

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Pernecky, Tomas. *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, 2016, pp. 236, \$49 paper, ISBN 9781446282397

Even the most descriptive forms of qualitative research are shaped by ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions. In this new book, Tomas Pernecky argues that qualitative researchers must always reflect on the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of their work. They need to understand how theory informs their research. *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* promises to instruct qualitative researchers on how to approach these issues and make sense of them. I had high hopes that this book would provide instruction on how ontological, epistemological and theoretical assumptions matter in the realm of qualitative inquiry, and that perhaps it would be good to use in an upper-year undergraduate or a graduate-level qualitative methods course.

Pernecky begins by suggesting that most literature on qualitative research does not adequately address issues of ontology (the study of and/or a position on what exists and levels of reality) or epistemology (the study of and/or a position on how we know what we know or what can be known). For example, Pernecky critiques Crotty's (1998) elements of research design as well as Lincoln, Lynham and Guba's (2011) work on paradigms of qualitative inquiry, suggesting these schemes are insufficient. Pernecky contends that these approaches fail "to thoroughly capture the unavoidable complexity of philosophical thought and the spectrum of possibilities in research design" (15). The author assures that an inquiry into key metaphysical and epistemological debates will act as a corrective.

Chapter 2 reviews debates in rationalism and empiricism. Pernecky suggests the major difference between these two broad positions is that the proponents of rationalism are most often associated with *a priori* knowledge (knowledge grounded in thought, not experience), whereas empiricists (and positivists) develop inductive or deductive means of testing knowledge claims. Chapter 3 addresses idealism and skepticism. Idealism and especially Kantian philosophy represents an attempt to bridge rationalism and empiricism (77). For Pernecky, skepticism is a

key approach because it doubts all knowledge claims, even those produced using empiricist, positivist methods.

In Chapter 4, Pernecky delves into phenomenology and hermeneutics. Pernecky suggests that phenomenology extends Kant's fundamental question of how knowledge of the world is formed in the mind. Here, Pernecky reviews the works of Husserl. Hermeneutics offers a more historical and cultural understanding of how knowledge is formed. To expand on this, Pernecky reviews Heidegger's writings. As Pernecky puts it, "hermeneutics is not just a philosophical guiding principle or methodological endeavor, it extends to critical analysis of the 'hidden' and the 'taken for granted'" (108).

Chapter 5 assesses debates in realism. Pernecky reviews some forms of realism and their relationship to empiricism, with somebody like Paul Feyerabend representing the far anti-realism end of the spectrum. One paragraph is dedicated to critical realism (131). In Chapter 6, Pernecky addresses the issue of social ontology. Pernecky argues qualitative research requires a social ontology, a position that seeks to know and examine what is real about the social world. Engaging with literature on constructionism, the author contends that a social ontology would act as "a philosophy *for* social science" (161). Pernecky argues constructionism is often maligned as anti-realist or pure subjectivism, but this is not the case (159). Chapter 7 reflects on developments in quantum theory and their relevance for qualitative research. Quantum theory in its many forms explores how there are not simply multiple dimensions to reality, but how multiple realities can become entangled.

In the conclusion, Pernecky reviews the different approaches to truth outlined in the book, pleading for qualitative researchers to be aware of these metaphysical and epistemological debates. He suggests qualitative researchers should adopt a conceptual persona, but that the persona adopted by Norman Denzin as 'at war' with quantitative research and positivism has piloted Denzin and his followers into a nosedive of corporate closed-mindedness (195). Pernecky suggests researchers should instead strive toward philosophical and methodological freedom, which includes freedom from being forced to adopt one metaphysical and epistemological position or another out of convenience or tradition (or pressure from a supervisor or senior colleague).

The problem with *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* is that the connection to qualitative research is never made. I waited until the close of each chapter. I waited until the book's end. The explanation of how to make these ideas relevant in qualitative research and how to access the full "spectrum of possibilities in research design" (15) does not appear. The title is misleading. I went back to the preface,

where Pernecky noted “this is not a methodological text: its focus rests with metaphysical and epistemological questions” (vii). What this means is that sociologists and other qualitative researchers will need to look elsewhere for instruction on how ontological, epistemological and theoretical claims and assumptions matter in the day-to-day life of a qualitative researcher. That said, *Epistemology and Metaphysics for Qualitative Research* does provide a solid exegesis of foundational statements in and secondary texts on philosophy and the sociology of knowledge. This book would be a useful source for a third or fourth year sociology of knowledge course, or for theoretically-oriented interdisciplinary courses and programs.

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REFERENCES

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- Lincoln Y., S. Lynham, and E. Guba. 2011. ‘Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited’. In Denzin, N., and Y. Lincoln (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 97-128. Los Angeles: SAGE.

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