

Hypothetically Speaking:

Using Vignettes as a Stand-alone Qualitative Method

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Overview

This chapter focuses on vignettes, where a short story or narrative (the vignette) is presented to participants, who then respond in writing to a series of open-ended questions. Drawing on our experiences of using vignettes across a range of different research projects – particularly, a project on lay discourses of teenage ‘anorexia’ (See Box X.1) - we argue that vignettes offer great potential for exploring participants’ interpretations of a particular phenomenon, within a given context. They also offer a variety of *practical* benefits, not least of which is being able to collect data with relatively few resources. In this chapter, we explore the theoretical and practical aspects of using vignettes, and provide guidance and personal reflections on how to do research with vignettes.

Box X.1 Constructing the Teenage ‘Anorexic’

This study was conducted by Bronwyn Royall as her third year dissertation. The aim was to explore the ways in which teenage male and female ‘anorexics’ are discursively produced in ‘lay’ discourse; adding to the growing body of work that has looked at how ‘anorexia’ is constructed by the media, by health professionals, and by those diagnosed with the condition themselves. Vignettes offered a specific set of advantages for this study, as it meant that participants did not need to have any direct experience of ‘anorexia’ themselves; capturing more ‘lay’ discourse. At the same time, therefore, using vignettes enabled us to research a potentially very sensitive issue in a relatively safe way. Additionally, participants’ attention could be directed towards a specific group (in this case, teenagers), and capture

how participants make sense of these scenarios in their own words and using their own terms. Finally, it also meant that we could explore how gender featured in constructions of teenaged 'anorexics', which may have been more difficult using other data collection methods, where normative ideas of 'anorexia' as a problem of girls' and women may have dominated. Thus, vignettes have the potential to generate data not easily accessed through other methods. For the study, two near-identical vignettes were developed that described two characters, Harry and Hannah, who in each vignette are diagnosed with 'anorexia nervosa' by their doctor. (see Box X.2). Participants were allocated either the Harry or Hannah vignette and asked to complete ten open-ended questions about the character. The questions were designed to be relatively broad, giving the participants considerable scope to present their own image of the character, and allowing them to provide relatively unconstrained and detailed responses. Data were collected online, using Qualtrics. In total, 57 participants took part in the study, generating a substantial amount of in-depth data that highlighted the complex and often contradictory ways in which 'anorexic' teenagers are constructed and the ways in which gender featured in these constructions'.

Introduction to Vignettes

Vignettes have been widely used across the social and health sciences since at least the 1950's. They are predominantly a *quantitative* method, where the aim is usually to tap into participants' general attitudes or beliefs about a given situation or scenario (Finch, 1987). In *qualitative* research, they are typically used to complement other data collection methods (like interviews or focus groups) - as a 'warm-up exercise' to get participants talking to each other (e.g. Hazel, 1999), as an elicitation technique to focus conversation on a specific topic (e.g. Gray, Delaney and Durrheim, 2005; Gray and Manning, 2014; Fischer, Jenkins, Bloor,

Neale and Berney, 2007), or as a way of exploring an issue in more detail and/or in different ways (e.g. Barter and Renold, 1999; MacAuley, 1996; Jenkins, 2006; Wade, 1999). In this chapter, we explore what we see as a valuable, but relatively underused, type of vignette research – vignettes as a ‘stand-alone’ method, where data is collected in textual form as a response to a series of open-ended questions about the vignette.

Vignettes are highly diverse. The most traditional (and perhaps most common) form of vignette is a written hypothetical or fictional story that is presented to participants with a set of questions about the story. But ‘vignettes’ can also be visual or video-recorded (McKinstry, 2000) and can be presented to participants on paper, on screen or online (Stolte, 1994; Vitkovitch and Tyrell, 1995; Taylor, 2006). Similarly, they could also consist of ‘real-life’ stories, news stories (e.g. Gray, Delaney and Durrheim, 2005), geographic data (e.g. Gray and Manning, 2014), or could, for example, be taken from public health campaigns, art or literature. Format-wise, vignettes can either follow a ‘staged’ model, where the story is presented and developed across a number of stages with each stage being proceeded by a series of questions (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Fischer et al. 2007), or they can be presented as a single complete ‘story’ followed by one set of questions. Stories can be written using a first person perspective (using ‘I and me’) or a third person perspective (using ‘him’ or ‘her’) and participants can be directed to answer as if they were the character or from their own personal perspective.. Participants could also be asked about how they or a particular character in the story ‘should’ ideally act, or how they or the character ‘would’ realistically act, focusing attention respectively on either more ideal dimensions of situations or on the more pragmatic (Finch, 1987).

