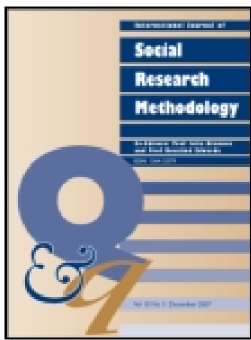

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'I wanna tell you a story': exploring the application of vignettes in qualitative research with children and young people

CHRISTINE BARTER and EMMA RENOLD

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Few methodological papers exist which examine the use of vignettes within qualitative research and more specifically, with children and young people. The paper will briefly discuss the application of vignettes within quantitative and qualitative research traditions derived from the available literature before outlining the major theoretical and methodological issues relating to the use of this technique in social research. Using empirical examples of young people's responses to a selected vignette, we then go on to explore the various benefits of vignettes that can ensue when employing this technique in isolation or as part of a multi-method approach. This discussion concludes with an exploration of how vignettes can be harnessed to engage young people, particularly in the discussion of sensitive topics, whilst enabling them to retain a high level of control over the research process.

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Introduction

This article is based on research into violence amongst children and young people in residential children's homes.[1] UK Children's homes now frequently accommodate children of varying ages, with very challenging behaviour and diverse and conflicting needs. However, given the possible effect this may have upon the climate of violence between children, it has received scant research attention (Barter 1997). Based on a sample of 14 different children's homes and 149 interviews with staff (75) and young people (74), our study aims to redress the balance by exploring in-depth young people's own definitions, perceptions, experiences and evaluations of violence amongst peers, including the impact these have on their lives and the coping strategies they employ. The research also examines care workers

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and residential managers' responses to such violence and the development of formal policies and working practices surrounding the issue. The methodological interest of the study lies in designing research methods that can facilitate an environment in which young people can engage with research on a sensitive topic (violence) and freely discuss and comment upon abstract and personal experiences of violence and violent behaviour.

Divided into three main sections, the article explores the employment of vignettes in both quantitative and qualitative social research and then moves on to discuss the theoretical and methodological limitations surrounding the vignette technique. The remainder of the article outlines the use of vignettes in the study of peer violence in residential children's homes and includes discussions on the content, format, size and length of vignettes, their ability to encourage participation and exploration of sensitive topics, and their application within a more integrated approach with other data collection techniques.

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The use of vignettes in social research: definitions and applications

Vignettes have been used by researchers from a wide range of disciplines to explore diverse social issues and problems. Yet very few methodological papers exist which examine the use of this technique within social research (although see Schoenberg and Ravdal 2000) and particularly its application within qualitative research with children and young people. However, what the available literature does clearly demonstrate is the ability of this technique to capture how meanings, beliefs, judgements and actions are situationally positioned.

Hazel (1995: 2) states that vignettes are stories that provide:

> Concrete examples of people and their behaviours on which participants can offer comment or opinion. The researcher can then facilitate a discussion around the opinions expressed, or particular terms used in the participants' comments.

Hughes' (1998: 381) definition echoes Hazel's, emphasizing the capacity of this method to explore participants' subjective belief systems by using:

> .... [S]tories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes

and continues that:

> Participants are typically asked to respond to these stories with what they would do in a particular situation or how they think a third person would respond

Many of these previous studies typically employ vignettes within a quantitative paradigm, generally as a self-contained method or following a large scale survey questionnaire. Commonly participants are presented with a number of standardized scenarios and asked to answer a range of questions using predetermined categories (see Broussard and Wagner 1998,

Corser and Furnell 1992, Heinman *et al.* 1998, Johnson 1990, Podell *et al.* 1994). A number of these previous studies have successfully used vignettes depicting abusive situations to measure how participants rate different associated factors (for example: Broussard and Wagner 1988, Podell *et al.* 1994) and a minority have focused directly on children's perceptions (see for example Miller-Perrin *et al.* 1990).

