

Essay

The use of vignettes in an international comparative social work research: In-practice and on-practice reflections on practices

by

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Abstract

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the strengths and challenges in qualitative comparative research on personal social services. The specific methodological approach that these reflections emerge from is the application of case vignettes in focus group interviews with social workers, working in different welfare regimes.

We describe the process of vignette construction and implementation in focus group interviews, and relate this to findings in a large international project with researchers and data from Chile, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Ireland and the UK.

Findings reveal that some globally spread professional norms prevail when they are applied locally, while others are more formed through welfare systems with strong contextual norms and legal and socio-economic barriers. The strength of the data retrieved from the study is that it makes it possible to separate information on actual practice from information on principles and system norms, thus providing in-practice and on-practice reflections.

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Introduction

Comparative studies of social policy have contributed for decades to our understanding of the differences between welfare systems, organizational structures and the roles and functions of street-level bureaucrats. These studies have helped us to identify the driving forces behind, and the consequences of, different welfare policies. Earlier on, a substantial part of social policies was usually more or less excluded from welfare state comparisons, namely the personal social services (Sipilä, 2019), including child protection work, social work with disadvantaged people and the social care of the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill and the treatment of people addicted to alcohol and substance abuse. Comparisons of these types of policies can be complicated for various reasons (Nygren, White & Ellingsen, 2018; Wollmann, Koprić & Marcou, 2016). Social services are often decentralized and vary between regions and communities, as well as varying within the mix of the public, NGOs and private for-profit service providers. Also, they are not easily quantifiable, since they consist of 'people working with people', rather than fixed sums of financial allowances or the number of beds. Additionally, the professionals in these areas often act with a relatively high degree of autonomy, so their personal judgment will affect the services and measures that are offered. Another obstacle in the comparisons of personal social services is that cultural norms affect how they are delimited, and how they incorporate different levels of coercive measures and restrictions in the lives of their service clients.

The aim of this essay is to reflect on the strengths and challenges in qualitative comparative research on personal social services, based on an international project on family complexity in social work. The specific methodological approach that these reflections emerge from is the application of case vignettes in focus group interviews with social workers, working in different welfare regimes. One of the strengths of the data retrieved from the study is that it makes it possible to separate information on actual practice from information on principles and system norms, thus providing in-practice and on-practice reflections.

The Family Complexity project

The Family Complexity project, a part of the NORFACE Welfare State Futures programme, compared family policies and family-based social work in various types of welfare states¹. It aimed to describe and analyse how social workers across different contexts understand notions of family, and how they describe practices and objectives in their work with families in four service areas: child welfare, drug/alcohol abuse treatment, migrating families and people with disabilities. Social workers from Bulgaria, Chile, Ireland, Lithuania, Mexico, Norway, Sweden and the UK participated in the project (Nygren et al., 2018). The eight countries were classified into four groups based on whether they could be labelled as de-familialized, partly de-familialized, re-familialized or familialized welfare policy regimes (Hantrais, 2004)

The Family complexity project refined comparative research methods by how it combined contextual and qualitative data from social practice. A substantial part of the data, besides international and national statistics and descriptions of national social policies, was first-hand accounts from social workers in the eight countries. A large number (>50) of focus groups were organized with one or two persons from the research team as moderators. Most focus groups had 3-6 participants. The vignette with the fictitious case was introduced by the moderators, who continuously prompted the discussions with new information from the case. The case (see: bit.ly/FACSK2) was developed by researchers from across the participating countries, in order to create a case scenario that would be familiar to social workers, both from all the countries and from different areas of social services. All focus group interviews were transcribed, and except for the UK and Irish groups, translated to English.

In this essay, we draw from our experiences as project leaders of this large international and comparative study of social work with families with complex needs (bit.ly/FACSK2). Our analytical reflections about strengths and challenges go beyond previous studies in the use of vignettes in social research primarily, based on single case studies (Sampson & Johannesson, 2020). Our approach is comparative in two dimensions: It is international, and compares social work in eight countries in four different welfare systems around the world, and compares social work in different

¹ Project website: bit.ly/FACSK2

service areas, in our case child welfare, mental health, addictions and social work with migrants, i.e., areas covering a multitude of complex social problems.

We draw upon notes from data collection in the field and analytical work in the multinational research group for this essay. Additionally, we distributed a small survey to most of the members of our research team who were involved as instructors, leaders or observers in the focus groups. Due to their current work situation, we were unfortunately only able to acquire feedback from Swedish and Norwegian colleagues: however, they were covering data collection from Chile, Mexico, Norway, Sweden, Lithuania and Bulgaria.

