Work with vignettes in qualitative studies: analysis of their use in business management research

Trabalho com vinhetas em estudos qualitativos: análise de seu uso em pesquisa de gestão empresarial

Trabajo con viñetas en estudios cualitativos: análisis de su uso en la investigación de gestión empresarial

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ABSTRACT
The use of vignettes in research has been examined through various theoretical lenses, referring mainly to their use in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. The vignettes initially were used in quantitative studies but, increasingly, have established themselves as an alternative to be considered in qualitative approaches. This study aims to investigate the theoretical and methodological implications of this technique in qualitative research in social sciences. Firstly, we determine the implications of the use of vignettes in qualitative research and propose a new approach to the vignette-use decision trail described by Wilson and While (1998); secondly, we analyse the application of the technique in a published work from the area of business management.

Keywords: vignettes, methodological aspects, qualitative research.

RESUMO
O uso de vinhetas na pesquisa tem sido examinado através de várias lentes teóricas, referindo-se principalmente ao seu uso no estudo de percepções, crenças e atitudes. As vinhetas inicialmente foram utilizadas em estudos quantitativos, mas, cada vez mais, estabeleceram-se como uma alternativa a ser considerada em abordagens qualitativas. Este estudo tem como objetivo investigar as implicações teóricas e metodológicas desta técnica na pesquisa
qualitativa em ciências sociais. Em primeiro lugar, determinamos as implicações do uso de vinhetas em pesquisa qualitativa e propomos uma nova abordagem para o rastro de decisão de uso de vinheta descrito por Wilson e While (1998); em segundo lugar, analisamos a aplicação da técnica em um trabalho publicado da área de gestão empresarial.

**Palavras-chave:** vinhetas, aspectos metodológicos, pesquisa qualitativa.

**RESUMEN**

El uso de las viñetas en la investigación se ha examinado a través de diversas lentes teóricas, refiriéndose principalmente a su uso en el estudio de percepciones, creencias y actitudes. Las viñetas se utilizaron inicialmente en estudios cuantitativos pero, cada vez más, se han establecido como una alternativa a tener en cuenta en los enfoques cualitativos. Este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar las implicaciones teóricas y metodológicas de esta técnica en la investigación cualitativa en ciencias sociales. En primer lugar, determinamos las implicaciones del uso de viñetas en la investigación cualitativa y proponemos un nuevo enfoque para el uso de viñetas en la toma de decisiones descrito por Wilson y While (1998); en segundo lugar, analizamos la aplicación de la técnica en un trabajo publicado desde el área de gestión empresarial.

**Palabras clave:** viñetas, aspectos metodológicos, investigación cualitativa.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

This study aims to investigate the methodological implications of the technique of using vignettes in the qualitative research in social applied sciences. The vignettes might be defined in different ways, such as a focused description of a series of events that represent something typical or emblematic, a case or situation (Miles and Huberman, 1994), or they can be conceived as compact stories that can be used to introduce people, to predict events, to highlight specific findings and to sum up a particular topic or subject.

For the purposes of this article, vignettes are conceived as a primary-data collection technique (Alexander and Becker, 1978; Lieberman, 1987; Finch and Mason, 1991), in which participants are invited to position themselves in relation to brief descriptions of a particular stimulus social situation, which may be real (Alexander and Becker, 1978; Lieberman, 1987; Wright, Heathcote and Wibberley, 2014) or hypothetical (Finch and Mason, 1991; Martin, 2004).
Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that, although the focus of analysis of this work is other, vignettes may also consist of other forms of stimulation to the participants, such as videos (Liyanapathirana et al., 2016) or images of people, situations and structures (Hughes and Huby, 2001). From the perspective of an interactive study, there are also vignettes named developmental vignettes (Jenkins et al., 2010) or continuous narrative vignettes (Hughes, 1998), whose preparation is based on a scene with a series of stages and the participants are invited to comment on the story’s progression, being their choices able to affect the course of history depending on the researcher’s objectives (Jenkins, 2006).

2 THE USE OF VIGNETTES

The vignettes are usually used to the study of the subjective belief system of the research’s participants (Renold, 2002). With respect to content, the vignettes should present the factual and specific references in detail in order to represent the most important factors for the participant’s decision-making process (Alexander and Becker, 1978).