For example, Corser and Furnell (1992) compared responses of social workers, foster carers and parents in the general population to the desirability of foster care. They constructed six vignettes from which participants were given 24 statements with which to either agree or disagree. One of the main benefits of this technique for quantitative researchers is its ability to study relatively complex issues with a large sample of respondents:

> Whilst still capitalising on the strengths of the survey method, in that equivalence of answers can be assumed more readily and therefore the data can reasonably be used as the basis for generalizations about a given population (Finch 1987: 111)

However, in large-scale studies, West (1982, cited in Finch 1987) cautions that general attitudes are often sought at the expense of more peripheral and finer detail. Another weakness of using vignettes in this manner surrounds the use of pre-structured response categories; the most prominent being that replies may not correspond to the predetermined classifications. In recognition of this, Finch's (1987: 112) use of this technique resonates closely with qualitative researchers', especially in her non-directive application which 'leaves space for respondents to define the situation in their own terms'. As Hughes emphasizes, vignettes often represent a selected 'snapshot' containing limited information on which participants are asked to comment. Consequently, responses are often characterized by the 'it depends' answer, which provides the situated context for participants to offer and define central influencing factors. Work situated in qualitative paradigms have been central sites for capturing and exploring these complex situational positions ascribed by different actors.

Some of the major differences surrounding the use of vignettes within qualitative paradigms include: whether they are used as a self-contained method or adjunct to other research techniques; how the story is presented; at what stage in the data collection process they are introduced; and how responses are structured. These choices seem very much dependent upon the researchers' methodological and theoretical framework and the aims of the project[2] and will be explored in detail in the discussion of how vignettes were applied in our own study. What follows is a discussion of three main areas which qualitative researchers have signalled as issues that need careful consideration when approaching vignettes from a qualitative standpoint. These include: the tapping of general attitudes and beliefs, asking questions about the vignette and the significance of context. Thirdly, this section will address the use of this technique within multi-method approaches.

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Tapping general attitudes and beliefs

Within qualitative research vignettes have been increasingly employed to elicit cultural norms derived from respondents' attitudes to and beliefs about a specific situation and to highlight ethical frameworks and moral codes. Hughes (1998: 384) states that:

> Vignettes highlight selected parts of the real world that can help unpackage individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes to a wide range of social issues. The relative distance between the vignette and the respondent can facilitate this.

Finch (1987) explores the merits of tapping into the general imagery of respondents, especially when using more than one vignette, and varying the story with different variables (such as age, gender and ethnicity). Wade (1999 personal correspondence) for example, employed vignettes to explore the ethical frameworks which inform children's thinking about issues such as the family and Neale's research into post-divorce family life (1999 personal correspondence), used vignettes as a useful way of exploring the moral codes young people adhered to and contingent status of these codes within different contexts (see also Astor 1994).

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Asking questions

Obviously the specific questions asked by the researcher depend upon the distinct aims of the project. However, what is clear is that vignettes have been used in many different ways and with varied research aims. Nevertheless some common themes do emerge in relation to how participants are asked to engage with the presented story. Typically participants are asked to respond to a particular situation by stating what they would do, or how they imagine a third person, generally a character in the story would react, which often entail some form of moral dilemma. Sometimes participants are asked to comment on both.

Context

West (1982, cited in Finch 1987) states that in relation to a non-directional application of vignettes, 'fuzziness is strength' and ambiguity productive, insofar as it leaves space for young people to define the situation in their own terms. Thus, although vignettes need to contain sufficient context for respondents to have an understanding about the situation being depicted, it is beneficial for them to be vague enough to 'force' participants to provide additional factors which influence their judgement decisions.

Multi-method approach

As mentioned earlier, vignettes have successfully been used in conjunction with other data collection methods. In fact, one of the major benefits of

using vignettes is the flexibility they provide in multi-technique approaches.

