

## DO CFOs HAVE HEARTS? A REVEALING PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW

CFOs TÊM CORAÇÃO? UMA ENTREVISTA FENOMENOLÓGICA REVELADORA

¿TIENEN CORAZONES LOS CFOs? UNA ENTREVISTA FENOMENOLÓGICA REVELADORA

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**RESUMO:** Este artigo buscou compreender como diretores financeiros, os CFOs (*Chief Financial Officers*) lidam com sentimentos e emoções. Criticados por sua visão estritamente positivista diante da necessidade de compatibilizar recursos escassos e necessidades diversas, os diretores financeiros são reconhecidos por sua frieza em tratar questões delicadas como demissões em massa, corte de benefícios e investimentos e por referirem-se aos números através de uma perspectiva orientada para resultados. Através de uma entrevista realizada com uma diretora financeira utilizando a abordagem fenomenológica, foi possível revelar aspectos pouco conhecidos destes profissionais, relacionados à administração de seus sentimentos e emoções. As respostas, baseadas em sua experiência real, confirmam as percepções da autora, também gestora da área financeira, de que demonstrações de emoções positivas são mais bem aceitas que as negativas, não somente na área de finanças, mas no ambiente corporativo em geral. A importância de uma rede de apoio e questões de gênero também aparecem, como a conexão entre sentimento e fraqueza, atribuída às mulheres. Finalmente, a capacidade de lidar com situações complexas e fatores externos através da inteligência emocional e de uma abordagem calma e equilibrada constitui-se em valiosa qualidade a ser alcançada, inspirando respeito e credibilidade.

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**Palavras-chave:** Diretores financeiros. Entrevista fenomenológica. Emoções e sentimentos.

**ABSTRACT:** This article sought to understand how Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) deal with feelings and emotions. Criticized for their strictly positivist view while reconciling scarce resources and diverse needs, financial directors are recognized for their coldness in dealing with sensitive issues such as massive layoffs, benefits, and investments cuts, referring to the numbers through a results-oriented perspective. Through an interview with a financial director using the phenomenological approach, it was possible to reveal little-known aspects of these professionals, related to the management of their feelings and emotions. The answers, based on her real experience, confirm the perceptions of the author, also a financial manager, that statements of positive emotions are better accepted than negative ones, not only in the finance area, but in the corporate environment in general. The importance of a supportive net and gender issues also appeared, such as the connection between feelings and weakness, attributed to women. Finally, the ability to deal with complex situations and external factors through emotional intelligence and a calm and balanced approach constitutes valuable quality to be achieved, inspiring respect and credibility.

**Keywords:** CFOs. Phenomenological interview. Emotions. And feelings.

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**RESUMEN:** Este artículo buscó entender cómo los Directores Financieros (*Chief Financial Officers - CFOs*) tratan los sentimientos y las emociones. Criticados por su visión estrictamente positivista al tiempo que concilian los escasos recursos y las diversas necesidades, los directores financieros son reconocidos por su frialdad al tratar temas delicados como despidos masivos, recortes de beneficios y inversiones, refiriéndose a los números a través de una perspectiva orientada al resultado. A través de una entrevista con una directora financiera utilizando el enfoque fenomenológico, fue posible revelar aspectos poco conocidos de estos profesionales, relacionados con la gestión de sus sentimientos y emociones. Las respuestas, basadas en su experiencia real, confirman las percepciones de la autora, también gerente financiero, de que las declaraciones de emociones positivas son mejor aceptadas que las negativas, no solo en el área financiera, sino en el entorno corporativo en general. La importancia de una red de apoyo y las cuestiones de género también aparecen, como la conexión entre los sentimientos y la debilidad, atribuida a las mujeres. Por último, la capacidad de hacer frente a situaciones complejas y a factores externos mediante inteligencia emocional y un enfoque calmado y equilibrado constituye una cualidad valiosa que debe lograrse, inspirando respeto y credibilidad.

**Palabras clave:** Directores financieros. Entrevista fenomenológica. Emociones y sentimientos.

## INTRODUCTION

Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) stereotype of being heartless, owners of a rational, insensible mindset is the result of their objective approach, always referring to numbers through a result-oriented perspective. These are some of the characteristics financial guys are currently known for. CFOs have built this image through the years mostly due to their cold positivist position in meetings when budget is scarce, and executives from the other departments are fighting for better resources allocations based on their own criteria of what best meets the company's needs. Having worked in the financial planning and analysis (FP&A) and corporate finance department of worldwide and Brazilian companies for over thirty years, I experienced this perception many times.

