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Using Fiction to Reveal Truth: Challenges of Using Vignettes to Understand Participant Experiences Within Qualitative Research

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Key words: vignettes; qualitative research; authenticity; marginalised communities; socially desired responses

Abstract: Vignettes are increasingly used within qualitative studies to research difficult topics, requiring ethical mindfulness and sensitivity from researchers. In this article, I examine the methodological issues of incorporating vignettes within qualitative research, specifically my research exploring South Asian maternal experiences of supporting their children with special education needs and disability (SEND). I present participants with seven vignettes concerning the roles of religion, culture, gender and immigrant history. By presenting the participants' responses, I explore the applicability of two ensuing methodological concerns: 1. Are authentic representations useful and straightforward measure of vignette's effectiveness? 2. Do reduced socially desired responses reflect the effectiveness of a vignette? I consider these questions in detail, as well as how addressing the first issue affected my commitment to the second issue. I conclude that vignettes can be a rich point of reference from which participants can exercise agency and actively construct their own understanding of the issues presented in the vignettes.

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1. Introduction

Educational researchers exploring complex intermeshed social issues and contexts face a challenge regarding the suitability of available research methods. Whilst some researchers rely on data collection tools previously utilised in a similar research area, others experiment with different techniques to gain a different perspective. In this article, I explore the methodological issues surrounding the use of vignettes within qualitative educational research, providing an overview of how vignettes have been defined and utilised by different social science studies to date. Specifically, I examine two major areas of methodological concern outlined in previous studies that have included vignettes: 1. the manner of designing vignettes involving an attempt to authentically represent participant reality as closely as possible and 2. the strategies participants use to give socially desired responses that they consider least offensive to people. I also discuss the concerns arising from the narrow conceptualisation of these two issues and explore how they were addressed within a qualitative research project. In addition, I also examine the methodological dilemma of seeking authenticity within research, when the research is grounded in the feminist paradigm which challenges a singular representation of the authentic voice. [1]

Rhidian HUGHES and Meg HUBY (2004, p.37) broadly defined vignettes as "... text, images or other forms of stimuli which research participants are asked to respond [to]" from their own perspectives or from the viewpoint of fictional characters within the vignettes. The vignettes in my research project were in the form of short stories portraying fictional characters and situations, created to encourage participants to express opinions (BARTER & REYNOLD, 2000; HUGHES & HUBY, 2004). Nancy SCHOENBERG and Hege RAVDAL (2000) posited that vignettes are typically used to explore participants' attitudes about sensitive issues, by eliciting comment from participants who act as detached outsiders to the characters in the story; participants are typically asked what advice they would give to a character or what they would do in a similar situation. Nicola SPALDING and Terry PHILLIPS (2007) suggested that presenting participants with vignettes closely resembling their personal experiences can be useful in providing them with a neutral reflective space which minimises their discomfort when dealing with sensitive issues. Notably, Patrick WEST (1982, p.3) stated that if vignettes are utilised to research subjective experiences, researchers should remember that a vignette's "… fuzziness is strength". This statement is seemingly a contradiction to the design of vignettes within qualitative research, which involve focus on detail and context. However, WEST suggested that researchers should endeavour to create balanced vignettes with sufficient specificity to provide participants with the necessary context to meaningfully relate to the vignettes, whilst being vague enough to encourage participants to interpret those accounts. Researchers also have the flexibility to change the context within each vignette, giving participants a clearer indication of the key social phenomena under focus (POULOU, 2001). [2]

Vignettes have increasingly become popular in recent decades within health and social care research, including several benefits for researchers who aim to

conduct their tasks sensitively and ethically. However, vignettes have been less commonly used within educational research than traditional tools, making it difficult to find examples where their trustworthiness and effectiveness as data collection tools have been assessed. Due to their fluid nature, vignettes have been utilised as a supplementary tool within quantitative, qualitative and mixed method studies (KANDEMIR & BUDD, 2018; WILKS, 2004). Tom WILKS (2004) suggested that vignettes are often used within qualitative research to encourage participants to reach their own understandings and to take up rhetorical positions when examining sensitive issues that may be overlooked by more structured formats such as interviews or focus groups. Vignettes more effectively simulate real-life examples and promote reflective thinking within participants than definitions. SCHOENBERG and RAVDAL (2000), through their qualitative research, questioned senior citizens about formal community services and utilised two vignettes based on a fictional older person experiencing difficulties alongside semistructured interviews. This depersonalised fictional character can be helpful for participants to reflect freely on their own experiences, arriving at their own understanding of what should transpire in the vignette. [3]

