

Use of vignettes (<https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>)

### **What are Vignettes?**

Vignettes are *“short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond”*. Finch (1987:105)

Vignettes enable participants to define the situation in their own terms. Vignettes provide a brief evocative description, account, or episode (bringing strong images, memories, or feelings to mind).

**In summary** - the vignette technique is a method that can elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations.

### **How do you assess Vignettes?**

The responses are an important aspect of the technique, without which the full perception of the interviewee is not recognised. Assessment is done with a scale 1 = poor to 10= excellent; items assessed may include: usefulness, content, relevance of session, facilitation, and overall.

They are also assessed using the Likert scale 1–4 (4= extremely important, 3= moderately important, 2= slightly important, 1= not important).

### **Why are Vignettes used?**

Vignettes can be employed either to enhance existing data or to generate data not tapped by other research methods (such as observation or interviews).

Vignettes may be used for four main purposes in social research or therapeutic education:

1. to allow actions in context to be explored
2. to clarify people’s judgements and
3. to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics.
4. To assess the participants level of learning and intelligence on specific topics.

### **Vignettes with regard to Intelligence and Learning:**

Howard Gardner, professor of education at Harvard University, highlights eight types of intelligences in his book ‘Frames of Mind’.

Learning, on the other hand, can be thought of as a kind of mental or behavioural journey, with successful learning resulting in a reliable or positive change or development of behaviour at the end of that journey.

We facilitate the full spectrum of intelligences through participants involvement / ownership of guided learning through practical projects and vignette assessments.

Practically this means we would structure learning projects to incorporate vignettes throughout the project journey. Multiple types of intelligences may be developed; and the

learning may be evidenced through positive behavioural change as well as specific completed written and verbalised solutions.

### **Practical applications:**

Our starting, or mid-point is to use vignettes to elicit '*cultural norms*' derived from respondents' attitudes and beliefs about a specific situation, with regard to the phase of a project they are involved with.

The student would be asked to respond to a particular situation by stating what they would do, or how they would react to certain situations or occurrences, which often entail some form of moral dilemma.

### **Sensitive topics**

Vignettes can be useful in exploring potentially sensitive topics that participants might otherwise find difficult to discuss (Neale 1999). As commenting on a story is less personal than talking about direct experience, it is often viewed by participants as being less threatening. Vignettes also provide the opportunity for participants to have greater control over the interaction by enabling them to determine at what stage, if at all, they introduce their own experiences to illuminate their abstract responses.

We may use vignettes to explore participants' '*ethical frameworks and moral codes*'. Wade (1999), for example, used vignettes to explore the ethical frameworks informing children's thinking about issues such as the family. Alternatively, we may explore children's perceptions and experiences of long-term residential or foster care.

### **Comparing perceptions of disparate groups**

Vignettes also offer the possibility of examining different groups interpretations of a 'common' situation. In their children's homes research, Barter and Renold (1999) use vignettes to explore young people's, residential care workers' and managers' evaluations and perceptions concerning different forms of violence between children (this may have been extended to violence towards staff). Responses were then analysed to reveal the level of harmony or discord between adult and child evaluations, thus providing benchmarks for understanding differences in interpretation.

**The use of vignettes in this context can be directly related to intelligence and learning in respect of any positive changes in behaviour – subsequently, they can be used as an assessment tool. We use them as a caring guide.**