The research’ participants should be invited to make statements on the set of circumstances that involve the stimulus situation (Finch and Mason, 1991; Gourlay et al., 2014) so that the researchers be able to identify their judgments (Barter and Renold, 2000).

The effectiveness of vignettes is their ability to start a reflexion process involving different perspectives, encouraging problem solving, promoting decision-making and increasing awareness about one’s self and others (Tettegah, Bailey and Taylor, 2007).

The vignettes may be used separately or in an integrated way with other techniques (such as observations or interviews) expanding the possibilities of data-generating, which might not be fully explored through other techniques. Some researchers have used vignettes as an ‘icebreaker’ at the beginning of an interview to facilitate the discussion, or as a warm-up exercise to develop a relationship between the participants before introducing a particular topic and as
an especially useful way to address sensitive or uncomfortable topics with ‘normality’, for example (Barter and Renold, 1999; Renold, 2002).

2.1 PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF VIGNETTES’ USE

Firstly, the vignettes can be an alternative for the level of abstraction resulting from studies conducted through interviews and questionnaires, making them less inaccurate and bringing them closer to decision-making in real life.

Furthermore, the use of vignettes allows the researcher to obtain a higher degree of uniformity and control of the stimulus situation (Alexander and Becker, 1978), allowing the use of selective representations of reality and increasing the focus of the study, since the desired information can be defined and included according to the specific requirements of the research (Hughes and Huby, 2001).

Along these lines, vignettes allow the researcher a growing sense of understanding of the meaning of the investigative work (Spalding and Phillips, 2007).

Other beneficial aspect to be considered, which arises from the use of vignettes, is that their use allows the researcher to collect data from a larger number of participants. This turns the vignettes into an interesting solution for research with limited resources and tight budgets, especially when the costs involved in other research approaches are considerable (Wilson and While, 1998).

2.2 THE USE OF VIGNETTES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Before discussing the use of vignettes in qualitative research, it should be highlighted that some studies use vignettes in a quantitative perspective integrated with the use of large-scale surveys (Martin, 2004). In this context the vignettes present scenarios to the participants about which they are inquired and the answers are usually collected through a Likert scale (Barter and Renold, 1999, 2000; Renold, 2002).

Although the use of vignettes allow quantitative researchers to study complex issues with a large number of participants, these studies are limited to
general descriptions to the detriment of more specific descriptions of the stimulus situation to ensure the research feasibility, mainly when the answers do not match predetermined ratings (Finch and Mason, 1991; Barter and Renold, 1999; Renold, 2002).

The qualitative implementation of vignettes can overcome the limitations of the quantitative use of vignettes, as it allows the participants to describe the stimulus situation on their own terms (Barter and Renold, 1999, 2000; Renold, 2002), emphasising the capacity of this technique to explore the subjective belief systems of the participants (Hughes, 1998; Crafter et al., 2010).

The vignettes technique can be used in several different ways in qualitative research, and the choice of which is the best way to use them should be directed by the theoretical and methodological options of each researcher. Therefore, this choice requires careful consideration of the best use of this technical approach (Barter and Renold, 1999; Renold, 2002).

Regarding the use of vignettes in qualitative research is important to emphasise their use in studies related to research cultural norms derived from the attitudes of respondents; studies about beliefs and moral and ethical framework codes of respondents, especially when using more than one vignette; and studies related to ethnicity and gender (Finch and Mason, 1991; Barter and Renold, 1999; Renold, 2002). Additionally, in qualitative research, the vignettes are an effective longitudinal research tool, highlighting for the study the changes in interpretive frameworks over time, providing the data needed to generate a understanding of these changes (Jenkins, 2006).

