

Researching Lived Experience

Second Edition



Human Science for an
Action Sensitive Pedagogy

Max van Manen

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Table of Contents

| | |
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| Preface | ix |
| Preface to the 2nd Edition | xi |
| 1 Human Science | 1 |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Why Do Human Science Research? | 4 |
| What Is a Hermeneutic Phenomenological Human Science? | 8 |
| What Does it Mean to Be Rational? | 13 |
| What a Human Science Cannot Do | 21 |
| Description or Interpretation? | 24 |
| Research—Procedures, Techniques, and Methods | 27 |
| Methodical Structure of Human Science Research | 30 |
| 2 Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience | 35 |
| The Nature of Lived Experience | 35 |
| Orienting to the Phenomenon | 39 |
| Formulating the Phenomenological Question | 42 |
| Explicating Assumptions and Pre-understandings | 46 |
| 3 Investigating Experience as We Live It | 53 |
| The Nature of Data (datum: thing given or granted) | 53 |
| Using Personal Experience as a Starting Point | 54 |
| Tracing Etymological Sources | 58 |
| Searching Idiomatic Phrases | 60 |
| Obtaining Experiential Descriptions from Others | 62 |
| Protocol Writing (lived-experience descriptions) | 63 |
| Interviewing (the personal life story) | 66 |
| Observing (the experiential anecdote) | 68 |
| Experiential Descriptions in Literature | 70 |
| Biography as a Resource for Experiential Material | 71 |
| Diaries, Journals, and Logs as Sources of Lived Experiences | 73 |
| Art as a Source of Lived Experience | 74 |
| Consulting Phenomenological Literature | 74 |
| 4 Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection | 77 |
| Conducting Thematic Analysis | 78 |
| Situations | 80 |
| Seeking Meaning | 86 |
| What Is a Theme? | 87 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| The Pedagogy of Theme | 89 |
| Uncovering Thematic Aspects | 90 |
| Isolating Thematic Statements | 92 |
| Composing Linguistic Transformations | 95 |
| Gleaning Thematic Descriptions from Artistic Sources | 96 |
| Interpretation through Conversation | 97 |
| Collaborative Analysis: The Research Seminar/Group | 100 |
| Lifeworld Existentials as Guides to Reflection | 101 |
| Determining Incidental and Essential Themes | 106 |
| 5 Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing | 111 |
| Attending to the Speaking of Language | 111 |
| Silence—the Limits and Power of Language | 112 |
| Anecdote as a Methodological Device | 115 |
| The Value of Anecdotal Narrative | 120 |
| Varying the Examples | 121 |
| Writing Mediates Reflection and Action | 124 |
| To Write is to Measure Our Thoughtfulness | 127 |
| Writing Exercises the Ability to See | 129 |
| To Write is to Show Something | 130 |
| To Write is to Rewrite | 131 |
| 6 Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation | 135 |
| The Relation Between Research/Writing and Pedagogy | 135 |
| On the Ineffability of Pedagogy | 142 |
| “Seeing” Pedagogy | 149 |
| The Pedagogic Practice of Textuality | 150 |
| Human Science as Critically Oriented Action Research | 154 |
| Action Sensitive Knowledge Leads to Pedagogic Competence | 156 |
| 7 Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole | 161 |
| The Research Proposal | 161 |
| Effects and Ethics of Human Science Research | 162 |
| Plan and Context of a Research Project | 163 |
| Working the Text | 167 |
| Glossary | 175 |
| Bibliography | 189 |
| Index | 197 |

Preface

This book is an attempt to introduce and explicate a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to human science research and writing. Influenced by the spirit of the European movements as well as by certain North American developments, the text offers a pedagogically grounded concept of research that takes its starting point in the empirical realm of everyday lived experience. The notion underlying this approach is that interpretive phenomenological research and theorizing cannot be separated from the textual practice of writing. Thus, a semiotics inspired dimension is part of this research approach, while the practical nature of the pedagogic lifeworld demands that this form of educational inquiry does not convert into armchair philosophizing or abstract theorizing.

