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UNDERSTANDING FEELING VALUED – A KEY DRIVER FOR ENGAGEMENT

Summary. This paper analyses two studies that the author has carried out on how people come to an understanding of what makes them feel valued. The studies explore how people know they are valued and what they identify as factors that make them feel valued. This paper analyses the approaches and data collection of these two studies to consider the thinking process that participants used to get to their conclusions about being valued. The interest in this process came about because it was found during the studies that none of the respondents had ever been asked what made them feel valued before. The methodological approach, the philosophical approach and the data collection methods of the two studies were analysed in order to understand how, if and why they supported the understanding of this phenomena and to map out what thinking process was used by the participants. The thinking process which was largely reflective was considered alongside models of reflective thinking.

Keywords: engagement, being valued, reflection, grounded theory

POCZUCIE BYCIA DOCENIANYM KLUCZOWYM CZYNNIKIEM ZAANGAŻOWANIA

Streszczenie. W artykule dokonano analizy dwóch badań, które autorka przeprowadziła w celu zrozumienia powodów, sprawiających, że ludzie czują się doceniani. Badania odkrywają, jak ludzie rozpoznają, że są doceniani i jakie identyfikują czynniki, które sprawiają, że czują się doceniani. W artykule dokonuje się analizy podejść oraz metod gromadzenia danych w przeprowadzonych badaniach celem identyfikacji procesu myślowego wykorzystywanego przy wnioskowaniu dotyczącym bycia docenianym. Powodem podjęcia powyższego tematu był brak dotąd realizowanych badań w zakresie zrozumienia, rozpoznania i ujawnienia powodów, dzięki którym ludzie czują się doceniani. Podejście metodologiczne, podejście filozoficzne oraz metody zbierania danych w obu przeprowadzonych badaniach zostały przeanalizowane w celu stworzenia mapy procesów myślowych

wykorzystywanych przez uczestników badań. Proces myślowy został przeanalizowany w odniesieniu do modelu myślenia refleksyjnego.

Słowa kluczowe: zaangażowanie, bycie docenianym, refleksja, teoria ugruntowana

1. Introduction

Instinctively it is clear that employees want to *feel valued* at work or have a sense of *being valued,* and they report that this makes them feel engaged but it is not as easy to identify what they mean by these terms. *Feeling valued* can be seen as a driver to employee engagement and also an outcome of employee engagement. The originator of studies on employee engagement is Kahn and he defines engagement as '"the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." (Kahn 1990, p. 694). This paper is aimed at understanding the construct of ***feeling valued*** as this is the strongest driver of all for engagement (Robinson et al, 2004). Organisations want their employees to be engaged as research is showing that engagement brings many other positive outcomes. There are indicators that engaged employees are more productive (Gruman & Saks, 2011). There are also studies that show a link between employee engagement and: discretionary effort; innovation; customer loyalty; quality, profitability; earnings per share and productivity (BlessingWhite, 2008). These studies have increased the level of interest in what drives employee engagement and since ***feeling valued*** is a key driver, this is worthy of exploration. Robinson et al (2004), state *feeling valued and involved* is seen as an overarching driver which is an aggregate of 10 separate drivers (training, development and career; immediate management; performance and appraisal; communication; equal opportunities and fair treatment; pay and benefits; health and safety; co-operation; family friendliness; job satisfaction) all feeding into it. In their follow up study, this driver of *feeling valued and involved* was adjusted and it was no longer seen as an amalgamation of the other drivers but a separate driver alongside 7 others (job satisfaction; equality of opportunity; health and safety; length of service; ethnicity; communication; co-operation). They state "our Phase 1 findings included the fact that the main driver of engagement in the NHS was found to be feeling valued and involved. The extent to which it was the main driver was so overwhelming that all other drivers, even if significant statistically, appeared relatively unimportant. Our Phase 2 findings show that, although feeling valued and involved is very important in driving engagement, it is not the only key driver – in overall terms, it contributes approximately on a par with job satisfaction." (Robinson et al, 2007).

