

DISCUSSION PAPER 7

A Parable of Discrimination and Vignettes



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A Parable of Discrimination and Vignettes

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Abstract

Discrimination is a sensitive topic. Conventional research tools like household schedules and Focus Group Discussions have certain drawbacks in assessing discrimination. Vignettes offer a less threatening way to explore sensitive topics like discrimination. This paper gives a step-by-step account of assessing discrimination in social programs using Vignettes. The paper adopts a fictional approach and finds an enterprising social researcher in the main protagonist: Ms. Inquisitive: A social researcher. Over the course of the story, Ms. Inquisitive, explores using Vignettes as one of the effectual tools to assess discrimination in social programs. She learns about the challenges and complexities faced while using Vignettes as a research tool. She meets several protagonists and learns about different types of Vignettes, methods of drafting and analyzing Vignettes. She also gets an insight into findings from the field, where one of the characters administers the research tools and shares his experiences with Ms. Inquisitive. With the help of fictional characters, the paper scrutinizes and suggests ways to construct, contextualize, administer and analyze Vignettes.

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A Stifling Hot Afternoon

It was a hot afternoon. Mr. Utopia, Additional Director of Department of Social Welfare was sweating profusely. He walked into the office of Department of El Dorado- one of the think tanks, which looked after monitoring and evaluation of social programs implemented by the government. Mr. Utopia straight away walked into the room of Mr. Oracle, Director of El Dorado. Before the director could greet him, Mr. Utopia unceremoniously broke into an emotionally charged harangue, “Our paths through life must be righteous. Discrimination is the quintessential bane of our society. A society riddled with discrimination cannot progress. The state of affairs vis-à-vis social programs is disconcerting. Such programs are fraught with subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination. The vulnerable sections of the society are at the receiving end. Mr. Oracle, kindly help us out. We are planning to roll out a program to sensitize the vulnerable sections of the society about their rights and entitlements. We want to empower them. We want to equip them so that they can fight against discrimination. We have a proposition for your department: Please carry out a baseline study in the TIMARU states and help us know the level of discrimination across the flagship social programs of the government. Please help us identify the most vulnerable communities of the society who bear the unrighteous brunt of discrimination. This will help us in designing and rolling out our program.”

By the time Mr. Utopia finished his harangue he was short of breath. However, he could muster enough breath to greet, “Good afternoon, Mr. Oracle. How you doing?” Mr. Oracle sat in stunned silence; he could barely acknowledge Mr. Utopia's greeting. Mr. Oracle somehow recovered from his stupor and announced in self-assured voice, “Mr. Utopia, we will be really glad to help you out with the study.”

Mr. Oracle sat still for a long time after Mr. Utopia left. “Please, send Ms. Inquisitive to my room”, Mr. Oracle gently said on the phone. Ms. Inquisitive was one of the brainiest and promising researchers at the department. The moment Ms. Inquisitive stepped into the office, Mr. Oracle apprised her about the meeting he had with Mr. Oracle. “You see Ms. Inquisitive, we have quite a task at our hands. Discrimination is a tricky subject. It is a sensitive issue. Long time back we tried to assess discrimination prevalent in schools for the Department of Upright Education but we faced a lot of difficulties. One of the striking difficulties was that the respondents felt uneasy about answering any direct questions related to discrimination. Many respondents just refused to answer the question. However, this time we could use Vignettes as the primary tool for assessing discrimination.” Ms. Inquisitive had heard about Vignettes but she never had the opportunity to work on the research tool. Mr.

Oracle said, “See what can be done about this baseline study.”

The moment Ms. Inquisitive left the room she had a several thoughts in her mind; one thing was clear: She had to read a lot of literature on Vignettes. Over the ensuing weeks she read a lot on Vignettes. Vignettes kept her busy for few weeks.

