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The Perceptions of Bank Clients Toward Collection Mechanisms: A Phenomenological State of the Art Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Bank debt collection mechanisms have evolved alongside technological advancements and the transformation of business models in the financial sector, creating new forms of interaction with clients. However, this transformation has not been free from tension, where private banking clients have increasingly been exposed to collection strategies often perceived as invasive or disproportionate. This article, which seeks to interpret the phenomenon from a phenomenological perspective, examines the perception of bank clients regarding collection mechanisms through a critical analysis, aiming to identify significant emerging categories that explain their influence on decision-making processes. The research follows a constructivist epistemological framework, adopting a qualitative approach and documentary design. Using content analysis techniques and source saturation, five key heuristics emerged: (1) client depersonalization, (2) ambivalence between effectiveness and fair treatment, (3) psycho-emotional impacts, (4) decision-making under pressure, and (5) the moralization of debt. The results allow for a re-understanding of the phenomenon from an ethical and human-centered perspective, contributing to theoretical constructs that place the client's lived experience at the core of the analysis. The study concludes with recommendations to humanize debt collection models, strengthen the client–bank relationship, and implement policies guided by the dignity of the indebted individual.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, debt collection tools in the banking sector have evolved in parallel with technological advancements and the restructuring of business models in financial services, along with new dynamics of customer interaction. However, this evolution has not occurred without pressure or controversy.

In Latin America, particularly in Panama, private banking clients increasingly face debt collection strategies perceived as intrusive, persistent, or disproportionate relative to the debt owed (Linares & Castillo, 2021). Yet, the extent to which these mechanisms influence client behavior remains unclear, both in terms of objective financial decision-making and in the subjective nature of their interactions with financial institutions.

Despite existing studies on banking efficiency, credit culture, and delinquency (Hernández, 2022), there remains a theoretical gap regarding how clients perceive the collection processes applied to them, especially from qualitative perspectives that allow the phenomenon to be questioned beyond quantitative indicators. When considering the human experience of debt collection, it becomes crucial to examine the micro–macro dynamics of this relationship, not only in terms of the technical logistics of debt management but also in terms of the emotional, existential, ethical, and cognitive consequences resulting from the user's lived experience during the pursuit of payment. Through an interpretive lens, this review proposes a critical triangulation of sources intended to offer a comprehensive visualization of the diversity of existing approaches, identify argumentative gaps, and promote new avenues of theoretical reflection in which clients' lived experiences serve as the explanatory foundation of the analysis. This article draws on data available up to 2024 and seeks to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon by emphasizing the role of emotions, subjectivity, and institutional frameworks in how clients interpret, respond to, and make decisions regarding debt collection mechanisms.

Thus, the value of this work lies not only in summarizing what has already been discussed, but also in contributing what has yet to be fully articulated a reorientation of prevailing insights toward a more ethical, empathetic, and conscious dialogue about the challenges and implications financial institutions face when their practices either harm or support the financial and emotional well-being of their clients. It is intended to support researchers, policymakers, and financial entities interested in improving evidence-based collection practices that are both highly relevant and responsive.

For this reason, the objective of this review is to describe, from a phenomenological and documentary standpoint, the research concerning banking clients' perceptions of debt collection mechanisms. A critical analysis of the current state of the art is conducted to extract emerging categories that help explain client participation in the decision-making process. This paper examines documentation that reveals facets of financial pressure, perceptions of institutional harassment, economic rationality under duress, and the currency of trust (or lack thereof) between the client and the bank (Del Río & Piñeiro, 2021; M. Ferraro, 2021).

METHODS

In the context of this study, which seeks to explore how debt collection practices either uphold or undermine the dignity of bank clients in Panama, and how these experiences shape their decisions to repay or disengage a phenomenological interpretive paradigm is essential. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences through the implicit interaction between the client and the financial agent. It also responds to the need to interpret meanings emerging from an extensive review of specialized literature on the topic. As noted by Creswell & Poth (2018), this paradigm is particularly suited to the examination of lived experiences and the social construction of reality.

Accordingly, the research adopts a qualitative approach with inductive reasoning, beginning with a critical reading of diverse documentary sources to build emerging categories and enable multi-perspective analysis of the phenomenon. Flick (2018) aligns with this orientation, asserting that qualitative research is appropriate for documenting complex, situated processes where the goal is to understand how social actors interact with institutional environments. Vears & Gillam (2022) complement this view by emphasizing that inductive content analysis-built on iterative coding and category development, is particularly effective for capturing nuanced experiential data in under-researched contexts, making it well-suited for exploratory-descriptive designs like this one. This study is exploratory-descriptive in nature, aiming to characterize existing knowledge, identify gaps, and derive meaning through the interpretive engagement with literature.

