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Research Interviews to Investigate and Co-create Values

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Introduction

We are living in an interview society in which much information is gained by asking questions (Silverman, 1997). News media introduce us to both leaders at the top level and people in the street. Sport reporters are famous for asking athletes how it feels to pass the finish line. Questions like: 'What do you feel now?' has been used to uncover information as a kind of entertainment.

Asking questions is a main method of data-gathering in doing research in social science. We can ask, what distinguishes questions in a research interview from a journalist asking questions? Or, how do the questions in a research interview move the questioning beyond the journalism arena? The researcher is often not an expert in asking questions. Some might experience difficulty in finding the right way to explore the research question. Sometimes we see that research questions might be complicated and

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technical and not necessarily easy to answer. In the interview, some researchers might be more concerned with asking questions than being aware of the answers.

How then can we develop a gold standard of qualitative methods to become a viable arena to develop insights during investigation? A good interview requires practical skills, personal insight and training. To conduct an interview is a form of craftsmanship (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). Knowledge of the interview process, preparation for the interview and working on skills for asking questions and listening to others are part of the process and of special interest when investigating what is 'worth having, doing and being', which indicates that values are involved (Selznick, 1992, p. 60).

Values can be explicit and intended or tacit and hidden in practice, making them difficult to capture (Aadland, 2010). Values can be understood as emerging in our experience (Williams, 1967) as part of our 'human behaviour' (Kraatz et al., 2020, p. 485). In moving away from investigating values as matters of fact to a more relational and temporal phenomenon, we will here look at how research interviews can be used to identify values as part of the experience that is surfacing, including both the present situation and future-oriented desirables. Thus, the central question guiding this chapter is as follows: How can the researcher, through a process of interviewing, explore values in organisations?

In this chapter, I will first discuss how research within different paradigms utilises interviews as a method in various ways. Further, the chapter will present how a constructivist approach can be useful when researching values and values work. The interview process will, in this approach, take the form of a process of inter-viewing, of together-seeing with an-other. In this situation, values and the meanings of values can be part of constructing reality together with another. Finally, general and useful qualitative interview questions in order to explore values and values work will be suggested.

Research Interviews and Their Philosophical Underpinnings

When you as a researcher are starting a research project, you might be driven by an interest in investigating a topic, theme or phenomenon. Some researchers may start with a question they seek to answer, others with a puzzle to solve. Some might start with a preference for a chosen method; for others, the various philosophical assumptions emerge later in the process. However, at some point, you as the researcher have to make decisions on how to build the study on philosophical assumptions, what kind of research design you want and which research methods you want to utilise. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe four different paradigms: postpositivist, constructivist, transformative and pragmatic worldviews. By worldview, we here mean 'a basic set of beliefs guiding your action', establishing a platform for your philosophy of science (Guba, 1990, p. 19). Choosing an interview to collect data is a decision about what research method you would like to use. In order to give examples of different research strategies for interviewing, I will further describe how the postpositivist and constructivist worldviews approach use research interviews differently.

Both positivists and constructivists use the techniques of interviewing to collect data. Within a postpositivist tradition, most often, a standard or structured interview is conducted in the form of a questionnaire. In a questionary, the interviewee (the person interviewed) is asked questions in a precisely determined order, identical for all interviewees. The interviewer (the person making or asking the questions) takes a neutral position and does not prompt nor improvise during the session (Silverman, 2017). The questionary most often reflects the researcher's concerns, and the postpositivist interviewer is mostly interested in the answer given, not what is happening between the interviewer and interviewee. In searching for values as end-states and not necessarily as part of a process, the researcher can ask questions such as the following: 'On a scale from 1 to 7, to what extent do you see the value of respect being practiced?'

Within a constructivist worldview, the interviewer might not always be interested in obtaining objective information. What the interviewer is

looking for in the conversation is human experience, interpretations of facts, events and behaviours (Gudkova, 2018). An interview guide is most often used with a series of questions; however, there is flexibility in the conduct of the interview and an opportunity to vary the sequence of questions (Bryman, 2016). The interviewer has the latitude to ask questions in response to what is seen as significant replies. This exploratory purpose of the interview provides the potential for insight into how people perceive and understand reality. It allows for a reflection of the interviewee's implicit values, work and perspectives. In this situation, the interviewer can ask questions like the following: 'In relation to the value of respect, how do you see it being practiced?' The interviewer may then proceed with follow-up questions aimed at understanding the answers better.