The flexibility of vignettes is similarly useful within quantitative and qualitative studies; however, assessing their effectiveness can be more challenging within qualitative studies. Janet FINCH (1987, p.112) suggested the use of vignettes within quantitative studies has been underpinned by positivistic values and developed by "limiting the possibilities for a respondent's interpretation by specifying the circumstances of the case". This approach helps to stimulate generalisations across the sample, systematically measuring the response triggered by each variable. However, within qualitative research, vignettes are more contextual and specific, providing more autonomy in how participants can interpret and respond. They are underpinned by a different epistemology: reality is experienced across multiple axes; it is not reducible to any variable; and is "time and context-bound" (LINCOLN & GUBA, 1985, p.75). Some authors (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000; BLODGETT, SCHINKE, SMITH, PELTIER & PHEASANT, 2011) claimed that vignettes are particularly useful in eliciting responses on sensitive topics, or from marginalised participants requiring a frame of reference to share their experiences. [4]

Essentially, in assessing a vignette's appropriateness, I do not question the appropriateness of other traditional tools such as unstructured interviews in tackling sensitive topics; rather, I seek to examine how existing studies have included vignettes to research-sensitive issues. For instance, in their qualitative research exploring residential children's homes, Christine BARTER and Emma RENOLD (2000) utilised vignettes and conducted semistructured interviews with children (ages under 14 years) and young people (ages 14-17 years) to explore their experiences of abuse. They developed separate vignettes for children (limited to 150 words) and young people (between 200 and 300 words), using feedback from pilot interviews and existing research; a maximum of three themes were incorporated within any vignette storyline to ensure clarity and consistency for participants. Vignettes are commonly used either to engage participants with the research process or to conclude data collection, as was the case with

SPALDING and PHILLIPS (2007). However, vignettes were central to BARTER and RENOLD's (2000) data collection, albeit they were triangulated using interviews; with the *fuzziness* of the vignettes, their young participants were able to redefine contexts and interpret the vignettes based on their own experiences, providing a neutral space to freely discuss their experiences of abuse. Having the same contextual references can arguably affect the vignette's fuzziness; however, qualitative studies primarily include vignettes as a frame of reference to elicit comments whilst providing participants autonomy to divulge their own experiences, moving the discussion from the abstract to the personal. [5]

Vignettes are also useful in "providing the same contextual framework" to all participants (POULOU, 2001, p.56). This framework is particularly helpful when exploring abstract and intersecting concepts, which are difficult to define, and for reducing participant ambiguity about the researcher's aims. By providing an identical frame of reference, the researcher can draw similarities and dissonances from participants' responses and help them avoid providing responses in a vacuum. The framework can be helpful in addressing the transferability of contexts presented in the vignettes to some degree and in developing meaningful themes across data sets. [6]

Vignettes have also been used to challenge the inherent *Whiteness* of research methods and question Western epistemologies that typically portray marginalised communities as passive and exotic *others* within mainstream academic research. Andrea DOUCET and Natasha MAUTHNER (2002) suggested that for research to be accountable to its participants, the reflexive stance needs to be consistent throughout the research and not merely limited to the research's underlying epistemology. They posited that a fluid relationship between the epistemology and the methodology encourages the use of innovative methods useful in facilitating "a certain listening and responding to the data" (p.133), challenging the exclusion of different ways of knowing. Ann PHOENIX (2009) called for a post-colonial lens to dismantle the power relations between the coloniser and the colonised in a U.K. context, and the manner the colonised are represented within mainstream research. In her own research, PHOENIX found that British-Caribbean migrants were aware they were constructed and represented as less able-bodied and less valued compared to mainstream British society and were stereotyped as having language and behaviour difficulties. Therefore, a post-colonial perspective can be helpful in decolonising research practice and providing space for participants to be more agentic in how they identify themselves. In their participatory action research (PAR) with university academics and Canadian-Aboriginal communities, Amy BLODGETT et al. (2011) created nine portrait vignettes based on the personal experiences of Aboriginal coresearchers. The vignettes were intended to convey empowering stories framed from the Aboriginal community's viewpoint and to explore new ways of engaging in authentic research with indigenous communities. With this in mind, I incorporated vignettes into my study with British-Pakistani disabled families because I wanted to provide an appropriate platform for discussing sensitive topics. [7]

In constructing vignettes within qualitative research, researchers will have to consider two questions: 1. Does the vignette involve an authentic representation of participant reality? 2. Can the possibility of invoking socially desired responses be reduced? In the next two sections, I explore how existing literature has shown the methodological issues that arise when addressing authentic representations and reducing socially desired responses (Sections 2 and 3). Afterwards, I discuss my own research project drawing on participants' experiences of using vignettes, where I disclose issues that may arise from narrowly focussing on authenticity and reducing social desirability as a way of assessing whether or not a vignette is fit for purpose (Section 4). I examine how my own theoretical positioning affected these two methodological issues, and whether a more useful and ethical criteria were needed to assess the suitability of using vignettes within a qualitative research project (Sections 5 and 6). I then conclude my discussion in Section 7. [8]

