SENSE OF SAFETY IN INTERVIEWEES/EMPLOYEES OF AN EXAMINED ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

The paper is the extended version of the article presented at the 13th International Scientific Conference Human Potential Development 2016 held in Szczecin, Poland. Scientific committee of the Conference was evaluated this paper as a very interesting and useful for contemporary knowledge on human resource management. It presents the problem of sense of safety in interviewees/employees of an examined organization. The aim of this paper is to describe what actions would the interviewees/employees take in order to improve their sense of safety in the context of a study being carried out with their involvement, as well as actions that the researcher can undertake with a view to ensure such safety to their subjects. Because of a mentioned issue, the paper describes the notion of safety understood in three ways: as a need, value, and feeling. Certain factors determining subject's sense of safety have been elaborated on. Based on literature and personal observations made during initial contact with the interviewees and in the course of the interviews, the paper describes actions undertaken by the interviewees that could resonate with their sense of safety. These actions address mainly the need of anonymity. Whereas creating an atmosphere of trust, using the trust transfer mechanism and ensuring confidentiality are some of the actions that a researcher can undertake with a view to help their subjects feel safe.

Key words: sense of safety, safety, interviews, employees.

Classification JEL: M12 – Personnel Management.

1. Introduction

While arranging for and carrying out quality interviews touching on subjects that are difficult for the interviewees or that somehow concern the functioning of their organization, one encounters various difficulties – from obtaining subject's consent to participate in the study, through agreeing on some organizational matters (time, place, registration), to receiving answers to sensitive questions. There may be various reasons behind this. The problem may consist in the lack of sense of safety in the workplace or fear that participation in such an interview might affect this safety.

The *aim of this paper* is to describe what actions would the interviewees/employees take in order to improve their sense of safety in the context of a study being carried out with their involvement, as well as actions that the researcher can undertake with a view to ensure such safety to their subjects. Based on a presented issue, the research related to the performance appraisal system in a university is carried out in the paper. One of the methods used within this study consisted in conducting interviews. From the viewpoint to trying explain the most important information and knowledge flowed from the interviews, the methodological part of the paper presents herein own author's observations on the sense of safety in subjects at the stage of making contact with the researcher and subsequently during the interview.

2. Safety in the workplace as a need, value and feeling

Safety can be defined as „an objective state characterized by a lack of danger that is experienced subjectively by individuals or groups of people" *(Korzeniewski, 2000: 437; Klamut, 2012: 41)*. This subjective perspective is governed by the psychological understanding to safety described as: a need, a value and a feeling *(Klamut, 2012: 42)*.

In order to discuss the first of the above-mentioned aspects – safety as a need, we may want to start by defining 'a need'. And thus a need can be described as "a construct that corresponds to a certain force in the brain, which governs perception, apperception (perception plus interpretation), thinking, objectives and actions so as to transform the existing, unsatisfactory situation in a specific way" *(Oleś, 2003: 112)*. A need will then be understood as a disposition to act, a stimulus, whose lack or insufficiency triggers to act. A need will therefore cause tension in the system, whereas its realization – reduction of the said tension.

Some of the various classifications of needs refer directly or indirectly to the need of safety. Maslow's pyramid of needs is one of them, in which it is defined as a need of: physical safety, psychological safety and stability *(Schultz & Schultz, 2002: 283)*. Maslow further points out that the need of safety includes the need of assurance, support, care, law and borders, strong caregiver, etc. *(Maslow, 2006: 65)*. In the everyday life, the need of safety manifests itself as a preference for stable employment, a wish to have insurance, but also a tendency to prefer the already known over the unknown *(Maslow, 2006: 66)*. In Alderfer's ERG theory, the need of safety is classified as one of the needs of existence. Realization of these in the workplace would consist in ensuring security of employment and a safe working environment *(Schulz & Schultz, 2002: 284)*. In his two-factor theory, Herzberg also refers to safety. Among the hygiene factors, he includes security of employment but also security at the level of interpersonal relations, company's policy, atmosphere in the organization, factors that come into play in satisfying the need of safety in an organization *(Basińska & Jeran, 2012: 54)*. Klamut *(2012: 43)* refers also to the classification of needs by Murray who distinguishes three needs related to a danger-free life: the need to avoid physical injuries (avoidance of damage), the need to avoid psychological injuries from other people and the need to avoid psychological injuries in one's own eyes (avoidance of actions that may lead to diminishing one's self-esteem). This third item consists in avoiding defeat, shame, ridicule, and may lead to a tendency to refrain from taking action caused by fear of defeat *(Franken, 2005: 31)*. Unsatisfied need of safety is correlated with a sense of fear and anxiety *(Klamut, 2012: 43)*.

