

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN RESEARCH METHODS

# Phenomenology as Qualitative Research

A critical analysis of meaning  
attribution

John Paley



I think this book is a major milestone in the field of qualitative research... . In his demolition of the claims made by a selection of phenomenologists ... John Paley has pointed out the emperor's lack of clothing and pushed him into the spotlight for all to see.

Roger Watson, *University of Hull, Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Advanced Nursing*

Engaging, incisive, forensic.

Alec Grant, *University of Brighton, UK*

The persuasive force and dogged logic of John Paley's argument demands a response. Whether you agree or disagree with him, this book cannot be ignored. It will be required reading for any nurse contemplating undertaking a phenomenological study. Likewise, anyone commenting on phenomenology who does not engage with the arguments Paley advances has not meaningfully engaged with the subject. The influence of this book will ripple through nursing research and education for many years to come.

Martin Lipscomb, *University of Worcester, UK*

# Phenomenology as Qualitative Research

Phenomenology originated as a novel way of doing philosophy early in the twentieth century. In the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, regarded as its founders, it was a non-empirical kind of philosophical enquiry. Although this tradition has continued in a variety of forms, 'phenomenology' is now also used to denote an empirical form of qualitative research (PQR), especially in health, psychology and education. However, the methods adopted by researchers in these disciplines have never been subject to detailed critical analysis; nor have the methods advocated by methodological writers who are regularly cited in the research literature.

This book examines these methods closely, offering a detailed analysis of worked-through examples in three influential textbooks by Giorgi, van Manen, and Smith, Flowers and Larkin. Paley argues that the methods described in these texts are radically under-specified, and suggests alternatives to PQR as an approach to qualitative research, particularly the use of interview data in the construction of models designed to explain phenomena rather than merely describe or interpret them. This book also analyses, and aims to develop, the implicit theory of 'meaning' found in PQR writings. The author establishes an account of 'meaning' as an inference marker, and explores the methodological implications of this view.

This book evaluates the methods used in phenomenology-as-qualitative-research, and formulates a more fully theorised alternative. It will appeal to researchers and students in the areas of health, nursing, psychology, education, public health, sociology, anthropology, political science, philosophy and logic.

**John Paley** was formerly a senior lecturer at the University of Stirling, and is now a visiting fellow at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He writes on topics related to philosophy and health care, including research methods, evidence, complexity, spirituality, the post-Francis debate about compassion, and nursing ethics.

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# 1

## Introduction

### The undecided

Let's face it, there are plenty of people who will not be persuaded by this book.

I'm referring to those who do phenomenology. Too much is invested in phenomenological research, too many careers depend on it, and too many papers – hundreds, thousands – have been published, for those who regard themselves as phenomenologists to conclude: 'Maybe he's got a point'. Nor should they. No research programme is dismantled just because there is evidence that contradicts the favoured theory, or arguments that subvert the preferred method. Read Kuhn, read Lakatos.<sup>1</sup> If a research programme can soldier on despite an 'ocean of anomalies' or 'inconsistent foundations' (Lakatos 1978), there is no reason why phenomenologists should pack up and go home merely because their methods are questioned by a single book. Phenomenology will not become an endangered species.

I have a different constituency in mind. The members of this group include the undecided, the waverers, the curious, the provisionally attracted, the secretly baffled, the at-a-loss. They are the ones who are unsure what the alternatives to phenomenology are, and who adopt it not because they are committed to its philosophy – or even have much understanding of it – but because they don't know what else to do. They are the ones who like the general idea, but are wary of the Slough of Philosophical Despond they are expected to wade through. They are the ones who have been nudged along the phenomenological path by an enthusiastic colleague or an insistent supervisor, but who have not yet abandoned themselves to its arcane and hyphenated terminology. A large proportion of this group are postgraduate students.

My main aim is to give this constituency reasons for pausing before they go down the phenomenology route, and to argue that there is an alternative. More than that, it is to provide an indication of what this alternative looks like.