2. Authentic Representation in Vignettes

Perhaps the most common methodological concern attached to using vignettes is whether they involve an authentic representation of participant reality. The studies reviewed so far have indicated this as the difference between the vignette narrative and the participants' actual realities, and the way this gap may negate the purpose of using the vignettes. Julie WILSON and Alison WHILE (1998) suggested that the more detached a vignette is from participant reality, the more difficult it is to determine whether participants can relate to it. Yvonna S. LINCOLN and Egon G. GUBA (1985) posited that the accuracy of the representation of reality reflects the credibility of the research. They suggested several techniques that researchers can use to address credibility, such as prolonged participant engagement which can provide a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences; moreover, it can also clarify discrepancies in data collection and analysis over time. Credibility can also be achieved by triangulating different methods such as using vignettes in conjunction with interviews or surveys, different sources or participants, and where feasible, different researchers. LINCOLN and GUBA also stated that peer debriefing and member checks can strengthen qualitative tools. [9]

The straightforward application of LINCOLN and GUBA's criteria for strengthening credibility are shown in several studies that have included vignettes. For instance, WILSON and WHILE (1998), in their study examining interprofessional collaboration between nurses and social workers, piloted their vignettes with nurses and social workers who were nonparticipants; their feedback acted as a member check to make minor revisions to the vignettes and make the narratives more relevant to participants, thereby strengthening their credibility. They also addressed credibility by asking participants to discuss their experiences of using vignettes after data collection. SCHOENBERG and RAVDAL (2000) also considered authentic representation within vignettes by conducting pilot studies. Moreover, they constructed the vignettes after reflecting on data they had collected from interviews with similar populations in previous years and by examining existing literature. A critical understanding of key issues highlighted within existing literature can be helpful for researchers to incorporate

those issues into the vignettes, making them more relatable to participants. SPALDING and PHILLIPS (2007) explored patients' and health care professionals' views about preoperative educational programmes on hip replacements; they also piloted their vignettes before introducing them to participants, making the vignettes more meaningful to participants thereby improving their authenticity. They observed educational programmes and utilised prolonged participant engagement to design vignettes as close to real practice as possible, thereby encouraging reflexivity from practitioners. Despite these measures, BARTER and RENOLD (2000) posited that a *reality gap* inevitably exists between what participants *believe* they would do in a hypothetical situation and how they behave *in reality*. This observation has an effect on the researcher's confidence in the vignettes and in the subsequent interpretations derived from the data collected. [10]

However, BARTER and RENOLD's focus on the side effects of the reality gap is a deviation from the central purpose of using vignettes within qualitative research —*that researchers should be concerned with the participants' expressed views in response to the vignettes.* Nicholas JENKINS, Michael BLOOR, Jan FISCHER, Lee BERNEY and Joanne NEALE (2010, p.178) suggested that the aim of vignettes "should not be to arrive at an accurate prediction of an interviewee's behaviour, but instead to achieve insight into the social components of the participant's interpretative framework and perceptual processes". More importantly, this focus on seeking authentic representation becomes problematic and evident for a re-examination when the research is grounded in a critical theoretical lens that is concerned with agency and representation. For instance, BLODGETT et al. (2011; grounded in PAR principles) and PHOENIX (2009; utilising a post-colonial lens) were not concerned with comparing the gap between participants' realities with the vignette narrative to seek authenticity; rather, they gauged vignettes as *effective* when they became a medium for participants to be more agentic. This observation indicates that authentic representation should not be the primary focus within research underpinned by a critical theoretical lens, concerned with understanding why participants took different stances in relation to the vignette character and themselves. [11]

3. Socially Desired Responses

In common with all qualitative research tools, a far broader concern regarding vignettes is that they can be useful in prompting socially desired responses from participants who cause "offence to the fewest possible people" affecting the credibility of their responses (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000, p.312). HUGHES and HUBY (2004) suggested that this can depend on the type of questions posed to participants; where participants are expected to "respond to vignettes from the perspective of vignette characters and not themselves, they may feel less need to give socially-desirable [*sic*] and ‘public' accounts" (p.45). Maria POULOU (2001) concurred that vignettes can be helpful in minimising participant bias within qualitative research, because participants are discussing fictitious characters, not their own personal lives. [12]