The diversity of vignettes means that they can be used to address a wide range of different research topics and aims. In qualitative research this has included topics as diverse as violence between children in residential care homes (Barter and Reynold, 2000; Barter, Reynold, Berridge and Cawson, 2004), drug injectors' perceptions of HIV risk and safer behaviour (Hughes, 1998), social work ethics (Wilks, 2004) and perceptions of receiving and providing health care (e.g. Brondani, MacEntee, Bryant and O'Neil, 2008). They can also be used across a variety of different theoretical approaches. For example, Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney and Neale, 2010 propose a phenomenological approach for their research on user involvement in drug treatment decision-making and young people's injury-risking behaviours in leisure settings. They argue that vignette studies can help researchers understand the complex meanings and processes that are involved when participants are interpreting a situation. Likewise, O'Dell, Crafter, De Abreu and Cline (2012) use a dialogical approach in their vignette work on young people's normative representations of work. They argue that vignettes were valuable for exploring the various positions of identification participant can take when discussing the vignette characters, e.g. seeing the character as themselves, as someone else or as what 'ought' to happen.

In our own studies, we have approached vignettes from a social constructionist perspective (see also Wilks, 2004), and we have found vignettes to be a very valuable method for analysing how people construct (often multiple and contradictory) accounts of particular social categories and identities such as 'the 'anorexic' teenage boy'). From our perspective, vignette methods are highly productive sites for understanding discursive practices and rhetorical accounts - providing insight into (often multiple and contradictory) constructions of reality, and the ways in which such constructions are contextually situated.

What Vignettes Offer the Qualitative Researcher?

Vignettes offer researchers a uniquely flexible and highly creative way to explore participants' meanings and interpretations of a particular phenomenon, within a given context or situation. The researcher sets the context and focus of the research, by drawing up the parameters of the hypothetical story or scenario (or by carefully choosing the material that will be used as the vignette). This can help researchers to manage complexity by 'isolating certain aspects of a given social issue or problem' (Barter & Renolds, 2000, p.312). Through open-ended questioning, participants are then asked to fill in the gaps and to engage in processes of interpretation that can provide important insights into complex phenomena and situations. Participants can explore the vignette scenario in their own language; thereby capturing elements of how participants themselves make sense of the story that they are presented with (Barter and Renolds, 1999; Hughes and Huby, 2004). In our own research, this meant that we could focus participants' attention on a specific aspect of 'anorexia' (its occurrence in male and female teenagers), whilst also capturing the terms participants themselves used to define 'anorexia', what they saw as central to being 'anorexic', and how they negotiated the various situational positions ascribed to different actors in the vignettes. Vignettes can be useful when participants might have little knowledge or understanding of the situation of interest (Hughes, 1998; Hughes and Huby, 2001). The fact that participants are asked to comment on a hypothetical scenario means that they don't need to have had any direct experience of the situation depicted in the vignette, which can be very useful if the topic of interest is not particularly well-understood or well-known in your participant group. Or, if you want to present your participants with something that they know little about in order to access their spontaneously generated

meanings and assumptions about some topic (Bendelow, 1993). As a warning, however, it may be unwise to make assumptions about the level of knowledge in your participant group. In our study, for example, it turned out that 30 of our participants had personal knowledge of someone who had previously received a diagnosis for an eating disorder. So, it is always a good idea to check this as part of your data collection process.

Vignette methods can also be particularly good for exploring issues that could be potentially difficult for participants to discuss, as they allows participants to discuss issues from a 'non-personal and therefore less threatening perspective' (Hughes, 1998, p. 383) and because it can help to 'desensitize' aspects of difficult topics for participants (Hughes and Huby, 2002, p. 384). In studies where participants may be 'too close' to the topic – e.g. where they may have personal experience of the topic being studied - they can be asked to comment on the story as if they were the character, as opposed to drawing *directly* on their own personal experiences,. Vignettes also provide the opportunity for participants to have greater control over the research interaction by enabling them to determine at what stage, if at all, they introduce their own experiences to illuminate their responses (Barter and Reynold, 2000; Barter, Reynold, Berridge and Cawson, 2004; Thaler, 2012)

Vignettes can also help prevent 'social desirable' responding (e.g. see Gould, 1996; Gourley, Mshana, Birdthistle, Bulugu, Zaba and Urassa, 2014), as they introduce a sense of distance between the researcher and the participant; particularly if the study is done anonymously as ours was. In our research, we are not concerned about social desirability in the more traditional sense (i.e. in terms of it obstructing participants faithfully reproduction of their 'real' views), but we did feel that vignettes might elicit opinions that could be less socially 'safe'

than if we asked people about their opinions face to face. In our experience, vignettes do not necessarily stop participants from producing 'socially desirable' views but they do also elicit views that might not be voiced more openly . For example:

