The construction and interpretation of vignettes in social research

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Vignettes refer to stimuli, including text and images, which research participants are invited to respond. Drawing on a range of social science sources, this paper focuses on two substantive areas concerning the use of vignettes in research. Considered first is the development and construction of vignettes. This section is concerned with internal reliability; research topics; participants; and interest, relevance, realism and timing. Considered second are vignette interpretations and responses, in particular open and closed questioning; vignette perspectives; and difficulties with interpreting and responding to vignettes. Together these explorations contribute to the wider appreciation of vignette methodologies used within the social sciences. The paper concludes by outlining the limitations of using vignettes in social research.

Asking questions and seeking answers

Much of social research is concerned with the study of beliefs, attitudes, values and perceptions. These topics raise many challenges for the application of social research methodologies which aim to capture, as fully as possible, the reality of people's lives. Empirical research questions underpin the adoption of particular research methodologies. Answering these research questions is informed by the kinds of information required and how best this information can be obtained. Other factors also influence the research questions posed and the methodologies considered most appropriate to answering them. For example, the epistemological stance of researchers may determine the choice of particular research questions and subsequent research methodologies. There may be ethical issues arising from, for example, the study of certain topics or research conducted with particular participant groups that shape the way research questions are asked and, therefore, the answers obtained.

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Practical issues also influence the choice of research methods including financial constraints and the timing of research.

Vignettes refer to text, images or other forms of stimuli which research participants are asked to respond (Hughes and Huby, 2002). Vignettes play an important role in social work research including, for example, in longitudinal studies (Fook et al., 1997), cross-cultural research (Christopherson, 1998; Soydan, 1995; Soydan and Stål 1994), comparative research between groups of professionals (Wilson and While, 1998) and service users (Sim et al., 1998). We explore two sets of substantive issues that surround vignettes: first, the development and construction of vignettes, and, second, vignette interpretations and responses.

Developing and constructing vignettes

Of particular importance when considering the development and construction of vignettes are internal validity of the vignettes, their appropriateness to the research topic, the kinds of participants involved and the interest, relevance, realism and timing of the vignettes in the research encounter.

Internal validity of vignettes

The internal validity of vignettes refers to the extent to which vignette content captures the research topics under question (Gould, 1996; Flaskerud, 1979). Internal validity has been explicitly considered in the development and construction of vignettes (Gould, 1996; Lanza and Carifio, 1992; Flaskerud, 1979). Criticism has been levelled at studies that fail to address internal validity and Gould (1996, pp.211-212) suggests it is important to question:

> What attempts have been taken to establish internal validity? More specifically, has the author drawn upon existing literature or case study material to develop each of the scenarios presented? Have they been vetted by an expert panel whose members have sufficient knowledge and experience to judge their suitability for the study? Have the questions asked in relation to the vignettes been adequately pretested to extract items that are ambiguous or other unsuitable?

The construction of vignettes has been informed by a combination of the existing literature and previous research (Cheek and Jones, 2003; McKeganey et al., 1995; Levkoff and Wetle, 1989), researchers' and their consultants'

personal and professional experiences (Sprat, 2001; Wilson and While, 1998; Kalafat et al., 1993; Barry and Greene, 1992) together with actual case studies and individual experiences (Scott and Rosenberg, 1998; Wilson and While, 1998; Rahman, 1996; Friedenberg et al., 1993). Vignettes are usually piloted prior to their application, as is the case in most research. Similarly, professionals may be used to assess the extent to which vignettes are representative of situations relevant to participants and research topics (Flaskerud, 1979). Study group members have also been used to pilot vignettes (McKeganey et al., 1995; Kalafat et al., 1993). These procedures can strengthen the internal validity of vignettes, especially when the study requires vignettes to be as realistic as possible (Gould, 1996; Flaskerud, 1979). However, it is important to recognise that the internal validity of vignettes depends on the purposes for which vignettes are used. Some vignette studies for reasons of, for example, ethics and access to participants may be designed to simulate events in a hypothetical or imaginary way in order to prompt discussions on topics that are unlikely to occur in order to discover how people might react to such events in principle (Wolfe et al., 1999; Perkins et al., 1998; Peterson-Badali et al., 1997; Nosanchuk, 1972).

Research topics in question

The research topic will influence the development and construction of the type of vignette used. Vignettes commonly tend to be textual but static and moving images are also used in the form of film or as live acts performed in the company of participants. Textual vignettes take many forms and range from short written prompts to extended stories. Short staged written vignettes, for example, portraying a child's family circumstances, were used in cross-national research to identify differences in social workers' responses to the vignette family's situation (Soydan, 1995; Soydan and Stål, 1994).

