

The problems in researching perceptions of social responsibility

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define “crisis” – what crisis are you talking about, or it is crisis in general?

Abstract

This paper addresses problems in qualitative research on the perception of social responsibility. The study was conducted by means of semi-structured interviews. Its main objective was to discover how crisis influences different aspects of the lives of Slovenian respondents with different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. We examined how people perceive and talk about social responsibility. We found that respondents talk more openly about institutions and their social responsibility than about their own social responsibility and attitudes connected to it. One of the main problems in this field is determining how respondents perceive social responsibility and how they express it. To conclude, we address the problem of doing qualitative research in this area: how to overcome the lack of openness and information.

Keywords: crisis, perception, social responsibility, problems in research

Introduction

The concept of social responsibility is most commonly researched in relation to business practice and performance. Although it involves the values and needs of the broad vicinity in which it operates (Newell, 2014) and includes the common denominator of responsible behaviour, heavily influenced by one’s anticipation of the impact that behaviour will have on society (ISO, 2011), this basis of exploration offers only a partial insight into social responsibility.

An examination of the concept of corporate social responsibility suggests that it consists of four main components: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic (Carroll, 1991). To strive for improvement of people’s lives and simultaneously making a profit is a two-sided occurrence, which is beneficial to society and the institution itself. Additionally processes by which the profit is acquired and spent are a vital part of corporate social responsibility (Newell, 2014). And while the individuals are indirectly involved in contributing to society

when meeting these requirements in the institutions, this does not represent their own views on social responsibility.

Colby (2003 in Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009: 78) sees social responsibility as a characteristic individuals can recognize on their own. While this characterization still includes one's values and needs, they are more important in relation to feeling the connection to others and a sense of responsibility someone has for them. Individual must feel civically responsible and consider himself a part of much larger community, whose social problems are at least partly his or her own. In addition, Brumen, Čagran and Berro (2014: 118) recognize that individual and direct action is necessary, but they acknowledge that non-systemic and partial or one-sided action helps further aggravate the crisis.

In this paper we focus on the question '*What is social responsibility and how do respondents perceive it in the reality of everyday life in Slovenia?*' with particular emphasis on problems of research studies using a qualitative approach. We indirectly investigate realities as situated practices, culturally embodied in statements obtained in semi-structured interviews. Adopting the conception of culture as the world of meanings (Godina, 2016: 233) we outline different meanings that interviewees associate with social responsibility. Our method is based on data and methodological experience (in form of interviewer report, interview memoing and other forms of reflection or evaluation feedback) gained while performing 114 semi-structured interviews in two research projects focused on measuring the influence of crises on respondents' lives. First, we define the concept of social responsibility and the theoretical framework of semi-structured interviews. Second, we present the perceptions of social responsibility among our interviewees, and last, we tackle the question of problems in researching perceptions of social responsibility. In the end we provide some suggestions for further research.

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Semi-structured interviews and perceptions of social responsibility

Qualitative research is relevant to the study of social relations, because of the pluralisation of life worlds (Flick, 2009: 12). A semi-structured interview is one of the most often used methodical and research tools of qualitative research in social science; it is common in household research, where it can elicit useful data (Edwards & Holland, 2013: 1–3). This is the kind of interview done in professional surveys (Bernard, 1988: 212). The interviewer is able to obtain objective knowledge about the interviewees and their social world (Edwards & Holland, 2013: 1–2).

A semi-structured interview has a framework based on the themes that are to be explored. This framework is not formed around a rigid set of questions like a structured interview, but rather has a fluid and flexible structure. The interviewer develops and uses a paper-based interview guide. This is a list of questions and topics to be covered during the conversation, usually in a particular order. Because the interviewer is able to follow topical trajectories in the conversation, the semi-structured interview is more open than a structured interview, allowing new ideas to be brought up depending upon what the interviewee says. The interviewer is able to word questions differently depending on context or situation and therefore he or she has the opportunity to identify new ways of seeing and understanding the topic at hand. These questions are usually called open-ended questions. Informants have the freedom to express their view in their own terms. Meanings and understanding are created in an interaction, which is effectively a co-production involving the construction or reconstruction of knowledge. Both interviewers and interviewees can learn more about certain

aspects of themselves and the others (Bernard, 1988: 212; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Edwards & Holland, 2013: 3–4).

