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**'Yes it is phenomenological': a reply to Max Van Manen's critique of
interpretative phenomenological analysis**

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Abstract

In this paper I present a rebuttal of Max Van Manen's (2017) critique of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Unfortunately Van Manen's piece contains a series of misrepresentations of IPA and its history. Here I answer these misrepresentations and present IPA as subscribing, and contributing, to a broad and holistic phenomenology concerned with both pre-reflective and reflective domains of lived experience. I contend that IPA has much to offer to our understanding of the experience of health and illness where participants are spontaneously and actively engaged in making sense of the significant and unexpected things which happen to them.

Keywords

Interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA, phenomenology, illness, experience, reflection

In his editorial for a special issue of *Qualitative Health Research* on phenomenology, Max Van Manen (2017) expresses concern at what he believes are widespread misunderstandings regarding the nature of phenomenological research. He then engages in a critique of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), seemingly as one example of the misconceptions he is concerned with. Here I offer a rebuttal to Van Manen's review of IPA.

In the first part of his paper, Van Manen presents a series of 'misconceptions of phenomenological inquiry and research' (p776). The structure of his paper makes it difficult to assess whether he is then claiming that IPA manifests all these misconceptions or that this list represents a set of misunderstandings, of which IPA is guilty of a subset. Therefore I will refrain from responding to all of these points and concentrate instead on the section of the paper explicitly addressed at IPA.

In this section, Van Manen expresses a concern that he sees IPA as a psychological 'therapy oriented' research methodology rather than a phenomenological approach:

When Smith describes the participants of his research in the mid-nineties as "co-analysts" he remains very much a therapy oriented psychologist who requests that his clients describe and interpret their experiences... Psychologists want their clients to tell and make sense of their experiences and then it is the psychologist's responsibility to make sense of the sense that their clients reveal.... Smith wants to substitute the ordinary role of the psycho-therapist into a phenomenological researcher role... Psycho-therapists may be interested in encouraging their participants to make sense of their traumatic or major life experiences. This is what therapists do. But it is not what phenomenologists do. (p. 777-8)

Unfortunately this is a considerable misrepresentation of the principles and history of IPA. I don't recognise the person being described here! I am, and always have been, an academic psychologist, not a therapist. I am conducting research with participants, not engaging in psycho-therapy with clients. It is indeed the case that psychotherapists of some orientations (but by no means all) may engage in a process of trying to help their clients interpret their presenting problems as part of the therapeutic process to aid healing or enhanced well-being. But that is not what IPA is doing.

IPA has a conception of the person as inherently self-reflective who, when faced with difficulties or unexpected events, quite naturally attempts to make sense of what is happening. This sense making happens automatically. It is part of being human. It doesn't need the researcher or therapist to engender it. I share this model of the person as a self-reflective agent with many writers within the human sciences (e.g. Taylor, 1985; Martin and Sugarman, 2001; Giddens, 1991). Thus the primary role of the researcher is: (i) to invite the participant to share this sense making; (ii) to act as a witness to its articulation; (iii) and then, in turn, to make sense of it. It is this which makes IPA a hermeneutic endeavour and aligns it with Heidegger's conceptualization of hermeneutic phenomenology.

A final comment on Van Manen's passage above: he picks on one phrase "co-analysts", takes it out of context and amplifies it as though it is the key component of the research process. This again is misleading. From the beginning of IPA, the primary locus of analytic work has been the hermeneutic researcher interpreting the verbal material provided by the participant. It is the case that, in one early study, I decided to then engage in a supplementary exercise in participatory reflexive inquiry. For this, participants were presented with extracts from their accounts from a previous point in their life transition and asked to comment now on what they had said then. This then became an

additional component in the overall analysis. However “co-analysis” was never the primary IPA analytic activity and it has not been widely employed in subsequent work using IPA.

Pursuing his theme, Van Manen presents another of his binary categorizations, claiming:

Smith focuses on the person and on the personal experience of a participant and on his or her views and understandings, rather than on the phenomenon itself. (p. 778)

IPA’s particular focus on the reflective domain puts it at odds with Van Manen, for whom ‘phenomenology is the study of the primal, lived, prereflective, prepredicative meaning of an experience’ (p. 776).