According to a survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), *feeling valued* is a key indicator of job performance. Employees who feel valued are more likely to be engaged in their work and feel satisfied and motivated. Astonishingly, only half of employees in America **feel valued** (APA, 2012). The APA survey shows that **being valued** has consequences for other benefits. The survey report states "*employees who report feeling valued are significantly more likely than those who do not feel valued to report that they are satisfied with their job overall, and are also more satisfied in other key aspects like employee involvement, growth and development and recognition.*" (APA, 2012). Here are some examples of responses to questions. The question *I am motivated to do my very best for my employer* gained responses of agree/strongly agree by 93% of workers who felt valued and only 33% of those who did not feel valued. The question *I am satisfied with my job* gained responses of agree/strongly agree by 70% of those who felt valued and only 40% of those who did not feel valued. The question *I am satisfied with the employee recognition practices of my employer* gained responses of agree/strongly agree by 76% of those feeling valued compared to 6% of those not valued. Those feeling valued are also significantly less likely to say that they intend to seek employment outside of their company within the next year, 50% compared to 21%. Also "*employees who report that they do not feel valued are significantly more likely than those who feel valued to report that a variety of factors significantly affect their stress levels at work.*" (APA, 2012). Low pay is a significant stress factor for 72% of those who feel undervalued but only 32% of those who feel valued. Lack of participation in decision making was a significant factor for only16% of those who felt valued but 57% of those who felt undervalued. Feeling stressed from lack of opportunity and growth was significant for 75% of those who felt undervalued but only 26% of those who felt valued. So *feeling valued* has consequences for how employees experience other factors in their work and how engaged they are. *Feeling valued* is both a driver for engagement, a moderator for other work outcomes and experiences and an outcome in itself. Although there is much evidence to suggest that feeling valued leads to engagement, it is not clear what *feeling valued* means and there is little research in this area.

2. Two studies that were analysed

This paper analyses two studies that the author has carried out on how people come to an understanding of what makes them *feel valued*. The studies explore how people know they are valued and what they identify as factors that make them feel valued. This paper analyses the approaches and data collection of these two studies to consider the thinking process that participants used to get to their conclusions about being valued. The interest in this came

about because it was found during the studies that none of the respondents had ever been asked questions about what made them feel valued before and hardly any of them had asked themselves these questions. It was therefore quite a difficult task for them to consider ways in which they were valued and what factors determined this. The methodological approach, the philosophical approach and the data collection methods of the two studies were analysed in order to understand how, if and why they supported the understanding of this phenomena and to map out what thinking process was used.

The two studies on being valued involved employees of a manufacturing company and students on a Master's in Human Resource Management, respectively.

The results for the first study, which used a grounded methodology and in-depth interviewing for data collection, were that employees were valued when: they were enabled to actively work towards those things they were proud of (rather than those things the organisation wanted them to be proud of); they had a shared purpose which was so strong that it included mutual sacrifice to sustain it and their leaders were authentic servant leaders shown by the sacrifices they made for their employees.

These are conceptualised into three interrelating dimensions:
- authentic pride enablement (including mutual accountability)
- altruistically-orientated shared-purpose (including mutual sacrificing)
- servant leadership (including self-sacrificing and accountability)

Full details of this study are available at Claxton (2014a).

The results for the second study, which also used a grounded methodology but focus groups rather than one-to-one interviewing, was that the HRM students felt valued when there was: supportive, responsive and meaningful communication; where their individual needs were legitimised and supported; when they had respectful and upholding relationships with peers, tutors and administrators, and when their involvement and participation in classroom discussions were given respect and appreciation and affirmed as being important. These are summarised as:
- Supportive, responsive and meaningful communication
- Legitimising and Supporting individualised need.
- Respectful, upholding relationships.
- Participation and involvement.

Full details of this study are available at Claxton (2014b).

3. The Methodological Considerations

The concept of being valued is amorphous and there is little research into how employees and students experience being valued. It was considered important to collect qualitative rich data and to let that data speak by reiterating and sifting until theory presented itself. The usefulness of conceptualising data into a theory as an output rather than leaving it as themes means it can be applied to other contexts. For these reasons a Grounded Theory (GT) approach was considered appropriate and the different versions of GT were explored. Sometimes GT is reduced to a method, viz, Grounded Theory Method (GTM), but this was too narrow an approach. Glaser and Strauss (1967) first discovered Grounded Theory, but since then they have disagreed on its essence and other authors have created other versions.

The three most well-known approaches are:
–   Classical Grounded Theory by Glaser (1992).
–   Evolved Grounded Theory by Strauss and Corbin (1998).
–   Social Constructivist Grounded Theory by Charmaz (2000).

