Book review: Reflexive methodology—new vistas for qualitative research (2nd edn) Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg. London: SAGE, 2009. 350 pp. $29.99 (pbk)

Journal Item

Reflexive methodology – new vistas for qualitative research. Second edition. Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg.

Sage Publications Ltd., London, 2009. 350 pp. £29.99 (pbk). ISBN 978-1-84860-111-6; 978-1-84860-112-3 (pbk).

Although I am familiar with some of Mats Alvesson's earlier writing on critical management research, Kaj Sköldberg's work is new to me and I somehow missed the first (2000) edition of this popular text. This edition boasts a number of significant developments and although I am not sure I'd invest in a copy just for the new sections, I would certainly recommend this version in its own right.

Reflexive research (basically a contextualised refinement of reflective research, both terms being discussed at some length) is characterised by recognising that all data are the results of *interpretation*, and systematic *reflection* on the implications of such interpretation at several levels. Although the book provides a very strong rationale for exploring philosophies of science in depth, including approaches that eschew empirical research, the authors demonstrate a sustained enthusiasm for getting stuck in to 'the field' (while never taking 'reality' for granted). From the many passages I considered quoting to convey the distinctiveness of Alvesson and Sköldberg's approach, I have returned to the Introduction to give a clear sense of what follows:

> "Empirical research in reflective mode starts from a sceptical approach to what appear at a superficial glance as unproblematic replicas of the way reality functions, while at the same time maintaining the belief that the study of suitable (well thought out) excerpts from this reality can provide an important basis for a generation of knowledge that opens up rather than closes, and furnishes opportunities for understanding rather than establishes 'truths'." (p.9).

The implication, should one believe in applied social science, is that research is most likely to have a positive impact on both practice and theoretical knowledge if researchers continually question "the taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots in their own social culture, research community and language" (p.9). However, by the end of the book it is clear that the resulting re-orientation of research questions and application of themes covered here may create uncomfortable research journeys for individuals and teams, challenge power bases and vested interests and require re-education of sponsors (both funders and participant organisations). These are my words. Alvesson and Sköldberg's style is consistently gentle and non-confrontational, albeit occasionally wryly self-mocking; in their words, "To encourage rethinking on the part of [sponsors] is a major intellectual but also pedagogical task" (p.316).

By locating reflexive research within social, economic and political contexts, the authors have explicitly differentiated this book from both the many available 'methods' texts, both those that support research design and methodology choice for newer researchers and specialist guides to the adoption of particular approaches. This edition has nine chapters, of which 3-6 cover in depth four "currents of methodology and philosophy of science, which we regard as important sources of inspiration" (p.10): empirically-oriented methods (especially grounded theory), hermeneutics, critical theory and postmodernism. Although the chapter formats vary, each includes the intellectual and historical background and a serious (and constructive) critical appraisal of the focal approach. For instance, the authors' conclusions on postmodernism and poststructuralism, which are fairly evidently not their preferred perspectives, acknowledge these orientations as "... important as a corrective to and a source of inspiration for more traditional views of research. The criticism against naïve realism is considerably strengthened ... The focus on the narrative, local, fragmented, and ambivalent has much going for it, as does the pointing out of the irreducible contradictions and instability in all human knowledge." (p.223) Through the use of such assessments, the authors weave threads through the book to support the underpinning logic of their argument.

Chapter 7 addresses discourse analysis, feminism (gender research) and genealogical power theory (Foucault) rather as 'representatives' of other strands in contemporary social science in which the reflective potential deserves development. These are selected from a range of justifiable 'topical influences'. Personally I wish that ethnicity and social class had also been included (and perhaps a wider approach to power) but the additional work would have been considerable and perhaps not added all that much to the thesis of the book.

While Chapters 3-7 contain the methodological 'meat in the sandwich', Chapters 2 and 8 (both effectively new for this edition) are very important condiments, the former discussing three key philosophical 'reference points' ((post)-positivism, social constructionism and critical realism) and the latter unpacking a number of dimensions of reflexive interpretation which the reader can now appreciate from the vantage points of the four main orientations. Table 8.1 on p.273 gives a particularly succinct representation of the focal interests of the 'levels of interpretation' represented by the four main currents. However, the introduction on p.271 of '*quadri-hermeneutics*' to describe this four-level framework seemed to me superfluous!

To complete the sandwich metaphor: the first and last chapters definitely turn the book from a set of ingredients into a satisfying meal. Chapter 1 is a brief but essential Introduction (do not be put off by 'the intellectualization of method' subtitle). It provides sufficient coverage of 'ways of explanation and understanding', the priority given to qualitative method here (ontology and epistemology being mentioned in

passing), reflective/reflexive research and the four chosen approaches, to enable the reader to move forward with confidence. Chapter 9 includes illustrative accounts of reflexive interpretation in use, and reminders of why being a reflexive (or reflective) researcher involves more than simply adopting one of the orientations described in this book. I wish I had skimmed through the last chapter before tackling the middle ones because at this point, through practical considerations of the benefits and challenges of being a reflexive researcher, the relationships between philosophy, theory, methodology and methods become clearer. But that may just reflect the fact that I took quite a long time to read the book so had forgotten much of the scene-setting from the Introduction. Suffice it to say that if you are unsure where things are going during one of the longer expositions (for me this meant Chapters 4 and 6), it is worth a look ahead to see how the story concludes; this will not spoil the plot!