2.3 KEY FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE VIGNETTES DESIGN

The literature indicates a set of key factors that should be considered in the design of a vignette: (1) the stimulus situations exposed to the respondent should be developed to represent each of the theoretical dimensions of interest for the study (Lieberman, 1987); (2) each stimulus situation should be as detailed as possible and should be developed based on literature (Wilson and While, 1998), approximating a decision or judgment taken in the life of the participant.
(Alexander and Becker, 1978; Lieberman, 1987; Barter and Renold, 1999); (3) in case there are restrictions to describe a given stimulus situation, due to its specificity, collaborative development of the vignettes with experts is recommended (Lieberman, 1987; Wilson and While, 1998); (4) it is important to conduct a pre-test to ensure the adherence of vignette content with the situation studied (Wilson and While, 1998); (5) the vignettes must contain a sufficient context for participants to have an understanding of the stimulus situation, but they should be vague enough that the participants provide additional factors that influence their decisions (Barter and Renold, 1999); (6) the vignettes must be presented in a suitable format, and, although written narratives are the most usual, the vignettes may also be presented in videos (Barter and Renold, 1999); (7) in some circumstances, it may be desirable to include a control vignette to check for any significant differences in the participants’ answers (Barter and Renold, 1999, 2000).

2.4 VIGNETTE-USE DECISION TRAIL

With the intention to facilitate an understanding of the factors involved in the application and construction of vignettes for use in research. Wilson and While (1998) proposed a decision trail (Figure 1) to be considered in the design and development of vignettes.
This model clearly identifies each step of the process that was used in the authors’ research. Nonetheless, its specificity for the research developed by the authors holds back its generalization potential for applying in other researches. Beyond, it does not highlight the building aspects of the stimulus situation to be used.

After the theoretical review conducted for this study concerning the key factors to be considered in the vignettes design, presented in the previous section, we realised that there was an opportunity to review the decision trail proposed by Wilson and While (1998) incorporating new steps and increasing the potential of impact (Figure 2).
2.5 THE USE OF VIGNETTES IN BUSINESS MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

In business management research, the vignettes technique has been used by researchers of several studies. We highlight the following: a study on the construction of organisational identity (Foreman and Parent, 2008); a study about the effects of the social context of economic exchanges on the governance of transactions in supply relationships between companies (Rooks et al., 2000); a study about how entrepreneurs perceive and delimit opportunities (Suddaby,
Bruton and Si, 2015); a study of the diffusion or translation of management ideas (O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016); and studies related to trust in organisations (Mizrachi, Anspach and Mizruchi, 2007; Kirschbaum and Hoelz, 2014).

2.6 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF USING VIGNETTES

A common criticism of the use of vignettes is that they are considered a simulation of real events and some researchers argue that the vignettes have a certain artificiality compared with other approaches, such as observation (Wilson and While, 1998; O’Dell et al., 2012). According to these researchers, the reason for this is that a vignette does not provide the full picture of a given situation, which can harm the understanding of the respondent of a particular context that was presented.

Nonetheless, as a counterpoint to this criticism it is important to emphasise that, in many ways, the vignettes selectively stimulate the elements and research topics being studied, but as a research tool it can never mirror reality (Faia, 1980). The fact is that the use of vignettes allows the researcher to collect the data that he/she would not get otherwise, but on the other hand, making sure that hypothetical situations refer appropriately to real life continues to be a problem (Martin, 2004).

In the same way there are researchers who argue that the vignettes are an incomplete reflection of social reality, while others conclude precisely the opposite (Barter and Renold, 1999, 2000).

Finally, it is important to argue that it is not the result (or action) that is of interest in research, but the process of meanings and interpretations used to achieve the result that should be the centre of concern for social scientists. Thus, the vignettes are a useful tool to illuminate these complex processes, isolating certain aspects of a social issue or problem and improving the understanding of these processes when integrated with a multi-method approach such as observation or interview (Barter and Renold, 1999, 2000; Renold, 2002).
3 THE APPLICATION OF VIGNETTES IN A BUSINESS MANAGEMENT STUDY

At this stage we will analyse a study of (Kirschbaum and Hoelz, 2014) that employed the technique of vignettes to explore how individuals interpret situations where there is ambivalence in the relational characteristics between partners. In this sense, how individuals in a software company interpret specific transactional situations was investigated, and how they build their perceptions about the relationship between trust and control. From the vignettes presented, qualitative reports of the respondents were collected, which show how their assumptions and questions lead to a resolution of the stimulus situations.