I came to the human sciences, phenomenology and hermeneutics, in my studies of pedagogy in the Netherlands. During the nineteen-sixties the predominant orientation to teacher education was an approach that was called *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* in Germany and *Fenomenologische Pedagogiek* in the Netherlands. The German tradition of "human science pedagogy" (the Dilthey-Nohl School) employed an interpretive or hermeneutic methodology and the Dutch movement of "phenomenological pedagogy" (the Utrecht School) was more descriptive or phenomenological in orientation. This text reflects aspects and features derived from both traditions. However, a characteristic of the European approach to pedagogy was its almost total unconcern with questions of method. Those who engaged in interpretive phenomenological research in education (such as Langeveld, Beets, and Bollnow) often wrote sensitively reflective studies of the pedagogic lifeworld that parents and teachers share with their children and students. But questions of method or how to partake in such scholarship

were simply not raised. During the late sixties the German hermeneutical pedagogy movement and the Dutch phenomenological tradition declined as a result of certain ideological and social pressures; on the one hand from influences of North American behaviorism, and on the other hand from emerging social critical theories in education in Germany. More recently a resurgence, although in different forms, of the earlier human science impulses is noticeable.

In pursuing this project I have benefitted from discussions with colleagues and friends Ton Beekman, Bas Levering, Antoinette Oberg, Helmut Danner, Robert Burch, Alan Blum and others. And I have been particularly stimulated by the students I have worked with in these past years. Many of them have become good friends and colleagues. I like to mention especially David G. Smith, Vangie Bergum, Carol Olson, Rod Evans, Stefan Baldursson, Kim Krawchenko, Chizuko Maeda, Mikio Fujita, and Stephen Smith who, in their own unique ways, have helped to make the Human Science Pedagogy project such a fascinating endeavour. I thank Geoff Milburn for his confidence and encouragements to publish this text.

The author and publisher wish to express their gratitude to Dr. Phyllis Chesler for granting permission to re-print an extract from *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood* (New York: Crowell, 1979), which appears on pages 72-73 of this book.

Preface to the 1997 Edition

Researchers in professional domains such as education, nursing, medicine, law, psychiatry, counselling and psychology increasingly are becoming aware of the importance of interpretive models that place human situatedness central and are based on the belief that we can best understand human beings from the experiential reality of their lifeworlds. How *do* we experience the lifeworld? On the one hand it is already there; on the other hand we take part in shaping and creating it. In other words, the world is given *to* us and actively constituted *by* us: reflecting on it phenomenologically, we may be presented with possibilities of individual and collective self-understanding and thoughtful praxis.

Although this 1997 edition remains unchanged, this new preface allows me to make a few comments about questions that have been raised by readers of this text. Some questions are related to the difficulty that hermeneutic phenomenological method does not offer a procedural system; rather, its method requires an ability to be reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience. Other questions are prompted by the interests of different research perspectives.

The field of research is susceptible to cycles. When this book was written, ethnography, biography, content analysis, feminist history, gender studies, action research, constructivism and critical theory were dominant in the field of qualitative research; and post-structuralism, psychoanalytic readings of contemporary culture, media studies, cultural studies, deconstructionism, and narrativity were about to become *de rigueur* amongst a broader contingent of qualitative researchers. As we turn the millenium, some of these approaches are now on the wane, and others have been incorporated into existing methodologies.

Many of the sustaining contributions of these developments have their roots in the tradition of human science and attest to the vitality of concerns with reflective interpretation, experience-sensitive understanding, the textuality of meaning, and humanistic impulses. For example, deconstructionism has demonstrated the complexity of

refractive relations between meaning and text; (auto)biography brings home the value of the uniqueness of personal experience and the priority of the self; narrative inquiry has shown the power of story to shape personal and collective history; feminism and cultural studies prove the importance of contextualizing interpretive meaning; and poststructuralism makes us more pointedly aware of the subjective and intersubjective roots of meaning. Thus, seemingly divergent inquiry models serve to make us aware of enduring and shared human science concerns.

Questions prompted by the influences of poststructuralism, gender studies, and so forth are legion. Some show that we need to radicalize more profoundly themes such as the subjectivity of understanding, the complexity of the lifeworld, the importance of otherness, the commitment to truly listen to the voices of the vulnerable, and that we need to guard against polemical moral self-righteousness. Themes that often emerge have to do with the uniqueness of experience, the assumptions of essentialism, the (in)commensurability of cultural and gender studies, and the relation between language and experience. I will touch briefly on each of these issues.