I imagine Hannah to be a typical self-absorbed teenager. She probably feels egocentric, that all eyes are on her. Shes probably an avid watcher of music channels, celebrity get me out of here and the only ways is Essex. (HLR089)

"I think people generally will see him as a silly boy who has taken his exercising to excess. They will think that he has done this out of vanity, and probably think he should just be able to change his habits and start eating normally immediately. They will think him wilful when he does not, and lose patience and have no sympathy for him". BR574(M)

These extracts highlight two quite different constructions of the 'anorexic' as 'silly'. In the first, we see a quite derogatory portrayal of Hannah as self-obsessed and concerned only or primarily with media trivia. In the second, we see similarly unsympathetic descriptions of Harry as silly, vain, wilful, and abnormal. We have no way of knowing if these same views would have been expressed using other data collection methods (like interviews or focus groups). However, overall, our experience of vignette methods across a range of studies is that they enable us to access a much wider range of responses than might have been possible if participants were asked to express their views more openly.

What these extracts also highlight is that it is very easy with vignettes to introduce an element of 'comparison' into the research; between different features of the vignette and/or between different groups of participants. So, as in our study, the gender of the main character could be changed (see Box X.2) Alternatively, data could be collected and

compared between men and women participants. In a more complex design, we could have varied both the gender of the character and the gender of the participants. Comparisons could similarly be done for age, ethnicity, position, or any combination of these or of other indices of identity, depending on the research question. These comparisons can provide important insights into contrasting interpretations of otherwise uniform situations or contexts, or into contrasting interpretations of particular social groups. Indeed, the extracts presented above show a clear difference in how male and female 'anorexics' are described by our participants whereby Hannah was frequently portrayed as a normal or typical teenage girl and attributed with stereotypically 'feminine' characteristics while Harry was more often imagined as an isolated and atypical teenage boy, described in terms that deviated significantly from a traditional masculine 'norm'.

The vignettes thus helped us to understand how constructions of 'anorexia' are gendered; insights that would have been difficult to capture using other data collection methods where comparative data are not as easily achieved.

Vignettes also offer more *practical* advantages. Data can be collected from a relatively large sample of participants in a relatively short space of time, often with less expense than other forms of qualitative data collection (see also Gould, 1996). In our example study, data was collected from 57 participants in less than a month. Given that these data did not need to be transcribed, this allowed more time to be spent on analysis, and a more quickly completed study. Thus, vignettes can confer advantages of both time and cost for the researcher, when compared to the investment needed for interviewing or focus groups.

If data are collected online (as was the cases in our study), there can be significant advantages in sampling and recruitment – typically allowing access to populations that are geographically dispersed. This was not important for our study, which was conducted with a mainly student sample. However, in other vignette studies, we have advertised online (e.g. by posting a link on a specialist forum) and recruited participants from all over the UK. Similarly, we have also used crowd sourcing websites to collect vignette data and this has worked well – e.g. Mechanical Turk in the USA or CrowdFlower in the UK. These sites allow you to post studies that are completed by participants, who are then paid for their time. The advantage of using crowd sourcing is that its participants tend to be demographically more diverse than standard Internet samples, and significantly more diverse than student samples in terms of age, gender and ethnicity (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling, 2011). Data collection is also very fast (in our experience less than a day) and can involve participants from all over the world. The disadvantage is that you will need to resource the participant payments, and this can be significant depending on your sample size

Suitable Research Questions for Vignettes

The diversity and flexibility of the vignette method offers researchers the opportunity to address a wide a variety of different types of research questions, beyond the traditional interest in attitudes, perceptions, beliefs or cultural norms (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998). Overall, a distinction can be made between 1) research questions which aim to capture some aspect of practice, or what participants would *do* in a given situation, including what might influence particular actions, 2) research questions aiming to capture participants' understandings or perceptions of a given situation or phenomonon, including their definitions

or constructions of events, people, social groups and so forth and 3) research questions that are focused on participants' ethical frameworks or moral codes.