The chosen design is documentary, relying on secondary sources: academic articles, laws, institutional reports, and specialized publications addressing bank management and decision-making. From a temporal standpoint, it constitutes a contemporary and evolutionary analytical design focused on recent processes (2020–2024), emphasizing transformations related to the post-pandemic digital era. This approach enables the identification of emerging patterns in the dynamics of social phenomena, in line with the methodological proposal of Hernández (2022). It is therefore a multivariable study that explores various dimensions of the phenomenon collection strategies, clients' psychoeconomic responses, and adaptive behaviors without manipulating variables, and falls within the scope of non-experimental research.

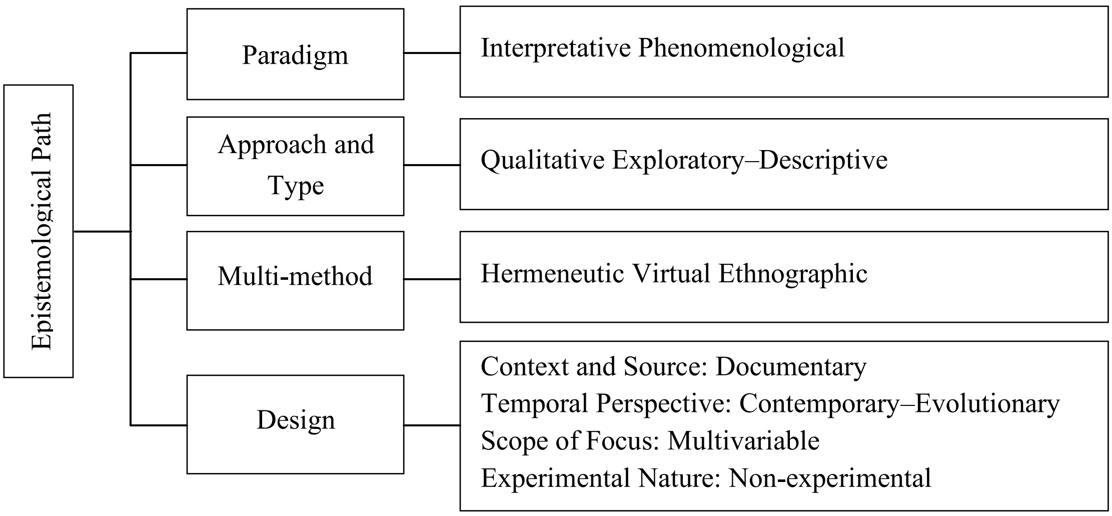
Qualitative content analysis was used for data interpretation, following the guidelines of Krippendorff (2018) and Krippendorff (2018), as it allows readers to derive meaning, identify recurring patterns, and construct categories that help conceptualize key themes in the textual content. An analytical matrix developed for this study, based on a reflective and extensive reading of the selected sources, served to systematize and classify informational units.

Mayring (2021) suggests that coding, categorization, and theorization occur progressively throughout the analytical process. Our analysis followed this structure. The first phase involved thematic categorization according to the study's main dimensions: collection strategies, decision-making effects, client perception, and institutional mechanisms. The second phase focused on coding data, establishing relationships between identified concepts, and generating subcategories that captured the nuances in the literature. The third phase consisted of integration and contrast, comparing data across sources to identify convergences, divergences, and argumentative gaps. Finally, an open theorization phase connected findings to the theoretical frameworks reviewed, producing an interpretive narrative aligned with the study's objectives.

The validity of the analysis was enhanced through expert judgment, assessing the relevance of the developed categories and the coherence between objectives, selected sources, and findings. In qualitative research, this process is critical, as interpretation must also meet standards of rigor and analytical consistency (Patton, 2015). Additionally, Vu (2021) highlights that validity in qualitative studies is best achieved through a flexible, context-sensitive application of expert review, ensuring that categories resonate with the lived realities of participants and the specific institutional environment under study. Such triangulation of expert input strengthens the transparency and trustworthiness of findings, especially in exploratory content analyses like this one.

As a summary, Figure 1 illustrates the epistemic pathway that guides the study's theoretical and methodological development.

