# SAGE Research Methods Case Education Submission for Consideration

## Case Title

Using vignettes in interviews: Exploring discourses around child sexuality


## Author Name(s)

Paul Flanagan

## Author Affiliation & Country of Affiliation

University of Waikato, New Zealand

## Author Email Address

Email: paulf@waikato.ac.nz


---


## Keywords

Vignettes, interviews, sensitive research, childhood sexuality, discourse analysis


## Relevant Disciplines

School/Educational Psychology

## Methods Used

Vignettes, interviews, discourse analysis

## Academic Level

Postgraduate

## Contributor Biography

Paul Flanagan is a senior lecturer in counsellor education at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. He previously practiced as a child and family counsellor in both statutory and community agencies. Paul's research takes up an area of interest from his counselling practice, examining constructions of childhood sexuality, and the effects for children from how their actions position them discursively, in education and family, but also wider social and cultural contexts.

## Link to the Research Output

Flanagan, P. (2014a). Ethical beginnings: Reflexive questioning in designing child sexuality research. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 14*(2), 139-146. doi:10.1080/14733145.2013.779734

Flanagan, P. (2014b). Unpacking ideas of sexuality in childhood: What do primary teachers and parents say? *Open Review of Educational Research, 1*(1), 160-170. doi:10.1080/23265507.2014.972436

The doctoral study using the research methods in this case study will be completed in 2016.

---

## Abstract

In this case study I describe the process of data gathering using vignettes in both interview and focus group contexts. Vignettes offer multiple possibilities when researching sensitive topics in which participants may experience vulnerability. This research examines understandings of sexuality in childhood. As a child and family counsellor working closely with principals and teachers in primary schools, I supported schools and families responding to children's 'sexual' activity. Parents and teachers questioned the causes and effects of these children's actions. Many adults responded from fear, naivety, confusion and assumptions about children's actions. These adult reactions led towards over reactive and punitive consequences for children. Informed by adults' discomfort and subsequent inscriptions of children's actions as *sexual*, I developed six vignettes to elicit participant knowledge. I

worked alongside two primary schools and a community counselling agency. In this case study I will discuss developing the vignettes and their implementation in interviews with teachers, parents and counsellors.

## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case students should be able to:

- Identify applications of vignettes as a method in sensitive research
- Describe and understand the purposes and effects for using vignettes in research interviews
- Consider some of the practical issues in planning research involving vignettes
- Consider some of the potential ethical issues for participants and researcher

## Case Study

**Project overview and context:**

This case study describes my use of vignettes as a method for inquiry into a sensitive topic within my doctoral research project. My research explores constructions of sexuality in childhood. I use discourse analysis on a range of texts, including transcripts of interviews and focus groups that I conducted using vignettes. This case study will focus on the process of developing and using vignettes to elicit data from participants.

It is important to locate this research in context, and acknowledge a range of complexities involved. I came to research this topic having worked in professional practice as a counsellor with children and young people in schools, with *Child Youth & Family* (the New Zealand statutory child protection agency), as well as in *Parentline,* a non-government community child advocacy agency. Through the experience of counselling with children who were referred for their 'sexualised behaviour', I found that significant adults (such as teachers

and parents) often emphasised children's words and actions as sexual – but coming from adult perspectives of actions and words which were understood as sexual. This point will be expanded later. One intention of my writing and research is to support the generation of conversations in schools and among parents about sexuality in childhood. Such conversations could expand ideas of what sexuality possibly means in children's lives, and not limit thinking to fear of abuse or harmful behaviour. A further possible effect could be supporting more open spaces for transparent and robust conversations related to sexuality education.