The first type of research question is more common in quantitative vignette studies, but there are very good examples of qualitative research where vignettes have been used to address questions about what participant would do in a given situation, or how participants come to a decision about what to do in a given situation. Examples include: how health professional make decisions on whether to withhold or withdraw life prolonging treatments when faced with an advanced directive (Thomson, Barber and Schwartz, 2013); how patient characteristics can influence the decisions that physicians make about diabetes management (Lutfey, Campbell, Renfrew, Marceau, Roland and McKinlay, 2008); and about the barriers to using HIV services in rural Tanzania (Gourlay et al. 2014). The second type of research question is more common in qualitative research, and is typically concerned with how participants understand and make sense of the given hypothetical story or scenario, in order to understand something about participants' constructions, perceptions or assumptions about a particular phenomenon. Our study falls into this category, as we were primarily concerned with how our participants would discuss the characters of Hannah and Harry so that we could explore how teenage 'anorexics' are constructed in lay discourse and how gender features in these constructions. This kind of research can also focus exploring some aspect of participants' own experiences – e.g. young people's experiences of peer violence in children's homes (Barter and Renolds, 2000).

Finally, vignettes can be useful in examining participants' ethical frameworks or moral codes (Finch, 1987; Wilks, 2004). In this kind of study participants are presented with a moral,

ethical or practical dilemma and then asked about how a particular character in the story 'should' react to a particular situation and/or how the participant themselves 'should' react to the situation. This can include research questions about, for example, how social workers make decisions about moral and ethical practice (Wilks, 2004); how ethical frameworks inform children's thinking about the family (Wade, 1999); and what are the moral codes that inform children's thinking about post-divorce family life (Neale, 2003).

There is much debate in the wider vignette literature about the gap between vignettes and social reality – e.g. how the decision making practices that are discussed in relation to a vignette may or may not mirror decision making practices in real life (Faia, 1979; Hughes and Huby, 2004; Parkinson and Manstead, 1993). Overall, this is not usually an issue for qualitative vignettes research, where researchers are less concerned with predicting people's responses to real-life situations; instead focusing on exploring meanings and interpretations. However, as this is a contentious issue, we caution against research which aims to elicit responses that mimic 'real life' responses, as vignettes are considered to be of limited value in such designs (Hughes, 1998).

Design, Sampling and Ethical Issues

Somewhat surprisingly, there are few 'how to' guides for designing vignette studies, and this kind of research is not well represented in either qualitative or quantitative research methods texts. The central design concern is the construction of the vignette scenario, where the task is to provide participants with a scenario that seems meaningful, authentic and understandable (or at least not overly complicated), but is also sufficiently detailed and targeted to the specific issues that are of interest. The scenario needs to provide enough

context and information for participants to have an understanding of the situation being depicted, but needs to be vague in ways that compel participants to 'fill in' additional details (Hughes and Huby, 2001). There are also a number of choices that researchers will need to make about how to structure the vignette. Importantly, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions – rather, the vignette story needs to fit with the research question and work to elicit the data you're aiming to collect. The questions that you need to consider are:

1. *Will your vignette be presented en bloc or incrementally?* Will you present the story to participants as a single story, followed by questions, or in sections, with questions following immediately after each section? A single story has the advantage of being much simpler as all the information is presented at once (Hughes, 1998). However, this also means that you are more limited in the detail that you are able to provide. An incremental vignette can give more freedom (and control) around plot or character development, as different elements of the story can be introduced at different times. But, this also has the potential to confuse participants who may not always follow your story arc (Finch, 1987). The choice of whether to provide a single or incremental story depends largely on your research question and the type of data you are hoping to collect. For example, an incremental vignette is better if you are interested in participants' responses to more than one character or to a particular plot development, e.g. the reactions of friends or family to a decision. These could be difficult to elicit using a single vignette story. On the other hand, you may want to keep the story relatively uncomplicated, as you may want to introduce other sorts of variations in your vignette. For example, we knew we would have two versions of the vignette in our example study

and didn't want to also include additional story elements as we felt these would over-complicate the study. So, we chose a single story design.

2. *Will it be designed to allow comparison?* Do you want two (or more) versions of the vignette that vary in some way (e.g. different gender or age of characters)? Any variation needs a sound theoretical or empirical rationale, and you need to design a vignette that can be varied without changing much other detail, so that you can keep the comparison clearly based on this factor. In our study we decided to have one vignette in which the teenager diagnosed with 'anorexia' is a girl and another in which they are a boy as there is considerable evidence that 'anorexia' is not only much more frequently diagnosed in girls and women but that it is also often seen as a 'feminine disorder' (Malson and Burns, 2009) and we wanted to explore this. We were also able to easily construct two versions of the vignette that differed only in terms of the main character's gender (see Box X.2). This is often the most difficult part of a comparison and if you cannot write two near-identical vignettes, then it is likely that a comparison is not appropriate.
3. *How much detail do you want to provide about the characters or their situation?* Having some aspects of the vignette be deliberately ambiguous can be very useful, particularly if you are looking to explore participants' assumptions (e.g. about gender, race, sexuality or age) (Hughes and Huby, 2001). Conversely, you may want to direct participants to focus on particular issues, and so may want to include specific details about age, gender, ethnicity and so forth that locate your participants responses in some way (as we did).
4. *Whose point of view do you want to emphasise?* Vignettes are typically written in either first or third person. First person - writing from the point of view of the character - is useful if you want participants to empathise (or sympathise) with a particular character in

the scenario. It can also help to encourage participants to see things from that character's point of view. Writing in the third person – as if the character were someone else - can help to distance participants from the characters a little, and so can be useful if you want to probe more sensitive topics.