Glaser and Strauss went their separate ways as Strauss developed grounded theory to become more structured and created the evolved grounded theory with Corbin. Glaser's stance is that "data emerges" from the experience of people and therefore presents the same picture of facts to every researcher in form of some objective truth. Strauss and Corbin's viewpoint on the other hand stresses that a researcher has to actively obtain theory from data, and depending on their background experience and values, will focus on different aspects of the data more strongly. Sharmaz (2000) takes this one step further. She argues that both Glaser's and Strauss & Corbin's approaches to grounded theory assume an objective external reality and in contrast she advocates a constructivist approach to grounded theory that assumes multiple social realities. She does not support the view that theories emerge and are discovered but believes that the studied world needs to be portrayed in an interpretive way because interviewee and researcher embark together on the process of constructing reality (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, the key difference between Glaser, Strauss & Corbin and Charmaz is that Charmaz rejects notions of emergence (Mills et al, 2006).

Charmaz also says that Glaser and Strauss & Corbin take a positivist and objectivist stance but Glaser refutes this classification stating that classical grounded theory is a neutral inductive model and can be used with any theoretical perspective.

Glaser advocates no literature review prior to data gathering to allow the data to speak without confines. Data is collected in field notes, not taped, and there is no need to use verbatim data though quotes can be used. Strauss and Strauss & Corbin prefer a framework from a preliminary literature review to guide the data collection.

So, the outcome of Classical Grounded Theory is *discovery* and *emergence* followed by development of *theory without preconceived* ideas based on the experiences of participants. The outcome of Strauss and Corbin is *theory* developed from an already established *theoretical framework* but allowing for movement to create theory on the experiences of participants. The outcome from Charmaz is *socially constructed themes* about the participants and what they have experienced.

In addition to these three well known types of grounded theory, there is feminist grounded theory which has been used in the nursing profession and takes a feminist perspective when the research is based on women (Plummer & Young, 2010). There are also two approaches of analysis which are termed as types of grounded theory by Sbrainai et al (2011). These are:

– Postmodern Situational Analysis – Adele Clarke (student of Strauss).
– Dimensional Analysis – Leonard Schaztman (colleague of Strauss and Glaser).

Postmodern Situational Analysis is where grounded theory is resituated and is provided with a wider array of situational maps and analyses to shift grounded theory further towards the social constructivist approach put forwarded by Charmaz (Clarke, 2003, p. 559).

Dimensional Analysis developed by Schatzman (1991) is an approach which is a slight broadening of grounded theory, and which uses an analysis, whilst still involving constant comparison, and emphasises taking different perspectives into account.

There is also an approach which is often attributed to be an *underpinning* element of grounded theory, which is called *Symbolic Interactionist (SI)*, which is an approach that emphasises agency. Glaser (2005) refutes that grounded theory is based on symbolic interactionist. Herbert Blumer, a student of George Herbert Mead, created the term "symbolic interactionism" to explain Mead's perspective that people derive their meanings from social interaction and interpretation, that they "create their own social reality through collective and individual action" (Morrione, 1988). Milliken and Schreiber 2012 state that "Grounded theory is inherently symbolic interactionist". They argue that in the absence of an appreciation of the centrality of symbolic interactionism to grounded theory, researchers are limited in their capacity to develop a useful, deep, rich, explanatory theory. (Milliken and Schreiber, 2012). This is in contrast to Glaser, who in 1999, had said that "GT can be done outside the theoretical framework of SI". He reports in his paper *The Impact of Symbolic Interaction on Grounded Theory* (Glaser, 2005) that "The SI takeover is clearly a remodel with many negative consequences. GT is simply a general inductive method that conceptualizes into a generated theory, which explains the latent patterns in any type of data in a general area, whether substantive or formal "(Glaser, 2005, p. 11). He also quotes here from a colleague Judith Holton "GT has been co-opted by the critical mass of those working within SI and constructivist theoretical frameworks (esp. nursing and related health services).

The result is a remodelling and eroding of classical GT as a general methodology (…) they continually reinforce mutually held perceptions thereby blocking out their ability to remain open to GT as a general methodology that works within any theoretical framework" (Glaser, 2005, p. 11).

Having considered all grounded theory approaches available, Glaser Classical Grounded Theory was considered the most useful in exploring and gaining an understanding of a construct that is personally perceived and held and for which there is very little research already published.