The Theme of Uniqueness. This text offers a method that begins with a turn to the lifeworld, and requires that we approach experience in a manner that is as unbiased as possible: we must dislodge and confront our unexamined assumptions. But what is this experience to which we turn? And how do I know that I experience things in the same way as does someone else? Is each of our experiences not unique, even though we may use the same words to describe those experiences? To be sure, there is no guarantee that our subjectively felt experiences are identical to those of other people. For example, if I experience pain or anxiety, then it seems as if this inner experience is so special and so undeniably mine that no other person could possibly understand and describe exactly what I have undergone. Adjectives fail to capture the way in which I experience this anxiety. Even for myself I can never fully give an account of what I experience in a particular moment or place. What belongs to my inner life seems

quite beyond words. The most carefully crafted poem falls short. No one can quite feel what I feel. No one can quite see what and how I see, no matter how hard he or she may try. This means that in any particular situation we may not understand things as does the person next to us. And yet, within certain cultural limits and contexts we use the same words and the same language to describe our experiences. What, then, does language describe?

One answer is that language is simply inadequate in describing experience.¹ Ultimately words miss the fullness and the uniqueness of our private worlds. Words fall short because language is essentially social. It is only through the collectivity of language that we can access experience, the experience of others as well as our own. And so the essentially unique and private qualities of inner experience will ultimately be beyond our linguistic reach. But while our spoken or written words may never coincide with the actual sensibility of our lived experiences, it may still be possible and worthwhile to try to emulate our prereflective life by means of lifeworld-sensitive texts. In this sense human science can practise the paradox of theorizing the unique.

Another answer is that language creates and describes an intersubjective lifeworld. By learning a language we learn to live in collective realms of meanings. This means that language has implications for our experiential possibilities. A person who is at home in several languages knows that one can say some things in one language that one cannot quite say in another language. Thus, we recognize differentiated possibilities of meaning that adhere to the socio-cultural context to which a given language belongs. Moreover, our lifeworlds are made up of different experiential regions that border each other, partially overlap, and are nested within each other. Wittgenstein tried to show that these different forms of life have their own circumscribed regions of meaning. Through phenomenological language we explore these experiential possibilities and we navigate lifeworlds and their hermeneutic horizons.

A third answer is that language lets us know what is experienceable. Through language we discover our inner experiences, just as

we can say that through experiences we discover the words to which they seem to belong. It is true as well that certain words or certain expressions may hold personal meanings for an individual that no one else can ever fully grasp. In these senses hermeneutic phenomenology employs a heuristic of discovery: we discover possibilities of being and becoming.

A fourth answer is that hermeneutic phenomenology employs modes of discourse that try to merge cognitive and non-cognitive, gnostic and pathic ways of knowing. By these terms we mean that not only do we understand things intellectually or conceptually, we also experience things in corporeal, relational, enactive, and situational modalities. Thus, hermeneutic phenomenological method tries to “explicate” meanings that in some sense are implicit in our actions. We know things through our bodies, through our relations with others, and through interaction with the things of our world.

Phenomenological research/writing succeeds when we can make these meanings recognizable.

The Theme of Essences. Do things have essences? Can we speak of the specific whatness of something? For example, is it correct to speak of the essence of humanness, the essence of language, the essence of thinking, the essence of music, the essence of a flower? the essence of poetry? Is it not simplistic to think that things have essences? This is an important question because “essence” and “essentialism” have become the ugly words of qualitative research, especially amongst poststructuralists. But why? What is wrong with the notion of essence? It would seem that the danger of the concept of essence lies primarily in the moral significance that is attached to it.

When we speak about the essence of poetry, for example, all we mean to say is that in some respects poetry has certain qualities or properties that make it distinguishable from other literary forms such as novels, plays, or essays. In other words, without these qualities or properties poetry would no longer be experienced as poetry. And this

is true for almost anything. And so we can ask what properties belong to flowers such that a flower would no longer be a flower if one were to take these properties away.

