Turning on the tap: the benefits of using 'real-life' vignettes in qualitative research interviews

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Abstract

The use of vignettes that are based upon fictionalised accounts is well-established in contemporary social science. Vignettes have been used in a variety of ways to contribute to studies with both a quantitative and a qualitative orientation. This paper reflects on two recent qualitative studies which have made innovative use of 'real-life' vignettes. In each case, the paper describes some of the unanticipated and overlapping benefits that accrued from their incorporation into the research design and reflects on the advantages that 'real-life' vignettes might bring to future research. Drawing on two different research projects, the paper highlights the further potential contribution of 'real-life' vignettes to the repertoire of research methods currently available to social scientists.

Introduction

The use of vignettes has become more common in social science in recent decades. However, it is arguably the case that they could make an even greater contribution to qualitative research methods and be more broadly applied across a range of research studies. In this paper, we draw on our own experiences of using 'real-life' vignettes in two pieces of research. In both cases, vignettes were incorporated in order to gain access to rich and detailed accounts more rapidly, and more effectively, than would have been possible using semi-structured interviews (given the spatial and temporal constraints

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pertaining to the research contexts). We begin by briefly discussing the place of vignettes in social research. We go on to outline some brief contextual details relating to the studies and our chosen approaches. Drawing upon field notes and extracts from interview transcripts, we then tease out some of the anticipated and unanticipated benefits of using 'real-life' vignettes in our research. We conclude by reflecting on some ways in which vignette-based interviews may be useful to future researchers.

Vignettes within social science

Vignettes (and stimulus materials more generally) have been utilized in a variety of ways across different social science disciplines. As a result, there are inevitably variations in the form and content of vignettes. However they can broadly be described as a written description of a (frequently fictitious) event which relates to the central topic of study. Having been presented with a vignette participants are prompted to respond in some way (usually several ways) by the interviewer who is present. In recent years, vignettes have become increasingly recognized by social scientists as useful research instruments (Barter and Renold, 2000). Whilst their more widespread application has been relatively recent, however, important precursors are found in stimulus-response work dating back to the early post-war period. This is relevant in highlighting the extent to which vignettes have developed in conjunction with a variety of other efforts to support interviewers in eliciting the information they desire from interviewees in qualitative work.

In 1946, sociologists Robert K. Merton and Patricia L. Kendall introduced the idea of the 'focused' interview. Participants were exposed to the same stimulus - mostly wartime propaganda films. The researchers had performed a content analysis of the stimulus material ahead of time, and had articulated hypotheses that they wanted to follow-up on in the interviews. Based on their experience with this methodology, Merton and Kendall developed a protocol for designing and conducting such interviews (Merton and Kendall, 1946). This early stimulus response work has subsequently been taken forward in a variety of ways. For example, Crilly et al. (2006) describe using graphic illustrations as stimulus materials in the course of interviews with industrial designers and Törrönen (2002) describes a variety of stimulus materials, including films, photographs, news and historical sources, which can be used in order to encourage 'interviewees to speak about the research topic' (Törrönen, 2002: 343). He suggests three ways of using stimulus texts as: clues; microcosms; and provokers. Explaining that:

> When we use stimulus texts as clues, we build the interview session so that the texts, together with the interview questions, induce our interviewees to extrapolate how the texts stand for the whole (metonymy). When we use stimulus texts as microcosms, we pose the interview questions so that our interviewees compare their worlds and identity positions against those of the stimulus objects (mimesis, identification). When stimulus texts are used as provokers, the researcher chooses cultural products that challenge, with the aid of provocative questions, the interviewees to deal with the established meanings, conventions and practices (symbolic dimension, naturalness, normality) of the phenomenon under examination (Törrönen, 2002: 343).

In what may be seen as an adaptation of the use of 'texts' and using a 'high tech' approach Stacey and Vincent combined the use of recorded stimulus materials with electronic (i.e. email or on line) interviews (Stacey and Vincent, 2011: 606). In doing so, they suggested that this 'provided for a richer interview than would have been possible with a face-to-face interview in the more limited time frame [available]' (Stacey and Vincent, 2011: 622).

In all these different forms, the intention is to assist interviewers in achieving their project objectives. Fictionalised-vignette based interviews can be seen to fit with these approaches given that they incorporate a particular form of stimulus. In sociology, fictionalised-vignettes have generally been used to research values and beliefs. For example, in a key study from the nineties Corser and Furnell (1992) considered the responses of social workers, foster carers, and parents to a series of vignettes in order to compare their value-driven perspectives on foster care and natural parents (Corser and Furnell, 1992). By contrast, in psychology it has been more common to use fictionalised vignettes in order to predict human behaviour. In both cases, the vignettes can be seen to serve as a particular kind of stimulus and an aid to researchers seeking to encourage participants to discuss their thoughts openly.