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method of investigation interested in the detailed exploration of personal lived experience, examined in their own context and with a primary emphasis on participants' meaning-making (Smith et al., 2012).

Phenomenology aims to “bring out the ‘essences’ of experiences or appearances (phenomena)” to identify their underlying ‘reason’ (Pivcevic, 1970). According to Cope (2005), “the aim of phenomenological inquiry is to understand the subjective nature of ‘lived experience’ from the perspective of those who experience it, by exploring the meanings and explanations that individuals attribute to their experiences.” This understanding is later

ratified by Nizza et al (2021), who state that exploring subjective lived experience is the key objective of phenomenological enquiry.

Being close to old bosses and having my own personal experience, I thought it would be interesting to give CFOs and financial executives voice and an opportunity to share their lived experience and a chance to demystify this image. Therefore, the phenomenological approach was considered the most appropriate to help me reach this goal. I propose the research question: “How do CFOs perceive, think about and give meaning to the way they deal with their own emotions and feeling over time?”

## METHODOLOGY

Ontological and epistemological assumptions. Regarding core ontological assumptions, for the phenomenological approach (one of the subjectivist approaches to Social Science), “reality as a projection of human imagination.” (Cunliffe, 2011, p. 650).

Nevertheless, regarding the three knowledge problematics — Intersubjectivism, subjectivism, and objectivism, phenomenologists along with anthropologists and sociologists have been arguing that it is necessary to consider social experience as intersubjective rather than subjective (Cunliffe, 2011). The Morgan and Smircich article, revised by Ann Cunliffe (2011), about the three knowledge problematics, positions the Phenomenology in between the intersubjectivism and the subjectivism.

According to the author, the objectivistic problematic is interested in observation, categorization, and causality, looking for patterns and generalizations about human behavior. The world exists, independently of us. Knowledge is replicable and meanings are linked to common and literal understanding of words. This is not the chosen approach in this exercise.

In contrast, intersubjectivism explores interactions with others and the collaborative construction of meaning. Social reality is molded in specific moments, drawing upon relational and embodied experiences within time and space. Counterpointing the subjectivism problematic, interpretation is built ‘between us’ and a relational ontological position indicate ‘we are always selves-in-relation-to-others’ (Cunliffe, 2011). This is not the approach selected either.

This interview exercise is positioned in a subjectivist ontological and interpretivist epistemological position.

Although I have experienced a variety of feelings and emotions along my finance executive career, this exercise remains subjectivist because my interest lies in individual experiences and interpretations rather than the relational, shared interpretations between the interviewee and my personal impressions. According to the chosen approach, “people are reflexively embedded in their social world, influenced by and influencing discursive practices, interpretive procedures etc.” (Cunliffe, 2011) There is no external independent reality.

The questions explore how the interviewee experiences and talk about her feelings, which are related to specific context, time, and location, connecting them to her world. Responses will be relevant to better understand differing meanings and interpretations, inherent to the subjectivist ontological approach. Knowledge is embedded in contexts, in everyday conversations, and meaning make references to daily experiences and interrelations between people and their world.

While ontology is related to the “nature of social reality and what it means to be human”, epistemology deals with “the nature and purpose of knowledge” (Cunliffe, 2011).

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In our exercise, the interpretivism was the epistemological stance chosen. It is one of the four paradigms identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979). It can be defined as an approach to generate knowledge which ‘looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social lifeworld’ (Crotty, 1998, p.67). Depending on what the interviewee reveals about her experience and the meaning she assigns to it, diverse levels of interpretation are possible, revealing meanings at different levels of depth (Smith 2019).

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) describe the interconnection between the phenomenological stance and the interpretative approach: “The phenomenologist views human behavior – what people say and do – as a product of how people interpret their world. The task of the phenomenologist, and, for us, the qualitative methodologists, is to capture this process of interpretation. Aiming to grasp the meanings of a person’s behavior, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view.” (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975: 14). Considering all these aspects, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the method used to analyze the responses that emerged in the interview.

The interviewee chosen was the CFO group for over 10 years from an American worldwide company specialized in workplace and digital printing solutions. We first met in 1990 when she was the plant Controller in Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil when I was the FP&A intern. In two months I was hired as a trainee and ascended to higher qualified positions through the years. Later she moved to the United States where she assumed many challenging positions in the financial area until she reached the highest level as the CFO group. We built a beautiful friendship and she found me at Facebook some years ago. She encouraged me a lot to take the PhD course and accepted to be interviewed by me immediately when I send her a message through the Facebook some days ago. She found the goal and the approach very interesting, as she never had the opportunity to talk about her feelings and emotions at work before.

