How to elicit data that provide meaningful information about intrapreneurship in interviews with senior professionals? Trying to catch the truth

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Abstract

1 Introduction

Issues regarding work life extension and working healthy and motivated in the second part of employees careers form the background for our main study. Under the title: life stage aware HRM policy, all kinds of suggestions are formulated for practice (Task Force ouderen en arbeid, 2003, Ilmarinen. 2005). Entrepreneurship is presented as one, out of a range of possible solutions for the problem of the greying workforces in (western) industrialised countries. Intrapreneurship - or entrepreneurship within the boundaries of an organization (Menzel, 2008) - is hardly mentioned as a possible instrument for career development in later life stages or as a labour market tool, although it is recognised as an important possible contributor to innovation (Pinchot, 1985, Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003). The central question be answered in the main study is: How can intrapreneurship serve as a perspective in later career stages? And more specifically: How can intrapreneurship be developed in later stages? The main questions are rather broad “how”- questions asking for an explorative approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The purpose of the study is gaining theoretical insight in the phenomenon of intrapreneurship in later career stages, as well as the development of a tool for practice. The general research approach and the choice for more specific research methods should depend on the nature and characteristics of the posed research questions and purposes of the study (Yin, 1994, Baarda & De Goede). This logical and pragmatic proposition leads in the present study to the choice for a qualitative approach and more specifically to the work of Strauss and Corbin (2008) and their range of thoughts regarding grounded theory. Because of the explorative nature of the central question and research goal, a second quantitative phase was added that should result in additional information regarding found dimensions, but also to make reliable comparative estimations and evaluations. So the definitive research design consists out of two more or less consecutive phases: the first one a qualitative inquiry aiming at theory development and the second one a survey built up around a simulation. All together the research design can be characterized as a mixed method approach (Creswell, 2003). But also as multi methodical, a bricolage of several methods and techniques (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) as will be elaborated in the next paragraphs. The research project started with a pilot study; interviews with experts from practice, as a course searching exercise. The purpose of the pilot was to explore the problem field and possible sensitive topics in the field and to define the research question more in detail. The main study in phase one started with personal interviews with acting intrapreneurs. In Figure 1. the general research design is depicted.

**Pilot study**  
Expert Interviews → RQ’s → Actor Interviews → Simulation → Theoretical Model + Tool  

**Main Study**  
Actor Interviews → Survey + Simulations → Theoretical Model + Tool
This paper focuses on the first phase, the qualitative interviews. The target group in this study, the units of analysis can be described as older (40 plus) employees, professionals functioning in non profit organizations in the sectors: Education, Healthcare and Social Welfare. It was decided to choose image determining professions in each sector respectively: lecturers, physical therapists, and community workers. The sample for interviews in the first phase consists out of 3 * 8 respondents to start with, males/females (50/50 %) all acting intrapreneurs. Ongoing analysis can lead to the decision to approach more (specific) respondents for reasons of theoretical coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and saturation.

2 Methods

2.1 Interview, interview techniques and interview problems

Intriguing questions regarding interviews are: How “true” are the opinions participants bring forward in interviews? What are their deeper unconscious ideas and feelings? How to investigate in a way that we find data that reflect meaningful, relevant knowledge, subjective standpoints that actually have a strong impact on human behaviour. Our unconscious opinions seem to be much more important for our behaviour than our conscious ones especially regarding our decisions and choices (Dijksterhuis, 2004, 2007). The data out of our pilot study: expert interviews, can be considered as examples of rational and more abstract opinions, reflecting more or less the actual discourse of experts on topics like intrapreneurship, life stage HR policy, etc. But how “real”, in the sense of personal, determining convictions, are they? Some quotes out of the expert interviews may illustrate this:

Employees attitudes towards intrapreneurship differ per sector, organization, profession and life stage. There are all kinds of characteristics, some based on hard genetic factors, and some based on soft, attitudinal factors. Characteristics can be measured with specific instruments and estimated by experienced people. Management and management style play an important conditional role in stimulating intrapreneurship. Intrapreneurship should be integrated in the total career span and not restricted to a specific stage.