I don’t think it is helpful to be overly prescriptive with regard to what is - or is not – phenomenological. Moran (2000), like many others, has pointed to the wide range of positions adopted by different phenomenological theorists. They share a core concern with attempting to let experience appear in its own terms, but there is a complex nexus of convergences and divergences in how they see this working. Researchers drawing on these conceptual sources to inform their empirical work can (and should) discuss the methodological consequences of their choices but they cannot lay claim to a single, definitive form of phenomenology because phenomenological philosophy is diverse.

In our book on interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin; 2009) (which Van Manen briefly refers to) we give extended treatment to a model of a fluid and graded set of positions adopted by participants on the pre-reflective- reflective spectrum. In the book we explicitly link this to Husserl’s interest in these shifting levels of reflectiveness:

While observing, I perceive something; in a like manner I am often “busied” with something in memory; while quasi-observing, I follow in inventive phantasy what goes on in the phantasied world. Or I reflect, I draw conclusions; I take back a judgement, perchance “abstaining” from making any judgements at all. I am pleased or displeased, I am glad or sad, I wish, or I will and I do something; or, again, I “abstain” from being glad, from wishing, willing and doing. In all such acts I am present, I am *actionally* there. Upon reflecting, I apprehend myself as the human being who is there. (1982, p. 190)

Husserl’s model is multi-layered and dynamic and is consistent with my own view of experience.

This becomes particularly apposite when ones research question is concerned with the lived experience of health and illness. One can, for example, look to Sartre’s (1951) conception of what happens as one becomes ill where, Sartre suggests, the person’s position shifts from pre-reflective reception of sensations to reflective awareness of illness. Picking up on Sartre’s thinking, Toombs (1993) describes the shifting levels of reflective awareness which happen as the patient becomes engaged with the bodily sensations occurring. She summarizes:

It is important to recognise that the meaning of illness is constituted by the patient at both the pre-reflective and reflective levels. The fundamental level is that of pre-reflective sensory experience. At this level one’s immediate experience is such that it leads one to become aware of some disruption in the manner in which one “exists” one’s body... Once the immediate experience of disruption is thematised at the reflective level, it may be apprehended as “suffered illness”. Suffered illness is a synthetic totality in that it incorporates the immediate bodily sensations- the various and varied aches and pains- as parts of a larger whole. In particular, the unusual

sensations are interpreted as symptoms which point to or characterize a more complex entity- illness. Furthermore, at this reflective level, the disruption is identified and located as say “in the leg” or “in my leg”. *It is important to note that both pre-reflective sensory experience and suffered illness represent lived experience.* (p. 38)

So yes of course it is important for phenomenology as a whole to include a concern with the pre-reflective but it is also a legitimate part of phenomenological research to examine the reflective. This is an important part of the participants’ lived experience, especially in relation to the context of their interpretations of significant things happening to them. Reflective accounts make an important contribution to a broader and more holistic view of phenomenological research.

Like Toombs, I would contend that, when confronted with a significant health concern, the originally taken for granted body may become a focus for awareness, attention and questioning. This natural shift to the reflective on the part of the participant means therefore that, contrary to Van Manen’s dualistic splitting of a focus on ‘the personal experience of a participant and on his or her views and understandings’ from a focus on ‘the phenomenon itself’, the participant’s reflection becomes part of the phenomenon itself.

Unfortunately, Van Manen makes a number of factual errors in his description of the history of IPA, serving to misrepresent its origins. Van Manen contends I used a number of methodological terms for my early work in the 1990s and that I then decided, in the mid-1990s, to change the name of my approach to interpretative phenomenological analysis because, according to Van Manen, ‘it is obvious that he was searching for a more interesting label for his work’ (p. 777). This is factually incorrect. I used the term interpretative phenomenological analysis for my work from the outset. If Van Manen had taken the trouble to read the early papers he refers to, he would see that, in most of them, the methodology is described as interpretative phenomenological analysis.

As part of his account of the history of IPA, Van Manen also states, ‘in the 1990s, Jonathan Smith published half a dozen papers with the phrase *case study* in the title’ (p. 777). Again this is a misrepresentation. Of the 17 papers I published in the 1990s, 3 have the term *case study* in the title. The case studies were a small part of the corpus produced and do not reflect a particular pre-occupation, as implied by Van Manen’s claim. Further, they are not ‘case studies’ in the clinical sense; they are analyses of single cases.