It can be a tricky to speak of children and sexuality together. Robinson (2005) identifies "three dominant contradictory discourses that operate around children and sexuality" (p. 7), of the adult/child binary; the gendered 'knowing child' as loss of innocence; and a moral panic about children as 'sexual beings'. Discourses of sexuality can position people as *normal* or *perverted* (see Burr, 2003), or hold fixed and fluid meanings around *reproduction*, *relationship* and/or *recreation* (see Frayser, 2003). Negotiating these meanings of sexuality for children adds to a complex set of contested discourses on childhood – as passive or active learners; persons who are 'becoming' or in 'being'; or as latent or engaged in their sexuality. I have heard of children labelled as 'toucher' or 'sex offender' or 'deviant' for their 'sexual' actions and words, by adults in authority (teachers, parents, social workers, police, and others). I have reflected elsewhere on linking research and my counselling practice (see Flanagan, 2010, 2014a), and this research responds and contributes to the literature around telling sexual stories and researching sexual stories (for example, Plummer, 1995). I had also been reflecting in my writing on a range of stories from counselling practice that explored understandings applied to specific children's experiences (see Flanagan, 2009, 2011, 2013). Given that my research investigates what ideas adults have about children's 'sexual' words and actions, I wondered how best to invite adults to talk about these issues.

The challenge for my research was how to encourage people to speak about these issues in an open and transparent way. Vignettes offered a clear and simple approach.

**Developing Vignettes**

The literature on using a vignette method acknowledges the use of "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances" (Finch, 1987, p. 105), to offer concrete examples of human experience that participants are invited to respond to (Hazel, cited by Barter & Renold, 2000). Calling for 'authentic' vignettes (Neff, cited in Barter & Renold, 2000), real and actual scenarios were developed so that participants understand these experiences really do occur for children. Participants' thinking can be further explored by the researcher drawing out opinions and thoughts about the event.

Vignettes enable people to participate who might find it difficult to discuss or explore sensitive topics (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). This exploration can be done safely, as the hypothetical nature of vignettes offer participants distance from personal experience, allowing them to explore sensitive topics in a less threatening way (Barter and Renold, 1999). Commenting on a story is not threatening, compared with being asked to respond from direct personal experience. Participants can respond to a scenario about what they themselves would do, or to imagine how another person, such as one of the vignette characters, might respond (Hughes, cited in Barter & Renold, 2000). There is space, however, for participants to disclose personal connection to events or ideas of a particular vignette, if they so choose to do. Participants have control over whether and when they might introduce personal experiential responses. Barter and Renold (2000) comment that vignettes can be used across a range of participant groups for comparison of perceptions, as I intended to do with teachers, parents and counsellors.

I decided to use vignettes as the method of inquiry, due to the potential sensitivity of the research topic. My research questions were:

- What current understandings of childhood sexuality are known and used within school, family and therapy contexts in NZ? And what effects do these understandings have for children who sexually act with others?
- Are there other accounts identifiable in NZ about children's sexuality and sexual activity (by parents, teachers, counsellors/therapists) that stand apart from dominant understandings or perceptions?
- What discourses (e.g. of childhood(s), sexuality and childhood sexuality) help shape these stories?
- How are children and adults connected with them positioned within discourses of childhood sexuality? What possible effects do these discourses have for identity constructions of children as sexual beings?

These questions consequently shape and have effects for the vignette method in this research. Prior to recruiting and engaging research participants I had first consulted and piloted these ideas with parents, principals and teachers. Using networks from when I practiced as a counsellor, I contacted principals and teachers who knew of my work with children. I considered that these people would respond honestly to what I was proposing. I asked them to respond, both as education professionals and as parents, to my ideas for the research and to the draft vignettes: how would these work? What problems might they foresee? Did they have any suggestions to improve or develop the vignettes? I received feedback that vignettes would offer a structured and safe process to explore these areas. My thinking in using scenarios or vignettes included a number of ideas:

- that participants have a focus on real and specific events;
- that a range of examples invite participants to explore widely their own perspectives;

- that a range of actual stories might invite the participants to tell something of other stories (whether personal to their own history or someone closely connected, or professionally where they have had experiences they could bring into the interviews);
- that a variety of examples could draw forth ideas that connected with sexuality in childhood, and so provide rich data for examining discursive positioning and shaping of "perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes" as well as opening space for ideas related to gender, culture and other social and historical genealogies that form part of the archaeological mix of discourses on childhood and sexuality.