Do these mainstream opinions reflect what the experts really think and feel personally? So the challenging question for the main study was: How can we catch the subjective, unconscious opinions, perceptions, on individual level in order to construct a theory that can serve as a reliable ground for the development of an effective tool for practice? In sum the leading question for this paper is: what would be the right interview techniques that lead us to develop a valid theoretical model and an effective tool for practice? The specific techniques to “catch” unconscious knowledge and affective experiences we choose and applied in our interviews with acting intrapreneurs are presented in the next section.

The general interview procedure is presented here first in order to give an idea how we went along. We developed an interview guide consisting of 19 topics with possible alternatives for open questions and suggestions for probes. The interviews were moderated by the researcher himself sometimes accompanied by a second one. The first moderator is a trained and experienced interviewer specialised in career interviews. The interviewees were approached by their management, or colleagues and in a later stadium by the interviewer applying the chain or snowball technique (Neergaard, 2007) for recruiting participants. Until now we were successful in recruiting enough candidates, matching our
sample criteria. They were provided with information in advance regarding the goal and procedure of the study and interview and background of the interviewer. A short table with factual question was sent to them additionally in order to gather some concrete information (gender, age, education, career, etc.) before the interview took place. The interviews were organized and executed in the work organization of the participants. Of course we assured confidentiality and took procedural measures to safeguard that like giving them a pseudonymous. All interviews were taped and will be transcribed. All participants were informed about the report procedure; they will receive the analysis results in a special report; their managers will be invited for a Delphi discussion session about the results. At the moment we finalized 9 interviews in all three mentioned sectors.

2.2 Special interview techniques

Qualitative research interviews cover a range of approaches, but they have some characteristics in common. The dominant format has usually a low degree of structure with open questions, and the interviewee is more an active participant than a passive subject. The general goal is to see the research topic from the subjective perspective of the interviewee (King, 2004). This interview strategy is aiming at finding meaning and significance regarding the topics under investigation. This basic qualitative interview strategy offers some possibilities for finding “truth” and relevance, but in order to dig deeper and in other directions four specific techniques were applied additionally: the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), free and induced association, and metaphors as a projective technique. See Figure 2. These techniques were chosen because they are focussing on spontaneous behaviour and/or responses trying to bypass the conscious control mechanisms of the participant.

Firstly we propose the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as an interview technique focusing on spontaneous, immediate reactions, asking to report critical incidents and actor behaviour in those situations. The underlying proposition is that, especially in critical situations, people’s behaviour and actions are rather spontaneous and mainly based on their “gut feeling”, their underlying unconscious opinions (Dijksterhuis, 2007). The CIT was introduced by Flanagan (1954) and can be defined as: “...a qualitative interview procedure, which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes or issues), identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects. The objective is to gain an understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements.” (Chell, 2004, p.48). This author applied CIT intensively in qualitative research also in the field of entrepreneurship, stating that it enables inductive theory development by adopting a grounded theory approach. She describes the possibility to get closer to the subject like in observation and interviews as a substantial advantage of this technique. Closeness to the participant, significance of the incidents reported and action orientation are our additional positive arguments for choosing CIT as a specific technique. The disadvantage that respondent has to rely on retrospection reporting a critical incident can be handled by probing, asking for concrete substantial information. And like Chell (2004) is arguing: the fact that incidents are critical means the subject have a good recall. Because CIT can be considered as a direct, explicit interview technique or procedure it can in fact not be labelled as an elicitation technique like the three next ones.