The purpose of the study was to explore how individuals develop their perceptions and the intermediate actions they take before the final decision when situations become more ambivalent and is part of the dissonance. In order to explore these situations, vignettes were created that expose incomplete and incongruous narratives and, thus, frustrating a univocal decision-taking. The study results suggest that the mechanism that links the initial perception of a situation to the final decision regarding the partnership is not linear. Individuals can seek new information to improve their interpretation of the situation, as well as selectively censor or highlight signals given by the situation for facilitating a decision-making process.

3.1 THE STUDY CONTEXT

The study considered in this analysis was carried out in a Brazilian company in existence for 15 years, specialising in producing software and information technology solutions (IT) and operating in various segments of the industry. This company has a global structure of services that includes six units in Brazil, subsidiaries in the United States, Japan and China, as well as an office in Europe.

This organisation has approximately 850 employees and operates in lines of business software solution projects and application outsourcing management and invests heavily in software exports, prioritising marketing applications and
offshore management services, which together account for 40% of the transactions made. The focus on the international market has resulted in a significant increase in revenues from sales to the US market.

### 3.2 METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY ADOPTED FOR THE STUDY

The authors developed their study from the premise that vignettes consist of a data collection technique that is ideal for use in research and creates a positioning of the participants about determined situations. These situations only serve as the starting point to the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee (Swidler, 2001).

According to the authors, this approach may be accused of removing the individual from their concrete context due to the presentation of situations that were not indeed experienced by the interviewee, bringing this methodology closer to the experimental approaches. Faced with this criticism, the authors suggest the following reflections.

Firstly, in using vignettes it is important that the researchers take into account their knowledge of the context of the participants. This knowledge is built in an exploratory preliminary stage and complemented by the reaction of key informants to the vignettes presented (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Secondly, vignettes can be taken as the equivalent to narratives shared in an organisation and are central to the socialisation of new members. From this perspective, the narratives that are part of the cultural repertoire of the organisation are reinserted in social action as they are mobilised in concrete interactions. By suggesting that the participants position themselves towards the vignettes that were offered to them, the authors assumed that participants would re-enter the narratives decontextualised in their own context.

Along these lines, the using of vignettes as a data collection technique differs from experimental approaches, since variables aiming to observe quantifiable behaviours are not manipulated. In contrast, following the qualitative research idea, situations offered to the respondents enables a closer dialogue, where researcher and subject each other build the research material.
3.3 CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE USE OF VIGNETTES IN THE ANALYSED STUDY

According to the methodological strategy described by the authors, the vignettes were created related to situations involving theoretical issues of interest and, at the same time, incompletes, requiring the interpretation of the respondents to create sense to the situations presented (see, e.g., Table 1).

Table 1. Vignettes examples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIGNETTES</th>
<th>SOURCE OF DISSONANCE</th>
<th>THEORETICAL INTEREST CATEGORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 1 - Company A promised the development of a software component X</td>
<td>Clash of frustrated expectations with positive history</td>
<td>Confidence as a result of past interactions versus future subjective expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. After one month of delay, company B holds a meeting with company A to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>review the project. After five meetings over the following six months and</td>
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<tr>
<td>a review of the schedule due to delays, company B said it would change</td>
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<tr>
<td>supplier. Company A said that this time it would meet the deadlines and</td>
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<tr>
<td>that, after all, the history between the two companies had always been</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>positive. What to do? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 2 - João Marcelo, company X, and Pedro Paulo, company Y, are</td>
<td>Clash of strategic complementarity with formal control</td>
<td>Relationships between incomplete contracts, competitive advantage and trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaged in a joint development project of a medical device. Therefore,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>company X provides electronic miniaturisation technology, and company Y,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the blood content measurement technology. João Marcelo fears Pedro Paulo</td>
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<tr>
<td>will pass the company X’s technology to his competitors. However, there is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>no time to make a contract. What to do? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vignette 3 - Adriano was designated as an international project manager.</td>
<td>Clash of cost control with the need to control</td>
<td>Relationships between trust and boundary-spanning roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The goal is to develop software for control of oil drilling platforms in</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships between monitoring cost, perceived-risk and control</td>
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<tr>
<td>the Gulf of Mexico. Part of the software development will be made in</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brazil and the other part will be made by company X contracted in the</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States. During the first phase of the project, company X had a</td>
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<tr>
<td>reliable performance, delivering the tasks on time and with the expected</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>cost and quality. During the second phase of the project, there was a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>strong need for cost reduction. Therefore Adriano wants to eliminate the</td>
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<tr>
<td>accompaniment trips of the company X’s tasks. Must Adriano leave company X</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>without control? Why?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kirschbaum and Hoelz, 2014.