Kinicki et al. (1995) suggest that these widely used 'paper-people' vignettes impose low cognitive demands on individuals and only require selective attention when compared to the observation of videotaped or live events. Videotaped or live events require participants to draw their own meaning from observations to a greater extent than written vignettes that are unambiguously processed in the mind. Observed actions contain visual and non-visual cues, some that may be contradictory, and are therefore more meaningful by virtue of their complexity than written vignettes. As Kinicki et al. (1995, p.355) exemplify:

Thus, a student may readily classify a written description about an instructor delivering an engaging lecture as representing an effective teacher prototype

but feel hesitant about a videotaped instructor wearing old-fashioned clothing who presents the same lecture.

Spratt (2001) used real child protection referrals as vignettes but recognises that vignette responses are decontextualised from the kinds of 'real' responses social workers might take in highly pressured real-life situations. Of course, written vignettes are only one type of 'paper' presentation. Some topics may be better addressed with participants through vignettes using visual imagery. The highly subjective perceptions of pain, for example, have been explored using various forms of visual imagery including photographs and painting (Bendelow, 1993) and line drawings (Chambers and Craig, 1998).

The nature of participant groups

It is important to match the type of vignette used to specific participant groups (Weisman and Brosgole, 1994). As noted previously, experiences of pain are highly subjective. To explore perceptions of pain amongst children Chambers and Craig (1998) used a series of line drawn faces representing a range of expressions from upturned mouths to downturned mouths, each being associated with a position on a scale. Cartoon pictures of children were also developed and accompanied by a verbal story that depicted different scenarios. For example, one scenario depicted a child having a medical injection. The study found that the type of faces portrayed in these vignettes influenced children's perceptions of pain. This highlights the importance of carefully considering the form of vignettes used. Subtle differences in content, in this case facial expressions, can affect responses. Reflecting wider concerns with vignette validity, Chambers and Craig (1998) suggest that future research should aim to understand more on the reliability and validity of these vignettes, rather than developing new variants on the same theme.

Images can be useful when exploring difficult to research topics with participants who may be less receptive to written materials. For some groups, however, text can be a very useful research medium. Wilson and While (1998) developed a series of six written vignettes based on nursing and social work referrals. The vignettes were short and could be considered artificial because they do not completely portray the situations being studied. However, for the participants – nurses and social workers – Wilson and While (1998) noted that the form of delivery of information reflected the reality of participants' professional practices. Many referrals, like the vignettes used, can be incomplete and contain inadequate information. Different forms of response can be used in conjunction with textual vignettes. Sheppard and Ryan (2003) for example invited social workers to 'think aloud' as they were

presented with written vignette referrals. Other work employing postal questionnaires has invited social workers to offer their responses in writing (Hardman, 1997). Both forms of response work well with social workers who, in everyday practice, are familiar with dealing with referrals both verbally and in writing.

Interest, relevance, realism and timing

Generally vignettes are more likely to be effective when they engage participants' interest, are relevant to people's lives, and appear real. Staging vignette scenarios (Sim et al., 1998; Soydan, 1995; Soydan and Stål, 1994) and presenting extended written narratives and storybooks (Stewart, 1999; Hughes, 1998; Rahman, 1996; Ouslander et al., 1993) can help to keep participants interested. Placing short vignettes at different points in the research meeting, offering breaks and changing tasks can help to avoid vignette response fatigue (O'Connor and Hirsch, 1999).

Short vignettes are valuable, for example, in helping to maximise response rates when used in postal questionnaires (Lawrie et al., 1998). They may also help to save time during research meetings with participants. However, people may lose interest and tire of responding, often repetitively, to a number of short vignettes. Furthermore, responding to vignettes repetitively risks a carry over effect from one vignette to another (Sniderman and Grob, 1996). This may be particularly apparent when there is little continuity between vignette scenarios. Equally, longer vignettes may be answered carelessly when participants lose interest over time (Nosanchuk, 1972).

Whilst longer vignettes can add to the time research participation imposes on individuals they can help to keep participants interested for longer. Continuous narrative vignettes, for example, which build upon previous events can be economical in terms of time as contextual material need not be supplied for each scenario. This can leave scope for extended coverage of issues contained within the vignettes (Hughes, 1998). Such an approach can lead to a more detailed and complex insight into the topics being studied (Rahman, 1996).