Elicitation techniques are described as indirect questioning methods to reveal the deeper experiences of interviewees (Mariampolski, 2001). They try to seduce the individual to respond in a not rationalised way, revealing the primary experiential world of that individual (Stalpers, 2007). These characteristics fit well in our search for specific interview techniques. Association as a spontaneous, verbal reaction on specific stimulus words as for instance: “intrapreneurship” is the next concrete chosen technique. Free association was already applied as a preferred technique by Sigmund Freud (1911) and other psycho-analysts to reveal the unconscious mind of patients. Besides free association also more pre-structured or induced association techniques were developed like sentence completion. Also projective techniques were developed in clinical psychological settings like the Rohrschach
inkblots and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) (Reber, 1993). Both association and projection can be considered as elicitation techniques in the above mentioned sense (Stalpers, 2007). Other authors like Drenth (1971) consider association as a specific projective technique. In this paper association and projection are presented as two different approaches. The fourth technique: asking respondents to find and formulate metaphors to describe their career and positions in it can be seen as a projective technique. Asking for a verbal reaction, using a suggestion for the used format, leaving the creative filling in to the participant, who can project his/her meanings, emotions, and convictions, on a certain “image”. In that sense we consider this as a projective elicitation technique. Schmitt (2005: 371) defines a metaphor as: A word or phrase, strictly speaking, can be understood beyond the literal meaning in the context; and the literal meaning stems from an area of sensoric or cultural experience (source area), which, however, is transferred to a second, often abstract, area (target area). Using metaphors trying to describe and understand careers and how they are perceived is extensively applied by Inkson (2007). This author argues that metaphors encourage creativity and help people to see things in new ways; metaphorical thinking is particularly common in relation to careers and potentially expands our understanding. These were additional arguments to select this specific technique for our explorative interviews.

CIT
retrospective verbal response

Free -------------- free assoc, exercise
Association
Induced ----------- sentence completion

Elicitation techniques
immediate verbal response

Projection ---------------------------------- metaphor exercise

Fig. 2. Overview of specific interview techniques.

3. Application and results

This section intends to illustrate the concrete way the special interview techniques are applied and developed during the interviews. Also experiences of the interviewer and reactions of participants are presented. Applying the CIT means asking for critical incidents in the careers of the participants focussing on those incidents or events that were meaningful for the development of their intraprendeurial competence or role. The opening question for this topic is:

Can you go back in time and mention a specific situation, an event or incident that you consider as a starting point for you becoming intrapreneurial?

When a participant mentions one or more specific situations or circumstances next questions are asked as generic probes:

What happened next? Why did it happen? What was the role of others? What did you think? What did you feel? How did you react? What did you do? What was the result of your actions? What was the role of others? What were the consequences?
Of course the response on these questions are rather different per participant. Some could not point out a specific incident or event and described their intrapreneurial development as a gradual process facilitated by their organizational environment or other circumstances. For example:

*I always had this entrepreneurial drive and entering this organization I found enough possibilities to act intrapreneural.*

Another participant reported:

*We were expected to do our job more outside our organization, meanwhile the financial conditions changed.*

Others came up with a more clear incident that sometimes had a crisis character.

*I was told to leave the organization and had to become independent, so that they could hire me. Now I am an entrepreneur against my own will.*

Another participant responded:

*I was told not to became a manager, that was a good reason to look for other possibilities to develop my career.*

All together the CIT results in different but generally spoken rich data, but with a strong variation depending on the personal and subjective experience of each specific participant. The association exercises developed over time. In the first interviews we asked our participants to associate freely on the topics: entrepreneurial and intrapreneurship. Some came with a rational explanation or definition, another with suggestions for entrepreneurial projects. It is clear that some explanation is needed on forehand, and also that this exercise is not applied in a clinical setting with probably a couch to induce a relaxed state of mind of the participant. So in the next few interviews more structure was added to the exercise using a list of keywords and asking to associate every keyword with one or eventually more than one word.

**Think of yourself in the role of intrapreneur and give your association in one word as a response to the keywords I present:**

An example:


This more structured procedure worked out productively for the interviewed participants. On the other hand the key words were chosen more or less accidentally and some participants blocked. For those reasons it was decided to use just one free association on the term: intrapreneurship, with a good introduction and example if necessary.

**Think of the term Intrapreneurship and tell me the words or terms that pop up into your mind. Let me give you an example: Citizenship…. loyalty, voting, tax, al together, community, etc, etc.**

Also the question was posed:

**And what do you feel?**
Besides free association a more structured form was presented using four incomplete sentences was presented:

Think of yourself being an intrapreneur, try to imagine take your time. I will present four incomplete sentences, finish them with what comes into your mind. It doesn't matter what. Being an intrapreneur I do…, I think… I feel… I want….

This approach resulted in answers like:

**Being an intrapreneurs I take initiative, risk, I think of how to approach my clients, I feel good, satisfied, happy, I want to be free, autonomous….