Additionally, within a constructivist approach, there is the potential for open-ended interviews. Open-ended interviews most often have a few key questions and can be used to generate life stories in life story interviews (Atkinson, 1998). In order to achieve rich data, the interviewee has in this interview approach the freedom to talk and ascribe meaning to their perspectives, beliefs and values. The interviewer takes an active listening position. There are also focus group interviews in which the interviewer takes the role of being a facilitator. In these interviews, the researcher asks one or two questions to stimulate discussions, for instance, to identify processes and mechanisms of how an organisation is working on the value of respect and if there might be different experiences of it.

The Role of the Interviewer

What kind of role does the qualitative researcher with a constructivist worldview undertake? A metaphor of the interviewer can be either a traveller or a miner (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). Through the eyes of a traveller, the interview is considered a tool to collect data. Hidden knowledge is waiting to be discovered, and the interviewer is the one who defines its structure. The miner interviewer understands knowledge as buried, and the interviewer's role is to uncover the valuable information, retrieving the knowledge from the ground and working to understand what there is

to discover. In searching for meanings and values, I will here elaborate on the miner metaphor. The miner researcher is concerned with investigating foundations of social life, practice and reality, of desirables and that which is worth having, doing and being. In order to understand the miner researcher's role, I will start with drawing a distinction between interviewing and interrogation.

In standardised and semi-structured interviews, the interviewer can convey interviews with the purpose of interrogating, which in this context means to help, educate or evaluate respondents. Interrogation methods are mostly known from employment interviews or police investigations (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The interview implies certain expectations about thematic progression, form and outcome of the interaction, as well as the constraints of the context. The interviewer is recognised as the one that asks questions, and the role of the interviewee is to answer questions. In these situations, respondents become repositories of facts and the details of the situation. However, there is a risk that the interviewee might end up as a passive vessel of answers only answering questions not bringing along experiences (Gudkova, 2018).

In taking a more constructively active position, the interviewer can transform interviews from a passive position (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012) to 'a knowledge-producing activity' (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015, pp. 3–4). Taking this position, the interview is an arena for producing knowledge in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Thus, the interview can be understood as an interaction that takes place between two persons (or more) who form their experiences and interpretations together to explore a phenomenon of values and values work.

The Process of Inter-Viewing

To understand the process of interviewing as an arena of experience and interpretation, I will here turn to the etymological roots of the word 'interview'. The word is derived from the French 'entrevue', meaning 'to see each other, visit each other, have a glimpse of' and to view 'between' (Harper, 2021). As such, the research interviewing process can be viewed

as a process of inter-viewing, of together-seeing, a kind of participation and seeing in-between. In this situation, inter-viewing goes beyond *me* (interviewer) participating in *your* (interviewee's) world and moves towards understanding the situation of *us* trying to look at experiences *together* with our both imaginative and reflexive worlds (Bjørkeng et al., 2014).

The process of inter-viewing challenges the traditional subjectivity-objectivity dualism that is often implicit in the practice of interviewing. Instead, it is replaced with connectedness and co-interpretation. To overcome the situation of making the respondent a passive vessel of information exchange, the interview is turned into a search-and-discovery process (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015), as the miner metaphor indicates. To further broaden what is found during search-and-discovery, the process can be called a 'narrative speech act' producing subject, text and knowledge in itself (Mishler, 1991). In a narrative speech act approach, the interview is understood as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively formed and shaped through a reflexive and communicative act (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). This implies that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion. The interview is an occasion for constructing accounts forming and shaping the content of what is said.