Finch (1987) discusses the development and construction of vignettes that aimed to be as realistic as possible. To achieve this the vignettes depicted mundane occurrences to reflect the reality of people's lives and little emphasis was placed on eccentric vignette characters and disastrous events. Lupfer et al. (1998) also aimed to present realistic vignettes, but to engage participants' interest further vignettes were portrayed vividly depicting characters in crisis. If situations presented in vignettes appear hypothetical rather than realistic then responses may be answered in a similar, hypothetical fashion. This can

be a problem as realistic responses are required. Neff (1975) suggests that the more hypothetical vignettes appear, the less likely reactions will correspond to actual behaviour.

Further concerns have been raised about the effects of posing hypothetical situations in vignettes (Kirmayer et al., 1997; Constant et al., 1994). In Kirmayer et al.'s (1997) study with Inuit people the focus was on how participants themselves would react to the vignette characters described. On reflection, the authors suggest that the vignettes used may have been too hypothetical to direct respondents' thinking. This problem may have been compounded by participants' unfamiliarity with the research process and questionnaire methods. In such cases they suggest that a vignette character may prompt a response based on ideas about how some person known to participants would be likely to respond, rather than giving their own reactions.

The timing of vignettes is important. Participants in Hamers et al.'s (1997) study, for example, were asked to read a written vignette, watch a video and then answer questions. The time allowed to answer questions was restricted and participants only answered after a researcher had posed the questions. The authors note that some participants complained about the imposition of arbitrary time limits and that this might affect data quality. Stolte (1994) showed that satisficing, the processing of vignette information less carefully and effectively, can increase when participants have time restrictions imposed upon them to respond to vignettes. With regards to visual imagery, however, Bendelow (1993) suggests that images tend to prompt fast, yet often detailed, responses. Responses to visual imagery may be more immediate than responses to textual or other vignette forms requiring thought and interpretation. Thus, in situations where visual imagery is used the timing of responses may be less important.

In summary, when participants are interested in the research, feel it to be relevant and real then the quality of data is likely to increase. Bendelow (1993) reports that participants enjoyed responding to visual imagery vignettes and some felt the experience to be therapeutic and assisted participants to put their own experiences into perspective. Similar expressions of participant interest have been shown in other vignette-based research (Hughes, 1999; Barry and Greene, 1992). Care is needed in vignette design to ensure that the desired type of response – personal or hypothetical – is elicited and that time constraints do not limit responses arbitrarily.

Vignette interpretations and responses

Depending on the purposes of the research, responses to vignettes can be elicited in a number of different ways. The nature of responses depends on whether open or closed ended questions are asked and on the perspectives participants adopt when answering.

Open and closed questioning

Responses may be elicited through closed and forced choice responses (Coleman et al., 1999). Closed ended questioning tends, although not exclusively, to be employed with quantitative applications of vignettes. For example, factorial surveys employ a closed series of responses to aid quantification and sometimes participants are invited to rate responses along a scale (Alves and Rossi, 1978). However, closed questioning may not capture, as much as open ended questioning, the socially situated elements of participants' responses.

Open ended questioning has been shown to have considerable value in vignette studies (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003; Hughes, 1998; Sumrall and West, 1998). Sumrall and West (1998) used open ended questions to promote individual creativity amongst participants when responding to vignettes, and Kalafat and Galiano (1996) note that open ended responses may provide a more realistic estimate of reactions to real life situations.

Vignettes using closed ended questioning, notably in surveys (Wagenaar et al., 2001; Denk et al., 1997; Thurman et al. 1988; Alves and Rossi, 1978), allow for a broad range of variables to be incorporated into the vignette research design. Thurman et al. (1988, p. 583), for example, discuss the merits of a factorial survey approach which constructs vignettes from a list of all possible behaviour and attitudes towards mental health:

> While this approach employs hypothetical situations rather than actual mentally ill persons to elicit responses, we believe that the factorial survey proves to be aptly applied to this area of study. The factorial survey approach allows for rich descriptions of persons who may be mentally ill. Thereby improving on early attempts to model the factors influencing popular conceptions of mental illness. It is this capability of parsimoniously incorporating large and varied amounts of information into the description being judged that champions the use of factorial surveys in future studies …

Employing a combination of open ended and closed ended questioning can capture some of the advantages of both questioning approaches (Perkins et

al., 1998; Rahman, 1996; Finch, 1987). For example, Rahman (1996) used a combination of fixed choice and open ended questioning that was particularly valuable in allowing participants to vary their responses possibly keeping participants interested in the vignettes for longer. Perkins et al. (1998) asked for 'yes' or 'no' decisions together with room for more open justification in response to vignette-based questions. They found that some participants drew on personal experience to respond. As noted earlier, Kirmayer et al. (1997) found people provided information based on the experiences of others known to them.

