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ABSTRACT

This article describes a qualitative research approach (in-depth phenomenological interviewing) and illustrates, through the example of an actual study, its potential for helping institutions of higher education understand their students. It argues that progress in understanding college student outcomes, such as persistence, has been retarded by the failure to take into consideration the meanings the phenomenon of going to college holds for students. The limitations of quantitative approaches to institutional research are addressed first, as well as the need to examine the process of interpreting the data, i.e., approaching the study through the eyes of the students, not the researcher. Next, a general overview of the approach is described including the purpose behind phenomenological interviewing and its methodology. Finally, an illustration is provided of the phenomenological interview approach in action that involved a study of Mexican-American university students' perceptions of going to college. Included in the study's description are the data collection and analysis procedures, the research perspective used, the interpretation of the data's meanings, and the researcher's theoretical interpretations. A summary and conclusion are presented. Contains 41 references. (GLR)

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Phenomenological Interviewing in the Conduct of Institutional Research: An Argument and an Illustration

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An increasing number of observers (e.g., Alfred, 1982; Van Maanen, 1988) are calling for the use of qualitative research methodology in the conduct of institutional research. These commentators point to the gaps in our understanding of institutions of higher education and their members, and the resulting impairment of our ability to make well-informed policy, that have resulted from the virtually exclusive reliance of institutional researchers upon quantitative research approaches. As the latter tend to keep institutional researchers at a distance from the everyday lives of the institutional members, including the members' perspectives on their lives, they cannot, these critics argue, provide a comprehensive data base for decisions about the members (Alfred, 1982).

Van Maanen (1988) has considered the issue with respect to the study of students in particular. Here the tendency has been to focus on inputs and outputs; the measure of these dominates institutional research involving these institutional members. Van Maanen (p.6) observes: "We probably know far more about our students before they enter and after they leave than we do while they are with us. . . . This [is] short-sighted, for if we are to manage education better it is with the process of education itself we must begin." Noting that "process entails experience, and experience is best captured by narrative," Van Maanen calls for "descriptions of student lives-in-progress" (p.6). Similarly, Alfred (1982, p. 64) urges institutional researchers to collect "detailed and descriptive data about the situations, interactions, and observed behavior of students." These, Alfred insists, are the only appropriate basis for informed decision making.

Research of the type advocated by Van Maanen and Alfred has not been entirely ignored by the profession. Snyder (1971), for example, used qualitative research methods to examine student cultures at MIT, an investigation that was conducted through that institution's Division of Institutional Research. And certainly, within the literature of higher education generally, there are numerous exemplars of research of this sort (e.g., Becker et al., 1961, 1968; Bushnell, 1962; Cottle, 1977; Lamont, 1979; London, 1978; Moffat, 1989; and Weiss, 1985; and for an extended discussion of the use of qualitative methods in research on higher education, see Crowson, 1987).

The general reluctance of institutional researchers to employ qualitative methods may be related, at least in part, to a lack of appreciation of the kind of information they are capable of generating. The purpose of this contribution to the *AIR Professional File* is to describe one qualitative research approach--in-depth phenomenological interviewing--and to illustrate, through a study of student persistence the author recently conducted, its potential for illuminating our understanding of our students.

The Limitations of Quantitative Approaches to Institutional Research: The Case of Student Outcomes

Institutional researchers spend a great deal of time trying to understand what happens to students in their institutions in terms of such outcomes as achievement, persistence, and satisfaction. Typically, they will investigate such matters by administering to a randomly selected sample of their students a survey instrument that contains a limited number of predetermined items with a limited number of predetermined response categories, the responses to which are analyzed by multivariate statistical techniques of one type or another (Pascarella, 1982). Their success in illuminating in this way the factors that influence the outcomes experienced by their

students depends, in large measure, on the prior conceptualization which informs the selection of the survey questions, in other words, variables and their indicators and the particular statistical techniques employed (Attinasi and Nora, 1987; Pascarella, 1982). Still, no matter how theoretically and analytically sophisticated, this approach will never be capable of fully informing us as to how and why particular student outcomes occur. This is because such methods do not, and cannot, adequately capture the perspectives of the individuals whose outcomes are of concern.