Normally, semi-structured interviewing is used when the interviewer has only one opportunity to perform an interview (Bernard, 1988: 212). In such cases, semi-structured interviews provide a clear set of instructions for interviewers and these enable gathering reliable and comparable qualitative data. The interviewer can also help him or herself with observation, informal and unstructured interviewing in order to develop a keen understanding of the topic (with memoing). Because open-ended questions and discussions may diverge from the interview guide, it is generally best to record interviews and later transcribe the recordings for analysis (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Recorded interviews are a permanent archive of primary information that can be passed on to other researchers (Bernard, 1988: 227).

We focus on the influence of crisis on different aspects of people's lives in Slovenia, with particular emphasis on the development of survival strategies in respondents with different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. Therefore, the questions in our interviews were grouped into different topics:

- changes in household functioning (household economy, use of social networks, gender roles in the household, education practices, housing practices, healthcare practices, family planning, relation to politics and the state),
- changes in lifestyle consumption (material consumption (travel, clothes), food, digital practices, cultural consumption, leisure activities),
- changes in values, attitudes, identity, trust (whether the crisis changes people and in what way (conflict, isolation, solidarity, withdrawing from life),
- changes in trust (general, individual, institutional), life goals, important things in life and religious practices.

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We were particularly interested in evidence of changes in values, attitudes, identity, and trust. Since these areas are subtle and potentially delicate or even unpleasant for respondents, they were accessed indirectly, mostly in the process of data management and analysis, for example, by forming composite codes or recoding gathered material. Perceptions of social responsibility of our interviewees were reconstructed using coded segments from transcripts on the topics of trust, values, perceptions, attitudes and responses to crisis. In addition, interviewer memoing was used in order to provide additional context for coded segments and reconstruction of the perception of social responsibility.

Our data shows that there is no universal understanding of social responsibility among our interviewees, but there is a relatively strong consensus among them on what elements can be regarded as essential and integral parts of social responsibility. These elements are on the micro, interpersonal, level, mostly tied to mutual help and support, and on the macro level (on the level of the state or institutions) to institutional obligations in assuring the survival of citizens. On both levels, the essential core of social responsibility is based on trust. Interviewees talk openly about the social responsibility of the state and its institutions and express low trust in institutions, the state/government and Slovenian society in general. It is evident that the interviewees perceive the state and its institutions as distant with regard to their citizens and unconcerned and unable to solve real problems. The social responsibility of institutions is in this regard understood as the state's responsibility for assuring the survival of its citizens, and since the crisis has diminished the state's ability to provide, the interviewees perceive this as a betrayal of its citizens. Interviewees perceive the state as inefficient, corrupt

and malicious, and talk about this critically and openly. On the other hand, relationships on the micro level exhibit relatively high levels of trust, but interviewees tend to be reluctant to speak critically about this.

In Table 1 we classify different answers our interviewees gave us into groups, which present reports on different spheres of life and interviewees perceptions of social responsibility.

Table 1

Values	Relation to state, politics	Trust in institutions	Trust in people
<p>- (Physical) work, family, kindness, help, honesty, diligence are highly valued.</p> <p>- On job: you have to be honest, hardworking, but an employer should not exploit workers. You should be treated as a human being on job.</p>	<p>- Two opinions among interviewees:</p> <p>1) State could do more (in social transfers, more jobs for especially young people, opening the factories, helping economy, lower taxes etc.).</p> <p>2) People have to find job/work by themselves – if a person does not have a work, it is his/her fault.</p> <p>- Really little trust or</p>	<p>- Low trust in all institutions (state, local municipality, the judiciary, school*, social care*, police, the army, church, NGOs):</p> <p>- problem is corruption,</p> <p>- institutions are not transparent enough (especially helping people from NGOs – where does the money go?),</p> <p>- institutions are too bureaucratic, not practical, professional enough;</p> <p>- the rules should</p>	<p>- In general low trust in other people (envy, conflict, anger etc.);</p> <p>- help (material, financial, emotional, physical help as work in the fields, at home, redistributing food, child care etc.) among each other (especially in family,</p>

involvement/desire of involvement in politics (you cannot influence politics, politics is corrupt).

be the same for everyone;
- redistribution of money, wages – equality;
- problems of getting a job, best medical care according to social groups you belong to.

as partners, then as friends, neighbours, and co-workers) – social responsibility among own social groups, not wider.

