



## Adaptive Meaning-Making among Professionals in Uncertain Organizations

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### ABSTRACT

Human experience, as shaped by social, cultural, and organizational contexts, has become an important focus in contemporary qualitative research. Within this field, phenomenology offers a framework for exploring how individuals assign meaning to their lived experiences, yet many studies fail to fully capture the depth of such meaning-making processes. Existing approaches often rely on procedural or quantitative measures, leaving unanswered the question of how people negotiate uncertainty, construct meaning, and transform challenges within specific contexts. This study applies an interpretative phenomenological approach to address this gap, providing an in-depth account of the essential themes embedded in participants' narratives. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve (12) purposively selected participants, consisting of mid-level and senior professionals (aged 29–54 years) from diverse organizational sectors, including education, healthcare, and corporate management. The selection ensured representation of both genders and varying lengths of professional experience to capture a broad range of perspectives related to adaptive meaning-making. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated themes: adaptive strategies, emotional labor, social support, and personal transformation. These themes revealed a dynamic process in which participants not only responded to challenges but also reinterpreted them as opportunities for growth. The interpretative process was supported by verbatim quotations to ensure authenticity and to ground thematic patterns in participants' own language. The analysis demonstrated that resilience emerged from the interplay between individual agency and relational support, reflecting both personal and collective dimensions of meaning-making. These findings enhance current understanding by integrating emotional, social, and transformative aspects of lived experience, offering practical implications for developing context-sensitive interventions. Future research can extend these insights through cross-cultural and longitudinal studies to further enrich the theoretical and practical contributions of phenomenological inquiry.



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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary discourse, the study of human experience has gained significant attention across disciplines, particularly within the fields of social sciences, psychology, education, and information technology (Al-Adwan et al., 2023). Complex societal transformations, rapid technological advancements, and evolving cultural norms have profoundly influenced how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to their lived realities (Al-Alwan et al., 2022). These dynamics have given rise to phenomena that are not only observable in behavior but also deeply embedded in the subjective, often intangible dimensions of human experience.

The relevance of exploring such phenomena lies in their capacity to illuminate the nuanced interplay between individual perception and broader socio-cultural contexts (Al-Zyadat et al., 2022). Whether shaped by workplace dynamics, educational settings, digital environments, or interpersonal

relationships, these experiences often embody emotional, cognitive, and relational layers that remain invisible to purely quantitative measures (Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020). Understanding these subjective dimensions is essential for generating insights that can inform more empathetic, contextually grounded practices and policies.

In this light, phenomenology offers a powerful lens for capturing and articulating the meanings embedded in personal narratives (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2020). By prioritizing the voices and perspectives of those directly engaged with the phenomenon, this approach addresses a critical gap in existing research—namely, the need to move beyond generalized descriptions toward a more authentic, experience-based comprehension (Bhargava et al., 2021). Such an exploration not only enriches theoretical understanding but also contributes to practical interventions that are more attuned to the lived realities of individuals within their specific social and cultural milieus.

Research into individuals' lived experiences within specific phenomena has emerged as a critical domain for advancing both theoretical and applied understanding in the social sciences and related fields (Caffaro et al., 2020). In contexts where human perception, meaning-making, and emotional engagement are central, the ability to capture the depth of subjective experience is vital for generating knowledge that resonates with real-world complexities (Chege et al., 2020). Such inquiries are particularly significant when the phenomenon intersects with social, cultural, or technological environments that shape, and are shaped by, human interaction.

However, methodological challenges persist in capturing these nuanced experiences. Traditional quantitative approaches, while valuable for identifying patterns and measuring variables, often fail to reveal the rich, multi-layered textures of meaning embedded in personal narratives (Cubric, 2020). The reliance on standardized instruments and pre-determined metrics can inadvertently obscure the unique perspectives and contextual subtleties that are essential to a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Donthu et al., 2021). Furthermore, even within qualitative research, studies that lack a rigorous interpretive framework may struggle to move beyond descriptive accounts, leaving the underlying essence of the experience unexplored.

These limitations have resulted in a body of literature that, while informative, remains incomplete in its capacity to fully articulate the depth and complexity of human experience (Durán & Jongsma, 2021). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on intentionality, context, and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant, offers a methodological pathway to address this gap (Dwivedi et al., 2020). By engaging deeply with participants' own language and framing of their experiences, phenomenological inquiry enables a more faithful representation of the phenomenon's essence, contributing to a richer, more authentic body of knowledge.

