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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Methods of Qualitative Phenomenological Research

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How the Write a Phenomenological Dissertation **by Katarzyna Peoples, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif. & London, 2020, 176 pp, ISBN 9781544328362, price £22.99**

Introduction to Phenomenology: Focus on Methodology **by Cheryl Tatano Beck, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif. & London, 2020, 204 pp, ISBN 9781544319551, price £34.99**

The recent monographs by Katarzyna Peoples (*How to Write a Phenomenological Dissertation*) and Cheryl Tatano Beck (*Introduction to Phenomenology: Focus on Methodology*) are practical and timely contributions to the enterprise of qualitative (or applied) phenomenology. Peoples' book is designed for USA-based students undertaking qualitative phenomenological dissertations, whereas Beck's book adopts an explicitly international perspective and cross-disciplinary approach. Together, these books will be of interest to students, researchers and academics looking to utilise qualitative phenomenological methods – and for anyone interested in the evolving and philosophically controversial field of applied phenomenology. As qualitative phenomenological methods have received increased recognition from a philosophical audience – with the philosophical works of Dan Zahavi (2019a, b) and Havi Carel (2016) being noteworthy contributions – Peoples' and Beck's monographs may also be useful to philosophy students who are interested in exploring the possibilities (and limitations) of using phenomenology in an applied, empirical form.

Peoples' and Beck's monographs have a shared focus on phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology – but the topic is approached in different ways. In her Chapter 1, Peoples sets out the central objective of her book as 'to give dissertation students practical answers to how to design a phenomenological research dissertation from beginning to end' (Peoples, 2020, p. 6). Peoples' book offers the novice phenomenological researcher a simple and rudimentary step-by-step guide for conducting a dissertation that uses a phenomenological method, but this is not intended to be rigid or overly prescriptive. To this end, what the reader – or, as intended, first-

time phenomenological researcher – can expect from Peoples' book is a focussed and basic outline of *how* to conduct a qualitative phenomenological dissertation from start to finish.

Contrastingly, taking a macro-level approach, Beck's book offers a panoramic overview of several different qualitative phenomenological research methods. The two main schools of phenomenological thought form the primary focus of Beck's book, namely: *Descriptive Phenomenology* (Part 2), which includes chapters on the respective methods of Paul Colaizzi, Amedeo Giorgi, Adrian van Kaam and Clark Moustakas's modification and Karin Dahlberg; and *Interpretative Phenomenology* (Part 3), with chapters covering the methods of Max van Manen, Patricia Benner, Jonathan A. Smith and Karin Dahlberg. By capturing this broad range of qualitative phenomenological methods, Beck's book is likely to be palatable to a wide audience. Read together, Peoples' and Beck's books offer a bi-dimensional account of *how to conduct qualitative phenomenological research* – from the focussed journey of completing a dissertation developed within Peoples' book, to Beck's overview of the diverse range of qualitative phenomenological research methods.

The narrower audience demographic (i.e. dissertation students) is inherent within Peoples' book, with the book's chapters structured and organised like a dissertation, and with the following sections: How to Begin; Introduction and Literature Review; Methodology, with sections on Data Collection and Data Analysis; Results; and Discussion. Peoples' monograph is aligned to the general requirements for dissertations in the USA – writing from the context of Duquesne University, an academic institution that is notable for its expertise in qualitative phenomenological research. Accordingly, the text functions as a useful map for dissertation students within American institutions – but it also raises several points that should be considered by students within UK-based institutions.

In the UK, the home-grown method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is arguably the most commonly (and often exclusively) taught and supervised qualitative phenomenological method within applied health and social science disciplines. Respectively, Peoples' and Beck's books will enable UK-based students to engage with other qualitative phenomenological methods in a simple, introductory way – and acquire a more general sense of what constitutes the very project of qualitative phenomenological research.

Beck's book, on the other hand, is intrinsically wide in scope, with the text illuminating the cross-cultural and multi-disciplinary application of different qualitative phenomenological research methods. Throughout the book, Beck draws upon published examples of high-quality qualitative phenomenological research to not only illustrate how to apply each method per se, but also to exemplify how the methods have been used within different disciplinary contexts (such as nursing, business studies, sociology, social work, psychology, physiotherapy and more) and across the globe, as part of an 'international perspective' (Beck, 2020, p. 3). Therefore, the usefulness of this guidebook extends across the social, behavioural and health sciences.