The use of questionnaires with preselected items and fixed-choice response categories to collect data that are analyzed with aggregative multivariate statistical techniques is a research strategy that largely imposes the researcher's frame of reference upon the data collection and analysis procedures. Researchers who use these methods of data collection and analysis either (1) assume they already understand the meanings things have for the individuals they are studying or (2) ignore such meanings under the assumption that they are not important for understanding outcomes. "Meaning is either taken for granted and thus pushed aside as unimportant or it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behavior and this behavior as the product of such factors" (Blumer, 1969, p.2). It is swallowed up in sociological factors such as social position, norms and values, and social roles; and/or psychological factors such as attitudes, motives, and stimuli, which are used to account for the behavior under study.

There are many observers who insist, however, that the behavior of human beings is understandable only to the extent that *their* definitions of things and the process by which they construct them are understood. They believe that because "people act, not on the basis of predetermined responses to predefined objects, but rather as interpreting, defining, symbolic animals [their] behavior can only be understood by having the researcher enter into the defining process" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p.33). Accepting this proposition means acknowledging that further significant advances in our understanding of student outcomes are most likely to occur when research approaches designed to take account of the "subjects'" meanings are employed. Let us examine the proposition more closely.

The Need to Examine the Process of Interpretation. Blumer's (1956) classic critique of variable analysis, published more than thirty years ago, would appear to be an appropriate point of departure for our examination. Blumer argued that a major shortcoming of the variable analysis approach, which then dominated and continues to dominate social research, is it failure to accommodate the process of interpretation or definition that goes on in human groups, a process that is certainly "the core of human action" (p.685). Blumer presumed that all sociologists would recognize, at least implicitly, that:

> Human group life [is] chiefly a vast interpretative process in which people, singly and collectively, guide themselves by defining the objects, events, and situations which they encounter. Regularized activity inside this process results from the application of stabilized definitions. Thus, an institution carries on its complicated activity through an articulated complex of such stabilized meanings. In the face of new situations or new experiences individuals, groups, institutions and societies find it necessary to form new definitions. These new definitions may enter into the repertoire of stable meanings. This seems to be the characteristic way in which new activities, new relations, and new social structures are formed. (p.686)

Whenever the object of research is to understand a matter that either directly or indirectly confronts people and thus enters into human group life, the researcher must take account of the process of interpretation. Obviously, such matters are the principal focus of variable analysis in sociology. Yet social researchers today, as at the time of Blumer's writing, are "markedly disposed to ignore the process" (p.686). Blumer further observed:

> The conventional procedure is to identify something which is presumed to operate in group life and treat it as an independent variable, and then to select some form of group activity as the dependent variable. The independent variable is put at the beginning of the process of interpretation and the dependent variable at the terminal part of the process. The intervening process is ignored or, what amounts to the same thing, taken for granted as something that need not be considered. (p.686)

The assumption is made that as long as one has neutralized other factors which may influence the dependent variable, one may appropriately conclude that the dependent variable is the necessary result of the independent variable.

But the assumption is an incorrect one; the independent variable does not automatically exercise its influence on the dependent variable. Rather, there is a process of definition intervening between the events of experience presupposed by the independent variable and the formed behavior represented by the dependent variable. Thus, to use Blumer's examples, the relationship between the presentation of political programs on the radio and the "resulting" expression of the intention to vote cannot be understood in the absence of a consideration of the interpretation by the listeners of the political programs. Similarly, the relationship between the occurrence of a business depression and the "resulting" rate of divorce is incompletely understood if the interpretation made by husbands and wives of the many events and happenings which together constitute the business depression is ignored.

Blumer considers several options for including the process of interpretation within variable analysis, but finds each potential strategy for characterizing the process as a variable to be unsatisfactory. These include characterizing it either in terms of its product (the interpretation) or what enters into it (the objects perceived, the evaluations and assessments, etc), or breaking it down into component parts (perception, cognition, analysis, etc.) and treating each of these as variables. Blumer finds no way in which the process of interpretation "can be given the qualitative constancy that is logically required in a variable" (p.688).

For those areas where the process of interpretation is important, he urges the use of an entirely different scheme of analysis, a scheme which seeks to trace the lines of defining experience through which ways of living, patterns of relations, and social forms are developed, rather than to relate these formations to a set of selected items. Accomplishing this requires a distinctive form of procedure. "This procedure is to approach the study of group activity through the eyes and experience of the

people who have developed the activity" (p.689).

