

A Review of Katarzyna Peoples' How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide

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Introduction

In his introduction to Catherine Adams' and Michael van Manen's (2017) article about their approach to teaching and doing phenomenology, Max van Manen avers that to do this well "demands a suspension of existing dogmas by orienting to primary sources, scholarly phenomenological traditions, exemplary practices, and leading authors" (p. 780). That is, one should endeavour to turn to the foundational components and language of phenomenology and its diverse philosophical underpinnings. Indeed, to honour those things themselves, one must attend to the essence and the wholeness of phenomenology. Adams and van Manen (2017) contend that "phenomenology calls us to wonder, reflect, and draw nearer to joy, love, loss, contact, care, and all manner of deeply human meanings. It grants inceptual understandings of the nature of being and becoming human in our increasingly commercial, distracted, and conflicted world" (p. 781). For this author and reader, a doctoral candidate very much still at the first figurative steps of understanding all the is-ness of phenomenology, there is sometimes no greater distracted and conflicted world than that which contains the march towards a completed phenomenological dissertation.

Katarzyna Peoples' *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide*, published in 2021 as part of Sage Publications' Qualitative Research Methods Series, acts like a travel guide for those setting out to explore somewhere new, somewhere surely different from where they already have comfort and ease. She is here to be a gentle and welcoming guide into a terrain unknown by her intended audience, offering that this book "is meant to be simple and rudimentary for the first-time phenomenological researcher" (Peoples, 2021, p. 6). Both in tone and content from the outset, Peoples (2021) manages expectations for the slim volume that follows, stating that "this book is written in the simplest how-to fashion for novice researchers; it is in no way intended to be used as a rigid technique with no room for modifications" (p. 5). She continues, adding that "my goal throughout this book is to give dissertation students practical answers on how to design a phenomenological research dissertation from beginning to end" (p. 6). This is a refrain repeated throughout the book, and if a reader were to question the author's purpose, they surely would have missed at least a dozen more disclaimers like this spread throughout the book.

Again, I assume, to temper the expectations of readers who may hope for a robust treatise on everything that phenomenological writing could be, Peoples (2021) addresses what the book is not: “this text is not intended to reduce the richness or complexity of phenomenological research through a series of how-to strategies. It is, however, meant to be the simplest step-by-step guide a novice phenomenological researcher can access” (p. 6). For Peoples, this does include brief background sections on Husserl and Heidegger, and a few sentences to explain some of the philosophers’ foundational language. As a doctoral student constantly flirting with grasping these terms, some days feeling that I have captured their meaning, other days convinced that I move only in a shadow of understanding, it is helpful to have the terms defined simply in the context of this introductory guide.

The book is divided into three parts: Before the Dissertation, Writing the Dissertation, and After Your Dissertation. Part One acts as an expanded table of contents, offering explanations of the chapters that constitute the second and third parts of the book. For example, in *Connecting to the Theoretical Framework*, Peoples (2021) indicates that in that section of Chapter Four, she provides instructions for students on how to relate the findings of their studies back to the theoretical frameworks they have chosen.

In Part Two, the author does indeed start from the beginning, offering advice on effective searches for relevant research literature. She discusses crafting problem statements, purpose statements, and research questions, all within the context of phenomenological research. In the section on proper research questions, Peoples (2021) states the “one unwavering rule” of phenomenological research questions, namely that “the inquiry must always be about experience as lived” (p. 27). She examines the machinations of wording a question so that it aims directly at the focus of experience, while simultaneously recognizing that a researcher must not assume that the experience is indeed present for the participant. She calls for, and gives examples of, the succinctness and flow that should characterize quality research questions. As with all sections in these chapters, there is a text box at the end of the section to summarize the key assertions.

The next chapter of Part Two contains sections on methodology, the role of the researcher, data collection, data analysis, considerations of validity and reliability, and research ethics. Chapter Four addresses Results and Findings, with Peoples then moving in Chapter Five to the Discussion section of a phenomenological dissertation. She states that all discussion is an interpretation of findings and a dialogue with the literature that grounds the study itself.

As Peoples herself has bounded the scope of this book, and as I took her at her word to engage this as an introductory guide, the book is highly effective. There is enough explication of enough key considerations to justify, for a budding phenomenologist, having this book at hand. Peoples designed her guide to follow the sequence of a typical doctoral dissertation, though she is not entirely lock-step in her approach. Indeed, she makes explicit how good phenomenological writing is not always prescriptive or sequential, and the process of writing a phenomenological dissertation should not be undertaken as one might follow a recipe. In some ways, what she offers is not a recipe per se, but her understanding of what the main ingredients are and what the best way to put them together might be.