Thus, the authors constructed situations where there was a dissonance element that frustrates the traditional formula of projecting the future as a continuation of the past. To handle the dissonance, the participants may try to
reconcile the contradictory elements or, alternatively, can ‘remove’ or ‘reject’ parts of the received information to avoid the dissonance (Stark, 2009).

3.4 OPERATIONALISATION OF RESEARCH

To conduct the survey, 30 questionnaires were sent, of which 20 were completed, totalling 67% of the company’s project managers. In addition, five exploratory interviews with senior managers were completed, which lasted an average of three hours each.

In the first phase, the descriptive encoding was performed, identifying the codes on each response, allowing the researchers to understand the situation in relation to temporality of events presented in participant answers. For example, to better interpret a standoff between customer and supplier, the respondent may speculate on the trajectory of the relationship in the past. These additional elements are not contained in the originally offered vignette and are an important part of the individual’s effort to make sense of the experience. Similarly, event projection explicit the reflection of how actions in the present can generate future scenarios.

In the second phase ‘the patterns codification’ was carried out, which sought to find patterns among the respondents for each vignette. In an effort to reduce the data to the standards, the authors sought to keep the variations between individuals in the organisation in order to reproduce in the text, the wide range of interpretations and provisions revealed by the data.

The focus of the authors was the concatenation of ideas, promoting possible connections between assumptions and interpretations of the situation. Thus, the patterns were identified from the perspective of the respondents. These hierarchical connections were reviewed by both authors in order to achieve greater convergence and validity of the analysis.

Lastly, response patterns were analysed between the vignettes in order to understand the interpretive standards applied by the respondents to the vignettes offered. In this latter analytical phase, the concern was no longer identifying
concrete mechanisms for the offered situations, but the more abstract understanding of how individuals distinguished themselves in the same situations.

4 RESULTS

From a methodological perspective this article took the view that the exploratory approach by vignettes can be an interesting mechanism to be used in a qualitative study, especially in contexts where the researcher is studying exploratorily some constructs of interest.

According to the authors, this approach enables the researcher to get a privileged access to the repertoire of narratives of individuals. Each vignette reflects a situation to be put to the participants and leads them to evoke values, beliefs and attitudes in the narratives that otherwise would not be collected in a questionnaire.

The data analysis suggested that the final decision of the participants occurred through various alternative mechanisms: (1) selective censorship of conflicting signals, (2) inclusion of non-existent assumptions in the original narrative, (3) a focused search for information, and (4) critical reflection about the co-responsibilities. According to the authors, the adoption of one mechanism rather than another may have important implications for the unravelling of the interorganizational relationships studied.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we discussed the use of vignettes in qualitative research in order to explore the hermeneutics of subjects. The use of vignettes in this way reveals theoretical and methodological issues, addressed in this work. We outlined a possible approach to using qualitative vignettes in business management research.

From this perspective, vignettes consist of a data collection technique that is ideal for use in qualitative research, being important as a useful tool for elucidating the processes of meanings and interpretations made by subjects. The vignettes serve as starting point for critical reflection. When faced with situations
that require decision-making or judgment, subjects position themselves towards the vignettes, re-entering the narratives decontextualised in their own context, enabling a closer dialogue with the researchers.

Ending up, it is worth highlighting that the researcher’s knowledge of the context of the respondents must be built in an exploratory preliminary stage and complemented by the reaction of the informants to the vignettes. In this sense, the conceive of the vignettes is an important phase of the research process, in which the researcher must focus at the key factors presented in the decision-trail offered in this article.

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