The study of what happens to students in college is undoubtedly an area of human life in which the process of interpretation is central. To fully understand the outcomes of college for students, it is necessary, the author would argue, to turn to research strategies that will accomplish what Blumer proposes, that will permit the researcher to approach the study of students "through the eyes and experience" of the students themselves. Recently, the author employed such a strategy in a study of the freshman-year persistence of Hispanic university students. Subsequently, he will describe his use of the strategy in that investigation. What follows immediately is a general overview of the approach.

An Alternative Approach: Phenomenological Interviewing

The Purpose of Phenomenological Interviewing. As an alternative to traditional variable analysis for studying student outcomes, the author is proposing in-depth phenomenological interviewing (Tesch, 1988). Research of this type has two basic premises: (1) An individual's behavior cannot be understood apart from the meaning he or she makes of his or her own experience and (2) such meaning is accessible when the individual reflects on the constitutive factors of personal experience (Schutz, 1967). The task of the phenomenological interviewer, then, is to gain access to the meanings that particular objects, events, and situations have for the interviewees by encouraging them to reconstruct their experience and reflect on the meaning they make of it (Seidman, 1985).

The Method of Phenomenological Interviewing. To accomplish this, the phenomenological interviewer employs a qualitative research interview of the type describe by Kvale (1983). Such an interview seeks detailed "description and understanding of the meaning of themes in the life-world of the interviewee" (p.174). Technically, it is "semi-structured" (Gorden, 1987), being neither a free conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire. It is carried through following an interview guide which, rather than containing exact questions, focuses on certain themes. The interview is taped and transcribed verbatim. The typed transcription, together with the tape, constitute the material for subsequent interpretation of meaning.

With phenomenological interviewing, data collection and data analysis take place more or less simultaneously. The process has several phases which can be thought of as occurring at different points along a continuum between description and interpretation. There are six possible phases, according to Kvale:

1. The interviewee describes his or her life-world with respect to the phenomenon of interest. This is a spontaneous description, without any special interpretation of the description from either the interviewee or the interviewer.
2. The interviewee discovers new relations, sees new meaning in his or her life-world on the basis of the spontaneous descriptions. Again, this occurs without any direct influence from interpretations by the interviewer.
3. The interviewer during the interview condenses and interprets the meaning of what the interviewee describes and, perhaps, "sends" the interpreted meaning back for confirmation or clarification.
4. The interviewer or another person alone interprets the completed and transcribed interview on three different levels: (1) the self-understanding of the interviewee, (2) a common sense interpretation which involves extending the meaning of what the interviewee said by reading between the lines and by drawing in broader contexts than the interviewee did, and (3) more theoretical interpretations, based upon, for example, an existing social or socio-psychological theory.
5. The interviewer gives the interpretations, based on his or her analysis of the completed interview, back to the interviewee in a second interview. This provides an opportunity for the interviewer to correct and elaborate the interpretations.
6. There may be an extension of the description-interpretation continuum to action. Perhaps the interviewee begins to act from new insights gained during the interview, or the researcher and the interviewee(s) together, in a program of action research, act on the basis of experiences and insights about social situations developed through the interviews.

These phases are not to be thought of as presupposing each other logically or chronologically in any strict sense, nor will every study include all six phases. Further, "the offerings of each phase have their own worth and can stand and be utilized independently of the others" (Wertz, 1985, p.161).

Phenomenological Interviewing in the Study of Student Outcomes: An Illustration

A Phenomenological Study of Persistence in the University. As an example of the use of phenomenological interviewing in the study of college student outcomes, the author refers the reader to a study he (Attinasi, 1989) conducted recently of Mexican-American university students' perceptions of college-going. The purpose of that inquiry was to obtain detailed descriptions of what going to college meant for these students at various points in their lives, how they came to have those meanings, and how they used them in deciding, in the first place, to enter college and, in the second, to sustain their enrollment through the freshman year. The author wished to understand the entire socio-psychological context in which they made these decisions. Toward that end, he interviewed phenomenologically and in-depth eighteen individuals, from a single entering class of a large public university in the Southwest, who were either sophomores (13 informants) or freshman-year leavers (5 informants) at the time of the interviewing.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures. An interview guide with general, open-ended questions was used in obtaining from each interviewee a detailed description of the meaning of college-going to him or her, both prior to and during the freshman year, and of the processes through which he or she obtained and used those meanings. These interviews took place at locations of the interviewees' choosing, including the university library and dormitory, the interviewees' homes, and the library of a local community college. Each interview lasted between one and one-half and two hours and was audio-taped. The tapes were transcribed word for word.

