



3-1-2011

A Reflexive Pragmatist Reading of Alvesson's Interpreting Interviews

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Recommended APA Citation

Gearity, B. T. (2011). A Reflexive Pragmatist Reading of Alvesson's Interpreting Interviews. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 609-613. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1077>

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Abstract

Remember those interviews you collected for that qualitative research study? How did you address issues of interviewee power, impression management and rationality? Was it "trustworthy"? Really? In *Interpreting Interviews*, Mats Alvesson summarizes the current state of thought on interviews as a tool for qualitative data collection and challenges this framework as simplistic and failing to account for its complexities as a social act. Alvesson argues for a critical consciousness and pragmatic approach to interviews. This review blurs genres from autoethnography and more traditional approaches while taking Alvesson's approach, reflexive pragmatism, to its logical consequences. As a whole, *Interpreting Interviews* is timely, intellectually stimulating, and the latest (un)fortunate wrench in the qualitative research machine.

Keywords

Interpreting, Interviews, Empiricism, Critique, Reflexivity, and Qualitative Research

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A Reflexive Pragmatist Reading of Alvesson's *Interpreting Interviews*

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*Remember those interviews you collected for that qualitative research study? How did you address issues of interviewee power, impression management and rationality? Was it "trustworthy"? Really? In *Interpreting Interviews*, Mats Alvesson summarizes the current state of thought on interviews as a tool for qualitative data collection and challenges this framework as simplistic and failing to account for its complexities as a social act. Alvesson argues for a critical consciousness and pragmatic approach to interviews. This review blurs genres from autoethnography and more traditional approaches while taking Alvesson's approach, reflexive pragmatism, to its logical consequences. As a whole, *Interpreting Interviews* is timely, intellectually stimulating, and the latest (un)fortunate wrench in the qualitative research machine. Keywords: *Interpreting, Interviews, Empiricism, Critique, Reflexivity, Qualitative Research**

The Qualitative Report has a Facebook page? Oh, and they're looking for a scholar to review *Interpreting Interviews* by Mats Alvesson (2010). I have no idea who he is or his work, but it looks interesting enough. Sure, I'll do that review. I'm still very much interested in qualitative research since completing 18 credit hours in qualitative research in graduate school and completing an existential-phenomenological dissertation two years ago. Reviewing this book may help expand my horizons a bit, plus I get a free book! The timing is good since I'm going to a seminar on grounded theory and I also plan on sitting in on an ethnography course here at Southern Miss next summer. But who am I to review a senior scholar? I guess I'm qualified enough to review this book...I did review my mentor's book (Gearity, in press-a) and I've published work from my qualitative dissertation (Gearity, in press-b; Gearity & Murray, in press).

(A few days pass.) Grades are turned in and now I'm free...to do that book review. This is more like it...sitting at home at my kitchen table, wearing sweat pants, drinking hot tea on a chilly winter morning engaged in a good book. Having read Chenail's (2010) advice on how to read and review a book, I can dive right in. Front cover—nice picture of a sunrise or sunset and the colors glowing off a horizon of water. Back cover—what kind of boat is that? What do the covers say about the book? Back cover description—"Reflexive methodology," "postmodernism and social research," "critical research." This is going to be some heavy stuff, which is great; I'm really looking for something deep. "Essential reading for postgraduate students"—hey, that's me.

Starting with the End in Mind, or, the Whole and Then the Parts

(Shaking my head.) My head hurts from reading this whole book today. *Interpreting Interviews* wasn't a difficult read, but it sure wasn't easy. Indeed, as the back cover page suggests, I would recommend this book to postgraduates and experienced scholars. Since Alvesson (2010) does not review, or even provide a quick overview, of paradigms or research foundations, the casual reader may be a bit lost in the constant mixing of language and references related to constructivism, critical theory, and post-structuralism/post-modernism. I think this is what he did in his previous work (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009). Yet, I feel this book would be strengthened with at least a basic summary of these positions. What a (devilish) treat it would be to smack this book down on the table at a doctoral student's defense and say, "How did you deal with the issues Alvesson raises?!" I must not waste time...start the review... (cursor blinking)...how do I write an interesting review while covering what I think to be essential? What would it mean to take an Alvessonian approach to a book review?

