RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: DISCUSSION
PAPER - METHODOLOGY

Phenomenography: A useful methodology for midwifery research

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Abstract

Aims: To outline the theoretical, philosophical, and major assumptions associated with phenomenography and then address the application of a phenomenographical approach within the context of midwifery research.

Background: Phenemonography is a little-known qualitative research approach amongst the main design traditions of phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography more typically used within midwifery research. Phenomenography aims to describe the qualitatively different ways that people perceive, conceptualize, or experience a phenomenon. Phenemonography has a distinctly different approach from other qualitative methods as it places emphasis on the 'collective' meaning over individual experience.

Methodology: Phenomenography, as an approach, rests within the interpretivist paradigm recognizing that there are multiple interpretations of reality. Phenomenography emphasizes the various ways that people experience the same phenomenon, including both the similarities and differences. The second-order perspective embraced by phenomenography suggests that the researcher directs themselves towards people's understanding of the world; essentially the world is described as it is understood rather than as it is. It is the reporting about how these different realities appear at a collective level that is the output of phenomenographic research.

Findings: A framework for conducting phenomenographic research is illustrated by outlining the steps within the methodological approach required to undertake a research study using phenemonography.

Conclusion: Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that can usefully be applied in many midwifery contexts where a collective understanding of a phenomena is required. Using a phenomenographic approach can provide the midwifery profession with knowledge about variations in how women and midwives think, and how aspects of different phenomena are experienced in within a midwifery setting.

KEYWORDS
midwifery, phenemonography, qualitative approaches, research methods

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Midwifery may be an age-old art with deep traditions and 'ways of knowing' (Davison, 2021; Reed, 2021), but it is also a profession that is underpinned by an international professional framework that values research evidence (Kemp et al., 2021). Evidence based practice is a fundamental component of contemporary midwifery (International Confederation of Midwives, 2021), and over the last few decades there has been a proliferation of midwifery research with many of midwifery's core knowledge and competencies based upon evidence generated from research conducted by midwives (International Confederation of Midwives, 2019, 2021).

The realm of human experience (Newnham & Rothman, 2022), which by nature is complex and subject to a wide range of influences often beyond our control, requires the gathering knowledge and evidence obtained via a qualitative approach. Qualitative research with its emphasis on discovery and its explanatory, inductive, and descriptive nature offers methods best suited to determining the nature of a phenomenon, an experience or an understanding of meaning (Toles & Barroso, 2018). The complexity of human life and experience often cannot be broken down into measurable outputs, meaning midwifery requires good qualitative research.

Qualitative research encompasses a broad range of methodologies with the main design traditions of qualitative research being phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative research, ethnography, case study, and action research (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The objective of this paper is to introduce phenomenography, a little-known qualitative research approach, which aims to describe the qualitatively different ways that people perceive, conceptualize, or experience a phenomenon (Ekström et al., 2019), and demonstrate its application and usefulness for framing midwifery research. Phenomenography, whilst a less mainstream methodology shares commonalities with all qualitative research methodologies in that they are discovery orientated, use words instead of numbers to explain phenomenon and are context dependant (Toles & Barroso, 2018). This paper will first outline the theoretical, philosophical, and major assumptions associated with phenomenography and then address the application of a phenomenographical approach within the context of midwifery research.

2 | WHAT IS PHENEMONOGRAPHY?

The word phenomenography is derived from the Greek *phainomenon* meaning '*appearance*' and *graphein* meaning '*description*', with the literal translation meaning a 'description of appearances' (Marton, 1986). The main purpose of phenomenography is to discern the different ways a phenomenon is understood (Hajar, 2021). It has been previously conceptualized by Marton, one of the founders of phenomenography, who stated that:

> Phenomenography is a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them. (Marton, 1986, p. 31)

Phenomenography did not appear as a distinct research approach until the 1970s in Scandinavia when Ference Marton and his colleagues in the University of Gothenburg undertook an empirical investigation focusing on the process of learning; essentially the research was asking the question 'why do some people learn better than others?' (Marton & Booth, 1997). The researchers established that there were variations in the way that people learn and it was this study that resulted in the now well-known theory of surface and deep learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976). Marton then went on to propose phenomenography as its own distinct field of inquiry which focuses upon describing the variation of peoples experience of a phenomenon (Marton, 1981).

3 | THE NATURE OF VARIATION

Phenomenography, as an approach, rests within the interpretivist paradigm, and interpretivism recognizes that there are multiple diverse interpretations of reality (Dawadi et al., 2021; Moon & Blackman, 2014; Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013). Knowledge gained through phenomenographical research is relational, and phenomenographers try to describe an aspect of the world as it appears to the individual and is used to understand how these individual realities together represent a 'collective consciousness' of a phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997). What phenomenography is trying to do is capture those variations in experience, as it is less interested in individual experience than it is in emphasizing collective meaning (Barnard et al., 1999).

