

SECOND EDITION

Edited by **Stuart C. Aitken** and **Gill Valentine**

Approaches to Human Geography

Philosophies, Theories, People and Practices



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Approaches to Human Geography



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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1 Ways of Knowing and Ways of Doing Geographic Research Stuart C. Aitken and Gill Valentine	1
PART 1 PHILOSOPHIES	15
Introduction to Section	
2 Positivist Geography Rob Kitchin	23
3 Lived Emplacement and the Locality of Being: A Return to Humanistic Geography? David Seamon	35
4 Feminist Geographies of Difference, Relation, and Construction Deborah P. Dixon and John Paul Jones III	49
5 Marx and the Spirit of Marx George Henderson and Eric Sheppard	64
6 Structuration Theory: Agency, Structure and Everyday Life Isabel Dyck and Robin Kearns	79
7 Human Animal David Lulka	91
8 Realism as a Basis for Knowing the World Andrew Sayer	106
9 Postmodern Geographies and the Ruins of Modernity David B. Clarke	117

10	Poststructuralist Theories Paul Harrison	132
10a	Postscript to Poststructuralist Theories in Geography Stuart C. Aitken	146
11	Actor-Network Theory, Networks, and Relational Geographies Fernando J. Bosco	150
12	Postcolonialism: Powers of Representation Clive Barnett	163
13	Geohumanities: Engaging Space and Place in the Humanities Trevor M. Harris	181
14	Mind the Gap: Reconsidering Geography's Twentieth Century Technological Settlements Francis Harvey	193
PART 2	PEOPLE	215
	Introduction to Section	
15	Institutions and Cultures Gerard Rushton	217
16	Places, People and Contexts David Ley	224
17	Memories and Desires David Harvey	231
18	Understanding the Heart of Place... Robin Kearns	239
19	Personal and Political Vera Chouinard	247
20	How I Became a Geographer Michael Goodchild	255
21	Movement and Encounter Lawrence Knopp	264
22	Spaces and Flows Janice Monk	272
23	Setting Out Nigel Thrift	279

PART 3 PRACTICES	285
Introduction to Section	
24 Mapping and Geovisualization Martin Dodge	289
25 Quantification, Evidence and Positivism A. Stewart Fotheringham	306
26 Geographic Information Systems Michael Goodchild	320
27 Humanism and People-Centered Methods Paul Rodaway	334
28 To Build Another World: Activism in the Light of Marxist Geographical Thought Michael Samers, Patrick Bigger and Oliver Belcher	344
29 Producing Feminist Geographies: Theory, Methodologies and Research Strategies Kim England	361
30 Poststructuralist Approaches: Deconstruction and Discourse Analysis John Wylie	373
31 Pricing Dignity: Psychoanalytical Frameworks and the Burden of Proof Maureen Sioh	385
32 Research is Theft: Environmental Inquiry in a Postcolonial World Paul Robbins	400
33 Contested Geographies: Culture Wars, Personal Clashes and Joining Debate Gill Valentine and Stuart C. Aitken	417
<i>Glossary</i>	430
<i>Index</i>	436

1 Ways of Knowing and Ways of Doing Geographic Research

Stuart C. Aitken and Gill Valentine

This book is intended as an accessible introduction to the diverse ways of knowing in contemporary geography with the purpose of demonstrating important and strategic links between philosophies, theories, methodologies and practices. As such it builds on the other books in this series: *Key Concepts* (Holloway, Rice and Valentine, 2003); *Key Methods* (Clifford and Valentine, 2003); *Key Thinkers* (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine, 2004); and *Key Texts* (Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine, 2008). The original edition of this book was published in 2006, and this new edition features updates and five new chapters. Our intention is to guide beginning students in the sometimes complex and convoluted links between ways of knowing and ways of doing geographical research. The book is a philosophical reader designed to be a practical and usable aid to establishing a basis for research projects, theses and dissertations. It is an attempt to lift the seemingly impenetrable veil that sometimes shrouds philosophical and theoretical issues, and to show how these issues are linked directly to methodologies and practices. The book highlights some intensely serviceable aspects of a diverse array of philosophical and theoretical underpinnings – what we are calling ways of knowing. It makes a case for embracing certain ways of knowing in terms of how they inform methods and practices. We believe that ways of knowing drive not only individual research projects but also the creative potential of geography as a discipline. Philosophies and theories, as ways of knowing, are not simply academic pursuits with little bearing on how we work and how we live our lives.