On the one hand, someone who argues that there are no essences seems to be taking an extremist position. A poem differs from a short story, a flower differs from a tree, pain differs from comfort, trust differs from distrust. There is little controversy about this way of speaking about essences. This is not to deny that the line between poetry and prose sometimes is difficult to draw; or that a poetic text sometimes is indistinguishable from prose text. The essence of things depends precisely on the play between difference and sameness, and Wittgenstein has shown that these shifts of meaning are reflective of our forms of life and family resemblances of meaning. As Eagleton points out, "For something to display certain essential properties does not necessarily mean that we always know for sure where it ends and another object begins. A field with uncertain boundaries can still be a field."²

On the other hand, phenomenologists know that the notion of essence is highly complex and that the early Husserlian view tended towards simplifying the search for essences in some of his followers. Essence is not a single, fixed property by which we know something; rather, it is meaning constituted by a complex array of aspects, properties and qualities—some of which are incidental and some of which are more critical to the being of things. The term essence derives from the verb to be—by definition a profoundly existential notion. It asks what something "is" for the one who asks the question. Essence asks for what something is, and without which it would no longer be what it is. And it asks this question while being aware of context, (inter)subjectivity, language, and so forth. It is for this reason that human science is such a fascinating project: every interpretation can be called into question; every inquiry we can begin anew; every hermeneutic phenomenological conversation is unending.

Anti-essentialists have provided an important service. By arguing that essences are illusory, they have drawn attention to the danger of confusing culture with nature, and of reification in the humanities

and the social and human sciences. Anti-essentialists have criticized philosophical and cultural outlooks that define, for example, the nature of womanhood, childhood, or ethnicity, and that subsequently draw moral conclusions from these definitions: for instance, the notion that women are inherently weak or emotional and therefore ill-suited for leadership, or that children are by nature sinful and therefore must be rid of their inborn inclination towards evil, or that certain ethnic groups possess innate properties from which cultures or nations must be cleansed. Anti-essentialists have shown that there are essentialist perspectives that reduce social phenomena to immutable categories and social groups to fixed types. Essentialism of this categorical variety shares with positivism the reification of experiential phenomena into external objects. Categorical essentialism is dangerous in that it tends to see things in absolute terms, and from these fixed properties one derives moral convictions.

The Theme of (In)Commensurability. The most frequently raised issue concerning (in)commensurability has to do with the relation between culture studies and phenomenology. Of course, it goes without saying that experience is personal and is influenced by factors such as gender, culture, etc. For example, is the phenomenological attitude compatible with the feminist one? The best answer is probably both yes and no—since there is not one kind of feminism and not a singular phenomenological method. Some feminists have pointed out that certain themes—such as the idea of essence in philosophy, the *epoché* in the early Husserl, the objectifying look of Sartre, or the notion of embodiment in Merleau-Ponty—have been rather insensitive to contextual factors of culture, gender, and language in the constitution of meaning.

But, on balance, one could probably argue that there are many important epistemological and ontological themes that phenomenology and gender studies have in common: (a) there is Husserl's critique of naturalism in the positive sciences which is reminiscent of the critique of the hegemony of scientific truth, objectivity and neutrality; (b) the phenomenological program of reclaiming lived

experience is important for women who want to ask how the experiences of women or young girls may differ from those of men or boys; (c) the phenomenological method of radically questioning one's assumptions is compatible with the reflective unravelling of male prejudice in language and in the institutions and practices of everyday life; (d) the phenomenological emphasis on suspending theoretic biases also may serve to make us aware of the patriarchal roots of many theoretic concepts, linguistic structures, and methods in sciences such as medicine, psychoanalysis, and education; (e) both phenomenology and gender studies entail turning to experience as we live it rather than as we represent it in abstract theory and in binary oppositions like thinking and feeling, cognition and emotion, action and reflection; (f) both attempt to find modes of discourse, voice, and expression that can reveal felt meaning that goes beyond the prevailing paradigm of logic, cognition, prediction, and control. In this sense hermeneutic phenomenology seems to be quite amenable to feminine forms of knowing, inquiring, and writing.

