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THE STUDY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS BY THE VIGNETTE METHOD: A QUANTITATIVE INTERPRETATION*

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Abstract. The article focuses on the prospects of creating vignettes as a new method in empirical sociology. It is a good alternative to the conventional mass survey methods. The article consists of a few sections differing by the focus. The vignette method is not popular among Russian scientists, but has a big history abroad. A wide range of problems can be solved by this method (e.g. the prospects for guardianship and its evaluation, international students' adaptation to the educational system, social justice studies, marketing and business research, etc.). The vignette method can be used for studying different problems including sensitive questions (e.g. HIV, drugs, psychological trauma, etc.), because it is one of the projective techniques. Projective techniques allow to obtain more reliable information, because the respondent projects one situation on the another, but at the same time responds to his own stimulus. The article considers advantages and disadvantages of the method. The authors provide information about the limitations of the method. The article presents the key principles for designing and developing the vignettes method depending on the research type. The authors provide examples of their own vignettes tested in the course of their own empirical research. The authors highlight the advantages of the logical-combinatorial approaches (especially the JSM method with its dichotomy) for the analysis of data in quantitative research. Also they consider another method of the analysis of the data that implies the technique of "steeping", i.e. when the respondent gets new information step by step, which extends his previous knowledge.

Key words: projective techniques; vignette method; social representations; logical-combinatorial methods; JSM method; qualitative methods; quantitative methods

The vignette method enjoys quite a long history in social sciences and has been applied both in qualitative and quantitative research. The development of the method goes back to the works of J. Piaget who used story situations to study children's moral reasoning. Piaget proposed an important rationale for vignettes application and made an attempt to pose the main methodological question concerning their validity: "while pure observation is the only sure method, it allows for the acquisition of no more than a small number of fragmentary facts ... Let us therefore make the best of it and ... analyse, not the child's actual decisions nor even his memory of his actions, but the way he evaluates a given piece of conduct. We shall only be able to describe [it]... by means of a story, obviously a very indirect method. To ask a child to say what he thinks about actions that are merely told to him — can this have the least connection with child morality?"

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[20. P. 112—114]. In other words, the vignette method allows the researcher to collect data that could not be gathered at all, or only for a small number of cases. However, the question arises whether evaluated hypothetical situations relate to real-life decision making. Piaget himself admits his pragmatism towards validity when he argues that “...any method that leads to constant results is interesting, and only the meaning of the results is a matter for discussion”.

Recently the method has been used in various research projects, for the most part foreign. The methodology has been used by such scholars as *Brondani M.A.*, *Mac-Entee M.I.*, *Bryant S.R.*, *O’Neil B.*, *Barter C.* and *Reynold E.*, *Gerber E.*, *Hughes R.*, *Neff J.A.*, *Rossi P.N.*, *Thurman Q.S.* [2; 4; 10; 11; 12; 17; 23; 28] and many others. Among Russian scholars, *Devyatko I. F.* and her project of folk sociology should be mentioned. The agenda of the research by foreign scholars is quite diverse — health problems faced by elderly people, projects involving interviewing children and young people on sensitive issues (HIV, drugs, psychological trauma, etc.), the prospects of guardianship and its evaluation, international students’ adaptation to an educational system, social justice studies, marketing and business research, just to name a few.

SPECIFICITY OF THE VIGNETTE METHOD

The main direction of the vignette method is the study of attitudes and beliefs. For example, *Cochran J.K.* and *Heide K.M.* studied people’s attitudes to death penalty. When they asked their respondents directly about their attitudes to death penalty, the answers they received differed from those obtained by means of the vignette method. Vignettes reflected the character of the crime and provided information about the victim as well as criminal’s life circumstances. People’s readiness to support death penalty decreased in the presence of various factors associated with the crime. The direct question does not provide an opportunity to measure and explain these significant factors underlying people’s attitudes to death penalty [5].