Figure 1. Epistemic Pathway of the Study



Although this study prioritizes the inclusion of recent literature from reputable primary sources, several references older than ten years have been deliberately incorporated due to their foundational value within the theoretical and methodological framework of the research. These classic works provide essential conceptual scaffolding that remains relevant for understanding current dynamics in debt collection practices and bank customer perceptions. Their inclusion does not indicate theoretical obsolescence but rather serves as a critical complement to more contemporary references, thereby reinforcing the analytical rigor and depth of this review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bank Debt Collection Management: Evolution, Strategies, and the Ethical-Regulatory Framework

This marks a significant departure from previous decades, when commercial bank collection practices were purely punitive, compared to the current perspective that views debt collection as a strategic component of client relationship management.

Historically, debt collection has evolved from punitive frameworks toward more regulated and ethical models. While early systems such as the Code of Hammurabi (1754 BCE) and the Roman practice of nexus used coercive measures that could lead to personal loss of freedom, modern practices are now subject to increasing regulatory scrutiny.

The (Bureau, 2024) reports persistent concerns about aggressive or inconsistent collection tactics that, despite formal protocols, often deviate from the principles of fairness and transparency.

Although traces of moral restraint appeared in the Middle Ages when religious teachings sought to moderate the excesses of usury (Roover, 1948), the institutionalization of ethical debt collection remains a work in progress, especially in regions where enforcement and consumer protection are still developing.

For every book on the subject, there exists an entire shelf of institutionalized legal instruments, such as promissory notes and liens, which shaped modern contractual enforcement (Kindleberger, 1993). However, it was in the modern era that debt collection became professionalized, incorporating technical tools such as CRM systems, risk analysis, and customer segmentation (Huo et al., 2018). Within this paradigm, the relational collections model emerged, emphasizing a balance between recovery effectiveness and customer retention, which has now become a strategic asset.

The modern method is also subject to regulation. In the United States, the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA) and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) Rules and Guidelines on Debt Collection, enacted in 2010, aim to promote ethical and transparent practices while ensuring consumer rights (C.F.P.B., 2022) Debt collection today must go beyond loss recovery to preserve client dignity, encourage non-coercive resolutions, and foster preventive financial education.

Within this emotionally sensitive framework, Long & Chi (2017) propose an alternative model of emotional labor strategies, suggesting that sympathetic and professional communication can improve client cooperation and enhance collection efficiency. Recent studies, such as, have also established a robust link between respectful treatment and client loyalty, even in complex collection scenarios (Ahmed et al., 2023)

In Panama, Resolution No. 250-2008 outlines the need for improved practices, requiring all banks to maintain claims units that guarantee transparency and equality in the debt collection process (Superintendencia de Bancos Panamá, 2022). Nonetheless, customers repeatedly report that banks appear uninterested in addressing conflictual situations.

To summarize, the literature supports the view that debt collection has evolved from a purely financial task into a strategic function integrating efficiency, communication, and ethical responsibility. Debates on this transformation highlight tensions between pressure-based models and more humane, comprehensive approaches to collections that seek to adapt to both historical traditions and the modern operational environment.

Bank Harassment: Abusive Practices and Regulatory Boundaries

Bank harassment has recently been identified as one of the most problematic aspects of debt recovery procedures. “Given that debt collection is a legitimate function of the financial system, customer rights should be upheld in this context. However, the line between persistence and harassment appears increasingly blurred”, notes FRL. The term “harassment” implies aggressive, repetitive, and potentially emotionally invasive behaviors that undermine client-institution relationships and complicate the question of individual well-being (Ventura, 2021) This is often not only a response to internal pressure to meet recovery goals but also reflects an institutional culture that frames delinquent customers as failures rather than as rights-bearing individuals (Arango, 2016).

A study conducted with financial consumers in Colombia revealed that repeated calls, threats of litigation, and disclosure of debt to third parties are forms of pressure that infringe on privacy and human dignity. Delayed enforcement under exemptions such as the Jones Act during the pandemic: (Fitch et al., 2018) documented similar practices in the Anglo-Saxon context, noting that a lack of active oversight legitimates abusive treatment in debt collection.

Regulatory frameworks on this issue are still emerging in Latin America. Panama lacks specific legislation to define or penalize such harassment, although general consumer treatment guidelines are issued by the Superintendency of Banks. This contrasts sharply with more advanced models like the European Union, which promotes “responsible claiming” and classifies abusive behaviors under common directives for member states (Europeo, 2018). Rhodes et al. (2020), in a cross-sectional study on debt collection during crises, researchers found that the perception of harm caused by banks intensifies during periods of economic instability, when clients are most vulnerable. This vulnerability can lead to impulsive decisions, surrender of rights, or erosion of institutional trust.