Another aspect of this research requiring care was thinking about safety for those participating in the research and also for me, as the researcher. I made use of the process of ethical review to consider this issue, positioning the ethics review committee as consultants in my research process (see Flanagan, 2012, 2014a). Considering safety for participants, and attending to this research area as a sensitive topic, I prepared information for participants on support services. This was offered and given to them at the beginning of the interview, prior to the first vignette. In the event that any of the participants did experience a level of vulnerability or trauma, resulting from the vignettes or their participation, they had information to access counselling services or links to helpful webpages. Engaging in sensitive research can also have effects for a researcher. I was aware of potential effects for me from possibly hearing stories of abuse and trauma. There was also some risk for vulnerability from being positioned as a middle-aged, white male exploring sexuality in childhood. I constructed a network of support with my own professional counselling supervisor, in addition to the support of my doctoral research supervisory panel. I have also reflected on this in some writing (Flanagan, 2015).

**Research design: Selecting narratives and constructing vignettes**

Six vignettes were designed using material from clinical and anecdotal stories of children's actions in contexts where adults had responded to these events as *sexual* actions. Identities and details of the stories were altered and developed, to construct a hypothetical event and to afford anonymity for the children, families and schools originally involved. The facts or 'truth' of these vignettes sit in their origins as events told me in counselling or consultations by children, teachers, principals and counsellors over years prior to engaging in this research. These vignettes authentically recount events that have been experienced by children.

With each vignette a specific and brief scenario is explored. The various stories make use of different contexts and experiences, including a range of ages of primary school children, both male and female. The stories develop in complexity and ambiguity, implicitly inviting participants to explore their thinking and ideas of responses in a gradual and scaffolded process. There is an ambiguity about adult gender, and character ethnicity, while providing detail about child age and gender. Some are single stage vignettes, while others have as second and third stage in their telling.

**Six vignettes developed**

These vignettes were used to prompt discussions about participant perceptions of what is sexual: to expose binaries in discourse; about what actions could be deemed normal or deviant or other; and opening space to elicit any other personal and specific stories they might be willing to share. In the space available, I cannot present all six vignettes, and refer readers to Flanagan (2014b) for an account of the vignettes about *Mark* (#1) and *Jackie* (#4). Here I give a brief outline of three vignettes (#2, 3, and 5), so that readers can have an understanding of the range of these vignettes, and how they develop in diversity and complexity. I then present an account of *Steven and Lucy* (#6), (see below, 'Method in action: Responses to one vignette') describing how participants responded to this vignette.

**Deirdre and Frank (#2)**

The second of the six vignettes in my study has two parts. The first part describes two eight year old children, a boy and a girl, in the school playground. The girl kisses the boy on the lips.

> *Deirdre and Frank are both eight years old. Their classroom teacher sees them playing together in the classroom, and then again notices them playing together outside. During their morning playtime, Deirdre was seen by her teacher kissing Frank on the lips.*

This first part opens possibilities for ideas about gender, about girlfriends and boyfriends; heteronormative ideas of friendships; cultural perspectives of kissing per se; and the possibility of fears or questions about where the action might have originated or might progress to. The second part includes a response from the teacher and principal.

> *The teacher asked Deirdre's parents to come to a meeting with the principal. The principal told her parents that Deirdre's behaviour was not normal and could possibly lead to "more serious sexual offending" as she gets older. The parents were told that Deirdre would be suspended while the school considered its response.*

This second part sounds shocking and unbelievable, but gives a factual account of what occurred to a child in school. What might sit behind a particular teacher or principal's thinking is not known in this scenario, but the value of the vignette in research is to open space for broader thinking about how adults understand children's actions, and how participants might consider kissing and sexuality and gender.

**Oliver**

The third vignette (in two parts) tells of a five year old boy pulling down his pants in the classroom.

> *Oliver is five years old and he's been at school for a few months now. He usually plays with the other boys at lunchtime on the playground. On this particular day after lunch in the classroom, he pulls his pants down in front of his teacher and his classmates, and he's smiling while he does this.*

This vignette offers further space for discussion around gendered actions, and ideas of social acceptability of boys' 'mooning', and about the discourse of 'boys being boys'. The second part adds more context to the vignette, inviting participants to assess their ideas about what happened in the classroom.