Nonetheless, if participants are expected to respond using their own experiences, they are more likely to give socially desired responses. This is arguably the case for all data collection tools; for instance, participants may present an idealised narrative during interviews or present the ideal version of themselves during observation. Here, again, researchers seemed to have dealt with this issue through a formulaic approach. For instance, HUGHES and HUBY (2004) proposed that socially desired responses can be reduced if a vignette character's actions are socially unacceptable or contrary to participants' values, since participants have the freedom to *choose* a position that they think is appropriate. However, HUGHES and HUBY cautioned that the success of this technique depends on whether participants feel free to offer their own opinions or feel compelled to give a *correct* answer; in which case, they respond in a manner they perceive matches the researcher's expectations. Essentially, participants are assured beforehand that there are no right or wrong answers. Socially desired responses may also be minimised by incorporating more open-ended questions so that the participants have more autonomy in giving their responses. [13]

In contrast, BARTER and RENOLD (2000), in their research with young people's experiences of violence, posited that in focusing on reducing socially desired responses, researchers risk losing participant perspectives, which may be further from the reality portrayed in the vignette but which nonetheless provide insights to the issue being discussed. This consideration is important for research on sensitive topics or with hard-to-reach groups and where participants' diverse views need to be represented rather than be confined to fit a certain narrative. This concern was also part of my research. In the next section, I explore how I considered and tackled the issues relating to vignettes in this study, as well as the limitations of using this tool. [14]

4. The Study

4.1 Background

I conducted a small-scale qualitative research between 2013 and 2016, the time I examined the ways in which British-Pakistani mothers worked with schools to support their children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). I also aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of maternal placement preferences within special-mainstream schools and the manner that wider social contexts such as religion, culture, gender and immigrant trajectory could have an effect on their experiences of support. [15]

In comparison with other ethnicities, children from British-Pakistani families have higher instances of moderate learning difficulties (MLD), severe learning difficulties (SLD) and profound multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), whilst British-Bangladeshi children have higher instances of PMLD; both ethnic groups have identification rates that are 25% above the U.K. average (LEARNING DISABILITIES OBSERVATORY, 2016). This has implications for professionals within various settings, and more importantly, for primary carers supporting children with SEND in the context of wider social inequalities. British-Pakistanis

and British-Bangladeshis also live in persistently higher rates of poverty and material deprivation compared to other ethnic groups, and they are more likely to be unemployed and living in large families (FISHER & NANDNI, 2015). South Asians constitute the largest minority group in the United Kingdom (OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, 2012), with these two particular ethnic subgroups reporting significant new migrant populations annually. [16]

A few studies have been instrumental in examining South Asian disabled families'[1] experiences of health and social care services in the United Kingdom (BYWATERS, ALI, FAZIL, WALLACE & SINGH, 2003; CHAMBA, AHMAD, HIRST, LAWTON & BERESFORD, 1999; CROOT, GRANT, COOPER & MATHERS, 2008; HATTON, AKRAM, SHAH, ROBERTSON & EMERSON, 2004; HUSSAIN, ATKIN & AHMAD, 2002; SHAH, 1995), providing an in-depth understanding of the ways in which social and health care professionals work with these families and the potential barriers these families continue to experience in accessing support. The study researchers provided useful insights into minority experiences of gaining access to provisions. However, with their findings, they primarily focussed on the difficulties resulting from language and cultural barriers; therefore, they called for health and social care professionals to develop cultural competencies to reduce misunderstandings arising from overarching stereotypes. However, scant attention has been given to the multidimensional contexts shaping the fluid experiences of South Asian disabled families, which may help us understand this group's heterogeneity in terms of language, family structure, migration trajectories, religion and culture. Barring a few studies (McLAUGHLIN, GOODLEY, CLAVERING & FISHER, 2008; RIZVI, 2015; RIZVI & LIMBRICK, 2015), there is limited understanding of British-South Asian disabled family experiences with schools and other educational professionals and the manner that parents, specifically mothers who are the primary carers at the forefront of maintaining school relationships, navigate their child's disability experiences and act as active agents of change. More importantly, little research has been undertaken within the United Kingdom using an intersectional lens to examine South Asian maternal perspectives of mothering children with SEND, which concomitantly recognises mothers as the primary carers who are at the forefront of negotiating SEND provisions for their children. Therefore, I conducted this research to provide a more authentic understanding of how British-Pakistani mothers work with schools and to challenge their stereotype as passive participants in supporting their child's SEND. [17]

1 By using the term *disabled families,* I concur with the stance taken by GOODLEY and TREGASKIS (2006) that families become *disabled* in trying to secure provisions and services necessary to support their child with SEND.