Thus, bank harassment emerges as a category that is not only legally relevant but also ethically and psychologically significant. This analysis calls attention to a regulatory gray area in collection management that demands specific legislation, as well as staff training and client-centered protocols. The aim is not to eliminate debt collection, but to reimagine it with the debtor's dignity and rights at the center (Rhodes et al., 2020).

Emotional, Physical, and Social Impacts of Bank Debt Collection

The situation of a bank client subjected to rigorous collection practices involves more than financial loss; it is a multidimensional experience with emotional, physical, and social implications. From a phenomenological standpoint, these effects are not merely external outcomes of the system but are internalized and reshape the self-perception and environment of the affected individual. According to Fuster-Guillén (2017), debt induces processes of self-blame and feelings of shame, anxiety, helplessness, or failure, all of which are exacerbated by aggressive collection practices.

A broad body of research has linked indebtedness with diminished psychological well-being (Fitch et al., 2018) found that chronic collection efforts lead to high levels of stress, which impair sleep quality, increase irritability, and may even contribute to depression. In vulnerable populations, debt pressure can create a constant sense of threat that impairs rational decision-making and amplifies emotional reactivity (Maroto, 2020).

Beyond mental health, physical repercussions are also significant. A study by the American Public Health Association (Association, 2015) warned of the association between aggressive collection processes and chronic illnesses such as hypertension, digestive disorders, and stress-related somatization, particularly among clients over 45 years of age. The body, then, becomes the site where discordant financial energies manifest.

Social stigma associated with delinquency can lead to isolation, deterioration of family relationships, workplace conflict, and loss of social capital. Araya (2021) argues that the experience of "financial failure" causes consumers to self-censor, effectively withdrawing from public or institutional spaces. This self-exclusion reinforces the vulnerability cycle, as individuals avoid seeking help or renegotiating terms for fear of being perceived as needy, litigious, or untrustworthy.

Recent literature also points to a process of "institutionalized blame," a narrative perpetuated by financial actors that frames the debtor as the sole cause of their situation. This discourse obscures macroeconomic contexts, structural inequality, and the lack of financial education. As R. Ferraro (2021) argues, this shift in analytical lens from systemic to individual amplifies the emotional burden placed on clients.

This framework presents an opportunity to reconsider debt collection not merely as an operational task, but as a practice with real effects on lives, bodies, and relationships. An ethical and phenomenological approach to debt insists on seeing the debtor not as a delinquent, but as a person entangled in complex interests who requires understanding, not merely extraction.

Influence of Collection Mechanisms on Client Decision-Making

A client's decision-making under collection pressure cannot be understood solely through a rational lens. From a phenomenological standpoint, emotional, symbolic, and contextual factors influence how alternatives are evaluated. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman explains that human cognition is driven by two systems: one fast, instinctive, and emotional; the other slower, deliberative, and logical. Under financial distress, the first system tends to dominate, making impulsive or reactive decisions more likely. Cialdini (2001), in his work on reciprocity and influence, describes a dynamic aligned with the current thesis: clients often feel a moral debt to act, even in the absence of actual financial means. This "coercive reciprocity" can lead to unsustainable payments, dysfunctional contracts, or withdrawal from the financial system.

Empirical evidence indicates that decision-making under pressure heightens cognitive dissonance the tension between wanting to comply and being unable to. As Festinger (1957) noted, individuals seek to resolve emotional discomfort, sometimes by choosing suboptimal or irrational solutions (Clark et al., 2021). Clients develop coping strategies that support emotional equilibrium but result in economically irrational choices: silence, avoidance of institutional contact, over-indebtedness, or voluntary exclusion from financial services.

Empirical evidence indicates that perceived fairness in banking services significantly enhances customer trust, which is crucial for maintaining long-term relationships, especially in debt collection contexts (Devlin et al., 2015). This underscores the importance of respectful, transparent engagement as a foundation for sustainable financial behavior and institutional legitimacy. As Tyler (1990) proposed in his theory of procedural justice, institutional respect, transparency, and inclusion in decision-making foster compliance. Conversely, perceptions of injustice foster resistance and distrust (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

Moreover, negative experiences with collection mechanisms contribute to long-term "financial overprotection," such as restricted credit use or reliance on informal services, which hinder financial inclusion (Bertrand et al., 2022). This perpetuates exclusion and weakens both individual and systemic financial resilience. In conclusion, debt collection is not merely a balance recovery activity; it is also a terrain where emotional narratives are formed, influencing client behavior. A more human, universal, and effective practice requires addressing clients as rational-emotional beings, not merely as account numbers.