I suspect that for readers of *Management Learning*, perhaps more than other journals, the ethos and resulting critical (small 'c') approach throughout the book will give it an intrinsic appeal making it worthy of serious consideration, if not already 'preaching to the converted'. That said, although written in an accessible style, it is a long and sometimes heavy read especially because of the challenging nature of some of the approaches covered. Even as a reviewer I ended up skimming several chapters – but I would anticipate returning to them sometime because the authors gained my trust in their opinions and I found the tone highly engaging.

I also ended up with a stronger understanding of, and confidence in, my own tendency towards critical interpretations (the reason for my existing familiarity with Alvesson's work). The last two chapters in the book convinced me that it is appropriate to encourage even novice researchers (and especially practitioner-researchers) to interpret their activities in a reflective way and to make notes of these reflections – whatever methodology they adopt.

Which leads me to the subject of the audience for *Reflexive Methodology*. While the written style is certainly accessible, this book is most suitable for people who have already realised that undertaking social scientific research is not a neutral, technical activity, and have (as the authors succinctly state) "A certain capacity to cope with cognitive dissonance ..." (p.314). Discussion of the role of 'data' and its collection and analysis is thought-provoking and potentially disconcerting – watch out for the 'mushroom-picking' and data-dredging metaphors and you may, like me, experience an important penny dropping! Therefore I would not generally recommend this book to undergraduate students; and Masters students undertaking individual projects may only feel comfortable engaging with some elements of the arguments when they have actually completed their work and are reviewing the process. On the other hand, I would encourage most research students to read

and discuss this book as part of their transition to the main phase of doctoral research. It is certainly a good read for PhD supervisors – next time you have a student who decides they are 'going to do Grounded Theory', point them firmly in the direction of Chapter 3, and if they are bold (or foolish) enough to stick to their intention the result will almost certainly be more successful than it otherwise would have been! Because this is definitely *not* a 'methods textbook', it should even appeal to experienced investigators who want a balanced review of any of the focal approaches, or to locate themselves in a community of reflexive researchers.

I have a few small criticisms, and a couple of areas that I wish had been developed further but which could equally usefully be the jumping-off points for further work. There are quite a few typographical errors (perhaps concentrated in the new chapters/ revised material); mostly they don't affect meaning but occasionally I was not sure if the problem was my own ignorance or the proof-reader's lapse (e.g. 'habile' applied to 'empirical contact', p.306 line 4). I also wondered whether some relevant recent works had been overlooked, as gut feel led me to expect more 21st century citations in some areas. That said, there are *plenty* of references and I liked coming across citations for classic works such as A.N. Whitehead's *Process and reality: an essay in cosmology* and Toulmin's *Philosophy of science* (1953) (1929) and among them.

Management Learning readers however may be surprised not to find explicit reference to Argyris, Schön, Burgoyne and other writers on reflection in action, action learning, reflective practitioners and the like, not least because of the strong tradition of action research in business and management. This is a reflection of the most under-developed feature of the book – whether there is a place for reflexive qualitative research in all social science disciplines. Alvesson and Sköldberg's work (with others and individually) will be familiar to many readers with management, public administration, organisation studies and business research backgrounds. Where examples are given from research studies of any kind or period, the majority seem to be from these areas. But the book is not written as a 'management research' or 'organisation studies' text by any means, which may explain the lack of coverage of action learning etc. Indeed the authors illustrate relatively few concepts, methods or approaches with examples from actual studies (so readers from other backgrounds should not feel left out). I suspect that academics working in areas close to professional practice (education, social work and nursing as well as management for instance) will feel the book is definitely 'for them'. On the other hand, I would have welcomed some explicit coverage of the role of academic discipline in the development a broad-ranging reflexive approach to social science research – what would it feel like to read this book as an economist, political scientist or psychologist, rather than a sociologist or management researcher (of whatever sub-disciplinary flavour)?

My concern here was triggered by a second under-developed area: the role of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams and projects. With the ever-increasing emphasis on collaboration and working across boundaries, there are surely discussions to be had about how to foster reflexivity when some project participants (especially at the 'harder' end of qualitative research) may dismiss the very concept as 'navel gazing' or sloppy technique. True, a start is made in Chapter 9 but it is tantalizingly brief. Especially frustrating is the passing mention of the importance of developing self-awareness and listening to feedback about one's strengths and weaknesses as a researcher – more, please!

I will end with two brief quotes from the 'Final Comment' in Chapter 9 which help to explain the affinity I have developed with *Reflexive Methodology*:

> "To put it polemically, we have argued that both 'recipe-book research' and 'theorizing in a vacuum' should be replaced by reflective activities, where the collecting, processing and analysis of qualitative data are regarded as a misleading description of what goes on ..." (p.316);
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> and
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> "... attempts to define empirical research as a supremely rational project are not particularly successful. [...] Instead we adopt the view of research as a provisionally rational project, in which the kernel of rationality is a question of reflection rather than procedure'. (p.317)

If you are comfortable with such positions, you will enjoy this book!

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