Analysis was by means of qualitative induction (Erickson, 1986). That is, concepts and hypotheses emerged from an examination of the concrete details of the informants' lives reported in the interviews. The

induction process was constrained only by the research perspective (see below).

The analysis began with open coding of the interview transcriptions, that is, the coding of their contents in as many ways as possible. The coding categories related to context and setting, informants' definitions of situations, informants' ways of thinking about people and objects, process (sequence of events, changes over time), activities, events, strategies, relationships, and social structure (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). Some kinds of coding categories--those most related to the research questions and research perspective--were more likely to be identified than others. Examples of the former are everyday social interactions and pre- and post-matriculation perceptions of the university. A total of 119 coding categories were initially assigned to the contents of the interviews.

Next, the open-coded interview transcriptions were subjected to a data reduction process which involved the elimination of some coding categories and the establishment of conceptual links between others. In the first instance, data reduction was accomplished by (1) identifying and retaining the most salient categories, that is, those for which there were many incidents and which seemed to be related to other categories, (2) merging categories, and (3) eliminating categories which had few incidents and few links with other categories. One category was merged with another when a decision was made that there were no substantial differences between the incident types they contained.

With time, the reduction process became increasingly conceptually based. After the number of coding categories had been reduced by merging and eliminating categories, further reduction was effected by "clustering" (Stern, 1980) the remaining categories. This involved the establishment of connections, or "linkages," between two or more coding categories by identifying some higher order category under which they could be fitted without sacrificing their individual integrities. In this way, initial coding categories became subcategories or properties of higher level categories.

For example, the categories "scaling down" and "getting to know" were seen to be linked, since they were both processes that helped student negotiate, or penetrate, the campus geographies. Thus it was possible to "reduce" these two categories to form the broader category "getting in." "Scaling down" and "getting to know" then became subcategories of the category "getting in." In forming higher order categories, the author gradually "moved out of the data," and coding categories gave way to conceptual categories.

Raising the data to a conceptual level did not await the formal completion of the coding, category sorting, and data-reduction steps. Simultaneous with the coding of the first interview, the author initiated a process of research "memoing" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). That is, he would write down, as they occurred to him, insights into the data and their analysis. Ranging in length from a single sentence to several pages, these memos were intended to "exhaust the analyst [sic] momentary ideation on the data" (Glaser, 1978, p.84). Ideas for analysis occurred at an uneven pace and at unlikely hours. It was important, therefore, to have a mechanism for recording such ideas whenever they struck, without awaiting the formal completion of the coding analysis.

As the analysis proceeded, there was increasing interplay between the data reduction and research memoing phases of the research. Progress in reducing the data and generating conceptual categories expanded the contents of memos and suggested connections between the ideas in separate memos. This led to a process of "rememoing," that is, writing memos based on other memos. At the same time, the writing of memos and rememos facilitated the data-reduction process by suggesting how categories could be collapsed into other categories and, hence, categories of a higher conceptual level generated.

Research Perspective. The collection and analysis of the data were guided by a broad research perspective--the sociology of everyday life (Douglas, 1980). The latter is actually a collection of research perspectives in sociology, all of which focus on everyday social interaction in natural situations and have as their starting points (1) the experience and observation of people interacting in concrete, face-to-face situations and (2) an analysis of the actors' meanings. In particular, two of the sociologies of everyday life--symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology--were used in conducting the inquiry.

Symbolic interactionism emphasizes social interaction as a process that forms human conduct: it is from the interaction of the individual with others that the meaning of things arise, and it is on the basis of their meaning that the individual acts toward things. The concern of symbolic interactionists then are shared emergent meanings. Ethnomethodology seeks to understand how actors go about the task of seeing, describing, and explaining the world in which they live, that is, the process of creating shared emergent meanings and using them to account for things in their everyday world. Two assumptions, following from the research perspective, underlay the study: (1) Persistence behavior is the consequence of a process in which the student is an active participant; he or she takes account of various things in his or her everyday world and acts on the basis of how he or she interprets them and (2) persistence behavior is related to the manner in which the university becomes and remains, through everyday social interaction, a reality for the student.