These procedures seem to be clear for the participants and productive too.

As fourth elicitation technique we use metaphors asking the participants to come with a metaphor regarding their career, their career as an intrapreneurs, themselves being an intrapreneur. Sometimes the example of a machine as a metaphor for an organization is used. Some participants needed time to think and report that the exercise is not easy. Here follow a few examples of the given metaphors:

*I see my career (as an intrapreneur) as a motorcycle, as a rambler.*

Probing after the first “image” results in extra response. Questions like:

**What kind of motorcycle? Where are you driving? What is your destination? What do you feel?**

These additional questions seem to develop the connected affective and cognitive content of the metaphor. All together four special interview techniques were explored and developed during nine personal interviews so far. A first evaluation can be made up now.

## 4 Evaluation and discussion

Technically spoken the four techniques, adjusted in the interview practice, function well as techniques or exercises. They were accepted, clear enough, productive and valued by the most participants. In general they reported the interview as interesting and stimulating, enjoying the experience and that it helped them to clarify some issues related to the topics. In the words of the participants it provided:

*A more clear view on were I am now in my career…. A better understanding of the reasons of my career changes….A sight on what I have to do to develop my career in future….*

For some participants the interview functioned more or less as a career interview or even partly as a career coaching session. With regard to the specific techniques participants reported that they were sometimes difficult and but also revealing new insights to them. It was also clear that these specific techniques suppose a good trustful relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Sometimes extra time is needed for the exercises but also encouragement from the side of the interviewer. Extra time needed is an interesting point here. It may frustrate a spontaneous reaction, a characteristic of connection with the unconscious. This also points at the necessity to encourage the participant to react as quick as possible, and that a good relaxed atmosphere and introduction is needed.

Even more important of course is the question if these techniques actually reveal affective and unconscious content. Are they generating another kind of data that would otherwise stay under the surface? Are they generating data that are less under the conscious or rational control of the participants? Thorough analysis of the interviews and comparison of the data generated with the different techniques and the usual interview techniques is necessary in order to answer these questions properly. For now we have to rely on first observations and impressions out of the interview transcripts. An interesting perspective in the stage of analysis will be the possibility to triangulate the
data on the level of analysis, combining different coding techniques analysing answers on diverse open questions (Corbin, 2008) with analysis on metaphor level (Schmitt, 2005). The first impression is that the additional application of the specific techniques leads at least to richer descriptions of phenomena and situations. It seems easier to get through to affective levels and meaningful situations. Dijksterhuis (2005) underlined the important role of the unconscious in human behaviour, especially with regard to choices and decisions. We acknowledge his claim and applied techniques trying to investigate unconscious opinions. Research interviews differ considerable from experimental or therapeutic settings and of course also the goals of experimental research and psychotherapy. For the goals and research questions in the present study we applied specific techniques trying to reveal the same intriguing layers of the human mind. Techniques that seem promising when applied in qualitative research interviews.

5 Conclusions and implications for further study

We applied a multi interview technique approach in the framework of a multi and mixed method research design in the role of a bricoleur in order to find truth and effectiveness in a creative way. We noticed that associative and projective techniques sometimes are perceived as a bit strange, need some structure and a good introduction with eventually a few examples for clarification. This also means that a good atmosphere of confidence and trust must be established. Of course that counts for all interviews but in this case even more rigorously. The CIT applied so far provides response depending on the specific situation and career development of the participants. This technique elaborated and reviewed the career development of some participants. The metaphor exercises are reported as educative and challenging, tempting the creativity of the interviewees. All four described specific techniques are playful ways of interviewing, for the participants as well as the interviewer. They seem promising techniques, well applicable in qualitative research techniques in addition to more general and usual interview techniques as asking open questions and probing. The experiences with these techniques inspired to the development of a scenario for a critical incident to be used in a simulation as data generator in the next phase of our study. We expect that the analysis of the interviews will feed the construction of the survey and the simulation exercise, particularly because of the application of the special techniques. A more fundamental evaluation of the applied techniques will be possible after a specific comparative analysis of the data out of the interviews.

References


