objective. This is literally grasping the subjective vision of the world of the person, his subjective experiences that have a direct impact on life choices and human behavior.

Having dedicated his work to a research interview and describing the interpersonal situations, Kvale (1996, 2009) notes that a qualitative research interview for a respondent can be a very rewarding experience. In particular, the researcher is interested in respondents during the whole interview; a qualitative interview gives a boost of positive mutual experience and compensates for the common lack of communication.

There is a variety of research interviews: focus groups (focused group interviews) and individual interviews (phenomenological interviews). Both of them are included in our study.

### **Methodology**

*Existential paradigm and phenomenological approach in qualitative research.* The ways of understanding a person and the authenticity of externally observable data (Binswanger, 1963; Boss, 1963, 1979; Buber, 1947; 1970; Bugental, 1965, 1978, 1987; Frankl, 1967; Husserl, 1925; May, 1969, 1983; May, Angel & Ellenberger, 1958; Yalom, 1980) have been discussed for a long time in the existential-phenomenological tradition. Existential psychology raises complex questions about the objectivity of human studies of man: can we be sure that we see man as he is, or do we see a projection of our own theories about him?

Western psychologists claim the existence of man is manifested in the world in four dimensions: the world of things (Umwelt); the world of people (Mitwelt); own world (Eigenwelt); the spiritual world (Überwelt) (Binswanger, 1963; Busygina, 2013; May, 1983). They described possible ways of understanding, creating Daseinsanalyse (Binswanger, 1963). We can never penetrate into the person's world to know him or her directly. On the other hand, we must know him or her, must exist in his or her world if we want to have a chance to understand this individual. Does a person him- or herself understand the world in which he or she lives and how this picture of the world determines his or her actions and choices?

Phenomenology and existentialism complement each other. An existential view of a person is impossible without an understanding of its uniqueness and originality; it cannot be measured by statistical procedures and quantitative indicators. From the point of view of existentialists, human studies cannot be without a holistic understanding of a person immersed in the context of the world and reflecting this world in his or her inner world.

The existential trend in psychology focuses on qualitative research methods precisely because a human being is unique, capable of self-knowledge and self-development, is determined by his or her

actions and choices. For this reason, an individual cannot be understood without the context of his or her life and relationships. Man is able to learn about himself in the context of his relationships. It is awareness, from the point of view of existentialists, which makes him Essence (Dasein).

Such an attitude in relation to a person suggests a completely different view on the possibility of studying the experiences of a person and the grounds for his or her choices. We must understand that what we see is largely determined by our own attitudes and limitations. Understanding in the area of human relations is due to the resonance of joint experiences in contact. We may only understand what the other person can feel, when this individual him- or herself understands this. Therefore, the task of the researcher is to organize the situation and conditions of understanding by the respondent of what is happening in his or her inner world so that he or she can share the results of self-observation and self-investigation. Exclusively by connecting these data with the data of the researcher, we can obtain the result close to the truth.

### **Results**

*Experience of using focused group interviews and phenomenological interviews in classes with graduate and postgraduate students of pedagogical specialties.* Phenomenological interview as a type of qualitative research interview implies not only special attention to the respondent and his or her experiences, but also co-creation in the study of this experience. The questions asked during the interview are structured to help the respondent to be aware of the meaning of what he or she is experiencing. When the respondent begins to understand what is happening with him or her and share this understanding with the researcher, then data allows describing the respondent's inner world and his or her comprehension of it is collected.

Considering the features of qualitative research methods and, in particular, the phenomenological interview, Giorgi writes that the research can be conducted in a strictly disciplined way, without necessarily leading to quantitative expression. He describes the rules and procedures of the study, where the data is expressed by means of the usual language (Yanchuk, 2000, 2011).

Phenomenological interview is a type of qualitative interview that is aimed at describing and understanding the meaning of the central aspects of the respondent's world. The information received is a subjective experience of the respondent of specific situations related to events significant for him or her. These events are described and interpreted by the respondent him- or herself when the interviewer creates the conditions for this awareness of the respondent and his willingness to share this with the interviewer. These special conditions are the atmosphere and the way in which questions are asked during the interview process, as well as the interviewer's readiness to give feedback about his or her feelings.

The researcher in this case is an included observer participating in the process of the respondent's awareness of the experience. Thus, this is a special relationship of joint research and description. Using questions, the researcher (interviewer) leads the respondent to certain topics, but not to certain opinions. The focus in such an interview is to keep the attention on the topic, although freedom is possible in discussing various aspects of it. All hypotheses arising from the researcher are clarified with the respondent. The process of understanding is a very difficult process. The researcher's professional skills in a phenomenological interview are aimed at creating conditions for understanding what is happening with the respondent and finding a place for this experience in the respondent's life. These features of the interview organization change the perception of what is happening in the respondent's life. They also change and enable him or her to independently manage this experience. Thus, this research dialogue

carries the pedagogical aspects associated with obtaining the respondent's new experience of awareness. Of course, the respondent is expected to apply this knowledge in the future, when he or she is faced with similar life situations.

