Playing a role - but which one? : how public service motivation and professionalism affect decision-making in dilemma situations

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Chapter 4

QUALITATIVE METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

This chapter elaborates further on the research design of the qualitative part of this study. In the first section (4.1), the research method, semi-structured interviews, is introduced and I discuss the structure of the interviews and the reason why I consider semi-structured interviews to be most suitable in the context of this study. As indicated in the previous section, I also conducted document analyses, participant observation, and interviews with several key figures of the NVWA. Because these methods were used as preparation for for the semi-structured interviews – they represent a pre-study – I do not discuss them. In the next section (4.2), the composition of the two interview panels and the selection of interviewees are described. In Section 4.3, the coding process is described and explained. Finally (4.4), I assess the quality of the research by discussing its reliability, validity, and limitations.

4.1 Research method: semi-structured interviews

According to Boeije (2010), who is referring to Maso (1987, p. 63), an interview is "a form of conversation in which one person – the interviewer – restricts oneself to posing questions concerning behaviours, ideas, attitudes, and experiences with regard to social phenomena, to one or more others – the participant or interviewees – who mainly limit themselves to providing answers to these questions" (p. 61). Qualitative research is intended to describe and understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning individuals bring to them (Boeije, 2010). Interviews provide deeper insights into the ways individuals interpret and experience the roles they hold in society (Grotevant, Thorbecke & Meyer, 1982) and help us to learn more about the question of how individuals interpret 'constructs' (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This makes interviews a suitable method to research the meaning of PSM and of professionalism seen as professional role identity. The interviews used in this study were semi-structured, which means that the phrasing and order of the questions were not present. Rather, a list of topics - which can be found in the Appendix (Tables A1a, A1b, and A1c) - was designed beforehand on the basis of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the information gained in the pre-study. In this way, interviewees were able to speak freely, while at the same time all topics were systematically addressed. The semi-structured interviews enabled me to gain in-depth knowledge of the concepts I am interested in and so investigate the propositions put forward in the theory chapter.

Each interview lasted on average one hour. About half of the interviews were taken by myself together with a colleague and the remaining half by either of us individually. The reason why we took a great number of interviews jointly was that many interviews (up to five) were scheduled on one day. Taking interviews is a demanding activity, because the researchers have to decide on the spot how to formulate questions and which order to

follow (Boeije, 2010). In order to avoid fatigue and lack of concentration these interview-intensive days were taken by two researchers together.

All interviews had a similar structure. The interviewers introduced themselves, explained what the interview would be about, and assured the interviewees that anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. After that, the interviews were started very broadly by asking the inspectors why they had studied veterinary medicine in the first place, how they had ended up at the food safety authority, and what motivated them in their work. Other topics addressed were work-related dilemmas (how were these perceived and solved?) and the interviewees' perceptions of the role of veterinary inspector. For example, I would ask "What situations do you find difficult in your work?" or "Can you give us a situation in which you found it difficult to make a decision". If respondents told us about a dilemma situation or a situation in which they had difficulties reaching a judgement, I then went on to ask "how did you solve this difficult situation?", "What did you base your decision on?" In order to learn more about the way respondents interpret their professional role, I asked "What do you think are the most important characteristics a good veterinary inspector needs to possess?" As will be explained in detail in the following section (4.2), the qualitative results of this dissertation are based on two interview panels: one large interview panel presenting a representative sample of the entire population, and a longitudinal panel of all individuals who very recently started to work at the NVWA as veterinary inspectors: a panel of newcomers. The interviews with newcomers are important because they enabled us to hold organizational socialization mechanisms constant. In the interviews with the newcomers I addressed work and organizational expectations, via questions such as "What did you expect from the NVWA as an employer?" and "Did you have any prior expectations of the work of a veterinary inspector?" In order to learn more about the reality of the work, we asked in the second round of interviews with the newcomers "Is the job any different from what you had expected"? and "Any problems you encountered?" The interviews also included topics that are not part of this dissertation, such as organizational socialization tactics; these will be analysed by Daphne van Kleef in a different dissertation, also part of the NWO VIDI 'Double Bind' project.

4.2 Selection of interviewees: two interview panels

This study is based on two interviews panel: one large representative panel and one longitudinal panel consisting only of newcomers to the NVWA. Both panels will be discussed in detail; I will pay particular attention to the composition of the panels and the reason why especially these two groups of veterinary inspectors were interviewed.

The large interview panel

Following Ziebland and McPherson (2006), who claim that the purpose of sampling strategies in qualitative research is to present a wide range of perspectives and experiences, we applied the principle of purposive sampling. The respondents were selected on the basis of such characteristics as age, gender, years of employment, team, and type of employment contract (Table A2a in the Appendix provides an overview of the respondents' characteristics). After the executive of the Veterinary & Import division had informed the interviewees by e-mail of their selection, I contacted them directly, or indirectly via their team leader. After having talked to 38 interviewees I no longer heard no new information; rather 'new' answers started to resemble 'old' answers. Therefore, I decided not to interview any more additional employees, and the size of the interview panel was limited to 38 (N=38).