The book avoids jargon-laden, impenetrable language and concepts while not sacrificing the rigour and complexity of the ideas that underlie geographic knowledge and the ways that it is conflicted and contested. It is written for students who have not encountered philosophical or theoretical approaches before and, with this in mind, we see the book as a beginning guide to geographic research and practice. We believe that grounding research in philosophy and theory is essential for human geography research because it provides a hook for empirical work, it contextualizes literature reviews, it elaborates a corpus of knowledge around which the discipline grows, it energizes ideas, and it may legitimate social and political activism. In addition, and importantly, an understanding of philosophy and practice directs the discipline of geography conceptually and practically towards progressive social change by elaborating clearer understandings of the complexity of our spatial world.

The book is split into three parts: philosophies, people and practices. In the first part, leading academics make special and partial 'cases for' particular philosophies, and illustrate their argument with short examples. Although it is far from comprehensive, the first part covers a large swathe of philosophical perspectives and highlights some of the tensions between various ways of knowing. It is not intended to offer the student an all-inclusive guide to philosophies in geography (this is better achieved by more specialist texts such as Johnston, 1991; Cloke et al., 1991; Unwin, 1992; Hubbard et al., 2002; Castree et al., 2005; Henderson and Waterstone, 2009; Creswell 2013) but rather it offers practical insight into how philosophies inform work and how research questions are always based on assumptions and choices between different ways of knowing. The chapters do not resolve philosophical debates; instead they lead students to consider what choices and assumptions must be made when beginning a research project, and when choosing methodologies. The second part of the book places geographic thought amidst the complexity and struggle of people contextualized in places. Within contemporary human geography there is an emphasis on situated or contextual knowledges – which has its roots in the feminist belief that 'the personal is political' and critical feminist science's challenge to traditional conceptions of scientific practice as objective and disembodied (Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997). Thus personal writing is seen by many as an important strategy to challenge the disembodied and dispassionate nature of previous academic writing (e.g. Moss, 2001). In the second part, several prominent geographers write about the people, places and events that shaped their personal ways of knowing. Finally, philosophy is often taught separately from methodology, which means that students sometimes fail to recognize the connections between theories and practices. The final part outlines some of these relationships and illustrates them with examples from a range of geographical studies.

Students beginning a research project in geography encounter a mind-boggling array of methodologies and practices. These methodologies and practices are linked in complex ways to theories and philosophies. Geographical research comprising a cloudy web of methodologies, theories, philosophies and practices ultimately elaborates geographical knowledge. We have tried to represent this complexity in Figure 1.1, and yet this diagram structures and represents our concerns too simply.

Ways of doing are not attached to static ways of knowing but rather are changing as one set of ideas is challenged and informed by others. How we come to approach the world through theories and philosophies – our ways of knowing – is constantly refined, challenged, rejected and/or transformed. Customarily, theoretical traditions (positivism, humanism, Marxism, feminism, etc.) have been understood to emerge and dominate geographical thinking at particular times for a particular period. In other words, they have become what Kuhn (1962) termed 'dominant paradigms'. As such, some writers have mapped out the development and adoption of different philosophic approaches within the discipline of geography (e.g. Johnston, 1991; Unwin, 1992), highlighting paradigm shifts – when new philosophical approaches emerge to challenge previous ways of thinking. Johnston (1996) suggests that paradigm shifts are a result of generational transitions. New ways of thinking are taken up at first by younger academics; as this generation becomes established, and takes on editing journals and writing textbooks, so their ways of thinking come to the fore. A paradigmatic approach to geography began in the 1950s when positivistic spatial science emerged to challenge and supersede the regional tradition in geography. In turn the positivist paradigm is understood to have been overturned in the 1970s by other approaches,



Figure 1.1 Ways of knowing and ways of doing

such as humanistic geography, and radical approaches including Marxism and feminism. In the 1990s a paradigmatic perspective would understand poststructuralism as displacing these ways of thinking.

Yet, while sometimes a whole set of ideas is thrown out in light of perceived shortcomings, usually part of the thinking continues in one form or another (see Figure 1.2). The institutional framework of geography – professional organizations, journals and departmental cultures – may privilege or reinforce particular fashionable ways of thinking, but there are always dissenting voices. In reality, most ways of knowing are partial and are in flux; they continue to change as geographers examine and re-examine their strengths and weaknesses and as new ideas come along as a challenge. The discipline always includes a range of generations, and scholars who don't act their age! The linear narrative of the development of unified paradigms thus falsely creates a sense of sequential progress when consensus is rarely complete or stable. Although the chapters in this book are loosely ordered in relation to the genealogy of their emergence in the discipline, it is not our intention to suggest that one displaced another. Rather, our intention is to show how each approach to geography (positivistic geography, humanistic geography, Marxism, feminism and so on) contains within it multiple trajectories of thought and how each has continued to evolve whatever its paradigmatic status. Part of the

excitement of doing geographical research is the continual struggle to make sense of these changing perspectives and their connections.