Theme (or, My Interpretation): Purpose of the Book

"The purpose is partly to encourage critical consciousness of the problems of interviewing..." (2010, p. 7). Alvesson has a lot going on in this text; and while I can follow along with his argument, at times he is less than sequential in the development of the material. He uses the words *purpose*, *aim*, and *argument* synonymously, but his focus is to deconstruct, de-center, and cast doubt on the grand narrative or dominant discourse that portrays interviews as simplistic, rational, apolitical bits of data. He clearly does not want this book to be about interviewing techniques or methods such as snowball sampling, interview protocols, or how to elicit rich responses from participants. His argument calls for us to shift our thinking about interviews from procedure and technique to theory and consequence.

What Alvesson (2010) seeks reminds me of what Maxine Greene (1973) says about developing consciousness or being wide awake. Alvesson puts forth a "reflexive" consciousness that is wide awake to the interview at all stages of the research act. He wants us (warns us) to avoid interview procedural dogma, and like other qualitative researchers (Maxwell, 2005; Rock, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) he advocates a flexible approach that may lead to deeper and divergent understandings. He takes our thinking of the interview—planning, process and product—further. Drawing upon pragmatism and post-structural and post-modern texts, he extends the critique of rationality and empiricism; his argument reveals the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1990) of interviews.

Theme: Reflexive Pragmatism

Alvesson (2010) puts forth a "perspective-shifting" framework on interviews, aptly labeled *reflexive pragmatism*. It is reflexive in that the interplay between research design and research questions, interviewing, and written product should be challenged on the relationship between epistemology and method. Alvesson goes further than most constructivists who talk about multiple realities, theoretical frameworks, interpretations

or what qualitative researchers have long called rival or alternative hypotheses (AERA, 2006; Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Alvesson balances this ontic doubt with pragmatism, defined as “endless reflexivity and radical skepticism” (p. 7). He wants us to seriously acknowledge these potentialities and argues for researchers to push in new, perhaps more interesting, ways as the interview unfolds and conclusions are made.

I’m reminded of my graduate school professor, and philosopher of education, Dr. Thayer-Bacon, and her argument of “qualified relativism” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003); what we know is always on shaky ground, but we act through warranted assertions or the best evidence possible. I really need to read more William James. My post-modern oriented friends have recommended Brian Massumi (2002) and talked of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome (1987); maybe it doesn’t matter where we start the interview, the research project? It seems like their work, although more philosophical in nature, might run parallel to Alvesson’s (2010) argument. Alvesson’s point is that the interview is not some magical path to the “Truth,” but sometimes researchers portray it as such. Although he does not reference Lyotard (1979), he argues for a “localism” approach to the interview which is acutely aware of the local, social context.

Conclusion: Idiosyncratic Ramblings, Intellectual Interpretations, and Recommendations

(Fearing this “review” will quickly approach essay length, I search for an ending.) Alvesson (2010) has certainly made me (re)consider the interviews I have completed and how/what I’ll do in the future. Some of his reasons have been acknowledged elsewhere, but this book presents the interview act more fully and comprehensively than any I’ve read. I like how he (re)told the reader that interviewees are not fully explicit or rational in their responses and are possibly motivated by self or political interests, and that they may do a bit of impression management or presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). If an interviewee exists in a pluralistic-meaning filled world, one constructed by power and discourse, what does it really mean when researchers try so tidily to make sense of this in a 45-minute interview? Imagine interviewing one of the characters from the movie *Inception*, who is dreaming of a dream, inside a dream ad nauseam (gasp). What about the conclusions and recommendations we make from our research? Is Alvesson’s book going to strengthen the state of qualitative research with his sharp critique and new framework, or will he weaken it by being too forthright regarding the limitations of interviews, and research in general?

Alvesson (2010) sets out to offer an “intellectual” account or theoretical argument of the interview in its totality (laughing); he accomplishes this task. Like the eight new metaphors he draws upon to demonstrate the complex social act that is an interview, Alvesson’s work may be considered a metaphor. He doesn’t take the road less traveled; rather, he adds several more forks to the road. How far should we take the consequences of Alvesson’s work? How many theoretical frameworks, rival hypotheses, or (de)limitations are sufficient? Is there a “just right” or is this a contradiction? Should ways of seeing fluctuate? I wonder how much journal editors or reviewers really want what Alvesson puts forth. How forthcoming should we be in representing our findings, conclusions, and how the interviews conducted relate to them? Alvesson alludes to the

uncertainty of his argument, that issues, questions, and even contradictions may result. Questions without clear answers—I imagine somewhere Alvesson is smiling.

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Article Citation

Gearity, B. T. (2011). A reflexive pragmatist reading of Alvesson's *Interpreting Interviews*. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 609-613. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-3/gearity.pdf>