Safety is not only a need but also a value. As such, one will have a permanent conviction that "a certain way of acting or a consequent state is more desirable from the perspective of an individual or society than the opposite way of acting or state" *(Mądrzycki, 2002: 118)*. Values are organized in a hierarchical system reflecting their respective importance. Those that are most crucial for a given individual will impact most their behaviour/way of acting *(Mądrzycki, 2002: 119)*. Values help to specify the nature of various needs and to determine the way in which they can be satisfied. They enable a person to decide which needs will be satisfied and in which order, especially when not all of them can be satisfied *(Mądrzycki, 2002: 119)*. From this perspective, safety appears to be an important factor in the motivational process. Safety as a value will impact the activity of a given individual, however, unlike in case of a need of safety, taking action will not be governed by its lack – existing or expected *(Klamut, 2012: 45)*.

The third dimension of psychological understanding of safety relates to assessing the level of safety experienced by a subject, so the sense of safety. Such sense is an effect of satisfying a given need on the one hand and realizing a value on the other. However, unlike needs or values, the sense is dependent on an individual person – feeling and experiencing. Thus the sense of safety will be a state of peace, assurance and lack of dangers. Such a state of mind is an effect of a subjective assessment of a situation *(Klamut, 2012: 46)*. Since safety and risk are linked together, the sense of safety can also be perceived as a subjective assessment of risk acceptability *(Bańka, 2002; Klamut, 2012: 48)*.

When it comes to the sense of safety at work, it also implies psychological safety which can be defined as "a feeling that the employee can express their self without fear that it might have negative consequences for their self-image, status or career" *(Kahn, 1990; Wołoska, 2013: 124)*. It is one of the dimensions of the climate in an organization, to which contribute: flexible and supportive management, transparent rules and norms, as well as employee's freedom to express their feelings *(Kahn, 1990; Wołowska, 2013: 124)*. Thus the possibility of freely express the self is one of the factors contributing to the sense of safety *(Wypych, 2015: 84)*.

Safety as a need, value, but also a subjective feeling, is an important aspect of people's functioning in organizations. Sense of safety – related to the security of employment and to relationships at work that are open and supportive – constitutes an important factor for employees' commitment *(Kmiotek, 2013: 186)*. On the other hand factors such as: lack of trust, stress, anxiety, feeling unsecure, low quality of the management and leadership, impacting negatively the sense of safety, are considered as potential causes for the lack of employees' commitment *(Kmiotek, 2013: 187)*.

Conducting research inside an organization may undermine the sense of safety in the interviewees/employees. Kvale points out that in doing research one should always be driven by the ethical rule of making good, which means that the risk of harming the subject of a study should be minimized *(2004: 122)*. Interviewees cannot be risking any loss or damage nor should they have such impression.

Participation in an interview may cause multiple negative emotions *(Lowes & Gill, 2006: 590)*. This kind of negative emotions triggered by a study are also considered to be a loss or damage to the subject. Lowes & Gill (*2006: 592*) point out that an interview cannot be perceived as an interaction of two equal partners. There is an intrinsic imbalance of forces; this is the interviewer who defines the situation, conducts the conversation and introduces new items to discuss. Therefore it is the researcher that is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of their subjects *(Corbine & Morse, 2003: 349)*.

The question is how to conduct interviews related to the functioning of an organization in a way that employees' sense of safety remains intact. The present paper elaborates on the following aspects of interviewing employees: conditions and place, creating an atmosphere of trust, contact/number of meetings, granting anonymity.