4.2 Methodology

I utilised a qualitative approach and the feminist theoretical lens of intersectionality (CRENSHAW, 1991; WEBER, 2001) to shape the research enquiry and gain a more contextualised understanding of participant experiences. The intersectional lens helps to deconstruct the homogenisation of minority experiences to explore how power and privilege can have an effect on their experiences per their race, gender, class and other social divisions. The intersectional framework that I utilised in my study was developed by Lynn WEBER (2001), who theorised that social categories are mutually dependant and that an individual's experiences are simultaneously determined by the intersection of macrostructural and micropsychological constructs, historical and geographical contexts, and power dynamics. The intersectional framework had significant influence on what I considered essential to *research* in my study, not only addressing the crystallisation of how South Asian disabled families are represented within existing literature, but also informing a more ethical and reflexive choice of data collection tools. [18]

I used a combination of unstructured interviews, semistructured interviews and vignettes to collect data over a six-month period. Vignettes offered a nuanced and sensitive way of researching various intersections and how they shaped South Asian disabled families' experiences. My research was conducted in Southwest England with eight British-Pakistani mothers who had one or more child with SEND. Four mothers were second-generation British-Pakistanis and four were first-generation British-Pakistanis. Conversations revolved around their 12 children with SEND, although some mothers also had nondisabled children who were independent of the project. My research was conducted in three phases: Phase 1 included unstructured interviews which involved unrestricted space for mothers to discuss the issues and events that they felt had significantly been influential in shaping their experiences. Phase 2 entailed semistructured interviews, which became opportunities to explore maternal understanding of home-school relationships, as well as the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved. Phase 3 involved seven vignettes which were developed from maternal responses garnered from the unstructured interviews and from issues raised within existing literature, showing how religion, gender, culture and immigrant history became factors in shaping the participants' multiple stances and experiences of support. I deliberately introduced the vignettes in the final phase of data collection so they could be designed based on participant responses from the unstructured interviews. In Phase 1 unstructured interviews, the mothers were able to share personal experiences of inclusion-exclusion and experiences intersecting with religion, gender, immigrant experiences and culture, which they felt were most relevant to them; this phase was a rich data source for developing the vignettes. Phase 3 also included semistructured interviews which probed maternal experiences of placement decision-making and sensitive issues. All mothers were provided copies of interview transcripts, and although their input was solicited, no mother actively participated in data analysis because of their hectic schedules. [19]

I followed the ethics guidelines set down by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the university's ethics committee. In addition, I obtained consent each time I interviewed the mothers, so that participants knew they could discontinue their research participation at any stage. [20]

4.3 The vignettes

It was important to approach research participants using an ethical research tool, which did not involve judging their mothering practices, choices and identity. Therefore, I developed seven vignettes from responses of the participants' Phase 1 interviews based on religion, gender, culture and immigrant experiences, as well as from issues and situations highlighted within existing South Asian family literature. The mothers were deliberately not pressed for responses to each vignette; rather, I offered flexibility in how they interpreted the vignettes. I assigned Muslim names and appropriate contexts to the vignette characters and portrayed them in cities with significant British-Pakistani Muslim communities so that they would have relevance to the participants. I read the vignettes aloud several times, and I provided participants with ample time to reflect on the issues presented. [21]

I followed up the vignettes with predetermined questions which served as a starting point for participants to share their own experiences. Maternal responses to the vignettes varied in this study; some mothers were able to discuss these sensitive issues but only from the perspective of the fictional characters, whilst others felt sufficiently comfortable to transition from the vignette character to their own lived experiences with these issues. [22]

In this article, for illustrative purposes, I have considered two vignettes that I used in my study which focus on religion and gender; I evaluate their fitness for purpose and their appropriateness to address the research aims. [23]

4.3.1 First vignette

The following religion-inspired vignette was an opportunity to explore religious duty and participation, as well as their impact on feelings of inclusion and exclusion. [24]

"Farah lives in Manchester with her husband and her three children. Her youngest son Adil is 14 years old and he has autism. Farah and her family are very religious ... and regularly attend their local mosque. Recently, Farah has become increasingly worried because Adil has no understanding of prayers (namaaz) which becomes obligatory at his age, and Adil is becoming difficult to manage within the mosque during prayer time. A number of members in the mosque have complained about having their prayers disturbed, and now a committee member has asked Farah and her husband to attend a meeting to discuss Adil's attendance at the mosque.