In discussing the use of vignettes in social science, Jenkins et al. (2010) describe them as typically making use of fictionalized or fictional characters in order to quiz participants in relation to what they think such characters might 'do' next. This technique has most frequently been used to achieve a better understanding of the values held by individuals and social groups. In a variation of fictionalised vignettes, Jenkins et al. (2010) describe the potential of 'developmental vignettes' which are constructed as hypothetical scenarios that change depending on participants' reactions. Thus, as they have been used more frequently social scientists have sought to bend them to their own purpose in order to maximise their potential.

However, for all of their potential, fictionalised vignettes have been recognised as giving rise to a number of analytic challenges and as having significant limitations. One difficulty that has been identified with use of such fictionalised accounts, relates to the analytic challenges associated with participants shifting their focus from the fictional characters to their own views and ideas (O'Dell, 2012). When analysing such interview material it can be difficult to unpick which expressions represent the opinions and thoughts of participants and which represent their understandings of social norms. There are strong indications that in responding to vignettes and questions about what characters 'should' do next or what participants themselves would 'do next' interviewees provide idealised answers which do not bear any relationship to 'reality' (Barter and Renold, 2000). Here, there is a suspicion that participants are more likely to reflect socially acceptable responses anchored in societal norms and values than honest predictions/representations of their own behaviours/beliefs. There is also a suggestion that flaws in the development of fictionalised vignettes (making them too far-fetched for example) may contribute to the provision of unconvincing responses which deviate markedly from 'social reality' (O'Dell, 2012). Whilst this has been identified as a potential strength in research which does not seek out 'social reality' but is interested in understanding the multiple voices with which participants may engage in 'dialogue' (O'Dell, 2012) for those with a more 'realist' perspective such features of fictionalised vignettes present a barrier.

For these reasons, the use of fictionalised vignettes was not deemed appropriate in the research design for either of the studies discussed here and was not seriously considered. However, in both studies there was scope for the evolution of the research and relatedly of the adopted methods. As a result, having completed the initial stages of the research, in both studies the authors sought to adapt traditional fictionalised-vignette methodology to be used as a device to provide richer interview material than had already been collected and could be expected with the use of semi-structured interviews within constrained time frames. We considered that vignettes had the potential to act as a 'stimulus to extend the discussion' (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 183) and as such could potentially perform better than time-limited semi structured interviews as a result of their capacity to act as both microcosms and provokers in the sense described by Törrönen (Törrönen, 2002: 343). However in both cases, we were specifically focussed on efforts to engage with 'social reality' and were acutely aware of the limitations of fictionalised-vignettes in relation to this objective. As a result, in a departure from the standard practice as described in the literature, studies A and B both made use of real (and anonymized), rather than fictional/fictionalized case materials.

Background to studies A and B

Although we used similar approaches with regard to 'real life' vignette-based interviewing, the multi-layered research design for each study was different. Study A (2015) was a follow-up on an explorative field trip on a subsea vessel that performed specialized operations (such as underwater pipeline repair using robots) on subsea infrastructures. This is a field where safety is paramount and the study explored the management of safety in a multi-team working context (i.e. the subsea vessel). The exploratory field trip had suggested the existence of an adaptive mechanism to handle unexpected events not documented in extant research literature relating to safety. On board the vessel, we observed that when unexpected events triggered a need for leadership functions such as 'boundary management', 'coaching' and 'problem solving', the operational leader tended to be tied up in task coordination. In a few instances, we witnessed other individuals stepping in (without any explicit delegation) and improvising to perform leadership functions under the purview of the designated leader. This practice seemed to contradict the strong emphasis on procedural rigor in these systems, and yet it also seemed to provide capacity for rapid response to unexpected challenges. The researchers tentatively named this phenomenon 'leadership redundancy' (Johannessen et al., 2012). If confirmed, it would add to earlier findings of how 'High Reliability Organizations' (HROs) balance structure and flexibility (Schulman, 1993; Faraj and Xiao, 2006; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). However, examples from the field study were low in number, and critics had asked if the researchers could provide 'existence proof' of the mechanism in similar contexts. This created a challenge, as even if the researchers' preliminary conclusions were 'correct', only a few events were likely to be followed by this kind of intervention. Potentially, they could be studied on extensive field trips, but that would be expensive and impractical. The 'concept' was also in its infancy, which precluded the use of questionnaires based upon it. The researchers looked for a 'methodological fit' (Edmondson and McManus, 2007) to combine focus to confirm or disconfirm the existence of the

concept with an exploratory approach to understand how participants made sense of the phenomenon when they noticed it. To achieve this, the researchers turned real observations from the field trip into stimuli for 35 interviews with 'experts' across four vessels calling at ports on a two-weekly basis (Johannessen et al., 2013).