A focus group is a group in-depth interview focused on the studied topic. It is expected, that the participants answer the questions posed by the moderator, addressing personal experiences or attitude to the participants. The term "focused interview" was introduced by Merton, Fiske & Kendall (1956, 1990). In domestic studies, the focus group method is described by Belanovsky (1993, 2001, 2001), Buber (1947), Dmitriyeva (1999), Folomeeva (2001, 2003, 2011), Folomeeva & Bogomolova (1996), Folomeeva, Bogomolova & Melnikova (1995), Giorgi, A. & Giorgi B. (2003). The group is offered a topic on which the group is then surveyed. It is not so much the opinion of the participants, but their attitude towards the subject that matters. The questions are given by the moderator in a specific order. They should involve the participants and actualize their personal experiences. Questions gradually expand the horizon of the topic or, on the contrary, narrow and concretize it. Most important is that participants in a focused group interview should be interested and be active in answering the moderator's questions. The questions posed by the moderator should clarify the degree of awareness of the problem, free opinions, a specific attitude, the reasons for this relationship and the intensity of the relationship. A focused group interview affects the feelings of the participants, therefore the more complicated the subject of the discussion is, the more emotional it is going to be. When there are more points of view in the group, then the fewer questions can be considered.

We have used this method for students to discuss psychological and pedagogical problems in a group. The topic was the content of training in academic disciplines aimed at preparing for pedagogical activity and was aimed at determining student's position, as well as their attitude to the subject being studied (Zeleeva, 2010, 2015, 2016). The comprehension and involvement of participants in a focused interview put them in a situation of self-study in which the reflexive position and introspection are activated. Questions in the group were chosen by the moderator so that the students voicing and recording their answers could observe the dynamics of their position or their attitude, changing under the influence of self-observation and the statements of other group members. The last question of group work, concerning the reflection of their participation in this group process, required the participants to voice their feelings and conclusions on the topic.

As a result of this work, students voiced what was interesting, useful and effective for them. They shared openly, changes on their view of the topic triggered in respect to the discussion, the attitude to their position, to themselves and to other members of the group. The attention within the group is directed rather on the relationships than on the topic. The focus is to be directed on the conditions in which the group is developed, towards the individual dynamics experienced by the participants in the group, on the change in their position, ability, readiness for self-observation and self-correction.

There are several tasks, besides diagnostic ones, which are solved by a focused group interview within the pedagogical class. The diagnostic aspect is one of them, however, the method provides for identification of the motivational aspects of a person's behavior, expectations, ideas and values, making them available for the creative process. Firstly, a change in student's attitudes in a group focused interview serves as the basis for remedial work during a class session. Secondly, the discussion of methodological and applied aspects of organizing and conducting focused group interviews allows students to use the experience gained in their professional activities, to act as organizers and presenters of group discussions. Thirdly, group support in the process of discussion increases the self-esteem of the group participants. In

the process of discussion the participants often find their solutions to the problem situations and then use these solutions in practice. This therapeutic effect raises interest in classes built according to this principle. For example, a group focused interview with students, the subject of which is teaching practice, reveals expectations, and, sometimes, fears of participation in the group. Fears can be unfounded, and in the process of discussion, negative attitudes to this training form are significantly reduced.

Phenomenological interviews and focused group interviews show different possibilities and call for different tasks in using these methods for the learning process. However, there are some related common characteristics. These methods in the practice of education are not used for research purposes, although most of the rules of their organization are observed. Their peculiarities lie only in the fact that, joining the research dialogue, respondents are included in self-observation and the study of their own experiences, thus becoming researchers in this process. A respondent, being in this position, gets an opportunity to adjust what is perceived in a dialogue with the interviewer or focus group participants on their own. Therefore, the use of these methods in training sessions with graduate and postgraduate students sends them on a path of self-knowledge and self-development in their professional activities. Living out the experiences through participating in these methods, they prepare to apply these methods in their professional practice, observing ethical standards of interaction. The students analyze their own experience of participation. Subsequently, they receive methodological recommendations on the application of these methods in the educational process and master these methods “from the inside”, evaluating their effectiveness.