1. What kind of advice would you give to Farah about Adil's religious responsibilities?
2. What would you advise her to discuss at the committee meeting?" [25]

4.3.2 Second vignette

This vignette involved the intersections of culture, gender and disability; specifically, it included maternal expectations about education, employment and marriage for boys and girls with SEND, as well as the patriarchal nature of South Asian culture. [26]

"Meera lives in Luton with her husband and her two children. Her daughter Mona is 18 years old and her son Amjad is 15 years old. Both children have very similar levels of special educational needs and disabilities and attend the same special school. Meera is already thinking and planning for Amjad to go onto Further Education College and obtain some skills that would be useful for his future career. The school has encouraged Meera to also send Mona to a nearby college after she is finished with her school. Mona enjoys cooking and arts and would like to do this all the time. Meera supports her daughter but also feels that Mona is now at an age when the search for a prospective husband for Mona should begin. Meera also feels that since they do not have any extended family in the United Kingdom, that it would also benefit Mona to have someone to look after and care for her after Meera and her husband have died. Meera is unsure about government support beyond the age of 25 for Mona and since their family finances cannot cope without government support, Meera and her husband feel a potential partner for Mona would also address this concern.

1. What do you think about Meera's concerns about post-19 support for Mona?
2. What would you advise Meera to do about Mona's future?
3. Do you think Meera's concerns for Mona and Amjad's futures should be different?" [27]

5. Vignettes as Authentic Representations

I found embracing BARTER and RENOLD's (2000) stance was problematic in terms of assessing whether participants' hypothetical advice to a vignette's character was in parallel with their actual behaviour. The reason for this observation is that my research was grounded in the feminist framework of intersectionality (CRENSHAW, 1991) and focused on providing space for the co-construction of maternal narratives and validating maternal accounts, rather than determining if participants were actually providing truthful answers. I concurred with the view of JENKINS et al. (2010) that the aim of vignettes within qualitative research is not (a) to focus on a false binary between real versus hypothetical situations, (b) for participants to recall their own experiences of a similar situation, or (c) to predict an exact behavioural response. Rather, vignettes should be helpful for researchers to understand how participants make sense of their

subjective experiences and feelings towards the vignettes, thereby generating in-depth authentic accounts. [28]

I utilised vignettes as a creative tool to explore how participants understood and challenged intersecting contexts, eliciting personal stories as counternarratives. I employed a number of strategies to improve the authenticity of the vignettes, some at the design stage and some after data collection. For instance, the first vignette discussed above was developed by combining insights from an interview in the first phase of data collection in which the participant had shared her son's experiences of exclusion within her local mosque, as well as from research by CHAMBA et al. (1999) and HUSSAIN et al. (2002) who both found that young Muslims with SEND face considerable difficulties in exercising their rights and identities as Muslims, because the local community sees their disability first. Similarly, I based the second vignette on insights gathered from one of my previous studies (RIZVI, 2015) conducted with South Asian mothers of children with SEND in Northern England; mothers in my previous study had expressed their future hopes and concerns about finding suitable husbands for their daughters with SEND, with the intention that their daughters' partners would fulfil the role of carer after they passed away. [29]

I could not pilot the vignettes in this study because gaining access to participants was more difficult than I had initially expected; this group was hard to reach and vulnerable, and I only initially gained access through gatekeepers. Moreover, I considered it would be unethical to expend my participants' already limited free time for input that would merely refine the research tool. This concern may be a cause for researchers exploring sensitive issues with hard-to-reach groups to consider alternative means of addressing vignette authenticity, if piloting is unfeasible. In line with WILSON and WHILE's (1998) suggestion, I held discussions with participants about their views on the use of vignettes after the data collection phase had ended; the mothers suggested that the vignettes were relevant and reflected their daily lived experiences. For instance, two mothers commented:

> Shehnaz[2]: "I mean, the stories that you told, I think they were quite interesting, it's something I can relate to because obviously I'm Asian and I've seen these stories before. So, it's something we need to think about."
>
> Parveen: "The stories you just read out ... I can completely understand them because I see similar stories day-to-day ... and other women I know experience them too ... this is the reality ... [it's up to] you how you deal with such situations, you're going to deal with difficult people ... you have to learn to deal with them ... the more you learn the better you'll be ... of course you will make mistakes ... but that's human nature." [30]

Many mothers remarked that the vignette stories were relevant to the British-Pakistani Muslim community. More pertinently, they also stated that they personally knew people in their local community who had experienced situations

2 All participant names and their children's names have been anonymised to protect their confidentiality in line with the ethical requirements of this research project.

similar to those presented in the vignettes, and that in most situations, the outcome had been damaging to the families involved. Such feedback made it possible for me to assess whether or not the vignettes had been useful for eliciting maternal responses on these difficult topics. However, in other instances, a few participants suggested that the vignettes had little relevance for them. In such instances, rather than conforming to a chosen position, the vignettes involved space around which to contest a particular positioning associated with the British-Pakistani Muslim community. For example, one participant, Kiran, commented that the scenario portrayed in the vignette was outdated and no longer occurred in the British-Pakistani community. The vignette in question explored the disabling attitudes of the British-Pakistani community towards single mothers of children with SEND. When asked how she thought the British-Pakistani community should behave towards the single mother in the vignette, Kiran responded:

