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BEYOND NEOPOSITIVISTS, ROMANTICS, AND LOCALISTS: A REFLEXIVE APPROACH TO INTERVIEWS IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

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In this article I develop a framework for thinking about the research interview, and I critique dominating neopositivist and romantic views on the interview. I suggest eight metaphors that offer reconceptualizations of the interview, drawing upon recent theoretical trends on language, the subject, and discourse, and develop a reflexive theoretical framework. The article provides new ways of dealing with interviews, along with implications for fieldwork interaction with subjects, interpretations of empirical material, and research questions possible or suitable to address based on interviews.

Organization studies, like other forms of social science studies, are fairly strongly oriented toward empirical research. There is a strong belief that the "collection" and processing of data can prove or disprove various hypotheses and theories. In qualitative research (e.g., grounded theory) it is common to assume that data may guide the researcher to understand specific phenomena and develop theory. This great faith in data and empirical inquiry as a cornerstone in knowledge development has been challenged in a multitude of intellectual streams during recent years. These range from interpretivist approaches that emphasize the centrality of preunderstandings, paradigms, and metaphors in research work to discursivist and constructivist approaches that deny science any privileged access to the objective truth about the social world (Steier, 1991). Scholars argue that language constructs rather than mirrors phenomena, making representation and, thus, empirical work privileging "data" a basically problematic enterprise (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995).

The critique of positivism and neopositivism is massive, which does not prevent the majority of researchers from doing "normal science" more or less as if nothing had happened. One problem with the critique is that it is rather categorical—it is perceived as destructive and therefore neglected. Another problem is that much of the critique addresses philosophical and epistemological issues, whereas research practices have received much less attention. The wealth of insights about problems of developing knowledge and the limitations to social science as a rational project need to be connected more strongly to research practices. In this article I aim at strengthening the interface among philosophy, theory, and method. In a sense, this article follows a tradition of a nontechnical discussion of method and knowledge in *AMR*, including such works as Morgan and Smircich (1980), Knights (1992), Kilduff and Mehra (1997), and Calás and Smircich (1999).

Here I address qualitative interviewing, which I treat as an example of modes of knowledge production and, as such, of general interest. Many of the themes have broad relevance for research in general. Qualitative interviews—in opposition to "talking questionnaires" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987)—are relatively loosely structured and open to what the interviewee feels is relevant and important to talk about, given the interest of the research project. Advocates of interviews typically argue that this approach is beneficial inasmuch as a rich account of the interviewee's experiences, knowledge, ideas, and impressions may be considered and documented (Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth, & Keil, 1988; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Martin & Turner, 1986).

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Regarding interviews as a superior technique for tapping subjects on their knowledge about their experiences and/or social practices neglects the interview situation as a socially and linguistically complex situation. It is important not to simplify and idealize the interview situation, assuming that the interviewee—given the correct interview technique—primarily is a competent and moral truth teller, acting in the service of science and producing the data needed to reveal his or her "interior" (i.e., experiences, feelings, values) or the "facts" of the organization. Social and linguistic complexities should not be seen as just sources of bias. The interview as a complex social event calls for a theoretical understanding or, rather, a reflexive approach in which a set of various theoretical viewpoints can be considered and, when there are reasons for doing so, applied. Without a theoretical understanding, any use of interview material risks being naive, and interpretations of it rest on shaky ground.

This paper is an effort to connect epistemology with field practices, as well as with social theory. My first aim here, thus, is to review and develop a broad critique of the idea of using interviews as vehicles for tapping people for knowledge of their social realities and/or their subjective worlds. My second aim is to suggest using interviews in ways that are more theoretically well informed, with the intention of developing methodological guidelines for a more reflexive approach to qualitative research and offering a better balance between options and problems in the interview. My third aim, implicit in the first and second, is to suggest some theoretical ideas on the research interview, with specific relevance for organization studies. Vital here are the metaphors for the interview situation and interview accounts. Drawing attention to metaphors encourages a reconceptualization of the interview involving theoretical abstraction and the use of a vocabulary encouraging openness to complex patterns and deep thinking, moving beyond a view of interviews as the optimization of techniques and the minimization of bias.

The article offers an alternative strategy for using interview material—that is, that we look upon interviews and interview outcomes as existing in a field of tensions between different logics (e.g., communication of facts and experiences, political action, script following, and impression management). I propose a *reflexive pragmatism* view on the interview. This approach means working with alternative lines of interpretation and vocabularies and reinterpreting the favored line(s) of understanding through the systematic involvement of alternative points of departure (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Through the consideration of a variety of theoretical ideas, expressed through metaphors, the research questions and the possible interpretations and uses of interview material are targeted for more sophisticated consideration. A reflexive approach to research means two potential advantages: (1) avoidance of naivity associated with a belief that "data" simply reveal reality and (2) creativity following from an appreciation of the potential richness of meaning in complex empirical material. Reflexivity operates with a framework that stimulates an interplay between producing interpretations and challenging them. It includes opening up the phenomena through exploring more than one set of meanings and acknowledging ambiguity in the phenomena and the line(s) of inquiry favored, and it means bridging the gap between epistemological concerns and method. Pragmatism means balancing endless reflexivity and radical skepticism with a sense of direction and accomplishment.

I structure the article as follows. First, I review predominant perspectives on the research interview. I then present eight alternative conceptualizations of the interview, which I summarize in terms of metaphors (see Table 1). Each of these offers a critique of mainstream ideas on interviews and suggests paths of using interview material in different and often unconventional ways. After that follows a section on reflexivity, indicating how one may work with the metaphors in research. I then discuss some more specific implications for research practice.

VIEWS ON INTERVIEWS: A REVIEW

Two principle positions on research interviews can be identified: neopositivism and romanticism (Silverman, 1993).[1] To these I add a

[1] Of course, there is much variety in the field. Many researchers locate themselves in between the stronger versions of neopositivism, studying "facts," and romanticism, focusing on meaning, but for the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to relate to these two positions.

TABLE 1
A Summary of the Eight Metaphors of Interviews

Metaphor	Key Problem/Feature	Neopositivism (Non)response	Romanticism (Non)response	Localism (Non)response
Local accomplishment	The mastering of complex interaction in the interview situation	Denial—managed through strict interview procedure	Partial denial—managed through empathy	Acknowledged as a key feature of the interview situation
Establishment and perpetuation of a storyline	Ambiguity of situation and the need for sensemaking	Denial—managed through strict interview procedure	Partial acknowledgement—managed through openness and dialogue	Partly outside what localists focus on since it involves speculations about interviewee's sensemaking work
Identity work	The situated adoption of identity position(s)	Denial—researcher control over identity	Encouragement of authentic self, making genuine response possible	Identity work and self-positioning in the situation are possible objects of study
Cultural script application	Difficulties of representation and normative pressure for adopting certain talk	Partial denial—counteracted through specific questions	Partial denial—possible to avoid/minimize through interaction bringing forward genuine response	Acknowledged as a possible object of study
Moral storytelling	An interest in legitimacy promoting oneself and one's group	Partial denial—counteracted through specific questions	Risk reduced through interview technique aimed at encouraging honesty	Acknowledged but difficult to study since it is hard to identify moral storytelling as a distinct topic
Political action	Interview subjects are politically oriented	Denial	Risk reduced through interview technique aimed at encouraging honesty	Falls outside research agenda since it assumes interests that cannot directly be studied
Construction work	Problems of representation and ambiguity of language	Denial—inconsistent with neopositivist view on language	Denial—inconsistent with romantic assumptions of meaning	Acknowledged as a possible object of study
Play of the powers of discourse	Interviewees constituted and responding within discourse	Denial	Denial	Falls outside the research agenda since it assumes macropower

third—localism—which is fairly marginal but increasingly influential. Localists break with conventional ideas on interviews and are skeptical about the idea of using the interview as a research instrument. All three positions are not limited to interviews, but they offer distinct views on these.