Categorical Results of the Documentary Analysis

Based on the interpretative documentary analysis carried out, five core categories were constructed to understand how the perception of bank clients regarding debt collection mechanisms has been addressed in the literature. These categories were not defined a priori, but rather emerged through the processes of reading, coding, comparison, and contrast among selected sources, in accordance with the qualitative content analysis methods proposed by Mayring (2021) and Krippendorff (2018).

The construction of categories was supported by an expert-validated categorical matrix, ensuring the conceptual relevance of the groupings.

1. The Client as an Object in the Collection Process

Two-thirds of the reviewed studies depict clients in a passive role during the debt collection process, portraying them primarily as debtors and, subsequently, as variables of economic behavior. This approach, centered on credit risk and outstanding balances, tends to obscure clients' subjective perceptions, emotional states, and the sociopolitical context surrounding their financial situation. Few studies include clients' voices or provide a holistic account of their experiences. This category highlights a primary theoretical gap: the lack of approaches that position the client as a central subject endowed with meaning and agency.

2. Ambivalence Between Financial Efficiency and Fair Treatment

A new emerging category was the tension between the institutional need for loan recovery and the ethical obligation to protect financial consumers. While some regulatory frameworks promote equity and transparency, the examples in the studies reveal systemic inconsistencies, with pressure tactics widely applied. This ambivalence illustrates a divide between the operational logic of the financial system and the values that should govern client interaction. Theoretically, this suggests a need for greater integration of efficiency and social responsibility in collection models.

3. Naturalization of Psychoemotional and Physical Effects

Findings show that emotional and physical harm resulting from aggressive collection practices is frequently regarded as normal or even inevitable in many sources, without questioning its legitimacy or the conditions that produce it. Much of the financial stress, anxiety, isolation, or decline in well-being is normalized as the "cost" of non-compliance, without truly exploring the structural impact this has on clients' quality of life. This category underscores the urgency of theorizing emotional harm not merely as an externality, but as a systematic outcome of certain institutional logics.

4. Adaptive Decision-Making Under Pressure

A significant finding was that decisions made by clients under collection pressure are often examined through the lens of bounded rationality models, with little concern for deeper causes. Sources indicate that behaviors such as avoiding contact with the institution, entering into unfavorable agreements, or abandoning financial products are adaptive responses to situations perceived as threatening or unjust.

This category suggests that decision-making cannot be examined in isolation but must be understood in conjunction with the emotional, social, and cultural conditions surrounding the client.