Box X.2 'Anorexia' Vignettes

Vignette (Harry/Hannah)

Harry/Hannah is 15 years old and studying for his/her GCSE's. For the last few months Harry/Hannah has become preoccupied with his/her body weight, and has recently lowered his/her daily food intake dramatically. Harry/Hannah regularly avoids meals, and some days he/she eats very little at all. Harry/Hannah has also begun a strict fitness regime, attending the gym once a day and regularly swimming at the local leisure centre. Harry/Hannah's recent eating habits and intense exercise programme have resulted in extreme weight loss, causing his/her family to insist on him/her seeing a doctor. After a consultation with the doctor, Harry/Hannah is diagnosed with the eating disorder Anorexia Nervosa.

Please answer the following questions, providing as much detail as possible:

1. Please describe how you imagine Hannah – for example, her family and social background and the kind of personality, interests, habits and social life she might have.
2. What do you imagine Hannah is likely to look like?
3. Why do you think Hannah has become preoccupied with her body weight and changed her eating and exercise habits? What do you think might have caused this?
4. How do you think Hannah is feeling?

5. How do you think Hannah's family might feel about her weight loss and her new eating and exercise habits?
6. How do you think Hannah's friends might react to her weight loss and her new eating and exercise habits?
7. How will people generally view Hannah?
8. Do you think Hannah needs help, and if so, what do you think might help Hannah?
9. What do you imagine will happen to Hannah in the next two months?
10. What do you imagine will have happened to Hannah a year from now?

Once you have a story to present to participants, it is important ensure time and attention is devoted to constructing the questions that you want to ask participants about the vignette (see Box X.2 for an example). There is some overlap with the design of qualitative surveys here (see Chapter X), although the questions that are asked in a vignette study must clearly relate to the story and so may be more directive than those typically found in a survey study. As with the design of the story, there are several questions that researchers are faced with at this point:

5. *How do you want to frame your questions?* Do you want to ask participants about how a character *should* ideally act/feel and/or how they *would* realistically act or feel? 'Should' questions direct participants to focus on the idealistic aspects of a situation; 'would' questions direct participants to focus on the pragmatic (Hughes, 1998). In most cases, you will find that researchers use a mixture of 'should' and 'would' questions to capture both the idealistic and pragmatic aspects of a situation. You will see from the questions in Box X.2 that we tended to use 'might' questions rather than 'should' or 'would'

questions, e.g. what might have caused Hannah/Harry's preoccupation with weight? How might their family and friends feel? These kinds of questions effectively invite people to 'imagine others' feelings and thoughts and to articulate likely explanations for various aspects of a vignette scenario. For example, participants in our study provided some quite detailed accounts of why Hannah or Harry had become preoccupied with body weight:

One of the reasons may be to do with the fact that she is studying for her GCSE's – it can be very stressful and she may be using her obsession with weight as a distraction. She may be nervous about the prospect of leaving school and feels a pressure to look a certain way for jobs etc. She is also at the age where she is going to be starting to be keen on having a boyfriend – she probably believes that getting thin will help this. Also, if the majority of her friends are smaller than her then she is at an age where this is going to bother her – and therefore she may feel pressure to be the same as them. (SP850)

6. *What about time?* We used questions that framed time in different ways – e.g. inviting people to think about what might happen to the character in two months, or in a year. This is useful if you are looking at how something is resolved (or not resolved) over time, and what this says about the issue you are interested in. This can also be useful if you choose to have a single story vignette, rather than a developmental one, as it can be a way of capturing additional detail about how participants see particular characters developing; albeit in a more constrained way.