Phenomenography emphasizes the various ways that people experience the same phenomenon, including both the similarities and differences (McClenny, 2020) and it is the reporting about how these different realities appear at a collective level that is the output of phenomenographic research. Variation implies relationality: things are different, yet something remains the same (Wright & Osman, 2018). It is argued that at any one-point people will perceive and experience different aspects of an object or situation, dependent upon their personal context or what is at the fore of their awareness, but the "experience is always partial" (Akerlind et al., 2014, p. 231). Take for example this image (Figure 1) of an elephant by illustrator Christophe Vorlet (2008), dependent upon where you stand depends on what you see, therefore, the knowledge gained through phenomenographical research is relational, in that the people stood in the top window have a different perspective from those at the bottom. Phenomenographers try to describe an aspect of the world as it appears to the individual and are interested in how these individual realities together represent a 'collective consciousness' of a phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Essentially 'context is everything' and this can be said about all things we experience in life including many contemporary midwifery issues. Childbirth is recognized as an existential experience (Leinweber et al., 2022), yet reading the vast published literature
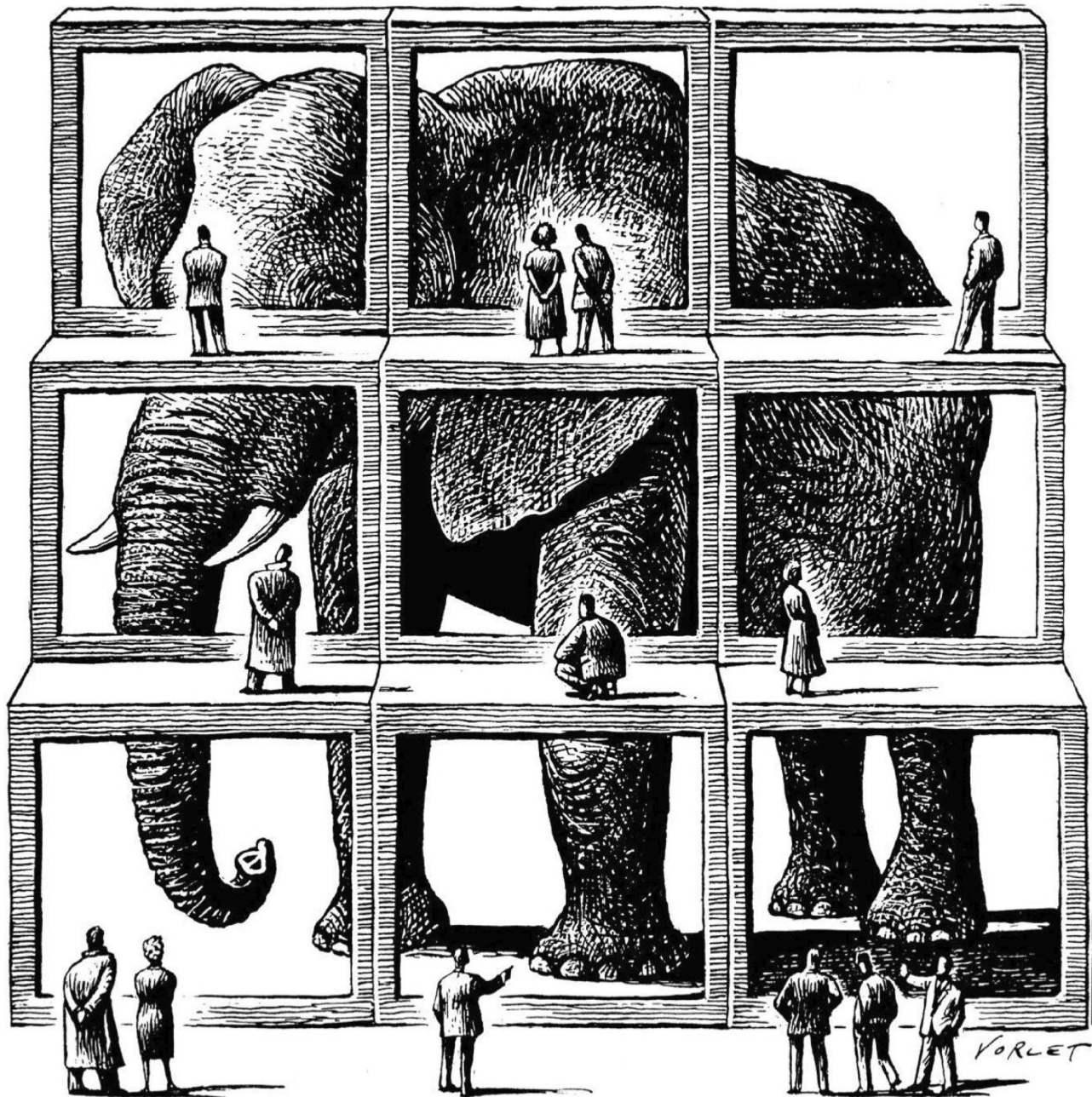
FIGURE 1 Illustration © Christophe Vorlet.

available on childbirth trauma reveals definitions of what constitutes a traumatic childbirth experience, and these definitions vary widely, dependent upon the context of the person defining or experiencing it (woman or clinician) (Dekel et al., 2020; Horesh et al., 2021; Leinweber et al., 2022; McKenzie-McHarg et al., 2015).

