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Researching Values in Organisations and Leadership

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The Complexity of Research on Values

Values are essential to understand but difficult to define. As any set of acts in everyday work is value-driven (Askeland et al., 2020), values can be understood as ‘that which is worth having, doing, and being (i.e., normative goods or “ends”)’ (Selznick, 1992, p. 60). However, if you ask organisational members to define their values or elaborate on their organisation’s values, they often have problems answering. If you ask them to define the values that are important to them on a personal level, their answers will most likely be quite divergent and not necessarily reflect their employer’s official core values.

In short, although values are desirable, they can also be multiple, diverse, abstract, tacit, hidden, temporary and conflicting. This curious

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nature of values makes them notoriously difficult to research in practice. And yet, because they are so important for actions, practice, decisions, policies and communication on both individual and organisational levels, having a solid methodological basis for doing research on them seems to be exactly what is needed in order to advance insights into their significance. Values research could, for example, provide in-depth insights into social order (Scott, 2013) and social needs (Selznick, 2008). It could bring out fruitful discussions of identity, ‘ethos’ and the purposive institutional work of leaders and organisational members. It could reveal how values emerge and dwindle, which values carry moral weight in decisions and interactions, which values enter into conflict with each other and with what consequences and how values are affected by other causal forces (Kraatz et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the purpose of this book is to provide an overview of research methods and approaches for doing research on values in organisational settings that could enable such insights. The research question of this book is as follows: *How can research on values in organisations and leadership be conducted?* The chapters seek answers to this question by addressing different ways to identify and elicit values, offering practical guidance and examples of how to research values and values work and showing how discussions in the philosophy of science underpin important assumptions in values research.

Overall, a large and diverse body of research on values will be reflected in this book. The contributors come from disciplines such as sociology, leadership studies, organisational research and public administration. While some parts of this literature emphasise how values guide, constrain and provide meaning to individual and organisational behaviour (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Vaisey, 2008), other studies address changes in values resulting from macro-level reforms and trends (Hebson et al., 2003; Kernaghan, 2000; Reynaers & Paanakker, 2016; Selznick, 1957/1983; van Wart, 1998). Additionally, scholars have discussed conflicts that can arise between values in specific institutional settings (de Graaf et al., 2016; de Graaf & Paanakker, 2015; Goodsell, 1989; van der Wal et al., 2011). Taking a practice perspective, researchers have also begun to explore values work (Askeland et al., 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2019; Fayard et al., 2017; Gehman, 2021; Gehman, Trevino & Garud, 2013;

Vaccaro & Palazzo, 2015; Wright et al., 2017) or the practices that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right and wrong, good and bad in organisations.

This variation in theoretical approaches will be evident in the following chapters. Despite the variation, however, the contributions to this book share an important common grounding in qualitative research designs. Doing qualitative research is a complex endeavour. In general, through qualitative research, we study the characteristics or traits of given phenomena. Qualitative research methods can help assess the impact of policies or give insight into people's individual and collective experiences. They can also help evaluate service provisions and the exploration of little-known behaviours (Grbich, 2012). Doing qualitative research means shuttling between proximity and distance (Repstad, 2009). It includes a movement between the long lines and the small details, with the long lines often being tangible in the details and the details in the long lines. More importantly, qualitative research methods are ideal for studying values. Although quantitative approaches are well-established in large-scale comparative studies of values (Hofstede, 2001), qualitative approaches hold benefits over quantitative approaches when it comes to capturing the more subtle and tacit aspects of values as they relate to tension, conflict, identities, expressions, practices, work and processes. Methods and approaches for acquiring insights into these important aspects of values constitute the main focus of this book.

Key Concepts and Questions in This Book

The literature on values and values-related matters in organisations and leadership comprises at least six decades of research. Considering the insights that this research has provided not only into values but also into the methods for studying values, the time has come to take stock of the most common research methods and consider their merits and limitations. But, what do we mean by methods? Rather than favouring one single method for studying values in organisations, this book presents a variety of them, variously referred to by the authors as methodology, method, strategy, technique or approach. No attempt will be made here

to provide an overall framework for the book that clarifies the meaning of these concepts and their relational differences, as they often are used interchangeably. We note, however, that methodology is the more basic and overarching theoretical concept. Referring to the general research strategy that outlines how research is undertaken, it is a rationale for the research method and the lens through which the analysis occurs (Howell, 2012). Thus, it impacts the choices in the research process by grouping together a combination of methods, strategies, techniques and approaches used to enquire into an empirical phenomenon (Duffy & Chenail, 2009; Greenbank, 2003). A methodology for researching values, for example, could involve action research, discourse analysis, case studies, field research and theory generation. It could also involve the development of other approaches and strategies that are not as clearly associated with a known method but which could still draw on a number of well-known methods such as interviews, observations and document analysis.