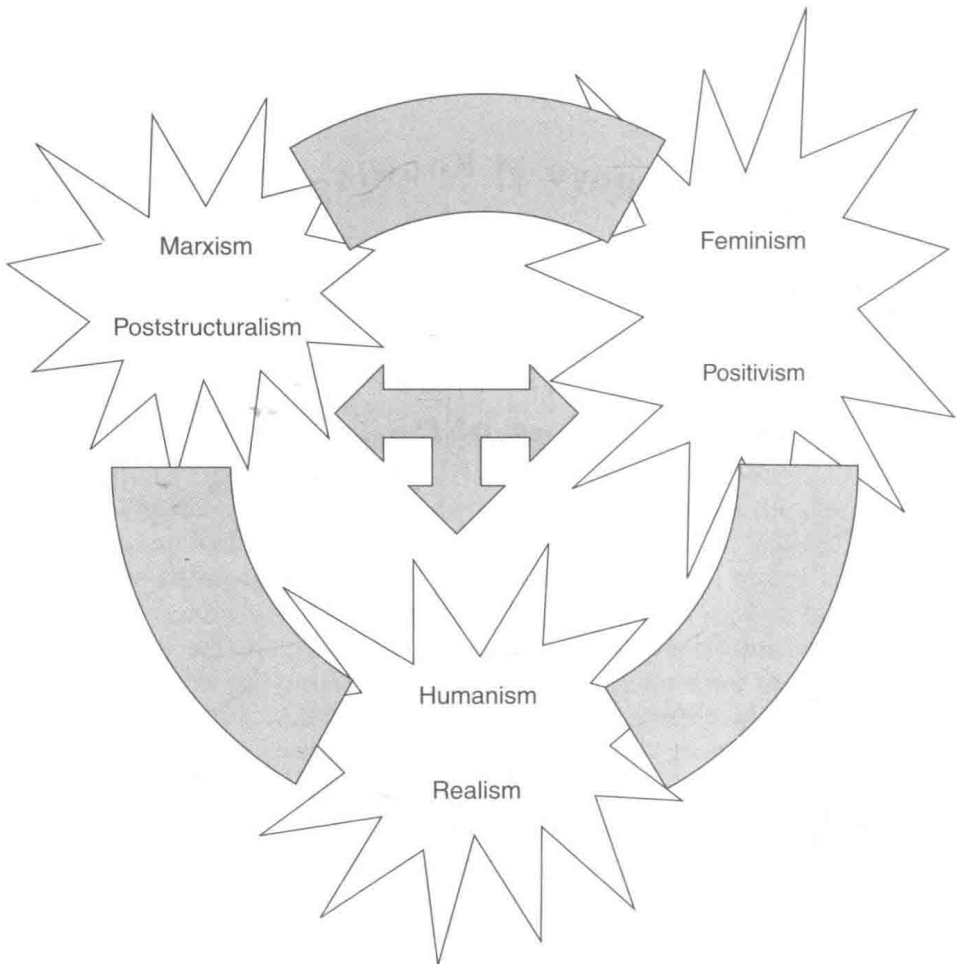


Figure 1.2 Ways of knowing clash, connect and change

When writing a research proposal, choices must be made about appropriate ways of knowing and doing. Students must be aware of the assumptions of particular ways of knowing, how they help raise appropriate questions and their adequacy for addressing those questions. Ultimately, all researchers must be able to justify the answers they give to their research questions, and that justification cannot avoid philosophical and theoretical ways of knowing. In this sense, philosophy is a form of communicating not only what we know but also how we know it. Understanding philosophical processes as forms of communication suggests an important pedagogical metaphor. Elspeth Graham argues that ‘philosophy is to research as grammar is to language ... just as we cannot speak a language without certain grammatical rules, so we cannot conduct a successful piece of research without making certain philosophical choices’ (1997: 8). Philosophy helps contextualize and justify the answers to our research questions in ways that communicate what we know. We can