'Regular' veterinary inspectors (those directly employed by the NVWA) were able to adjust their regular working schedule so that they were free for the interview. Practitioners were not paid by the NVWA for the hours they spent taking part in the interviews, and hence we gave them a voucher worth 50 Euros (to be redeemed at a great variety of shops) for their time and trouble. Most veterinary inspectors were very cooperative and willing to participate in this study. Four were more sceptical; they either wanted to know exactly what the interview would be about, or indicated that a voucher worth 50 Euro would not cover one hour's work. In the end, all participants agreed to take part in this study. Most of the interviews were performed on NVWA premises. However, because it was more convenient for some interviewees, a few inspectors were interviewed at their homes or at the places where they were working on the day of the interview.

The analysis of the results for the large interview panel had several purposes: 1) show the fuzziness of PSM and investigate if insights from identity theory – approaching PSM as a role-dependent concept – are indeed useful to clarify the meaning of PSM; 2) learn more about whether insights from identity theory are also useful to clarify the meaning and behavioural consequences of professionalism, how veterinary inspectors perceive their professional role (professional role identity), and how this perception is related to behaviour; 3) increase our knowledge about the relationship between PSM and professionalism; 4) identify dilemma situations and learn more about the considerations that influence decision-making in these situations, and finally 5) identify the types of decisions public service professionals make in dilemma situations. In other words, these interviews were a first step towards answering the five secondary research questions.

The longitudinal interview panel of newcomers

Unlike the large panel, the interviewees in the longitudinal panel of newcomers were not selected individually. Rather, I talked to all veterinary inspectors that had recently entered employment at the NVWA, because their number was rather small: 15 employees (Table A2b in the Appendix provides an overview of the respondents' characteristics). There were no practitioners in this panel, so no vouchers had to be distributed. The first round of interviews took place shortly after the respondents had started work at the NVWA. They were still in training at that moment (October 2012). The second round followed on average 15 months later (spring 2014), which means that I talked to each interviewee twice over a period of a little more than one year. The first round of interviews took place at NVWA premises. In the second round, I talked to most of the interviewees face-to-face (also at NVWA premises). Five interviews were conducted by telephone. This might be seen as a threat to the quality of the research design: one disadvantage of telephone interviews is that interviewees cannot be observed while they are answering (Van der Velde et al., 2004). Moreover, it is more difficult to create a positive interview climate on the phone. However, because I had already talked to the interviewees face-to-face in the first round, I am convinced that the telephone interviews constituted an acceptable research method in these particular cases.

The analysis of these interviews was primarily aimed at gaining a better understanding of how and why PSM develops of time. Except for one, the interviewees had no prior working experience in the public sector. They had either just graduated from university or had been working in the private sector as practicing veterinarians.

4.3 Strategies for analysing the interviews

All interviews were recorded, anonymized, transcribed[1], and coded using the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. The strategy for analysing the interviews for both panels – the large panel and the panel of newcomers – consisted of two phases: open coding and axial coding. Both strategies will be described in detail for both panels. In the Appendix (Table A3a, A3b, A3c), complete coding schemes are provided for both the 'large' and the 'newcomer' interview panel.

1 Most of the interviews were transcribed by student assistants. Eight interviews were transcribed by myself and Daphne van Kleef.

4.3.1 Strategy for analysing the results for the large interview panel

I started the coding process with open coding, which means that after reading the interviews very carefully I divided the interviews into fragments and compared these with each other. The purpose of open coding is to explore the data. All fragments dealing with the same interview topic are marked with a code. For instance, all elements mentioned by the respondent as being motivating were coded as 'motivation'. In a similar way, all aspects mentioned by veterinary inspectors as their interpretation of their professional role were coded as 'professional role', all situations in which respondents say they experience tensions were coded as 'dilemma situations', all considerations in dilemma situations were coded as 'considerations in dilemma situations', and all concrete ways of dealing with these dilemma situations as 'decision-making in dilemma situations'.

From the code 'motivation' I derived four subcodes distinguishing PSM from public sector motivation, motivation based on contact with others, and motivation based on task variety. The coding scheme for PSM was specified beforehand on the basis of the theoretical description of the construct provided by, for example, Kim et al. (2013). For each dimension of PSM, one or two subcodes were developed. The subcodes for the other types of motivation were developed in an exploratory way. The coding scheme for the role of veterinary inspectors was developed in advance, on the basis of the document analysis described in the previous chapter and interviews with team leaders and key figures within the food safety service. (For more information on the coding scheme for the professional role of veterinary inspectors see Van Kleef et al. (2015).) The most important codes are 'strict rule enforcement', 'safeguarding values', 'communication and social skills', and 'knowledge base'. On the basis of the 38 interviews I was able to develop subcodes for different interpretations of the professional role on the part of veterinary inspectors: subcodes for different professional role identities. Interpretations of the role of veterinary inspector that were in line with organizational objectives such as safeguarding public health and strict rule enforcement, were categorized as 'organization-focused professional role identity'. Interpretations related to values prominent in the university veterinary medicine courses, such as the economic aspects of farming and animal welfare, were labelled as 'veterinary medicine-focused professional role identity'. The subcodes for the 'dilemma situations' code were worked out on the basis of the theoretical description of three key characteristics of the public sector: contrasting demands, value pluralism, and the objective to safeguard the public interest, although new subcodes based on relevant interview statements, such as unworkable rules, were also added. The subcodes for 'considerations in dilemma situations' and 'decision-making in dilemma situations' were worked out in