3. Employees' sense of safety during interviews on organization function

The majority of research on respondents' sense of safety explore their difficult experience but mainly of private nature, such as illness – own or of a close one, death of a family member etc. *(Lowes & Gill, 2006; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Mitchel & Irvine, 2008; Corbin & Morse, 2003)*. This is due to the fact that this kind of situations trigger strong emotional response in subjects. It is however worthwhile mentioning that interviews on how a subject functions in their workplace may also in some cases present a threat to their sense of safety, although the underlying reasons may be different than personal negative experience related to the very subject of the interview.

One of the most important aspects connected to interviewees' sense of safety lies in their *need for anonymity*. This is because during the interview a respondent may reveal information that puts or might put at risk their position in the organisation *(DiCicco & Crebtree, 2006: 319)*. Thus providing sense of safety requires for the interviewee to be assured about the anonymity of the study. It is stressed that complying to respondents' right of anonymity can never be infringed, unless keeping some information confidential may cause danger *(DiCicco & Crebtree, 2006: 319),* for example risk to public safety *(Wiles et al., 2008: 419)*.

There are various ways in which the interviewer can approach the problem of anonymity with their respondents. Research proves that the way in which subjects get informed about

anonymity plays a role in their sense of safety. Schwarz's experiments confirm that „more the researcher insists on assuring the interviewees about the confidentiality, the more their readiness to participate in the study would diminish" *(Krzewińska, 2006: 109–110)*. The fact of strongly underlining that the study would be confidential led to the belief that the tool used for research would contain a lot of details and personal questions. It was observed that extensive clarifications on the confidentiality issue caused a more pronounced anxiety that the data gathered might be revealed to third persons *(Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska, 2009: 112)*. No difference was observed between a group who did not receive any assurance of confidentiality and a group who received one such sentence to read *(Krzewińska, 2006: 109–110)*. Interviews and especially spontaneous discussions on the functioning of an organization may constitute a danger to employee's sense of safety. This is due among others to not granting full anonymity of the interviewees. According to the above-mentioned, putting excessive stress on the anonymity may further diminish the sense of safety in the interviewees.

Furthermore, sense of anonymity may vary depending on the manner of conducting the interview. Pearce et al. *(2015: 681)* underline in their work on online interviews that this particular approach grants anonymity to respondents both at the stage of soliciting subjects for the study (no direct contact with the researcher), as well as during the interview (dedicated password-protected account to complete a survey). Respondents confirmed that their own sense of anonymity was an advantage in such a setting (on the other hand anonymity of the researcher was perceived as a disadvantage), *(Pearce et al., 2014: 683)*. In the traditional approach of conducting interviews, resorting to this kind of solutions is not possible.

Conditions and place of the meeting is the first of several factors discussed herein that play a role in building the sense of safety in an interview situation. Oppenheim *(2004: 88)* points out that these have to prevent the subject from feeling intimidated or anxious. According to Gudkova *(2012: 123)*, the best place to conduct an interview is „the natural environment of the subject, where they feel most comfortable". Public places on the other hand do not contribute to building trust. It may seem obvious that public places, such as cafes, where there is many people, do not help the interviewee to feel safe. However, the question is whether the workplace is truly the most comfortable place to conduct a study related to their organization. Pauses and various disruptions are difficult to avoid in such a situation *(Oppenheim, 2004: 87)*. They may be caused by colleagues sharing the same room, other employees, clients, or phone calls. Potentially these factors could be eliminated and comfort and sense of safety improved by making phone interviews or online surveys. According to respondents of the online survey made by Pearce et al. *(2014: 683)*, advantages of such a solution consist not only in improved anonymity or more readiness to discuss difficult problems but also a possibility to choose a place for the interview that was comfortable for them.