In the final section of his critique of IPA, Van Manen refers to my (2011) paper evaluating a part of the IPA corpus. In that paper I present a set of criteria for assessing IPA papers and give brief summaries of what I consider good exemplars. In some instances, I give short quoted extracts and outline why they are helping to contribute to excellent work. Of course these are just samples and the reader would need to read the complete study in order to appreciate the force of the analysis. However, his presentation suggests that Van Manen has not done this and, if this is the case, I do not think he is in a position to give a fair assessment of the authors or their work.

Van Manen draws on my review paper to present a couple of quotes from one of the original studies and then claims that:

Feeling alarmed and scared are psychological themes and not eidetic phenomenological themes. Psychological themes as cited by Smith do not get at the primal meanings of the experience of the VAD (Ventricular assist device). (p. 778)

Firstly this seems a strange categorical distinction. I would suggest that fear is a pretty fundamental human response and can be described as phenomenological as well as psychological. And then, without reading and drawing on the study in which those quotes are embedded, it is not really possible to make an informed evaluation of the claims or potency of a paper. And yet Van Manen implies this work is 'superficial and shallow'.

Of course it is important to judge whether work is not just consistent with a particular research approach but that it is also making a contribution that is significant. But I think that judgement should be based on a full and careful assessment of the evidence available. IPA, like any other approach, can be done well and can be done less well. In my opinion the best IPA is careful, insightful, surprising and leaves the reader feeling they have learned something important and powerful.

One of the reasons I felt it necessary to write this response is because of the singular and prescriptive conclusion offered by Van Manen:

IPA research papers that fail to provide genuine phenomenological understandings and insights should not be accepted for publication as phenomenological studies. An IPA study that is inspired by phenomenology but does not aim for phenomenological outcomes should be reviewed and evaluated as a psychological research study. (p. 778)

This is actually a complicated statement. At face value, it may seem reasonable in its apparent differentiation of a certain type of *poor* IPA paper from other *potentially good* IPA papers. However in the light of what has come earlier in the paper, the statement is troubling. The whole thrust of Van Manen's argument is that, according to him, IPA is psychological and not phenomenological and, therefore, by definition cannot offer phenomenological outcomes.

In my response to his paper, I have outlined a series of misrepresentations of IPA that it contains and pointed to what I consider unhelpful binary categorizations and prescriptive definitions of phenomenology. It is in this context that I find Van Manen's above statement most problematic. Van Manen is setting himself up as the singular authority and arbiter. In effect he is telling journal editors that they should not publish IPA studies that claim to be phenomenological or that they should require authors to amend their papers so their claims are presented as psychological. The problem is three-fold:

1. Phenomenology is such a complex and multi-faceted entity. I don't think any one person has the authority to prescribe rules about what does or does not constitute phenomenology and what should or should not be published.
2. Van Manen's misrepresentations of IPA mean that he is not in a position to offer sound judgement on how IPA papers should be evaluated by journal reviewers and editors.
3. It is possible for good work to be both phenomenological *and* psychological. IPA is not the only approach which demonstrates this, but it is a particular strength of good IPA.

It is, therefore, also important to contest the recurrent differentiation Van Manen makes in his piece between phenomenology and psychology as though they are two mutually exclusive constructs vying for the same territory. In reality these constructs are operating at different, but mutually compatible, levels. There are plenty of people who are both psychologists and phenomenologists, just as there are many people from other disciplines who are conducting phenomenological research, for example, in: health sciences, sports science, sociology, management, architecture, humanities, and pedagogy. When doing their work, therefore, these researchers are being, at one and the same time,

both phenomenological and sociological or both phenomenological and architectural or both phenomenological and musical etc.

In concluding, I would like to say that I wish I did not have to write this piece. I had considered Max Van Manen as engaged in the same broad academic endeavour as myself. However I felt it necessary to respond in order to rebuff the misleading claims made by him in his paper. The human science project, and phenomenological research as a central part of that, is of crucial importance. However it is also fragile and precarious. It concerns and saddens me, therefore, when misleading characterizations are presented, prescriptive judgements and categorical differences are invoked, and individuals become embroiled in disputes. I would hope we can move toward a position where we can, at one and the same time, celebrate connectivity and communality and can also respect and work with difference.

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