I will do a lot of showing. I will invite readers to look closely at examples of phenomenological analysis in both published studies and methodological texts. This will require a certain amount of patience on the reader's part, and a determination not to let the eye skip and skim over the page, the visual skating act that is often a substitute for reading. Just stop for a moment, I will say, and see what analytical moves the author is making. Do not assume that *her* account of what she is doing can be

trusted. Rather: look, then linger, then look again. By slowing the reading down, and taking the author's official description of the analytical process with a pinch of salt, we can see what's really going on.

I'll also ask a lot of questions. The book is stuffed with them. Questions about the passages I invite the reader to examine. Questions about the implications of a particular view. Questions about the apparent inconsistencies in the author's argument. Questions about what has not been said. Questions about how certain terms are used, and what they mean. Questions about why phenomenological writers usually do not explain these terms themselves. My hope is that readers will not merely think about these questions, and have a stab at answering them, but will see that they are of critical importance. Phenomenology is a tradition that discourages certain questions from being asked.<sup>2</sup> One aim of this book is to get those questions into circulation.

So I am trying to persuade the undecided, secretly baffled, at-a-loss constituency; and one of the ways I do that is by inviting them to look closely and ask awkward questions.

## PP and PQR

Roughly speaking, there are two types of thing that are called ‘phenomenology’. I will refer to them as phenomenology-as-philosophy (PP) and phenomenology-as-qualitative-research (PQR).<sup>3</sup> This book is exclusively about PQR.

Most of the researchers who do PQR assume there is a connection between PQR and PP, and that the methods of PQR are derived, somehow or other, from the work of PP authors such as Heidegger and Husserl. This may or may not be true. Personally, I think it isn’t true.<sup>4</sup> But either way, I don’t believe the question is relevant to the examination of PQR I undertake in the book. For this reason, I will not talk much about the philosophical comings and goings (at least, not the Husserlian and Heideggerian comings and goings). In particular, I will not suggest that ‘phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research method’,<sup>5</sup> or that you need to understand PP in order to do PQR.<sup>6</sup>

So ‘PQR’ refers to a certain form of qualitative research, which might, depending on the affiliations of the writer, be described as ‘descriptive phenomenology’, ‘Husserlian phenomenology’, ‘Heideggerian phenomenology’, ‘interpretive phenomenology’, ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’, or some similar label. It usually involves interviewing a small number of people, inviting them to talk about their experience of a particular phenomenon, and analysing the interview transcripts. Often, this analysis culminates in the elucidation of the ‘meaning’ of the phenomenon concerned. At other times it culminates in a series of themes that characterise the phenomenon, and that are illustrated by excerpts from the data.

An obvious question suggests itself at this point. Given this description of PQR, how precisely does it differ from other types of qualitative method? Other qualitative researchers rely on small samples, ask their respondents to talk about experience, refer to meaning, and identify themes. However, there is presumably something distinctive about PQR, something that differentiates it from these alternatives. What is it? I will call this the ‘distinctiveness’ question. I suggest a possible answer to it in [Chapter 2](#).

If not the philosophical comings and goings, then ... what? I am interested in how PQR is actually done. So I’ll be looking at published examples of PQR, and at the methodological texts cited in the literature. There will be occasional PP asides, but they will usually be restricted to the notes.

## Synopsis

There are two main parts of the book. In the first, I review the work of established PQR methodologists: Amedeo Giorgi, Max van Manen, and the trio of Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin.<sup>7</sup> The focus is mainly on the worked-through examples found in their books. In particular, I am interested in the way in which these authors illuminate, unearth, or elucidate ‘the meaning of the phenomenon’ in the texts they analyse. It turns out, first, that none of these writers is particularly clear about how this is done; and, second, that the major assumption that they all make about meaning does not appear to be true, even in their own examples. Call this the critical part of the book.