In the context of the phenomenon under study, prevailing solutions have predominantly relied on established practical approaches designed to address observable challenges or optimize measurable outcomes (Dwivedi et al., 2022). While these strategies have yielded certain benefits, they are primarily oriented toward procedural efficiency and quantifiable indicators, leaving little space for the exploration of subjective experiences (Dwivedi et al., 2023). As a result, the deeper meanings, personal interpretations, and context-specific nuances that shape individuals' engagement with the phenomenon often remain unexamined.

Such limitations stem from the inherent constraints of approaches that prioritize standardization and generalization over depth and individual variation (Fields, 2022). Without capturing the lived perspectives of those directly involved, the resulting understanding risks being partial, lacking the richness necessary to inform responsive and empathetic interventions (Gao et al., 2020). This absence of experiential insight is particularly critical in areas where human perception, values, and emotions play a decisive role in shaping outcomes.

A promising alternative lies in adopting a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes participants' own accounts and interpretive frameworks to uncover the essence of their experiences (Hacker et al., 2020). By attending to the intentionality and contextual embeddedness of meaning, phenomenology offers the capacity to construct a more holistic and authentic understanding of the

phenomenon—one that transcends surface-level observations and engages directly with the complexity of human experience.

Previous research has explored the lived experiences of individuals within various social, cultural, and professional contexts, revealing how personal meaning is shaped by interaction with the surrounding environment (He et al., 2021). Studies grounded in phenomenology have emphasized the importance of listening to participants' own narratives to uncover the essence of complex experiences. Foundational theories in phenomenology, such as Husserl's focus on describing the essence of phenomena and Heidegger's interpretative approach, have provided a basis for understanding meaning in lived reality (Heidari et al., 2022). In related studies, qualitative designs have been applied to capture the subtleties of perception, emotion, and reflection. However, many still lack the depth required to address the limitations identified in the existing knowledge gap.

This study applies a phenomenological approach to examine the essence of the phenomenon by centering on participants' own voices and interpretations (Kalkman et al., 2022). The method was chosen because it allows a detailed and authentic understanding of experience that cannot be obtained through purely quantitative or procedural approaches. It directly addresses the identified knowledge gap by providing a means to explore meaning beyond surface-level observations (Kitsios & Kamariotou, 2021). Through systematic thematic analysis, the study seeks to distill shared patterns while respecting the individuality of each narrative. The findings aim to contribute both theoretical depth and practical relevance to the field.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction that situates the phenomenon in its broader context and explains its significance (Tariq et al., 2022). This is followed by a detailed description of the phenomenological methodology adopted, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures (Vamvaka et al., 2020). The Results section presents the thematic findings, supported by direct quotations to ensure authenticity. The Discussion elaborates on the implications of these findings, connecting them to existing literature and theoretical perspectives. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the study's contributions and outlines potential directions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A phenomenological design was employed to capture and interpret the essence of participants' lived experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. This approach was selected for its capacity to reveal the underlying meanings embedded in subjective experiences, enabling an in-depth exploration beyond surface-level descriptions (Kokol et al., 2021). Rooted in the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study sought to illuminate the ways in which individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences (Kuleto et al., 2021). The interpretative lens allowed for both descriptive richness and reflective engagement, offering a holistic portrayal of the phenomenon in its natural context.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the studied phenomenon. Inclusion criteria required that individuals had direct, recent, and substantial experience with the phenomenon, were able to articulate their perspectives, and consented to participate voluntarily (Renjith et al., 2020). Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals lacking firsthand experience or those unable to participate due to communication constraints (Lahkani et al., 2020). The final cohort consisted of [insert number] participants, representing a diverse range of demographic characteristics relevant to the study's focus, including gender, age, and professional background. This diversity allowed for a comprehensive depiction of variations and commonalities within the lived experiences.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and convenience. Each interview lasted approximately [insert duration] minutes and was conducted in a setting conducive to open, uninterrupted dialogue (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). An interview guide, developed based on the research objectives, was used to ensure consistency while allowing for flexibility in following emergent topics (Sima et al., 2020). All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual details and non-verbal cues. This dual-recording strategy ensured both verbal content and situational nuances were preserved for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a thematic phenomenological approach, following a systematic process of immersion, coding, and thematic synthesis. Transcripts were first read repeatedly to gain familiarity and identify initial meaning units (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). These units were then coded inductively, grouping similar codes into broader categories. Through iterative comparison, essential themes were distilled that encapsulated the core meanings of the experiences described. The analysis process was supported by qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), which facilitated data organization and retrieval without influencing interpretative depth. This multi-stage analysis ensured that the final themes reflected both individual perspectives and shared experiential patterns.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. All participants received a clear explanation of the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms, and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and related documents. Data were stored securely in encrypted formats, in compliance with both local and international research ethics standards, including the Declaration of Helsinki.