Inter-View as a Narrative Inquiry to Research Values

A narrative inquiry can be a useful approach to get in touch with the more in-depth experience of values and values work (Askeland et al., 2020; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). The key to the inter-viewing process is to recognise the interview as a process in which both interviewer and interviewee play an active role. As values are often part of hidden practice, the narrative production can be used to identify the deeply and unavoidably pattern of practices of values work that reside within the experience of the situation. Meaning is not merely directed through asking skilful questions, nor in truthful replies. Taking care of how the narrative interview unfolds is as important as what is selectively composed

and preferred. The researcher utilising a narrative inquiry approach is turning the attention to the meaning-making and the communicative conditions of the interviewing process that is happening and the values involved. In this process, it is the constructive hows and the substantive whats that take the interviewer's attention (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012).

The mutual participation in and engagement with the dialogue can be part of the interpretation, making it more than mere 'data-gathering' (Bjørkeng et al., 2014; Skjervheim, 1957/1996). Instead of treating the sayings of the other as facts, the utterances of the other could be engaged with by offering responses and questions in return. For instance, when an interviewee is talking about the desire to be met by respect, the interviewer can ask how the person understands the value of respect and how the other knows this is about respect, for example, by asking, 'What do you think the value of respect really means? Seeing people being treated with respect—what are you seeing they are doing? Can you tell of a situation when you were met with respect?' As such, the whole interview can provide notions of what respect actually mean, the experience of the value and how it is practised.

Co-creating Meaning: Practical Examples from a Research Process

I will here draw examples from a recent PhD project discussing the hows and whats of the narrative practice of inter-viewing and how values and values work were animated through the interviewing process (Espedal, 2019a). The aim of the research process was to investigate how values work emerges and how it is performed in a faith-based organisation. Both interviews and observations were conducted to gather data. Since the case organisation had been working with values for more than 150 years, the researcher assumed that informants had much information on values through conveying daily value discourses and performing activities rife with values practices. To uncover the knowledge of values and values work performed, the researcher decided to do interviews before

observation to gain relevant information on what to work on in the observation phase.

How, then, to choose questions for the interview guide knowing that values are often taken for granted and tacit knowledge? The researcher knew that to start the interview with an open question on what values the informants appreciate most would most likely not lead to in-depth answers. Asking people what they value most often require reflection and a search for tacit values hidden in their daily life and practice.

To gain information, the researcher established an interview guide with a four-fold structure. First, the interviewer asked open-ended questions regarding activities, challenges and the major concerns of the leaders and employees, asking, 'Can you tell me about the typical activities you engage in during a normal working day?' and 'What challenges do you face in being a manager/employee in this organisation?' These questions were used as an initiation and warm-up phase. To avoid the process ending as a stimulus and response activity in which the interviewee was merely a repository of answers, the researcher engaged in the answers as a form of 'speech activity' (Mishler, 1991). Taking a naïve position as an interviewer, the researcher followed up with small questions, such as 'Why is this so?', 'Then what happened?', 'How do you know that?' and 'How do you know this is important?' During the informants' speech, the interviewer would say 'hmm' as a confirmatory marker that the respondent was on the right track for the interview purpose (Mishler, 1991).

Second, the interviewer was involved in the narrative approach by asking, 'Can you tell me a story of when you made a difference to someone at work?' This was an intention they liked to present as some kind of 'saying' in the organisation (Kemmis, 2009). The organisational workers wanted to be known for making a difference for people (Skirbekk & Nortvedt, 2011). The researcher assumed there were some intentions and actually some ideals hidden in the stories. In telling stories of when the informants made a difference for someone, it was possible for the interviewer to uncover the story of how they were taking an ownership position of enacting values and values work. The goal of the question was to hear their stories and gain knowledge of their work. This question was followed by 'How do you know this made a difference to someone?' The question was asked to gain knowledge of how this process actually became

knowledge for the informant to identify some of the knowledge-creation activities of the organisation. Gubrium and Holstein posed a similar question in trying to channel themes from a recovery group when interviewing pharmacists, asking, 'Whose voices do we hear in these stories?' This question illustrates how a spectator theory of knowledge lurks beneath the surface in reflexive accounts (Bjørkeng et al., 2014).