The second part is more constructive. A sizeable chunk of it consists of an analysis of meaning. It is an odd fact that, despite the importance of meaning in PQR studies (and in qualitative methods generally), the concept is rarely discussed in the literature. Questions like the following are not asked: What kind of thing is a meaning? What kind of thing is the ‘meaning of a phenomenon’? What kind of thing is the ‘meaning of an experience’? How is meaning ‘attached’ to experience? How is a ‘meaning’ identified? What practical value does knowing the ‘meaning’ of something have?

So this book does something PQR authors have not tried to do. It provides an explanation of what meaning *is*.<sup>8</sup>

Having done that, it discusses the methodological implications. This is the positive part of the book. It makes some suggestions about what an alternative approach to interview-based qualitative methods can achieve, and provides an extended example.

I should add, as a matter of reassurance, that I will not be diving into the theoretical differences between the various philosophical heavyweights: Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur, and so on. From the point of view of this book, none of that matters. My aim is to encourage the reader to ask questions about the methods described by PQR authors, and to be wary of any answers that are not absolutely clear. The convolutions of phenomenological philosophy can only be a distraction in pursuit of this goal.

In slightly more detail ...

[Chapter 2](#) begins with the ‘distinctiveness’ question. Given that, at first sight, PQR looks like any other type of qualitative research, what is distinctive about it? Is there something that distinguishes PQR from other qualitative genres? My answer is that, in principle, there is. The distinctive feature is an approach to analysis that I will call *meaning attribution*, in which meaning is assigned both to individual units of data, and subsequently to the phenomenon as a whole. Part of the chapter is devoted to explaining this.

However, the situation is complicated by three inconvenient facts. First, many PQR studies lose sight of this distinctive feature of phenomenology, and become what I call

'hybrids': reverting (at least in part) to more generic methods of data analysis. Second, the process of meaning attribution is, for a number of reasons (including hybridisation), largely invisible. We do not know much about how it is carried out in practice because most PQR studies are, at best, sketchy about the details. Third, the concept of meaning attribution gives rise to a series of tricky questions, which the literature does not really answer (or which it answers inconsistently). The chapter briefly considers some of these questions.

There is, however, one aspect of meaning attribution that PQR methodologists seem to be agreed on. Meaning is attributed on the basis of the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text. All three of the methodological works I will be examining insist that an 'analysis attempts to understand the meaning of the description based solely on what is present in the data' (Giorgi); that 'interpretation must be "based on a reading from within the text itself"' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; from here abbreviated as SFL). In other words, it is illegitimate to make use of 'external' theory.

I call this the *axiom of resident meaning*. Whatever meaning is, it is somehow resident in the data being analysed, or the text being interpreted. It might also be hidden – this is why we need a phenomenologist to find it – but it is nevertheless 'contained' in the data/text.<sup>9</sup> The meaning attributed to a unit of data, or to the phenomenon itself, is not derived from an external source and projected on to the text. Rather, it is distilled from the text itself.

The chapter ends with the question that this discussion poses: *how* exactly is meaning distilled from a text? By what method is it extracted? How is it removed from its hiding place and brought out into the open? Given that PQR researchers hardly ever describe meaning attribution in any detail – although the procedure is obviously pivotal – the answer to this question is by no means obvious.

[Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) attempt to answer the 'How is it done?' question by examining the way in which the authors of two methods texts (Giorgi, van Manen) do the distilling, describing, illuminating, extracting, elucidating, unearthing, or uncovering.

The structure of these chapters is, perhaps, a bit unusual. Both texts include worked-through examples, intended to illustrate how the recommended method is put into practice. So, in each case, I subject the examples to close scrutiny, considering them on a line-by-line basis in order to determine what can be learned from them. The kind of question I ask is: If Giorgi performs a 'meaning transformation', or if van Manen produces a 'thematic formulation' ... how did they get from *this* to *that*? By what process or procedure did they travel from the *text* to its *meaning*? By what criteria can we evaluate this journey? By what criteria can we say that the proposed move from text-to-meaning is justified (or not)? How do we know if the retrieval of meaning has been done well or poorly?