*Some interviewees still trust in the educational system and medical care (we have still public services), also in the police and the army. They trust the state, church and NGOs less (because of the affair of stealing money from the Red Cross).

As we see, the interviewees are especially critical of institutions – they normally give opinions and their perspective on how institutions and the state should be working in order to be socially responsible. They are also not politically involved. Godina (2014, 2016) claims this is because solutions of state are not suitable for the cosmology of native people.

Even though the interviewees are critical of the state and institutions, they value “being hardworking”. We noticed that they have strong opinions about how the state should react to people who do not want to work:

‘For some households the state should do more, for others not. If the person is healthy and young, he/she should be working. Even though you cannot get every job, you have to start somewhere. The ones who do not want to work, should not get social transfers. The ones, who are ill or invalids, should get more social transfers.’¹

On the other hand, interviewees generally believe that the state and the crisis negatively influence relations between people: “You never know whom to trust, whom not, who will betray you; everything is just one big pretending.”²

Furthermore, when people talk about the future, they see it as unpredictable one because of instable conditions of the state and institutions. They also talk about or mention going abroad. Some see their own activity as directly connected with reaching a better future.

None of our interviewees talked about being socially responsible at large, even though they do not trust people in the wider sense. Furthermore, interviewees normally don’t talk about their own experience; what they describe is the reciprocity of helping each other, not helping society at large. For example:

‘We always helped each other as neighbours. Or as relatives, brother to brother, sister to brother, so there aren’t any problems. For any kind of work you asked for help, they came and helped.’³

‘Yes, we return someone’s favour, by helping at the first chance we get. For whatever reason they call. We are all in good health, so we can help. If it concerns plumbing, or working on a field – you work no matter where.’⁴

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In short, when talking about their own responsibility, interviewees mostly focus on one recurring theme – help among social groups, especially family, then friends, neighbours and co-workers. We noticed that they talk about reciprocity, which is, according to Godina (2016), one of the dimensions of Slovenian cultural characteristics. According to Slovenian popular belief, one of the primary Slovenian social and cultural characteristics is direct democracy, based on the search for consensus before making a decision. Historically, the neighbourhood was of prime importance (Godina, 2016: 236–238); because of this widespread conviction, we claim that for our interviewees, their own social groups (family, neighbours, friends and co-workers) are important. In helping their social network, they perceive themselves as socially responsible. Furthermore, another dimension is concentration on strategies of survival (Godina, 2016: 239). This we noticed in statements about helping each other. Almost all of the interviewees said that an important part of the household is the help from parents, friends,

¹ »Za nekatera da, za nekatera bi morali ukiniti. Če je človek zdrav in mlad, lahko gre delat. Ampak moraš vedeti, da vsakega dela ne boš dobil, ampak nekje je treba začeti. Takim, ki nočejo delat, bi morali pomoč ukiniti. Tistim, ki pa so invalidi ali pa bolani ali pa kaj takega, pa bi morali povečati finančna sredstva, da bi lažje živeli.«

² »Namesto, da bi se povezali skupaj, so nas v bistvu spravili narazen. Ne veš, komu lahko zaupaš, komu ne smeš, kdo ti bo nož v hrbet zaril, vse je neko veliko pretvarjanje.«

³ »Pri nas je blo to skos v naše, od nekaj smo si pomagale med seufkak soside. Ali pa že rodbina nej, brat brate, sestra brat, tak ka nega nikših problemov. Za bilo kakšo delo si oproso, so prišle, pomogle.«

⁴ »Ja usluge tak če on tebi naprave, boš ti pač njemi nazaj vrno, ob prve prilike. Zajkakolepozovejnej. Saj smovsi telko pri moče, kalejko pomoremo. Če se tiče za vodovod ali na polje delaš in bilo ge.«

neighbours, and in return, giving them food and assistance. We conclude that they share a deep conviction regarding the importance of egalitarianism and redistribution that helps everyone to survive with an adequate lifestyle (for more see Godina, 2014 and Godina, 2016).

