

Advanced Phenomenological Inquiry: Theoretical Explorations and
Practical Applications KA*719, Module 2:
Reporting on Max van Manen's *Researching Lived Experience*
E. Christopher Mare – Winter 2011

As the intentionality of my consciousness began to focus its attention on understanding the meaning underlying van Manen's book about "researching lived experience" (i.e. by actually engaging the book as an object of study), one of the first things I noticed was similarity with Helmut Wagner. Apparently, here were two European transplants steeped in the continental human science tradition who were knowledgably propagating in the New World this way of knowing and apprehending. They both wrote with such warm, genuine, empathic understanding of the human condition; there was a sense of the wise *pater* in their message, a trusted grandfatherliness that can only come from a lifetime of experience with the material at hand, as if they had thought through these ideas and concepts so thoroughly that their written word was more like craftsmanship than deliberative argument. Based on the advice-like impression I received from their lifetime-of-experience vantage point, it's almost tempting to counsel upcoming writers to wait until their hair turns grey before attempting to consolidate what might be presumed as knowledge!

Somehow, I am able to relax more into the full life-cycle nature of scholarship after reading their work.

Perhaps what touched me most about Max's wisdom was his heartfelt, deeply caring treatment of "pedagogy." I had always assumed that pedagogy was a method or style of teaching, a sort of technique that one can apply when the situation is appropriate – yet now I understand it to be so much more. For example, Max says:

Few educational theorists have addressed the question of how to apply the measure of pedagogy to the standard of one's own work. To be unresponsive to pedagogy could be termed the half-life state of modern educational theory and research which has forgotten its original vocation: that all theory and research were meant to orient us to pedagogy in our relations with children (p. 135).

According to this interpretation, pedagogy is not a 'thing,' a 'device,' or a 'method' that one can try on and later put in the pocket; no – pedagogy is a way of *being*, a way of being *present* in a learning situation where one feels responsibility for the well-being of the learners – and this can be true in either teaching *or* parenting situations.

We first must consider that the use of the word "pedagogy" as a noun is already somewhat ambiguous. How may we come to an understanding of the ineffable nature

of pedagogy while recognizing that pedagogy is something that animates our living with children? (p. 143)...[P]edagogy is not identical to observable action; rather, it resides in that which makes the action pedagogic on the first place (p. 146).

As a human science researcher writing about the pedagogy of human science, Max insists that this is the purpose of the entire project: all the theorizing and writing, data collecting and analyzing, dialogue and debate, has this one purpose: to be able to act more thoughtfully and tactfully in the presence of a child. “The end of human science research for educators is a critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness” (p. 8).

This is what I mean by the “grandfatherliness” of Max’s understanding; for he’s far beyond motivations like trying to make a name for himself or attempting to influence the direction of a certain tradition. Max reminds us that all this work we do as scholars and as practitioners, as researchers and as writers, as ambitious people wanting to make a difference – it all comes to a point of validation in that moment when we are sitting across from a young person (or student or client) and can act with *tact* in response to their unique situation. This is the essence of pedagogy.

A few other impressions stand out from this book: 1) the continuous reminder that human science research *is* writing, the production of texts; writing is not something that happens after the research is finished, rather they are simultaneous; 2) the continuous reminder that phenomenology is an investigation into the ‘lifeworld,’ the everyday world of ‘lived experience’ – and although we’ve heard this before, Max presents it with an especially humanizing urgency, as a person whom we sense genuinely cares about the outcome; 3) the accented attention that continental European human scientists give to their choice of words – especially when they are translating their ideas into English. There seems to be an extra feel for the nuances a given word or phrase may carry, and for the aptness of a word appearing in a given context based on its etymology. It seems to be rare that native English speakers will give their choices as much attention, instead *assuming* that they will be understood.

All in all, I’m very happy to add Max van Manen’s book to my accumulated bibliography. I can say for sure that he has significantly influenced my sense of being a human science researcher. Somehow, the task seems much broader than before, much more general in its application. Sure, we need to learn specific terminologies, methodologies, epistemologies, and histories so that we can communicate clearly with one another; but yet, when it’s all said and done, what seems to matter most is that we’ve come to understand a little more what it means to be living a human life in this wild, wonderful, sometimes crazy world. If all the reading, writing, and research has not produced a glimmer of empathy, maybe physics should have been chosen as a vocation?