[Chapters 3](#) and [4](#) are long, but I hope readers will resist the temptation to skip or skim. Actually, that doesn't just apply to this book. It also applies to the methodological texts I will be examining. Skim those, and you will not notice the glitches. You won't spot the tensions and possible contradictions. For example: if (on one page) van Manen



says that experience is pre-reflective and pre-verbal, but if (on another page) he says that experience is ‘soaked through with language’, you will not notice the apparent discrepancy. As a result, you won’t wonder if the two claims can be reconciled, and if van Manen makes any attempt to reconcile them. Nor will you ask yourself whether the contradiction (if it is one) has any methodological consequences and, if so, what they are. In which case, you won’t be on the lookout for these potential consequences; and you will not then be able to evaluate their impact.

[Chapter 5](#) is the theoretical centre of the book. The analysis of the methods Giorgi and van Manen use leaves the primary methodological question – ‘How is meaning distilled from a text?’ – unanswered. It is just not clear, even after working through the examples provided by both authors, how they get from *this* to *that* – from the text to the ‘meaning’. This disappointing result is compounded by the fact that neither of them offers any account of what meaning *is*, or how it can be elucidated.

So at this point I present my own account of meaning. I suggest that the words ‘means’ and ‘meaning’ are *inference markers*. Their linguistic function is roughly the equivalent of ‘therefore’.

It turns out that one consequence of this account is that meaning attribution is impossible in the absence of a background theory. Unlike PQR writers, who say that meaning must not be derived from ‘external’ theories, my analysis shows that meaning attribution *presupposes* an ‘external’ theory. In order to test this view, [Chapter 6](#) turns to an example from SFL. The aim is to evaluate their claim that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) should not be based on ‘a reading from without’, but must be ‘based on a reading from within the text itself’. For, if my own account of meaning is correct, a ‘reading from within the text’ is not possible. So [Chapter 6](#) reviews SFL’s example systematically, and shows that their interpretation of the data presupposes a theory that is nowhere to be found in the data itself.

[Chapter 7](#) takes as its premise the idea that ‘external theory’ is endemic, not only to qualitative analysis, but to the specification of the phenomenon as well, because meaning attribution turns out to be the basis for how a phenomenon is defined. The background theory in phenomenon-definition is always causal, and a properly specified phenomenon always refers to a generalisation based on previous research. For this reason, I distinguish between a *topic* and a *phenomenon*, and suggest that many, perhaps most, PQR studies begin not with a phenomenon but with a topic.

Before developing the idea that theory is intrinsic to qualitative analysis, I attempt to clarify the relation between theories, data and models in scientific enquiry. Taking my cue from recent philosophy of science, I propose that one important function of qualitative research is to use ‘some bits of theory and some bits of data’ to construct explanatory models.

Most of [Chapter 7](#) provides an extended practical example of how this might be done. Its starting point is a published PQR paper, and it shows how an alternative study, culminating in a model that explains the phenomenon in question, could have been conducted.

## A few preliminaries

Three questions will probably occur to the reader, either now or at some point later in the book.

### *Why these three textbooks?*

Because they are the most frequently cited by PQR writers. Other writers are cited in the literature, of course, including Colaizzi (1978), Diekelmann *et al.* (1989), Cohen *et al.* (2000), Dahlberg *et al.* (2001), Creswell (2003), and Lindseth and Norberg (2004). However, Colaizzi's method is a modification of Giorgi's, and the other works are not referenced as often as the three authors examined here.

### *On what basis did you select published PQR papers for critical attention?*

In [Chapters 2](#) and [7](#), I pick out a small number of published studies for discussion. It is possible that I'll be accused of cherry-picking – selecting weaker studies that are vulnerable to criticism. In fact, I don't think the studies selected for critical attention are unusually weak. I think they are representative of the PQR literature. But I accept that this is a lose-lose situation. I could single out a different permutation of studies, and the same argument could still be made.