7. *Do you want to focus questions on the characters, or ask participants about how they themselves should or would act in the same situation?* We primarily used character-based questions that asked participants how they imagined the *character* would look, feel or act. This allowed us to investigate different aspects of our participants' perceptions and understandings of 'anorexic' teenagers, rather than capturing their own personal experiences of anorexia. Had we wanted to capture more of their experiences, we could have asked more questions about how they would have thought, felt or acted in the same situation (Barter and Renolds, 1999). This would be useful if, for example, we had recruited a sample of teenagers diagnosed with anorexia, and we wanted to know more about their own personal experiences and interpretations of their diagnosis.
8. *How many questions do you need?* There is no *ideal* number of questions for a vignette study, and there is a trade-off to be made between the number of questions and the length and depth of the responses you are likely to get. In our experience, ten in-depth questions is quite a lot, and responses to the latter questions can tail off in both depth and detail. Think about how much time participant will be likely to give, and only ask questions that you want the answer to. Overly long and overly complex vignette studies can put participants off and therefore impact on data quality.
9. Finally, it is a good idea to include an 'any other comments' question at the end of your vignette questions. This can be a valuable way for participants to feed back – either about the study, or to address issues that we hadn't thought of ourselves.

Whatever choices you make about your vignette questions, they need to be short, clear and precise. Participants should be able to understand immediately exactly *what* they are being asked. Two key principles for writing good questions are 1) avoid confusion and 2) keep the

participant's perspective in mind. Are you asking participants questions that they *can* answer? Ask single-focused questions: multi-part and double-barrelled questions asking more than one thing can be confusing. Make sure that you're thinking from your participants' perspective, and orient questions to their language, knowledge and understandings.

There are no particular *sampling* issues related specifically to vignette methods - the different types of sampling suitable for qualitative research are suitable here (see Bryman, 2001; Patton, 2002). There are also few prescriptions in terms of sample *size*. In a vignette study you trade some depth for breadth of responses – meaning in general you will need to collect data from more participants than is traditional in, say, interview-based qualitative studies. The sample size you need will largely be determined by your study design. If you have lots of different versions of your vignette, then you will need more participants to allow for enough data to make meaningful comparisons. Likewise, the more comparisons you want to make between participant groups (e.g. based on gender or age) then the more people you will need to recruit. In general, a study with two vignettes (like ours) would need around 60 people (30 in each version of the vignette) to provide sufficient data for analysis and comparison. However, with three versions of the vignette, you would probably need 90 to make the comparison work. Similarly, if you had two versions of the vignette and wanted to compare two participant groups (e.g. men and women), then you may need 120. As you can see, this can get large very quickly, and so you will need to take this into account in designing your study (see point 2 above).

The usual ethical processes for research (BPS, 2013) apply, including providing participants with a comprehensive information sheet and requiring some process of consent. Care does need to be taken in how the study is described to people invited to take part. You don't want

participants to be faced with a (potentially distressing) vignette scenario they were not expecting and so a brief description of what topics the vignette will cover is necessary. If your study is online, consent can be in the form of a tick box accompanied by a short declarative statement, e.g. "by ticking this box I indicate that I have read the information about this study and I agree to take part". You can also manage participant access to the study, so that they cannot see the vignette or the questions until after they have given consent. This is a good idea as it means ensures all participants have given their consent to take part. If your study is offline, then you can give your participants a hard copy of your information sheet, and ask them to sign a consent form, before you give them the vignette and the accompanying questions.

Participants are entitled to withdraw their data during and after taking part (BPS, 2013); although in practice this can be hard to manage. If your study is online, then withdrawal is usually managed by participants simply closing the browser window, at which point none of their data is stored. This process needs to be described to participants in the information sheet. It is possible using online survey software to make particular questions mandatory but – outside of the question about consent – this is not a good idea, as participants have the right to refuse to answer any specific question. To enable withdrawal after taking part, online survey software can generate a unique participant ID for each participant. Participants can then email this ID to the researcher and request that their data is deleted. Likewise, if the data is offline, then the researcher can give each participant a unique ID that they can use to withdraw. If this is the case, then all electronic and hardcopy data should be destroyed (e.g. deleted and shredded). It is not mandatory that participants be allowed to withdraw their data after taking part, although it is considered good ethical practice (BPS, 2013). If you do wish

to allow participants to withdraw it is a good idea to set a time limit on this, e.g. one month after participation or by a particular date. This should be a date that will enable you to realistically complete your analysis and finalise your report, after which no withdrawal of data would be possible.