Vignettes have been widely used as a complementary technique alongside other data collection methods (see Hazel 1995; Hughes 1998). Their complementary status can be employed either to enhance existing data or to generate data untapped by other research methods (such as observation or interviews). Wade (1999) for example employed vignettes following individual interviews in her study about children's perceptions of the family and selected stories on topics that had not been covered in the interview. MacAuley (1996) sought to explore children's perceptions and experiences of long-term foster care, using an impressive array of assorted techniques. Her research used vignettes, unfinished sentences, response cards, games, postal boxes and other visual stimuli to achieve an 'in-sider' position on children's perceptions and value systems. Vignettes have also been used as 'ice-breakers' and within focus-groups to facilitate an initial discussion (Hazel 1995: 2) and as a way of winding down the interview and broadening the focus from the personal to more abstract experiences (Rahman 1996, Wade 1999).

In the following section we move on to address some of the theoretical and methodological limitations that have been raised in the use of this technique by social scientists before examining how they were applied in our study of residential children's homes.

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Theoretical and methodological limitations

Mapping social reality

The most frequently cited theoretical limitation of employing this technique surrounds the distance between the vignette and social reality, what people believe they would do in a given situation is not necessarily how they would behave in actuality. Indeed, some commentators have argued that the undefined association between belief and action represents the foremost hazard in using this technique as a stand alone method (West 1982, cited in Finch 1987). Other theorists for example (Faia 1979) have questioned the value of using this technique for social scientists if the aim of the research is to map some aspect of social reality.

The indeterminate relationship between belief and action has been explored in some multi-method approaches. Unfortunately the seemingly contradictory findings emerging from these studies only serve to illustrate the complexity of the issue (Hughes 1998). A number of studies indicate that responses to vignettes mirror how individuals act in reality (Carlson 1996, Rahman 1996). Others, like Hughes (1998: 384) conclude that, '. . .we do not know enough about the relationship between vignettes and real life responses to be able to draw parallels between the two'.

Some writers, have argued for a different theoretical perspective in relation to belief and action. Building on the work of Douglas (1971), Finch (1989) states that the relationship between the two is particularly important for social scientists, and that although it is not straightforward neither is it

problematic. Finch suggests that it is not always necessary to be concerned about the inconsistency between principles (beliefs) and practice (actions) as it is perfectly possible to agree in principle to a general norm, but believe that it is not relevant in particular circumstances or that it does not apply for particular reasons. Therefore it is not the outcome (or action) that is of research interest, for this will always be situationally specific, but the process of meanings and interpretations used in reaching the outcome that is of central concern to social scientists. Vignettes can thus provide a very useful tool to illuminate and tap into these complex processes.

Another major criticism, related to the above, centres upon the artificiality of the technique. Integral to social life are the continual interactions between individuals and their environment; as vignettes are unable to duplicate this complexity, findings derived from this method cannot be generalised to any aspect of people's social lives. A counter argument to this criticism is that, as processes in the social world are complex and multiple, vignettes offer researchers the opportunity to manage this complexity by isolating certain aspects of a given social issue or problem. As Corkery (1992: 256) states:

> The use of simulations recognizes that social phenomena require an examination of complex systems rather than isolated entities . . . and investigation of dynamic rather than static phenomena. By simplification, simulations often make more salient or visible a social system's operating framework, whereas the simulated system's natural complexity and detail can be so great as to obscure the phenomena being investigated.

Ultimately no research tool can completely capture the complexity of social existence, however, by adopting a multi-method approach, researchers can build on the individual strengths of different techniques.

Socially desirable responses

A second and common theoretical and methodological dilemma revolves around the notion that participants may initially provide socially desirable responses. Moreover, only upon probing will they reveal how they truly believe they would actually respond to a particular situation or dilemma and why. Douglas (1971: 243) argues that when people present their actions to strangers, especially when 'on the record' there is a strong tendency to draw upon 'the least common denominator of morality which is the public morality—a common strategy designed to offend the fewest possible people'. Thus, some studies ask participants to describe how they feel the person in the story would act and why, and then how they would respond and why. If the character then behaves in a socially unacceptable way this can allow participants the 'freedom' to express how they think they would actually respond in that situation by reducing the pressure to provide socially desirable responses. The success of this technique also depends on how participants feel if a story-line takes a contrary direction from the one suggested by them, and whether they think they are giving an 'incorrect' answer.

