



**Researching Lived Experience: Human Science  
for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy** by Max van  
Manen, London, ON: Althouse Press, 1990

*Reviewed by*

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At the outset I must acknowledge that I accepted this invitation to review van Manen's book because of the way he has contributed to my "interior renewal" as I have come to know phenomenology. In the words of Kwant (1969), when someone decides to become familiar with a train of thought hitherto unknown to him or her, he or she attends lectures and reads certain books—turns in a new way to the world. Sooner or later one no longer merely uses that language but begins to think differently by having undergone interior renewal. As I have followed van Manen's writings, I have been consistently taken by his use of language which sets the pedagogic tone (1986) that he is so well known for. Much as van Manen describes good teachers by their tone of being attuned to those they teach as they embody their work, so it might be said of van Manen in relation to his teaching that his writing offers. I approach this review as one who continues to learn from his pedagogic presencing, and as I read the book I considered how it spoke to me as one who will use this book to help others experience the pedagogic call of researching lived experience. The headings I have chosen are van Manen's quotes which have had the strongest "lighting of the way" for me in relation to each chapter's focus.

Early in the book I found myself recalling a familiar and recurring tension that van Manen is forthright about in relation to method. As the purpose of his book is to introduce and explicate a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing, he hopes to "show that there is a way to deal with methodological concerns that is decidedly un-methodological in a purely prescriptive or technocratic sense. The fundamental thesis of this approach is that almost anyone who is seriously interested in human science research can benefit from an examination of its methodological dimensions" (p. 3). In my concern about method and learning to ask questions that truly open the way to seeing, I have come to see that such questioning has to be lived and that the meaning of meth-

od has to be seen in our way of being—how we live what we think. Van Manen lives his methodology as we can *see* it in his writing (a second intent of the book being pedagogical—how we live as teachers, parents, educators for those to whom we are responsible). He acknowledges that “while it is true that the method of phenomenology is that there is no method, yet there is a tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of the lives of thinkers and authors, which taken as an example, constitute a source and methodological ground for present human science research practices” (p. 30). He displays his approach to hermeneutic phenomenological research through a dynamic interplay among six research activities, not to be learned as a set of procedures, but rather to initiate inventiveness and insight. Although we have been these elements before (van Manen, 1984), they are amplified here with additional rich illustrations and insights. Before illuminating those activities, each of which comprises a chapter in the book, he provides a background for the human science tradition.

*“Whoever is searching for the human being first must find the lantern” (Human Science)*

This quote by Nietzsche in reference to Diogenes, the Greek philosopher, is used to illustrate the importance of asking the question, What is the nature of human being? and to show that a “human being is not just something you automatically *are*, it is also something you must try to be” (p. 5). The lamp is seen as a commitment to practical reflection on the concreteness and fullness of lived life and not to abstract philosophical discourse. This is the strength of van Manen’s book. He brings the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenological human science into our grasp through a language that openly reveals rather than conceals what this orientation is like as it is lived.

In light of the aim of phenomenological research, to become more fully who we are in the fulfillment of our human nature through the study of lived experiences, the dimensions of human science are revealed in relation to concepts that heretofore have been defined through a quantitative natural science model. A particularly compelling claim is that *human science is rationalistic*, displaying a more richly embodied notion of human rationality. “To be a rationalist is to believe in the possibility of understanding the world by maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relation with the world” (p. 16). Human experience, then, cannot be captured in “deadening abstract concepts and in logical systems that flatten rather than deepen our understanding of human life” (p. 17). Human science is also said to be *rigorous*, but “it is ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ in a moral and

spirited sense. A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself" (p. 18). At the same time, however, van Manen suggests that human science is prepared to be "soft" and "sensitive" as the meaning of life's phenomena are brought to our reflective awareness.

Comparison of hermeneutic phenomenological human science with other disciplines is particularly helpful when trying to help students and colleagues see the differences that mark this orientation, to help see its uniqueness in the formation of criteria that grow out of its own authentic orientation rather than being cast in terms of other views of the world. A reconception of "objectivity" in the human sciences means that "the researcher is *oriented* to the object which stands in front of him or her" (p. 20), wherein the interest is showing and interpreting the phenomenon of interest while remaining faithful to it. "Subjectivity" is defined as being "strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way—while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions" (p. 45).

*"A phenomenological researcher cannot just have a question—He or she must live it" (Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience)*

Since lived experience is the starting point and ending point of phenomenological research, a true phenomenological questioning is not possible until the researcher displays his or her interest in the phenomenon as lived. "The question of knowledge always refers us back to our world, to our lives, to who we are, and to what makes us write, read, and talk as educators: it is what stands iconically behind the words, the speaking and the language" (p. 46). As van Manen frequently does throughout the book, he provides a wonderful illustration of his lived experience of pedagogy on page 37 through an example of "going for a bike ride" with his son, and relates how this "biking consciousness," through the lived experience of it, provides a conversational space which gives unity to the experience. It is not enough, however, merely to recall an experience, he cautions; the phenomenological task is to construct a possible interpretation of it. It becomes possible to truly question something phenomenologically and bring about such an interpretation, then, if the question comes from the heart of our existence or, as van Manen says, if we are animated by the question in the very life

we live with children. That brings about the need for a closer look at the collecting of such experience from others.

