

# Utilising vignettes as prompts in semi-structured interviewing for employment relations research

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## Abstract

This article illustrates how vignettes were utilised as prompts in a semi-structured interview study of multiple job holders during the Covid-19 pandemic, to overcome challenges created by the latent nature of the topic under investigation and the atypical situation created by the pandemic. Our illustrative qualitative study sought to understand how multiple job holders identify their 'main job'. Three key benefits of using vignettes are outlined. The first of these was the ability for vignettes to encourage participant reflexivity (introspection) in a way that was conducive to 'unpacking' a tacit research problem to produce rich data. The vignettes also enabled efficient use of participants' scarce time, helped significantly by providing an interesting experience rather than a laborious one. Lastly, focusing participants' attention on the hypothetical vignette situations helped to enable some sense of normality in an atypical context which could have otherwise considerably skewed the data. On this basis, we present vignettes as a useful research tool that other employment relations researchers may wish to employ.

**Keywords:** vignettes, scenarios, qualitative research, multiple job holding

## Introduction

As employment relations (ER) researchers, we are, at times, faced with the challenge of measuring or understanding concepts or phenomena that our participants may not have explicitly considered beforehand or previously thought about. Additionally, we are often required to do this within real time constraints as our participants are typically very busy, participation in our research is voluntary and in addition to their normal routine. Furthermore, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, it caused (and continues to cause) significant disruption for researchers and participants alike (Dhakal et al., 2021; Malinen et al., 2020; Stewart, 2022). Notwithstanding the primary concern for human wellbeing, there was still the expectation that ER research would continue, albeit having to rapidly pivot to new methodologies and platforms to enable research to be conducted remotely. Drawing from a qualitative study that aimed to understand the notion of a 'main job' among individuals juggling multiple jobs, this article explores the application of vignettes as introductory prompts for semi-structured interviews. We found this method to be an efficient way to help multiple job holders connect with what is known to be a subtle or implicit research subject (Kottwitz et al., 2019) under atypical conditions (i.e. the Covid-19 pandemic).

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Specifically, we highlight three key advantages: enhanced reflection, time savings, and the establishment of normative conditions.

## **Specific case study outline**

There appears to be no clear consensus within the multiple job holding literature as to the meaning and, more importantly, identification of the concept of a 'main job' (Kottwitz et al., 2019). Although having broader applicability to those researching multiple job-holding in general, this concept of a 'main job' is of central interest in quantitative research which involves psychometric scales, as these scales typically need to be completed in relation to a specific 'job', hence the importance of being able to effectively direct participants to focus on their 'main job'. Recognising the importance of understanding why people with multiple jobs might choose one as their 'main job' when asked, we determined that a qualitative study would be best suited to investigate the decision-making process of these individuals.

Comprising two distinct parts, the first part of the study involved the presentation of brief vignettes outlining various (fictional) multiple job holding situations, followed by a semi-structured interview. Initially, the decision to include vignettes as prompts for the interviews was driven by the latent, implicit nature of the concept of interest. However, their perceived usefulness increased due to the highly atypical context (that of Covid-19 restrictions) faced during the data collection period.

Vignettes are "short descriptions of a personal or social situation which contain precise reference to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making or judgement-making processes of respondents" (Alexander & Becker, 1978 as cited in Weber, 1992, p. 138). While the vignettes used in the present context generally have the same core features – a hypothetical situation presented to participants to prompt their response to questions that require a decision of some form to be made (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000) – researchers can craft vignettes in a way that is conducive to the achievement of their own unique research objectives and context.

The four vignettes in this study were developed with consideration of Skilling and Stylianides' (2019) framework for vignette construction and chosen as a study tool because vignettes have, on multiple occasions, been praised for their role in studying behaviours or perceptions which may not be clearly visible or observable (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). They allow this by facilitating discussion on the hypothetical situation, which can reveal underlying perceptions or decision-making processes (Poulou, 2001; Skilling & Stylianides, 2019). As suggested by Schoenberg & Ravdal (2000), researchers can "delve into an area that may not be foremost in people's thoughts, but nevertheless is worthy of consideration" (p. 69). Similarly, vignettes can be ideal for facilitating discussion on a subject that may be vague and abstract, sensitive to discuss or have subtleties/peculiarities, thus, possibly be difficult to directly question individuals about or even collect data (Forsyth et al., 2018; Goss, 2013; Martin, 2004; Torres, 2009).