Having outlined and briefly explored how vignettes have been applied in social research from the available literature, the remainder of the article

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describes and illustrates how vignettes were employed within our own research in residential children's homes, with a special focus on their suitability for research with children and young people on sensitive issues.

The use of vignettes in the study of peer violence in children's homes

Why vignettes?

Our study aims to map a range of both incidence (types of violence) and experience (impact upon young people) of violence between young people in children's homes. We draw on Kelly's (1987) definition of violence as a continuum because it allows for a wide range of possible forms of violence to be positioned according to participants' own evaluations and interpretations.[3]

In addition to our theoretical framework, we also needed to develop a methodology that could: engage young people to participate in the research; enable a discussion of both personal experiences of violence and types of violence that participants may not have directly encountered; explore the interpretations and meanings different actors ascribed to different situations and courses of actions; and additionally provide young people with a greater level of control over the research interaction. Two complementary techniques were employed to fulfil these diverse aims. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were used in which young people could name, define and contextualize their own personal experiences of violence.[4] Secondly, vignettes were employed to depict different forms of violence along the continuum, mentioned above, on which young people could respond to and locate themselves within. Questions following each vignette included how they thought characters in the story would feel and behave and how they themselves might feel and respond if presented with a similar scenario and why. The reasons surrounding each response were then *freely* explored with each participant, thus allowing them the space to re-define contexts and behaviours by drawing on their own and others' experiences. Thus, where the semi-structured interviews offered a platform for participants to draw on their own experiences of violence, the vignettes provided an opportunity for young people to comment on types of violence they had not encountered as well as violence they had experienced, but felt too uncomfortable to disclose through direct discussion. Moreover, they allowed young people more control over when to introduce personal experiences and enabled young people's definitions, meanings, evaluations and value judgements to be represented. Such practice, as the next section illustrates, is fundamental to recent developments in researching the experiences and perceptions of children and young people and a central focus of our study.

Elucidating children's definitions and meanings

Traditionally, both socialization theories and sociological studies of childhood prior to the 1970s often viewed children as solely constructed

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by the environments which they inhabit (Brannen and O'Brien 1996). However, within contemporary sociology a new paradigm for the study of childhood is emerging centring upon the dissonance which exists between children's own experiences of being a child and the institutional form that childhood takes (James 1993, James and Prout 1990). Within this surfacing literature, children's social relationships and cultures are viewed as worthy of study in their own right and not just in relation to their social construction by adults. Children are therefore viewed as both constrained by structure and agents acting within and upon it. By exploring the relationship between these two levels we can then begin to elucidate the link between given and largely adult-defined social institutions and the activities which children construct for and between themselves.[5] To this end, our use of vignettes within the children's homes project provided a useful tool to foreground children's *own* subjective definitions, meanings and experiences of violence.

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Content, format, size and length

Four different vignettes were used, each depicting a different aspect of violence from the continuum outlined above. We decided on written narratives as an accessible and appropriate format, although vignettes can be presented in a range of ways: on cards, in a flip-book format, using comic book style,[6] on videotape (Cohen and Staryer 1996, Leierer *et al*. 1996), on computers (Stolte 1994, Vitoritch and Tyrell 1995) or through music and music videos (Peterson and Pfost 1989). Stories included sexual, emotional, physical and verbal forms of violence and were based on young people's accounts of 'real' experiences from earlier pilot interviews and data from previous research (Barter 1996). Each vignette was adapted to use with younger children (aged 6–12) and adolescents.

It is important, particularly in research with younger children that the vignettes are easily followed and understood, and are internally consistent and not too complex. Heeding the advice of Finch who found that more than three changes to a story line were often too confusing for participants to remember, all of the stories were divided into three separate sections, except for one which had only two. The vignettes for adolescents were all between 200 and 300 words long whereas for younger children the longest story presented was just over 150 words. After each part was read out, either by the interviewer or the young person, a number of predetermined questions were asked, and the participant's responses to these were then freely explored. Thus, responses of residential social workers, managers and young people could be compared and contrasted.[7] Overall, we found that most participants were generally happy with the level of context we provided and readily introduced additional factors that shaped their evaluations of the situation.