The basic assumption that is frequently made in the vignette-based research runs as follows: “narrative representations of emotional events can be treated as functionally compared to the corresponding real-life encounters” [19. P. 296]. Credibility is a crucial factor in the vignette design. The more trustworthy the protagonist’s situation is, the higher probability there is that the respondent can put himself into the protagonist’s place. Moreover, unrealistic scenarios can provoke participants’ negative reaction including perplexity, embarrassment, anger, demotivation. The question then arises, however, whether such brief descriptive narratives could capture the reality in the necessary context so that the answers similar to respondent’s reactions in real-life situations were obtained as a result. Some researchers using the given method admit that it fails to provide a full grasp of the reality under study. However, they find the method to be especially useful in terms of schematic nature of the displayed material. The absence of details in vignettes enables the respondent to fill in the gaps, which may be important for further research. Thus, participants’ interpretation of the vignettes provides valuable research material rather than reveals the weakness of the research tools.

There is a very important issue here, which concerns the assumption that respondents project, transfer their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and social norms onto the vignette personage. There is quite a developed reference base on projective tests in psychology where psychodynamic framework is used to interpret projective answers. However, the situation in sociology can still be described in simplistic terms: while researchers using vignettes try to study people's behaviour in different situations, they apply cognitive theorization involving a direct link between the stated attitude and behaviour. For example, in the study of females taking care of elderly people, Rahman argued that their answers were very similar to what their real-life behaviour would be. *McKeagney N.* [16] emphasizes the fact that injection drug users were more likely to speak about needle sharing in the vignette survey than in self-presentation, which points to the absence of pressure and approved answer. However, it is worth mentioning that emotions may play an important role in real life decision-making processes, which cannot be reflected in the vignette methodology. An alternative way for the researcher to interpret participants' responses to vignette material may be the study of dominant representations shared by everybody and the less dominant ones, i.e. those which may occur due to respondent's personal experience and life trajectory. Thus, the attention will be focused on subjective representations rather than shifted towards what respondents would actually do in a specific situation.

Hughes R. points out possible difficulties for the researcher in data analysis: a number of respondents react to vignettes putting themselves into the position of the vignette personage, while others provide a third-person narration. The respondents are obviously involved into the displayed reality. At the same time, however, they can choose: either to provide a wide range of reactions to the given topic immediately revealing themselves or to demonstrate stigmatized opinions and socially desirable reactions. It is natural that vignette-based experience is different from that of real life. However, the validity of the vignette as a research tool depends on the rationale for its application.

APPLICATION OF THE VIGNETTE METHOD

Vignettes are short stories or scenarios describing hypothetical characteristics and situations to which the respondent is expected to react. As long as situations are hypothetical, there is more opportunity to handle thorny issues and study sensitive topics. For the sake of realism, vignettes may be based on real-life situations. Vignettes are often used to obtain data on group beliefs, values and norms of behaviour, although such research is more likely to focus mostly on social perceptions, identification, and deeper understanding of the problems under study. A good example is the research conducted by Gerber [10; 11] who used ethnographic interviews to investigate people's opinion of their residence, the language used to describe it and the factors taken into consideration in their decision to answer researcher's questions. Initially, Gerber conducted non-structured interviews with 25 respondents, many of whom experienced difficult living circumstances, which hindered their residence identification. People from overnight homes and homeless shelters were chosen as respondents. Gerber collected descriptive data on res-

pondents' ways of life and identified expression patterns and language used to describe situations. Here we provide a fragment of an interview to illustrate the division between "living" and "temporarily staying" (e.g. intentions, disposition of things):

A: I'm just a friend of hers. I lost my apartment in December.... That's why I said I'm staying there, cause I'm not living there. I'm doing everything I can to find a way out of there.

Q: So you're not living there....

A: Well, you would say I'm living there, I been there since December, but I'm just saying it's not mine ... But I live there, I bathe there, I sleep there, I dress there, my clothes are there — not everything I own. Most of my things I got out of storage and took to my mother's, but basically everything I have to live with since December is there. As a matter of fact, it's packed up at the door. Because I'm trying to get out..."