Major Positions on Interviewing: Neopositivism, Romanticism, and Localism

The *neopositivist* is eager to establish a context-free truth about reality "out there" through following a research protocol and getting responses relevant to it, minimizing researcher influence and other sources of bias. Here, "the interview conversation is a pipeline for transmitting knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 113). Researchers imitate quantitative ideals for data production, analysis, and writing. Rules, procedures, avoidance of bias, detailed coding, large quantities of material, and so forth are emphasized in methodological texts, as well as empirical writings (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The ideal is a maximum, trans-

parent research process, characterized by objectivity and neutrality.

The problem with this is that respondents may produce only superficial and cautious responses. Many researchers are aware of problems of trust and limited control over the interviewee responses. This reflects a more social understanding of the situation, which has led to such techniques as repeat interviews in order to establish better contact, to check for consistency over time/between situations, and/or to give interviewees as well as interviewers a chance to reflect upon what has been said before (e.g., Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991; Collinson, 1992). Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, and Samuel, for example, report a large apparatus of various techniques to master the situation, some of which were intended to contribute to their efforts to "move beyond the facade of the firms and 'party-line' descriptions" (1998: 305). Techniques include the continual sharing of emerging interpretations and insights into trends in and across the firms, interviews of various kinds at various places, returning transcripts of life histories, lengthy talks with key informants, and so forth (Covaleski et al., 1998: 305ff).

The *romantic*, advocating a more "genuine" human interaction, believes in establishing rapport, trust, and commitment between interviewer and interviewee, in particular in the interview situation. This is a prerequisite in order to be able to explore the inner world (meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions) or experienced social reality of the interviewee. The typical goal of interview studies is to accomplish "deeper, fuller conceptualizations of those aspects of our subjects' lives we are most interested in understanding" (Miller & Glassner, 1997: 103). Romantics emphasize interactivity with and closeness to interviewees—seen as "participants." Fontana and Frey (1994), for example, suggest that the researcher may reject "outdated" techniques of avoiding getting involved or providing personal opinion and instead engage in a "real" conversation with "give and take" and "emphatic understanding":

> This makes the interview more honest, morally sound, and reliable, because it treats the respondent as an equal, allows him or her to express personal feelings, and therefore presents a more "realistic" picture that can be uncovered using traditional interview methods (1994: 371).

Some researchers talk about "active interviewing" as an ideal form (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). Here, the idea is that the researcher's interventions transform the interview subject "from a repository of opinions and reasons or a wellspring of emotions into a productive source of knowledge" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 121), since "the subject's interpretative capabilities must be activated, stimulated and cultivated" (1997: 122). One could say that some interview proponents have responded to the critique of the more cool, minimalistic versions of interviewing—aiming to avoid bias—by advocating hyperromanticism—that is, escalating efforts to accomplish "depth" and authenticity, turning the interview into a moral peak (as in the quotation of Fontana and Frey above)—or by activism—turning the interviewee into a focused and systematic knowledge producer. Although this move may sound sympathetic, it hardly guarantees "truthful" interview statements that give a "realistic" picture. It may lead to interview outcomes that are strongly tied to the idiosyncracies of the situation and the moves of the interviewer.[2]

A still relatively small but growing stream on interviewing breaks with the assumptions and purposes of neopositivists and romantics. I refer to this as a *localist* position on interviewing. This approach emphasizes that interview statements must be seen in their social context. An interview is an empirical situation that can be studied as such, and it should not be treated as a tool for collecting data on something existing outside this empirical situation. Localists do not ascribe to the interview an ontological status different from other events and situations. People talk with their bosses, they serve customers, they drive trucks. They also participate in interviews. Behavior in interview situations can be studied in ways similar to those used for these other phenomena.

[2] Ideas such as active interviewing are not shared by all advocates of interviewers addressing some of the recent critique of this practice. Other researchers suggest different interview styles. Miller and Glassner (1997), for example, propose neutrality as a suitable response to what interviewees are saying. Kvale (1996) states that one criterion of a good interview is short questions followed by long answers, which presumably implies an interviewer who is withdrawn rather than active. An interesting feature of the advice-giving literature on interviews is that it often recommends different, even opposite moves, which supports a nontechnical view on this subject matter.

In interviews, localists argue, people are not reporting external events but producing situated accounts, drawing upon cultural resources in order to produce morally adequate accounts. Against the neopositivist and, to a considerable extent, also the romantic views on the interview as a technique, localists see it as a situated accomplishment (Silverman, 1993: 104). As expressed by Potter, "Social structure becomes part of interaction as it is worked up, invoked and reworked" (1997: 147). Sources of inspiration include ethnomethodology, conversation, and discourse analysis.

Localism, to some extent, also shares certain features with postmodernism, rejecting a mirror view of language and a humanistic view of the subject (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Rosenau, 1992). Versions of localism such as conversation analysis and discourse analysis are, however, research programs with a strong and specialized empirical focus and a rigorous methodology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Silverman, 1993). They differ, then, in vital respects from postmodernism, which typically favors more philosophical and often more playful ideas. Kilduff and Mehra (1997) identify five "postmodern problematics": problematizing normal science, truth, representation, conventional styles of writing, and generalizability. Silverman (1993), a leading representative of localism, takes a different position on virtually all those problematics, emphasizing ideals such as accumulation of knowledge, objectivity, the possibility of and very precise demands for representation, a clear writing style, and the possibility of generalization.

The localist approach to interviewing is basically a critical one: it challenges the assumptions, claims, and purposes of those wanting to use interviews instrumentally (Silverman, 1993). Its proponents generally favor "naturally occurring interaction," but interviews can also be used as objects of study. A valid critique of localism concerns its rather narrow focus and its underestimation of using knowledgeable subjects to communicate important insights about their social reality. It comes close to denying the possibility of exploring meaning and the "native's point of view," as well as "social facts." But it can also be used as a framework for studying interviews as an interesting empirical setting. In the case of the research interview—as distinct from interviews as part of consulting work or recruitment processes—this may appear as narrow and myopic, if not odd, but there are some interesting options to which I return in the final parts of the article.

The three ideal-typical positions on interviews here indicate the broadly shared views of interviewing in the method literature and organizational research. My ambition is to move beyond these; I am to some extent drawing upon localism in a critique of the two dominant positions on interviews but also take issue with localist ideas in trying to save some version of a "tool" view on interviews. My ambition is then to use the interview as a site for exploring issues broader than talk in an interview situation, without falling too deeply into the trap of viewing interview talk as a representation of the interiors of subjects or the exteriors of the social worlds in which they participate.

Summing Up the State of the Art

The development of the interview method has moved from neopositivist conceptions to an increased awareness of the complexity of the interview situation, including the need to get the full cooperation of interviewees. Most of the literature on interviewing still deals at length with how this practice may be used as effectively as possible and how to get the interview subject to talk a lot—openly, trustfully, honestly, clearly, and freely—about what the researcher is interested in. Increasingly, however, authors include remarks signaling caution—for example, they use expressions such as interviewees "reported such feelings" (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998: 449) or "gave me this account" (Barker, 1993: 408), or they express some modesty in the claims of the study, such as "ours are but provisional interpretations" (Covaleski et al., 1998: 308). Still, such qualifiers only marginally soften the impression of the data and results presented as being robust and authoritative, and the reader is not encouraged to reflect upon what the accounts really are about. The interview then appears, on the whole, as a valid source of knowledge production, although it is indicated that the social process and local conditions need to be appreciated and actively managed by the interviewer in order to accomplish valid results.

Challenging this logic and opening up the possibility that interview statements reveal less about the interiors of the interviewees or the exteriors of organizational practices and more

about something else, I suggest a variety of different theoretical conceptualizations of the research interview and its dynamics.