4. The Philosophical Considerations

In addition to selecting which grounded theory approach was appropriate, the philosophical approach for collecting data was also important because of the complex nature of this construct. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2005) was chosen as the approach used for collecting data. The *appreciative inquiry* approach means to deliberately pose questions focussing on the positive, that is, in this case, around what makes people feel valued and not what makes them feel unvalued, not valued or undervalued. This is in order to focus on what is identified as providing a positive valuing so that ideas around these things can be explored and new possibilities opened up. This can then lead to actions that further build the valuing. It is not the easiest approach for respondents who often find it easier to think of things that have made them feel unvalued/devalued/undervalued. However, exploring factors for not valuing can lead to negativity and focus on mending the problem or addressing the causes. This can then lead to defence responses which do not provide creative solutions or new ideas. An example of this from the data collection stage was a student saying that he felt devalued when his tutor said he couldn't talk through his draft work with him that week at the point in time when he felt he needed that support. The tutor explained that there were set times in the module for one-to-one feedback on drafts and that extra sessions could not be provided. This was a defensive position which left the student feeling devalued and the tutor frustrated as he wants to help all student progress. In the data collection session the student was asked to turn his response to what makes him (or would make him) feel valued and he immediately replied "well, having a mentor to help me when I need them not just at a set time". This immediately moves away from solving a problem and implying lack and opens up possibilities for new ideas and possibilities. Having a mentor would provide a sense of being valued and so, from an organisational perspective, the focus could be on exploring ways of finding this provision. Who could be a mentor? Perhaps it could be an experienced student who has already passed the course. Perhaps it could be another academic or support staff

other than this specific tutor. Appreciative Inquiry opens up possibilities rather than presents problems to be solved. The continuum of the concept of being valued is not established. Just as satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not on a continuum (Herzberg, 1968) so being valued and being unvalued, being devalued or not being valued are not on a continuum. This is a paper for another day.

5. The Data Collection

Data was collected in the following ways:
– 25 In-depth individual interviews of 1-1½ hours.
– 2 Focus groups of 12 people.

Attempts were also made to collect data using email and a worldwide student network. However, the data collection by these methods was not useable and mainly contained questions of clarification and confusion. Even in a real-time discussion on the forum or email it was difficult to gain useful understanding of the type of data needed. None of this data was used.

The methodological approach of grounded theory with its emphasis on emergence, discovery and data speaking and the philosophical approach of appreciative inquiry with its emphasis on the positive, that is, the dimension of being valued, rather than the dimension of not being valued were all seen as *enabling* factors for the participants in their process of understanding the phenomenon of *feeling valued* and concluding what made they feel valued.

The 25 interview scripts and the 2 focus groups from the two studies were analysed for stages in the data flow process. The following emergent model, Figure 1, illustrates the stages that were created from that analysis.
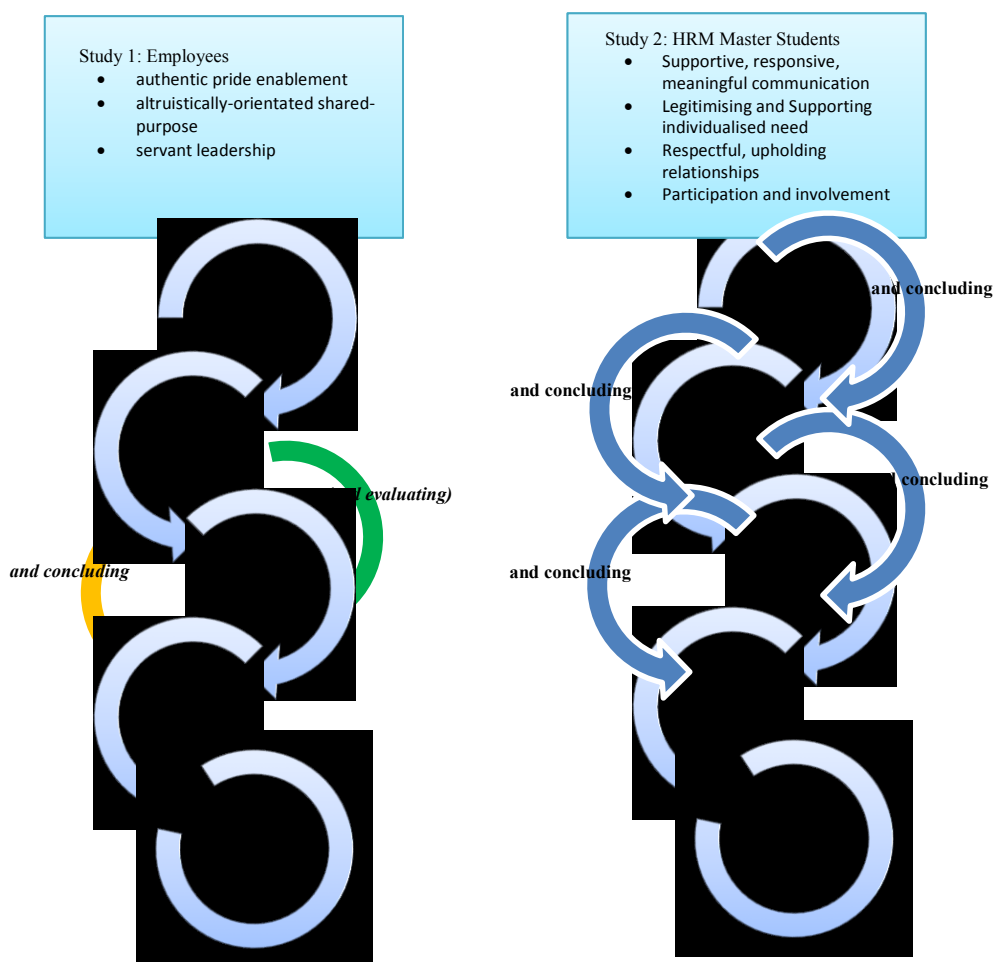
Study 1: Employees
- authentic pride enablement
- altruistically-orientated shared-purpose
- servant leadership