The Theme of Language. The person who begins a hermeneutic phenomenological study soon discovers that this form of inquiry is not a closed system. There are many paradoxes that mark the routes of a human science journey. As one develops a focus on the phenomena of lived experience, it soon appears that these phenomena are highly elusive and problematic. If I focus on an experience that strikes me as particularly interesting but that is not easily captured in language, then I may wonder: what word(s) do I use to describe this experience? Sometimes a story may help: "Has something like this...ever happened to you?" Sometimes a scene from a movie or a few lines from a poem may help to communicate the topic of our inquiry. And yet, experience is always more immediate, more enigmatic, more complex, more ambiguous than any description can do justice to. The human science researcher is a scholar-author who must be able to maintain an almost unreasonable faith in the power

of language to make intelligible and understandable what always seems to lie beyond language.

I am moved by an evocative musical passage. I feel strengthened by an encouraging hand on my shoulder. I recall a frightful childhood experience. I am struck by the loveliness of someone I meet. I wistfully reminisce on a holiday adventure. I exchange a meaningful glance with someone. How do we capture and interpret the possible meanings of such experiences? The things we are trying to describe or interpret are not really things at all—our actual experiences are literally “nothing.” And yet, we seem to create some-thing when we use language in human science inquiry.

What then is the relation between language and experience? It seems that with words we create some-thing (concepts, insights, feelings) out of no-thing (lived experience), yet these words forever will fall short of our aims. Perhaps this is because language tends to intellectualize our awareness—language is a cognitive apparatus. What we try to do in phenomenological research is to evoke understandings through language that in a curious way seem to be non-cognitive. This matter is important because many professions (such as pedagogy, nursing, healing, counselling) seem to require not only trainable skills and specialized bodies of knowledge but also abilities that have to do with discretionary, intuitive, pathic, and tactful capacities. It seems that in these directions lie the relevant and continuing contributions of hermeneutic phenomenology for the epistemology of professional practice.³

Notes

1. See Patricia De Martelaere, *Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1966.
2. See Terry Eagleton, *The illusions of postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. 98.
3. See Max van Manen (forthcoming), *Meaning and Method*.

CHAPTER 1

Human Science

Introduction

It may be useful to state at the outset what the intention of this book is and what interest a reader may have in it. On the one hand, this text describes a human science research approach, showing a semiotic employment of the methods of phenomenology and hermeneutics. And on the other hand, the text engages the reader in pedagogic reflection on how we live with children as parents, teachers, or educators.

So one may read this work primarily as a methodology, as a set of methodological suggestions for engaging in human science research and writing. But in the human sciences, as conceived in this text, one does not pursue research for the sake of research. It is presumed that one comes to the human sciences with a prior interest of, for example, a teacher, a nurse, or a psychologist. This book attempts to be relevant to researchers in nursing, psychology, and other such professions. But the fundamental orientation in here is pedagogic.

The various examples provided throughout this text will often involve an investigation of the meanings of teaching, parenting, and related pedagogic vocations—not assuming, of course, that teaching and parenting are identical phenomena. And so when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way.

One can distinguish a variety of approaches in the field of the human sciences. A research method is only a way of investigating certain kinds of questions. The questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting points, not the method as such.

But of course it is true as well that the way in which one articulates certain questions has something to do with the research method that one tends to identify with. So there exists a certain dialectic between question and method. Why then should one adopt one research approach over another? The choice should reflect more than mere whim, preference, taste, or fashion. Rather, the method one chooses ought to maintain a certain harmony with the deep interest that makes one an educator (a parent or teacher) in the first place.

The human science approach in this text is avowedly phenomenological, hermeneutic, and semiotic or language oriented, not just because that happens to be the particular interest or prejudice of the author but rather because pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children's realities and lifeworlds). Pedagogy requires a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the lifeworld in order to see the pedagogic significance of situations and relations of living with children. And pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact.

Pedagogy is the activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children, that requires constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations. The knowledge forms generated by a human science methodology as described in this text are meant to serve the practical aims of pedagogy. The term "human science" is employed more narrowly in this text than it might be encountered elsewhere. Here, "human science" is often used interchangeably with the terms "phenomenology" or "hermeneutics." This usage is not inconsistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition as found in Germany (from about 1900 to 1965) and in the Netherlands (from about 1945 to 1970). The present text intends to be a modern extension of certain aspects of that tradition of "Human Science Pedagogy."