RETHINKING INTERVIEWS: NEW METAPHORS FOR INTERVIEWS

All thinking about complex phenomena is based on metaphors (Brown, 1977; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1980; for critiques and debate, see, for example, Grant & Oswick, 1996, and Pinder & Bourgeois, 1982). As Morgan writes, the use of metaphor is "a primal, generative process that is fundamental to the creation of human understanding and meaning in all aspects of life" (1996: 228). Metaphors—in the sense of root or organizing images or gestalts, rather than poetic language use—draw attention to implicit aspects and may function as powerful starting points for new ways of seeing. Metaphors may be used in order to provide overviews of intellectual fields and indicate what is illuminated and what is hidden in different perspectives and vocabularies (Morgan, 1980, 1986).

The dominant metaphors for the research interview are (1) an instrument, to be used as effectively as possible in the hands of the more or less capable researcher, and (2) a human encounter, encouraging the interviewee to reveal his or her authentic experiences. Arguably, these metaphors are pragmatically helpful and fit into neopositivistic and respectively romantic epistemologies, but they draw attention away from significant aspects of the interview as a complex social situation. The eight metaphors offered below all represent a rather basic critique of the dominant views on interviews and suggest reconceptualizations with wide-ranging implications for research. They each involve a key feature of an interview and a central problem (challenge) that the interviewee must "solve" or relate to (see Table 1):

1. the social problem of coping with an interpersonal relation and complex interaction in a nonroutine situation
2. the cognitive problem of finding out what it is all about (beyond the level of the espoused)
3. the identity problem of adopting a contextually relevant self-position
4. the "institutional" problem of adapting to normative pressure and cognitive uncertainty through mimicking a standard form of expression
5. the problem (or option) of maintaining and increasing self-esteem that emerges in any situation involving examination and calling for performance (or allowing esteem enhancement to flourish in the situation)
6. the motivation problem of developing an interest or rationale for active participation in the interview
7. the representation/construction problem of how to account for complex phenomena through language
8. the "autonomy/determinism" problem of powerful macrodiscourse operating behind and on the interview subject

An Example: Talking Hierarchy

In order to show the relevance of the metaphors for understanding empirical material, I now present a brief excerpt from an interview with a senior consultant in a large IT/management company. In the interview we talked about the motivation of people in the company. Throughout this section I produce interpretations of the excerpt based on the various metaphors.

> I get the impression that most people here are heavily focused on career. For them it is important to have a good job with high prestige and right promotion. Right here means being prepared or having worked a certain time or something similar. Well . . . for me, for me then, hierarchy has a tendency to sound negative, for me hierarchy has certain advantages, including that those above you take care of you to some extent, and that you should take care of those below you. So this is a rather educating environment and that I find good. So to me hierarchy is not negative, but it guarantees quite a lot. Then I am extremely sensitive to when there are wrong individuals at the top. How in hell could they get there . . .

From conventional research points of view, the interviewee, although mainly positive to hierarchy, shows some ambivalence to it. A neopositivist may assume that this reflects his attitudes and/or the structure of the company, whereas a romantic may interpret this is as an expression of the meaning ascribed to hierarchy—an arrangement facilitating care, responsibility, support, and personal development but also dependent on the right people and orientations. As will be seen below, there are other ways in which the account can be understood.

1. The Interview in Its Context: Accounts As Local Accomplishment

An interview is a social situation set up by the researcher, "in order that the respondent speaks openly, authentically or truthfully, to produce valid reporting on some interior or exterior state of affairs" (Baker, 1997: 130), so that the interviewer can use this speech as "data" in a research publication. What takes place during the interview, however, may be seen as complex interaction in which the participants make efforts to produce a particular order, drawing upon cultural knowledge to structure the situation and minimize embarrassments and frustrations, feelings of asymmetrical relations of status and power, and so forth.

The metaphor, which basically summarizes the localist view on the interview, suggests that complex social interaction aiming at establishing a functioning micro-order takes precedence over the researcher's triggering productive responses through certain techniques. The interplay between two people, with their gender, ages, professional background, personal appearances, and ethnicities, puts heavy imprints on the accounts produced. Parker (2000), for example, notes how age had a strong significance in his interviews with managers: in some cases, with older interviewees, he was addressed as a junior and novice, and in others, with people close to his age, he was used as a confidante; in a third type of relation, with very junior and/or marginal people, he was seen as an expert (management consultant or even management spy). The specific words used by the interviewer, his or her gestures, writing behavior (accounts may be followed by more or less intensive note taking), and so on affect the responses of the interviewee.

Carrying the point a bit further, Schneider, in a study of interviewing in an educational organization, shows how interviewers are not "simple conduits for answers but rather are deeply implicated in the production of answers" (2000: 162). Localists argue that accounts produced are in themselves empirical phenomena calling for explanation—not reflections of other empirical phenomena or "proofs" for explanations of these (Baker, 1997; Silverman, 1985, 1993).

In the interview excerpt above, from a local accomplishment metaphor, the account may be seen as an outcome of the scene more than a reflection of the organization "out there" or the interviewee's mind "in there." The scene—a conversation with a business school academic, whose appearance (dress code, etc.) indicates little interest in formal status and whose questions focus on the human side of organizations—may trigger a nuanced stance on hierarchy and the use of a vocabulary of caring.

2. Framing the Situation: The Interview As Establishing and Perpetuating Basic Assumptions

In some versions of anthropology, the task of the researcher is to go out there and find out what the subjects of the study think they are up to. The interviewees may be less ambitious in their quests about what the researcher may be up to, but may still develop ideas about what the research project is about and how the results can be used. This does not necessarily correspond to what researchers think the interviewees are thinking or would like them to think.

The assumptions that the interviewee develops in order to be cooperative and competent in the position may only rarely become explicit during the interview. Occasionally they do. In a study of blue collar workers in washing factories, people were asked about their image (cognitions) of the organization, but they answered as though the question concerned their job satisfaction, apparently reflecting the assumption that academics interviewing low-level employees are only interested in job satisfaction and related issues, such as discontent and absence (Lidström-Widell, 1995). Whyte (1960) describes a research project where he unsuccessfully tried to clarify a particular subject with specific questions. It was only after revealing to the interviewee the particular puzzle behind the question that Whyte got the "right" answer.

In qualitative research, at least outside the neopositivist camp, the purpose is to explore complex, often personal matters, and it is often insufficient to put forward clear questions that are easily understood and given a standard, context-free meaning. Intensive interpretation of what the researcher is after—before, during, and perhaps after the interview (before a repeat interview)—and the forming of work assumptions of what the entire exercise is about and how specific themes addressed should be understood guide interviewee responses.

Neopositivists would argue that well-structured questions limit the need to take seriously sensemaking activities guiding the answers. Romantics would emphasize the need and possibility to bridge frameworks and to develop a shared "miniparadigm" between the active interviewer and the participant/interviewee, making possible coproduction of knowledge. The metaphor suggested here assumes that the interview is a highly ambiguous situation calling for intensive sensemaking on behalf of the interviewee, making what is espoused an outcome of the interviewee's implicit "work paradigm" as much as the explicit interventions of the researcher.

In the interview example with the senior consultant above, the interviewee may have developed the assumption that organizational structure is of key interest for management researchers, which makes it understandable that the explicit question on "motivation" leads to talking about hierarchical structure.

3. Tuning in the Subject: The Interview As Identity Work

A basic aspect related to sensemaking activities is the identities that are called upon in interview work. These frame the situation and guide responses. No nontrivial account about the organization one works in is produced outside or abstracted from identity—that is, self-definition and efforts to accomplish a feeling of coherence and direction. Interview work means that the interviewer—and the interviewee—invoke an identity, in explicit and implicit ways. Identities are relational.