Discussion

Our main research problem was, first, to discover how respondents perceive social responsibility in the reality of everyday life in Slovenia and, secondly, how to carry out qualitative research in this area; more specifically, how to overcome the problem of the lack of openness and information.

We have come to the conclusion that social responsibility is mostly perceived on the institutional level. Respondents talked about obligations that institutions have towards them and how they are personally unsatisfied with institutional efforts to fulfil them. Furthermore, we found that on a personal level, respondents perceive social responsibility as helping others inside their social network or as being truthful to their employer and *vice versa*. Another finding is that respondents more openly talk about social responsibility on the institutional level, rather than on a personal level. They also don't talk about examples of their own social responsibility.

This is one of the main limitations of our study. The problem here is the method of interview, which because of its intimate nature can't be successful unless the interviewer can generate some trust between him or herself and the interviewee or if the interviewee doesn't feel safe enough to talk openly about their experiences and understandings (Edwards & Holland, 2013: 77). Even though we endeavoured to create this trusting atmosphere, semi-structured interviews are carried out in just one meeting, so we don't have a complete understanding of people's actions.

Methodologically, through interviews we can explore the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and hopes of research participants, how social processes, institutions, discourses and relationships work, and the significance that they generate (90–91). However, we should consider some of the challenges: criticism that research with qualitative interviews is anecdotal, illustrative, descriptive, subjective, lacks rigour, is unsystematic, biased, impossible to replicate and not generalizable (91; Flick, 2009: 12–13)⁵. Because of this, we suggest the use of other methods in addition, such as participant observation to observe their actions on both macro and micro levels (state level, at the work place, at home). This could be supplemented with semi-structured and unstructured interviews, which would ask questions directly connected with social responsibility.

Our suggestion, when researching social responsibility, is to directly question the perception of social responsibility (what is it, how can it be constructed, manifested and assured, do they perceive themselves as socially responsible). By asking these questions directly we could form a normative but nevertheless culturally appropriate set of criteria of social responsibility. Additionally, the potential existence of different forms of social responsibility (personal,

⁵ Despite the criticism of objectivists, we still consider qualitative methods as the most effective ones because, as Flick (2009: 12) argues, the qualitative method is most suitable for understanding a plurality of life worlds. To formulate subject- and situation-related statements, which are empirically well founded, is a goal that can be attained with qualitative research (Flick, 2009: 14).

work-related, community related, state related)⁶ should be considered. Here we could also examine if respondents feel social responsibility towards institutions or the state and what are their expectation of both in light of their perception of socially responsible behaviour (what makes institutions or the state socially responsible). It is also equally important that we find out if social responsibility is in fact for most of them (as we concluded based on our results) solely a responsibility that institutions have towards people or is it also their personal responsibility to fellow men and not merely something that occurs inside their own social network. Consider not repeating the phrase “social responsibility” in every sentence.

In our study we gathered different perceptions of social responsibility, upon which we can gain an approximate picture of values and ways of thinking among group of people of the same culture⁷. It is a must to research the perception of social responsibility among people who share the same culture, not just global characteristic of what social responsibility should be. We should always consider that various cultures have different understandings of concepts, and that there are social and topographical differences between interviewees’ opinions, even though they share the same culture⁸. We should also pay attention to power and emotions during making the interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013: 87).

Hopefully, our suggestions may help shape the complex concept of social responsibility among Slovenian people and stimulate the search for ways to make social responsibility a higher priority among institutions and citizens of Slovenia.

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⁶ For example, one interviewee talked about social responsibility in relation to working hard, which for him meant he is not a burden on the state. On the other hand, he does not vote in elections and does not take part in civil-political activities.

⁷ Culture in an anthropological sense, as different ways of seeing the world (Eriksen, 2001; Monaghan and Just, 2000). In anthropology, the concept of culture is normally used to explain the extraordinary diversity of the ways human beings live life (Ingold, 2005: 329).

⁸ Not all members of a culture have the same knowledge, people come from different parts of the country, different households, etc. They are a part of a sub-culture, which is normally abstracted from a general culture – because diversity also exists within one community (Duranti, 2009: 32).

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