More generally, the questioning approach adopted is informed by the research design and shapes the types of data obtained. Barry and Greene (1992) argue that little is known about the effects of using vignettes with open-ended and closed ended questioning on the data obtained. They call for systematic evaluation.

Vignette perspectives

There are a number of different perspectives that may be adopted when inviting participants to respond to vignettes. Participants may respond from the point of view of the vignette characters, their peers and people more generally, or from their own personal viewpoints. On other occasions, as with open-ended and closed-ended questioning, a more flexible approach may also be adopted when encouraging participants to respond. The focus will, of course, depend on the requirements of the research, the topics and participant group.

Some studies have invited participants to adopt an informants' role from which to respond to vignettes. Thus participants are asked about vignette characters and situations (Coleman et al., 1999; Scott and Rosenberg, 1998; Swartzman and McDermid, 1993; Barry and Greene, 1992). For example, Swartzman and McDermid (1993) asked participants – college students aged between 19 and 39 years – to respond from the perspective of the vignette character aged either 70 or 20 years old. They note that some participants may have found it difficult to adopt their own perspective if responding to vignettes about people 70 years of age.

Alternatively, individuals may be asked to think of themselves as being in the vignettes and then responding (Redding and Reppucci, 1999; Kirmayer et al., 1997; Constant et al., 1994). Constant et al. (1994) note that studies about information sharing are prone to socially desirable patterns of responding. Thus, they used vignettes and asked people to respond from vignette characters' perspective as if they were that person in the vignette situation, rather than on the basis of their own lives. They note that such an approach can reduce the effects of social desirability influencing responses given.

Sometimes participants may be invited to adopt the role of consultants when responding from the perspectives of vignette characters. Similarly, participants may be invited to act as consultants in discussing how peers and other people more generally might react to vignette scenarios (Kendall et al., 1997; Friendenberg et al., 1993; Foxx et al., 1989). For example, Foxx et al. (1989) note that when conducting research with people with closed head-injuries on problem solving abilities, some participants may become defensive about their own abilities. Thus, vignettes decisions were posed from the perspective of a friend rather than the participants themselves. Focusing on a third party through vignettes therefore helps to desensitise potentially sensitive research topics (Finch, 1987).

A number of studies have used vignettes to uncover how participants themselves react to particular vignette scenarios (Kirmayer et al., 1997; McKeganey et al., 1995; Ouslander et al., 1993). However, there can be differences between what participants consider should be a response and what they would do themselves. For example, Carlson (1996) found a discrepancy between what participants consider should happen about dating violence, notably ending the relationship, is different to what actually does happen, usually the continuation of the relationship. More generally, benefits can accrue from inviting participants to respond on the basis of what participants consider should or would happen in the situations described within vignettes (Hughes, 1998; Finch, 1987; Alves and Rossi, 1978). Fook et al. (1997) used practice vignettes with social workers and found that participants would openly express ideas about what they would or would not do. However, respondents were less open in discussing beliefs about the likely effectiveness of these potential actions within the constraints of the situations described.

Sometimes a combination of focuses from which participants are invited to respond to is advantageous (Kalafat and Cagliano, 1996; Rahman, 1996; Van Scoy, 1994; Farrow, 1987). Farrow (1997) in a study of a dangerous driving situation involving alcohol asked what parts of the story sound like a situation the participants themselves had been in. The interviewer then invited participants imagine themselves in the vignette character's position. Participants were asked about an imaginary situation and their possible responses. This approach was valuable in employing the wide-ranging vignette perspectives thereby answering different elements of the research questions being posed.

In summary, there are a number of perspectives from which participants may be asked to interpret and respond to vignettes. In some cases, a particular perspective may be explicit in the research process, at other times there is more room for participants to adopt their own perspective and many studies have used a combination.

Difficulties with interpreting and responding to vignettes

It has been noted how little is known about the interpretation of vignettes (McKeganey et al., 1995; Finch, 1987; Liker, 1982). For example, Finch (1987) points to the lack of knowledge about how information presented in vignettes is filled in, what assumptions participants make during interpretation, and whether particular elements of vignettes trigger certain responses. However, these issues can be directly addressed through vignettes, especially using less structured vignette styles. The notable grey areas that vignettes produce, through the selective representations of various elements of reality, can be harnessed and used to help uncover and clarify the concepts at work and under study.