Study 2: HRM Master Students
- Supportive, responsive, meaningful communication
- Legitimising and Supporting individualised need
- Respectful, upholding relationships
- Participation and involvement

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Fig. 1. Five Stage Process of Value Consideration
Rys. 1. Analiza pięciu etapów procesu doceniania

1. *Snapshot Feeling* – participants were asked "In this organisation, HOW are you valued?" If further prompts were needed then they were: "In what ways do you FEEL you are valued?" "How do you KNOW you are valued?" On consideration of this or these questions the participants produced a very quick "snapshot" response based on "gut feeling" or intuition. For two respondents this was, "I don't actually feel valued." For most it was, "I don't really know," or "I've never been asked that before," and some provided a response "they keep paying me …" or "because I have a job …" or "people appreciate my work …." These were not thought out responses but reactions to a question that most stated they had never been asked before.

2. *Memory Walkthrough* – If the respondent had stated they did not feel valued then the follow on question was "Are there any times at all that you feel valued or have felt valued?" In order to help respondents expand on their answers, questions such as "what things, people, processes make you feel valued," and "what, specifically, makes you feel valued?" To answer these questions most respondents started to recall memories.

The memories were of all types, e.g. conversations between themselves and others; the reactions of others to them personally and to their work; particular events in their lives e.g. illness or difficulty; their training and apprenticeships; social aspects of their work, feedback and rewards received (or not) and aspects relating to the work culture, including the founding values of the company leaders. The most powerful memories were those that had a strong emotional tone. For some participants, their feelings of being valued related to one single event that happened to them, for example, where they were shown support through difficulty, shown grace over a misdemeanor or shown care for themselves or a family member. For memories with particular emotional traits the evidence held a freshness even when several memories were over 10 years old and two were over 30 years old. The strength of the emotion within the incident provided the memory with durability. This was a stage of detailed description with the respondents talking with ease and fluency as they revisited memories.

3. *Dissecting* – After a time of memory walkthrough the interviewee responded to research question prompts such as *so why does this memory tell you/show you that you are valued?* This then opened up the next stage which was *dissecting*. This is where the participant unraveled the memories, separated out the elements and then identified particular components of the stories that were evidence to them that they were valued. This led to identification of more specific factors for being valued.

4. *Evaluating* – Sometimes coming alongside dissecting, and also comprising a separate stage, was the process of *evaluating*. This is where the participant started to consider on what basis they were selecting components as evidence, what factors they were identifying in each memory, and questioning *why that* particular action or word made them *think/perceive* they were valued and/or *feel* they were valued, and what did this tell them about what value needs they may have or may respond to. Criticality was emerging and then growing during this stage and there were elements of pondering in deep thought and also 'aha!' moments as they reviewed their responses to particular stimuli.

