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**Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg**

**Re-imagining the Research Process: Conventional and Alternative Metaphors**

London: SAGE Publications, 2021. 194 pp.

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Is our research interesting, relevant, and inspiring? Is it the best it can be? These are important questions not just when it comes to our own research but also with a view to the development of our discipline. Since the 1990s, we have witnessed a rapid massification of published research outputs, with a small number of prestigious outlets leading contemporary academic discourse. Some argue that this has helped our community to structure scholarly debate, others have noted that researchers follow increasingly standardized templates to publish in prominent journals, leading to incremental research lacking inspiration and relevance (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014; Tourish, 2020). So, is our research the best it can be? A new book by Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg addresses a related but arguably deeper question: *What research can we imagine?* This question draws our attention away from the politics of ‘publish or perish’ to the very connection between research practice and scholarly competence.

The authors adopt a metaphorical approach when they examine how we think about our research in terms of the actual research process. They identify common metaphors that govern contemporary research and writing, such as *research design*, *gap-spotting*, and *theory-building*. They argue that by treating these metaphors as unequivocal representations of specific research activities, we freeze our understanding of what research entails. As a result, ‘rigour is confused with conservatism and conventionalism’ (p. 35). This can lead to ‘a form of functional stupidity’ (p. 8) where researchers no longer question the conventions and templates they rely on.

To open up new perspectives on what kind of research may be desirable, and indeed thinkable, the authors discuss both dominant and alternative metaphors for different elements of the research process. For example, they examine how data are commonly conceptualized as ‘reality recorders’ (p. 109) or as ‘referee’ (p. 109) passing (or failing) claims of knowledge. They then identify alternative metaphors, such as data as ‘clues’ (p. 111), that enable researchers, like detectives, to trace phenomena hidden from view; as ‘artistic portraits’ (p. 111) intended to convey something more deeply or imaginatively, and as ‘lightening rod[s]’ (p. 111) discharging (and hence protecting us from) unsupported interpretations. They invite us to contemplate what these different metaphors and related understandings imply for the ways we think about and conduct our research. Expanding on this idea of contrasting dominant and alternative metaphors, Alvesson and Sandberg develop a framework for *metaphorical reflexivity*, which can serve as a heuristic device for scholars wishing to question (and perhaps break away from) some of the existing conventions; true to the maxim ‘I only know what I think when I have been confronted with another way of thinking’ (p. 8).

The book is structured in three parts. In the first, the authors lay out the basis for their argument. They start by problematizing the role of conventions in contemporary research, drawing on ongoing debates on the state of our discipline (Alvesson, 2013; Tourish, 2020). They continue with a chapter on metaphors where they consider how metaphors guide our thinking about how and why we conduct research. This is followed by a chapter on reflexivity as a source of critical awareness where the authors contemplate five dimensions of reflexivity: introspection, engagement with participants, paradigms and conventions, society, and discourse – a useful framework in its own right. Part 1 concludes with a discussion of how a reflexive use of metaphors can help us surface underlying assumptions, thereby aiding reflexivity and opening opportunities for (re)imagining alternative ways of conducting research.

The second part of the book is about the actual metaphors. It consists of four chapters that examine the research process in terms of its grounding, framing, processing, and delivering elements. *Grounding elements* include the purpose of research, the role of the researcher and academia, and the research phenomenon. With a view to the purpose of research, the authors scrutinize the deeper meaning of dominant metaphors like ‘knowledge building’ that imply an almost engineering-like research process where planned activities are carried out to yield ‘building blocks’ for the ‘collective building of a knowledge cathedral’ (p. 52). This perspective is contrasted with metaphors, such as ‘knowledge demolition’ (p. 53), where research aims at problematizing, challenging, and dismantling established truths; and ‘game playing’ (p. 55), where research is seen as a sport or game academics need to succeed in to advance their careers. The following chapter on *framing elements* covers literature review, theory, and design. Again, Alvesson and Sandberg identify and dissect some dominant metaphors for each of these elements and then contrast them with alternatives. For example, they discuss common views of literature reviews as involving ‘knowledge packing’ (p. 80), and ‘gap spotting’ (p. 80) before they consider alternative metaphors of the literature review as a ‘sparring partner’ (p. 82) in the development of an idea or as a tool for identifying and questioning widely held assumptions. The same approach is adopted in the subsequent chapters on *processing elements* (i.e., data and methods), and *delivering elements* (i.e., contribution and writing). In each chapter, the authors identify and discuss conventional, alternative, and additional metaphors for each element.