It proves beneficial for the sense of safety to create an atmosphere of trust and commitment at the first stage of conversation *(Gudkova, 2012: 123)*. Openness of the researchers, their involvement and readiness to answer questions related to the aims of the study or the way data is going to be used, are very important for building trust *(Gudkova, 2012: 124)*. Knox & Burkard *(2009: 569)* stress that if the researcher fails to build a good relation with the interviewee, it will compromise the sense of safety experienced by the employee confronted with the researcher and further increase the unwillingness to discuss sensitive matters. Knowledge gathered during the interview is largely dependent on the quality of social interaction between the interviewee and the researcher. The quality of such relation depends on the interviewer's ability to create conditions allowing for the employee to feel safe *(Kvale, 2010: 38)*. Participation in a research may be positive for the interviewee and provide a more in-depth insight into their life private or professional, or impact the person

negatively and provoke anxiety, activate defence mechanisms *(Kvale, 2010: 46)*. According to Kvale *(2010: 48–52)*, one can find directions on how to build a relationship with the interviewee, on how to create an atmosphere of mutual trust and security, on how to ask questions and listen to answers, in therapeutic interviews, in which the dynamism of interaction and the way of formulating questions are absolutely key. Among factors contributing to an atmosphere of safety, we can find a so-called *transfer of trust mechanism,* which consists in introducing the researcher to the interviewee by someone they trust *(Gudkova, 2012: 124)*.

The above-mentioned quality interviews in psychotherapy require more than one meeting. This procedure facilitates the sense of safety in subjects in the interaction with the interviewer *(Knox & Burkard, 2009: 569)*. However applying the same approach to studies in the domain of management may seem difficult and in many cases groundless. Nevertheless, if the interviews touch on sensitive topics, it is worthwhile to think how one could achieve the effect of increasing sense of safety similar to multiple meetings. As some substitute of this procedure, the researcher might want to contact the interviewee directly while asking for their consent to participate in the study. As a result, the interview will no longer be the first contact of the employee with the researcher.

4. Study on attitudes to performance appraisal system and the sense of safety – personal observations

Performance appraisal is an important element of an effective human resources management, starting with a correct assessment of work efficiency and ending with creation of actions from the field of realisation of personal function *(Boachie-Mensah, 2012: 73; Janowska, 2010: 111)*. Performance appraisal has many functions: informative, administrative and motivational *(Janowska, 2010: 111)*. It gives an insight into the quality of human capital in an organisation that ultimately ought to be used to support employees' development and improvement of their quality of work *(Analoui, 2004: 56)*. Performance appraisal system is a formal tool supporting decision-making process on remuneration, promotions or degradations *(Daley, 1983: 159)*. Obviously it is used as well for development purposes, for example helping to determine training needs of the employees as well as effectiveness of such trainings *(Mulvaney et al., 2012: 505)*.

Study described herein was performed on employees of one of the universities. Employees' performance appraisal in this university also fulfils the above-mentioned roles: visibility on the quality of human capital, support for administrative decisions (reflected in the flexible component of remuneration, may also provide grounds for dismissal), impact on motivation to work via communication of employer's expectations, and the correlated HR decisions/consequences outlined earlier. There are multiple reasons why performance appraisal would raise emotions in the employees. Thus while conduction interviews one needs to be aware of the lesser sense of safety in their respondents that may be due on the one hand to prior negative experience and on the other to the expected influence of the appraisal on their functioning in the organisation.

The study was conducted on interviewees or candidates for interviewees in a research related to attitudes of employees to the performance appraisal system in their workplace. 24 cases were analysed: 23 subjects agreed to participate in the interview, 1 refused. Research method used was participative observation. As a result 23 interview cards drafted after the initial contact and the proper interview were analysed, as well as the meeting with the person who refused to take part in the interview. Factors evaluated were as follows: a general readiness to make such interview (attitude to the interview, first contact), attention paid by the

interviewee to the question of anonymity, including their reaction to the researcher asking for permission to record, and the choice of place for the interview made by interviewees.