Both monographs are highly pragmatic in approach. Beck's aim is to 'distil the method [of qualitative phenomenology] into a single guidebook'; and Peoples' aims to articulate a simple step-by-step guide for conducting a qualitative phenomenological project. However, the downside of this approach is that both books

err on the side of being over-simplistic – especially with respect to the philosophical phenomenologies that underpin qualitative phenomenological methods. Rather pessimistically, while Peoples' does encourage students to grapple with the complex concepts within classic philosophical phenomenological works, my concern is that students will be drawn to the book's simple style, and may thereby not engage with the core philosophical texts from which applied qualitative methods have been extrapolated. Peoples rightly emphasises that 'the most important thing to remember in phenomenological research is that philosophy is just as important as techniques' (Peoples, 2020, p. 7). It is crucial that students engage with philosophical phenomenological texts in order to develop an understanding of the core concepts that underpin and inform phenomenology in its applied form.

The fact that, despite her hopes, Peoples' book does not do much to further the reader's understanding of the underpinning philosophy is not a major downfall – given that an exposition of philosophical phenomenology is not the primary aim of her book. However, it is likely that a gap in understanding will remain in the minds of the target audience – that is, the novice phenomenological researcher, who may struggle to see *how* philosophical phenomenology is being translated into an applied qualitative form. Here, an emerging critique of qualitative phenomenology comes to mind: it is unclear how, and the extent to which, philosophical phenomenology is being used within qualitative phenomenological research methods (for example, Gallagher, 2012; van Manen, 2017, 2018; and Zahavi, 2019a, b). For this and other readers with an academic background in Psychology and Philosophy, it would have been beneficial to see Peoples and Beck critically engage with, and respond to, this debate from their own perspectives as applied phenomenological practitioners.

Beck's monograph does provide a brief outline of the 'Philosophy of Phenomenology' (Chapter 2), encompassing a short commentary on the philosophies of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer – although on introducing the book, Beck states that her aim is not to provide a detailed account of philosophical phenomenology, as 'many books have been published on the philosophy of phenomenology but not on its methodology' (Beck, 2020, p. 2). While this is a confusing statement, given that phenomenology is itself a methodology within the discipline of philosophy, it can be confidently assumed that Beck is referring to the methodology of qualitative phenomenology. Overall, regardless of the reader's intellectual background, it is crucial that these books are treated as supplementary (rather than primary) texts if one is to undertake rigorous and good-quality phenomenological research.

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice some striking differences and tensions between these texts in respect of how qualitative phenomenology is conceived. First, the texts posit contrasting definitions of phenomenology. For Beck, 'Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of experiences in everyday life', and 'uses particular experiences to inductively describe the general or universal essence, namely the heart and soul of the phenomenon' (Beck, 2020, pp. 1–2). In this sense, the human subject can be seen as the medium through which the researcher gains an insight into the essential features of a lived *phenomenon*, which (in the Husserlian sense) refers to the appearance or manifestation of an object (thing) to consciousness – and the conditions that make this appearance possible in the first place. This means that first-person accounts are part of the process, rather than the

end-point, of qualitative phenomenological research.

It is not true, however, that all the research methods outlined in Beck's book align with this definition – for example: drawing upon ideography, Smith's IPA prioritises first-person experience *in itself*. The goal of IPA is an in-depth and 'detailed examination of a particular experience for a person' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 93), rather than the uncovering of a general or essential structure to an experience. Considering this, Beck's effort to assemble a guidebook of qualitative phenomenological methods is illuminating, as it inadvertently exposes the ontological differences between each method with respect to the definition of phenomenology that is employed. This further substantiates Earle's (2010, p. 286) early claim that phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology lacks unification and 'holds rather different meanings depending on the context'.