> *Earlier, while Oliver was playing a ball game with other boys on the playground, another boy had pulled Oliver's trousers down, showing his underwear. Boys and girls in the area laughed. Oliver laughed as well.*

**Quentin**

The fifth vignette (in two parts) describes a nine year old boy's act of touching another boy's penis, and then how this was responded to by adults.

> *Quentin is a nine year old boy who goes to a rural school where there are other children who are both older and younger. In the toilet one day, he comes up behind another boy from his class and puts his arms around his hips and touches the other boy's penis.*

This vignette has the possibility for adult participants to explore what questions they have about this event, in addition to their ideas about the action as described. How might participants understand this action? Is it different for men and women? Or for those who may have experienced unwanted touch? Or those who engaged in exploratory sexual behaviour as

children? Is there any question about queer sexualities? The second part then tells what happened to one child, inviting participants to further explore their ideas of how Quentin's action was perceived and understood:

> *The principal expelled Quentin from the school – he was no longer enrolled. When he went to enrol at another school he was turned down. Quentin's parents heard from a parent friend that a teacher had referred to Quentin as a "sex offender".*

**Method in action: Three sites – two primary schools, one counselling agency**

After *consultation* with ten school principals and teachers, and therapists in three community counselling agencies, I then *piloted* interviews with individuals and groups to explore areas of interest and how vignettes might work as a method. These pilot interviews included a teacher, a parent, and one group of three teachers. The six vignettes were then shaped specifically to reflect the ideas and feedback of the pilot participants – particularly around the vignette subject material, as they considered the range of topics valuable to include.

The subsequent research interviews (group and individual) took place in three contexts: two primary schools of similar size (600-700 children aged 5-11), each from a different socio-economic context; and one community counselling agency (in a city with a population over 100,000 people). Participants came from both the North and South Islands of New Zealand. I conducted three focus groups: one group of teachers and one group of parents within the same school community; and a group of counsellors from the agency. I also interviewed seventeen individuals (5 teachers; 6 parents; 6 counsellors) who came from all three sites. Each interview was transcribed. I then produced a summary document for each of the group interviews which I sent to participants for their comment. I sent the interview transcript for each individual participant to them for them to check and comment on.

In each focus group and interview, the vignettes were read out by me, and participants were asked for their responses. Participants were asked about their response and thinking on what they heard, what could be imagined as possible, and if they chose, to declare any specific or personal responses. As I listened to their responses I was asking yself, and in turn asking them: What is the thinking and language that supports these responses given?

**Method in action: Responses to one vignette**

In this section I give a description of using one vignette, and how this was responded to by participants. These responses come from group and individual interviews. After this description I then offer some practical lessons learned from the experience of using vignettes, and the affordances they offer.

**Stephen and Lucy: Sex talk**

The sixth vignette tells about two similar aged children where one describes 'sex' to the other:

> *Stephen is a seven year old boy. He is overheard by the class teacher while he is talking to Lucy, aged six, in the playground. They were sitting by the sandpit, and he said to Lucy, "And that's when I put my penis in your vagina".*

Introducing a vignette on two young children talking together about sexual intercourse offered space for further engagement with ideas on childhood age and immaturity, knowledge and questions about risk and protection, and on whether children are viewed as sexual beings. This story set a scene for sharing of knowledges around 'the right age' for sexuality education and at what stage children should have access to information about sexual intercourse, and about what children might/should know at any particular age/stage.