The second study of the, less specialised, cargo shipping sector (study B) took place in the period 2012–2016. The study involved three major phases of empirical data collection. The research phases made use of observation and semi-structured interviews (n=239) on nine vessels (phases one and three), shipboard and shore-based vignette-centred interviews (phase two, n=514), and the administration of 2,500 shore-based questionnaires (phase three).

In the second phase of data collection, the project made use of 'real-life' vignettes as a way of encouraging participants to recall examples of real events and, like study A, to explore how commonplace some previously observed experiences were. They also served to provide researchers with full and evocative accounts of these experiences in order to increase our understanding of them. The vignette interviews were largely developed for use with seafarers who were temporarily ashore (usually for a matter of hours) and were therefore more accessible to researchers than those who were on board. The interviews required participants to reflect back on, what had sometimes been, long careers and in the course of their conduct it was hoped that the team would elicit rich examples of seafarers' specific experiences. However, practical issues relating to the recruitment of interviewees meant that participants were likely to be interviewed in time-constrained contexts (interviews were generally of approximately 60 minutes duration) and in the absence of the rapport that we had been able to generate whilst sailing with seafarers on board. In this situation there were concerns that standard semi-structured interviews would not be fit for purpose. Vignettes were therefore constructed drawing on field notes that had been written by researchers during the first phase of the study which had involved observations and semi-structured interviews with seafarers in the course of long voyages aboard cargo vessels. The intention was to use the illustrations as 'triggers' in order to 'draw seafarers out' and to encourage them to talk in much the same way that we had witnessed in social situations (such as mealtimes) on board: the account provided by a seafarer of one real situation stimulating seafarers to tell of others they had experienced. The vignettes were accompanied by a series of questions and in the field they served their purpose in eliciting rich material very well. In this respect, they met our hopes and expectations.

However, in addition to the shore-based interviews, the vignette-based schedules were also utilised on board a single cargo ship. The intention in undertaking this voyage was to follow-up on some of the less-well corroborated (at the level of direct observation) findings of the study relating to one specific topic. As before, this voyage combined interviews and observational work. Observation was the critical element of the voyage. However, it also provided an (unplanned) opportunity to add to the stock of vignette-based interviews undertaken ashore (n=502) as the only conditions for interviewee participation related to seafarers' employment status (as active seafarers). On this basis, a total of twelve shipboard vignette-based interviews were conducted in the early stages of the trip. These twelve interviews, and the field notes which were written in the course of the five-week voyage, form the basis of the account offered here which describes how

some additional benefits of real-life vignettes were revealed as a consequence of their opportune use in an unanticipated context.

Studying high-tech subsea operations

To meet the objectives of the study A team, each vignette scenario described a triggering event that created a problem that needed attention, and which it was hard for the designated leader to take care of as well as an intervention by somebody other than that leader.

The approach bore fruit. The vignettes provided a focal point that was easy to register reactions to. As a result, we were satisfied that the existence of the concept which we had identified could be confirmed, and that the practice which we had observed remained controversial. We also welcomed digressions triggered by the vignette scenarios that took us in new and partly unexpected directions. This gave us rich material on values, practices and dilemmas and helped contextualize the phenomenon that we studied (Johannessen et al., 2015). However, two further benefits proved more important than the researchers had anticipated prior to the interviews. The vignettes triggered engagement and a willingness to discuss sensitive issues sooner than one would normally expect in a brief interview and, in some cases, they reduced the tendency for idealised answers.

Triggering engagement and openness

Each vignette invited comment on scenarios explicitly taken from reality. For example, Vignette #1 was framed in the following way in one interview:

> all the cases I'll show you are real in the sense that they have happened at least once. We are wondering how they strike other people in the business – as realistic or less realistic, whether you would do things differently if you were involved, and so on. (V531_STI_ME06)

After the participant had a chance to read the scenario, the interviewer paraphrased it to reinforce the focus and to sequence the questions, for example:

> What you see in this example is a minor incident with (a robotic subsea vessel). There's a leak. In the heat of the battle, a client rep (representative) happens to be close by and he starts a discussion with some of the others about what caused the problem. The offshore manager comes along and sees that discussion as at the wrong time and place, and he moves the discussion away so that the (subsea specialists) can deal with the immediate problem. First of all, have you seen anything like this happen? (V531_STI_ME06)