However, vignettes also have potential limitations; for example, reluctance by participants to respond to questions about the vignette due to feelings of not being expert enough or for fear of

incorrect responses (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000), therefore, vignette design is critical. Harrits and Møller (2021, p. 543) state the importance of crafting vignettes to ensure that “attention to detail and realistic representations” do not conflict with authenticity and engagement. Similarly, Murphy et al. (2021) refer to the uncertain link between reported behaviour and what happens in reality as well as the risk of complexity or oversimplification in vignettes leading to limited engagement; issues also noted by Sampson and Johannessen (2020), and Wilson and While (1998). Torres (2009), however, refers to the need for vignettes to be reflexive enough to respond to “the challenges that vignette construction and deliverance can pose” (p. 108).

In this study, the vignettes were used to provoke reflection and dialogue from participants as to how they would select one main job. Participants were given the choice between reading the vignettes or having them read to them. For each vignette, participants were asked to identify which job they regarded as the hypothetical individual’s ‘main’ job as well as the rationale for each response. An example of a vignette used in the study is below.

#### **Example of vignette (Vignette 4)**

Suzie has three kids, and her partner has not been able to work since a workplace accident a few years ago. The family’s finances are really tight, and the job that Suzie has had for most of her life – where she cleans at the hospital for around 20 hours a week earning minimum wage – isn’t enough to pay the bills anymore. She is only on a casual contract for this job, so the hours aren’t guaranteed, and she’s always nervous that she won’t get enough hours every week.

Suzie also recently got a part-time permanent job (so her hours are guaranteed), cleaning the local high school in the evenings. She works 15 hours a week in this job, but her hourly rate is higher than her hospital job – so she earns more here than she does cleaning at the hospital.

As well as this, Suzie also has a casual job as a Sunday School teacher for her church – where she looks after the kids who come to church, while teaching them bible study. This job is only 2 hours per week so she doesn’t earn much from it, but she enjoys it the more than any of her other jobs. She feels like she is really making a difference, sharing her knowledge with the kids – it gives her a sense of achievement. She also knows that the families with children at church all rely on her. If she wasn’t there to teach Sunday School, no one else would do it and the families with children would struggle to come to church.

In the semi-structured interview segment that followed, participants were asked questions regarding their own situations – how many jobs they held, why they held multiple jobs, and which one they regarded as their main job and why. This provided a means of prompting conversation and refocusing their attention and reflection from the vignettes to their own situation. In addition to insights that emerged from participants’ reflections on the vignettes, discussion of their own situations provided further insight into the factors upon which they based the selection of their

main job. A total of 15 participants from throughout New Zealand were interviewed, at which point theoretical saturation was deemed to have been reached (Guest et al., 2020)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Three advantages of using vignettes in this research**

Reflecting on our use of vignettes as prompts, we identified three key advantages of using them to investigate the ‘main job’ concept with multiple job holders. Firstly, the vignettes facilitated participant reflexivity (introspections of research participants that are stimulated by their involvement, see Cassell et al., 2020), enabling us to ‘tap into’ underlying reasoning and internal dialogue from participants on the ‘main job issue’. Next, they ensured efficient use of participants’ scarce time – both by promptly ‘cutting’ to the heart of the ‘main job issue’ and by providing an experience for participants that was engaging and not laborious. Finally, the vignettes allowed us to pose the research question within some staged semblance of normality, creating some distance from the highly atypical context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These advantages will now be discussed in more detail.

#### *1. Vignettes as a tool to encourage reflexivity (introspection) when exploring a tacit research problem*

We believe that the vignettes encouraged introspection and more general reflexivity, eliciting access to participants’ internal dialogue and thought processes as they worked through the questions posed to them. Participants appeared to quickly get comfortable with sharing their internal dialogue and reflection aloud. It was not uncommon for participants to acknowledge this – with one participant starting their response with: “this is me thinking out loud”. Witnessing and capturing this internal dialogue produced data that directly contributed to answering the research question.