*"We gather people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (Investigating Experience As We Live It)*

Although I have resisted the notion of "collecting data" in doing phenomenological research, van Manen again provides a reinterpretation of this intent in human science work that breaks from the association with quantitative overtones. He suggests that it is not entirely wrong to consider methods of phenomenological inquiry such as conversational interviewing as the collecting or gathering of data. "When someone has related a valuable experience to me then I have indeed gained something, even though the 'thing' *gained* is not a quantifiable entity" (p. 54). If we consider, too, the original meaning of *datum* as something *given* or *granted*, we can see the connection of our experience given to us in everyday life. A significant insight, for me, which this chapter makes clear is that lived experience descriptions are "data" or material on which to work. But the lived experience description must be seen as a way to help open up the question of the meaning of pedagogy. The opening up also occurs through the tracing of word sources which have lost some of their original meaning in everyday use, as well as searching idiomatic phrases that often grow out of lived experience in the first place. In obtaining experiential descriptions from others, various sources are possible and suggested (protocol material, conversational interviews, close observations, literature, biographies, diaries and journals, art, and phenomenological literature), but the one that van Manen develops most compellingly is that of anecdote—which he describes as a "narrative with a point." While these sources *do* help us become more experienced, the question is raised by van Manen as to when one should turn to these sources—in the beginning or end of one's study—the concern being that it might be more difficult to suspend one's understanding of the phenomenon if looked at too soon. A major contribution of this "collection of experience" is the "way the work of others turns into a conversational partnership that reveals the limits and possibilities of one's own interpretive achievements" (p. 76).

*"Themes have phenomenological power when they allow us to proceed with phenomenological descriptions" (Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection)*

This chapter addresses how themes are understood as *structures of experience*, not in the realm of conceptual formulations or categorical statements (this is not content analysis), but

rather the “knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 90). This chapter is rich with examples of uncovering themes, and one can clearly see the creative hermeneutic process of interpretation at work in the composing of linguistic transformations. As these efforts at exploration of the life world reveal, four existential themes pervade the life world of persons (spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality), and these are productive categories for the posing of questions, reflecting, and writing.

*“Silence makes human science research and writing both possible and necessary” (Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing)*

The thrust of this chapter is the “showing” of how human science research *is* a form of writing, and how silence (literal, epistemological, and ontological) reveals the limits and power of language. The value of anecdotal narrative is displayed in its ability to compel, to lead to reflection, to involve persons, to transform, and to measure one’s interpretive sense. What speaks most clearly to me here is that research does not merely *involve* writing, but that research *is* the work of writing. Van Manen illustrates so well the tension in writing that abstracts our experience of the world, yet also concretizes our understanding of it—how it distances us from the life world, but at the same time draws us more closely to it. Van Manen says, “To write means to write myself, not in a narcissistic sense but in a deep collective sense ... the untiring effort to author a sensitive grasp of being itself” (p. 132).

*“To be oriented as researchers ... means we do not separate theory from life” (Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation)*

The focus on *orientation* here is a call to be responsive to our pedagogic interest as educators and to bring its meaning and significance out from concealment by theoretical overlays that have been constructed to look at teaching. We must “listen” to pedagogy and “see” it, as van Manen says, rather than “possess” it. “Pedagogy is something that a parent or teacher must continuously redeem, retrieve, regain, recapture in the sense of recalling” (p. 149). I am especially drawn in this chapter to his description of “living norms” which comprise the moral or normative dimensions of a pedagogic relation (responsibility, reliability, and competence) between parent and child or educator and child. It is a reaffirmation for me of the critically oriented interest of hermeneutic phenomenology that places it in the realm of a critical philosophy of action. “Human science is concerned with action in that hermeneutic phenomenological reflection deepens thought and therefore radicalizes thinking

and the acting that flows from it ... [bringing us] to the edge of speaking up, speaking out or decisively acting in social situations that ask for such action" (p. 154). Pedagogic competence is a form of thoughtful praxis.

*"Phenomenological projects and their methods often have a transformative effect on the researcher himself or herself" (Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole)*

I am reminded here of the voices of graduate students with whom I have worked as I have seen the transformation that has occurred with them in their phenomenological projects and have lived through it with them. Almost in chorus I can hear, "There are no shortcuts doing phenomenological research!" Sheila reflects, "Working on this dissertation I gained not only an understanding of my being-as-researcher, but I also began to understand more about my being-in-the-world as one-caring and my potential to be a pedagogue ... I was forced to question my taken-for-granted assumptions and to discover what certain experiences really meant to me" (Stark, 1989, p. 209).

As Max van Manen's work has been influential in helping my work with doctoral students as well as my own, this book will contribute to the interior renewal of those who are oriented phenomenologically already or who have begun to turn in this pedagogic way.

## References

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