Such openings led most participants to launch into an evaluation of the case. They did, however, know that we were granted access to them through their main client, the oil company that had commissioned the subsea work. We anticipated that some participants might be wary of fully answering questions because of the corporate expectations of commitment to procedural rigor and existing safety regimes. The concept that we wanted to explore involved, by contrast, coping mechanisms that might not be reflected in rules, plans and procedures. We hoped that in presenting participants with examples that were

'real' (in the sense that they had occurred at least once) participants who had experienced similar situations and acted similarly would feel less exposed in describing what were essentially deviations from established practices. By the same token 'real' examples could be expected to trigger strong reactions from those who considered that rules and procedures should be followed 'to the letter'. As such, we hoped that the vignettes would increase the chances that participants would engage in discussions about these phenomena.

As the following excerpt from a field log illustrates, concerns about our visits were both articulated and noticed:

> One informant . . . raised important concerns about confidentiality. He asked if a specific policy was set to delete the sound recordings . . . (The informant) wondered if *(the Norwegian Freedom of Information Act)*[1] applied in this case. (Log V213 researcher A)

In a few instances, we perceived participants as cautious, since they gave limited or abstract responses. We learned, however, that mild disagreement with the scenarios could increase the engagement of participants acting as a 'provoker'. A case in point was one senior participant who voiced some irritation over relevant information that he thought was missing in Vignette #1, and gave a series of 'it depends' replies, however, on handing back the first vignette and reaching out for the second, the participant laughed and exclaimed 'This is fun!'.

In most interviews, the vignettes quickly triggered rich replies. It seemed plausible to us that participants might entertain the idea that deviations from ordinary practice could happen if they were asked to evaluate the examples (which also provided an opportunity to distance themselves from those practices). This seemed to work, even with participants who initially reacted with some shock at examples of people who had not followed strict procedure. For example, Vignette #2 showed how a representative of an oil company improvised outside established procedures and took charge of solving a technical issue that the operational leader was unable to attend to. A participant (himself a client rep) reacted to this with a show of commitment to procedural rigor:

> The flexibility side of things is that in all the rigor we have, if you want to change something, you call a time out for safety, as we call it 'all stop'. There is nobody in the office, even if this vessel would be down for a half day, and that's expensive . . . There's nobody who would give me a hard time over it. That's where our flexibility lies. 'All-stop. This is not going to work. Time out. Make the site safe.' We discuss it. We look at the way forward. We risk- assess. We discuss it with the office if we have to. In that way, we are very flexible. But you do not go outside of the procedure – 'Let's take a quick sidestep here, and another sidestep, and another sidestep.' Then, before you know it, you're way out of your procedure, you're not risk-assessed, and something happens. And that is the root cause of many, many incidents. (V531_STI_CR07)

However, many responded in support of the examples of improvisation outside or alongside firm procedures. For example, a shift supervisor (the role that some felt was incorrectly bypassed in Vignette #2) instead saw the client rep's initiative as a supplying a fresh pair of eyes:

> Say you're working on a jigsaw puzzle. When you're that close to the jigsaw puzzle you can't see all the pieces . . . If you've just come into the room, you can say 'Hey, you're missing a piece. It's over there.' It's as simple as that. (V421_STI_SS07)

We saw similar variance in the reactions to the vignette that triggered the most controversy (Vignette #3). That scenario described a medic who observed a deck foreman (a leader who outranked him) struggling to cope with his role as a leader. The medic offered unsolicited coaching to the deck foreman who accepted this as helpful. While many had strong reactions against this practice, some evaluated it more favourably, as the following two excerpts show. A project engineer commented:

> Even if it is constructive and well-intended some may take offense, but that's the way it is. So that's a barrier to doing it, but maybe the medic was thinking it's part of my job, he sees it as his mission to walk around and observe. (V213_STI_PE10)

A shift supervisor, who would have been the deck foreman's superior, said:

> So (the medic) is an independent person who can go and speak to different people, which is fine in my view . . . Personally, as a chain-of-command thing I don't think that's a problem for the medic. (V421_STI_SS07)