With each vignette presentation being followed by an open question, participants were then allowed to lead the dialogue – something noted as crucial to creating a safe space for reflexivity by Cassell et al. (2020). Participant reflexivity appeared to be evident, specifically in two ways. The first of these involved prompting reflection/comparison to one’s own situation, which provided further insight, indicating how an individual’s own multiple job holding situation could influence how they selected a main job for their vignette character. Reflexivity was evident in a second way as some participants engaged in a detailed, methodical problem-solving process on behalf of the fictional character. While this did not necessarily or directly contribute to answering the original research question at hand, the depth of thought with which participants approached this problem solving was quite remarkable and unexpected. It signifies the impact that the vignettes had upon participants, and the level with which they felt able to connect with the fictional characters and engage with the task they were given.

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<sup>1</sup> Full ethical approval for the research was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics – Northern Committee, approval number NOR 19/08. All participants provided informed written consent to participate in the research prior to the start of the interview.

Indeed, there were a number of interesting examples of participants engaging with the vignettes in more depth than anticipated; thus demonstrating significant reflexivity and introspection. An example of this was participants placing themselves in the position of the vignette characters, even hypothesising on future events that may happen to the characters or actions they could take. The most fascinating example of this was in the case of Participant Two – someone who had held multiple jobs extensively throughout her life – who empathised with the characters to the extent that she would suggest ways in which they could resolve the dilemmas they faced. She exhibited this particularly in the case of Suzie (Vignette 4)' saying:

This is a tough one for her. She, she could get probably quite a lot of hours working at minimum wage [job one], and that will just be like the previous one [vignette], would just get exhausted from just working too much and having to run a household and three kids and an unwell partner. So... she needs to focus on that permanent job that pays more and try and seek more of that. Unless she can get that casual contract made permanent somehow or... might not always be possible, but bit of a precarious situation.

In the case of Wiremu (Vignette 3), Participant Two perceived Wiremu's dilemma whereby he would like to be able to do more work for his Iwi<sup>2</sup>:

I feel that in his heart, he probably would be happier to do more work for this... for the Iwi. Uhhh... I'm trying to think of how I could solve his problem for him [both laugh]. He could give up some of that salary and work half the days... probably would be able to get a person to job share.

Interestingly, Participant Fifteen – who, like Participant Two, was also someone who enjoyed holding multiple jobs and had done so throughout his life – tried to solve a perceived dilemma for Suzie (Vignette 4) in a similar fashion, suggesting that she attempt to grow the work in her third job:

So, if I were Suzie, I would, yeah, I think that being a Sunday school teacher at the church would be the main job. If she can talk to the parents of more kids to bring their kids to the church on a Sunday and she can maybe earn, you know, make a living through that job. If parents are dependent on her, and obviously see value in her teaching, and she enjoys that teaching and feels more useful and meaningful in the job. That should be the main job, but obviously she needs to, you know, put food on the table and look after her kids and all of that. So a very kind of tricky situation.

Participants also often highly empathised with the predicaments of the characters (again demonstrating significant reflexivity and introspection), which was particularly evident in the cases of Wiremu (Vignette 3) and Suzie (Vignette 4), where multiple participants expressed that they must be exhausted. Participants also revealed where they felt the characters may prefer for their main job to be different to the one that they had identified. An example of this can be seen in Joe's case (Vignette 1) with Participant Three, who took a fairly traditional approach across all

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<sup>2</sup> A Te Reo Māori phrase describing a shared Māori ancestry group akin to a tribe

main selections in terms of defining the main job. While he was adamant that Joe's main call centre job was his first job, which provided the most stable income, he acknowledged that Joe would likely prefer, and want to build up, his second, lower paying job in photography, which was also his passion, to ultimately become his main job.

Participant Eight also expressed the same sentiment:

I'd love to think that the photography was his main job because it aligns more with his sort of identity and what he wants to be and that sort of thing. But unfortunately, his main job to me is his call centre work.