If somebody is interviewed as a "woman," a "leader," and a "middle-level manager," different identities are invoked, as well as different inclinations to interpret the entire interview situation and different specific questions and evaluations of what kinds of answers are appropriate. The work situation and the organizational conditions of a woman, a leader, and a middle manager—even if it is the same biological person—are not the same. Quite often these identities are not clearly signaled, neither from the interviewer nor the interviewee, and the researcher may not be aware of how language use and other signals may operate on the person being interviewed in terms of identity. Being explicit about the identity position optimal for the research project may be counterproductive since it fixes the responses too firmly. Trying to control identity is difficult anyway: the response to control efforts is uncertain (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

The interviewee may also use the interview situation—in which a friendly, attentive, and empathetic listener is at one's disposal—to express, elaborate, strengthen, defend, and/or repair a favored self-identity. This is not necessarily the "true self" that emerges but may be seen as an effort to construct a valued, coherent self-image. In a study of advertising workers, subjects described themselves as intuitive, sensitive, emotional, committed, artistic, and serious, but also as result oriented and so on. This can be seen as reporting the truth on how they are or how they coherently see themselves (stable self-images), but perhaps less speculatively how they present themselves and try to construct an identity in this specific situation—that is, the interview is a site for identity work (Alvesson, 1994).

Returning to the interview example presented above, the consultant expresses a particular conception of himself, as a person taking care of those below him, contributing to their development, but "extremely sensitive" to "wrong persons" at senior levels. Whether this self-understanding matches others' perception of the individual or orientations to hierarchy in everyday life is hard to tell. The account may be said to construct an identity, not necessarily reveal one.

4. Complying with and Joggling Rules and Resources for Account Production: The Interview As Cultural Script Application

In an interview situation, typically an encounter between two strangers, one person faces the difficult task of communicating "how it really is" or "true experiences" in 60 to 120 minutes. In order not to make overwhelming demands on creativity and language skills and in order to say something that the interviewer can grasp relatively easily, the interviewee must rely on established cultural resources for describing issues at hand. This means that available vocabularies, metaphors, genres, and conventions for talking about issues—cultural scripts—are used.

Cultural scripts may be shared broadly across society or in specific segments within it—for

example, an industry, occupation, or organization. Corporate culture may be seen as a set of stories offering guidelines for how organizational employees should talk about the organization. An illustration of this can be found in an interview within a case study of a computer consultancy firm (Alvesson, 1995). To an open question regarding whether the company was different from other companies the interviewee had worked for, the interviewee referred to the relative lack of hierarchy, a flat structure: "My only boss is X (the subsidiary manager)." The statement reflected the script of the corporate culture representing the company as nonhierarchical, with only two layers: consultants and subsidiary managers. The scriptlike character of the statement became clear when the interviewee some minutes later in the interview referred to another person as a superior, "working directly under X" (and above the interviewee). Researchers sometimes pride themselves on being able to go beyond superficiality and party-line statements; however, scripts are not just offered by corporate management but also by other institutions and groups—professions, worker collectives—and isolating scripts following from "genuine" experiences and viewpoints is not an easy task. It is seldom explicitly addressed in research. Newton (1996), in locating interview talk of an executive to the ability of the management consultancy firm to enroll him, is to some extent an exception.

Of course, the use of cultural scripts does not necessarily make interviews "untrue." Cultural scripts are not only a nuisance for the researcher. They reduce variation and complexity and facilitate the transmitting of a package of information sometimes viewed as the core of the interview. In this way they make it easier for the researcher to collect data, but they say more about "members' methods for putting together a world that is recognizably familiar, orderly and moral" (Baker, 1997: 143) than how they experience the world in everyday life.

The interview excerpt above can be seen as a mix of two scripts. One is organization based and emphasizes that hierarchy and meritocracy go hand in hand, that hierarchical positions are reflecting and facilitating people's development, and that a senior position means a high level of competence and a capacity to develop juniors. The other is more broadly shared in Swedish society and the fashion-oriented part of business, and it means a skeptical attitude to hierarchy.

5. Moral Storytelling and Promotional Activity: The Interview As Impression Management

It is generally assumed that people want to give a good impression of themselves and also the institutions with which they identify and/or feel they represent. This is presumably also the case in a research interview setting. There are typically two broad sets of ideals and virtues at stake here: rationality (efficiency) and morality. Being a member of an organization or an occupation often means not only the internalization of, or identification with, certain values and ideals constraining one's consciousness but also a moral imperative to express oneself in loyal terms. This does not preclude critique but may still mean some, possibly nonconscious, holding back and an inclination to not break taboos.

The countermeasure to "moral storytelling" in interviews, from the point of view of the romantic, is an effort to establish rapport and trust, leading to "depth" in the contact, with the subject honestly telling the truth as he or she knows it. "Honesty" is a moral virtue that has to be demonstrated in a particular way. To appear honest—and not socially incompetent or odd—calls for impression management. As Silverman says, "Maybe we feel people are at their most authentic when they are, in effect, reproducing a cultural script" (1993: 96).

Script following and moral storytelling sometimes overlap, but they are not identical. One may follow scripts to be able to say something easily understandable, without necessarily wanting to communicate certain positive attributes. One may say something positive about one's self and one's affiliation in an innovative way that breaks with established conventions and scripts.

The moral dimension comes through rather clearly in the interview example with the consultant. He is aware of the potential negative impression that positive talk about career and hierarchy may trigger when he puts in the neutralizing statement that hierarchy "has a tendency to sound negative," indicating that this is misleading while it really, at least for him and his organization, is about care taking and educating. The interviewee's extreme sensitivity to

wrong people in superior positions further indicates high values.

6. Talk in the Context of Interests and Power: The Interview As Political Action

The romantic and, to some extent, the neopositivistic views on interviewing are grounded in an image of a potentially honest, unselfish subject, eager or at least willing to share his or her experiences and knowledge for the benefit of the interviewer and science. Recognizing the political nature of organizations (Deetz, 1992; Morgan, 1986; Pfeffer, 1981), the interviewee may be assumed to act in his or her own interests and/or the interests of the social group with which he or she identifies. Interviewees are then not seen—as in the moral storytelling metaphor—just as eager to save or improve their egos or their organization's reputation through more or less routinized and unreflective self-promoting (or organization-promoting) statements but as *politically aware and politically motivated actors.* Actors may use interviews for their own political purposes. They may cheat or lie, or they may very well tell the (partial) truth as they know it but in, for them, selective and favorable ways. This is illustrated by a top lawyer in a big company interviewed by Jackall, who, during a discussion of an issue, said:

> Now, I'm going to be completely honest with you about this.
>
> He paused for a moment and then said:
>
> By the way, in the corporate world, whenever anybody says to you: "I'm going to be completely honest with you about this," you should immediately know that a curveball is on the way. But, of course, that doesn't apply to what I'm about to tell you (1988: 161).

In another study Parker (2000) observed how he was perceived to be a channel of communication between the top and the bottom, feeding back information to senior management. Some managers in one company praised the general manager in the most effusive terms, probably reflecting an interest in using the research to promote themselves.

Political awareness may lead to either active constructions in accordance with one's interest or defensive moves motivated by the fear that certain "truths" may harm oneself or the organization or occupation with which one identifies. Such defensive moves may characterize senior people that are expected to take issues of legitimacy seriously, but also people at the bottom, who may risk sanctions if they air controversial opinions.

The researcher may think that guarantees of anonymity will reduce the politics of interviewing, but those interviewed may have some doubts. They can never be certain what will happen with the material. A managerial career calls for being perceived as reliable and rests upon an acquired ability to smoothly navigate in a tactful way, avoiding unnecessary risk taking. A habitual acting so that one cannot be tied to expressing dangerous opinions or indiscretion becomes part of the stuff making up managers, at least in U.S. companies (Jackall, 1988). It seems unlikely that interviewing—whatever the tricks used—manages to fully break this habit.

The example with the senior consultant expressing views about organizational hierarchy is presumably not an obvious illustration of politically motivated interview talk. Nevertheless, the generally flattering view of the corporate version of hierarchy may be seen as expressing an awareness of constructing corporate reality in a way that is favorable for the interviewee and the company.

