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## Mysteries and Qualitative Research? Review of Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman's Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method

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## Mysteries and Qualitative Research? Review of Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman's *Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method*

### **Abstract**

In an era of postmodern and social constructionist thought, qualitative researchers have experienced method as a mess. This time of conflict and tension has contributed to concerns and questions about researchers' interpretive and reflexive contributions to the study of social reality. Into these confusing times, Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman, social constructionist researchers, take a novel approach to how qualitative research can inform theory development. They suggest researchers embrace the mysteries when trying to make sense of social situations by taking a reflective and interpretive approach towards their empirical material to create results that can challenge established theory and thus inspire novel lines of theory development.

### **Keywords**

Qualitative Research, Social Constructionist, Postmodernity, and Metanarratives

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## **Mysteries and Qualitative Research?** **Review of Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman's *Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method***

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*In an era of postmodern and social constructionist thought, qualitative researchers have experienced method as a mess. This time of conflict and tension has contributed to concerns and questions about researchers' interpretive and reflexive contributions to the study of social reality. Into these confusing times, Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman, social constructionist researchers, take a novel approach to how qualitative research can inform theory development. They suggest researchers embrace the mysteries when trying to make sense of social situations by taking a reflective and interpretive approach towards their empirical material to create results that can challenge established theory and thus inspire novel lines of theory development. Key Words: Qualitative Research, Social Constructionist, Postmodernity, and Metanarratives.*

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Arguably, all research approaches will confront (or will have the potential to construct) breakdowns, as long as we accept that that social reality is not fully understood. (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 115)

Seen as a counter-narrative plotline, the story of qualitative research developed from what was left out of the quantitative and positivist, social science research narrative. Missing were the inductively developed understandings of grounded theory, the first person phenomenological accounts of experience, or thick ethnographic descriptions of institutional or cultural life. These modern qualitative approaches derived purportedly coherent understandings of social or personal reality from what could be observed or accessed through participant interviews. The linguistic and political insights that followed from Lyotard's (1984) declaration that postmodernity meant the end of "metanarratives" prompted serious questions about any claim that research could deliver understandings of things "as they are." For postmoderns, at best research could offer partial understandings tied to a researcher's premises, specific uses of language, and methods.

For postmodern or social constructionist qualitative researchers, a "messy" (Law, 2004) era regarding methods has followed. Concerns and questions about researchers' interpretations and reflexive contributions to what they "find" became paramount. Grounded theory has been quite instructive in this regard, if one traces its narrative plotline and current sub-plotlines. Its seminal text, Glaser and Strauss's (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (my emphasis), offered an inductive (as opposed to quantitative methods' hypothetic-deductive) approach to understanding social reality and its processes. Setting aside the theoretical disagreements of its founders (e.g., Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1990), grounded theorists have been grappling with postmodern insights (e.g., Morse, Stern, Corbin, Bowers, & Clarke, 2009). One response has been to

interpretatively contextualize what could be considered socially grounded (Charmaz, 2006), while another has been to map the messy tensions and outcomes following data collection, embracing the reflexive and interpretive dimensions of sense-making (Clarke, 2005). For such postmodern grounded theorists, however, gone are the days when a single theoretical account of some aspect of social reality could be considered objectively true. The same could be said for postmodern or social constructionist practitioners of other qualitative research methods.

Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman are social constructionist researchers who take a novel approach to how qualitative research can inform theory development. They are particularly skeptical of qualitative researchers who use analytic methods to bring a forced coherence to how they regard and report on their research. Data, as they are clear, do not pattern or report on themselves. This is where interpreting and reflexive humans come to shape research and its outcomes with their sense-making their ideas and methods. The concerns and the opportunities that Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) raise are the focus of their concise, informative, and provocative, *Qualitative Research and Theory Development: Mystery as Method*.

Alvesson and Kärreman are professors who do qualitative research as part of their faculty positions in Business and Management with Lund University in Sweden. Alvesson, Kärreman's former PhD supervisor, has written on social constructionist and postmodern themes in qualitative research since the early 90s. Both describe themselves as empiricists and write from an intrigue with the "mysteries" qualitative researchers encounter when trying to make sense of social situations. In their words, "Rather than asking and checking if there is a data-theory fit, we ask and explore if empirical material can encourage the challenging and rethinking of established theory and thus inspire novel lines of theory development" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011, p. 5). Readers might wonder what these social constructionist authors mean by "empirical" since this word typically refers data objectively validated. For Alvesson and Kärreman, empirical data are gathered through our varied methods: observations, interviews, surveys, documents, blogs, and so on. It is how we make sense of the data we have – particularly when it doesn't line up with our usual ways of making sense – which this book focuses on.

Readers need to be aware that the authors see qualitative researchers often have implicit ways of sense-making that block them; most notably, in their quest for patterns in ("coding") the data they have. This can lead researchers to make coherent reductionist accounts from analyses of their data despite any data's typical messiness or tensions (Clarke, 2005; Law, 2004). This is also where some researchers end up forcing their data into particular themes or narratives. It is precisely when our normal ways of making sense of data lead to "breakdowns" that the critical and generative ideas of Alvesson and Kärreman have much to offer readers. By "breakdowns" the authors are referring to what elsewhere is referred to as "extreme or deviant" cases (e.g., Creswell, 2006). These are places where a researcher's account or theme for what the data suggest comes up short because some of the data will not fit that account or theme. "Breakdowns" or anomalies of this sort provide an opportunity for researchers to newly "dialogue with their data" where they might otherwise force such data into reductionist or inadequate themes and accounts.

The subtitle of this book (*"Mystery as Method"*) brings to mind a detective's (e.g., Sherlock Homes) way of conversing with or about anomalous data. When detectives

come across data that doesn't fit their way of understanding, they revise their understanding, or the ways that they try to understand. The theory must fit the data, not the other way around, in other words – particularly since words, for social constructionists, can never be mirrors of the realities they aim to describe. Alvesson and Kärreman offer concrete suggestions to help researchers to see “breakdowns” as “mysteries” requiring new dialogues: (de-)fragmenting, defamiliarizing, problematization, broader scholarship, critiquing one's reflexivity. They also offer critical and generative ways of approaching common qualitative data collection methods, such as surveys, observations, and interviews. Basically, these suggestions counter modernist tendencies and assumptions social science researchers (quantitative and qualitative) can bring to analyzing data. We get stuck if, like detectives, we over-commit to a particular method or theory when trying to account for the social phenomena we study.

This book will be welcomed by qualitative researchers who already share the authors' social constructionist premises and who are comfortable with the kinds of postmodern developments I earlier related about grounded theory. For those who like their research methods conceptually and practically coherent and consistent this volume will be frustrating or irrelevant. A proliferation of hybrid methods has occurred in qualitative research over the last decade, arguably, in response to the very kinds of “mysteries.” The upshot may seem like a methodological Tower of Babel to some. The improvised and unconventional direction pointed to by Alvesson and Kärreman can seem risky for researchers seeking publication or seeking collegial endorsement. Historically speaking, qualitative researchers have always had to be mindful and articulate when defying social research conventions with new ideas and methods. Gadamer's (1988) magnum hermeneutic opus, *Truth and Method*, helped many a qualitative researcher to reflect on how much truth had equated with the method that produced “it.” Alvesson and Kärreman have not suggested abandoning qualitative research methods; they have instead offered a helpful book for when our ideas and methods break down into mysteries seeking as yet untried ideas and methods.

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