A Breezy Evening

Ms. Inquisitive managed to read a lot of research papers on Vignettes but she could not get any literature where discrimination was dealt in Vignettes. Though the papers were pretty helpful and informative but still she had few doubts. She decided to pay visit to her Sociology Professor: Ms. Delphi, who taught her Sociology when she was doing her Bachelor's in Sociology. Ms. Delphi was a kind lady but she always had had her share of eccentricities and peccadilloes. When Ms. Inquisitive reached her place, Ms. Delphi greeted her warmly. “Ma'am, I am grappling with a problem”, Ms. Inquisitive quipped but before she could complete her sentence, Ms. Delphi interposed,” Ms. Inquisitive, problems are a way of life. Enjoy them rather than just grappling with them.” Ms. Inquisitive could only muster a wry smile nevertheless she continued, “We have been asked carry out a baseline study where we need to assess discrimination across the flagship programs of the government. We have decided to use Vignettes as the primary research tools. I'm not sure how to go about the whole thing.” Ms. Inquisitive apprised her about the study in detail.

Ms. Delphi eyes lit up the moment she heard about Vignettes and discrimination. “I get your point Ms. Inquisitive”, Ms. Delphi excitedly remarked, “Let me first tell you very briefly about the research tool you intend to use: Vignettes are small stories or imaginary situations, which depicts hypothetical characters or situations to which respondents are asked to react. Since, vignettes depict hypothetical situations, they offer a less threatening way to explore sensitive subjects like discrimination. Vignettes specifically allow contextual influences on judgments to be examined³.” Ms. Inquisitive was furiously jotting down notes.

Ms. Delphi continued, “Your first task would be to ascertain who would be your respondents. Whom you would like to administer your research tool? Since we are going to deal with discrimination across flagship programs of the government, we have to see who are the beneficiaries of the programs. From the discussion we have had, I could gather that your respondents would be people

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from weaker sections of the society. But the question is who from the weaker sections of the society? Suppose, you would want to assess discrimination in TREGA program, it would make ample sense to administer the research tool to men and women from weaker sections of the society. Further, suppose that you want to assess discrimination in JSY health program then it would again make ample sense to administer research tool to only women from weaker sections of the society. I would suggest you to build specific questions related to specific program, which you would like to assess. Further, ask these questions only to relevant group of respondents.”

“Would you like to have lemonade?” Ms. Delphi asked. “No.”, Ms. Inquisitive politely answered. “Good. God bless you,” Ms. Delphi continued, “Your next task would be to formulate questions for the Vignettes. Let me give you an example how to do it: Suppose you would like to assess discrimination in TREGA. Now, discrimination comes in different tints and tinges: In the context of TREGA, there may be discrimination at several levels: Discrimination due to lack of knowledge and awareness, discrimination at the level of access to service and discrimination at the level of service delivery. Again to illustrate: Ms. Alpha is poor and illiterate. She belongs to the weaker section of the society. She wants to apply for a job card under TREGA. However, when she approaches the authorities to apply for a job card, the authorities told her that since is not married, she couldn't apply for a job card under TREGA. You see, Ms. Inquisitive, what Ms. Alpha went through was discrimination because of lack of knowledge and awareness about her rights and entitlements vis-à-vis TREGA. Ms. Beta is poor and oppressed. However, she has some awareness about TREGA and managed to get a job card. Every household, which holds a job card under TREGA, is guaranteed 100 days of employment. She had applied for work but to no avail. For several months neither did she get work nor any compensation under TREGA. What you see here is discrimination because of inability to access services. Ms. Theta belongs to the distressed section of society. However, she has a job card under TREGA. She had worked for 100 days under TREGA. But she was only paid for 50 days' of work done. However, her privileged counterparts were justly paid. What you see here is discrimination in service delivery.”

Ms. Delphi heaved a labored sigh but continued, “What we just saw was discrimination at several levels. Now, the agency, which is implementing the program, must build a well-tuned Performance Management Matrix for example Log Frame or Result Framework, which aptly captures the essence of outcome level indicators for mitigating discrimination across flagship social programs of the government. The outcome level indicators must capture different levels of discrimination. Your task would be to develop Vignettes strictly keeping in mind the outcome level indicators built by the agency implementing the

program. Every Vignette you develop must only deal with one indicator. Different Vignettes must address different levels of discrimination.”