The differences between these methods lie in the effects of group dialogue and interaction. In the phenomenological interview, the intimacy of the process accompanies a greater disclosure of the inner experiences of the interlocutors and the possibility of achieving greater depths of analysis with self-knowledge. In focus groups, attention is shifted to comparing their own experience and the experience of other participants. The degree of self-disclosure here may be less. However, we enjoy the opportunity to choose, try on and test other people's strategies. Additionally, group support and confidence in the ability to cope with many situations, if others cope with it, add to the benefit of this training. Teaching ethical dialogue and respect for the interlocutor through the experience of receiving group feedback allows seeing and adjusting the personal idea of yourself and others, and this makes the method of focus groups an effective method in the pedagogical field.

### **Discussions**

*Pedagogical technologies for organization of studies based on phenomenological interviews and focus groups.* The novelty of this study lies in the fact that the pedagogical aspects of conducting qualitative research methods in the context of training sessions are highlighted. The features of the dialogue in obtaining data have an impact on its participants, qualitatively changing the attitude of the respondents to the topic being studied.

The basis of the dialogue in the phenomenological interview is a joint study of the respondent and the interviewer. The respondent is facing it in a particular situation or in relation to an important event for the respondent. The task of the phenomenologist together with the respondent is to unpack the psychological senses hidden in his or her story. For this purpose, the text of the story is recorded, divided into semantic units, and their psychological meaning is checked along with the respondent. The logic of the movement in a joint study of psychological meanings is conditioned by the importance for the respondent to realize that there are specific feelings behind the narrated events and what they are. The respondents

pose where to go and what is the meaning of their experience for themselves. Technological methods of such research are described in the relevant literature (Busygina, 2013; Giorgi, 1970, 1984; Kvale, 1996, 2009; Sommers-Flanagan, J. & Sommers-Flanagan, 2006; Ulanovskiy, 2012; Zeleeva, 2010, 2015, 2016). In the process of such a dialogue, when the respondent gradually realizes what this experience meant for his or her context, helps him or her gain experience in analyzing what is happening with him or her and how it can be independently used in the future. If this part of the phenomenological interview is used only for ongoing changes with the respondent, then the respondent does not need further steps. In order to use the data obtained together with the respondent as a source for a larger study, this data is processed without the respondent's participation as follows: the psychological meaning obtained is condensed, the existing phenomenon is separated from it and the definition of the phenomenon under the study is defined.

*The focus group dialogue* is based on the questions asked by the moderator. Each participant answers these questions. Questions are formulated to include a discussion of experience or relationships, rather than reflections on the stated topic. The effect of group discussion is in having the participants hear each other's answers. It is also possible for the participants to adjust their own answers under the influence of what they have heard from others. This dynamic in the participants' perceptions is associated with rethinking their own position or attitude as the questions are being focused or via expansion of the topic. Therefore, the dialogue in the focus group is, in fact, a polylogue. The range of voiced answers is the space for researching one's own position and attitude and correcting them if necessary. The moderator indirectly manages this process by asking questions and triggering the dynamics for deepening the personal experience and emotions of the participants.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we found that in qualitative methods based studies (group focused interviews, phenomenological interviews, etc.) conducted with graduate and postgraduate students, the participation of respondents in such studies changes their attitude towards the phenomenon or problem being studied due to their activity and, as a result, leads to the dynamics of ideas and the development of a personal position in the topics discussed.

Studying the features of conducted qualitative group and individual research interviews, we can single out the following pedagogical effects developing their participants: 1) their presentation and attitude to the topic changes under discussion by comparing positions, attitudes and statements of other participants in the discussion (group focused interview); 2) the degree of awareness of the experience increases and is transformed into knowledge through the dialogue of the phenomenological interview; 3) communicative attitudes are changing and communicative behaviors of participants are being improved (group focused interview, phenomenological interview).

The conditions for the organization of qualitative research suggest a special communicative situation in which: 1) the respondent joins the research in a dialogue with the researcher; 2) the questions in the interview are put in such a way that the data on the psychological world of the respondent can be obtained from the respondent him- or herself by bringing him or her to the awareness of what is happening to him or her; 3) the researcher, as an involved observer, has a direct impact on the respondent; 4) both participants are changing in the research dialogue.

In the process of applying these methods, the basic techniques are determined, which allow to obtain pedagogical effects: 1) rules for having a dialogue and asking research questions; 2) the dispositions of the researcher and his behavior when conducting such an interview; 3) methods and techniques of

qualitative research and analysis of data obtained in this way, as well as their correlation with other research methods.

To conclude, the development of communicative culture of graduate and postgraduate students of pedagogy based on a qualitative group and individual (phenomenological) research interview is pedagogical process grounded on the new values, which include support for the student's self-processes in an open and dynamic socio-cultural space of developing relationships.

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