For the purpose of this article all examples will be drawn from one of the adolescent vignettes which depicts a situation between three girls. Although this vignette is split into three parts we have included only the

first two sections for brevity. The aim of this vignette is to explore young people's responses to different types of verbal and emotional violence including name-calling, intimidation, threatening behaviour and exclusion and to comment on both the 'victim' and 'perpetrators' in the story.

The following sections will draw upon this example to illustrate how the vignette technique can be employed to: elicit multiple interpretations to behaviours and events, engage young people to discuss sensitive topics, allow young people more control over what and when to disclose personal experiences, compensate for lack of personal experience and compare and contrast different groups.

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Forest Way children's home

Sarah was sometimes called names by two of the other girls, Jane and Julie who lived in the same children's home as she did. They would tease her about how she looked and what she dressed like. Then they started calling Sarah names like 'slag' 'bitch' and 'lezzie'. Although the other young people in the home didn't join in with Jane and Julie, some did stop being friendly to her and started ignoring her.

Questions:
What do you think about how Jane and Julie are acting?
Why do you think Jane and Julie are doing this?
Why do you think the other young people are ignoring Sarah even though she was friendly with them before?
How do you think Sarah feels?
What do you think Sarah will do?
What would you do?
If the insults were racist, would it make any difference to how Sarah felt?

After this had gone on for a couple of weeks Jane and Julie started to 'push' Sarah around threatening to 'get' Sarah if she didn't give them cigarettes and lend them her tapes etc. They also told Sarah that one of their boyfriends, who had a reputation for being violent, would also 'get her' if she told.

Questions:
What do you think about how Jane and Julie are acting?
What do you think Sarah will do?
What would you do now?

Multiple interpretations

Below are a range of answers four young people volunteered when asked about Julie and Jane's behaviour in the first half of the vignette. They each illustrate how young people actively and animatedly engage with the story and offer highly individualized accounts about why they think Jane and Julie are acting as they are:

Extract 1

Researcher: Why do you think Jane and Julie might act like that with Sarah?

Shirley: Cause they don't like her . . .

Researcher: Why wouldn't they like her?

Shirley: Em . . . because they're jealous or something of her

Extract 2

(Joint interview with two sisters)

Researcher: Why do you think they (Jane and Julie) might be acting like that?

Ann: She might stink . . .

Lisa: Cause she might have done something to them like robbed her fella

Ann: Or say like . . . (interrupted by Lisa)

Lisa: Robbed one of their fellas or something . . .

Ann: Or say like she's going out with them on activities and she's looking a mess, don't think I'd like anyone walking around with me that stunk . . . or looked dead scruffy

Researcher: So that's where the slag thing comes in?

Ann: Yer . . .and she might be a slag with all the . . . (interrupted by Lisa)

Lisa: Yer and she might try and take one of their fellas away or something, she might be like fucking feeling him up and all that . . . cause that's happened to 'er (laughs) . . . TRUE!

Ann: WHAT! . . .

Lisa: Er when Jackie tried to have Phil

Ann: Cheeky bastard . . .

Extract 3

Researcher: What do you think about how Julie and Jane are acting?

Sue: Well that's a bit tight like cause you shouldn't just start calling one girl for nothing especially slag

Researcher: Do you think the slag one's bad?

Sue: Yer I don't like people calling people slags, honestly I don't.

Researcher: So why do you think they would be picking on Sarah?

Sue: Maybe they've had a few run-ins with her they just don't like her . . . might be just cause she's different . . .she might dress different, talk different or look different . . . cause everyone's different but they might think she's too different . . . like they do . . . probably she (Sarah) hasn't done nothing to them.