4 | PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Ontology and epistemology within research are inextricably linked with one another (Moon & Blackman, 2014); ontology speaks to the

nature of reality (Whitehead et al., 2020) whilst epistemology asks the question 'how do we gain knowledge about reality?' and 'how do we know what we know?' (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

From an ontological perspective, the two main opposing schools of thought are those between the realists and the relativists; realist ontology believes in objectivism, the belief in an objective reality that exists independent of the observer, whereas the relativist believes in subjectivism, where meaning is imposed on an object by the observer as all meaning is constructed in the observer's mind (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Phenomenography rejects these opposing dualist views of an outer world (objectivism) and an inner world (subjectivism); instead, it upholds a non-dualistic ontology, asserting that these worlds

are related through an individual's awareness of the world and their experience of it (McClenny, 2020). Put simply this means that the object and subject cannot be separated, there is only one world, but people will experience it differently and cannot be seen as separate from their experiences (Watson & Reimann, 2021). Ontologically the phenomenographic researcher accepts that there is more than one way of experiencing the world, which can be understood through an individual's awareness (Rolls, 2023); the phenomenographer seeks to describe and map these variations in understanding with the key assumption being that individual experiences will be logically related when the phenomena they experience are the same (Åkerlind, 2012). Going back to our elephant, the people in the top window have a different perspective from those at the bottom but will likely all notice similar aspects, e.g. they may all recognize it as being 'large' or 'grey in colour'.

Epistemologically, phenomenography is experientialist, where knowledge is gained through experience, and the non-dualist ontology of phenomenography means that knowledge is always related to an individual's awareness of the phenomenon. Within phenomenography, knowledge is revealed through the content of descriptions from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Hajar, 2021); it is people's *experience* of a phenomenon which is the object of research in phenomenography (Stolz, 2020).

The founder of phenomenography, Ference Marton, created the principle of the 'second-order' perspective to distinguish phenomenography as distinct from other qualitative methodologies (Marton, 1981, 2000). Other qualitative research approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography adopt a first-order perspective (McClenny, 2020; Stolz, 2020). The second-order perspective embraced by phenomenography suggests that the researcher directs themselves towards people's understanding of the

world and makes statements about their experiences, in essence the second-order perspective describes the world as it is understood rather than as it is. This is in contrast with the first-order perspective where the researcher directs themselves towards the world and makes statements about it (Hajar, 2021; Marton, 1981; Ornek, 2008). Fundamentally, phenomenography can be described as a "democratic approach to research" (Hajar, 2021, p. 1425) as all the data and findings generated are based on participant accounts of their awareness of their world, not a researchers' account of it. Figure 2 illustrates a second-order approach adopted and contrasts it with a first-order approach.

5 | WHAT IS PHENOMENOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH?

5.1 | It's not phenomenology

The similarity in the nomenclature may lead to those unfamiliar with phenomenography to presume that it is similar to or a derivative of phenomenology, but whilst both approaches have human experience as their focus, there are significant differences in both their purpose and the outputs of the research.

Phenomenology has a much longer history with its roots in philosophical traditions laid down by Husserl and Heidegger (Rodriguez & Smith, 2018) whereas phenomenography emerged from empirical pedagogical endeavours in the 1970s (Hajar, 2021). Phenomenologists are seeking out the 'lived experience', trying to find the singular essence of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In contrast, phenomenography places emphasis on *the collective*
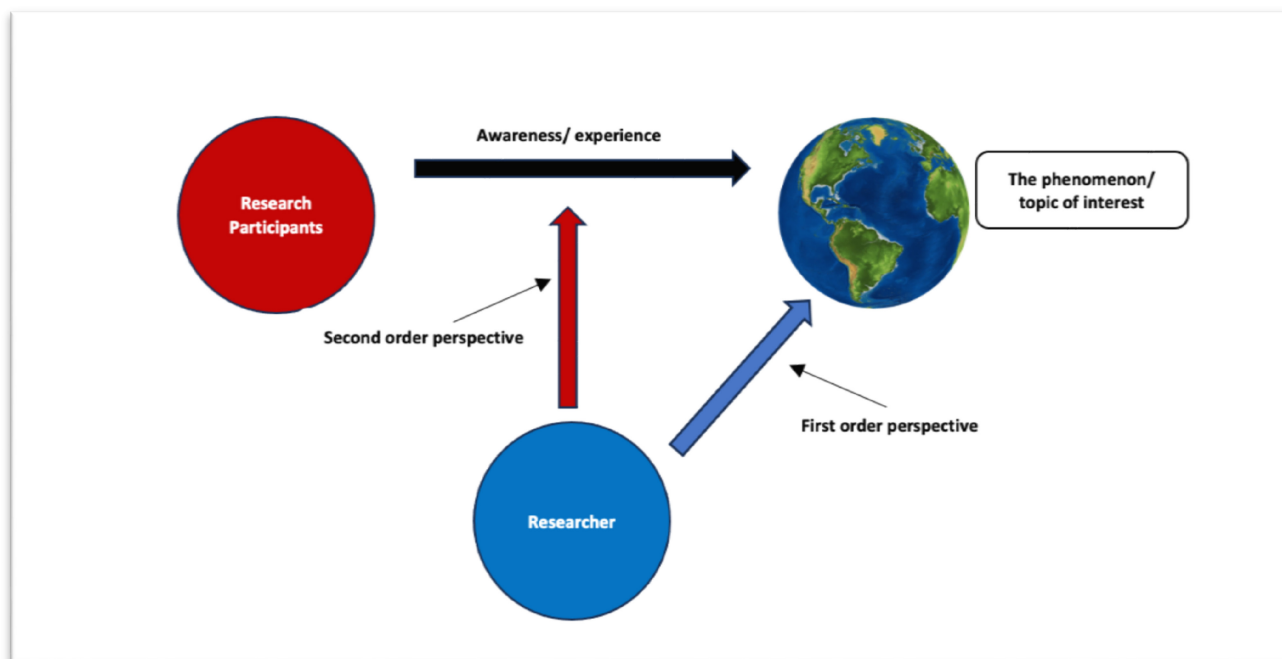

FIGURE 2 First- and second-order perspectives compared.

meaning over individual experience of a phenomena, seeking out people's experiences and the variations within (Barnard et al., 1999; Marton & Booth, 1997).