5. *Concluding* – Although there were some conclusions made during the previous stage, there was also a definite final stage of concluding. The criticality in the *evaluating* stage had enabled elements of evidence to be weighed up, discarded or affirmed as revealing something useful to the individual about how they experienced being valued and feeling valued. In nearly all of the cases the factors mentioned in the conclusion were not the same as those mentioned in the *snapshot* stage. For those who had said they did not feel valued at the *snapshot* stage found evidence for being valued in the following stages. One respondent who was very clear at the snapshot stage that he felt unvalued finished the interview astonished at how he had identified compelling evidence (which was evidence he had selected according to his own criteria) that he was and had been valued

for many years. He left the room with chest out and shoulders back, two inches taller. This is interesting in that it reveals the importance of organisations having a dialogue with its employees to help them to unpack what being valued means to them and identifying evidence in their workplace that supports the notion that they are being valued. So what was the process? It was compared to Gibbs (1998) reflective cycle which has six stages:

- *Description*: of the event being considered.
- *Feelings*: at that time.
- *Evaluation*: of the experience.
- *Analysis*: to make sense of the situation.
- *Conclusion*: of what has been learnt.
- *Action Plan*: for if the situation arose again.

The participants were not required to take action so the last stage is not relevant here. The Gibb stages of "description" and "feelings" were part of the "memory walkthrough". This stage was often strongly emotional for the participants. The participants also had the prior stage of "snapshot feeling" before any real reflection took place. However, this is an important stage and reveals that the question "How do you know you are valued?" is an emotive one. The most interesting area is *analysis and evaluation* in Gibb's model and *dissection then evaluation* in this emergent model. The participants here needed to go through the process of dissecting the experience before they could evaluate it, so these stages are reversed compared to Gibb's model. Perhaps this is because in reflection it is the whole story that has relevance whereas in this study the process involves trying to identify and separate out the particular elements, from the whole story, that indicated the person was valued.

The **focus groups** followed a similar process, but this was not such a clear process since having more people it was more dynamic, with respondents at different stages in their thinking. However, respondents were able to help each other grasp the research question, and once identification of evidence of being valued started to flow from the respondents it was easier for others to identify their own evidence. This speeded up the process and quite quickly specific pieces of evidence were being provided. These were collected on a flip-chart in view of everyone. Stories and emotions were shared but these were understandably in much less depth than in the individual interviews. The data collected had less detail and less emotional components to the *memory walkthrough*. In mapping the process, it jumped about and less time was spent on the *dissecting* and *evaluating* stages of the interview respondents. There were no additional stages or different stages, but there was a clear jumping to the concluding stage. Sometimes respondents provided conclusions as if answering a question for the general public and not for themselves, and the researcher had to be careful to ask for clarification and personal examples to check that the participant was talking with authenticity about something they experienced. The respondents may have felt pressure to contribute

something to the discussion rather than really understand the phenomena as to how it pertained to themselves.

6. Conclusion

Having analysed the data collection methods for the two studies on being valued, the finding is that online forums and email methods do not provide useful data and are not helpful for researching this phenomena. Face to face data collection was essential for clarification of requirements for the required type of data as it was not an easy concept for respondents to grasp, coupled with the fact they had not been asked about this before. Face to face was also essential for ensuring the appreciate inquiry approach was adhered to. This was easier to ensure in the interviews than in the focus groups as at times a few respondents together would start to talk negatively about not being valued, and the discussion had to be collectively turned around to talk about being valued. The more carefully considered responses came from the interviews where respondents had more mental space to follow a train of thought without interruption and were unhindered in careful recollection of memories and providing authentic data without being interrupted or concerned about speaking in public. The one-to-one in-depth interview is therefore considered the most appropriate data collection method for any further studies in this area. This method best enabled participants to follow through stages similar to a reflective process, where they could recall and register ways in which they are made to feel valued. Because emotion was a strong component of feeling valued, it was easier for respondents to reflect emotionally when they were on their own than when they were in a focus group.

The grounded theory approach enabled complete freedom to let the concepts emerge from the data, and this was entirely appropriate for the complexity of this construct and the way in which it is personally held, and also was not adversely affected by not having an established theoretical framework. The appreciative inquiry approach ensured that the data collected related to the concept of being valued and not to the concept of being unvalued, undervalued or not valued, all of which tend to lead to a problem solving response rather than possibilities for organisational creative action.

The result of mapping the process that the respondents followed in answering the questions on what made them feel valued provides a preliminary model useful for exploring this phenomena further and with other groups. Further research is already being planned on how to understand this phenomena as it relates to patients in the UK National Health Service.

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