The above extracts clearly reveal how vignettes can elicit quite different responses from young people and how freely they communicate their reactions to events. Both Shirley (extract 1) and Sue (extract 3), to varying degrees, believe that Sarah holds no responsibility for the name-calling and

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intimidation and suggest reasons why Jane and Julie may be behaving this way. In contrast, both Ann and Lisa (extract 2) immediately seek to legitimize Jane and Julie's actions by focusing on Sarah's role, possibly due to their own involvement in similar activities, with comments like, 'she might stink', 'look dead scruffy' or have 'robbed her fella'.

In relation to the earlier debate surrounding the conceptual space between belief and action, we were particularly interested in what interpretations and meanings different groups of actors ascribed to the different situations presented than the actual outcomes they reached, although actions were also viewed as important especially in relation to perceived thresholds of professional intervention. For example, we were interested in exploring if young people ascribed hierarchical interpretations of meaning to different forms of violence, and in what specific circumstances these were induced and if this resulted in different levels of intervention. In the above vignette we explore with young people if name-calling based on racist constructs is any different to insults surrounding sexuality.

Extract 4

Researcher: If they were calling Sarah (name of girl in the story) racist names would that make any difference?

Sue: Oh yer . . . it's . . . it's cause really if you think about it say if you have a black person and a white person that black person is the same as a white person cause under their six layers of black skin they're white . . . I've seen it on TV . . . It's nothing different with em they've still got feelings . . . and everything their just the same as us but on top their a different colour. I can't stand it (racism) me.

Extract 5

Researcher: If they were to use racist names would that make any difference?

James: No but if it was racist she needs to get them done by the police

Researcher: So if someone here said something racist to another young people would that be seen as needing to get the police involved?

James: I would . . . cause it's not the same like those other names they're just what you expect but racist stuff that's different it's . . . like it's just cause your black so I suppose I do think it's worse more upsetting than being just called a slag

Extract 6

Researcher: And would it make any difference to Sarah if the names they were using were racist?

Becky: Yeah they'd be dead upsetting to her

Researcher: More so than sexual comments?

Becky: Well it depends what's gone on in her background, coz if she's like had a normal life and that then, it depends what sort of environment she's come from.

Extract 7

Researcher: Do you think if they were using racist names do you think that would make (interrupted by Shirley)

Shirley: Make it worser . . . cause it's not nice.

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The above extracts illustrate that in many cases racist insults were viewed by young people as more serious than sexual ones (see extract 4 and 5). However, as extract 6 indicates, when other mediating factors were introduced by the participant, such as issues of past abuse, the impact of sexual insults are then viewed as being as equally serious as racist ones. In addition, although Shirley (extract 7) states that racism is 'not nice' she also later admitted to sometimes using racist insults. Previous research has shown that it is not unusual for children and young people to hold contradictory views on racism: to have anti-racist beliefs while still using racist insults in particular circumstances (see Barter 1999). Again this brings into focus the conceptual distinction between belief and action, highlighting the need to explore in what contexts and under what circumstances different interpretations and meaning are applied. The following section further explores how our use of vignettes encouraged young people to draw on their own experiences and enable discussions on more sensitive issues.

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Sensitive topics and participation

Vignettes can be useful in engaging young people to discuss potentially sensitive topics in a variety of ways. For example, informing young people that part of the interview process would involve showing them some stories to comment upon prompted many of them (previously uninterested) to become involved in the research. Moreover, the shift away from face-to-face discussions that can involve intrusive direct eye contact to focusing on the reading of a vignette also went some way to facilitating a non-threatening environment by creating a comfortable distance between the researcher and the participants. Feedback on using the vignettes was positive with many young people conveying their enjoyment, such as Lucy's comment in response to asking whether she wanted to read another story: 'Yeah, I like these stories, they're good, coz they're realistic'; Kay's comment in response to asking whether she wanted to read another one, 'they're top'; and Mark who said he thought they were 'wicked' and 'better than just talking all the time cause that's boring'.