Gerber used the information obtained during the interview to design vignettes, which served as the basis to launch a second set of interviews. Thus, the fragment of the interview given above was restructured into the vignette: "Mary asked her friend Helen if she could stay with her for a few days while she looked for a place for her own. It has been five months since then. Mary's suitcases are still packed and are at the front door. Should Helen count Mary as usually living there?"

All the vignettes described ambiguous life situations and were used to identify explanatory schemes and respondents' explanations for their residence. According to Gerber, making judgements about complex or ambiguous cases the respondents revealed the elements which were important to them and the logic they followed in their decision-making. During the interview Gerber intended to change the circumstances to follow out the whole chain of logical patterns. For example, she varied such parameters as shorter or longer duration of staying and identified the changes in the response to the vignette as a whole. Some features of vignettes developed by Gerber are worth mentioning: 1) Vignettes were selected from ethnographic sources in order to place the respondents within the scenario they may encounter in real life; 2) Gerber uses neutral vocabulary to look into the language respondents actually employ to describe their residence (for example, she uses such expressions as "sleeping in a definite place" and "spending time with a particular person" instead of "living" or "temporarily staying"); 3) The ambiguity of situations presented in vignettes stimulates respondents to formulate criteria they would apply to evaluate the situation with person's living or temporarily staying. The change of vignette details contributed to clarifying respondents' reasoning, as the following fragment of the interview illustrates:

A: Well, it seemed to me that if you had said he ate his meals and slept there, then I would consider that he lived there.

Q: ... if we said he eats at his wife's house, but he always sleeps at his mother's...

A: I'd say that's a weird arrangement.

Q: That's weird, but would you say that changed where he lived?

A: Well, if he slept at his mother's, I would consider that ye lived at his mother's. On a permanent basis... if he just slept there occasionally, I would not consider that he lived there..."

Having distinguished between "eating" and "sleeping" (and other circumstantial details), Herber was able to develop more subtle understanding of factors which had provided the given reaction.

4) The tasks solved by vignettes were understood even by people without special education or language fluency. The respondents often treated the task as a puzzle or a game. There was only one interview which had to be stopped because the respondent did not understand the task.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE VIGNETTE METHOD

Vignette-based methodology can be difficult for analysis and involves a number of complications if the researcher is inclined to separate a socially approved normative interpretation of the vignette from what respondents really think. The converse is also true: if the researcher uses the method to find out how people behave in real life, the analysis may turn out to be quite difficult. However, if the researcher uses a theoretical perspective assuming that the respondent will answer the questions in a state of constant dialogue with the self as contradictory positions may exist not only in a society but in every individual as well (taking into consideration even the “voices” influencing them), then vignettes may be used more efficiently. The method may lead to an ambiguity in the results, and this will help finding new positions and opinions not detected before. Therefore, the flexibility of vignettes may be considered as a key property of their application. Among the other advantages of vignettes pointed out by the researchers, the following may be marked: the vignette method is tailored for specific research goals, and may be based on actual circumstances in life; the vignette method may help avoiding socially approved answers because the question is not addressed to the respondent personally, on the contrary, he is asked to assess the actions of the vignette personage; most people articulate badly, or hardly recognize the factors affecting the process where some or other judgments are formed, and the vignette method may help them with that; properties in the vignettes are changing continually thus enabling the assessment of changes in individual variables and their combinations in view of the changes in attitudes or judgments of respondents; if the vignette scenario is limited to the minimum information scope, the respondent is driven to complete the picture of the contextual background by himself/herself; enables studying the relationships between social processes and perception of reality.

As any other method, the vignette method has its limitations and drawbacks; the following ones may be mentioned among them; the vignette method reduces the researcher’s compatibility capabilities as each respondent uses his or her own definitions and patterns in the answers; the correlation of behaviour and actual respondents’ actions with their answers becomes questionable; adjustment of the previously created vignettes to the current research is problematic, especially if the researchers have failed to take into account all aspects of the phenomenon under study; complexity and labor intensity in design and creation of vignettes.