Reducing idealised answers

We knew from the contact that we had established in the initial field study and background interviews that many business insiders were highly aware of the dilemmas inherent in their work and were willing and able to discuss them if they had developed a trusting relationship with a researcher. Since it usually takes time to earn such trust, we had not anticipated self-disclosure and self-reflection in the brief vignette-based interviews. However, in some interviews the vignette scenarios triggered conversations with a seemingly reduced tendency for idealised answers. As the conversations flowed, several participants ended up with a more nuanced position than at the outset. The client rep who had a strong reaction against improvisation in Vignette #2 serves as an illustration. At the beginning of the conversation he claimed that he always worked to procedure. About ten minutes later, however, he put forward a more complex view. He told a story of being involved in an innovative way of diagnosing a leak by using locally available materials offshore (similar to Vignette #2). The story carried with it a new criterion for how careful and rule bound one needs to be; this participant would never jeopardize safety, but seemed to give himself more latitude to improvise when the idea that he wanted to test was not directly safety-related. Follow-up questions gave additional information:

> Participant: . . . it's creativity in a way such that you're not taking any chances. It's being creative with simple stuff and nothing can go wrong in any way, safety-wise. You're not going to blow up anything, or you're not going to hurt somebody. You're just trying something.

Researcher: For something like that, would you need to write a procedure?

Participant: I think we wrote a Management of Change[2] just to cover our asses, basically. Sometimes it's silly but you follow the process because, if something does go wrong, you'd better make sure you've done what you need to do. (V531_STI_CR07)

The vignettes produced other, similar, responses. A shift supervisor elaborated on the adherence to procedure. Still using potential risk as the basic criterion for allowing latitude to improvise, this participant also pointed to the power of discretion that can come with experience.

There are a lot of grey areas. The Shift Supervisor needs to make a decision as to whether it warrants a change of control. I'll give you an example . . .

My job is [to stay] with procedures. I have to watch out for these incidences that come along and the potential impact on certain things. But I would use my experience to kind of decide what has less impact on the operation or what we can get away with. (V531_STI_SS08)

The focus provided by the vignettes and the follow-up questions thus enabled researchers to put their original impressions to the test and to gain insight into dilemmas and shared values in the context studied. It seems that the process driven by the vignettes established the researchers as credible and trusted partners in the kinds of open discussions that one would expect between insiders.

Studying seafarers on cargo vessels

In study B, the use of vignettes was adopted as a pragmatic response to a need to stimulate strangers to talk to interviewers in settings which were less than ideal in relation to the creation of rapport. Sampson had witnessed the ways in which seafarers in social situations on board, were stimulated by the accounts of their colleagues to contribute their relevant experiences with very little encouragement on her part. In their absence, she sought to simulate such interactions, as far as possible, by substituting written accounts (of their recounted/observed experiences) for their oral testimonies. To this extent, the vignettes worked extremely well. Interviewees (on board and ashore) responded to the real cases in order to endorse, or disagree with, the real-life examples/opinions that they were presented with. On the whole, we felt that they provided much more elaborate answers than we could have expected in similar circumstances using standard semi-structured interviews. For example, one engineer read an account of port officials stealing from ships. When asked if he had come across similar events he answered:

It has happened to us! It is not [even] necessary to read it, it is exactly what has happened in here in the Ukraine. So one of the medical [officials] whatever it was, the quarantine [department] or whatever, they came here. It was a shame to me [shameful to me], I am Ukrainian, it was very shameful. . . . these two women [officials], they went inside and they have been taking whatever they can see you know [stealing the medical supplies], it is very shameful, honestly. (Vig SS HS 306)

This account demonstrates how the vignette not only stimulated the interviewee to recall very similar events but also encouraged him to describe an event which he found painful. Despite his shame at the behaviour of his compatriots, the vignette encouraged him to share his account with a British interviewer in a form that he was well aware was open to future public scrutiny.

    This was one of many examples of the ways in which the vignettes outperformed expectations in relation to their capacity to encourage seafarers to talk openly about a range of subjects that were potentially difficult. This was particularly notable when they were used on board. The cargo shipping industry is overwhelmingly dominated by men (Belcher et al. 2003) and the institutional culture on board working cargo ships is characterized by traditional and 'exaggerated' masculinity (Sampson, 2013). This is summed up in crude form by the oft mentioned British seafarer lament that 'the only place you find 'sympathy' on board a ship is in a dictionary between 's***' and syphilis'. Despite this 'no-nonsense' 'strong man' culture, the vignettes encouraged seafarers to talk openly about a range of emotions, perceived failings, and about personal stress. It seemed that when presented with the words or actions of other 'real' seafarers they felt permitted to describe their own reactions/feelings even when they might have been afraid that these would normally be regarded as a demonstration of 'weakness' or 'inadequacy'. In one example, a seafarer described how he was unsure about his own ability to board a life raft unaided from the water in the event of an emergency. He explained:

> Fifty-fifty [chance that I] can manage [to board a life raft] because when you have this immersion suit, it's very hard to move, you cannot move easily. Even you cannot climb, maybe, to the life raft. (Vig ME HS 304-001)

Ashore and on board, the vignettes were therefore found to be very effective in stimulating seafarers with whom we had insufficient opportunity to establish strong rapport[3] to talk openly and frankly about their experiences and feelings. This was broadly in line with the ways in which we had hoped they would facilitate discussion. In the context of the shipboard vignette-based interviews, however, we found that there were further unanticipated benefits associated with their use.