Ms. Delphi was little short of breath but still she continued,” Have you heard about Anchoring Vignettes⁴?” “No, Ma'am” Ms. Inquisitive replied with a sullen face. “Good. God bless you”, Ms. Delphi continued,” I will tell you a bit about it. In Anchoring Vignettes there is a self-assessment question coupled with Vignettes describing five to seven hypothetical persons, just as you would describe hypothetical person in a simple Vignette. It is an interesting approach. I have a draft of Anchoring Vignette. You can have a look at it:

Vignette 1: [Tannu] studies in a primary school. She belongs to disadvantaged section of the society. She sits and interacts with all the children in the classroom. Nobody stops her in doing so. She has the Mid-Day Ambrosia in the same utensils as other children. She also shares meals with other children. She was never asked to wait for meals.

Vignette 2: [Ramu] studies in a primary school. He belongs to disadvantaged section of the society. He is free to sit anywhere in the classroom and he is also free to interact with any child in the classroom. But occasionally, he made to eat Mid-day Ambrosia in certain utensils. Most of the time he is free to share meals with other children. He was never asked to wait for meals.

Vignette 3: [Dulari] studies in a primary school. She belongs to the disadvantaged section of the society. She is not free to sit with anybody in the classroom but children from the similar social group. While having Mid-Day Ambrosia, she is made to eat the meals only in certain utensils especially kept for children from her community. However, she is never made to wait for meals.

Vignette 4: [Minu] studies in a primary school. She belongs to disadvantaged section of the society. She likes studying and wants to sit in the front row but she is always made to sit in the last bench along with children from her community. When Mid-Day Ambrosia is served, she is made to eat in different utensils but she is free to have meals with other children. But at times, she and other children from her community are made to wait to have meals until other children finished their meals.

Vignette 5: [Chinu] studies in a primary school. He belongs to disadvantaged section of the society. In the classroom, he is always made to sit away from certain children. When Mid-Day Ambrosia are served, he is always made to eat in different utensils. He is only allowed to take meals with children from his

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GARY KING Harvard University CHRISTOPHER J. L. MURRAY World Health Organization JOSHUA A. SALOMON Harvard University AJAY TANDON World Health Organization

community. At times, he is made to wait to have lunch until certain children from other community finished their lunch. Occasionally, he is also made to wash utensils.

For the self-assessment and each of the vignette questions, respondents are given the same set of ordinal response categories.

How often can discrimination happen to (NAME)?

Almost Always-1, Sometimes-2, Not so frequently-3, Rarely-4, Never-5

But I'm very skeptical if your respondents would be able to answer the questions in Anchoring Vignettes. I say so because in Anchoring Vignettes, the Vignettes describing hypothetical persons are pretty difficult to differentiate from one other. I assume that since your respondents would be illiterate and the research tool would be read to them, they would find it extremely difficult to answer questions related to Anchoring

Vignettes. I would strongly recommend that you just go for Vignettes. Nevertheless, you could pilot test both the instruments in the field and see, which one works well.”

Suddenly, Ms. Delphi was quiet. She pondered for moment and then said, “That would be all, young lady. All the best.” “Thanks, Ms. Delphi for your kind support”, Ms. Inquisitive replied in a courteous voice.

Ms. Inquisitive was now somewhat clear but still there was something bothering her: “How to analyze Vignettes?”

Over the next few days, she looked into some literature to get inkling about analyzing Vignettes but she was not satisfied. She decided to pay a visit to her statistics professor: Ms. Regressa.

A Starry Night

Ms. Regressa was on a sabbatical from the statistics department to complete her book on the life, works and impacts of the legendary statistician, Dr. Differential. Nevertheless, Ms. Inquisitive took an appointment from Ms. Regressa and they decided to meet for dinner.