VIGNETTE DESIGN METHODOLOGY

The first step in the use of vignettes is to define their function. The main goal is to understand social components involved in the process of respondent’s perception rather than to predict exactly his/her behaviour. A number of vignette presentation

methods may be used for this purpose. For example, the discrete orientation forms proposed by Schutz as prerequisites for the respective forms of social relations may be taken for the basis. The first and probably the most apparent form is the “We”-relations. The “We”-relationship is direct, with both persons existing in time and space. In the context of the vignette, both the researcher and the participant can examine each other and interpret the meaning of each other’s actions.

The second form, the “Thou”-orientations, helps revealing the relation between the respondent and the hero of the vignette scenario, and belongs to the “pure” experience. The respondent interprets the actions of the other person after putting himself or herself in the other person’s position. By designing the situation with hypothetic heroes, the participant of the research is asked to do it, and indirect confidential information is obtained this way. In this case, the credibility of the scenario is of critical importance for implementation of vignette stimuli that are to be responded further on.

The third type of orientations pertains to the personality and its companions in the living world. Schutz describes them as actors personally unknown to the individual but still existing (i.e., people with their own consciousness are able to create their own subjective interpretations). In the pure form, they do not exist in the world because they are ideal types; however, they are the product of the “recognition synthesis” on the part of the personality. The role of “they”-orientation is best explained on the example given by Schutz himself. The passenger taking a train does not know the driver personally (it is quite probable that they did not exist in the space-time before) but has certain assumptions regarding the patterns of behaviour. For instance, it is quite probable that the driver has some engineering skills and experience required for his work, and will use them to ensure that the train arrives at its destination. Such assumptions are a product of accumulated evidence.

Having taken into account all the above-mentioned facts, let us turn to the design process itself. To a certain extent, it is similar to the process where questionnaire items are prepared for qualitative studies. At first glance, the vignettes look quite simple, but their design is not simple at all. Their plot should be realistic, and be focused on specific questions required to achieve the goal of the research. The vignette must be detailed, but must not overload the respondent at the same time. The pilot study is equally mandatory, as well as the vignette revision based on its results.

The specific aspects of vignette design include the following:

— Will the vignette scenario and personages be relevant for the set of samples under study? Providing some details or personage names may make the vignette more vivid and interesting. The language used for it should be familiar to the respondents. Excessively complicated vignettes with many properties usually fail;

— If the respondent should be influenced by provoking him/her into accepting a specific point of view towards one or other personage of the scenario, then the attention must be focused on that personage, either directly or indirectly. Writing a vignette from the first person perspective (as regards the specific personage) may be one of the ways to induce the respondent’s comments on the actions performed by the personage after the respondent identifies himself/herself with this personage;

— If the vignette components are known to be multiple-meaning, then the assumptions can be studied in regard to multiple elements of the scenario (e.g., various characteristics of personages such as their sex, age, ethnicity, etc., or various types of scenarios such as accepting interracial marriages in liberal and in conservative ideologies);

— Is the respondent given a chance to describe the details freely, or is his/her attention only drawn to the specific existing parameters? This will provide for defining the scope of information to be introduced into the vignette and the questions to be asked afterwards;

— Is a single vignette presented at once, or are multiple vignettes presented stage by stage? What is the number of such stages, then? Each stage includes the events evolving around the personage. If the number of stages is in excess of four, it may cause the respondent's perplexity, may confuse him/her;

— It should be understood, what aspects of the situation the respondent's attention must be concentrated on, i.e., the moral or pragmatic ones. Basing on this, different types of questions have to be formulated;

— If the aim of the studies is reduced to revealing the proper or actual respondents' actions in the situation described in the scenario, then it is better to ask how the personage of the vignette should, or will, act in their opinion.

The number of the vignettes should be sufficient for the specific type of research: 15—40 vignettes may fit for small projects, 40—100 for medium ones, and 200 or above for large projects.

