

Book Review: Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research

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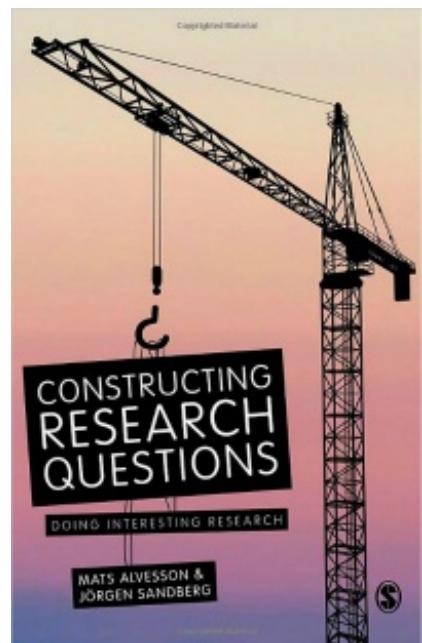
Traditional textbooks on research methods tend to ignore, or gloss over, how research questions are constructed. In this text, Mats Alvesson & Jorgen Sandberg seek to challenge researchers to look past the easy or obvious choices and create more interesting and rewarding questions. Joanna Lenihan feels that this is potentially a valuable and practical tool for researchers and could be integrated into required reading for research students in the humanities and social sciences embarking on research.

Constructing Research Questions: Doing Interesting Research. Mats Alvesson & Jorgen Sandberg. SAGE Publications. February 2013.

Find this book:

"All researchers want to produce interesting and influential theories. A key step in all theory development is formulating innovative research questions that will result in interesting and significant research."

So write Mats Alvesson & Jorgen Sandberg on the cover of their recent book *Constructing Research Questions*, which attempts to address what they see as an "increasing shortage of more interesting and influential studies in many disciplines within the social sciences" (p.3) by presenting a clear new method for constructing research questions that – the authors argue – will result in more significant research. Alvesson and Sandberg develop a problematization methodology for identifying and challenging assumptions underlying in existing theories, and guide the reader through this methodology through the use of examples from across the social sciences.



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This book holds relevance for students starting out in research and for academic and experienced researchers as it highlights the need to be creative when formulating research questions and provides alternative ideas in the pursuit of this. It would be an interesting tool for early-on researchers to spark a wider debate on choosing and formulating research questions, as this element is often lacking at undergraduate level.

Across the first five of seven chapters, the authors discuss some of the reasons why current methods of research question construction are not producing the results they should be. 'Gap spotting' – defined as the method of research question construction "where the researcher reviews existing literature with the aim of spotting gaps in the literature and based on doing so formulates specific research questions" (p.29) – is identified the main culprit and takes the focus of these chapters, though funding and other academic pressures play a part. By spotting gaps in the current literature and not questioning the accepted scholarship in a particular discipline, the authors argues that "many scholars tend to ask well defined and neat (and as a consequence, sometimes trivial) research questions rather than dedicating themselves to investigating large, messy, complex, controversial, and important societal issues" (p.12).

In chapters five and six, the authors develop their problematization methodology as an alternative to gap-spotting, and take the reader through a typology of assumptions that can be problematized, then through a set of methodological principles for how this can be carried out, alongside examples. Alvesson and Sandberg identify assumptions in ideology, field of study, and discipline-level root metaphors as locations for problematization. This section of the book becomes quite technical at times where the authors really strip back conventional research question ideas and assumptions regarding previously taken for granted ideas and theories.

The



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authors follow on the development of the problematization method by testing it in relation to two different established theories – [Dutton et al.'s 1994 study of identity in organisations](#) and [West and Zimmerman's \(1987\) study of the un-doing of gender](#) – in order to provide the reader with a rich and detailed illustration of how problematization methodology can be used in research question generation. The main subject matter in Dutton's et al.'s study is how individuals are attached to social groups, which the authors conceptualize as 'member identification'. They explain this as when members strongly identify with their organization, the attributes they use to define the organization also define them. West and Zimmerman in their un-doing of gender literature take issue with a number of common theoretical views on gender, such as the view that "gender is a set of traits, a variable, a role or a structural characteristic. Instead they see gender as the product of social doings of some sort" (p.80). The authors unpick some of the literature in these two bodies of research and deliberately challenge some significant assumptions they hold. They identify and articulate the assumptions underlying the chosen domain of literature, evaluate articulated assumptions, develop an alternative assumption ground where they suggest using critical theory. They consider assumptions in relation to their audience and they evaluate the alternative assumption ground all the time focusing on the perceived audience as a guide. The authors stress that "the alternative assumptions are not necessarily 'better' than those challenged, but after some time the latter may be worn out and parts of a research field may be caught by these and will then mainly conduct predictable research" (p.91).

The primary aim of the book is to encourage a more reflective and creative way of thinking about the construction and development of research questions. Although very heavily referenced, the book makes for interesting reading, focusing in depth into a subject many scholars grapple with: developing interesting research questions. The book gives step-by-step guidelines on how to unpick existing research and challenge many of the ideas held in order to apply the problematization method. The book also ties in with the current debate around how the [REF may affect academic research in the UK](#).

Alvesson and Sandberg are two senior academics from Sweden who felt the need to write this book as they were all too aware of the seduction of journal rankings and rejections of submissions and other such possible limitations to interesting innovative and inspiring research questions. They sometimes over use the phrase “interesting research questions” without defining what they mean by this, and who decides which questions are interesting and to whom, but much of the book is focused on really giving a method of searching for alternative methods of formulating research questions. They wanted to write the book to convey the feeling that something “odd and problematic was going on” in academia (p.123) such as the narrowing of research in general due to funding and publishing constraints. They decided to do something about this ‘problem’ and the result is this book, which, although sometimes quite technical and slightly repetitive, is a valuable and practical tool for researchers and could be integrated into required reading for research students in the humanities and social sciences embarking on research.

Joanna Lenihan is a final year PhD researcher in University College Cork, Ireland. Her primary research focuses on intentional communities as models for sustainable living and how their knowledge impacts outward into mainstream society. She is currently researching Eco Communities in Ireland. She lectures in Sociology at UCC Social Theory, Culture of Cities, Living Spaces, Social Construction of Habitat, Education, Learning and Work and Sociology of Community. [Read more reviews by Joanna](#).