These are the questions I included in the protocol:

3.1 Please, tell me your perception of how other people believe CFOs deal with their own feelings and emotions.

3.2 Based on your own experience, do people beliefs correspond to reality? How do you perceive the way you deal with your own emotions and feeling over time? Could you give me some examples to illustrate your response?

3.3 How negative events such layoffs and plant shutdowns affect you? How do you feel about having to include them in the financial planning and communicate them in strategic meetings? How do you deal with your own feelings?

3.4 What makes a good day and a bad day at work?

3.5 What's the most challenging thing about being a CFO from the emotional perspective?

3.6 Could you share some of your feelings and emotions in situations you had to decide between work and personal life? Could you give some examples to support your answers?

All these questions focus on personal perceptions from the interviewee perspective, give voice to lived experiences, aligned with the ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the Phenomenological approach described above.

## RESULTS

According to Smith et al (2012), in IPA research, our goal is to comprehend individuals' connections to the world, usually focusing on specific events, relationships, or processes within their lives. Our endeavors are necessarily interpretative, centering on participants' efforts to make meanings from their activities and the occurrences affecting them.

My interest rests on her own experience, considering the context she faced (a Latin-American woman occupying the worldwide American group CFO position for the very first time in the company's history), her feelings and emotions and perceptions regarding the environment she was in. The interview was conducted online (I was home and so was she). It lasted around one hour and a half. The interview progressed at a calm, relaxed pace, and I showed empathy for her. She got a little emotional when reminded tough times, but I could understand it, it was not a problem. One of the contributions of this exercise from the methodological perspective is that emotions in interviews were acknowledged, observed, and interpreted. I took notes along her speech to reinforce aspects I found relevant to the research. Partial transcriptions were made according to this criterion also. The interview was voice-recorded after the interviewee consent.

Some experiential statements, transcriptions excerpts and exploratory notes can be found in Table 1:

Table 1 – Interview summary

Experiential Statements	Transcriptions	Exploratory Notes
<p><b>The individual perception changes according to different level of humanized views.</b></p> <p><b>Showing emotions is a sign of weakness.</b></p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> Please, tell me your perception of how other people believe CFOs deal with their own feelings and emotions.</p> <p><b>Participant:</b> My perception is that most people do not associate emotions and feelings to the “money guys”. It is easier to find rapport in our pairs (who are experiencing the same context) or in other finance executives.</p> <p>I believe there is also a very individual perception, we cannot generalize – those who have a more humanized view, face us as human beings, as well. And emotions and feelings are part of it. On the other hand, I agree there is a general sense that showing emotions in public is not something people</p>	<p><b>Shared experience along the whole interview.</b></p> <p><b>Made a distinction regarding individual perceptions based on a criterion.</b></p> <p><b>Bad emotions/feelings are not welcomed.</b></p>

	<p>expect or accept. But it applies to all executives, not only financial. In the corporate environment, showing how you feel is still a sign of weakness (especially for women). Good emotions such as happiness are more acceptable. Bad ones (such as fear or sadness) are still not allowed. They are also related to lack of self-control and insecurity, which are terrible for leaders reputation.</p>	
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Table 1 – Interview summary (cont.)

Experiential Statements	Transcriptions	Exploratory Notes
<p><b>Dealing with emotions is not easy.</b></p> <p><b>Everybody is affected by emotions and deals with them in different ways.</b></p> <p><b>Having support is important to keep the balance.</b></p> <p><b>Our human condition makes us equal.</b></p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> Based on your own experience, do people beliefs correspond to reality? How do you perceive the way you deal with your own emotions and feeling over time? Could you give me some examples to illustrate your response?</p> <p><b>Participant:</b> I never thought about it...To me, it is very difficult to handle with feelings and emotions, especially in hard times when decisions have a strong negative impact on people’s lives, in situations such as lay-offs, for instance. We are not expected to show them, but they do show. What usually happens is that some of us somatize the stress (it is horrible, and we should not do it, I know) and become physically or mentally ill. In occasions like these, other professionals are also impacted as CEOs and Human Resources executives, among others. Everybody struggles with their own feelings, one way or another. It is important to bear in mind the main objective (not to collapse the whole business, for example) although tough decisions always provoke frustration and sadness in everyone. To deal with them, it is essential to have some support – family, friends... To me, having faith in God is essential...I need to strengthen my faith to keep going - but this is another response, to another question (laugh). And it is very personal. On such occasions, there is always room for powerful reflections about deep themes such as our purpose in life.</p> <p>In the end, we are all human beings, trying to do our best, according to our gifts.</p>	<p><b>Although emotions emerge, not dealing with them properly may lead to illness.</b></p> <p><b>Family, friends, faith – support that makes the difference.</b></p>

Table 1 – Interview summary (cont.)

