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## To Engage Research Critically : A Review of Kerry Howell 's The Philosophy of Methodology

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## To Engage Research Critically : A Review of Kerry Howell ' s The Philosophy of Methodology

### Abstract

The turn to philosophical grounding in qualitative research demands a depth of historical and conceptual knowledge that many trained in the social sciences may lack. Kerry Howell ' s *A Philosophy of Methodology* is a concise and useful guide to the key developments in Western epistemology then linking philosophical thought to social theory and paradigm of inquiry. For the novice researcher or graduate student, this book is an excellent desk reference, however there are several omissions, including feminism, which renders it a less - than - complete guide to the role of epistemology in social science inquiry.

### Keywords

Methodological Design, Epistemology, Paradigms of Inquiry

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## To Engage Research Critically: A Review of Kerry Howell's *The Philosophy of Methodology*

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*The turn to philosophical grounding in qualitative research demands a depth of historical and conceptual knowledge that many trained in the social sciences may lack. Kerry Howell's **A Philosophy of Methodology** is a concise and useful guide to the key developments in Western epistemology then linking philosophical thought to social theory and paradigm of inquiry. For the novice researcher or graduate student, this book is an excellent desk reference, however there are several omissions, including feminism, which renders it a less-than-complete guide to the role of epistemology in social science inquiry. Keywords: Methodological Design, Epistemology, Paradigms of Inquiry*

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Kerry Howell's 2013 book, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology*, is a very solid contribution to the literature bridging philosophical inquiry to methodological design and epistemology. Designed as a text for novice researchers, this book explores three particular aspects of methodological design: (a) the philosophical foundations, (b) inquiry paradigm, and (c) theoretical frameworks, exploring the historical and recent developments and evolutions in each area. She links topics from one chapter to another to highlight how one field reflects or contributes to the other and attempts to weave together theory, philosophy and methodology as each is used in different contexts throughout the book. As a researcher engaged in critical and cross-cultural fieldwork in education, I am constantly seeking opportunities to deepen my understanding of my own and others' epistemological groundings. Further, as a social scientist, the discussion of philosophy as it informs methodology and theory expands opportunities for transdisciplinary inquiry and understanding.

For students in the social sciences without a liberal arts or philosophy background, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology* is clear and accessible, working to potentially demystifying what for many students is, at first, a daunting element of pursuing qualitative research. Her selection of topics is both general and essential; it focuses primarily on methods and methodologies related to qualitative research but in her introductory chapters, carefully distinguishes between qualitative and quantitative approaches and epistemologies, acknowledging the limits and role of philosophical in positivist and post-positivist approaches. It is particularly timely given the current resistance in much of the qualitative research literature to demand that social science research replicate methods taken from the natural sciences, (e.g., measures of validity, generalizability, or replicability). This text is a quick reference for those seeking to begin to ground their work more firmly in an epistemological framework. Howell's book is strong in its narrative outline of epistemological and philosophical history, the role and purpose of theory and knowledge in methodological design and inclusion of different heuristics that engage students in activities and reflections designed to promote deeper understanding of selected topics. It does not, however, venture outside of traditional Western epistemological frameworks, ignoring feminist and non-Western epistemologies and frameworks. In fact, feminism is not even noted once in the book. This is either a serious oversight or perplexing exclusion, particularly given the book's attention to critical theory and participatory action research. Overall, as a general, introductory text, Howell's book is a solid introduction to mainstream Western philosophy and its role in social science research.

In the first four chapters of the book Howard (2013) outlines a brief history of Western philosophical inquiry. Here Howell targets key European thinkers and organizes their contributions to philosophy both chronologically, locating each one's place in time, and conceptually, connecting how each thinker built on preceding thought. In the second chapter, "Explaining and understanding theory," she explores the differences between theory, truth, knowledge and reality. Here, Howell positions the social sciences in relation to the liberal arts and draws connections in between each faculty's approach to knowledge. This is a very useful discussion and one that students new to the field of philosophy often find very confusing; exactly what philosophy is and how it is differentiated from theory, and how theory differs from knowledge, are abstract concepts that are generally glossed over in social science texts. In this respect, Howell's book is a bridge between two key fields; if there is a criticism to be made here, it is that the discussion of several of the developments in the history of philosophy may be too detailed for researchers who have little historical or philosophical background. The table in chapter 2, "Paradigms of Inquiry," is an excellent reference that organizes different methodological approaches (i.e., positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivist / participatory), and contrasts their position in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology (Howard, 2013, p. 29). Another very useful inclusion are the "definition" and "reflection" boxes which parse key concepts in a short, clear discussion, outside of the narrative of the text and often suggest discussion or reflection questions to deepen understanding. In other chapters, Howell includes bulleted "check lists" of either the assumptions or implicit assumptions related to different paradigms or concepts. In my experience, these summaries appeal to students and given them a clear organizer when first encountering complex ideas.

In the middle section of the book, Howell addresses several of the foundational paradigms of qualitative inquiry and links philosophy and theory to each. Critical theory, constructivism and participatory approaches, postmodernism and post-structuralism, ethnography, grounded theory and hermeneutics, as well as a particular focus on the contributions of Michel Foucault in a singular chapter, comprise the bulk of this book. These chapters are summary discussions of key qualitative paradigms; however, in Howell's treatment, there is a clear linkage between each approach and its epistemological groundings. She seeks to deepen understanding in each of these chapters through the use of reflection questions and hypothetical examples, challenging students to engage critically with the material and develop their own arguments for the use of one particular theory or concept to define or explain a problem. For example, in a reflection box activity in chapter 5, she engages bullying in the workplace and different interpretations of its root causes to link to a discussion of bullying as a social phenomenon linked to power and reflective of race, social/economic status and gender. This is an example that students would typically relate to, hence facilitating understanding of a more complex concept.

Throughout this text, Howell highlights several philosophers including Kant, Locke, Hobbes, Nietzsche and Derrida, but she selects Michel Foucault as the topic for a whole chapter. This signals the influence his work has had in recent decades on the social sciences. Students new to Foucault often complain his work is difficult or incomprehensible at first; Howell's discussion and outline of his work is accessible and clear. She locates Foucault's work within a broader tradition of European post-structuralist thought and also calls attention to Foucault's role as a public intellectual. Her narration of his positions and key concepts is presented as a linear narrative; this will definitely appeal to students, however, she does not identify challenges or point out limits to his thought and this is a glaring omission. There is as much enthusiasm for Foucault's social analysis in the field of social inquiry, as there is skepticism.

Finally, Howell (2013) concludes *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology* with a chapter that seeks to summarize the different philosophical positions presented and a glossary that is a great heuristic. Overall, this text will give philosophically oriented instructors and students a reference from which to begin an education in the incorporation of philosophical epistemologies into the construction of qualitative methodologies and data analysis frameworks. Let's hope in a future volume, the breadth of philosophical approaches is widened to include feminism and non-Western contributions, at least in some footnotes.

### **Reference**

Howell, K. (2013). *An introduction to the philosophy of methodology*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

### **Author Note**

Allyson Larkin is a PhD Candidate in Social Justice and Equity Studies in Education at the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include qualitative and feminist methodologies, critical ethnography, policy analysis and higher education internationalisation.

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