> "I think people are changing now. People did used to look down on you if you were divorced ... but I think that perception is changing now. If you look around and think about it ... people get married for three months and then get divorced again ... you know there isn't that stigma attached to it now like it used to be 10 or 20 years ago. So, I think we're sort of changing." [31]

Notably, the discussion did not end abruptly when Kiran challenged the premise of this vignette; rather, she went on to explain what the fictional character could *do* in that situation.

> Kiran: "Well, it's probably the older generation I expect ... they're more set in their ways ... the community needs to help her. I would advise her to get married again ... to have a partner ... to live her life again." [32]

Kiran's response was interesting because it shows that in research conducted through a critical feminist lens, the researcher should use tools through which participants have agency and space to generate counter narratives, rather than just focusing on authentic representation within the vignettes. Whilst Kiran could not relate this vignette to her own lived experiences, nonetheless, she actively engaged with her understanding of the issues raised within the vignette. It is also telling that, despite suggesting that cultural stigma around divorce for South Asian mothers was an outmoded perception, she still recommended that the character in the vignette should remarry so that she could be restored within the British-Pakistani community. This aligns with the assertion by JENKINS et al. (2010) that, rather than focusing on whether the vignette resembles the reality of participants' experiences, the researcher should concentrate on participants' views on the different issues presented within the vignettes. [33]

6. Vignettes and Socially Desired Responses

I found that reducing the risk of generating socially desired responses from participants was a complex process, because the interpretations of each mother varied with each vignette. In line with HUGHES and HUBY's (2004) suggestion of how researchers can reduce the risk of socially desired responses, I offered the vignettes as a neutral space where participants could recommend what the fictional characters *should do* in each situation, rather than participants being probed directly on how they would react themselves in such a situation. However, it was antithetical to gauge whether or not participants actually provided socially desired responses based solely on whether they referred to their own experiences in their responses or discussed the fictional characters. The reason behind this observation is that I utilised the critical theoretical lens of intersectionality and ascribed to the epistemic belief that all the different ways of maternal knowing are valid and must be acknowledged as such. Some mothers discussed their own experiences whereas others responded from the position of the fictional character. For instance, in response to the first vignette exploring religious exclusion of children with SEND, Parveen, a mother of child with PMLD, advised what the fictional characters should do:

> "The whole mosque in this case should be adapted to the needs of that child [but] his parents should in no way place any pressure of religious obligations on their child ... the mosque should hold workshops ... invite a specialist on autism and provide written information everywhere in the mosque on how to help a child with autism, and if the parents agree to it, then child's name and details should be included in this information leaflet. And in religious sermons, especially in the Friday sermons, they need to discuss the necessity of inclusion and understanding and also approach the community and ask them to actively volunteer to teach and give this child individual time in the mosque." [34]

However, Maria, a mother to two children with PMLD, recalled her own personal experiences:

> "This is something we didn't do ... We used to take Aamir [to the mosque] and people used to get disturbed about it, and my husband stopped taking him [to the men's section]. I was very cross about that, firstly because the ladies' section is upstairs and I can't carry Aamir upstairs. I used to, maybe once or twice I took him because I wanted him to get a feel of the environment ... But my husband stopped taking him because other people were getting disturbed ... they'd say, 'Oh we can't hear, we can't understand'. And so, we stopped taking him which is very unfair. We should've put up a fight and took him regardless of what people said because he's born into a Muslim family, this is our thing. But my husband didn't do that. So, I'd say go to the meeting, put forth your views and ... he's a Muslim, he's got as much a right as any person to be there." [35]

In examining both responses, it is contrary to feminist goals to question whether Parveen's response is more authentic than Maria's solely on the basis that it was given from the viewpoint of the vignette's character. Moreover, the need to