Part Three, entitled *After Your Dissertation*, contains two chapters. Peoples (2021) contends that:

Three major disciplines exist within the Western tradition of phenomenology: transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and existential phenomenology. Yet human experiences are so diverse, as are researchers, so much that the three main phenomenological methods cannot satisfy the expectations of every research study. There has to be room for other modes of phenomenological inquiries, and many researchers have created their own phenomenological methods for just these reasons. (p. 113)

In the first chapter in this final section, Peoples encapsulates nine of these modes, summarizing the approaches and identifying the originator of each. She touches upon such phenomenological disciplines as Todres' Embodied Life-World Approach, Smith's Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and Max van Manen's Lived Experience Human Science Inquiry. Recognizing that each of these approaches are inherently complex and nuanced in their own right, it is perhaps, for this reader, a bit reductive to even attempt to summarize each of them in half a page. Regardless, these nutshells are consistent with Peoples' own assertion that this book was written for the novice, for those at the nascency of their engagement with phenomenology and phenomenological writing.

The final chapter of *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation* may be innocuous for a beginner phenomenologist, but likely the most contentious for readers who are especially steeped in or committed to any one tradition or discipline. I think of Max van Manen's recent public dialogue with Jonathan Smith about whether IPA is fundamentally phenomenological, or whether it should rather be recognized as something distinct. To Smith (2018), van Manen acts very much like a steward of tradition, unable or unwilling to grant that disciplines may evolve beyond their philosophical underpinnings. To van Manen (2018), Smith's qualitative methodology has its own merits, but may not rightly be considered phenomenology, as "a phenomenological understanding of experience and of the essence of human situations is existential and very different from a psychological understanding of a particular person's life experiences" (p. 1960). (For what it's worth, though I am employing IPA as the methodology of my own doctoral study, I fall very much on the side of van Manen in this discussion.)

In the final chapter, the author appears to channel Bruce Lee, who famously created Jeet Kune Do, his own fighting art, by taking elements from the various martial disciplines he had studied in his life. Lee counselled others to "study all styles; keep what works." Peoples (2021) contends that dissertation students might do the same:

Learn the basics. In future studies, however, students who have become new scholars in the field and blooming phenomenological researchers can start to combine various phenomenological methods to create their own methodology. (p. 127)

She continues that with increased confidence and experience, students may devise their own methods, discarding the elements of a tradition that does not serve their aims or purpose. Again, I suspect that experienced phenomenologists, including doctoral supervisors who oversee students who aspire to write a quality phenomenological dissertation, might find this discussion both philosophically and practically problematic.

Peoples concludes the book with sample recruitment flyers, consent forms, and semi-structured interview guides. She is explicit that these are provided to give a novice phenomenologist a more fulsome sense of the scope of undertaking required to write a phenomenological dissertation. Perhaps also useful for the doctoral student looking to this book for some practical guidance, the author includes an appendix that includes a sample dissertation literature review, replete with references. For those of us in the practice of mining a book or an article's list of references for our own further reading, this is an easy way to quickly find published phenomenological studies. Reading the work of others is, as Peoples herself claims, an excellent way for a novice phenomenologist to cultivate a deep understanding of what constitutes quality phenomenological writing.

To begin writing a doctoral dissertation is a daunting prospect. There is so much to consider. Katarzyna Peoples has accomplished what she repeatedly stated she would do with this book:

Readers should read this book as a set of guidelines and recommendations for getting started rather than a permanent prescription for all future phenomenological research. To that end, it is purposefully written in the most basic way so that readers can grasp practical techniques to use in their first phenomenological research endeavours. (p. 7)

This is an introductory guide that mostly avoids reducing phenomenology to something that is easily grasped. I suspect that anyone reading this review in this journal has enough understanding and experience to attest to the fact that phenomenology is anything but easy to grasp. Peoples also avoids the opposite trap, in which one might bombard a hopeful beginner with so much complexity that they might turn away. The book is engaging, flowing seamlessly from section to section and chapter to chapter. It does not pretend to be anything more than a guide for those who are taking first steps on their journey to completing a phenomenological dissertation. Peoples brings an awareness to the great number of considerations a doctoral student will inevitably have as they write their dissertation, and does so in an accessible manner.

For the experienced phenomenologists and scholars guiding new researchers in their learning and writing, I expect that there is value in *How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation* as well. The book would be a constructive item on a reading list at the outset of their students' doctoral programs. It should spark discussion, giving students a number of entry points with which to engage their mentors on notions they may not have otherwise considered. Peoples' book would serve as an able complement to published scholarship about phenomenological research design and writing (van Manen & van Manen, 2021; Groenewald, 2004; Bliss, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Taken as a whole, a corpus

of literature like this would certainly help a novice phenomenologist conceptualize the many facets of quality phenomenological writing.

While the book may not adhere fully to van Manen's exhortation that began this review, as Peoples does not solely orient to primary sources and leading authors, it does provide a structure in which a novice phenomenologist might move themselves toward producing a well-crafted and carefully considered dissertation. This is a simple step-by-step guide, and it will be helpful for a budding phenomenologist looking to unravel or reveal the complexity of the process of writing a phenomenological doctoral dissertation.

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