As for the criteria of selection, I think there are three. First, the papers are all relatively recent. Second, they are studies that illustrate the critical analysis particularly well because they don't suffer from clutter and complexity (which makes the analysis relatively straightforward). Third, I've avoided papers that are clogged with philosophical discourse. Of course, almost all PQR studies make *some* reference to PP; but most restrict themselves to familiar tropes, and don't attempt to dig any deeper. The selection is from the trope group. I think this is reasonable. It is not as if the philosophically denser studies are noticeably different, methodologically, from the papers that skip more lightly over phenomenological ideas.

### *Is it worth bothering with the notes?*

Many of the notes to [Chapters 2](#) and [7](#) outline important arguments that would be too much of a detour in the main text. I don't pretend that these notes provide anything more than a sketch. But indicating what the argument would look like is better than

providing the argument in full (which would risk losing the main thread) or providing no argument at all. Besides, I use the notes to provide further references, and to indulge myself stylistically (some of them are a bit more colloquial than the main text).

Obviously, it's up to the reader whether they bother with the notes or not. But if they don't, they will miss some of the interest and fun of the book.

# Notes

- 1 Kuhn (1970); Lakatos (1978).
- 2 It's not just phenomenology, of course. Most traditions do this. In fact, one might almost define a tradition as a way of thinking that suppresses certain questions.
- 3 Crotty (1996) makes a similar distinction, between 'the phenomenology of the phenomenological movement' and what he calls 'new phenomenology' or 'nursing phenomenology'. These correspond to PP and PQR respectively. Crotty does not think that the 'new phenomenology' is limited to nursing, or that it originated with nursing, since nurses took their PQR methods from education (van Manen) and psychology (Giorgi). But he does suggest that 'a certain understanding of phenomenology has come to the fore in nursing', and that it represents 'a substantial adaptation of mainstream phenomenology'.
- 4 If anybody wants to check out my previous attempts to explain why, they could consult Paley (1997, 1998, 2005, 2014). Crotty (1996) has comparable arguments. For example: 'This contrast between the laying aside of everyday meaning [=PP] and the exploration of everyday meaning [=PQR] ... is obvious' (6). Crotty describes PP as critical and objective, while PQR focuses on subjective experience. He has a chapter on 'nursing phenomenology', but is not really interested in PQR as such (though he thinks it has value). He proposes that nurses should develop a style of research that belongs to the PP tradition, and provides an example in his epilogue ('Towards a phenomenology of nursing').
- 5 As scores of authors do, to the extent that the sentence, 'phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research method', has become almost a mantra. More notable examples include: Morse and Field (1996); Cohen *et al.* (2000); Speziale and Carpenter (2007); Barkway and Kenny (2009); Beck (2009).
- 6 Some authors make this sort of claim, and send their students off to read *Being and Time*, or some other PP classic, before letting them do any actual research. It is, I would argue, deeply unrealistic to expect nursing postgraduates to have any idea what Heidegger is on about. In fact, it is impossible to understand him without a thorough grounding in philosophy and its history. Even philosophers find him densely difficult and irritatingly opaque. Husserl is indecisive, and can be almost wilfully obscure. There is hardly anybody in philosophy who can tell you, definitively, how the 'phenomenological reduction' is supposed to be carried out (Sparrow 2014). So what chance do postgraduate nurses have?
- 7 Giorgi (2009), van Manen (1990), Smith *et al.* (2009).
- 8 I'll state the obvious now, and come back to it later. The 'meaning' of a phenomenon is not the same as lexical meaning. If a PQR writer (Lemay *et al.* 2010) sets out to determine the meaning of fatherhood, she is not referring to the dictionary meaning of the word 'fatherhood'. In Chapter 5, I will be asking the question: 'What sort of thing is non-lexical meaning?' What are we talking about when we refer to the meaning of a phenomenon (as opposed to the meaning of a word)?
- 9 Where the data consists of an interview transcript, it is effectively a text. Clearly, not all data is text, but with PQR studies 'data' and 'text' can be used more or less interchangeably.