The third and final part of the book introduces what the authors describe as a ‘kaleidoscope of research process metaphors’ (p. 139) – a table showcasing the conventional, alternative, and additional metaphors discussed in the previous chapters. This is accompanied by guidelines on how we may use metaphorical reflexivity to regain some intellectual control over what controls our research process. To illustrate the application of their framework, Alvesson and Sandberg present two examples based on well-cited papers: Barley’s (1986) study on how technology structures work relations, and Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann’s (2006) study of identity change in medical students when they take up residency. They consider the metaphors underlying these two studies and contemplate alternative metaphors that could have guided the research. The final chapter concludes with some further reflections on how the authors’ metaphorical approach may inspire more pluralist and imaginative research and writing.

The book is short (less than 200 pages) and makes for an engaging, at times meandering, read. In some sections, the authors invite the reader to follow them down the rabbit hole of reflexive thinking. Other sections, in particular those about alternative or additional metaphors, are a bit less engaging, and some readers may wish for more explanation, perhaps even more imagination. While the book appears to target a readership of more experienced researchers reflecting on their research practice, detailed accounts of existing conventions and dominant metaphors make this an informative read for novices trying to make sense of how to ‘play the game’ of academic research and publishing.

It is important to note that the kaleidoscope of metaphors is more indicative than exhaustive. Some of the metaphors included are intuitively accessible or explained in detail, others are more suggestive. This makes the book all the more thought-provoking, but it may also disappoint readers looking for ‘new recipes’ for conducting research. Focusing largely on qualitative research, the kaleidoscope, and the metaphors it features, is a work in progress. Readers may wonder what other metaphors could (or even should) have been included. Those who try to come up with additional metaphors may be surprised to find how disciplined their imagination has already become.

Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg encourage us to examine, question, and reject established recipes and templates. They also acknowledge that their kaleidoscope does not imply that ‘anything goes’. There is little point in seeking alternative metaphors for the sake of novelty alone. Reflexivity and alignment are key, as is a deep understanding of the forces that guide and discipline researchers in how they conduct research. And it is here that we face a paradox of sorts. As researchers, we may aspire to seek new horizons with our research – but this does not mean that we have an opportunity to do as we please, in particular at a time when tenure depends on publishing in a small number of reputable outlets. Even for our most eminent scholars, a recalibration of creativity and rigour is not an easy feat to accomplish! Many research strategies, methods, and ways of presenting research discussed in the methods literature are seen as unsuitable for publication in leading journals and hence are condemned to a peripheral existence. One cannot help but wonder how ‘alternative’ approaches to the research process will be received, and who will make space not just in their minds but also in their journals for what is proposed here – a problem also noted by Alvesson, Einola, and Schaefer (2022) and Gabriel (2010) among others. This leads me to question: *Are we as researchers, authors, readers, reviewers, and editors ready to re-imagine the research process?*

Of course, this book cannot answer this question, nor can it provide a ready solution to the challenges we face as we seek to balance research volume with quality, and originality with a need for structured academic debates. The book does, however, make a thought-provoking contribution by challenging our understanding of what constitutes scholarly excellence today; and it invites us to adopt a more reflexive, pluralistic, and imaginative approach to the research we conduct. As such, I consider this a deeply inspiring read, and one that deserves a wide readership.

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