In his work [13], *J.A. Krosnick* used the term “satisficing”, introduced by H. Simon in the 1950s. When the respondents answer the questions in the vignettes, they should interpret the meaning of the story, retrieve the respective information from their memory, integrate this information into their judgments about the story and communicate them so that the meaning is clear and accurate. After the respondent passes this process from the start to the end and manages to perform a complete and objective retrieval and integration of the information, the “satisficing” may be deemed achieved. However, the latter is also achievable even though the respondent fails to implement this process completely. *J.A. Krosnick* pointed out three conditions favorable for achieving it: 1) difficulty of the task; 2) respondent's competency and abilities; 3) respondent's motivation. If the difficulty is greater than the sum of the competency and motivation of the respondent, the “satisficing” takes place. Examples may include: the respondent selecting the first answer that seemed reasonable; agreeing with the statement in the plot of the vignette by saying “I do not know”, mental coin-flipping; missing differentiation in the use of rating scales, and approving the existing state of affairs.

J.F. Stolte found that the vignettes were the means of negotiating the response to stress situations. He also noted that the answers were more dependable when the respondents had been answering to the vignettes in a calm environment not distracting themselves with anything and had been given a stimulus to put forth their own opinion [25]. The advantages of using the vignette also include the fact that all respondents have to respond to the same types of stress factors. It facilitates the monitoring of stress characteristics and creates new opportunities of comparison in the analysis of the respondents' abilities to overcome the difficulties arising before people.

QUANTITATIVE STRATEGY OF DATA ANALYSIS IN THE VIGNETTE METHOD

The quantitative strategy is partially elucidated in the work of I.F. Devyatko [7] basing on the use of formalized methods: logic and combinatorial ones, and the JSM method. In the framework of the approach discussed, the JSM method of automatic generation of hypotheses (called in honor of John Stuart Mill) aids in passing from qualitative data to quantitative indicators. Thus, based on the works of V.K. Finn and his followers, a suggestion has been made that if the future vignette is provided with certain dichotomous indicators (yes/no, 1/0) and the vignettes are designed for all possible combinations of such indicators, then the determinative indicators of a particular subject under study will be obtained in data processing.

An example is the vignettes designed for the studies of qualities identifying an intelligent person. The indicators included in the vignette have been selected basing on the data previously obtained by the method of incomplete propositions [27. P. 44]. The core of the image seemed clear and evident: “education”, “upbringing”, “positive personal traits”, “culture”, and “moral standards”. However, there were several characteristics remaining at the image periphery but still applicable to the description of an intelligent person. To extract the most valuable traits, five of them were set up as indicators for the designed vignettes, including: the attitude towards the power (opposition/support); attitude towards the people (“flirting” with them/consumer’s attitude); patriotic sentiments (yes/no); striving for self-development (yes/no); hesitation (press/do not press their opinions on others).

Then these criteria were used to create 32 vignettes describing all possible combinations of the indicators. A couple of them are listed below:

1. You have become acquainted with some person. After the talk, it is clear that he has something very interesting about himself. He tries to learn something new each day. He takes an active part in various public actions and philanthropic activities. When it comes to politics, your new acquaintance supports the opposition more willingly than the power. This person loves his home country and will never move abroad to live.

Would you call this person “intelligent”? 1) Yes 2) No

2. You are introduced to a certain man. Once you start talking, his attitude towards the power becomes clear: an unconditional support for the policy being enacted. At the same time, people are only interesting to him from a consumer’s viewpoint as long as they satisfy his needs. His own opinion is the ultimate truth to be accepted by everybody around. Nevertheless, this man is keen to learn and never stops on what he has achieved. He knows the history of his country, and is proud of his homeland.