From a methodological perspective, it was encouraging that multiple participants were able to both relate to the vignettes presented to their own situations and empathise with the characters' situations. This suggests that the scenarios and characters depicted were perceived as appropriately realistic and relatable for participants (see Skilling & Stylianides, 2019; Sayre, 2006).

Furthermore, at times, empathy with the characters appeared to reach the extent of some participants even proposing solutions for issues that they perceived the characters to be facing (which was not an objective of the interview). It was particularly interesting that the two study participants, who had the tendency to undertake fairly in-depth problem-solving attempts for the vignette characters, were in similar work arrangement situations. Both participants were at similar stages of their careers, approximately middle-aged, and had held multiple jobs extensively over the course of their careers. Furthermore, multiple job holding appeared to be a choice for these two participants and – based on the details they shared – one that they seemed to enjoy and that enriched their lives. The problem-solving attempts of these individuals could perhaps be interpreted as them making recommendations to allow the vignette characters to achieve similarly enriching multiple job situations.

More generally, the vignettes appeared to significantly assist participants to organise and, importantly for this research, verbalise their perspectives on the meaning of a 'main job' for a multiple job holder – something that appeared to not have been previously considered or discussed in the literature. Moreover, the vignettes certainly appeared to act as a framework to both prompt relevant memories and beliefs from participants and to organise their perspectives on the focus of the research.

## *2. Effective time utilisation of vignettes as prompts*

As a research population, multiple job holders present unique challenges as, in addition to being a somewhat challenging niche group to recruit, past research also confirms that those holding multiple jobs tend to be busier than their single job holding counterparts (Hipple, 2010; Marucci-Wellman et al., 2014). Therefore, once participants were recruited (through social media networks of relevance to multiple job holders), the data collection method employed had to be one that was as efficient as possible in relation to time utilisation as well as one that would come across as appealing to participants. If a utilised method was not easily understandable or perceived as a positive use of their time, participants may not have responded to the recruitment efforts – effectively a form of 'face validity'. As multiple job holders are an under-researched population in

New Zealand, it was important that the research method actively engaged these individuals in the research process to collect rich data.

The decision to use vignettes in this study was partly driven with these goals in mind. Post-interview feedback from participants would suggest that these goals were achieved. Participants often commented on the vignettes' usefulness in focusing their attention while also making their participation more enjoyable and relevant to their own situation. For example, a number of participants commented, both while giving their responses and again after the interview, that the thought process they used during the interview (reading the vignette and answering associated questions) was challenging yet engaging, and that the vignettes played a significant role in this. Two participants stated that they found the process "interesting", while another labelled it "actually good fun", and expressed that they were "enjoying it". This may have been either related to, or enhanced by, the context in which the interviews were taking place during the pandemic – when many were still working from home and having relatively scarce interaction with the 'outside world'.

It is worth mentioning at this point that a key consideration to achieving these goals is to develop appropriately detailed vignettes. As noted by Skilling and Stylianides (2019), vignette content should be realistic so that the story is relatable and contain sufficient detail to give participants enough of a story to relate to. However, it is also important that vignettes are not too long or detailed, or an excessive number of vignettes presented at the risk of fatiguing and disengaging participants. Given the high frequency with which participants empathised with individuals portrayed in the vignettes and/or related the vignette story to their own situation, it appears that an appropriate balance was achieved. The vignettes ranged from 170-260 words, with content drawn from extant research on multiple job holders as to be realistic. Piloting our vignettes and the subsequent interview schedule in relation to content and process with a small group of multiple job holders (not involved in the study) was deemed to be essential in this respect.

Overall, we found that utilising vignettes facilitated efficient use of participant time, effectively focusing attention on the topic at hand, and increased motivation and engagement in the interview process. Although we used this technique within a tacit research type focus, we believe similar advantages in time utilisation are also likely for more explicit topics, that have been previously considered by participants.

### *3. Creating a verisimilitude of normality during a very abnormal period*

A key challenge, beyond the practical constraints imposed by undertaking research as the pandemic unfolded, was the unusual context it created. In a study that relied upon posing a rather tacit research focus to participants and requiring them to hypothetically respond in relation to their own situation, the atypical situation of the pandemic had the potential to confound and/or complicate responses. The use of vignettes, therefore, provided a consistent and relatable scenario to counter the highly abnormal environment present during the pandemic.