Distinctly, the output of phenomenography remains at a descriptive level, because no attempt is made to clarify the structure of meaning as in phenomenology (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). The goal of phenomenology is to discover the inner core of a phenomenon, what the thing is, and without which it could not be (Larsson & Holmström, 2007), whereas the phenomenographer is seeking to describe the variation in ways people understand and experience a phenomenon. Descriptions presented in Table 1 are adapted from Barnard and colleagues' (Barnard et al., 1999) founding paper on the use of phenomenography within health care, highlighting the differences between the approaches.

Phenemonography and phenomenology have much in common in that they are both based on a 'lifeworld' perspective, and about human experience, the debate between the differences within the approaches is ongoing. There are researchers who firmly believe that phenemonography should be subsumed into the broader research agenda that is phenomenology and all its iterations (Stolz, 2020). Within his critique and comparison of the respective approaches, Stolz (2020) recognizes that this belief is countered strongly by the phenomenographers who are keen to distinguish phenemonography as a distinct approach of its own. This debate is beyond the scope of this paper which seeks to highlight phenemonography as useful approach for midwifery research, but the papers by both Stolz (2020) and Larsson and Holmström (2007) offer valuable perspectives on this debate and the differences.

5.2 | Conceptions

Conceptions are the central unit of description in phenomenography (Marton & Pong, 2005). They are the expressed thoughts and perceived knowledge that an individual person has about an object or phenomenon; they tell us how a person understands or has experienced a phenomenon (Munangatire & McInerney, 2021). People can experience different conceptions of the same event because of their own individual perspective without their conception having any implications for the existence of others' conceptions (Feldon & Tofel-Grehl, 2018). This is because people are simultaneously aware

of many things; for some a certain aspect of the phenomenon will be in the foreground but for others they will notice something completely different, as individuals have differing focuses. This is how variation occurs. Going back to the elephant (Figure 1), the variation in conceptualization is entirely dependent upon what aspect of the phenomenon the individual focuses on.

5.3 | Categories of description

The emphasis within phenomenography is not to find one common understanding, nor to separate out an individual's understanding but to reveal a range of understanding of a phenomenon (Cossham, 2017). The collective understanding is revealed through categories of description, which are the outcome of phenomenographic research. Categories of description are distinct from conceptions; they are created by the phenomenographer to represent the conceptions at a *collective level*. Categories of description are not predetermined; they are the researcher's interpretation of the similarities and differences within the meanings of conceptions, emerging from the analysis of the data. Each category of description reflects a different way of experiencing a phenomenon, describing the similarities and differences within the meaning of the conceptions and the key aspects of the collective experience (Hajar, 2021; Khan et al., 2019). Essentially they are the interpretation of the collective voice derived from the individual decontextualized conceptions (Bowden & Green, 2010; Gabriel, 2021).

6 | APPLYING A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO MIDWIFERY RESEARCH

The following section of this paper introduces a working exemplar of current midwifery research to highlight the methodological steps required in phenomenographical research, and presents a framework for conducting research using phenemonography (Figure 3). The overarching research question guiding the current research is: *What are midwifery students' perceptions of emotional intelligence (EI) and its relationship to midwifery?* Permission to undertake this research was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics committee.

TABLE 1 Differences between phenomenography and phenomenology.