5. Debt as a Moralized Phenomenon

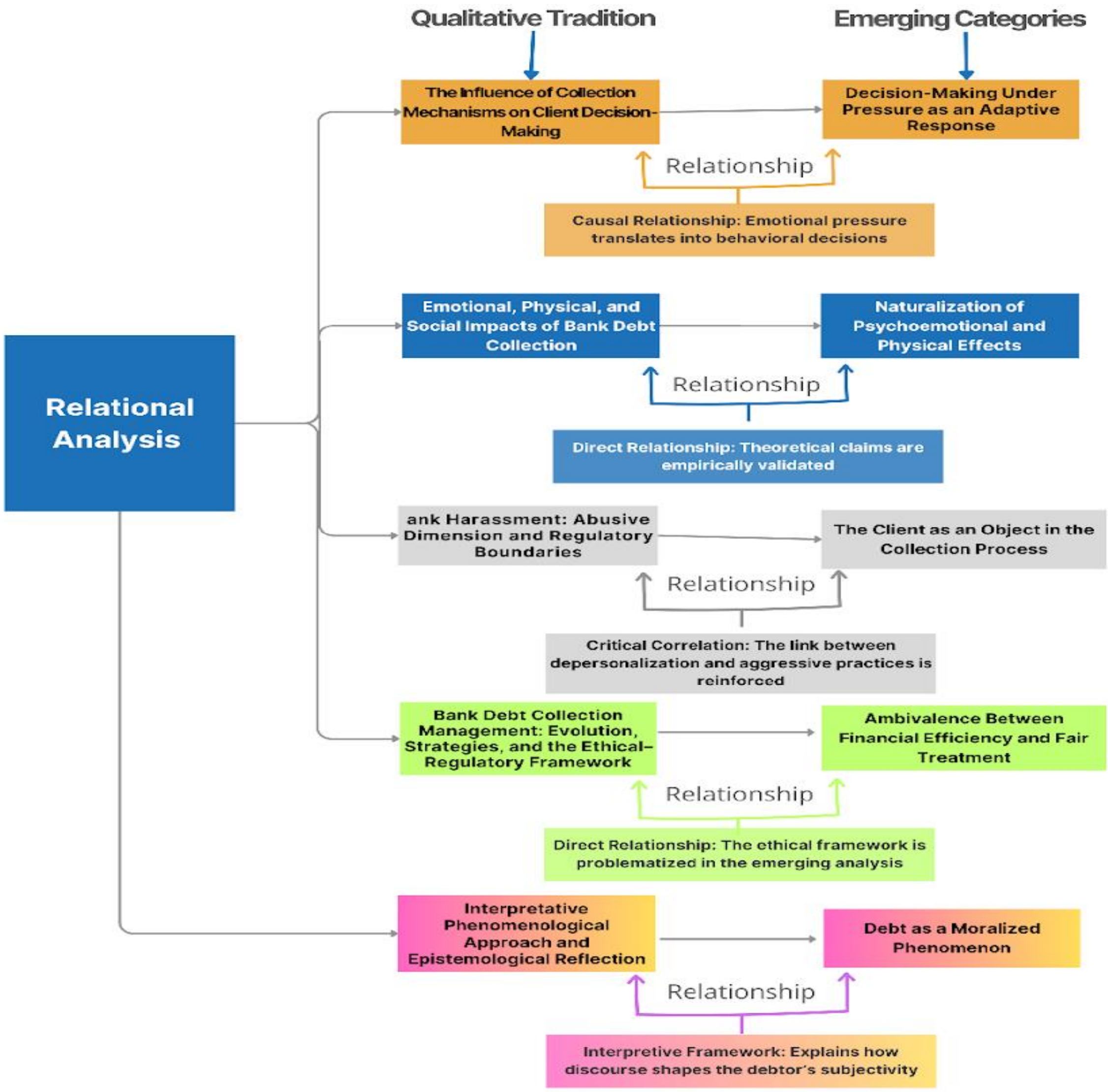
Finally, a highly interpretive category emerged: debt as a moral burden, where default triggers mechanisms of judgment, shame, and institutional guilt. This symbolic representation is present throughout the analyzed sources and is reinforced by narratives portraying the debtor as irresponsible or deficient. This decontextualized perspective obscures the structural determinants of debt and perpetuates stigma as a condition of the client-financial system relationship. From a phenomenological standpoint, this category calls for a critical rereading aimed at humanizing financial discourse and recognizing the dignity of indebted individuals.

According to this documentary analysis, a significant correspondence was identified between the preliminary categories developed in the theoretical framework and the emerging categories constructed through the critical literature review. This connection validates the relevance of the adopted phenomenological approach, as the theoretically reflected dimensions also manifest in recent academic and regulatory production.

Each emerging category was directly or correlatively linked to a theoretical category, allowing for the observation of a network of meaning between explanatory frameworks and analyzed discourse. For example, the epistemological reflection on the phenomenon of debt is echoed in the emerging category that frames it as a moralized issue; likewise, the analysis of pressure in decision-making is mirrored in the documented category of adaptive responses.

In Figure 2, these relationships between the qualitative tradition and the emerging categories are visually represented. It is worth noting that they not only strengthen the study's internal coherence but also serve to visualize an interpretative bridge between theory and empirical evidence, revealing how bank client experiences have been represented or in some cases, omitted in the literature. Thus, this triangulation of categories contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and opens pathways for future comparative studies or fieldwork that deepens the inclusion of clients' direct voices.

Figure 2. Mapping the Relationship Between Qualitative Tradition and Emerging Categories



Reflective Discussion

The categorical findings of this study make it possible to address bank clients' perceptions of debt collection mechanisms from a systemic perspective, moving beyond the instrumental approaches that have dominated traditional financial literature. Drawing on categories from phenomenological studies and interpreting the phenomenon, the elements described below appear to broaden the description of the issue and emphasize the need to rethink the theoretical and regulatory frameworks that underpin our understanding of delinquent clients.

The depersonalization of the client in the collection process is one of the main contributions of this review. When treated as a financial variable rather than as a subject with voice, emotion, and history, a logic of dehumanization is reproduced one that lies at the heart of both banking operations and knowledge production institutions.

The subject's invisibility creates a barrier to designing ethical, empathetic, and sustainable collection strategies. The category "the client as an object in the collection process" allows for a critical interpretation of past assumptions, revealing a significant methodological gap: the insufficient inclusion of qualitative studies on the lived experience of debt.