For the more reticent and for those who did not wish to discuss personal experiences, commenting on stories about other people's experiences was viewed as less threatening and also encouraged participation. This was particularly true for some of the boys and young men in our research who found discussing their own feelings and experiences in the semi-structured interview uncomfortable. Responses on these occasions were sometimes abrupt and monosyllabic. When the vignettes were introduced, however, many boys were freely interjecting and drawing upon personal experiences and events, even beyond the questions which directed responses from the abstract to the personal. In some cases only the vignettes were used, indicating that some boys only participated with the knowledge that they could avoid responding to direct questions about their lives and experiences.

Knowing that young people do not always feel confident in talking about themselves, particularly if asked direct questions about personal and sensitive subjects, how the vignettes are applied is crucial. Allowing participants the space and time to explore freely their responses and comments provided the opportunity for young people to have greater control over the interview interaction, by enabling them to decide at what stage, if at all, they introduced their own experiences to illuminate their abstract responses. The following extract illustrates the shift from the abstract to the personal (in italics) and the recollection of an incident not previously disclosed earlier on in the interview:

Extract 8

Researcher: What do you think about Jane and Julie and how they are acting in this story?

Liz: Fucking, that's stupid that in'it, going on at someone coz of what they look like and what they dress like, fucking, that's just being dead babyish that in'it . . . coz when they get out on the real world and they leave care and they go up to someone and say 'you look a dick head in that', they'll just turn round and fucking twat them one . . . coz if you think about it and you go to a big city like (name of town) anything goes, you can get away with wearing anything you want in'it and no-one 'll ever saying anything to you in (name of town).

Researcher: Do you think that happens more because you're in a home?

Liz: Yeah, coz they know in'it, coz they're in a home, do you know what I mean. If they were out in the big wide world they'd just keep their mouth shut.

Researcher: Why do you think Jane and Julie are doing this?

Liz: Might be jealous in'it, if the girl's dead pretty . . .*coz I used to, my mum said that to me, when I was in school people used to say, fucking like what trainers I was wearing and everything, coz thing is they were fucking top trainers and they used to take the piss and everything right, out of what I looked like right and all that and I thought right, fuck off, but my mum said to me it's coz you're skinny and you're pretty and all that . . . my mum goes it'll be all the way through your life people will be taking the piss out of you coz they're jealous of you, people do that don't they?*

On a more practical level, including the vignettes as part of the interview process also offered a more varied format, thus making participation more interesting and, at times, provided a break from the disclosure of sensitive personal experiences.

Importance of authenticity

Neff (1979) states that vignettes will be most productive when the situations depicted appear real and conceivable to participants. In response to this some researchers have constructed their vignettes around actual experiences, for example Harden *et al.* (1999, personal correspondence) used agony aunt letters in teenage magazines in their research on the impact of risk on the everyday worlds of children. We found that young people were especially enthusiastic about taking part in the research when they realized that the anonymized stories were based on actual situations that other young people had told us about. Shirley for example checked that

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each one was real and was very interested in what had actually happened to the characters. On another occasion, at a young people's meeting we attended to discuss our work, one of the girls unexpectedly announced that everyone should take part because we were using 'real things' that other young people had told us.

Furthermore, presenting young people with stories derived from real experiences was especially productive in encouraging them to speak out about the more negative perpetrating behaviour, such as young people who engaged in bullying others. However, it is important to remember that telling participants that a potentially upsetting scenario is based on a real experience may be distressing, especially if the participant is in a similar position. For example, in one of the homes in our study some of the children could not recount any form of peer violence. When they were presented with the vignettes some expressed shock that such behaviour occurred in other homes, which required very delicate handling by the researchers involved. In this isolated instance the interviewers decided not to show all four vignettes to some of the young people in case they created anxiety around what other children's homes were like, especially as children may move placements.

Compensating for a lack of personal experience

Sampling from a general residential population meant that we had no prior knowledge of young people's experience of violent behaviours within the residential homes. Thus, not knowing the extent or even existence of young people's experience of violence, the vignettes became an invaluable part of the methodology, providing a focus for participants who had no personal experience of violence. For example although participants from the above home reported no violent incidents, with the aid of vignettes, their attitudes and responses to a range of violent situations were not lost and could be explored regardless of whether they had any personal experience on which to draw. However, young people's ability to engage with the story may be enhanced if they have personal experience of the situation described, such as in the case of the two sisters, Ann and Lisa, when they rationalised the perpetrating behaviour of Jane and Julie towards Sarah.