We discussed the vignette within the project group to get researchers from all the countries involved in the development of the vignette, and ensure to avoid context-specific concepts. In general, the vignette functioned well, according to all co-researchers of the project's eight countries, as we managed to develop a vignette that all informants understood. They were able to relate to this as a realistic situation, although they had not exactly met this specific, fictitious family constellation in their practices. In some interviews, they were specifically asked about this, and they confirmed that the vignette reflected common issues and problems across different contexts. If they encountered information that was not very precise in relation to their context, the participants could comment that this discrepancy was due to the international profile of the project.

The Swedish research team reported that the facilitator's guide (see bit.ly/FACSK2) was helpful for their work as moderators. The Norwegians meant that the vignette provided a common basis for making the interviews structured, thereby enabling cross-country comparisons. The vignette was regarded as suitable in size, and gave resonance among professionals in the various service areas. Open questions gave the participants the possibility to provide elaborated information that was not specifically asked for.

The research teams from both Sweden and Norway reported that the vignette was a good tool to initiate on- and in-practice discussions. Discussions altered between

focusing on themes in the vignette itself, with examples from one's own practices highlighted in on-practice reflections.

Vignette studies in comparative social work

Vignettes are increasingly used in both quantitative and qualitative social and health research (Erfanian, Latifnejad Roudsari, Heydari & Noghani Dokht Bahmani, 2020). The early use of vignettes in anthropology and psychology in the 1950s was followed by many studies within disciplines that explore the function and development of welfare state professions and their target groups, such as school teachers, and the professions of health care, social care and social work and their clients. In particular, vignettes can be triggered in investigating professionals' perceptions, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, judgment and decision-making when the work tasks are complex (Križ & Skivenes, 2013; Smithson, 2000).

Case vignettes have been used to trigger feedback from interviewees, sometimes individually, while other times in group. Due to the complexity of social issues, social work actions commonly require professional reasoning and ethical judgements, so standardized measures are scarce. Therefore, the combined approach with case vignettes and focus groups has been considered as a feasible way to conduct comparative social work research. Focus group methodology is useful in combination with the use of vignettes, since it allows participants to co-construct and conceptualize their understandings and action strategies in relation to complex problems (Kreuger & Casey, 2014). For the comparative researcher, such information will possibly reveal the specific influence of culture, policies, socio-economic living conditions and other contextual factors that encircle professional social work.

There are several definitions of vignettes, but most of them share a common content with an oft-cited definition by Finch, thereby suggesting that vignettes 'can be defined as short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, and the interviewee is invited to respond to those situations' (Finch, 1987). In a review study of 105 books and articles, Erfanian et al. concluded that vignettes work as an effective tool that can be used to collect 'more diverse and thorough data,

particularly, in cross-cultural research' (Erfanian et al., 2000). Erfanian et al.'s review identified several practical rewards of using vignettes, e.g., strength in the 'assessment of attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and norms', 'desensitizing sensitive morally-charged topics', and as an enhancement of existing data. They also noted important limitations with vignettes in terms of validity, interpretations and the dilemma with the relationship between 'belief and action', also seen in methodological discussions as a potential gap between what interviewees talk about as actions in relation to a hypothetical situation, and what they would actually do in a real situation.

In social work research, vignette studies have been carried out in many ways, in many settings, dealing with different target groups, different organizational structures and professional judgment in complex issues (Forrester et al., 2008; Killich et al., 2012; Steckley, 2012; Stokes & Schmidt, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2010; Lee & Goh, 2020; Przeperski & Taylor, 2020; Wilks, 2004). Only a few studies have applied the vignette technique in international comparative research (Nygren & Olstedal, 2015).

The vignette as a ground for 'in'- and 'on'- practice reflections

'All human beings – not only professional practitioners – need to become competent in taking action and simultaneously reflecting on this action to learn from it' (Agyris & Schön, 1989, p. 4). When we study professionals' practices, we cannot just ask them what they are doing, but instead develop hypotheses as inaccurate representations of the behavior they claim to describe. 'We must construct his theory-in-use from observations of his behavior' (Agyris & Schön, 1989, p. 7). Inspired by Schön's (1983) concepts of 'reflections in action' and 'reflections on action', we identified different ways of approaching the vignette within the interviews. 'In-practice' reflections are reflections on the content of the vignette, and how they would approach the situation described in the vignette. 'On-practice' reflections are when discussions about the vignette, which lead the social workers to reflect on their own everyday practices.