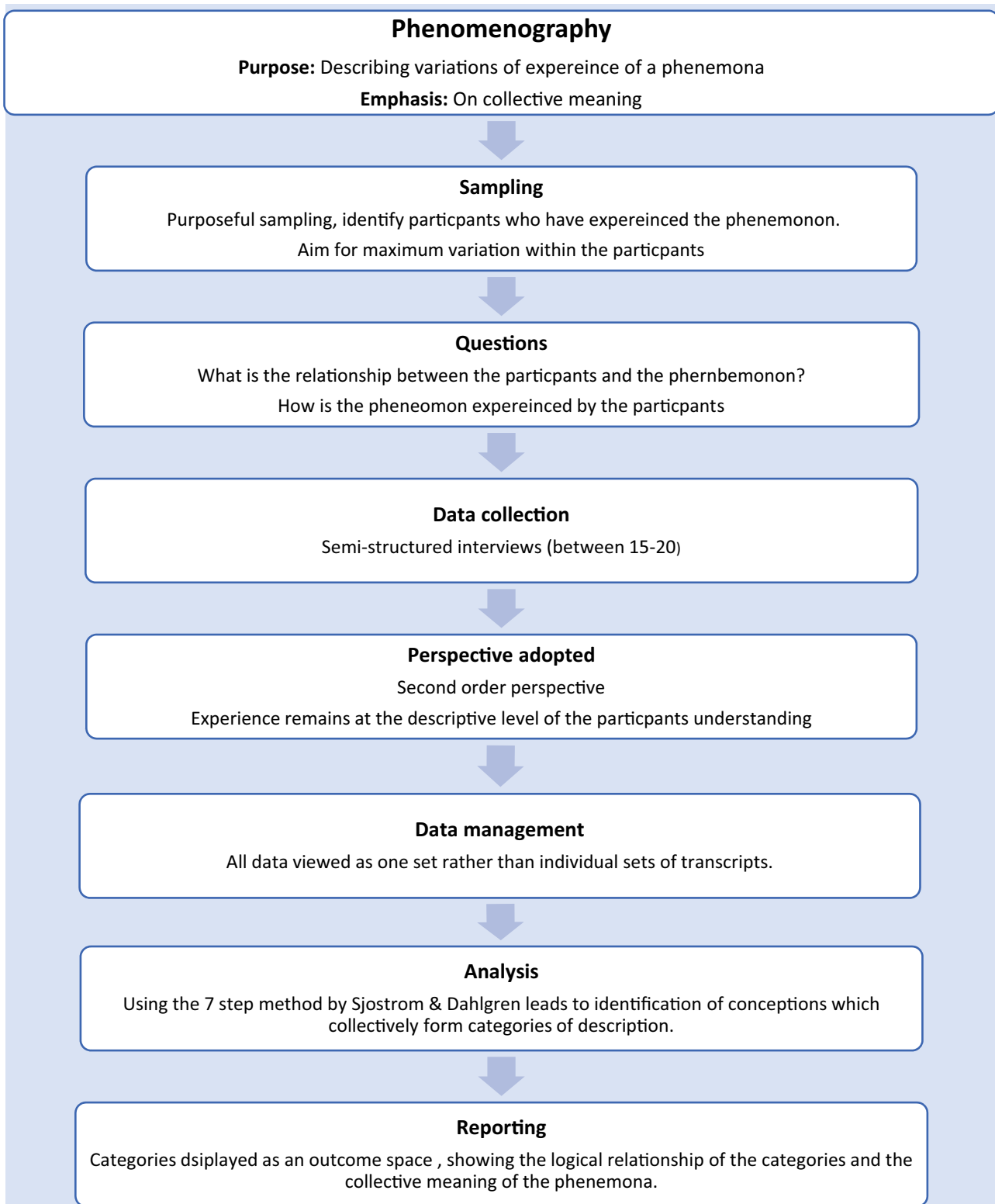|	Phenomenography	Phenomenology
Aim	To describe variation in understanding and experience of a phenomenon	To clarify experiential foundations in the form of a singular essence
Emphasis	On collective meaning	On individual experience
Perspective	Second-order perspective in which experience remains at the *descriptive* level of participants understanding	First-order perspective which engages in the psychological reduction of experience
Analysis	Leads to the identification of conceptions which form categories and an outcome space (*The outcome space is a visual representation of the categories and the relationships between them)*	Leads to the identification of meaning units and the overall essence of meaning

Phenomenography

Purpose: Describing variations of expereince of a phenemona

Emphasis: On collective meaning

Sampling

Purposeful sampling, identify particpants who have expereinced the phenemonon.

Aim for maximum variation within the particpants

Questions

What is the relationship between the particpants and the phernbemonon?

How is the pheneomon expereinced by the particpants

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews (between 15-20)

Perspective adopted

Second order perspective

Experience remains at the descriptive level of the particpants understanding

Data management

All data viewed as one set rather than individual sets of transcripts.

Analysis

Using the 7 step method by Sjostrom & Dahlgren leads to identification of conceptions which collectively form categories of description.

Reporting

Categories dsiplayed as an outcome space , showing the logical relationship of the categories and the collective meaning of the phenemona.

FIGURE 3 A phenomenographical framework for conducting research.

6.1 | Sampling

Phenemonography uses a purposive sampling method; participants who have experienced the phenomena being studied are specifically sought out with a phenomenographic study typically requiring between 15 and 20 participants. This number of interviews is thought to be sufficient to allow for enough variation in perceptions without producing an unmanageable amount of data to analyse, although the exact number depends upon data saturation (Hajar, 2021). Whilst data saturation is considered the 'cornerstone'

in determining the sample size in any qualitative study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), saturation within phenomenography has a distinct meaning as the aim of phenomenographical research is to capture variation (McClenny, 2020). Cossham in her 2017 evaluation of phenemonography discusses the concept of 'theoretical saturation', a term borrowed from grounded theory. Within phenemonography, theoretical saturation is deemed to have been met when the researcher is sure that no new or additional *variations* are being discovered within the data (Cossham, 2017). Whilst it is acknowledged that the concept of saturation within qualitative research is not without criticism or debate (Braun & Clarke, 2019), with some authors proposing that no new information "is a logical fallacy, as there are always new theoretical insights to be made as long as data continues to be collected" (Low, 2019, p. 131), that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. In total, 16 interviews were conducted in the current study with midwifery student participants, theoretical saturation was deemed to have been reached by the 13th interview, but as other the interviews had already been scheduled, they went ahead and provided confirmation of the perceived theoretical saturation.