Ms. Inquisitive briefed Ms. Regressa about the assignment and the meeting she had with Ms. Delphi. “Ms. Inquisitive, I get the drift of your story, but what is bothering you? Ms. Inquisitive shook her head and said, “I don't how to analyze Vignettes and arrive at the measurable values for the key indicators.” Ms. Regressa asked Ms. Inquisitive to be patient and recall her statistics lessons. “If you remember, I had taught a class on usage of Likert scale, how to analyze them and present the findings. Likert Scale is an ordered, one-dimensional scale with typically between four and seven options. The respondents can choose one option from these that best aligns with their view. I would suggest you to use a five-point scale in Vignettes which is bipolar and offers a neutral option.” Ms. Inquisitive could recapitulate the lessons on scaling and exclaimed “ In case of five or seven options, the respondents will be less likely to choose the extreme options by opting the neutral option. However, it is possible to use a scale with an even number of responses and no neutral choice. But in this situation, the respondents will be forced to decide whether they lean more towards the agree or disagree end of the scale for each item.” Ms. Regressa quipped, “You were always a bright student. I am glad to know that you remember the lesson.” Ms. Regressa said. “Vignettes can be used in a similar manner. You can use a similar Likert scale to assess how frequently the marginalized community perceives discrimination in different flagship programmes of the government.” Ms.

Inquisitive intervened by remarking, “If I get this correctly, then we can have a scale starting with respondents facing discrimination 'Almost always' and ranging to 'Never'.” Ms. Regressa reconfirmed, “Absolutely correct Ms. Inquisitive. You can use a similar Likert scale with Vignettes. Regarding the analysis of the Vignettes, you can calculate the percentage of respondents corresponding each option of the scale. You can also construct a confidence interval to estimate the population proportion by using the following formula:

$$\hat{p} \pm Z_{/2} \sqrt{\frac{pq}{n}}$$

Here, p is the proportion of sample, Z depends on the level of confidence desired, q is 1-p and N is the sample size.”

Ms. Inquisitive suddenly recalled Anchoring Vignettes, which was mentioned by Ms. Delphi and thought of asking Ms. Regressa about analyzing Anchoring Vignettes. Ms. Inquisitive remarked, “Ma'am, are Anchoring Vignettes analyzed in the same way?” Ms. Regressa was glad that Ms. Inquisitive raised this point and replied, “Analysis of Anchoring Vignettes is relatively complex and is done by using R software. As I do not have much knowledge about analysis of Anchoring Vignettes, I would suggest that you refer to Gary King's research papers.”

Ms. Inquisitive replied, “Thanks Ma'am for your time and consideration and clarifying all my doubts regarding analysis of Vignettes. I forgot to mention that the dinner was very good and I really enjoyed it.” “Good luck child with your study,” replied Ms. Regressa.

An Eventful Dawn

Ms. Inquisitive spent the entire week in developing both simple Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes based on the indicators of discrimination that were to be assessed in the Performance Management Matrix. She also referred several statistics textbooks and also Gary King's paper for analyzing the vignettes. Her next task was to pilot test the Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes on a small scale to get feedback on whether or not the Vignettes were likely to work as expected in a “real world” situation. She decided to contact their Field Manager, Mr. Grasshopper. Mr. Grasshopper had several years of experience in data collection but he had never used Vignettes in any of the research studies. Ms. Inquisitive had an additional responsibility to explain the concept of Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes to him and also how to administer them.

Before the pilot test, she decided to have a meeting with Mr. Grasshopper to acquaint him with Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes.