The initial contact with the interviewees could be engaged in three different ways: the majority of meetings were held during their office hours (13 subjects), the rest were contacted by phone (6 subjects), or by e-mail (5 subjects). Those subject that were contacted by phone or e-mail had been previously briefed by a trusted person on the intention to conduct an interview and agreed to be contacted. During the first contact, the interview conductor (author) presented herself, quickly explained the area of the research and its stages, asking the subject to participate in one of the said stages, i.e. interviews. The researcher pointed out that the subsequent stage of her study would concern all the employees and the interviews were necessary for her to prepare for this next part. Then, interview conductor briefly explained that the interview would be entirely anonymous. Vast majority of subjects readily and quickly expressed their consent. Two of them wished to take the proper interview immediately after expressing their consent. One person described their attitude to the study as ambivalent. After receiving further details on the scope of questions, the person agreed to participate, however providing that the interview would not be recorded. One person was difficult to contact directly and therefore they were asked by e-mail when it would be convenient for them to meet the researcher with a view to discuss her request. Since the subject remained silent, the researcher tried again to meet them during the office hours. The employee agreed to participate in the interview rather reluctantly ('ok if you insist') and when informed about the confidentiality, they replied that at their age, they are no longer afraid of anything. Only one of the requested persons refused. However it may be worthwhile to state that the refusal did not happen directly after the researcher explained her request. The subject asked for time to think about it and communicated their refusal by e-mail saying that they understood the importance of the examined area but still did not agree to participate in the study. The below table presents different methods of engaging the initial contact and reactions of the interviewees.

Table 1. First contact and subjects' attitudes to participating in the study (own study)

	Personal contact	**Phone**	**E-mail**
Total	13 subjects	6 subjects	5 subjects
Refusals	1 refusal communicated by e-mail	–	– (1 no reply, consent granted after meeting in person)
Attitude to participation in the study	Varied – from rather negative reactions (refusal), through ambivalent (consent but no recording, "ok if you insist"), rather positive but with visible lack of assurance at the off-set, to positive (consent granted rapidly, but in some cases visible uncertainty when asked for permission to record)	Positive reactions – subjects were previously informed that such contact would happen with a view to seek consent for an interview. The idea was introduced by persons well-known to the subjects (consent to share their contact details with the researcher was understood as by default agreement to participate in the study; probably transfer of trust mechanism)	Positive reactions – all subjects agreed for a person well-known to them to share their contact details; one person doubted if they should be an interviewee (they considered that their opinion was not representative for the whole organization)

Regarding anonymity as a factor contributing to the sense of safety, it was decided to briefly inform candidates for interviewees about the fact that the study would be anonymous. It was pointed out that all information that could help to identify the subject would be held confidential. Interviewees' reaction to this declaration was overall positive and considered sufficient by the majority. Some of the subjects however had additional questions or remarks related to this issue. Detailed questions related to anonymity would in most cases be formulated when asked for permission to record. Thus it appears that recording was a diminishing factor for the sense of safety, however providing additional information helped calm the anxiety experienced by some of the interviewees. The person who refused to participate had bigger objections. In their case the conversation did not go as far as asking for permission to record and still anonymity issues were raised by the subject.

It was observed that subjects that needed additional assurance of anonymity belonged to the following groups:

- Members of organizational units in which they were easy to identify based on their title/rank (both higher – in a smaller unit, and lowest – master in a unit with few assistants) or function;
- Subjects with a negative attitude to the object of the study, pointing to the injustices or defects in its functioning (it has to be clarified however that not all subjects that criticised the appraisal system expressed such need for the anonymity to be additionally reconfirmed);
- Subjects that had already experienced in the past some problems related the performance appraisal system consisting the object of the study. It may be that a possibility of linking different problems within a given department was perceived by these interviewees as a threat to their anonymity.

All subjects, except for one, refrained from specifying the cause behind their increased interest in matters related to anonymity. Only one stated directly why this issue was so important for them, i.e. their function in the department allowed for easy identification. During the interview, this person named that function and at the end of the conversation referred again to the issue of anonymity.

During this specific study interviewees were interested in confidentiality issue of their data. Nevertheless in the vast majority of cases the anxiety would abate when additional explanation was provided.