an exploratory way. Considerations could be divided into two subcodes: 'inspectee-related consideration' and considerations related to the activity of inspecting itself. From both subcodes, several subsubcodes could be derived which can be found in the Appendix (Table A3a). The decisions most frequently made by veterinary inspectors either favoured one value or demand above another, or deferred the decision, which resulted in the subcodes 'biasing' and 'avoidance'; two types of behaviour known from coping literature. In the second phase of the analysis I performed axial coding, which refers to "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 2007, p. 96). This technique makes it possible to investigate whether differences in behaviour in dilemma situations could be traced back to differences in professional role perception, and how these professional role perceptions relate to PSM.

4.3.2 Strategy for analysing the results for 'newcomers' panel

As with the coding strategy for the large interview sample, we started the first and second rounds of the interviews with newcomers with open coding. All elements mentioned by the respondent as being motivating were given the code 'motivation'. From this general code I was able to I derived six subcodes, distinguishing PSM from public sector motivation and other types of motives such as interaction and responsibility. The coding scheme for PSM was specified beforehand on the basis of the theoretical description of the construct. The subcodes for the other types of motivation and work expectations were developed in an exploratory way. All elements mentioned by respondents in the context of what they had initially expected from the job as veterinary inspector and from the NVWA organization were given the code 'organizational/job expectations'. The subcodes for this general code were developed in an exploratory way. Examples of subcodes are 'no expectations', 'rule enforcement' and 'resistance'. In the second round of interviews, all elements that reflect how interviewees experience their actual work and work context were given the general code 'working reality'. The subcodes of this general code – for example 'unwieldy organization' and 'lack of uniformity'- were also developed in an exploratory way.

By performing axial coding in the second step of the analysis, we were able to investigate how PSM developed over time (i.e., whether it increased or decreased) and the effect of a potential mismatch between the individual's initial job expectations and the actual working reality within this development. Put differently, we investigated in-person variation of PSM between two rounds of interviews of all 15 employees separately, and investigated whether this variation could be linked to a discrepancy between 'organizational/job expectations' and 'working reality'.

4.4 Quality of the qualitative research: reliability and validity

Two important criteria indicating the quality of research are validity and reliability (Boeije, 2010). Validity can be seen as truthfulness and reliability as dependability or consistency (Neuman, 2014). In this section I explain how I tried to maximize both quality indicators, and discuss the limitations of using interviews.

Flexible research methods – such as semi-structured interviews – may pose a threat to reliability (Kirk & Miller, 1986). In other words, repeated interviews might result in different outcomes. For this reason I ensured that all topics were covered in every interview by making notes as soon as a topic had been covered. In order to make it possible for the reader to retrace what I have actually done – how I handled and transformed the data – topic lists and coding schemes are included in the Appendix (Tables A1a, A1b, A1c, A3a, A3b, A3c).

To maximize face validity, which can be defined as the extent to which measures cover the topic under study based on expert judgements (Dooley, 2001), I discussed the topic list and interview questions with a small group of experts before performing the interviews. Exchanging opinions and views helps to ensure that all relevant topics are covered and that the questions do indeed measure the intended concepts (Boeije, 2010). Besides that, the first eight interviews were jointly coded by Daphne van Kleef and myself, and we consulted with each other every time we were unsure about how to code a certain sentence or sequence of sentences. This approach helped to ensure that the variety of codes and subcodes were applied consistently and accurately.

To maximize internal validity – which refers to the extent to which the observed causal inference is due to the presumed cause or to some other causes or causal mechanisms (Dooley, 2001) – I also took two measures. First, I ensured that I researched a representative sample of the population (large interview panel) or even the entire population (longitudinal sample of newcomers). Next to this, I tried to create a positive interview climate by stressing anonymity and emphasizing that I was not in a position to judge whether the answers were good or false. I hoped that by creating a positive climate I could ensure that interviewees would not remain silent or would not be dishonest about sensitive topics, which would lead to biased results. Another threat to internal validity in qualitative research is that "results are more easily influenced by researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20). In order to counter this weakness, I frequently discussed the findings within a small group of experts.

A third type of validity that I want to address here is external validity which, indicates the degree to which findings may be generalized to the world outside the research setting,

other populations, times, and places (Dooley, 2001). The problem with data from interviews is that the knowledge gained may not be generalizable to other people or settings, because of the relatively small sample size (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). I tried to counter this problem by selecting the interviewees especially, on the basis of variations in age, gender, years of employment, and team. However, critics may argue that the generalizability of my findings is low. For this reason, I used quantitative research methods in the second part of the analysis, which enabled us to verify if some or all of the qualitative results apply to or the entire population – veterinary inspectors working for the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods contributes to the general validity of this study.