Experiential Statements	Transcriptions	Exploratory Notes
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<p><b>Keep emotional equilibrium is the most challenging and best approach.</b></p> <p><b>Emotional stability inspires credibility and respect.</b></p>	<p><b>Interviewer:</b> What’s the most challenging thing about being a CFO from the emotional perspective?</p> <p><b>Participant:</b> Keeping the pace calm and well-balanced to help deal with decisions and consequences the best way. There are lots on noncontrolled events with strong impact on business we cannot forecast every day - anticipating scenarios helps focus on the targets. Recently Covid forced us to reinvent ourselves. Regarding emotions, there are several possible approaches, but I believe the one that relies on emotional equilibrium is the best one. Emotional intelligence is gold. As one of our roles is to support CEOs in strategic decisions, it is important to cultivate a stable temper, to inspire credibility and respect. To reach it, self-knowledge and self-compassion help a lot. The first lets you identify when you are moving away from your center and the second allows you to be kinder to yourself and the others. Never decide in anger. Taking a deep breath, also helps, especially if you do not have much time to recover from a bad feeling. Time and reflection are excellent advisors! And, back to the general question, CFOs (just like everybody) do have hearts! (laughs)</p>	<p><b>Positive approach.</b></p> <p><b>Self-knowledge/self-compassion.</b></p> <p><b>Practical tips (breath/time/reflection)</b></p>
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Source: prepared by the author.

## DISCUSSION

I focused on understanding the subjective nature of ‘lived experience’ from the interviewee’s perspective by exploring the meanings and explanations that individuals attribute to their experiences. Along the responses, it was possible to notice how the theme had an impact on the interviewee, mostly due to the memories and reflections brought back. According to her, although it is easier to find rapport in people who share the same context, emotions and feelings are part of the human being. For her, it is possible to identify that individual perceptions may be different - the more humanized a person is, more he will be able to recognize CFOs as humans too. In contrast, she recognizes there is a general sense regarding showing emotions in the whole corporate environment (not restricted to Finance), which is (still) considered a sign of weakness (“especially for women”), revealing a gender issue to be overcome.



She admits it is difficult to deal with her own feelings and emotions, especially during bad times and extends this perception to everyone – it does not make any difference the department you work for, even your position – on such occasions, feelings and emotions are hard for all. She admits having a support net (family, friends, and faith) eases the path. At this point, she becomes more reflexive, admitting that in hard times “there is always room for powerful reflections about deep themes such as our purpose in life”. She is a very optimistic person, and, in the interview, this characteristic appeared many times.

Finally, she shares her perceptions regarding the most challenging thing about being a CFO from the emotional perspective: being able to deal with unexpected variables using a calm and well-balanced emotional approach. According to her, self-control is a powerful tool and inspire credibility and respect. Self-knowledge and self-compassion were also remembered as tools that help people get back to their equilibrium. After practical tips regarding decisions, she comes back to the general question and affirms, emphatically, that CFOs do have hearts (just like any other person).

## CONCLUSION

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This article aimed to investigate how CFOs perceive, think about and give meaning to the way they deal with their own emotions and feeling over time. Based on an interview with a CFO using the phenomenological approach, it was possible to reveal little-known aspects of these professionals, related to the management of their feelings and emotions. As Sholokhova et al. (2022) state, “Phenomenology’s unique contribution to qualitative approaches is that it helps to focus on the person as a whole.” This approach gives interviewees an opportunity to express themselves, register their perceptions and allow researchers to access participants’ lived experience (Langley and Meziani, 2020). They defend this gender as flexible and it allows researchers to adapt their protocols to the object of investigation. Open questioning, broader guidelines and a listening stance can be adopted as well, inviting the respondent to talk about his inner world in his own way which can help ideally create openness and stimulate rapport.

Responses exposed powerful comments around emotions - the struggles, ways of dealing and not dealing with them. Emotions and feelings are part of the human being and recognizing it helps to look at others in a more humanized way.

Limitations of the study remain in the fact that only one in-depth interview was conducted, which opens avenues for further enhancements. Aspects like the importance of supportive nets and gender issues may be deepened in further studies as well.

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