Steps to using vignettes

The steps in vignette studies are similar to those of many other qualitative methods:

1. *Understanding the Background:* A thorough review of the literature in your research area is particularly important in vignette research to help you design your vignette and write your open-ended questions. It will help you to make decisions about what kinds of things would seem plausible or authentic in this context, and what kinds of details are important to emphasise (or not). Examples from other studies could help form the basis of a compelling and realistic vignette scenario, and you can often find good questions in previous studies in the same area.
2. *Designing and Writing the Vignette Scenario and Questions:* This stage is all about making some of the decisions discussed above in the section on design. These decisions will be shaped by what you discover in Step 1 (e.g. there may be known differences between different ages or genders that you want to focus on), and by your research question.
3. *Deciding on a mode of data collection:* In most cases, your mode of data collection will be decided when you develop your vignette scenarios, in the sense that you will already know if your scenario is a written one, and whether it contains visual or audio data. Each of these proscribes a different mode of data collection. For written vignettes the choice is between offline or online. Offline vignettes are typically

presented in hardcopy with participants responding in writing. Online modes of data collection typically involve either email or survey software (e.g. Qualtrics or Survey Monkey). The choice to use online or offline depends primarily on your population and what kind of access you have to them. An online mode is right when you know your sample has access to the internet (as ours did). However, an offline mode could be more appropriate if you are hoping to access your sample in a specific location or at specific time, e.g. in a school lesson.

4. *Deciding on Format:* In this stage, you will need to consider how to format your vignette study. For example, if you are presenting your study online, you need to consider how many questions to present to participants at a time. One per 'page' generally works well as it focuses participants on one question at a time. It also means that participants won't have to scroll down too much and, potentially, miss important questions. If you are conducting your study offline, then you need to think about how much space to allow participants for each question. Overall, half an A4 page per question is a good rule of thumb for this; although, you want to provide one or two spare pages where participants can continue their thoughts and ideas if they want to.
5. *Piloting and Revision:* vignettes are a type of 'fixed' data collection, in that they do not allow revision to take place once data collection has started. This makes it *really* important to pilot your vignette before data collection begins, usually on a small sample of 5-10 participants like those you plan to recruit - in our case students. In the piloting phase, the vignette should be presented to participants exactly as it will be presented to participants. However, it can be useful to add some questions at the end asking for feedback on the vignette, the questions, and so forth. This will help

you to see the vignette from the perspective of your participant and make any necessary revisions.

6. *Data Collection:* Once you have piloted and revised your vignette, it's time to collect your data! It is useful to do a thorough and final check before making your vignette study 'live' to participants. After this, you will probably be focused on participant recruitment and monitoring responses as they come in. It can be difficult to decide when to stop data collection. You may reach your target sample (e.g. 60 participants) and decide to stop on this basis. Or, you may have collected very rich and lengthy data from 40 participants and decide to stop because you have reached 'saturation' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Either way, it is likely that, by this point, you will have quantities of rich qualitative data ready for analysis.

What can go wrong with vignettes?

In general, there is little that can go very wrong with vignettes, but where problems do occur they are typically related to the scenario provided. If the scenario doesn't seem plausible or authentic to participants, then they may not take it seriously enough (or may get annoyed by it) and provide sketchy or nonsensical answers (Hughes 1998). Likewise, the scenario may not be sufficiently meaningful or familiar to participants to elicit rich data. For example, asking participants to respond to stories about characters who are markedly older or younger than they are often doesn't work well (Hughes and Huby, 2001; Swartzman and McDermid, 1993). Our study might not have worked so well if we had asked our participants (who were mainly in their early 20s) to answer questions about a much older character as they may have found it difficult to imagine their experiences. Matching the vignette with the participant group helps to avoid this problem.

Non- or shallow responses are another concern. It is sometimes the case that participants might not answer particular questions, or could answer questions in a fairly shallow way, which leaves you with limited and limiting data. In our study, some questions did not always prompt the kinds of in-depth responses we wanted. For instance, in response to the question: "How do you think Harry/Hannah is feeling"? some we got some one-line answers: *"Isolated. Alone"*, *"Really stressed and upset"* and *"Out of control, stressed, unsure"*. In our experience, length of answer differs across questions as well as across participants. In retrospect, an incremental vignette might have worked better, as it may have engaged people for longer or re-engaged them at different times. Also, it became clear in our study that our ten questions requiring detailed responses was rather a large task. Many responses became less detailed towards the end of the set of questions, illustrating that fewer questions could have elicited fuller responses. Such issues need to be considered in the design phase – and really highlight the importance of piloting.

Suitable Methods of Analysis

Pattern-based analytic methods, like thematic analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006), work well with vignettes, offering systematic methods for coding and identifying patterns of meaning in the data. Thematic analysis can be particularly useful if your study has a comparative element, and you are interested in different groups of people's interpretations of a given situation. You can compile and analyse your data in a variety of different ways, but also compare codes, categories or themes across groups relatively easily in order to see if there are broad differences in patterns of meaning. It can be difficult for (particularly novice) researchers to look beyond the 'structure' that is provided by the format of the vignette

questions and to code for patterns present *across* participant responses, or to engage meaningfully with the less obvious elements of the data. To help with this, you could consider detaching the data from the questions in the initial stages of data analysis (e.g. during coding), and then reintegrate the questions at a later point.