Ms. Inquisitive greeted Mr. Grasshopper and said, “Good Morning, Mr. Grasshopper. As you know, we have organized this meeting to discuss about the Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes, which we will be using in one of the research studies to assess discrimination faced by the marginalized community. These Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes capture the issues of discrimination that occur with some frequency in respondents' lives.” Mr. Grasshopper said, “Yes, Ms. Inquisitive. I have gone through the draft instruments developed by you. As I could understand, you have developed two types of Vignettes. First one is a simple caselet followed by a single question and other one is Anchoring Vignettes where a caselet is followed by a string of questions.” Ms. Inquisitive continued, “Good Mr. Grasshopper. Now our task is to administer these to the marginalized community in such a way that the respondents easily understand them. The field enumerators' have to make sure that all the details within the story concerning discrimination remain internally consistent. Additionally, Vignettes should provide enough contextual information for the respondents to clearly understand the situation being portrayed.” “I do not understand this point Ms. Inquisitive. Would you mind elaborating it further” Mr. Grasshopper said. Ms. Inquisitive replied, “Sure Mr. Grasshopper. For example, if the Vignette has to be administered to a woman of Omega caste, the Vignette has to be modified to specify the gender, caste and other details of the hypothetical character similar to that of the respondent. This is to make sure that the respondent is able to relate completely to the hypothetical character in the Vignette. I will illustrate with another example:

Vignette: Tani is a woman of your age (specify age) and caste/religion (specify caste and religion). She often visits Sangawadi for check-up of her infant child. The health workers are uncooperative towards her. At times, Tani is turned away from the Sangawadi without receiving any health services. Other women of higher caste are treated with dignity and are offered prompt health services.

In daily life, how often can this happen to Tani?

Almost Always-1, Sometimes-2, Once in a while-3, Rarely-4, Never-5

I hope the point is clear now.” Mr. Grasshopper explained the same to the team of investigators and went ahead for the pilot.

After one week when Mr. Grasshopper came back from the field, he decided to brief Ms. Inquisitive about the observation of the pilot exercise. Mr. Grasshopper informed Ms. Inquisitive, “The pilot exercise went off well. As explained by you, our investigators administered the Vignettes and Anchoring Vignettes giving similar contextual details of the hypothetical character as the respondent. This helped the respondent to relate to the hypothetical character and then respond to the situation. However, we faced serious problems while administering Anchoring Vignettes. As we were reading out the caselets and the following questions to the respondents, they were not able to differentiate between the different questions following one caselet. They got confused and could not respond. My experience says that Anchoring Vignettes should be used as a self-administered tool with literate people.” Ms. Inquisitive understood the situation cited by Mr. Grasshopper and replied, “I completely agree with you Mr. Grasshopper. I was earlier warned that we might face similar difficulty in administering Anchoring Vignettes. Now that our team has pilot tested both types of Vignettes and experienced the difficulties in Anchoring Vignettes, I suggest we drop the idea of using Anchoring Vignettes and focus on simple content specific Vignettes.” Mr. Grasshopper was glad that Ms. Inquisitive understood the field conditions and took a wise decision of not using Anchoring Vignettes.

Again a Stifling Hot Afternoon

Ms. Inquisitive walked into the room of Mr. Oracle and said, “Sir, I have some good news for you.” “Good gracious God, tell me, of late there has a paucity of good news in my life.” Ms. Inquisitive smiled and said, “I have figured out how to execute the study.” Ms. Inquisitive briefed Mr. Oracle about all the meetings she had had and also she gave a detailed account of Mr. Grasshopper's field visit. “Great. Brilliant. I shall apprise Mr. Utopia about the recent developments and we shall have a meeting with him within a fortnight. As of now, Ms. Inquisitive, take rest and have a really nice time. You worked hard enough to relax as of now.”

“Thanks”, Ms. Inquisitive replied in a contented voice.

SUGGESTED READING

1. Enhancing the Validity and Cross-cultural Comparability of Measurement In Survey Research: King, Gary, Christopher J. L. Murray, Joshua A Salomon, and Ajay Tandon. 2004.
2. Comparability of self rated health: cross sectional multi-country survey using anchoring vignettes: Joshua A Salomon, Ajay Tandon, Christopher J L Murray, World Health Survey Pilot Study Collaborating Group
3. Anchoring Vignettes In R: A (Different Kind Of) Vignette Jonathan Wand And Gary King
4. Anchors: Software for Anchoring Vignette Data: Jonathan Wand Stanford University, Gary King Harvard University, Olivia Lau Harvard University
5. Credible Comparisons Using Interpersonally Incomparable Data: Ranking self-evaluations relative to anchoring vignettes or other common survey questions: Jonathan Wand

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