7. Using Language for Crafting Accounts: The Interview As an Arena for Construction Work

Another basic problem, given conventional ideas on the ontological status of interview accounts, concerns the nature of language and language use. Many researchers claim that language is used for productive, forward-oriented purposes— not for mirroring reality. Like people in general, persons in an interview context are not just "truth tellers" or "informants" but they "use their language to do things, to order and request, persuade and accuse" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 32). This point is not restricted to, but can of course not be separated from, issues of impression management and political interest, but relates more to the active, functional, metaphorical, contextual character of language than any particular use or misuse of language. Language use means the construction of the world. Even if few people doubt that there are "objective" things going on "out there" or in the minds of people, any account of these means the construction of a particular version of how things hang together and how they

can be represented (Potter, 1996). "Objective reality" is not just mirroring itself in a certain, correct language.

As Hollway (1989) points out, any question can lead to an almost indefinite number of answers. Here we have the problem of representation, to some extent highlighted by the cultural script metaphor. The use of cultural scripts is an option, but often these scripts are not fully relevant, and both interviewer and interviewee may feel that they break with the norm of being authentic and credible. Creativity and construction work are called for in order to produce accounts that adapt or vary cultural scripts and/or use these as elements in more innovative interviewee work. The crafting of an account is similar to authorship. Even if the interviewee tries to be precise and honest, the elements of invention and fiction are significant.

Returning once more to my interview excerpt, a construction work metaphor would inspire an interpretation of the account as a creative production. Having picked "career" as key motivator, the interviewee moves, via promotion, on to hierarchy—a contestable theme that calls for careful treatment. The interviewee deals with the possibly alienating meaning ascribed to hierarchy through becoming personal ("for me"). Then the virtues of hierarchy are presented. The final statement in the excerpt, about being "extremely sensitive" for "wrong individuals," compensates for the risk of being read as expressing an almost extreme prohierarchy position. The entire account can thus be seen as an example of crafting a comprehensible and credible piece of text in light of using slippery language with multiple and sometimes negative connotations.

8. Language As Constituting the Interviewee: The Interview As a Play of the Powers of Discourse

Poststructuralists challenge the idea of the conscious, autonomous, holistic, and clearly defined individual as the bearer of meaning and as an acting subject around which the social world rotates (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1980; Hollway, 1984; Weedon, 1987). Instead, they view the individual (the subject) as constituted within discourse, which socially creates forms and expressions of subjectivity limited in time and space. Subjectivity refers to the individual's conscious and unconscious thoughts, emotions, and perceptions—the individual's self-insight and attitude to the surrounding world. Language is not an expression of subjectivity; rather, poststructuralists claim, it is what constitutes subjectivity. From this follows that subjectivity is frequently unstable and ambiguous—a process rather than a structure. Thinking and actions "depend on the circulation between subjectivities and discourses which are available" (Hollway, 1984: 252). The presence of a powerful discourse may stabilize subjectivity, but the plurality of discourse in people's lives typically encourages varied and fluctuating subjectivities: "identity is in flux, in a permanent state of becoming as various social and linguistic constructs (or discourses) vie with one another for supremacy" (Thomas & Linstead, 2002: 75).

Discourses constitute the subject in that available discourses position the person in the world in a particular way prior to the individual's having any sense of choice. In terms of interviewing, poststructuralists would see the situation as an outcome of the discourses being present, constituting the subject and his or her talk. The accounts produced are mainly of interest as indications of the discourses at play and the powers over the individual subject (Foucault, 1980). Prior argues that "a representation should be understood not as a true and accurate reflection of some aspect of an external world, but as something to be explained and accounted for through the discursive rules and themes that predominate in a particular socio-historical context" (1997: 70).

This metaphor to some extent parallels the one of the interview as identity work (number 3 above), but the discourse power play metaphor puts an emphasis on language use and its capacity to sweep subjectivity with it. Rather than the individual struggling to construct an identity through accounts, the metaphor discussed in this section suggests that discourse constitutes the individual.

The discourse power play metaphor also shows some similarity with the issue treated in the previous section (interview as construction work). Both problematize the relationship between discourse and subject. It is not the knowing subject but language that takes the upper hand. The discourse power play metaphor does not, however, focus on how the subject is constructing reality in light of the problem of representation but on how the discourses are making

themselves present in the interview situation, how they work on the subject, and how they give primacy to how the subject "carries" certain constitutions of the social world. The interviewee, then, is seen—almost—as a puppet dangling from the strings of the discourse(s).[3]

Returning to my example, a Foucauldian reading may show how a particular career discourse, assuming that people can be ranked and ordered in a hierarchical manner, speaks through the interviewee. The statement reflects the power of this discourse, rather than any facts about the organization or the authentic beliefs and values of the interviewee.

Working Through the Metaphors: Example Two

All eight metaphors can, in principle, be used on any empirical material. For space reasons, a very brief second example will do:

> We've got to move from an engineering-led culture to a market-led one. If railway engineers think they can run the trains because they like running trains, rather than running them for passengers, they then will end up out of a job (senior manager, interviewed in Watson, 1994: 152).

This kind of statement is not uncommon in interviews. It may be seen as expressing a "truth" about corporate affairs or the true beliefs and values of the interviewee. It may also be read as related to the specific scene: in an interview with a professor from a business school, this appears to be an appropriate statement (number 1, of my eight metaphors above). The interviewee may assume that this is the kind of thing that fits the research project (2). In the talk the person—a former engineer—constructs himself as market oriented (3). He follows scripts for talking: production orientation is outdated, and market oriented is what one should be (4). The statement gives a favorable impression through adopting the morally superior position of doing things for the customers rather than for one's own egocentric taste (5). The interviewee thereby adopts a position that is assumed to be legitimate and politically correct (6). In terms of trying to represent what the interviewee perceives to be going on, or what should go on, messy, ambiguous corporate reality is neatly ordered as either being an "engineering-led culture" or a "market-led one" (7). The contemporary dominating discourse on market orientation speaks through the interviewee, perhaps best seen as a passive site for this discourse (8).

As with metaphors in general, when employed to think through how we imagine and give meaning to various phenomena, the ones suggested here may be useful for mapping available positions to the subject matter (research interview), encouraging more informed choices about how we can relate to it, and supporting more creative research practices. The idea of a metaphor is less to give an exact map than to encourage productive lines of thinking.

REFLEXIVITY: A FRAMEWORK

The reader interested in social facts or meanings may now feel somewhat uneasy and may even question the point in doing interviews at all. It is *not*, however, my intention to make an extremely strong case against an instrumental use of interviews. While localists and others (poststructuralists, advocates of observational methods) have delivered an important critique of neopositivist as well as romantic notions of interviewing, it would be premature to ban this method or to use it exclusively in "minimalistic" ways (e.g., studying interview talk solely as local accomplishment and treating accounts as the object of study). As with all critique, it may be too harsh and taken too far, sacrificing relevance for rigor.

A possible response to the complexity and richness of qualitative interviews indicated by the eight metaphors is careful interpretation of the extent to which and how the accounts may be used for a variety of research purposes. What I propose here is a reflexive pragmatist approach to the research interview. The increasingly popular concept of reflexivity is used in a variety of ways (Brewer, 2000: 126–133). Perhaps the most common one emphasizes that the researcher is part of the social world that is studied, and this calls for exploration and self-examination.

> Acutely aware of the social and historical positioning of all subjects and the particular frameworks through which they are rendered visible, the researcher can only produce knowledge al-

[3] This metaphor may be criticized for ascribing too much strength to discourse and assuming too weak a subject (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Newton, 1998). As a potentially inspiring countermetaphor to dominant conceptions, it may, however, like the others proposed here, be productive.

> ready embedded in the power of those very frameworks (Hardy & Clegg, 1997: 5).