The questions that led to stories of when an informant made a difference to someone at work became a gatepost and opened up for something the researchers, after a while, termed sacred stories (Ricoeur, 1995), which were part of the organisation's values work (Espedal & Carlsen, 2021). Through asking the question above, the researchers discovered how the sacred was figured in two sets of tales that were lived and told with surprising intensity and consistency in the case organisation: the parable of the Good Samaritan and the tale of the legacy bestowed by the organisation's founder. In one article, the researchers theorised how this figuring of the sacred in stories and in action recast values work from a centralised and unitary process to a two-way dialectic learning process between the ongoing creative imitation of action and how it refigures new stories. There is more to read of this process in this book's chapter on narrative research.

In the third section of the interview, the interviewer asked, 'At work, what are the most important and difficult discussions you encounter?' Through this question, the interviewer discovered the challenges of the external conditions and regulatory frameworks that threatened the organisation's value platform. An informant told about legislation depriving the organisation of the ability to hire people who are only of particular religious origins and the secularisation of the general workforce working against the Christian legacy of the founder. The researcher discovered that health care regulations and competitive demands that favour economically viable patients worked against taking care of the marginalised (Espedal, 2019b).

As the fourth phase of the interview, the interviewer finally asked questions about how the interviewees saw value processes and value priorities at work. As the interviewer and interviewee had worked through challenges of both work and what was valued in work, this became a phase of summing up. The interviewer learned that values were part of the

everyday language of the organisation. Second, the values influenced practice. It was possible to identify a value practice of value inquiry linking facts of the situation to the ideals of institutional social engagement and the common good. The process elaborated a view on how the temporality of value inquiry became a dominant mechanism of integrating values to realign agency (Espedal & Carlsen, 2021, work in progress).

Capitalising on the information acquired during the four steps of the interview process, the researcher proceeded to collect ethnographic data as it occurred in the case organisation (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008). The aim then, was to investigate and observe values work in vivo in social situations.

Practical Considerations in Conveying Research Interviews

A good idea in preparing for an interview is to develop in advance of the interview a scenario of the interview based on the research questions or topics that the interview should explore. The researcher should think through questions like 'Just what about this thing is puzzling me?' or 'What do I need to know in order to answer the research question I am interested in?' (Bryman, 2016, p. 469). From this point of view, the researcher can start preparing the interview guide. An interview guide is most often a list of memory prompts of areas to be covered. Conducting a pilot interview can be a good idea to see how the interview questions work in relation to the research question. A pilot interview is an interview conducted to give the interviewer some experience with the questions and imbue them with a greater sense of confidence. Questions that make the interviewer uncomfortable or are not functioning in any other way can be changed.

Kvale and Brinkman (2015) suggest that interviews should have a warming-up phase to give the interview a direction. As an introduction, you can ask, 'Please tell me about…?', 'Do you remember an occasion when…?', or 'Could you describe a situation in which you noticed that the value of respect became valuable?' After the warming-up questions,

the interview can proceed with follow-up-questions to give the interviewee a chance to elaborate on his or her answers, asking questions such as 'What do you mean by that?' or 'How do you know that…?' It is also possible to ask probing questions to follow up what has been said through direct questioning, such as 'Can you give a detailed description of what happened when the value became prominent?'

The researcher can also ask direct questions that introduce topics and dimensions, for example, 'When you mention that people are living by the value of trust, what are you seeing them do?' The interviewee can, by answering this question, indicate which aspect of the value work on trust is central to them. A suggestion could also be to ask exploring questions, for instance, 'How did you know this was the right thing to do?' Depending on the phenomenon under investigation, the interviewer may search for the thoughts and emotions involved: 'When this happened, what did you think or feel then?' If something is happening in the interview, the researcher can explore: 'Is this difficult to talk about?' The interviewer is responsible for the course of the interview and should indicate when a theme is exhausted, saying, 'I would now like us to move on to a different topic'.

A qualitative researcher is also aware that silence in the interview can be beneficial. For a researcher, it is often tempting to ask a question again or ask another question when silence occurs. However, the silence might be of importance. Often something is happening in the silence—the interviewee is thinking. A good piece of advice for the researcher is to wait.

Questions to Identify Values

Leaning on the definition of values as that which is 'worth having, doing and being' (Selznick, 1992, p. 60), some specific questions can be used to explore values, such as the following:

- What do you value most in your job as a leader?
- What is the most important thing you do as a leader?