6.2 | Interviews as a data collection method

As is common with many other qualitative approaches, the individual in-depth one-on-one interviews predominate as the most common method of phenomenographic data collection (Akerlind, 2005; Bowden & Walsh, 2000; Hajar, 2021). Whilst other methods such as focus groups and open-ended survey responses can be used to collect phenomenographic data, it is the interview that provides the greatest potential to collect and clarify data in phenomenographic research (Khan, 2014; Khan et al., 2016, 2019), a position that is also supported by renowned phenomenographers (Akerlind, 2005; Bowden, 2000; Trigwell, 2000).

A phenomenographic interview should be structured in a discursive way (Marton, 1986), encouraging the interview participants to describe and give examples of their experience of the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). The focus of each interview should be to elicit the desired second-order perspective that is a feature of phenomenographic research. Within the context of this research, the focus was:

- How the phenomena (emotional intelligence within midwifery) was understood or experienced by participants (in this case midwifery students) rather than the focus being on emotional intelligence itself?
- The relationship between the participants (midwifery students) and the phenomenon.

The interviews conducted in this study were semi structured in nature, with only open-ended questions allowing subsequent discussion to proceed according to the responses given by the midwifery students. It was important that the primary researcher did not provide any substantive input to the content of the interview, instead seeking to facilitate the participant to explore their own ideas and perceptions and referring only to issues they themselves have introduced (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Bowden, 2005).

6.3 | Data analysis

The focus in phenomenographic analysis is on eliciting the collective meaning and revealing variation in how the phenomenon is experienced. It is considered important that the collective conceptions of *all* the interviews are considered (Gabriel, 2021); this involves selecting, comparing, and grouping significant statements within the interview transcripts, gradually shifting from individual transcripts to constructing a collective pool which brings together all the differing understandings of the phenomenon (Watson & Reimann, 2021). As all transcripts are brought together, the final categories of description do not necessarily represent individual respondents but instead are related to what is known as the 'pool of meanings' (Marton, 1988).

The analysis within this study was underpinned by a seven-stage process as described by Sjostrom and Dahlgren (2002) (Table 2) in their seminal paper on the use of phenomenographic research in nursing. Whilst these steps are displayed as a hierarchal process, phenomenographic analysis is a very iterative process, moving backwards and forwards between the steps, and has been likened to the constant comparative method used in grounded theory (Stenfors-Hayes et al., 2013).

6.4 | Output of phenomenographic research: The outcome space

The conclusion of phenomenographic analysis is called the outcome space. The outcome space consists of the categories of description arranged in a logically and structured way that describe the

TABLE 2 Phenomenographic analysis (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

1. *Familiarization*: Reading and rereading transcripts until you get familiar with the data
2. *Compilation*: Compiling all the significant statements from the interview transcripts which relate to the research question
3. *Condensation*: Statements are concentrated to identify conceptions; doing this creates a representative description of the central meaning of the conception
4. *Grouping*: Grouping similar conceptions together
5. *Comparison*: The different conceptions and emerging categories are compared to establish the borders between them
6. *Naming*: The different conceptions and emerging categories are named to emphasis their essence
7. *Contrastive comparison*: Describing the unique character of the category and again comparing them in terms of similarities and differences. The relationship between the categories is displayed as an outcome space

qualitative variation in peoples understanding of a phenomenon (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017). The outcome space is often presented as a diagram or in a table, graphically representing how the categories of description are logically related to one another, with the relationship often being a hierarchical one. This focus on structure within the outcome space provides an explanation of what is required to progress from a simpler to a more complex understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Yu, 2019). Figure 4 shows the hierarchal arrangement of the four categories of description in an outcome space in Bäckström et al.' (2017) phenomenographical study of pregnant women's partner's perceptions of professional support during pregnancy.

7 | ESTABLISHING RIGOUR WITHIN PHENEMONOGRAPHY

As a qualitative methodology, it is important to consider the strategies employed to attain methodological rigour. The following section addresses the concept of trustworthiness, long considered the 'gold standard' for judging the overall quality of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria are now considered in respect to a phenemographic study.

7.1 | Credibility

Credibility asks the question: are these findings believable? To be credible, the findings must appear to be a truthful representation of the phenomenon being explored (Billups, 2021). Within phenemonography, credibility relates to the defensibility of the interpretations made from the data (categories of description and outcome space) and the process through which they have been acquired (Kettunen

& Tynjälä, 2017), through a clear description of the methods employed during data collection and analysis. Whilst it is the researcher that describes the findings through the conceptions, categories of description, and the outcome space, credibility is authenticated through the use of verbatim quotes from the interview transcripts (Sjostrom & Dahlgren, 2002).

7.2 | Transferability

Qualitative research does not seek to produce results which are statistically generalizable, but if the findings of the research are described in sufficient detail, the reader can evaluate whether the findings are transferable to other groups and settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Phenemonography, in common with other qualitative approaches, presents findings that are unique to their respective contexts; in particular, phenomenographical studies are context specific with their focus being on a second-order perspective (Marton, 1981, 2000). The phenemographic researcher has a responsibility to provide adequate details of the research context which may have influenced the participants' experiences to enable the reader to determine whether the study's findings are transferable and could be applied in a similar setting with similar participants (Kettunen & Tynjälä, 2017).

