Book Review

Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg, *Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research*, SAGE Publications, 2013, Pages: viii + 141, Price: USD 51 (LKR 7,500 Approx.), ISBN: 978-1-44625-593-3 (pbk)

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Introduction

Constructing Research Questions, authored by Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg, is a simple, fairly short (141 pages), yet comprehensive book motivated by the lack of novel ideas that provide significant insight into social reality. It is intended for social researchers of postgraduate level and beyond who are grappling with the task of formulating interesting research problems that make significant contributions to knowledge.

While lack of novel ideas and the difficulty of making significant advancements in knowledge can be attributed to the fact that much has already been researched in many social science disciplines, it can also be attributed to the lack of imagination of researchers. Though many can view this book as a 'guide book' for beginners or even mature researchers on crafting a research problem, I wish to see it as a critical (but essentially partial) analysis of the issue of lack of 'interesting' theory. In summary, the conclusion that can be drawn from the book in relation to lack of interesting theory is that it is due largely to the high dependency on 'gap-spotting' as a method of constructing research problem. The beauty of the book is that it not only analyses the issue, but also presents a solution: problematization.

Contents

Opening the book with a discussion on what makes a theory an interesting one, the authors take us on a journey of showing how we have failed to develop interesting theories and how we should approach the research problem to develop an interesting theory in a very logical sequence (except chapter seven as will be discussed below). Here they subscribe to Davis's (1971) idea that a good theory should make the reader exclaim 'wow'. Going further, they argue that it is only when a theory

'challenges' or 'rejects' the existing wisdom it can make the reader exclaim 'wow'; thus, the first step in crafting an interesting theory is to challenge the assumptions underlying existing wisdom. After establishing the context of formulating a research problem in its perspective in the second chapter, in the third chapter, the authors explore the practice of gap-spotting, along with different types of gaps in literature namely confusion spotting, neglect spotting, application spotting, and their variants.

The fourth chapter is the chapter that I believe all key stakeholders of higher degree programmes should read. Because this chapter examines critically how gap spotting limits or prevents us from developing an interesting theory. In other words, how the 'structured literature review' approach of exploring gaps in literature – the dominant approach of PhD programmes in crafting research problems, prevents students from producing interesting theses. Without simply explaining how the gap spotting limits or prevents developing an interesting theory, the authors also explore the causes behind it, touching some aspects of the 'sociology' of knowledge production. However, unfortunately, they embark on it only after two more chapters; therefore, let me 'hop' into Chapter Seven. In this chapter, although authors identify institutional conditions, professional norms, and research identity construction as possible drivers of the prevalence of gap spotting, they limit the institutional conditions to 'publish or perish' attitude of institutions, forgetting the influence of 'must have' number of PhD completions for grants and for sustaining an academic career. Having identified these (negative) drivers, they go into discussing the possible ways of correcting them, which contributes immensely to lift the book beyond a mere 'guide book'.

Now let me go back to Chapter Five and read it together with Chapter Six. The authors introduce problematization as a (better) methodology of constructing research problems and explain why it can be considered as a 'cure' for lack of interesting theory in Chapter Five. Then they describe how it can be used in doing research. They first operationalize problematization as challenging assumptions and then they critically look at the practise of it in schools or paradigms of research such as critical research and postmodern research where this term is widely used. Later in the same chapter, they make a thorough investigation and identify five different grounds of assumptions, namely, in-house, root metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field, before presenting methodological principles for identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions. Finally, they conclude compiling these two – assumption grounds and methodological principles – into a typology making a problematizing analytical framework. Chapter Six is devoted to demonstrating with an illustrative example how problematizing can be practised.

Evaluation and Conclusion

I see a few pitfalls in this book which the authors can perhaps consider addressing in a new edition. First the discussion on types of questions (p.14-15) is limited to Dillon's (1984) classification. However, I believe a better picture on research questions can be provided with Higgins (1999) and Zanna and Fazio's (1982) classification of research questions into three generations. My suggestion is based on the capacity of these three generational questions to address different aspects of a theory, since the book is about generating interesting theory. Second, the authors have not paid sufficient attention to exploration of developing research questions through examining the interactions between theory and empirical data (or reality). In my belief, an interesting theory which also has practical relevance (the second aspect of important theory) can only be developed through the interplay between theory and reality.

About the Authors

   Mats Alvesson is Professor of Business Administration at the University of Lund, Sweden, and a part-time professor in the school of Business at the University of Queensland, Australia. He has published a large number of books on a variety of topics in the areas of organisation studies and social research methodology. Most of these have been published by Sage and Routledge.

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