At the time of data collection in mid-2020, many New Zealanders' employment had been affected in some way by the Covid-19 pandemic. Downturn in certain industries resulted in redundancies (although this was not widespread at the time of data collection – possibly in part due to the

Government's wage subsidy aimed at keeping workers in their jobs (Rosenberg, 2020). A large number of workers were, in effect, 'furloughed' from their roles; not required to, or indeed restricted from, physically going to work, but still received a portion of their normal salary or wages – often aided by the Government wage subsidy (Maré & Hyslop, 2021; Rosenberg, 2020). Outside of those unable to work for these reasons, a considerable number worked from home – a practice that was fairly novel to many of the impacted workers and employing organisations (Green et al., 2020). If one of a multiple job holder's jobs was affected by the pandemic, but another job remained largely unaffected, it is highly possible that they would identify the unaffected job to be their 'main' job at that point in time. While an interesting insight in relation to the pandemic, this would have been largely detrimental to the achievement of the research objective to investigate the main job issue in general – not in a pandemic-specific context. There was a very real risk that the data collected during such an event would have been completely skewed by the immediate external context. Postponing the research was not feasible for pragmatic considerations and, indeed, research seeking to examine the plight of this particular group of workers was perhaps even more necessary at the time (Hodder & Martínez Lucio, 2021). Thus, to persevere with the research, our methodological choices needed to be reviewed with the goal of minimising the influence of these external factors on the data collected.

This review process reinforced our intention to utilise vignettes as prompts in our research. It was deemed that use of vignettes could provide an additional benefit by creating some detachment from the context within which the research was being undertaken – thus assisting in creating a 'verisimilitude of normality' with the pervasive Covid-19 context present at the time not significantly featuring in the interview responses. Inevitably, the study could not occur in a vacuum and participants (and the researcher) were still conscious of the immediate events/abnormal situation. However, we found that the vignettes prompted a thought process and reflections of a more 'normal' work/life situation.

The use of vignettes to help participants determine what they perceived as the main job and why proved to be a useful approach to adopt in this study. The concept of a 'main' job was able to be presented and more easily explained through vignettes written for that purpose, helping to create distance and, at the same time, engagement between the participant and this somewhat esoteric concept (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Many of the participants explored the underlying perceptions of a 'main' job and were able to provide a clear rationale for their responses (Skilling & Stylianides, 2019).

From a practical perspective, their novelty helped to foster an element of enjoyment and engagement for participants, while the fixed narrative of the vignettes also helped to focus their attention and reduced the time requirement for participants (Sampson & Johannessen, 2020). The vignettes also enabled a degree of detachment between the participant and the topic of interest, with the participant providing opinion on a hypothetical situation relatively unrelated to their own (Torrinen, 2018). However, it is also important to note that the vignettes had a very specific and somewhat straightforward aim in this study, without the complexities which are likely to be present in a multi-faceted organisational scenario with a number of interacting system elements.

In summary, although we found vignettes to be useful within the Covid-19 pandemic context, we believe that their usefulness in relation to encouraging participants to focus on a particular



‘context’ could be useful in many ER research situations where the researcher seeks to detach the problem at hand from the day-to-day context in which research is being undertaken.

## Conclusion

In this article we have suggested that using vignettes when conducting qualitative ER research can bring a number of benefits. From our research we identified three such benefits. Firstly, their usage appears to help participants ‘organise’ their thoughts in relation to a somewhat tacit concept – “what is your main job?”. We explored this idea through the concept of reflexivity. Secondly, we found that this facilitation of reflexivity provided by the vignettes appeared to optimise the time utilisation – both in terms of efficiency and ensuring that the time participants gave us was not spent in a boring or arduous way. Lastly, we believe that the vignettes facilitated in creating a ‘veil’ of normality which was desired in our research around the topic of their multiple job holding during a very abnormal period – the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, we would encourage our fellow ER researchers to consider how vignettes may serve as a useful tool in their own research.

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