Discussions in the groups were quite animated with some participants engaging in humour and freely expressing their ideas. Group members would often piggyback upon

another person's response, and the discussion would gather a momentum. Sometimes this allowed for ideas to be quickly and freely spoken. In one group the initial responses following this vignette included a period of mixed humour and serious inquiry. Some of these responses included:

> *That's shocking – does he even know that's where that goes?*
>
> *Haven't you got that book at home?*
>
> *I was going to say 'hallelujah!' – He's using the right terminology. Better than [my] pee pee and your…*
>
> *Can you tell me how he said it? 'And that's when I put my penis in your vagina?*
>
> *It sounds like its straight out of a book!*
>
> *I've got the book!*
>
> *I would have struggled not to smile.*
>
> *I would have thought it's a fairly harmless conversation really.*
>
> *I don't think I'd be very happy about it if [my girl] came home…*

Participants in another group were quite concerned with checking the detail of the vignette. Some of their responses included:

> *Can you just say it again please?*
>
> *So they were in the sandpit?*

And then one person reflectively considered some possibilities, saying:

> *…maybe they're just talking about sex, and Stephen's giving a…[lesson]…and says, "when the man puts his penis in", but he specifically said, "that's when I put my penis in your vagina", so they were talking about…[sex]…he might have been asking Lucy if she wanted to have sex, and Lucy said, "what's that?"*

Telling this story produced a range of responses including shock, an intake of breath, along with chuckles and laughter, to expressions of concern for these children's safety and

wellbeing. For some there was a sense that Steven had learned this from an adult, as children might not use those words but others like ‘doodle’ or ‘fanny’. Two participants said:

> *He’s obviously just had a bit of ‘the birds and the bees’ conversation with somebody.*
>
> *Oh, it’s really inappropriate for children of that age to know.*

And another person said:

> *It saddens me, that that’s happened… It has to be a learned behavior. I just don’t understand how things like this can just pop out and not have been seen.*

This vignette also drew from participants specific stories from their own experience. For example, a participant in one group recounted:

> *[I know] a girl, she was four, and lying on her back with a six year old boy in her wider family on top of her humping up and down. They had clothes on and [when asked] ‘what are you doing?’ he said ‘rooting’. It turned out that he’d walked in on his parents [having sex] and that’s what [his] Dad had said to him – they [the parents] were under the blankets, thank goodness!*

Some responses to the vignette were not verbal. When one participant (Participant A) breathed in sharply I asked her what that was about:

> *Horror…the poor little seven year old girl – and boy …being exposed to that sort of sexual talk. It’s too young!*

Participant A then responded reflexively, questioning herself:

> *When is the right age? You see, I don’t know.*
>
> *Where has Mr Seven Year Old [i.e. Stephen] heard that?*

If participants asked me questions about the vignette, I would inquire further about *their* questions, asking what they were interested in and what their questions might bring forward. For example, if they were checking about the ages of the children in a vignette, I would ask why they were interested specifically about age. Age was a common question amongst most

of the respondents. A number of participants focused on the children's age as being too young for the level of information described by Stephen:

> *Obviously it's really inappropriate for children of that age to know…*
>
> *I think the longer we can keep our children sheltered, the better…makes me feel nervous about children knowing too much because then they get too curious, and you know…*
>
> *I'd be quite concerned if I found out my seven year old had been talking about that much detail, [and] wanting to know where they learned that from!*

I found that some individual interviews provided greater opportunity for deeper reflection about the ideas expressed. There was time to explore more fully with individual participants what their thinking was about. For example, Participant B reflected on his hearing of the vignette:

> *I would say that Stephen has heard 'penis' and 'vagina' somewhere, he knows a penis goes into a vagina, so he's learned that somewhere – has he learned it in a positive, healthy environment, where someone's taught him? Maybe how babies are made.*
>
> *…he could have been innocently talking…role-playing [or] maybe he could have learned the behavior in an inappropriate way, overhearing adult conversation…an older brother possibly could have showed him pornography…*

Participant B later said,

> *You know, if he said 'dick' and 'pussy' I'd be like… no adult talks about 'dicks' and 'pussies' to their seven year old kid…but because he's used 'penis' and 'vagina' he's learned it from a positive environment…I'd say, 'It's really cool that you know about these things, but you just need to be careful about who you share that information with, especially with someone that's younger".*

