

## Vignettes

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Vignettes are a qualitative research method. A vignette sets out a realistic outline of a situation that can be used to facilitate discussion with individuals or groups about difficult or sensitive topics in a non-threatening and non-judgemental way.

### **What do we mean by Qualitative Research?**

Qualitative research captures information that is not numerical in nature. It records people's attitudes, feelings and behaviours, and provides an in-depth but usually indicative picture about why people act in certain ways.

### **What is a Vignette?**

A vignette presents a hypothetical situation, which is seen as credible and realistic by its intended audience. Through how participants' respond to the situation, they reveal their perceptions, values, social norms or impressions of events.

### **Why use Vignettes?**

Vignettes are a method for:

- Generating real dialogue to get to the heart of perceptions / views on a topic
- Understanding values and clarifying people's judgements about what people 'ought to do' rather than what they would 'actually do' in a given situation
- Exploring sensitive topics which when discussed in other formats, may be threatening or difficult to discuss in other ways.

## **When to use Vignettes**

Vignettes can be used in a number of settings including:

- As an 'ice-breaker' to get people talking
- As part of a semi-structured interview to explore what interviewees see as relevant factors to weigh up in relation to a particular situation,
- As part of a group discussion, where a range of perspectives and viewpoints on a situation can be discussed and considered.
- As a supplementary research method to explore topics that would benefit from further investigation.

## **How to use Vignettes**

Vignettes can be presented as a story / example situation, or can be built up in stages through the successive release of new information about the situation, with relevant prompts to explore and tease out different aspects of the enquiry.

Rather than asking people about their direct experience, many find it easier and less threatening to comment on a story. Consider the different perspectives that you want to consider in relation to understanding the situation, and any differences in interpretation.

## **How to create a Vignette**

A vignette usually consists of a short story (with enough detail to follow but spaces for respondents to make assumptions), and a series of prompting questions for a facilitator or interviewer to ask. Vignettes are often deliberately ambiguous, with sufficient fuzziness to the vignette that people have enough information to be able to understand the situation and to use their own knowledge and experience to fill in the blanks.

The construction of a vignette therefore requires careful thought. It needs to be plausible and should be informed by real life examples. Often a vignette outlines a typical everyday situation rather than something that is unusual or rare. It should not be overly complex. If taking a respondent through a vignette in stages, do not use more than four stages / three story changes.

The language used should be authentic and easily understood. Using the first person in a vignette can help to explore empathy with the situation. Use names where appropriate to bring the situation to life. Think about the level of detail that you want to include, and include it where you want people to talk about the details of a specific situation.

Vignettes are usually in written form, but can also be presented through other media such as video or music, depending on the audience. Consider whether you want to produce more than one vignette to cover different scenarios, for example, the situation facing a young person, lone parent, or older adult.

## **Example Vignette: Welfare Reform in Kirkcaldy (What Works Scotland)**

During today's event we will be collecting data through table discussions using the vignette method as part of a piece of collaborative action research we (a group of Kirkcaldy practitioners) are conducting within the What Works Scotland programme. Our group (known as a partnership innovation team- or PIT) is undertaking a systematic inquiry on supporting people experiencing welfare reform and are focusing on the following inquiry question:

***How can we improve our knowledge of what data is available across partner agencies in Fife? How can we use this to prevent people from being sanctioned? And to better support those who have been sanctioned?***

By data we refer to specific statistics but also general practitioner and local knowledge from different agencies, professionals and communities. Today we are using vignettes to better understand perceptions and knowledge of sanctioning, service provision, and views on people who are susceptible to being sanctioned to help us understand how to improve the process of knowledge and data sharing.

To further develop our thoughts on how people experience welfare sanctions and examples of the reality of living in poverty, and to consider what responses and support might be available, please read and carefully reflect upon the following vignette(s). These vignettes are based on real examples of experiences in Kirkcaldy. After you have read the vignettes, the facilitator will then ask you to consider and discuss the reflective questions provided.

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### **Ian**

Ian is a 56 year old male who came to the job club for support following a benefits sanction. He had been instructed to complete his job search for job seekers allowance online but had no IT skills.

Alice (welfare support assistant) who works at the job club, contacted Jobcentre Plus on Ian's behalf but the time period to appeal the sanction had elapsed. He had no money, no fuel and he was worried he would be evicted if his rent was in arrears.

Alice spoke with Ian and together they were able to establish what was in his claimant commitment. A claimant commitment sets out the responsibilities you have accepted in return for receiving benefits. It also explains what could happen if you don't do what you have agreed.

Alice also encouraged Ian to attend a digital skills class within the local community where he could get support with using a computer for job searching.

During his conversation with Alice, Ian mentioned that he had no heating and that his gas had been cut off.

Ian also shared that he had several physical health issues and he felt that neither his GP nor Jobcentre advisor were taking them seriously.

### **Questions**

- What priorities or immediate concerns do you think a case worker would have for the individual presented?
- What services are available to support people in this situation?
- How might partners work better together to share knowledge or data to improve the situation?
- What could be done to prevent, or to mitigate the situation?

## Using Vignettes in practice

Some practical suggestions for facilitating a group session based on vignettes:

<b>Collecting data</b>	Consider how you will capture the conversation including use of any recording equipment, or through a note taker. Consider how you will get informed consent from participants to collect data from the discussion to inform your inquiry
<b>Table Rules</b>	Only one person should speak at a time Listen to others and be open to what they are saying Share your own thoughts and ideas Give everyone the chance to have their say Help to capture key points from the conversation
<b>Role of the Facilitator</b>	Introduce the task Keep the conversation on track, and to time Provide prompts to help others to answer Listen, learn and understand different views around the table Give your view where it helps the conversation to flow but don't monopolise the conversation Ensure that key points are captured from the conversation

## Summary

Vignettes provide a powerful tool for discussing sensitive and difficult topics by surfacing the underlying issues, social norms and assumptions in a non-threatening and non-judgemental way.

## References

Bennett, H (2016) Vignettes Guidance for Welfare Reform PIT. What Works Scotland Collaborative Action Research Workstream: Fife

What Works Scotland (2017) Welfare Reform in Kirkcaldy - Themes emerging from event held on 18 May 2016 - Strengthening Partnerships for a Fairer Fife: Working collaboratively with data that matters, Kirkcaldy Welfare Reform PIT

<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/WWSFifeKirkcaldyWelfareReformEvent.pdf>

Social Research Update 25: The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research

<http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html>