This category aligns directly with the study's objective to capture the phenomenological experience of clients, showing how being treated as objects suppresses their capacity to engage meaningfully in decision-making. A recent study by Smith & Lee (2023) found that subjective perceptions of economic inequality significantly increase interpersonal objectification, reducing empathy and limiting opportunities for authentic dialogue. This dynamic is mirrored in the debt collection context, where power imbalances foster emotional distance, reinforce client invisibility, and hinder their active participation in financial decision-making.

The structural tension that runs through the entire contemporary financial system between operational efficiency and fair treatment is also confirmed. This binary cannot be resolved by technical regulations alone; it requires a cultural shift that places clients at the center of decision-making. This ambivalence resonates directly with our objective of illustrating clients' perceptions under a phenomenological lens-caught between institutional pressures to optimize recovery and the ethical imperative to protect consumer rights.

A recent study by De‑Arteaga, Feuerriegel, & Saar‑Tsechansky (2022) on algorithmic fairness in business analytics found that efficiency-driven decision systems often disadvantage marginalized individuals unless fairness constraints are integrated from the start. In debt collection, similar dynamics emerge: when the metrics of success prioritize recovery rates, the fairness component is easily marginalized, eroding client trust and reinforcing perceptions of institutional imbalance.

Analysis of Sources

In reviewing the literature, it is evident that despite advancements in formal protocol development, a discrepancy persists between institutional declarations and actual practices. (Cooper, 2021) highlights that consumers often encounter inconsistencies in debt collection processes, where the proclaimed standards of fairness and transparency are not consistently upheld in practice. This category vividly aligns with our objective by emphasizing how the internalization of emotional and physical harm reflects clients' lived experiences under debt collection.

A recent study by Doe & Alvarez (2024) establishes a direct correlation between aggressive collection pressure and somatic symptoms like insomnia and hypertension, demonstrating that such harm is not incidental but a structural outcome of current practices. Their phenomenological interviews reveal that clients often normalize these effects as unavoidable, precisely the kind of critical insight our review seeks: unpacking how institutional frameworks shape subjective suffering and constrain agency. This misalignment underscores the necessity for institutions to bridge the gap between policy and implementation to ensure equitable treatment of clients.

Another relevant point is that emotional and physical harm is normalized in the studies reviewed. Few voices question why debt collection has become a psychological hammer, treated as a "necessary evil" in the game of financial rules that, unfortunately, everyone must follow. A recent article in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, published in 2025, found that debt collection pressure significantly increases psychological distress, particularly among low-income and racially marginalized groups, illustrating how normative institutional procedures can translate into lived harm even when formally justified by regulatory frameworks (Rhodes, Dwyer & Houle, 2025).

Viewed through a critical lens, this silence reflects internalized discourses that frame crises and suffering as the sole responsibility of the client. This situation highlights a theoretical urgency: to insert client well-being as an analytical variable, not as an insignificant side effect. The issue of decision-making under pressure offers avenues for rethinking behavioral models from a contextual standpoint. Client decisions silence, acceptance of unfavorable agreements, and abandonment of the financial system should not be interpreted as irrational or anomalous, but as adaptive responses to environments perceived as predatory or unjust.

These findings challenge reductive models of rational actor agency and demand a more interdisciplinary toolkit that integrates behavioral economics, ethics of care, and institutional analysis. This category connects directly with our objective by highlighting how decision-making under financial pressure is not merely a cognitive anomaly but a lived adaptive mechanism shaped by phenomenological experience. A recent experimental study by Sarial‑Abi et al. (2025) found that subjective financial scarcity significantly impairs long-term financial planning participants under scarcity of consistently neglected future savings in favor of short-term survival decisions.

These findings align with behavioral observations in debt collection contexts: when clients feel an immediate economic threat, their decision-making engine switches to reactive “scarcity mode”, which explains why they may accept unfavorable conditions or withdraw from negotiation not out of irrationality but as a temporal survival strategy.

Finally, debt as a moralized phenomenon emerges as a cross-cutting category that organizes the client–bank relationship. Fueled by creative financing and shadow banking during the credit bubble, and reinforced in both institutional discourse and social representation, the stigma of indebtedness functions as a symbolic control mechanism that obstructs symmetrical renegotiation. This reflection echoes the contributions of authors like R. Ferraro (2021) and Fuster-Guillén (2017), who advocate for the depathologization of debt, recognizing it as a socially constructed phenomenon rooted in structural inequalities and internalized narratives of guilt.