Would you call this person “intelligent”? 1) Yes 2) No

Numerous examples of vignettes are given in the literature, but the question on how the interpretation of the obtained material should be handled remains open. The vignettes enable us to advance from qualitative data to quantitative indicators. For instance, let us consider the JSM method basing on the works of V.K. Finn [9]. Each vignette is furnished with equal numbers of indicators. The expected number of combinations is then calculated for such indicators, and this number is taken equal to the number of vignettes

under study. Since the elements are taken from the same group in our case, and each element is returned back, such sampling is called the sampling with replacement. Then the number of all possible selections is n^k . E.g., for five embedded indicators, this formula results in 32 vignettes. Now consider processing of the data obtained by the vignette method in the case of the terrorist's image [21]. After the calculation, the vignettes are composed using the dichotomized indicators. Interviewing of the respondents is then followed by processing of the obtained data. Using simple calculations, we get the number of persons who have expressed their negative/neutral/positive opinion. The absolute frequencies are then reduced to relative ones. For a better understanding of what indicators have "worked" and what combinations of indicators induce evidently negative responses, the distribution over the combinations is derived taking into account the number of negative responses calculated earlier and selecting the weightiest ones. Passing to group estimates basing on one-dimensional frequency distributions of each indicator for separate vignettes requires the calculation of the following indices:

$$I_k = \frac{n_{pos} - n_{neg}}{n_{pos} + n_{neg} + n_{neutr}}$$

where n_{pos} is the number of positive responses of the respondents in regard to a given vignette, n_{neg} is the number of definitely negative responses, and n_{neutr} is the number of neutral responses of the respondents. The obtained index varies from -1 to 1 : it is 1 if the reaction towards the vignette is positive, -1 if it is negative, and 0 if the numbers of positive and negative responses coincide (neutral attitude). After these indices are calculated for each vignette, the obtained results are described. The combinations of indices are written down, and the dominant ones as well as those not affecting the image-building are separated.

The vignettes express a kind of cumulative image hiding in the subconscious of humans and allow tracing the links between the convictions and actions. A third party projection, a well-tailored hypothetical situation, and a set of indicators hidden in advance from the respondent determine how successful and reliable the data will be.

Thus, the vignette method is a good alternative to conventional mass survey methods. It has many advantages and certain drawbacks at the same time; however, such drawbacks do not impair its large-scale applicability. The vignette method is sensitive to limitations that can be found in all research methods we are familiar with. It enables the studies of the most delicate, problematic and sensitive topics on a large scale providing for their mass scope. The strategy of the data analysis unveils great opportunities for the application of this method to various themes and directions, and allows handling any slice of the problems under study and obtaining more comprehensive analytic results than in conventional methods.

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ИЗУЧЕНИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНЫХ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЙ С ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕМ МЕТОДА ВИНЬЕТОК: КОЛИЧЕСТВЕННЫЙ ПОДХОД*

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Статья посвящена зарождению метода виньеток как нового метода в эмпирической социологии. Метод виньеток выступает хорошей альтернативой традиционным методам массового опроса. Метод виньеток не отличается популярностью среди российских ученых, но имеет достаточно большую историю использования за рубежом. Использование данного метода помогает в решении широкого круга проблем (например, оценка перспектив опекуинства; адаптация иностранных студентов к системе образования; исследования в области социальной справедливости; маркетинговые исследования; бизнес-исследования и т.д.). Метод виньеток также может использоваться для изучения проблем, которые носят сензитивный характер (например, ВИЧ, наркотики, психологические травмы и т.д.), поскольку может быть отнесен к числу проективных методик. Проективные методы помогают получить более достоверную информацию, потому что респондент проецирует ситуацию на другого, но в то же время реагирует на стимул и отвечает так, как считает он сам. В статье рассматриваются преимущества и недостатки метода виньеток, авторы дают информацию о его ограничениях. В зависимости от типа исследования авторами приводятся основные принципы проектирования и разработки виньеток. Авторы приводят примеры самостоятельно разработанных и апробированных в ходе собственных исследований виньеток. Также авторы подчеркивают преимущества логико-комбинаторных методов (в частности ДСМ-метода с его дихотомией) в обработке данных в рамках количественной стратегии. Другой метод анализа данных предполагает технику «погружения», когда шаг за шагом респондент получает новую долю информации, которая обогащает предыдущую.

Ключевые слова: проективные методы; метод виньеток; социальные представления; логико-комбинаторные методы; ДСМ-метод; качественные методы; количественные методы

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