Overcoming suspicion/defensiveness

The shipboard voyage in the course of which vignette-based interviews were used, was conducted by Sampson on a vessel operated by a large high-profile company. The company employed seafarers from many different countries and this particular vessel was managed by a captain who seemed initially suspicious of both the research and the reasons for the company's selection of his particular vessel. In the initial week of the study, the captain talked of having the researcher leave the ship several weeks early before completing the planned voyage (ostensibly on the grounds of her security given the planned port calls). In the event, he was 'won over' and the vignette-based approach was judged to have played a part in transforming his attitude.

    Following his defensive start, the captain gave a long vignette-based interview which produced a transcript of 14,699 words. The quotes below illustrate the transition that was

made in the course of the interview experience. Early on the captain displayed reluctance to talk about his feelings as follows:

INT: How does that make you feel when you're in those situations[referring to a specific vignette]?
Captain: How you think?
INT: No, I can imagine how I would feel, but –
Captain: Yes, then you imagine right (laughs). Very stressful. No captains wants to go there, nowadays they not tell you whereabout what is happening there. (Vig SS HS 003)

As the interview continued, he demonstrated progressively more willingness to be open about his feelings and experiences as a later quote following the presentation of a different vignette illustrates:

Captain: It causes a lot of stress on the captain . . . mostly the captain is, under the fire. […] I had, also in West Africa, an actual situation – it was the second officer. He was meant to join in Douala in Cameroon… then suddenly the email from his local agency came that . . . he is not coming because they received the calls and email from his wife and kids, that they crying and they – so he cannot come, because the family is scared that he is going . . . so, actually I told back and I sent it to the company – 'listen, if you allow this man [not] to come, cause you afraid about his family – what about our families? We are here also… okay?' […]he was scared about, . . . joining the ship and sailing in West Africa. Because also, on top of what we're talking about, we have rising wave of piracy. Robbery, piracy, all sort of criminals and… each month is becoming much more . . . bigger issue than Somali pirates – they are more violent, better equipped . . . aggressive, yeah . . . and if you put all this picture together, and Malaria on top of this, and . . . unpleasant climate . . . so, of course, you don't like to go there. (Vig SS HS 003)

Suspicion of researchers (and shore-based personnel in general) is quite high amongst seafarers who generally feel themselves to be something of an uncared for workforce that is much misunderstood by the general public. Such suspicion is heightened when confronted with academics who are seen as likely to be disconnected from the normal world of ordinary people. When researchers enter a seafarers' world they are confronted with a relatively tight-knit group of people who are potentially scornful of their 'expertise' and suspicious of their intentions. When the researcher is female a further layer of distance and scepticism (sometimes incredulity) is added. In this context, Sampson was struck by the many unanticipated benefits[4] of using a vignette-based interview compared with the more standard semi-structured interviews she was used to undertaking on board.

Credibility and openness

The vignette-based interviews provided a short cut to credibility in a challenging research context. It is sometimes useful to play down knowledge of the field and allow

participants to treat researchers as a 'blank canvas' (Healey-Etten and Sharp, 2010). This allows researchers to perceive variations in practice, different perceptions and attitudes, and change over time. It also encourages seafarers (in this case) to talk more expansively about their world as some relish the rare opportunity to describe it to an uninformed outsider. However in some contexts, as with this study, it is less helpful to take this approach – particularly when a project is in its later stages. The challenge in such situations, is to establish credibility whilst not allowing prior knowledge to inhibit participants from offering their own perspective. It is also important not to give the impression that the study already has all the required information and that participation is unnecessary. Sampson found that the vignettes were helpful in allowing her to fairly subtly highlight to interviewees that the research team were quite well-informed about existing practices such as corruption and that seafarers were not necessarily giving anything 'secret' away in talking about port-based shenanigans or the difficulties they faced when dealing with their own company's shore-based staff. She made conscious use of the narratives to assist with the development of interviewee confidence/trust by drawing attention to the fact that they were derived from the real experiences of seafarers. At the same time she took care to make sure that seafarers were encouraged to voice their opinions.[5] The following example is illustrative:

> Sampson: This interview's about mandatory equipment. Like before, everything here is something we've seen on board the ship, or something somebody's told us about. So this is about the Bridge Watch Alarm, which I think is the same type as you have upstairs. (Vig ME HS 310)

This strategy[6] appeared to work well in as much as seafarers engaged seriously with the vignettes they were offered. Such engagement was vital and could not be taken for granted in the cloistered, sequestered, and pressured shipboard context which has already been (briefly) described and in which participants were operating with English as a second (albeit their working) language. The following example of a seafarer's response is typical of the ways in which they took a great deal of trouble to respond openly to questions despite, sometimes, struggling to find the right words[7]:

> Sampson: In this example, the chief engineer talked about being stressed by bunkering. […] Do you feel that some chief engineers find this very stressful, this interaction with … [interrupted by interviewee keen to answer]
>
> Engineer: Yes, not some - plenty - more than 50 percent. Because […]- if we see an internet price of fuel, it is very easy to recognise, in countries where is no cheat you. […] I mean normal countries where have quality control. Price of fuel more [there] than in other countries. So I don't know in English how to say, but we have joke – 'if it is cheaper, finally you pay more'. Something like this. Same with fuel […] Company of course try to find where is cheaper. Even we. On this route we take in [place name] where it is the cheapest. Of course, company pay less, but receive also less [laughs]… from barge. Who have problem? Chief engineer because he must finally negotiate with these barge people. For most people, this is stress. (Vig SS HS 312)

Discussing the 'insupportable'

The vignettes helped build trust with the researcher to the extent that seafarers were willing to reveal 'tricks of the trade' that could be used to bypass regulations or circumvent 'hassle' from the office. Such admissions are uncharacteristic of seafarers who are generally employed on precarious temporary contracts and who feel under constant threat of replacement in a highly flexible labour market (Sampson, 2013). The following quote illustrates how seafarers were conscious of how they might be expected to distrust the interview process and not tell the 'full truth':

> OFF: I've heard of the term magic pipe. I have never seen it, or – I'm not saying that just because I'm being interviewed (Vig ME HS 310)

In spite of such awareness, the vignettes encouraged interviewees to let down their guard and speak frankly about practices that could potentially land them in a great deal of trouble and/or reveal 'malpractices' in their profession. In one example an engineer described the process by which oil pollution sensors could be bypassed – a practice which is against international regulations and punishable with imprisonment.

> Engineer: I can tell what we can do, on this . . . Where coming pipe, we just . . . take out and put back. So we just fill up from top [with clean] water and real what we discharge nothing will come . . . Because inside oily water separator we have memory card. . . . Every time when we start, it's all recorded. And any . . . like inspector, he can go, he can take out this memory from inside, he can connect and he can see in which day we discharge, what time we start, what time we store up, like this
>
> INT: Would they be able to detect this – if somebody did use this technique . . . would the inspector be able to see that, or not?
>
> Engineer: No[…] No, but maybe plenty people don't know what I tell you, how to do this. (Vig ME HS 312)

Whilst in this example the engineer revealed 'guilty knowledge' he did not reveal personal malpractice as such. In some cases however, the vignettes encouraged sufficient rapport and trust to allow seafarers to frankly admit to ignoring procedures with negative consequences. For example, one seafarer described how he had ignored an alarm resulting in the eventual failure of an important piece of bridge equipment:

> Officer: It's necessary [the alarm] because, in my experience, I just keep ignoring, ignoring, ignoring. Then time comes, after a few weeks… there's a radar gone [i.e. inoperable]. There's a radar **gone**! Then I have a look[…] to the manual. Oh, it says that 'once this alarm came, contact the manufacturer'… so… if I had checked that alarm [i.e. what the alarm indicated]… the radar should not be something […] broken. (Vig ME HS 303)

These examples illustrate how 'real-life' vignettes can serve to build rapport, credibility, and trust so rapidly that participants come to see even 'the insupportable' as open to disclosure.

Reflecting on the usefulness of real-life vignettes

Both the studies described here dealt with groups of professionals who had important reasons for maintaining a façade of propriety. Admissions of deviance were risky in a context where employers had strong expectations of conventional rule-based behaviours within proceduralized work settings. In study A, access to interviewees was only possible with the permission of senior corporate managers and the interviews occurred on board the vessels where participants worked (albeit whilst they were in port). In study B, vignettes were designed for use with seafarers who were briefly ashore and away from their respective vessels. However, they were also used in the course of a single research voyage where (as with study A) access had been granted by shore-based managers. In these environments, with significant time-constraints and a need to rapidly establish rapport, the respective research teams independently resorted to the use of 'real-life' vignettes as an aid to focus and as a stimulus.