Similar difficulties may be encountered when participants are asked to adopt a particular vignette perspective, such that of a vignette character. Bettor et al. (1995) asked participants to play the role of the vignette character and this was noted to be a difficult task due to unfamiliarity of the situation. Furthermore, participants were warned that role-taking may prove frustrating, especially if vignette events took a different turn to those suggested by participants. Finch (1987) comments that participants may feel that there are 'correct' answers when vignettes take a different turn to those suggested by participants. It is important, therefore, that participants are assured that there are no right or wrong answers when responding to vignettes.

In some situations, participants' responses can reflect what is seen as socially desirable resulting in 'public' accounts of the topics under study. Using vignettes is generally recognised as a valuable method that can help to minimise this effect. When participants are invited to respond to vignettes from the perspective of vignette characters and not themselves, they may feel less need to give socially desirable and 'public' accounts (Bettor et al., 1995; Constant et al., 1995). However, interpreting vignettes in socially desirable and 'publicly' acceptable ways may be more likely when participants are asked to respond from their own perspective as the emphasis remains on the individual.

Some participants in vignette studies have voiced concerns over the lack of information provided in vignettes, which can provide an inadequate base for response (Hughes, 1998; Wilson and While, 1998; Soydan, 1995). Such concerns reflect some of the arguments levied against vignettes, notably that vignettes are unable to fully capture the elements of reality under study (Parkinson and Manstead, 1993; Faia, 1980). However, the selectivity of vignettes is one of the valuable features of the method. Vignettes cannot contain all the necessary information that participants may wish to draw on in responding to vignette events because, ultimately, vignette context is selective. Thus, the lack of information can help to clarify principles and

concepts under study (Rossi and Alves, 1980). However, where information is lacking or when cases appear hypothetical the ways in which individuals interpret these situations can provide a range of valuable data. For example, Hughes (1998) found that some drug injectors felt the vignette scenarios to be lacking detail. Participants drew on their own personal experiences, the experiences of their peers, together with previous events contained within vignettes to assist in the interpretations of the situations under study.

Concluding discussion

Vignettes transcend the wide-ranging subject disciplines within the social sciences and are invaluable in social research. When considering the development and construction of vignettes there are a number of pertinent issues. These issues include internal validity; research topics; participants; and interest, relevance, realism and timing. Considering vignette interpretations and responses also identified the importance of open and closed questioning; vignette perspectives; and difficulties in interpreting and responding to vignettes. These two broad sets of are, of course, not mutually exclusive. For example, choosing vignette perspectives from which participants are invited to respond is an important issue manifest throughout the research process.

In using vignettes it is important to consider conceptual boundaries. Commentators have rightly pointed out that the extent to which vignettes actually tap into real life processes is contentious and is likely to differ by the types of vignettes used (Parkinson and Manstead, 1993; Kinicki et al., 1995; Faia, 1980). More accurately, however, these arguments must be located within the rationale for using vignettes and the overall context of their application to individual studies. Rarely are vignettes used as a means to simulate complete reality. Rather vignettes are used to simulate partly elements of the topics under study. Vignettes are selective and it is this feature that can make them so valuable within social research (Lanza and Carifio, 1992; Rossi, 1979).

There is also a much wider debate surrounding the differences between the real world and the vignette world, which remains critically unresolved and continues (Freidenberg et al., 1993; Thurman, 1986; Foxx et al., 1989;). Thurman (1986, p.452) captures this debate with regards to the use of vignettes in surveys exploring decision-making:

> Since the subjects' judgements were simulated by hypothetical situations, a critic might question whether the results of such an exercise accurately model behavior. A reasonable reply is that the decision-making process modelled with this technique cannot be guaranteed to apply to what might happen in real life.

However, the factorial survey design offers an exceptional method with which to estimate what subjects intend to do in a particular situation.

Whilst vignettes are valuable in addressing particular research questions it is important to note that no research method can truly reflect the reality of people's lives. Each application of a research method is only one way of understanding the complexity of the social world. As Denzin (1978, pp.292-293) points out:

> …each method implies a different line of action toward reality – and hence each will reveal different aspects of it, much like a kaleidoscope, depending on the angle at which it is held, will reveal different colors and configurations of objects to the viewer. Methods are like the kaleidoscope: depending on how they are approached, held, and acted toward, different observations will be revealed.

As noted at the outset of this paper, decisions to use particular research methodologies and vignettes in particular are guided by the research questions being posed, research topics, participant group, together with the other influences that inform research designs. Vignettes provide one worthwhile route to exploring and exposing those elements of people's lives that social work researchers seek to understand and learn more about.

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