The Researcher's Common-Sense Interpretation of Meanings. The data collection and analysis in this study involved the first four phases of Kvale's (1983) phenomenological interviewing process (see previous section). The result of phase four--the researcher's interpretation of the completed and transcribed interviews--was at the common-sense level a bi-thematic scheme for understanding the meaning of college-going for the interviewees. The first theme, "getting ready," had to do with the interviewees' perceptions of various activities that either by design, or incidentally, got them "ready" for college. The second scheme, "getting in," centered around the interviewees' perceptions, upon matriculation, of the university as a tripartite geography (physical, social, and academic) too large and complex to be easily negotiated, and of their use of certain "strategies" that assisted them in the negotiation of the geography, that is, in "getting in" the university.

Getting Ready. Many of the informants described an early expectation that they would go to college, which was primarily a consequence of parental exhortation (initial expectation engendering). Subsequent "getting ready" experiences would provide substance, in the form of descriptions, prescriptions, and predictions about college-going, for this early generalized expectation of college-going. For example, "familial modeling" refers to

observations of the college-going of an older relative, usually a sibling, which had two potential consequences for the observer: first, a belief that he or she, too, would go to college one day and, second, a belief that his or her eventual college-going was likely to be of the kind that was described by the relative. Another source of descriptions of college-going was provided by influential high school teachers (mentors) who would relate their own experiences of and attitudes toward college, a "mentor modeling" of college-going behavior. High school teachers could also influence perceptions of college-going by making prescriptive or predictive statements about what college-going should or would be like for their charges. As with familial and mentor modeling, knowledge acquisition through this kind of "indirect simulation" was strictly vicarious.

In the case of "direct simulation," however, the informants engaged in a whole range of on-campus activities that provided them with firsthand experience of a college campus. In some cases, the activities (e.g., using the gym) were very short in duration, involved little interaction with campus personnel, and were unrelated to college-going per se. In others, such as accompanying an official enrollee to classes or actually being a class enrollee, the activities closely resembled those of a matriculated student.

Getting In. In describing their early impressions of the university, the informants were virtually unanimous in emphasizing a perception of bigness. The descriptor "big" turned out to be a gloss for articulating the perceived dimensions, mass, distance, and complexity of three campus geographies: (1) a physical geography, (2) a social geography, and (3) an academic/cognitive geography. Many of the post-matriculation experiences reported by the informants were the working out of strategies for fixing themselves in one or more of these geographies, that is, for "getting in." Two primary strategies for "getting in" were identified: "getting to know" and "scaling down."

"Getting to know" refers to strategies used by the informants to rapidly increase their familiarity with the geographies. There were at least two ways in which they accomplished this: (1) through mentoring relationships with veteran students who "showed them the ropes" (mentoring) or (2) through information-sharing relationships with fellow neophytes (peer information sharing) which resulted in cooperative exploration of the geographies. Through "scaling down," the informants perceptually and physically bounded the geographies, effectively reducing the extent of each with which they had to be familiar in order to locate themselves.

One focus of both the "getting to know" and "scaling down" kinds of experiences was the process of "majoring in." In addition to its manifest function--initiating a focused study of that part of the curriculum that is most closely related to one's life and career goals, selecting an academic major had another, more latent function: it provided a vehicle for locating oneself in the physical, social, and academic/cognitive geographies; it facilitated "getting in."

The Researcher's Theoretical Interpretations. The author interpreted the contents of the interviews on a more theoretical level by drawing upon elements of existing social and socio-psychological theories. For example, the concepts of "significant others" and anticipatory socialization illuminated certain aspects of "getting ready," while the notions of social integration and cognitive mapping were useful for understanding "getting in."