Overall, the 'real life' vignettes served their purpose and did not give rise to the kinds of concerns that may be associated with the use of fictionalised vignettes. That is to say that there was no confusion in relation to shifts in focus from the fictitious to the 'real world' (O'Dell, 2012) and that the use of 'real life' vignettes actually served to reduce idealised answers in contrast to fictionalised vignettes which have the potential to produce them (Barter and Renold 2000). In both cases, we found that the use of 'real-life' vignettes also allowed research team members to rapidly establish credibility whilst maintaining discernible interest in participants' own perspectives amplifying their effect as stimulus materials (Törrönen, 2002).

In reflecting on the overall contribution of 'real-life' vignettes to the outcomes of studies A and B, we consider that their greatest impact was in encouraging participants to engage with the materials presented to them to such an extent that interviewers were temporarily granted insider status within their 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Here the vignettes: stimulated engagement and openness; reduced the tendency for idealised answers; facilitated the development of a high degree of trust in situations where participants were suspicious; and generated credibility. This allowed participants to discuss matters that would generally be off-limits. In this context, they were able to reveal the 'unacceptable' (errors, deviant/prohibited practice, non-masculine behaviour) and reflect on the proscribed.

Our experience of 'real life' vignette-based interviews, indicates that whilst they resemble the use of fictionalised vignette-based interviews in format they are different in significant ways. As such, the contexts in which they are useful differ. The features of fictionalised vignettes which can be regarded as drawbacks in some research contexts (such as the inability to rely on them to produce accounts aligned with social reality) may be highly valued in research designed to reveal 'dialogue' with prevailing social values for example (O'Dell, 2012). In such research, the added value of using 'real life' vignettes is not apparent and the time that they require in construction (based, as they are, on prior observational work) would not appear to be worthwhile. However, in research which seeks to stimulate participants to provide more realistic accounts of their experiences/behaviours the use of real-life vignettes can be invaluable. Thus, we suggest that they should be carefully considered as research instruments alongside the

broad range of stimulus techniques already in use (see for example Törrönen, 2002, Stacey and Vincent, 2011).

However, there may be some particular contexts in which real life vignettes cannot be used. In our studies, the use of real-life anonymized vignettes was not considered likely to compromise confidentiality. Vignettes were presented as relatively small de-contextualized snippets of information which would only be likely to be recognized in the unlikely event of a participant having been present as an actor within the original scenario –in which case the details would already be known to them. However, this technique would not be deemed suitable/ethical in relation to single-location studies or in circumstances where participants might be privy to identifying information about others. Thus, the technique may be contraindicated in social work and/or medical settings for example.

Conclusion

Our reflections on the use of 'real-life' vignettes indicate their value in time-constrained interview contexts where trust, rapport, and credibility need to be established rapidly and in the absence of opportunities for everyday interaction with participants. 'Real-life' vignettes have the potential to allow for the elicitation of rich, detailed, and frank comments because of the ways in which they allow researchers, by association, to temporarily attain the status of an 'insider' within a group. This may be particularly the case in relation to studies of work. Here the use of 'real-life' vignettes may lead to researchers being treated as part of the broader communities of practice with which participants would more usually engage in discussions of sensitive matters. It is not our contention that it is only the use of 'real-life' vignettes that can achieve this however. Neither do we suggest that the use of 'real-life' vignettes should be restricted to this sub-field. As a time-efficient supplement to observational work, the use of 'real-life' vignettes in any appropriate context can allow researchers to very rapidly 'turn on the tap' and elicit rich, frank and extensive interview material. They therefore have the potential to play a very valuable role across the social sciences.

Notes

1. That potentially might give journalists access to the data. We explained that it did not apply, and also addressed the participant's other concerns.
2. Management of Change is a procedure for changing procedures to make sure that clients, contractors and subcontractors are all adequately involved and informed.
3. The interviews on board took place in the very early, deep-sea, stages of the voyage so that the researcher was free to undertake observational work once the vessel began its port calls.
4. The real-life vignettes had not been originally designed for use on board vessels and so their potential benefits in these specific contexts had not been given careful advanced consideration
5. We have many examples of seafarers disagreeing with experiences, views, and thoughts of other seafarers presented in the vignettes which we cannot include here.
6. The questions following the vignettes always began by asking seafarers if they had seen similar situations or heard of them and probed their experiences.
7. It is possible that real life vignettes may be particularly useful in motivating interviewees in other contexts where interviews take place in a second language.

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