This sometimes leads to a preoccupation with the researcher self and its significance in the research process, which can lead to forms of writing that place the researcher's personal experience in the center (confessional tales; Van Maanen, 1988) or to explorations of the various researcher selves that are active in the process (Reinharz, 1997). At worst, this may lead to researchers' being inclined "to give a cleansing account of their positions, preconceptions and interests" (Lee & Hassard, 1999: 396).

I am using reflexivity in a somewhat different sense, focusing more on the interview situation, the interviewee, and the accounts produced than on the interviewer, although this article probably also offers fuel for a "researcher/self-focused" type of reflexivity. *Reflexivity* for me stands for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favored angle and vocabulary. Rorty (1989) talks about the use of irony implying a constant awareness that there are always other vocabularies for addressing the line taken. One approach is to move between different lines of interpretation, varying and confronting an earlier used vocabulary with a line of interpretation that offers a different angle and with a different vocabulary (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). This means challenging the initial interpretation and the researcher confronting himself or herself and possibly the reader with alternative views; these views may facilitate arriving at the "strongest" or most interesting interpretation and/or producing alternative ones, in which the study may offer more than one type of result.

Let me give an example. The political action metaphor challenges the more conventional neopositive "tool" and romantic "human encounter" metaphors, but one could also turn the situation around, arguing that although individuals seldom act totally without political awareness and self-interests, they may also perceive the situation in other terms and may be enrolled in projects appealing to other "nonpolitical" motives, such as sharing insights, helping the researcher, and so forth. The ideal is to maintain an awareness that there is more than one good way of understanding something, and there is a great risk that the one chosen may hide more interesting understandings. Reflexivity means working with multiple interpretations in order to steer clear of traps and/or to produce rich and varied results. Reflexivity may be something that the researcher is engaged in solely or mainly during analysis (before "writing it up"), but it may more or less strongly affect textwork and be explicit in the completed text.

Pragmatism here means a willingness to postpone some doubt and still use the material for the best possible purpose(s). Pragmatism builds on an awareness that time, space, and patience are limited. It also means the occasional bracketing of radical doubt and self-critique for the achievement of results. There is an adaptation to the constraints and a willingness to compromise between reflexive ideals and the idea to "deliver knowledge." Results are, however, informed by reflexive considerations of how the empirical material can be interpreted. The knowledge produced may thus be quite different from what was intended at the start of the research process. Research results may also be multiple in character.

Reflexive pragmatism calls for epistemological awareness rather than philosophical rigor. Jumping between paradigms is a very difficult sport, but it is not impossible to widen and vary one's horizon, looking self-critically at favored assumptions and lines of inquiry. In order to facilitate such a reflexive pragmatist approach, we need to have a fairly broad and multiangled theoretical understanding of the research interview (and, by implication, similar social interactions in general). The eight metaphors are instrumental here. Each represents a starting point and some broad guidelines for theoretical—as opposed to technical—reasoning about the subject matter.

A reflexive approach means working with a framework involving a set of potential lines of thinking and theoretical ideas for how to understand a subject matter, rather than a definitive theoretical formulation and privileged vocabulary for grasping it. It means opening up and acknowledging the uncertainty of all empirical material and knowledge claims, but also offering alternative lines of interpretation for how to use the interview material in thoughtful and creative ways. A reflexive approach does not privilege a particular ontology but can in principle be combined with various paradigms and specific theories, although reflexivity in action

may well mean that various "substantive approaches" are not left intact, since reflexivity means challenging and reconsidering assumptions and beliefs of what data are all about. In this sense it shares some characteristics with critical theories and postmodernism questioning received wisdoms, thus opening the way for a plurality of meanings (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Boje, 1995). Reflexivity aims to inspire a dynamic, flexible way of working with empirical material and escapes a simple theory/method divide.

The eight metaphors combined with the metatheoretical framework proposed here give a fairly holistic, nontechnical theoretical view (or metaview) on interviews, but they can also be seen as offering *examples* of what can be included in an interpretive repertoire useful in exploring how empirical interview material can be conceptualized and rich meanings produced. Combining all or, given one's inclinations and research project, some of these with the tool and human encounter metaphors in a repertoire of viewpoints means that the complexity and richness of interviews are acknowledged—that there is no definite meaning or truth. This calls for a preparedness to employ various "seeing as" approaches in addressing them. This does not mean, of course, that all angles are equally productive and worth developing in specific instances. The set of metaphors offers resources for knowledge development and reflexivity; using these in a rigid way would counteract the ideal of reflexivity.

The framework suggested here can be applied to or combined with any positions on interviews. The conventional neopositivist and romantic assumptions about facts to be collected or stable meanings to be interpreted are not necessarily reproduced without friction in a research process taking the epistemology here proposed seriously. Some of the metaphors are strongly nonpositivist, but elements of the thinking they inspire can be incorporated in efforts to make neopositivist research more rigorous (see the next section). Some of the metaphors challenge the narrow localist view of studying language use in a microsetting through encouraging an interest in, for example, wider discourses and organizational politics. The idea with the set of metaphors is that they should be broadly useful in inquiry, irrespective of where the researcher comes from and anticipates he or she will go. Different metaphors and combinations of them may, however, be useful in different ways and to various degrees, for different researchers and research projects.

Working with reflexivity and metaphors as proposed in this paper can be combined with various "method positions" along the spectrum of social facts (neopositivism), meanings (romanticism), and language use (localism), or any combination thereof. One may work with a combination of a particular position and (a variety of) the metaphors, or simply downplay and even bypass the three mentioned method positions and emphasize the metaphors in relationship to how one is working with the production, interpretation, and presentation of empirical material. My two empirical examples above indicate a way of working with the interview material without necessarily a priori locating oneself as focusing on facts, meanings, or language use. In terms of developing a framework for empirical inquiry, the reflexivity-metaphor thinking introduced here may be seen as, in some ways, a challenge and an alternative to, and, in other ways, a complement to, other conventional ingredients in the setup of a research project. Because it slices the significant elements in research differently, and in particular transcends the conventional theory/method divide, it calls for some rethinking of what is needed. This reflexivity-metaphor thinking may, for example, downplay the significance of the procedural and technical aspects of method, and it may also postpone the need for a strict research question at the outset of research. But there is no formula for how to work with these ingredients. My point is that the epistemological ideas suggested here should not be seen as another complication just adding additional burden to the researcher. These ideas are intended to provide a way of thinking about how we can avoid getting caught in certain ways, but they are also intended to make life easier for the researcher through offering an alternative way to think about knowledge generation and to use interview material in realistic as well as innovative ways.

The reflexive approach can be formulated in dialectical terms: point of departure, negation, transcendence. One starting point here is the dominant view(s) on interviews: this "theory" asserts that an interview is a tool or human encounter in which a knowledge-transmitting logic prevails; language is a transparent me-

dium for communication of insights, experiences, and facts; the interviewee is motivated by a want to assist science and is called upon in a sufficiently well-structured or secure and personal way so that pretense and role play do not matter much and true or authentic answers are provided; the interviewee is—or can be mobilized as—an integrated source of meaning, knowledge, and intentionality; and so on. The metaphors then offer counterviews, negating this understanding in favor of a different kind of theorizing: the interviewee is a political actor rather than a truth teller; the interviewee is controlled by and within discourse, rather than a language user in control of meaning; and so forth. The metaphors are not, however, necessarily to be read as expressing superior truths about interviews, but may be seen as theoretical inputs in stretching the imagination, openness, and theoretical-methodological vocabulary so that some mistakes in using interviews are avoided and possibilities utilized better. This then calls for *not* a priori favoring a (set of) metaphor(s) or counterview(s) (as in localism), but for being open to the spectrum of positions possible and seeing what a reasonable compromise would be between research questions asked and methodological awareness in relationship to specific empirical materials. I speak more about this in the next section on implications.