Peoples claims that 'phenomenology is about personal experience' – but warns that phenomenological (research and interview) questions are 'limited to experiences and do not ask about opinions, perceptions, perspectives, or any other thoughts about a topic' (Peoples, 2020, pp. 6, 4). On this view, the aim of phenomenological research is not to capture a participant's thoughts and feelings about something – or what van Manen would describe as purely 'psychological' reflections (van Manen 2018, p. 1967). However, as Beck's panoramic overview reveals, other qualitative phenomenological methods actively seek to uncover the participants' feelings in the fullest detail possible. For instance, within the chapter on Colaizzi's method, an example illustrates that participants are asked: 'Share all your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that you can recall until you have no more to say' (Beck, 2020, p. 24). Similarly, van Kaam's method asks participants: 'Please do not stop until you feel that you have described your feelings as completely as possible'; and Smith's IPA also utilises feeling-based interview questions (Beck, 2020, p. 45; Smith et al., 2009, p. 60). This marks an underlying point of contention within the field of qualitative phenomenology; there is no consensus regarding the definition and aim of qualitative phenomenology.

Secondly, the books adopt conflicting stances towards the practice of combining different qualitative phenomenological methods. From the outset, Beck adopts a critical position towards what is termed 'method slurring', which is depicted as a 'pervasive problem in qualitative research' (Beck, 2020, p. 2). Here, Beck is referring to a practice whereby researchers 'cherry-pick' or blend aspects of more than one method together – which, according to Beck, undermines methodological rigour. As a former student of both Psychology and Philosophy, I am uncomfortable with this dismissal of methodological blending or, more crucially, the phenomenological creativity it represents. From my experience, it is vital that the phenomenon under investigation guides the inquiry and, accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that a degree of methodological innovation and adjustment will be fruitful or, at times, required in order to understand the phenomenon at hand.

Speculatively, it may be that Beck specifically takes issue with the merging of *existing* qualitative methods, in a similar way to Giorgi (1994) and Englander (2012) – rather than new methodological innovations within the field of qualitative phenomenology. It is disappointing that Beck did not make this clarification, as the risk is that the novice researcher will acquire a warped image of qualitative phenomenology as a rigid and inflexible practice that places a cap on phenomenological creativity.

Considering this, I was pleased to see Peoples' book encourage methodological innovation in Chapter 7, 'Creating Your Own Phenomenological Method'. Cautiously but sensibly, Peoples recommends that students who have never attempted or studied phenomenology before should 'start with Husserl or Heidegger before expanding out to other methods or creating their own' (Peoples, 2020, p. 128). In this chapter, Peoples sets out a creative and useful example of what Beck would critically term 'method slurring', in which Giorgi's phenomenological-psychological method is supplemented with elements from van Manen's lived-experience human-science inquiry – to engender a new qualitative phenomenological method.

In line with Peoples, while methodological creativity should be encouraged in applied phenomenology, it is also important to emphasise that the researcher must pay attention to the ontological tensions and/or epistemological challenges that may arise through a merging of phenomenological methods. The danger here is that one may lose sight of their aims and, crucially, that which makes the method *phenomenological*. This question regarding the 'phenomenological credentials' of these qualitative methods, as framed by Zahavi (2019b, p. 1), constitutes a prominent critique in recent times. As primarily expositional texts that describe *how to do* qualitative phenomenology, this critical debate is omitted from Peoples' and Beck's books.

In summary, Beck's and Peoples' monographs function as practical and accessible guidebooks for conducting qualitative phenomenological research. These introductory texts will be useful to a variety of readers (particularly students and early-stage researchers who are new to the practice of qualitative phenomenology) across both applied (social and health science) and philosophical disciplines. Read together, the texts complement each other well by offering a bi-dimensional account of qualitative phenomenological research methods – from the focussed journey of completing a dissertation presented by Peoples, to Beck's macro-level overview of different (descriptive and interpretative) phenomenological qualitative methods. Importantly, the texts also inadvertently expose several contrasting perspectives and key issues that permeate the practice of qualitative phenomenological research today – including the lack of consensus regarding the definition and aims of (applied) phenomenology, and the validity of blending qualitative phenomenological methods together. While Beck and Peoples do not explicitly address these tensions, their monographs remain useful as guidebooks for undertaking qualitative phenomenological research.

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