7.3 | Dependability

Dependability is concerned with the stability of findings; it asks whether the same data collection methods with similar participants would yield similar results (Billups, 2021). Phenemonography has been criticized for its lack of replicability (Cossham, 2017), making dependability a contested concept within this methodology. Marton,
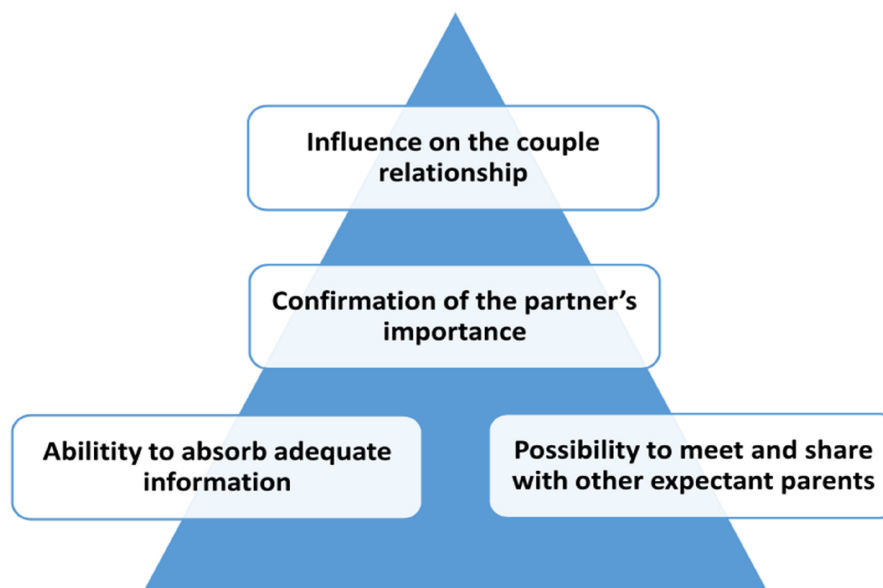

FIGURE 4 Outcome space: Pregnant women's partners perceptions of professional support durting pregnancy (Bäckström et al., 2017).

one of the founders of phenemonography, argues that replicability is neither warranted nor desired within a phenomenographical study, as the categories of description are a representation of the collective experience of the participants at a specific point in time (1988). It is also suggested that it is unlikely that other researchers would reach the same categories as the data gained via interview reflects the unique conversations between researcher and participants (Cossham, 2017). This, however, is not exclusive to phenemonography, as the same could also be said for many other qualitative methodologies.

7.4 | Confirmability

Confirmability aligns with the principles of objectivity and neutrality and is typically confirmed via techniques such as member checking, maintaining an audit trail, and in the researchers' own reflexivity (Billups, 2021). It relates to the authentication of the research findings, establishing that they are grounded in the data and that the researcher has faithfully conveyed the participants knowledge, experiences, and understanding (Birt et al., 2016). As the findings of phenomenographic research are the variations of different ways of viewing a phenomenon and as the categories of description are derived from the collective 'pool of meanings', it is unlikely that individual participants in a phenomenographic study would be able to recognize their personal contribution to the categories of description (Reed, 2006). This meaning member checking is not usually recommended in phenomonography (Gabriel, 2021). The researcher should provide an audit trail in the form of a detailed description of the methods employed during the study and provide a reflexive account to explain the researcher's prior knowledge and experience in an effort to assuage the influence that this may have had upon the data collection and analysis. The focus within phenomonography should be the variation in the way the phenomena is understood or experienced by the participants as opposed to reflecting the researchers' own preconceptions of the phenomenon (Cope, 2004; Marton & Booth, 1997).

7.5 | Bracketing

Additionally worthy of consideration is the concept of bracketing in respect to phenomenographic research. Bracketing is considered fundamental within phenomenological research and a widely recognized practice within other qualitative research approaches (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). It is not one without controversy though (Dörfler & Stierand, 2021), as bracketing requires the researchers to set aside their personal knowledge, presuppositions, and assumptions and separate them from what is observed in the research process; this is a highly contestable concept as true detachment from our consciousness cannot actually be achieved nor should it be desirable (Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

Within phenomonography the term *interpretative awareness* is used (Åkerlind, 2012), whereby the phenomenographer identifies their own understanding of the phenomena being investigated, and describes the processes they use to ensure they do not infiltrate the research process during interpretation and analysis (Hajar, 2021). The following principles, proposed by Cope (2004, pp. 8–9), should be applied during a phenomenographic study to increase the phenomenographers' interpretive awareness:

- the researcher's own background and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation should be identified;
- the characteristics of the research participants and the design of the interview questions should be clearly stated and justified;
- the stages organized for collecting data should be transparent;
- the data analysis methods should be conducted with an open mind, not by imposing an existing structure;
- the procedures for arriving at categories of description should be completely explained
- and illustrated with quotes; and
- the results should be presented in a manner that allows for scrutiny.

8 | LIMITATIONS OF PHENEMONOGRAPHY

Phenemonography is not without its limitations, and some of the criticism levelled upon relates to its lack of specificity concerning its conceptual underpinning (Cossham, 2017); as a relatively new approach, it is not governed by the longstanding theoretical and philosophical positioning that has evolved over the decades that other qualitative approaches like phenomenology, for example, has had (Whitehead et al., 2020). More controversially, other criticism is directed towards the perceived lack of interpretive rigour and the ad hoc way phenemonography uses concepts from other qualitative methodologies but does not adhere to others (Stolz, 2020). The preceding section of this paper on methodological rigour goes some way to addressing the concerns that are levelled towards the perceived lack of interpretive rigour.