Getting Ready. Haller and Woelfel (1972, pp.594-95), in their study of the occupational and educational goals of high school students, defined a "significant other" as "a person, known to the focal individual, who either through direct interaction (a definer) or by example (a model) provides information which influences the focal individual's conception of himself in relation to educational or occupational roles or influences his conception of such roles (a conception of an object)." In the author's study, parents, high school teachers, and, less frequently, siblings were definers with respect to college-going. These individuals communicated to the informant the fact that he or she belonged to the category of future college-goers and defined for him/her what it meant to be a college-goer. In addition, high school teachers and siblings created expectations with respect to college-going by modeling college-going behavior. The mere departure of an older relative for college might have signaled to the informant his or her membership in the category of (future) college-goers. Subsequently, the informant's observations of college-going behavior by siblings and teachers provided insight into the nature of the college-going role.

Anticipatory socialization has been described as a premature taking on or identification with the behavior and attitudes of an aspired-to group which "may serve the twin functions of aiding [an individual's] rise into [the aspired-to] group and of easing his adjustment after he has become part of it (Merton and Kitt, 1950, p.87). The concept has been worked out primarily in relation to occupational preparation (Pavalko, 1971) and the formation of political views (Sheinkopf, 1973), but there has been some consideration of it with respect to the role of the college student. Parsons (1959), for example, has argued that because, as early as elementary school, high achievers are culled from their classmates so they can be directed toward a college preparatory curriculum, the decision of a high achiever to attend college may be the result of a long period of anticipatory socialization. Siiber and his colleagues (1961) have reported that some high school students prepare themselves for college by rehearsing forms of behavior they associate with college students. For example, they take special courses that are viewed as trial college experiences.

Role rehearsing was clearly an aspect of "getting ready." It may have been very indirect as, for example, the simulation of certain aspects of college-going in college preparatory classes. A more direct kind of rehearsing occurred when the individual participated in on-campus activities--living in dormitories, going to parties, attending classroom lectures. A second component of anticipatory socialization, the forecasting of future situations, was also a feature of "getting ready," as, for example, when the informant, upon observing an older sibling depart for college, predicted his or her own matriculation.

Getting In. One of the first to elaborate the concept of social integration was the French sociologist, Durkheim, who used it in his theoretical treatment of the causes of suicide (1951). According to Durkheim, suicide was likely in populations where rates of social interaction (collective affiliation) were too low because this leads to a lack of common sentiments and values (moral consensus) and the precedence of individual interests over social ones. As individuals increasingly remove themselves from the social control of the group and, conse-

quently, from its ameliorating influence, they find less and less meaning in life and eventually come to view it as an intolerable burden.

Spadey (1970) and later Tinto (1975) borrowed the concept of social integration from Durkheim in order to conceptualize student withdrawal from college. In adapting these concepts to an explanation of student withdrawal from college, they specified a lack of collective affiliation (friendship) and a lack of moral consensus (cognitive congruence) as having separate effects on dropping-out behavior, that is, independently influencing the level of one's social integration. The results of the author's study suggest that moral consensus may be neither the (principal) outcome of collective affiliation (as postulated by Durkheim) nor an independent cause of one's persisting in life or college (as postulated by Spady and Tinto). A student's interaction with others may be important for his or her persistence in college not simply or primarily because it leads to the sharing of general values and orientations but because it assists the student in developing specific strategies for negotiating the physical, social, and cognitive geographies. The basis of the "getting to know" category of "getting in" is "collective affiliations" with specific individuals—mentors and peers—that "integrate" the student into the physical and academic/cognitive geographies as well as the social geography by providing him or her with knowledge of these geographies and the skills to negotiate them.

In theorizing about exactly how students, with the assistance of mentors and peers, come to locate themselves in the perceived geographies, the concept of "cognitive mapping" may be helpful. It is hypothesized (Stea, 1969) that when significant environments are too large to be apprehended at once (e.g., a large university campus encountered by a student for the first time), people will form "conceptions" of them. These conceptions, or cognitive maps, are a complex of things learned about the environment, including expectations, stereotypes, and value judgments. In developing cognitive maps of large and complex spaces, individuals make certain simplifications and adjustments in accordance with their own needs and experience.

The student's initial perceptions of the campus geographies may be understood to reflect the absence of cognitive maps. Thus, the geographies were perceived by the informants in the author's study to be large-scale environments in which objects stood separated from one another and seemed incapable of being resolved into meaningful components. The student's strategies for "getting in" may be conceptualized as mechanisms for facilitating the acquisition of these maps. For example, 'getting to know" behaviors—knowledge sharing with other neophytes and mentoring relationships with veteran students—are shortcuts to acquiring representations of specific objects within the various geographies and the associations between these representations. "Scaling down" behaviors result in more detailed maps of smaller portions of the geographies—areas of particular concern to the individual.