Taking one step away from the metaphors suggested and opening up more to conventional concerns, one could see interview situations and accounts as highly ambiguous and as a complex blend of knowledge-expressing elements and social, political, psychological, and discursive processes. The processes highlighted by the countermetaphors may not necessarily dominate. Instead of viewing interviews as an expression of local dynamics, one may see the possibility of interviewees being capable of abstracting from local specificity. The scene always matters, but not necessarily in a very strong way.[4] A counterpoint to the political metaphor could be to suggest that self-interest is not the sole motive for human beings and that, depending on the questions raised and the position taken by the interviewee, a want to serve science may dominate. The "informant" metaphor may be appropriate.

Interview accounts need to be read in a variety of ways. The themes that interviewers typically try to address—reality "out or in there"—often put some kind of imprint on the accounts. But so do various other issues. The relevance of different metaphors is related to the research questions asked, careful consideration of the critical reflection of what kind of ontological claims the material can carry, and, in particular, the productivity and innovativeness of the interpretations made.

Interview material is then carefully interpreted, considering a wide set of meanings and complications and considering that any interpretation of interview material is founded in analysis of the local context, political motives, the slipperiness and powers of language, and so forth that may make it difficult to use for conventional analysis. The researcher should provide strong reasons for giving interview material a particular ontological status, particularly if it is seen as referring to social phenomena out there or to the interior (level of meaning) of the interviewee and his/her likes. As indicated by many of the metaphors suggested above, treating interview material as discourse—examples of language use in which a particular view on social reality is constructed (not revealed)—is, of course, a possibility (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a,b; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998). The gap between the empirical material—interview talk—and what it is supposed to refer to—language use in organizations—is not that large, even though, as Boje (1991) observes, the former does not capture the process and performance dimensions so crucial in language use in organizational situations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH PRACTICE

The kind of thinking suggested by the understanding(s) of the research interview proposed here can be used in at least three different ways, as discussed below.

Implications for Methodological Practice and Technique

Incorporating the eight metaphors in thinking of method may encourage more informed fieldwork methods. An awareness of script following

[4] This can, to some extent, be tested through varying the scene in interviews: vary interviewers, frame the research project differently, and so forth.

may, if one is not interested in studying that aspect, lead, for example, to interview interventions in which familiar, institutionalized ways of talking about things are discouraged. Questions such as "Can you explore that with other words?" when interviewees use standard jargon, may trigger responses less caught in script-coherent expressions. In relation to the example (quotation from Watson, 1994) above, encouragement to use words other than "engineering-led" and "market-led" culture may be a possibility. Doing restarts and coming back to a particular theme through different vocabularies (points of entry) at later stages in an interview may be useful. Similarly, the researcher can change the scene by becoming more or less active or modifying the interviewee's assumption through framing the project in various ways. The political interest of interviewees may be reduced if the researcher communicates that the research will not be reported back to the company. This may reduce politically guided interview accounts but also decrease the motivation of people to participate, since the research may be seen as irrelevant for the organization; as with all techniques, these are mixed blessings.

This kind of implication for research practice would, however, mean a relatively modest lesson on rethinking the interview, leading to some strengthening of neopositivist and romantic views on interviewing. The possibilities of "rationalizing" interview practice—of translating a theoretical understanding into a set of technical rules—are limited.

One major implication would, of course, be to rely less on interviews than on ethnographic work, in which participant observations are central (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). However, many interesting research questions call for getting the voices of those targeted for understanding, and interviews are an important part of most ethnographies.

Implications for a More Rigorous and Reflexive Approach to the Use of Interview Material for "Conventional" Purposes

One option would be to maintain conventional concerns—using interviews as pipelines for studying settings or phenomena other than the focused one of the interview situation (as a location of discourse, as a scene, as a site of political action, as identity work, etc.)—but then to try to evaluate more carefully the nature of the empirical material in light of the metaphor framework proposed. The empirical material that stands the steel bath of critical scrutiny—that is, does not seem to be best understood through any or several of the "antitool" metaphors—can then be used in a conventional way.

Thus, it becomes possible to substantiate the case for using the material in order to make statements of phenomena "out there" (outside the interview situation). In the conventional view on empirical material, the interviewee is assumed to have provided the researcher with reliable data about a phenomenon, as long as there are no apparent reasons to believe otherwise. At least, rules for coding and conventions for presenting data generally imply this kind of stance. A more reflexive approach would replace this assumption with one of skepticism but not of rejection. If it can be credibly argued that specific interview accounts have validity beyond the local context, beyond the reproduction of discourse, and so on, those statements can be treated as indicating something "out there." The point is that it is insufficient just to present, or refer to, a number of interview accounts or the use of a particular tactic of managing interviewees in order to claim trustworthiness. A normal tactic is to emphasize the quantity of the empirical material and the technical rules for coding it. It may give a misleading impression of robustness. Interview reports from several people are not necessarily an indication of high validity; they may indicate that these people engage in similar impression management tactics or are caught in the same discourse.

In the case of the second example discussed above (manager cited by Watson, 1994), a case for relying upon the interview for the purpose of using it as an indicator of the interviewee's experiences and/or corporate change would be strengthened *if* a set of accounts of the interviewee triggered by the use of different entrances in the interview broadly pointed in a similar direction. In addition, observations would be called for.

Of course, another possible implication is to give empirical material less emphasis. The basic focus of this paper is how to use empirical work in a sophisticated and ambitious way. But sometimes interesting research questions and strong theoretical ideas do not fit well with what

we are able to study empirically. Perhaps we should be more prepared to let data abdicate its privileged position? According to Astley (1985), a theory's influence has very little to do with the degree of empirical support it has received. Perhaps we should be more modest about empirical claims in some cases, realizing that the shoulders of interviewees are meager and the capacities of interview talk to mirror or say something valid about reality are limited. This comment is, of course, even more valid about questionnaire and diary-based research (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). It is possible that careful methodological reflection of what interviews (as well as other practices) can do occasionally should limit our hubris and encourage the use of empirical material for inspirational or illustrative purposes or as ambiguous correctives for bad ideas, rather than provide a robust basis for the determination of the truth, meaning, or development of (grounded) theory. This would liberate thinking from empiricist straitjackets.

Implications for Novel Research Questions and New Lines of Interpretation

A third version is to view reconceptualizations of interviews as offering a variety of lines of interpretation of interview material. Recognizing the futility of many conventional research tasks and asking questions that simply can't be answered through empirical inquiry may trigger a reorientation of research (cf. the linguistic turn; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a). Interviews can thus be conducted, but the interpretation stays closer to the interview as an empirical situation and as a productive site for studying phenomena not that extremely dissimilar from it—that is, organizational discourses. This would go beyond localism, but with caution. All the proposed metaphors offer potentially interesting ways of using the material. Interview material may, for example, throw light on vocabularies of motives (Mills, 1940) or identity work (Alvesson, 1994). Of course, it is then important to give good reasons and/or some indications that talk during interviews says something about talk in everyday life. As Boje (1991) argues, interviews about stories in organizations may give a rather different impression from studying storytelling in "real life"; here the performance of storytelling and the specific context and readings of the listeners are vital aspects. The dynamics of the situation are very important to appreciate in order to understand how stories are told and how they work. Still, the key features of stories and other forms of language use also may allow interesting investigations (e.g., Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983).

The accounts in my two examples could, for example, be explored as organizational discourse (or in any of the other ways suggested by the brief metaphor-based interpretation above). Complemented with richer empirical material, they could illuminate how organizational life is permeated with hierarchy and market talk, respectively, and how these are used in interactive, persuasive contexts and related to issues of power, legitimacy, leadership, espoused values, etc.—all understood mainly within a discursive context. These kinds of talk may be more or less loosely related to what people think, feel, and value, as well as do, in various everyday life situations.