This is an example from the Family Complexity project data, showing the differences:

Informant 1: She's advised, it says, to call... [reads from the vignette:] *'I was advised to call you, if there were any support, so that is why I am calling'*.

Informant 2: Well, when we get phone calls like this, sometimes we get it from earlier patients, or patients who are on 'leave'. Then we just have to hear... just listen, because often when they have said things out loud, they in a way get things sorted out... And then, you know, we often ask: What do you think I can help you with? What do you think yourself? In a way, you pass the ball back to them, but in this case, it seems pretty chaotic, so I don't know how easy it is. Well... we still have to try, asking.. what do you think I can... you know.

They are in parts of this extract discussing the issue in the vignette itself, and in other parts they are talking about how they generally work.

In another focus group discussion, the moderator asks a question, and the informant then presents 'in-practice' reflections, describing how to listen to- and make the service user feel safe in the situation. Then there is a shift to 'on-practice' reflection, with a more general description of what people in the emergency team are supposed to do. They generally transfer such issues to the emergency team:

Moderator: Yes... so if one thinks a bit, that you now go into the office and you get a call like this. What would your day look like then? How would it affect your work today, sort of?

Informant: I think I would get the emergency team involved, so that she... of course I listen, I mean, as I've understood it, then the mother is also upset and starting to break down, so I'm thinking about making her safe so that she can receive support and help. And those in the emergency team can go and visit and better evaluate what is happening, and... and probably help her in a way to establish contact with the right bodies that she may fit in... that's how it is, the emergency team is after all fantastic like that...

The research provides the possibility to highlight the discussion about what they are planning to do and ought to do, and what they are actually doing. One example of this is when the informants ask critical questions about the contributions from fellow participants in the focus group interview. These reflections dealt with what was considered as real and not, see Studsrød, Ellingsen, Muñoz & Mancinas (2018):

Still, suggested actions from participants may reflect a mixture of 'real practice' and 'ideal practice'; on occasion, participants asked peers if they *would* do as they suggested.

Participants commented upon the answers from others in the group. The discussion related to the vignette can trigger the question about different interpretations of how they describe reality, and about the work they are doing. It is a discussion about the representation of what they are doing and the interpretation of the reality in itself. In addition, such discussions may reveal the reflective practices within a workplace. A vignette might trigger a discussion about the relationship between different

'constructions' and more joint perceptions of 'reality'. Such discussions within a research group context may strengthen the validity of the data.

Global social work ethos as a departure for contextual comparison

The analysis and reflections we have presented in this essay give an idea of the level of comparison that was possible to achieve from the vignette study, focusing on personal social services. In spite of system differences, social workers in all countries share mostly similar understandings of the relevance of family ties as resources in their work. This shared understanding may indicate a 'global social worker ethos' (Nygren et al., 2018) that might have followed from increasingly internationalized social work education (Trygged, 2010). This ethos plays out as an aspect of discretion, since it provides normative guidance for social workers' actions. Notable though, are the differences in the emphasis on the nuclear family (e.g. Lithuania) vs. more openness towards alternative family forms (e.g. Norway) (Oltedal & Nygren., 2019). This global ethos is not categorical, and is edited and translated into local contexts, so parallel to globalization there is also a 'force of indigenization' (Dominelli, 2014; Koskinen, 2019).

The Family Complexity project adds to the development of research methodology by its unique composition of contextual data, and data from direct social practice. For example, different national discourses regarding gender can be identified as something that affected the way social workers responded to the discussions of the focus groups. Even if the vignette was meant to function globally, there may be aspects that influenced how it was perceived in the different welfare contexts. The father was generally not defined as a possible caregiver for the children, while the focus was on the mother – in spite of her risk-oriented behaviour. A reason for this could be that the mother in the vignette was the one who contacted the social worker, and who said that the father was violent.

Sometimes, it is difficult to decide if something is 'lost in translation', or if it is anchored in different (national) discourses, e.g., about the legal framework/the approach towards/the reaction to violence. We are not sure if the translation between different languages was precise enough (good enough). For example, violence might

be translated in different ways into different contexts. The seriousness regarding violence is difficult to judge, and whether it is mediated in the same way in different countries. A theme like violence might trigger- and get the focus, and lead the discussions away from other issues.

Methodologically speaking, the focus group/vignette approach revealed an opportunity to distinguish between the interesting categories in-practice and on-practice reflections from social workers. The strength of the data retrieved from the study is that it makes it possible to separate information on actual practice (what is done in a real case) from information on principles and system norms (what they would do in cases like this) in the social workers' tellings, hence providing knowledge on how norms and contextual conditions are understood, and how they influence professional action.

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