still speak and write without awareness of grammar, but it is always there. Grammar is a useful metaphor for understanding the role of philosophy in research projects because it suggests that the more we know about philosophical underpinnings, the better we appreciate how influential they are to our work. If doing research is like the grammatical foundations of a language then, Graham (1997) notes, pushing the metaphor further, the beginning researcher must learn the appropriate vocabulary and terms. This involves reading and learning the vocabulary and the grammar and syntax of the speech community you wish to join. Just as Mexican Spanish and the practice of Mexican culture are intimately tied together, and are quite different from Scottish English and the practice of Scottish culture, then so too are philosophies differentiated. Marxist geographers use terms like production, social reproduction, class, superstructure and dialectics; positivist geographers use terms like paradigms, hypotheses, laws and verifiability; feminists and queer theorists use terms like patriarchy, bodies, sexualities and performativity; humanistic and experiential geographers use terms like essences, taken-for-grantedness and nihilism (these terms and others are defined and explained in Johnston et al., 2000 and McDowell and Sharp, 1999). Built around these language differences are systems of meaning, and so the beginning researcher must master more than just the terms: she must also engage associated cultures and practices. A positivist researcher engaging in the practice of falsification, for example, might follow the rules of hypothesis testing; a feminist researcher engaging in the practice of positionality might want to understand fully her own personal politics and situatedness. And just as aspects of Scottish and Mexican cultures and practices collide and meld, so too do aspects of humanism, Marxism, feminism, queer theory and positivism. The connections and conflicts are at once daunting and exhilarating. Exhilarating because this is the stuff of creative debates and purposeful practices; daunting because students reading this book are being asked to gain a working knowledge of many languages at once.

Ways of knowing are, of course, quite different from grammar in that they are at once more fundamental, and they are often more convoluted. Philosophy as a way of knowing elaborates the structures and essences of our existence. This is known as ontology. Ontology comprises theories, or sets of theories, which seek to answer questions about what the world must be like for knowledge to be possible. Philosophy also investigates the origin, methods and limits of our knowledge about existence. That is, it establishes what is accepted as valid knowledge. This is known as epistemology.

In the tradition of Greek Enlightenment, logic and reason are touted as the basis for all epistemologies. From this western perspective, it is assumed that minds are essentially rational and have similar experiences of the world (Peet, 1998: 5). It is also assumed that ideas can be abstracted from the material world, and it is the purpose of philosophy to organize these ideas into coherent patterns and then evaluate the knowledge derived from those ways of knowing. Once thought of, these patterns are spoken of and written about so that they may be understood as axioms around which aspects of existence revolve, or they may be criticized and rejected. In its strictest form, the assumption that all minds work in the same way suggests that there can be one unitary and all-encompassing philosophy. An alternative set of philosophical traditions holds that how we think is a social construction rather than being derived from some innate, universal logic. From this social constructivist perspective the distinctions between different philosophies are derived from different political and cultural milieu and then imposed upon the minds of those who are part of that context. This position accepts

that ontology is grounded in epistemology and that all epistemologies are embedded in social practice.

Most of the authors in this book do not view philosophy as a basis of knowledge that is completely abstracted from people and the places they work. Rather, they assume it to be the driving force that connects us with others, and that contextualizes who we are, what we know and what we do. Nor do most of the authors believe that philosophy and theory need to employ only logic and reasoning to organize knowledge into formal systems of understanding. Some believe that knowledge comes also from less reasoned and less representable ways of knowing derived from emotions such as anger, passion, love, joy and fear. Ways of knowing are at least in part derived from these and other emotions that are sometimes difficult to write about and represent in a logical form. Philosophy as outlined in the chapters in this book is seen as a social, political and cultural construction that contains elements of rationality and irrationality. And so, some of the authors argue that the rationality so valued by Greek Enlightenment thinkers is influenced by irrational beliefs and meanings derived from our bodies and our emotions, as well as cultural meanings and the places where we work and live.

Theories as Ways of Knowing and Being

Theory can be less heady than philosophy but it is equally important as a way of knowing. If philosophy encompasses larger ways of knowing that connect us to the beliefs, values and meanings of others (sometimes known as metaphysics) and systematize what we know, then theory extends this to the experiences of everyday life. As Richard Peet (1998: 5) points out, theory 'has a more direct contact with the occurrences, events, and practices of lived reality' than philosophy. He argues that theory is derived inductively (working from the specific to the general) and primarily from empirical sources (those derived directly from experience). He goes on to suggest that theory looks 'for commonalities or similarities, but also (perhaps) systems of difference or, maybe, just difference'. Theories are also deductive (working from the general to the specific) because they often speculate from one aspect of difference and uniqueness to others.

Whereas philosophy engages larger systems and webs of meaning, theory engages a more specific sphere of understanding and being in the world. In the field of the empirical sciences, hypotheses are constructed as systems of theories that are tested against experience by observation and experiment. In the humanities and social sciences, social or critical theories deal directly with understanding social, political and cultural perspectives and characteristics as they relate to transformations within societies and the day-to-day lives of people.

Practices as Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

Practices are ways of knowing in action. Academics are engaged in the production of knowledge and its dissemination. Philosophies help articulate the ontological and epistemological bases of that production. Theories help elaborate the production of knowledge from experience and experimentation, and they sometimes challenge conventional