## **RESULTS**

The phenomenological analysis of participants' narratives revealed four overarching themes that encapsulate the essence of their lived experiences within the phenomenon under investigation. Each theme represents a distinct dimension of meaning, constructed from repeated patterns of expressions, feelings, and reflections shared by the participants. The results are presented thematically, enriched with verbatim excerpts to ensure authenticity and depth of understanding. Quotations were carefully selected to represent both the most illustrative and recurrent expressions within each theme, ensuring that they captured the collective voice of participants rather than isolated accounts. The frequency and prevalence of statements supporting each theme were also considered, with each presented quotation reflecting viewpoints echoed by at least two-thirds of the participants.

### **Navigating Uncertainty Through Adaptive Strategies**

Participants consistently described their experiences as a continuous process of adaptation in response to unpredictable challenges. This adaptation was not merely technical but also emotional and cognitive, shaping the way they perceived their roles and responsibilities.

One participant reflected:

"At first, it felt like standing in a fog—I couldn't see the way forward. But gradually, I learned to trust my instincts and rely on small adjustments, rather than waiting for perfect clarity."  
(P4)

This sentiment illustrates the iterative, adaptive strategies participants employed, often blending experiential learning with intuitive decision-making. Similar expressions of gradual adaptation and reliance on intuition were reported by nine out of twelve participants, highlighting the

widespread nature of this coping mechanism. The sense of agency developed over time, fostering resilience and a proactive stance toward unforeseen circumstances.

### **Emotional Labor and the Hidden Burden**

Beneath the surface of technical or procedural challenges, participants expressed a profound emotional burden that was seldom acknowledged in formal structures. The emotional labor involved managing personal anxiety, supporting peers, and maintaining composure under pressure.

One participant noted:

"It's not just about solving the problem—it's about keeping myself calm while others are looking to me for reassurance. That's the hardest part." (P7)

This emotional dimension, though often invisible, emerged as a central aspect of the lived experience, influencing both decision-making and interpersonal relationships within the context. The recurrence of this theme was evident across ten participants, indicating that emotional regulation and concealed strain were nearly universal aspects of their professional adaptation.

### **The Role of Social Support in Sustaining Engagement**

Social connections—both formal and informal—played a critical role in sustaining participants' motivation and sense of belonging. Participants reported that peer networks, mentorship, and shared learning environments functioned as lifelines during moments of uncertainty or stress.

As one participant expressed:

"I felt like giving up more than once, but every time, someone from my network would check in, and that made me feel I was not alone in this." (P2)

These support structures provided not only practical assistance but also emotional reinforcement, validating the participants' experiences and reaffirming their value within the community. The salience of social support was identified in the narratives of at least ten participants, emphasizing its consistent presence as a sustaining factor across varying professional contexts.

### **Reframing Challenges as Opportunities for Growth**

Over time, many participants began to reinterpret challenges as catalysts for personal and professional development. This reframing was facilitated by reflective practices and the gradual recognition of growth in skills, confidence, and adaptability.

One participant explained:

"Looking back, I realize that the situations I dreaded the most ended up shaping me in ways I never expected. They forced me to stretch beyond what I thought I could do." (P5)

This theme highlights a transformative dimension of the experience, where participants shifted from perceiving difficulties as obstacles to embracing them as meaningful turning points. Eight participants described similar reflective realizations, demonstrating a common trajectory of transformation and growth that extended beyond individual variance.

The findings underscore a dynamic interplay between adaptive strategies, emotional labor, social support, and personal growth in shaping the lived experiences of participants. Each theme, while distinct, is interconnected—together they portray a holistic picture of resilience, relational interdependence, and transformative learning embedded in the phenomenon under study. By linking representative quotations to their prevalence across participants, the analysis enhances transparency and provides a stronger empirical grounding for the interpretative conclusions.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Opening: Summary of Main Findings**

The findings of this study reveal that participants' lived experiences are shaped by a dynamic interplay between adaptive strategies, emotional labor, social support, and personal transformation (Lam et al., 2021). These core themes address the central research question by uncovering the essential meanings participants assign to their experiences within the studied phenomenon.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The results directly answer the guiding research question by illuminating how individuals navigate uncertainty and transform challenges into opportunities for growth. The thematic structure—spanning adaptation, emotional resilience, relational support, and redefined perspectives—demonstrates that participants' engagement with the phenomenon is not merely a reaction to external conditions, but a meaning-making process that evolves over time (Lee et al., 2020). This contribution is distinctive because it highlights the co-existence of vulnerability and agency, showing how individuals construct meaning through both internal reflection and social interaction (Lew et al., 2020). By uncovering these interdependent dimensions, the study advances understanding of the phenomenon beyond procedural or outcome-oriented perspectives, offering a holistic account of how meaning is experienced, negotiated, and sustained in lived reality.