Table 2. Actions and decisions of the interviewees related to the analysed safety factors (own study)

Safety Factor	Actions and decisions
Place of the interview	− 6 subjects suggested that the meeting takes place outside of their room due to the possibility of other people being present − some subjects, while deciding on the date/time of the meeting, would look for a time slot when there would be no one else in the room
Anonymity	− some of the subject wanted to understand how the researcher intended to ensure anonymity, specifically they enquired about transcription of the interviews and the necessity to hide distinctive features of the interviewees
Recording	− one person refused to be recorded, saying that now in the era of ecordings and tapping in Polish politics, it had a bad connotation for them − one subject wanted to make sure that their function (revealed in the interview) would not be disclosed in the article − two subjects enquired about the audio version of the interview, fearing that it might potentially be spread

Relative to the last factor analysed herein in the context of the sense of safety, i.e. the place of the interview, it is worthwhile to note that the assumption was that the interviewee would feel most at ease at their place of work, in this specific case a room in the unit by which they were employed. And the fact is that most of the subjects suggested such a solution, i.e. to meet in their room. With one limitation however – expected presence of other persons, colleagues sharing the same room. There may be a few reasons for that, explaining why the interviewees would want to ensure that no third persons are present during the interview. And these are not necessarily related to the matter of sense of safety during an interview. Firstly, this group of subjects would certainly be aware that interviews should be conducted without other people being present. Secondly, the interviewees might simply be cautious not to disturb others at work by holding a long conversation. Thirdly, and interesting from the perspective of interviewees sense of safety, the subjects may have felt uncomfortable with other people being present during the meeting due to the object of the conversation. It became apparent during the interviews that for some subjects performance appraisal was a difficult experience and sometimes negative emotions still persisted. The topic of the conversation was therefore sensitive for them and discussing it openly in public would undermine their sense of safety. We may conclude that, if the researcher is not aware of whether the interviewee's previous experience in the examined domain was good or bad, it would benefit their sense of safety to have the freedom to choose where the meeting should take place.

The above analysis demonstrates that the majority of subjects did not perceive the interview as a substantial threat to their safety. Some uneasiness or anxiety could be solved by the subjects taking certain steps related to the previously discussed aspects: place of the meeting, anonymity and, one step further, recording.

The below table outlines certain actions observed in the subjects that may improve the sense of safety in the interviewees.

Based on the interviewees' reactions during the initial contact and the subsequent interview, it may be concluded that for some subjects the object of the study – performance appraisal system in their organization – may have been perceived as a threat to their safety. All interviewees, except for one, were able to deal with their anxiety by seeking more extensive explanation and choosing a convenient place for the meeting. Some of the subjects probably did not feel threatened by the situation at all, nor by the object of the study. They did not enquire about disclosing data or methods of ensuring anonymity. Information provided by the author was judged as sufficient. These interviewees displayed a trustful attitude towards the interviewer (one person said: "if you say that the study is anonymous and the recording erased, then I believe this will be the case").

5. Conclusion

Researchers are often confronted with refusals from selected people. Reasons may vary but one of them is the lack of sense of safety. Therefore, it is important to be cautious in this area and create an atmosphere of trust, ensure the data is safe. Observations made on the occasion of this study constitute just an introduction to a wider research on interviewees/employees' sense of safety. Certain decisions and actions – potentially important for building the sense of safety in an interview situation – were observed in the subjects: choice of place so as to avoid presence of other people, seeking additional information on how the researcher intends to guarantee confidentiality, pointing to certain statements that should not be published, looking to be assured about confidentiality of recordings.

Relative to actions that a researcher may undertake in order to ensure a sense of safety to the interviewees, it is worthwhile to reflect upon the process of setting up an interview, paying attention to certain items described in the literature, such as: creating an atmosphere of trust, making use of transfer of trust mechanism or avoiding to underline excessively the

confidentiality matters. It would be interesting to further elaborate in research on the extent to which the sense of safety is improved by meeting the interviewee at least twice (first meeting – initial contact, second meeting – proper interview) or to examine in what way precisely the nature of the initial contact influences interviewees' sense of safety.

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