Comparing disparate groups

Our research also sought to explore residential workers' experiences attitudes and views and to compare these to young people's accounts and beliefs. Although we were able to use the semi-structured interview to explore many of these issues, often accounts were difficult to match unless all participants were recalling the same event, which did not necessarily always happen in each home. Even when a single incident was identified participants often exhibited different degrees of recollection, which meant that mediating factors associated with incidents were sometimes only vaguely recalled. The application of vignettes offers the opportunity to

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compare and contrast different groups' interpretations of a 'uniform' situation while at the same time providing the opportunity to identify and isolate certain structural factors such as gender, age, ethnicity. This enables the wider context surrounding different groups' judgement issues to be explored, and ultimately permits the development of benchmarks for understanding differences in interpretation, which may be unavailable through using other methods.

Flexibility

Our own research used vignettes not as a precursor to other methods (e.g. as an ice-breaker) or to close the interview but harnessed the flexibility of the vignette technique in a more integrated approach with other data collection techniques. Consequently, at what point in the fieldwork process the vignettes were presented was largely dependent on the young person involved. Thus, if the participant seemed reticent or nervous about discussing their own experiences a vignette might be introduced relatively early, whereas, if the young person seemed content to discuss their own experiences, they were used later in the interaction. It was also common for the researcher strategically to introduce a vignette if they felt that the young person would benefit from talking about something other than their own experience for a while.[8] This may be particularly important with younger children who may find it difficult to say to an adult interviewer that they would like a break.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that, although qualitative researchers are increasingly employing vignettes in their work with children and young people, few methodological discussions have accompanied this. However, having explored the available literature we have highlighted how qualitative researchers have employed vignettes in their work and implementation of this methodology as well as exploring some of the theoretical debates surrounding its use. By drawing on empirical examples of young people's responses to a selected vignette we have explored the varied benefits associated with using this technique within an integrated approach. In our research we found that vignettes engaged young people, not only to participate in the research, but to explore and identify with a range of sensitive topics, from sexual harassment to bullying and intimidation that may have remained untapped using the standard interview technique in isolation. In addition, due to the flexibility of our data collection strategy, we were able to: adapt the data collection technique to fit individual participants needs, compensate for a lack of direct experience, and provide the opportunity for young people to have greater control over the research interaction. Using vignettes in a qualitative style, where responses can be expressed freely, also contributes to the current methodological development which allows the meanings and definitions of young people to be foregrounded and adequately represented.

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Notes

1 This project is funded by the ESRC as part of the Violence Research Programme. For details see: http: www.rhbnc.ac.uk
2 As with all social research, but particularly when undertaking research with children and young people, ethical considerations regarding voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and level of involvement in the research process itself need to be thoroughly addressed (see Alderson 1995 for a thorough exploration of the central issues and Kirby 1999 for a review of involving young researchers).
3 A continuum can incorporate 'everyday' behaviours such as name calling, intimidation or threats, alongside incidents of physical or sexual assaults, thus catering for a variety of physical, sexual or emotional abuses of power (Kelly 1987).
4 Staff were similarly asked about their experiences and management of violence between children in their care
5 Within this, the plurality of childhood must be acknowledged, for example according to class, age, gender, disability and ethnicity (James *et al.* 1998).
6 With younger children, it may be helpful to act out the story with dolls or puppets or to ask younger children to draw their responses and then discuss with them what their drawing means.
7 The questions asked to young people and staff were, on occasion, slightly different insofar as staff were asked how they might respond to a situation or behaviour as a member of staff.
8 Introducing the vignettes earlier in the interview process or to break up the interview occurred with approximately one fifth of our adolescent participants and just over one third of our interviews with younger children.

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