As researchers, our methodological choices stem from own philosophical positioning. The assumptions and beliefs we hold influences how we create knowledge and derive meaning from the research data and is personal to us (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Meaning phenemonography will not be an approach that suits everybody, as with any research approach there will be advantages and disadvantages, proponents, and opponents. Within the context of this study, phenemonography was chosen as a way to explore emotional intelligence (EI) through a midwifery lens using a methodological framework extending beyond the positivist research paradigm that the majority of EI research is situated within. Phenemonography with its emphasis on collective meaning was selected as it offers the ability to map the variations

in understanding of EI. This was considered important given the diversity of theories of EI that proliferate the existing literature (Bucich & Maccann, 2019).

9 | EXAMPLES OF PHENOMENOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN MIDWIFERY

As a less well-known methodology, there are limited examples of phenomenographical midwifery research within peer-reviewed journals. The following section provides examples of how phenemonography, as an approach, has been applied in recent midwifery and maternity-focused research.

Gabriel et al. (2023) conducted a phenomenographic study exploring how midwives conceptualized intrapartum risk; 14 Australian midwives with expertise of caring for women in the intrapartum period were interviewed to determine the qualitatively different ways midwives describe intrapartum risk. There were three different ways that midwives described intrapartum risk: *The woman as the risk*, *transdisciplinary risk*, and *institutional risk*, which varied dependent upon the midwives' experiences. Whilst the three categories describe differences in conceptualizing intrapartum risk, they were also interrelated. The birthing woman as an intrapartum risk could be either amplified or negated through the lens of the midwives' working relationships with other professionals (transdisciplinary risk) or through the environment, policies, and processes within the birthing space (institutional risk).

Buck et al.'s (2020) study explored how breastfeeding experiences inform early motherhood and how mothers describe their journey. Data was collected from 18 Australian women over a period of 3 weeks through a secure online forum, where the women posted their response to pre-determined questions relating to their breastfeeding experience. Three separate categories were identified which were identified as central to the experience of becoming a breastfeeding mother: *Unpreparedness*, *out of control* and *on your own*. The findings presented a clear view of the diversity of challenges that breastfeeding mothers face in the early postnatal period, but also demonstrated unity through the common feature that their breastfeeding journey was harder than they had anticipated, providing insight into the need for improved services and support in the early breastfeeding journey.

Skoogh et al. (2020) focused on health professionals' (midwives and doctors) perceptions of safety with a focus on the woman during birth. The researchers interviewed 19 Swedish health professionals in order to describe the different ways they viewed safety for women in childbirth, based upon their professional experiences of caring for women during birth. Four descriptive categories emerged from the data analysis: *Safeguarding the woman*, *safeguarding the birth process*, *respecting the individual and the team*, and *managing workforce and learning*. The findings demonstrated that despite differences in professional roles and experiences, all had the woman's safety as a central focus. This could be achieved by providing supportive care and emphasized that listening to women was a critical component of respectful and safe birth care.

10 | WHY PHENEMONOGRAPHY IN MIDWIFERY RESEARCH?

Everyone holds variations in the way they experience and think about the world around them. Within the context of midwifery, the reality is that women's responses to and their experiences of pregnancy and childbirth will vary enormously, especially as it is a life event which holds significant psychological, social, and cultural meaning for most women (Olza et al., 2018). Phenemonography is a suitable methodology for understanding phenomena that are not only complex but culturally mediated (Buck et al., 2020), therefore fits nicely when exploring women's (and their partners) experience of pregnancy and childbirth.

Midwifery as a profession is grounded in the principle of woman-centred care, and it is fundamentally important that midwifery care is based on considerations of the differences, and not only the commonalities, which exist between women. Using a phenomenographic approach can provide the midwifery profession with further knowledge about variations in how women and midwives think, and how aspects of different phenomena are experienced in within a midwifery setting. Phenemonography's attention to the variation of experience makes it a useful research approach for understanding both women and midwives' experiences. Additionally, within an educational setting, it is the willingness to understand the experiences of midwifery students and the differences between them and how they learn which has the potential to enhance awareness and improve both the teaching and learning for our future generation of midwives. This is essentially where phenemonography began, with Marton and his colleagues wanting to understand the variations in how students learn.

11 | CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to report on phenemonography, a little-known qualitative research approach and its potential in undertaking midwifery research. The subsequent exemplar of a midwifery research project has provided a potential framework for other researchers in midwifery to consider when undertaking qualitative research project.

Phenemonography sits firmly within the interpretivist paradigm, recognizing multiple realities exist but departs from many other traditional qualitative research traditions with its non-dualistic ontology and a focus on eliciting a second-order perspective. As individuals, whether we be midwives or the recipients of midwifery care, we will inevitably have different interpretations of same situations or phenomena. Independently, we are often aware of many things at one time but will have different focuses depending on our own personal contexts. It is this variation in experience

that is used in a phenomenographic approach to investigate and map differences and depict the 'collective understanding' on a given phenomenon.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kirstie Jayne Balding: Made substantial contributions to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data. **Kirstie Jayne Balding, Sadie Geraghty, Amanda Timler, Sally Pezaro, Sheena McChlery:** Involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content; Given final approval of the version to be published. Each author should have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content; Agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All the authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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