Accordingly, in this book, some chapters describe established single methods or techniques for collecting and analysing data related to values. Others describe cutting-edge approaches and strategies they have specifically developed or relied on to reveal important aspects about values that have remained overlooked. Regardless of the approach, however, the chapters will demonstrate the characteristics and merit of the methods or approaches. They will explain the settings in which a method is appropriate, thereby answering the question of when a given method should be used. By doing so, the chapters provide practical guidance for selecting suitable methods for studying values and ways of carrying out data analysis on values. Contributions come from different scholars from Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, the Republic of South Africa, Spain and Scotland, all of them engaged in different ways of doing values research.

Important questions for this book will include, but not be limited to, the following:

- How can various research methodologies inform our understanding of values and values work in organisations?

- What are the epistemological and ontological assumptions associated with research on values?
- How can different methods elicit and enable our understanding of values?
- How have these approaches enabled or hindered our understanding of values in organisations?
- How are different methods for data collection adequate for the study of values?
- How are different methods for data analysis appropriate for researching values?

Overview of the Chapters in This Book

A key concept related to knowledge building is identifying a study's position within the philosophy of science and its relation to ontology and epistemology. Ontology means the theory of the nature of *what is*, which in social science concerns the nature and knowledge of social reality (Delanty & Strydom, 2003, p. 6). Epistemology refers to the fundamental branch of philosophy that investigates the possibility, limits, origin, structure, methods and validity of knowledge (Delanty & Strydom, 2003), which can be viewed as the relationship between the inquirer and the known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The assumption we have of values influences the research process. Values can be described as standards of right and wrong behaviour, but they can also be in a constant process of reformulation and reassessment as we in organisations continually modify our practices and make small innovations in which things are done. Considerations of this kind are ontological (Bryman, 2016). They invite us to consider the nature of values as social phenomena. As for epistemological issues, the stance that the researcher takes on the experience of values has implications for the way in which the research is conducted.

Much research on values has been placed within the positivist and quantitative paradigm, describing how values are structured and

measured and investigating the impact values have on perceptions and decisions (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). However, values are also researched within a hermeneutical and constructivist paradigm. As researchers, we have to assess the possibilities and viability of different methodologies to answer research questions. Research on values and values work in organisations is intractably connected to the research question and will be followed by methodological reflections.

This book has three parts. Part I has a particular focus on methodological approaches to researching values, linking philosophy of science to research methods for the study of values and values work. Part II presents different methods for collecting data, followed by different methods for analysing data. In Part III, we present various empirical projects and issues related to and exemplifying values research.

In this first chapter, we introduce you to the field of researching values as well as the content of the book. In the second chapter, Beate Jelstad Løvaas links philosophy of science to research methods in studying values and values work by mapping the field of how research on values in organisations has been conducted. By linking the aim and research question with design and methods, Jelstad Løvaas presents a brief overview of quantitative and qualitative approaches that have been used to study explicit and implicit values in organisations. In the third chapter, Annette Leis-Peters identifies how definitions and conceptualisations can contribute to the development of the empirical research of values. She explores the different ways to define values with the help of selected projects. In the fourth chapter, intentionality and agency are addressed by Thomas Andersson, along with how they can be understood in relation to values and values work. There is a challenge connected to what extent people are aware of values that influence their actions and the values work they are involved in, in addition to what extent they are aware of relations/conflicts between values that are imposed on them (e.g., from an employer) and personal values, which will be discussed. In Chap. 5, Dag-Håkon Eriksen and Marta Strumińska-Kutra explore the concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) to enable research that goes beyond the three traditional research goals of exploration, description and explanation. When applied to research activity, the concept of practical wisdom opens

possibilities for combining theoretical knowledge, reflecting on values and improving practice, constituting a type of values work. In Chap. 6, Gjalte de Graaf and Hester Paanakker unearth values and value conflicts in the public realm. By elaborating two different and related research strategies that have successfully been adopted in different empirical studies, they describe how to study values in their context.

In Part II, we aim to provide new methodological insights to investigate values and values work. One focus concerns how the aims of research afford specific methods for collecting and analysing data. This section illuminates how to use different analytical techniques such as interviewing, observation and shadowing, as well as different research strategies, such as how to use thematic analysis, discursive analysis and narrative approaches when researching values.