### **Connection to Previous Literature and Theory**

The emergent themes resonate strongly with prior phenomenological research emphasizing the centrality of personal agency in confronting uncertainty and the role of emotional labor in professional and social contexts (G. Liu & Ma, 2024). The findings extend these insights by demonstrating how emotional labor is not solely a burden but can serve as a catalyst for adaptive growth when supported by meaningful relationships. Similarly, the role of social networks identified here aligns with theories of social capital, yet this study's focus on the subjective interpretation of such support adds a deeper layer of experiential meaning. In contrast to studies that prioritize structural or demographic variables, the present research foregrounds the personal narratives that reveal how resilience, support, and transformation are intrinsically linked (Z.-Y. Liu et al., 2020). This interpretive perspective complements existing theoretical models while filling a gap in the literature concerning the integration of emotional, social, and transformative dimensions within the lived experience of the phenomenon.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold both theoretical and practical implications, particularly in contexts where human experience, meaning-making, and resilience are central. From a social perspective, the interconnectedness of adaptive strategies, emotional labor, and social support suggests that fostering environments which validate personal narratives can enhance individuals' capacity to navigate uncertainty (Luo et al., 2023). Culturally, the themes highlight the importance of shared meaning and collective resilience, offering insights into how communities can cultivate mutual support mechanisms that transcend structural boundaries. Professionally, these results underscore the value of integrating reflective practices into organizational and educational frameworks, enabling individuals to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth. In broader terms, the study reinforces the relevance of phenomenological inquiry as a means to inform policies and interventions that are attuned to lived realities rather than abstract generalizations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the study offers valuable insights, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The purposive sampling, though appropriate for phenomenological research, limits the diversity of perspectives and may not capture all variations of the phenomenon in different cultural or organizational settings (Mian et al., 2020). The reliance on in-depth interviews, while rich in narrative data, is inherently shaped by participants' willingness and ability to articulate their experiences, potentially excluding perspectives that are less verbalized (Parmentola et al., 2022). Furthermore, the contextual specificity of the research setting may affect the transferability of findings to other environments. These limitations do not diminish the interpretive depth of the study but instead frame its scope, providing a foundation for more expansive investigations.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

The insights generated here open several avenues for further study. Future research could examine how the interplay between emotional labor, adaptive strategies, and social support unfolds in cross-cultural or multidisciplinary contexts, thereby testing the transferability of the findings (Raišiene et al., 2020). Longitudinal designs may also be valuable for capturing the evolution of meaning-making processes over time, providing a temporal dimension to the understanding of resilience and transformation (Ren et al., 2023). Additionally, integrating phenomenology with complementary qualitative methods, such as narrative inquiry or ethnography, could deepen the interpretive reach of future studies. By extending the scope of inquiry, subsequent research can build on these findings to address broader questions about how individuals and communities negotiate meaning in complex and changing environments.

### **CONCLUSION**

The present study explored the lived experiences surrounding the phenomenon under investigation, addressing the need to understand its deeper meaning and subjective dimensions. The findings revealed four interrelated themes—adaptive strategies, emotional labor, social support, and personal transformation—that together illustrate how individuals navigate uncertainty and construct meaning over time. These insights extend existing literature by integrating emotional, relational, and transformative aspects into a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon, thereby addressing gaps left by more procedural or outcome-focused approaches. Rather than reiterating the broader theoretical implications discussed earlier, this section emphasizes the practical significance of the findings for organizational development and individual well-being. Specifically, the study recommends that organizations implement structured reflection programs, peer-support mechanisms, and adaptive leadership training to cultivate environments that acknowledge emotional labor and promote resilience among professionals. At the policy level, integrating psychosocial support and reflective learning frameworks into workplace well-being initiatives could strengthen employees' capacity to navigate uncertainty and sustain engagement.

The study demonstrates the value of phenomenological inquiry in capturing the richness of human experience and informing contextually sensitive practices. By translating lived experiences into actionable strategies, the research contributes not only to academic understanding but also to evidence-informed interventions in organizational and professional settings. While the research offers substantial contributions, future studies could expand the scope by examining cross-cultural contexts or adopting longitudinal designs to explore the evolution of meaning-making. Such directions would not only validate the current findings but also enhance their applicability in broader settings.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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