Grey (1994), in a study of junior professionals in a big accounting firm, asked first-year trainees about the need to appear enthusiastic when performing tedious audit tasks, and got answers like the following:

> I'm not saying it's always interesting but I always know that I'm doing it for myself, in the end, because it's getting me a qualification I can do anything with. So I don't think "this is really boring," I think "this is getting me to where I want to be" (1994: 487).

This account may be read as not mirroring the feelings and thinking of the interviewee but as actually constructing a particular form of subjectivity, defined through the career project. This discursive act, whether espoused or produced in a mute dialogue that the subject has with himself, then is a part of a particular project. The interview situation and identity-creating talk performed does not refer to "something else," such as a fixed attitude, but is an instance of the ongoing project of "getting me where I want to be." This kind of interpretation—well in line with Grey's approach—reduces the gap between the interview situation as an empirical example and the possibility of going beyond this and referring to something broader and "extrasituational." The question of whether the interviewee "really" sees the work not as boring or is truly career oriented is thus avoided. The "mobilization" of himself along the outlined tra-

jectory is what takes place—in the interview and possibly in other settings.

In order for interview accounts to be used in conventional ways—seen as mirroring exterior or interior reality—it is reasonable to expect the researcher to make credible that a knowledge-producing logic dominates the account and that social reality out there or the meanings and experiences of the interviewee put strong imprints on the accounts. The accounts should preferably *not* be best interpreted based on the eight metaphors suggested here. This may be read as rather tough demands on conventional research, having implications, of course, not only for interviews but also for other research practices (such as diaries and questionnaire responses). Compared to some views expressed by localists, the approach suggested here still gives more space for using interviews in order to get empirical material on people's meanings, experiences, or social practices. Rather than predefine any interview content as, for example, being tightly connected (only) to the local situation and/or following scripts or drawing upon cultural resources in order to build a particular moral order (Baker, 1997; Silverman, 1993), one could critically examine the account for such elements and evaluate to what extent these are significant. Arguably, this is not always the case, and interviews can then be used for purposes other than those envisioned in localist research programs.

CONCLUSION

Recent developments in philosophy and social theory have encouraged new lines of thinking in relationship to methodology. Problems of representation, the nature of language, the centrality of paradigms, the inseparability of researcher and knowledge, and problems and options of writing have received a great deal of attention (e.g., Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Denzin, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Silverman, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995). Little of this work has specifically addressed interviews. Apart from the critique from (what I refer to here as) localist authors, writings on interviews tend to be normatively and technically oriented and weak on theory and reflexivity. Dominating understandings of interviews circle around a metaphor of the interview as a tool, and the outcome of the skillful use of it is a pipeline to the interiors of interviewees or the exteriors of social reality. Only recently, and to a modest extent, interview methodologists outside the localist camps have begun "to realize that we cannot lift the results of interviewing out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim them as objective data with no strings attached" (Fontana & Frey, 2000: 663). But this emergent insight is mainly restricted to acknowledging this complication and to a general call for being aware of and recognizing this, and there are not many efforts to develop a theoretical framework to understand context issues. In this paper I have aimed to do so and have proposed a rethinking of what is conventionally seen as sources of bias to be minimized through various techniques in favor of a view acknowledging social complexities as key features of interviews calling for an ambitious theoretical understanding.

In this project I have to some extent drawn upon and developed the work of localist authors such as Potter and Wetherell and Silverman. They tend to emphasize close readings of language use in the micro situation and do not address the broader contextual issues affecting interviews, such as political motives and the role of discourse in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1980). A strict localist approach would undermine the options of studying facts, meaning, and experience in an organizational context. The view proposed here then does not go as far—or it goes beyond, depending on how one sees it. The paper differs from localist work in suggesting opportunities for checking the dynamics undermining the interview as a purist knowledge-producing activity and, at least to some extent, under certain conditions, saving this project. It also differs through pointing at research problems bridging localist and conventional, broader concerns.

Instead of relying strongly on the researcher to optimize the interview as a technique or tool and/or to work hard in interview encounters at getting interviewees to be honest, clear, and consistent, the message expressed here is rather that the hard work should be conducted at the desk and that this is not primarily a matter of coding and processing data in an objective way. Fieldwork is, of course, important, but the complexities and pitfalls involved call for careful, ongoing reflection—not just a well-thought-out

and well-executed design. There is a strong need to think through (1) our basic theoretical stance on (metaphors of) interviews; (2) the possible research tasks that we can expect to carry out in interviews, avoiding putting too heavy a burden on the meager shoulders of the interviewer and the interviewee and realizing that language cannot really mirror reality; and (3) how we relate to empirical material emerging out of interviews—that is, considering a variety of possible meanings in an open and (self-) critical way.

These considerations lead to a more modest, more reflexive approach to interviews than the tool and pipeline version still dominating, although in various versions. Interviews cannot be reduced to simple (or even complicated) instruments—this metaphor for interviews is misleading if not challenged (and understood as a metaphor)—but must be carefully considered also, not necessarily exclusively, as complex social phenomena. In this article eight such conceptualizations have been suggested: as a local accomplishment within a specific scene, as perpetuating a storyline, as identity work, as cultural script application, as impression management, as political action, as construction work, and as a play of the powers of discourse. Some of these are based on localist thinking—in particular, local accomplishment and script application—while most others draw upon other intellectual inspirations (identity theory, political theory, Foucauldian discourse theory, etc.).

A theoretical understanding of the research interview means conceptualizing what goes on in the situation and how the outcomes can be understood. It means a "thicker" understanding than the one provided by the interview-as-technique-for-getting-data or the interview-as-a-human-encounter-leading-to-in-depth-shared-understanding. The multiple layers of meaning involved in interview work, and the contingencies of the performances of the interviewee, need to be appreciated. Here we have three major elements: (1) the social scene (involving the interviewer, but also the physical setting and general framing of the situation); (2) the individual (interviewee) subject targeted as constituted in terms of (the interaction of) identity, impression regulation, sensemaking, and politics and with a motive orientation that is crucial for the accounts produced; and (3) the double-edged nature of language (language speaking behind and through the subject and constituting him/her, and language actively used by the speaker, evoking effects on listeners).

Tying this together is not easy. It is not necessarily productive either. The scene, the subject, and the language offer different entrances and foci for understanding what goes on in an interview. In this article deep thinking of how we conceptualize and use interviews is encouraged through the proposal to address the level of the metaphor behind surface practice and technique. The advantage with conceptualizing something in terms of metaphors is that it avoids a categorical position on the subject matter. It challenges and inspires rather than suggests a firm position. It opens up our ways of looking at the interview, from prematurely and unreflectively seeing it as a researcher-controlled tool or as a human encounter for coproduction of knowledge to critically interpreting specific interview situations and accounts. Instead of a method-technical focus, the interview is placed in an epistemological-theoretical-methodological context.

A set of metaphors can be put together as an interpretive repertoire guided by a metatheoretical framework in which the interview situation is seen as a socially, linguistically, and subjectively rich and complex situation. This situation is seen as open in terms of knowledge-producing potential in relationship to other features, and as possible to use for a variety of research purposes, but where the interpretation of the usefulness of the material and the strengthening of the kind of approach taken calls for multiangled interpretation and a preparedness to reconsider favored lines of inquiry in light of alternative interpretations of what it is all about. Research interviews may involve many things, depending on one's purpose, but also on how specific examples empirically unfold; drawing upon a set of metaphors may encourage retheorizing about one's research practice and reconsideration of what one may use interview material for. Key aspects then become a problematizing attitude and a willingness to engage in theoretically informed interpretations about the interview situation and the various "logics" behind interview statements. The theoretical framework and the vocabulary suggested here are intended to support the critical judgement that must be viewed as the cornerstone in research. The conflict between these key elements in reflexive research and the tra-

ditional means of suppressing ambiguity and accomplishing pseudorationality—data management and technical rules—should not be underestimated.

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