- What is the ideal work environment? When have you experienced an ideal work environment? What happened? How do you work to maintain a good working environment?
- Tell me a story about a good leader you once had. What values do you think he/she had?
- Think ahead in time. You are sitting with your grandchildren, and you tell them something you did as a leader that you are proud of. What would that be?

As I have already mentioned, a good interview requires practical skills, personal insight and training. In all interviews, it is a good idea to be an active listener. Being active does not mean being intrusive; it means asking curious questions about the topic and experiences related to the topic to gain insight into the phenomenon you are investigating. It can be challenging for an interviewer to both listen to what the interviewee is saying and find new follow-up questions. Some researchers make notes during the interview; others trust a recorder. It is important to find your own way of doing inter-viewing, though it is suggested to start with a pilot interview to get some indication of what works. The pilot interview can end with a question from you as the interviewer to the interviewee: 'Would you mind giving me feedback on the interview process—what worked, what question got you talking, what you especially liked to talk about, what questions were of importance for understanding the phenomenon under investigation?'

Ethical Sensitivity and Interviewing

To conduct a research interview is an ethical issue. Often we research phenomena that can be sensitive or even represent complexity in an interviewee's personal life. The researcher is balancing a thin line between wanting in-depth information about the topic and risking trespassing the borders of the interviewee. In the research interview, you do not know what kind of reactions you may be triggering.

In relation to the interviewee, it can be wise to talk about the consequences of participating in the research project, especially when the topic

under investigation is sensitive and personal. The interviewee should be informed of the right to withdraw at any moment. The overall purpose of the project and the main features and design should be elaborated on in the informed consent. The informed consent most often notifies the interviewee about the confidentiality of the project and the anonymity of the participants. Please read Chap. 12 on the role of the researcher and participant validation (Chap. 13) for more information on the interview processes.

When to Use Research Interviews?

In what situation would it be useful to conduct research interviews? I have, in this chapter, especially concentrated on research interview based on a constructivist worldview. The advantage of using interviews as a research method is to explain, gain understanding, explore and interpret opinions, behaviour, experiences and phenomena. There is flexibility in conducting a research interview as part of the research design both in relation to gaining the necessary information and in choosing the time and place of the interviews. There is also flexibility in how the interviews are conducted, for instance, through cellular phones, in an office or on digital platforms such as Zoom. As such, it is clear why the research interview has become the gold standard of qualitative research. This can be done anywhere and anytime, and within different types of research designs, such as case studies, longitudinal designs and other designs.

In research interviews, interviewees may provide insight into the situation under investigation, involving cognitive meanings of that which is asked about. However, in some situations, this might not be enough. You might want further data, for example, about what values are embedded in work and practices. It might then be beneficial to include observation as a data-gathering approach as well. Through observation, you might see what is going on in practice, if there is consistency between explicit and implicit values (see Chap. 8 on observation and shadowing in this book by Sirris, Lindheim and Askeland for further information). A combination with observation or analysis of archival sources might present a broader picture of the phenomenon under investigation. Interviews are

also used in mixed-methods research in which qualitative and quantitative approaches are combined in different ways.

Conclusion

I have in this chapter presented how researchers, through a process of constructivist interviewing, can identify values and values work in organisations. In viewing values as part of our experience and a phenomenon that is worth having, doing and being, I have focussed on interviewing as a qualitative research method to identify information on values and values work. A research interview can be a useful method to collect in-depth information about a topic and can be a relevant research strategy when the answer is not obvious and is hidden in taken-for-granted organisational practices. Building on a constructivist worldview, I have identified the interviewing process as a process of inter-viewing, of seeing the phenomenon together with an-other, of co-creating meaning. The interviewer takes the role of a miner to uncover valuable knowledge and works to understand what is discovered, for instance, how the value of respect is being practised. Interviews are an appropriate research method when the researcher wants to produce and construct knowledge on the meaning of values and values work, and they are often chosen because of the flexibility of, for instance, following up information given to investigate the meaning of the phenomenon. Further deepening the values in practice observation is suggested as an additional research approach.

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