While a number of participants appeared to accept the use of ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ for genitalia, others held some discomfort. Most schools in NZ participate in the Keeping Ourselves Safe programme, initiated by the NZ Police to develop child protection within communities and schools. The programme includes calling body parts by their ‘proper’ names. One mother said,

> *I did struggle with that, to be honest. [My daughter] was five, it was her first year at school. Sitting down and saying it’s not your ‘flower’ [but] it’s your vagina…so she got an introduction to that earlier than my oldest child…so in that context I wouldn’t be surprised if my seven year old [child] was in that [vignette] conversation…*

Another mother considered their own experience of children asking where they came from:

> *We did the seed story [Daddy plants a sees in Mummy’s tummy]. I too used the appropriate words ‘cause I think it’s better that they know what the correct terminology is.*

Participant C told their child they would respond truthfully to any enquiry they made. After hearing a neighbour, their son asked

> *…what a fucking bitch was. ‘What is fucking?’…I didn’t actually say what fucking would refer to, but I said…it’s not a nice word.*

Then Participant C reflected, “this is contradictory isn’t it”, noticing their initial claim to speak openly and truthfully to their child, then hiding and ‘protecting’ their child from use of a language that appeared inappropriate.

Parent D spoke of sugarcoating factual information:

> *I understand they’re curious, absolutely, they would always want to know. But I’m sure you could sugarcoat it for a little bit longer than seven. I mean, most seven year olds would be quite believable [sic] – and I don’t know what you would tell them*

Yet another parent reflected on what they had shared about age seven being too young to have this information, but thinking that age nine would be acceptable. Acknowledging that they and their partner have two sons about that age, they remarked:

> *… we haven't actually talked about [who and how to talk to them]- but now it's probably relevant with the older one being nine, we need to start thinking about that.*

Finally, a story was told about the family dog having been de-sexed. That participant's son

> *was asking me all about 'what happens in the testicles? Why has he not got those anymore?' ...so we've had quite an in-depth conversation…because he wouldn't stop at the flowery answer.*

The vignette of Steven and Lucy provided space for participants to explore ideas around: difference and diverse understandings about language and terminology; of childhood innocence and risk/safety if children have more information than perceived they can cope with; ideas of curiosity leading to unsafe activity; and tensions between parent and teacher responsibilities for engaging in sexuality education. In this process, discourses of childhood innocence, development and panics are isolated for analysis.

**Practical lessons learned:**

In this section I briefly reflect on a number of specific learnings I have taken from applying this method:

*Purposes of vignettes*

These six vignettes have each offered opportunity for participants to respond to ideas about children and sexuality. Beginning with an apparently minor event, the vignettes were sequenced to support a relational quality of the research-participant relationship so that an engagement and 'ease' allowed sharing when more complex or trickier stories were told.

Furthermore, a number of the participants shared personal stories about themselves or family members, which suggests that this was a trusting and productive process for them.

*Coping with groups*

Although group interviews were recorded, there were times when participants would talk over each other. This made transcription difficult, and at times snippets of material could not be retrieved. An energy and enthusiasm could envelope the group as various vignettes were explored and ideas and stories would bounce and balloon when being shared. Facilitating the process as researcher, I was aware and tried to capture comments in writing, especially if I wanted to return to a comment and enquire further.

*Distractions: Rats and recording blimps*

Planning is essential, ensuring a venue where there is no or minimal interruption, and that the recording equipment is charged and reliable. Two occasions taught me that planning can also be hijacked!

While interviewing a teacher, who had recently qualified, a rat was seen running outside the room. There was no concern about it coming near us or into the room, but the conversation turned to informing the caretaker and me asking whether that should happen immediately or wait until the tea break. “Oh sorry”, she said, “That’s distracted us from the interview”. “That’s okay”, I replied, “Rats tend to do that to us!”

On another occasion I was interviewing a parent through the counselling agency. I had two recording devices for each interview, in the event that one might fail. One of the devices beeped. The parent said, “I think you’re recorder has turned off” and then it made another sound. Having looked at it I could assure her that it was recording, and there was no other problem – but our conversation had turned from the focus, distracted, into one on technology before returning to the interview focus. A little annoyed with the device, and

having no idea what really had happened, I delighted that we could easily return and continue with the interview.