discuss a vignette from the position of a fictional character rather than a participant's own positionality contradicts the need for a vignette to be relatable, and as a medium for participants to engage in active mean-making. My research project's theoretical intersectional framing includes this aspect as a dynamic part of the research process, rather than trying to eliminate social desirability. Whilst Maria related to the vignette on a personal level, she was not concerned with giving a socially desirable response; rather, her response reflected her frustration at not being able to enact *her ideal* response during her real-life experiences when she faced a similar situation to the fictional character in the vignette. Her response to the vignette magnifies her dynamic process of making sense of her past actions through a fictional story. The fact that Maria had not "put up a fight" and instead stopped taking her son to her local mosque not only reflects her resentment, but also the harsh realities in which she is situated and prevented from exercising her agency. Therefore, the vignette showed a safe space for Maria to discuss her real-life experiences of religious exclusion. Notably, when asked during an earlier semistructured interview how her local mosque had behaved towards her, Maria had responded in a neutral way without criticising the mosque openly. This was possibly because religion constitutes a manifest part of her identity, and she was unsure whether one negative religious encounter might be interpreted as a reflection of her overall religious experiences. In contrast, Parveen's response to the issue of religious exclusion within mosques was based on her general perceptions and overarching beliefs about the role of mosques within the British-Pakistani community. It was telling that Parveen's responses reflected her theological understanding; she expressed that whilst Islam does not obligate children and adults with SEND to perform prayers or other basic religious tenets, nonetheless, SEND should not be used to justify community members excluding individuals or making them feel like they are *lesser Muslims*. As a Muslim preacher with in-depth religious knowledge, Parveen was able to separate religious theology from cultural practices within the community, questioning the lack of a theological basis for religious exclusion. [36]

The second vignette, which explored gendered expectations at the intersection of SEND, also magnified the relevance and difficulty of gauging whether participants were giving socially desired responses. Another mother, Saira commented:

> "That's not going to benefit her daughter, is it? Let the choice be down to your daughter ... they [boys and girls] should be the same because both boys and girls need the same support ... so they shouldn't be different ... In real life boys get more privileges than girls, it's like 'hurry ... they're of age now, 17, 18 ... let's find a suitor and get them married off'. Boys don't have that pressure from their parents whereas girls do." [37]

Saira's response shows the difficulty of identifying a socially desired response when participant experiences are situated at various complex intersecting contexts (BARTER & RENOLD, 2000). Because of Saira's personal experiences of being married as a teenager against her wishes to a cousin from Pakistan, she recognised that she was deeply situated within a patriarchal culture favouring over girls; indeed, she added that "in real life boys get more privileges than girls".

In making sense of the differing opportunities and support available for British-Pakistani boys and girls, Saira was aware that ideally, gender should not be an issue. This realisation is an emphasis on the critical question: *How can a researcher claim to identify a socially desired response from a participant?* Surely claiming to *know what a participant is thinking* when responding is antithetical to the reason why a researcher chooses to work with a critical feminist framework. Equally problematic is assuming what participants might perceive as *socially unacceptable or acceptable responses*, since individuals can have very different opinions about various issues. [38]

7. Conclusion

I observed vignettes to be an ethical and sensitive data collection tool in my research. Vignettes have conventionally been used in conjunction with other data collection tools, and similarly, I employed vignettes alongside unstructured and semistructured interviews. I found that vignettes also proved effective in providing insight into how participants interpreted their disability experiences at the intersections with different social divisions. Participants were able to shift focus onto the fictional characters within the vignettes, using their fictional stories as a starting point for difficult conversations at various intersectionalities. However, the methodological issues around employing vignettes need to be examined further, as well as the fitness for purpose of vignettes within qualitative educational research that is framed within a critical theoretical lens. For instance, should researchers be concerned with reducing socially desired responses as a practical strategy? For qualitative researchers operating within a critical framework, does this concern not indicate that we are seeking overly simplistic binary responses that are either desirable or undesirable? Indeed, more problematically, are we claiming to know the ways in which we can ascertain whether participants' responses are desirable or not? Clear guidelines are needed to clarify the methodological concerns of using vignettes and how the resulting data can be analysed. [39]

I also deployed various strategies to address the authenticity of the vignettes and develop a richer and more nuanced analysis, such as designing the vignette narratives around the feedback from participant interviews as well as from existing literature. Since this research was grounded in the intersectional framework, I was able to assess a vignette's usefulness in researching sensitive intersecting topics when participants added their own interpretations to the story, adding another layer of analysis. A more accurate gauge of whether or not a data collection tool was fit for purpose appears to be when participants felt safe and in control to discuss and take up contested positions. Moreover, by engaging in a more dialectical process between the epistemology and the methodology, ensuring that vignettes reflected the values which underpin the intersectional framework, I could examine issues that were central to the participants' experiences and ultimately, to the research enquiry. Finally, my experiences of conducting this study show that researchers should consider more critical ways of assessing whether vignettes are fit for purpose, rather than merely focusing on authenticity and social desirability as the two main gauges. A more reflexive

approach would entail evaluating whether vignettes can be a creative and sensitive medium to examine intermeshed contexts and difficult topics when researching with marginalised communities, providing space that is inclusive enough for diversity of perspectives. [40]

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