To the extent that the European traditions are sources for this text, an attempt has been made to do a methodological reading of the work of German and Dutch authors. A distinguishing feature of the German *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* and the Dutch *Fenomenologische Pedagogiek* has been that there was a marked unconcern with methods and epistemology. Students of outstanding scholars such as Nohl, Litt, Flitner, Bollnow, Langeveld, van den Berg, and Buytendijk were meant to learn the process by osmosis or apprenticeship, which the Germans

would sometimes call *Bildung*. Only the most talented succeeded. One said of Dutch scholars who worked in the phenomenological tradition that there was no mediocrity in their research: the work was either very good or very bad. And, of course, only the good studies have survived—which is one criterion of their quality.

In his book *Truth and Method* (1975) the philosopher Gadamer argues that the preoccupation with (objective) method or technique is really antithetical to the spirit of human science scholarship. He shows that the preoccupation of Dilthey or later Husserl to develop an objective human science led them to programs that are alienated from the actual content of the concept of life. The irony in this argument is that the reference to “method” in the title of Gadamer’s book, *Truth and Method*, may have contributed to its immense popularity among scholars in North America. At any rate, in this text I hope to show that there is a way to deal with methodological concerns that is decidedly unmethodological in a purely prescriptive or technocratic sense. The fundamental thesis of this approach is that almost anyone who is seriously interested in human science research can benefit from an examination of its methodological dimensions. There is no guarantee, however, that all students of the human sciences will be able to produce work that is “very good.” One needs to be constantly on guard against the seductive illusions of technique (Barrett, 1978).

In North America, the field of the human sciences (which includes symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology, ethnography, ethnomethodology, critical theory, gender study, semiotics, etc.) consists of approaches to research and theorizing that have certain roots in continental sources while other developments are indigenous to North America. The distinction of “Human” Science versus “Natural” Science is often attributed to Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey developed the contrast between the *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural or physical sciences) and the *Geisteswissenschaften* into a methodological program for the latter. For Dilthey the proper subject matter for the *Geisteswissenschaften* is the human world characterized by *Geist*—mind, thoughts, consciousness, values, feelings, emotions, actions, and purposes, which find their objectifications in languages, beliefs, arts, and institutions. Thus, at the risk of oversimplification one might say that the difference between natural science and human science resides in what it studies: natural science studies “objects of nature,” “things,” “natural events,” and “the way that objects behave.” Human science, in contrast, studies

“persons,” or beings that have “consciousness” and that “act purposefully” in and on the world by creating objects of “meaning” that are “expressions” of how human beings exist in the world.

The preferred method for natural science, since Galileo, has been detached observation, controlled experiment, and mathematical or quantitative measurement. And when the natural science method has been applied to the behavioral social sciences, it has retained procedures of experimentation and quantitative analysis. In contrast, the preferred method for human science involves description, interpretation, and self-reflective or critical analysis. We explain nature, but human life we must understand, said Dilthey (1976). Whereas natural science tends to *taxonomize* natural phenomena (such as in biology) and causally or probabilistically *explain* the behavior of things (such as in physics), human science aims at explicating the meaning of human phenomena (such as in literary or historical studies of texts) and at *understanding* the lived structures of meanings (such as in phenomenological studies of the lifeworld).

The starting point of this text is the belief that human science research in education done by educators ought to be guided by pedagogical standards. The fundamental model of this approach is textual reflection on the lived experiences and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact. Phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, hermeneutics describes how one interprets the “texts” of life, and semiotics is used here to develop a practical writing or linguistic approach to the method of phenomenology and hermeneutics. What is novel to this text is that research and writing are seen to be closely related, and practically inseparable pedagogical activities. The type of reflection required in the act of hermeneutic phenomenological writing on the meanings and significances of phenomena of daily life is fundamental to pedagogic research. Thus, this text has pedagogic ambitions at two levels. It offers a research approach that is fundamental to the process of pedagogy, and it tries to practise what it preaches by orienting itself to questions of pedagogy in the discussion of method.

Why Do Human Science Research?

“Whoever is searching for the human being first must find the lantern,” Nietzsche said once (Buytendijk, 1947, p. 22). In this aphorism-