My point is, interviews are human interactions and can be messy and involve distractions and interruptions. Alongside these disturbances, the vignettes offered a pathway to support re-engagement.

*Impact for participants*

There are many moments I can recall participants reflected on the benefit of the research interviews for them, personally and professionally. I comment on three distinct occasions here. One was a parent, who said:

> *Oh, this has been really good for me to talk to you, because it's raised a lot of questions for me as a mother.*
>
> *I actually don't know what the school policies are – But I will, I want to follow that up.*

The therapist group considered the experience of a group interview enabled them an opportunity to share and discuss these issues. Such opportunities do not happen very often, as one therapist said:

> *I have enjoyed this opportunity to have the dialogue with the other [therapists]…and I wonder if there's some value in having a process like this [to] orient [new therapists] to the work. In terms of the discussion about different ideas, different positions, different ways of looking at things*

Teachers in the group interview remarked on the process as good professional development, giving them an occasion to discuss ideas and consider practice responses. One of the teachers said:

*There is a need for us to be able to have conversations about this, because it is something that does impact students, but it's actually a greater need right in the community as well.*

*Researcher positioning*

During interviews I recall finding, in moments, where my thinking about responding closely resonated with being a counsellor. I worked to position myself as researcher, while carefully using skills from counselling. These also heighten how a researcher may care for her/himself at specific times of vulnerability. There are two examples I reflect on here.

The first considers listening to an astounding story in an interview. I think a researcher might never be fully prepared for how one might respond. For example, 'humping' was referred to by a couple of participants. In one interview a person remarked about 'humping' happening at school between five year old children – boys on boys and boys on girls: "the girls would get really angry". In another interview a person then told the story of a boy humping her young daughter:

*She was being jumped up and down on by this guy, kid – he was six – but when I spoke to his mother [about why he did this] she said he'd asked her where babies come from. [She said that] she'd downtrou-ed and showed him!*

That is, the mother had pulled down her own pants, exposed her genitals to her son, explaining where he had come out from. There was silence – and after a while I said, "Okay, the silence is…". She said, "Yeah", and then again there was silence, to which I responded, "I'm not sure how to respond". In the moment, the detail of the story and the impact silenced us both. I then asked after a while if we could continue, and explored what this could mean for a child.

A second example involves another participant who was sharing a story about a boy, a family member, who she now cares for. This boy had been referred to counselling because of

initiating oral-genital activity with another child. She spoke of abuse, physical and sexual, that this boy had experienced at the hands of his father. I noticed an effect for me on hearing this story of abuse on a boy by his father, and was surprisingly taken back in memory some eight years previously to my counselling practice with a boy who disclosed his own abuse story. I was caught, in memory and in emotion, and noticeably slowed in my engagement in the interview. The effect of hearing the details of the story eight years earlier momentarily returned through this interview.

**Conclusions: Useful and engaging method for research; a method that has impact for participants**

From the data gathered in this research my experience of using vignettes has proved richly productive. By sequencing the stories from less shocking towards a development of complexity and questioning, a relational quality of the interview process supported participant involvement, sharing and disclosure of personal stories. The research material offers plentiful data for analysis.

The process of consultation and piloting the ideas, which then shaped into the vignettes, cannot be underestimated. The strength of the vignettes was enhanced by testing them with those who participated in the consultation and pilot stages, during which they were developed as a result of questions, clarification and feedback.

Finally, I am also pleased that the process demonstrated usefulness for participants, as parents, teachers and counsellors. The vignettes, and the ideas discussed offered participants material to take with them for dialogue with partners and colleagues, and to engage in discussions with their child's school staff.

**Acknowledgement:**

I wish to acknowledge and thank the anonymous reviewer and the editor for their useful comments on shaping this case study.