In Chap. 7, Gry Espedal discusses how organisational values and values work can be investigated through a constructivist and qualitative process of research interviews. The research interview is presented as a form of inter-viewing and of together-seeing and as a place for connectedness and co-interpretation. In Chap. 8, Stephen Sirris, Tone Lindheim and Harald Askeland provide insights into how participant observation and shadowing are relevant methods for studying practices and how they can be used for collecting data in studies on values work. They discuss how these methods offer insights into the core dimensions of values practices by means of granulated in situ and in vivo data.

In Chap. 9, Arild Wæraas explains how thematic analysis can be used to make values emerge from texts. The chapter presents a five-step approach to thematic analysis of values: (1) assigning codes, (2) generating themes, and if possible (3) organising themes, (4) identifying aggregate dimensions and (5) making visual representations of codes and themes. In Chap. 10, Benedicte Maria Tvetter Kivle and Gry Espedal discuss the identification of values through discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is here presented through three traditions with different theoretical and methodological connotations: structural-semantic discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology. In Chap. 11, Gry Espedal and Oddgeir Synnes suggest a narrative approach to exploring values and values work. A narrative approach can garner in-depth

information on organisational activities, identity, sense-making and change, depending on the narratives involved and the analysis of the content, aim and structure of the narratives. In Chap. 12, Stephen Sirris discusses the importance of reflexivity, referring to an examination of the connections between the researchers and the research. The chapter conceptualises role reflexivity as researchers' capacity to identify, account for and manage their roles before, during and after data collection.

Providing valid and reliable knowledge is essential and the overall goal when doing research. Validity is regarded as one of the strengths of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014) and indicates that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by applying certain procedures. In Chap. 13, Tone Lindheim presents participant validation as a procedure to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. This implies that the researcher in different ways presents the data material or the preliminary analysis to the informants to validate and assess interpretations. This chapter shows how participant validation addresses as well as raises ethical concerns.

In Part III, we present different practical cases and how they have studied values and values work. In Chap. 14, Nina Kurlberg seeks to address how the perspective of institutional logic can contribute to research on values in organisational practice. Drawing on empirical research conducted within an international faith-based relief and development organisation in the UK, the argument advanced in this chapter is that it is the 'telos' of each institutional logic in action within the organisation that shapes the values in operation within organisational practice. In Chap. 15, Anne Marie Reynaers goes beyond the often normative debate on the desirability of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to describe how a multiple qualitative case study approach that analyses how actors in PPPs give meaning to public values in practice can be applied to assess the extent to which public values are safeguarded in PPPs. In Chap. 16, Isaias Ezequiel Chachine presents how values-based participatory action research as a community-engaging research methodology can emphasise values, participation, mutual understanding and common action as methods of enquiry. An 'ethics of regard' is presented as a 'regard-based enquiry', which insists that the way in which values are understood impacts participatory decision making and research implementation.

Challenges to Future Research Methods

The methods and approaches presented in this book are arguably well suited for studying values in most contexts. However, although no one can tell exactly what the future will hold, we anticipate that the current knowledge of appropriate methods for values-related research in organisations can be challenged by trends not addressed by the chapters of this book. Increased use of digital technology has implications for data collection procedures (i.e., remote audio and video), for multi-modal data analysis (of text, audio, video) and for relevant ethical aspects when conducting research in a digital world, such as general data protection and privacy regulations (GDPR).

Values-related research on digital technology in organisational settings is still in its infancy but is clearly an area that can be expected to grow in importance (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). However, it is not yet clear which research methods are suited for such research. Notoriously tricky to observe in general, values become even more difficult to observe when they exist in computerised technology. This technology is not always accessible to researchers because organisations may not want to give researchers access to their technology, meaning that researchers will have to settle with addressing the values that informants say were put into the system or are implied by the outcomes of its use, rather than the values that are actually embedded in the mathematical code of the system. Furthermore, even if the technology was accessible, understanding exactly which values are embedded in it probably would require a type of technical competence not possessed by most organisational and management researchers.

With the increased use of digital organisational solutions and practices, the portfolio of relevant methods for values-focused organisational research needs to be expanded beyond qualitative data collection and analysis. Typical methods for data collection, such as qualitative interviews and observations, can be used to assess the ethical implications of technology. They can also be used to study at least some aspects of the processes of implementing algorithms. Different methods for analysing qualitative data for these processes, such as narrative and thematic

analysis, can also be applied (Sztandar-Sztanderska & Zielenska, 2020). However, to cope with the values-laden ‘black box’ of algorithms, methods that examine how values are given a de facto mathematical representation and configured in relation to desired outputs will be essential. As a result, there is a need for at least one more book on the methods of researching values.

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