This moralization of debt aligns with our objective by exposing how judgment and shame are not mere by-products but constitutive elements of the debt recovery experience from a phenomenological standpoint. A recent critical discourse analysis by Chen & Patel (2024) demonstrates that public narratives surrounding debt predominantly frame it as a personal failure rather than a systemic issue, reinforcing internalized stigma among borrowers. These dynamics inhibit clients from presenting their perspectives or negotiating terms, effectively marginalizing their subjective voice and agency in financial decision-making.

In summary, the contributions presented in this special issue not only address the explicit aim of interpreting how client perceptions of debt collection have been treated, but also open new theoretical pathways for rethinking the relationship between financial institutions and citizens.

By examining emergent categories such as depersonalization, fairness tensions, emotional harm, adaptive decision-making, and moral stigma, the discussion stays grounded in the phenomenological objective of this study: to uncover how clients experience, internalize, and respond to collection mechanisms. This interpretive lens allows us to see the client's voice not only as absent in the literature but as systematically silenced in practice calling for a shift from debt recovery logic toward an ethics of accompaniment, where the individual is not stripped of dignity without ceremony or expelled from the system altogether due to debt.

Conclusion

This documentary and interpretative review have made it clear that bank debt collection cannot be understood merely as a technical practice or as a financial recovery operation. It should be seen as a process with emergent categorical dimensions deeply tied to the client’s experiential subjectivity, emotional well-being, decision-making rationality, and the overall quality of the relationship between the client and the financial institution. Grounded in the interpretative phenomenological paradigm, this perspective allows us to see the client not as a passive economic variable but rather as a subject filled with history, emotions, perceptions, and vulnerabilities.

The study reveals significant gaps in the specialized literature regarding the bank client's experience when facing debt collection mechanisms. Quantitative and regulatory approaches dominate, often overlooking the emotional, physical, and social consequences that these practices may generate. Additionally, there is a near-absence of ethical problematization regarding the institutional exercise of pressure and the stigmatizing narratives of guilt, especially in contexts where default is framed as a matter of will rather than structural inequality or external constraints.

Another pertinent conclusion is that adaptive responses to pressure characterize many customers decision-making processes. These must be understood within their context, not judged against hypothetical models of rationality. Decisions to withdraw, submit, or avoid banking institutions are often protective strategies rooted in previous experiences of distrust, hostility, or invisibility.

Moreover, this article concludes from a critical standpoint that there has been a cultural construction of debt as a moralized phenomenon, where default is interpreted as personal failure, triggering mechanisms of shame, judgment, and exclusion. This line of thinking makes it impossible to foster relationships of trust, support, and financial rehabilitation.

Altogether, considering the findings and the conceptual contributions outlined, this study also proposes a visual and theoretical framework for understanding the transformation needed in debt collection paradigms. This triadic framework is represented through a dynamic triangular structure consisting of three interconnected axes, each embodying a pillar of paradigm shift:

Humanizing the Client: This axis calls for a redefinition of the bank client beyond economic abstraction. Rather than being reduced to a contractual entity or account number, the client is acknowledged as a person with lived experiences, socio-emotional dimensions, and contextually situated meanings.

Confronting Harmful Narratives: The second axis highlights the need to dismantle dominant institutional discourses that normalize psychological harm and stigmatize financial default as a moral failure. It underscores the importance of research that exposes the embodied distress caused by coercive collection mechanisms and institutional silence.

Ethical Redesign of Collection Models: this final axis promotes a shift toward collection strategies grounded in dignity, trust, and procedural justice. It frames financial institutions not only as agents of recovery but as actors of ethical coherence and social responsibility.

At the center of these three dimensions lies a spiral, a metaphor for cultural transformation within the financial system. The spiral conveys that progress is not linear; it evolves through feedback, ethical reflection, and systemic realignment. It is through this spiral dynamic that we move from a logic of debt extraction to one of relational repair and co-construction.

Incorporating this triadic model into the discussion contributes to both the theoretical richness and the practical implications of the study. It reaffirms that addressing the client's perception in debt collection practices requires not only a new analytical lens, but also a systemic commitment to transforming how institutions define, engage, and support financially vulnerable individuals.

1. Re-conceptualizing the notion of the “bank client” from a relational and situated perspective as trajectories, contexts, and meanings, not merely as contracts or numbered accounts.
2. Challenging institutional narratives that normalize distress as an inevitable part of non-violent resistance to debt and promoting research that makes visible the visceral and embodied harm caused by predatory collection practices.
3. Formulating a theoretical model of debt collection management based on dignity, trust, and procedural justice, where clients are free to exercise their rights without fear, and institutions are recognized as ethical and socially responsible actors.

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