---

## Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. In designing vignettes for a qualitative research project, what aspects would you need to explore to construct stories that are realistic and relevant for participants?
2. Create your own vignette. From reading this case study, or from a story in your own professional experience, consider how you might clearly construct a vignette. What aspects do you need to consider? How might you test this?
3. What issues might need consideration prior to interviewing participants about events in vignettes that could have resonance with their own life stories?
4. What questions might you need to consider asking participants for further clarification?
5. Utilising vignettes in my research enabled me to bring 'real' stories into the interviews, without disclosing identifiable personal information. What effects should researchers be aware of for participants engaging in sensitive research? What effects should researchers be aware of for themselves when engaging in sensitive research?
6. Do you think that these six vignettes would work with children as participants in interviews and focus groups? What changes might you think about (e.g. use of language; how detailed stories might be) when using vignettes with children in sensitive research?
7. What does this method offer/not offer in areas of sensitive research?

---

## Further Readings

Flanagan, P. (2015). Accompanied by suspicion: An ethnographic account of negotiating gender tensions and positioning in counselling practice and researching child sexuality. In R. Rinehart, e. emerald and R. Matamua (Eds.), *Ethnographies in Pan-*

*Pacific research: Tensions and positionings*. (pp.163-175). New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-138-85707-0

Flanagan, P. (2013). Meaning and social reality of sexuality in the lives of children in Aotearoa New Zealand. In S. Wray & R. Rae (Eds.), *Personal and Public Lives and Relationships in a Changing Social World,* (pp. 132-148). Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

## Web Resources

[insert links to any relevant web resources here]

## References

Barter, C., & Renold, E. (1999). The use of vignettes in qualitative research. *Social Research Update, 25*. Retrieved from http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU25.html

Barter, C., & Renold, E. (2000). 'I wanna tell you a story': Exploring the application of vignettes in qualitative research with children and young people. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *3*(4), 307-323.

Burr, V. (2003). *Social constructionism* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge.

Finch, J. (1987). The vignette technique in survey research. *Sociology, 21*, 105-114.

Flanagan, P. (2009). Play, prey or "sexploration"? Understanding and responding to sexual actions by children at primary school. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, *3*, 19-26.

Flanagan, P. (2010). Making molehills into mountains: Adult responses to child sexuality and behaviour. *Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice*, (1), 57-69.

Flanagan, P. (2011). Making sense of children's sexuality: Understanding sexual development and activity in education contexts. *Waikato Journal of Education*, *16*(3), 69-79.

Flanagan, P. (2012). Ethical review and reflexivity in research of children's sexuality. *Sex Education*, 1-10. doi:10.1080/14681811.2011.627731

Flanagan, P. (2013). Meaning and social reality of sexuality in the lives of children in Aotearoa New Zealand. In S. Wray & R. Rae (eds.), *Personal and Public Lives and Relationships in a Changing Social World*, (pp.132-148). Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN 978-1-4438-4968-5

Flanagan, P. (2014a). Ethical beginnings: Reflexive questioning in designing child sexuality research. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 14*(2), 139-146. doi:10.1080/14733145.2013.779734

Flanagan, P. (2014b). Unpacking ideas of sexuality in childhood: What do primary teachers and parents say? *Open Review of Educational Research, 1*(1), 160-170. doi:10.1080/23265507.2014.972436

Flanagan, P. (2015). Accompanied by suspicion: An ethnographic account of negotiating gender tensions and positioning in counselling practice and researching child sexuality. In R. Rinehart, e. emerald and R. Matamua (Eds.), *Ethnographies in Pan-Pacific research: Tensions and positionings*. (pp.163-175). New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-138-85707-0

Frayser, S. (2003). Cultural dimensions of childhood sexuality in the United States. In J. Bancroft (Ed.), *Sexual development in childhood.* (pp. 255-273). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds.* London, England: Routledge.

Robinson, K. (2005). Childhood and sexuality: Adult constructions and silenced children. In J. Mason and T. Fattore (eds.), *Children taken seriously: In theory, policy and practice* (pp. 66-76). London, England: Jessica Kingsley.

Schoenberg, N., & Ravdal, H. (2000). Using vignettes in awareness and attitudinal research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 3*(1), 63-74.