The author's common sense and theoretical interpretations of the meaning of college-going to the interviewees, both prior to and following matriculation at the university, suggest possible interventions by family, high school, and university to enhance the likelihood of Mexican-American students entering and remaining in the university (see Attinasi, 1989). Had the author chosen to do so, he could immediately have given these interpretations back to the interviewees, not only for the purpose of obtaining clarification and elaboration of them but also, and more importantly, to provide the informants themselves with the option of acting on the basis of the interpretations (steps 5 and 6 of Kvale's interviewing process). In subsequent research, the author anticipates inclusion of steps 5 and 6 of Kvale's research scheme.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has argued that progress in understanding college student outcomes such as persistence has been retarded by our failure to take into consideration the meanings the phenomenon of going to college holds for students. The premise for this argument is that it is on the basis of meanings that human beings act. Yet those who study outcomes (including institutional researchers) tend to ignore student meanings, either because they assume they already know them or because they consider them irrelevant. As with social researchers generally, their focus is on the relationship between static independent and dependent variables, with little concern for the intervening process of interpretation.

The paper has described one method--phenomenological interviewing--for obtaining the actor's meanings. In phenomenological interviewing, data collection and analysis occur in a series of phases, involving at first primarily spontaneous, uninterpreted description by the interviewee but, as the study proceeds, increasing interpretation and greater participation by the researcher. The researcher's interpretation of the completed interviews includes: (1) the interviewee's self-understanding of his or her life-world with respect to the phenomenon of interest, (2) a common-sense understanding of the phenomenon that extends the meaning of the interviewee, and (3) theoretical interpretation(s) which are drawn from existing disciplinary or interdisciplinary theory.

To illustrate the capacity of phenomenological interviewing to illuminate student outcomes, the author described his own recent study of the meaning of college-going for Mexican-American university student which was conducted in anticipation of illuminating the context within which they make decisions to persist or withdraw during the freshman year. Common-sense and theoretical interpretations of the interviews conducted with these students have illuminated the process through which they reached decisions to enter and remain--or not remain--enrolled in the university, and they suggest possible interventions by family, high school, and university to enhance the likelihood of Mexican-American students succeeding during the first year of university attendance and of persisting into the second.

There are areas of interest to institutional researchers, other than the outcomes of college for current students, which can be investigated through phenomenological interviewing. In an effort to develop new perspectives on improving the quality of instruction in community colleges, Seidman (1985; Seidman et al., 1983) interviewed faculty phenomenologically. He operated under the premise that the faculty's "description of their own experience and reflection on the meaning of that experience provide valuable insight into the problems within the community college" (p. xi). Schuman's (1982) study of former students, in which phenomenological interviewing was used to ascertain the impact of college education on everyday life, might serve as a model for innovative alumni research.

While the author is firmly convinced of the need in institutional research for phenomenological interviewing and other qualitative approaches that will get us "beyond a superficial understanding of central phenomena in the life-world of people" (Kvale, 1983, p.194), he is not unaware of the resistance of many in institutional research to qualitative research. The field has long been strongly committed to quantitative methods, which certainly reflects the typical training of institutional researchers in disciplinary (psychology and sociology) and professional (education and business) academic departments that emphasize traditional variable analysis, typically to the exclusion of other approaches. There is a basic skepticism among institutional researchers of inquiries in which data are not ultimately reduced to numbers that are evaluated statistically.

Among those in the field who see the merit of qualitative research, many have argued that they simply do not have the time and resources to undertake such a time-consuming, labor-intensive activity. Having been an institutional researcher in the recent past, the author can understand this objection. In these times of scarce resources, many institutional research offices are overburdened and understaffed. What this means is that institutional researchers who have become convinced of the worth of qualitative research must do a selling job. They need to convince their bosses and their bosses' bosses of the necessity of complementing the usual quantitative approaches to the study of their institutions with "work that seriously attempts to get close to its subject matter" (Van Maanen, 1988, p.10). If Van Maanen is correct that only the latter "produces the sort of answers that are worth having—in the long run the only kind of answers that will work," can institutional researchers afford not to?

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