Discourse analytic approaches can also work well with vignette data, offering insights into how particular social issues, social groups (e.g., 'anorexics') or social problems (e.g. 'immigration') are discursively constructed (Burman and Parker, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins and Potter, 2008). In our own studies, we have employed discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1991, 1996), and found vignettes enable interesting insights into how people 'make sense of' particular social phenomena, and how such sense-making practices draw on broader social and cultural resources to construct identities, experiences and so forth in various ways that may also at the same time re-produce and/or challenge particular social power relations such as, in our study, gender ideologies (see also Wilks, 2004) Vignettes can be particularly useful here in enabling researchers to analyse a relatively large number of anonymously expressed responses and to thus capture a wider variety of discursive constructions.

Conclusion

Vignettes offer qualitative researchers a highly creative and flexible method, with great potential for exploring participants' meanings and interpretations, grounded within particular situations and contexts. They can be used to collect data from a fairly large sample of people, relatively quickly and with few required resources. Overall, the approach has few dangers or pitfalls for the novice researcher, and can be an excellent way to start to collect

and analyse qualitative data. Data collected are generally rich and elaborative, and can be analysed in a variety of different ways.

Personal reflections on using Vignettes: Bronwyn Royall

When researching 'lay' perceptions of the teenage 'anorexic', it felt important to adopt a method that would allow participants to freely explore their own beliefs and express these using their own language. I chose to use a stand-alone vignette as I felt that offering a scenario would provide context and give a foundation for thinking, enabling participants to more easily draw on their own belief systems. The series of open-ended questions following the given scenario would provide direction and focus for participants, making it not only easier for them, but aiding the process of analysis. Although I found the process of designing the vignette easy, it did require a significant amount of research and consideration. I read numerous personal accounts from teenagers who identified as 'anorexic' to ensure that the characters and scenarios depicted within the vignette were authentic and based around others' realities. I felt it was important to ensure that the scenario was sufficiently detailed to enable participants to become immersed within the story, whilst simultaneously leaving the situation open to interpretation, providing participants with the opportunity to generate their own image of the character based upon their own underlying social, cultural and historic beliefs. Overall, I was pleased with the responses I got to my vignette. Lots of participants provided elaborate responses to the questions, creating a rich source of data and a solid foundation for a comprehensive analysis. However, some questionnaires were far more limited, some being only partially completed, and many consisting of one word answers. Initially I found these questionnaires frustrating and challenging to analyse. In hindsight however, this unelaborated, straightforward data did allow me to get an underlying sense of

where the analysis was headed, acting as a good starting point for analysing such a large data set by providing brief, unequivocal 'labels' that often presented a 'boiled down' version of lengthier responses. I found the structured format of the vignette significantly eased the analysis process. Categories appeared easier to identify and define due to the questions providing specified topics for all participants to focus on. There is no doubt in my mind of the virtue of the vignette as a data collection method. As with all research methods, it cannot be denied that there are certain limitations, however in my opinion, stand-alone vignettes provide an opportunity for generating rich qualitative data, while maintaining a degree of structure.

Further resources

For a good overview of the use of vignettes in social research:

Hughes, R. (1998). Considering the vignette technique and its application to a study of drug injecting and HIV risk and safer behaviour. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 20(3), 381–400.

Hughes, R., & Huby, M. (2004). The construction and interpretation of vignettes in social research. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 11(1), 36–51.

For a useful example of the vignette method: Barter, C. & Renold, E. (2000) 'I wanna tell you a story': Exploring the application of vignettes in qualitative research with children and young people. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 3(4), 307-323.

The companion website for Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's book: Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.

provides an introduction to the vignette method and examples of research materials for a vignette task on trans parenting: www.uk.sagepub.com/braunandclarke/study/additional.htm

Activities for Students

1. Brainstorm a qualitative research question that you think you could answer using a vignette methodology. Remember that vignettes are well suited to exploring people's perceptions, views and opinions of a social phenomenon.
2. Write your vignette story. Remember to keep your story meaningful to participants (written in clear appropriate language), as well as vivid, engaging and authentic (make the characters feel like real people). Think carefully about: what questions you are looking to answer and/or assumptions are you attempting to uncover by getting participants to 'fill in the blanks' and provide their own interpretation of the hypothetical scenario.
3. Write 3-4 questions that will follow your vignette. Remember that the questions should be open-ended and should be related directly to your vignette scenario
4. Produce a version of the vignette and questions and ask 3 or 4 people to complete it for you as a piloting exercise. Ask your participants for feedback on your story and questions, and consider how you could improve these.

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