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Vignettes as tool for research and teaching in life course studies: Interdisciplinary approaches

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ABSTRACT

Background: Interdisciplinary research and teaching often present similar challenges to investigators and teachers in higher education settings. Capturing and harnessing disciplinary knowledge from different fields to strengthen the process is desirable. However, in practice, this may be difficult to achieve. In this paper we set out a methodology developed in both research and teaching settings which has successfully brought researchers and participants from different disciplinary backgrounds together to work within a life course framework.

Methods: The methodology centres on using what we will describe as vignettes, or descriptive case histories and is divided into three stages. In stage 1 participants work together to write a vignette based on instructions. In stage two, participants work together in a group to analyse and deconstruct a different vignette. Here In stage 3 all groups present and discussed the analysed vignettes.

Results: We provide results from stage 1 on a specific vignette written by a group of participants. Here the participants get to grips with general life course concepts. In stage 2 participants learn about life course principles and constructs by deconstructing and analyzing a vignette. In stage 3 the participants are encouraged to shift from thinking about individuals, to population dynamics.

Discussion: We discuss the strengths and limitations of this method within the context of interdisciplinary life course research and teaching in higher education.

Conclusion: Using vignettes to both construct and deconstruct life courses has proved a useful tool for deriving new research questions and research material within the framework of life course theory.

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1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary research and teaching often present similar challenges to investigators and teachers in higher education settings. In both forms the challenge is to bring a group of people from potentially disparate disciplinary backgrounds together to reflect upon a transversal question or boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989). To go one step further, the aim in interdisciplinary research is to then produce new knowledge that transcends the sum of its disciplinary parts (Schieber et al., 2015), move towards a research objective, and develop interdisciplinary theoretical

frameworks. Whether in research or teaching settings, a mixed disciplinary group is, a priori, a valuable starting point. Capturing and harnessing disciplinary knowledge from different fields to strengthen the process is desirable. However, in practice, this may be difficult to achieve, especially if the participants have never worked together. In this paper we set out a methodology developed in both research and teaching settings which has successfully brought researchers and participants from different disciplinary backgrounds together to work within a life course framework.

This workshop method was originally developed to initiate and facilitate work within a research project. The research aim was specifically to bring disciplines together to examine and define how health inequalities are produced over the life course from early life environmental conditions. The life course framework was explicitly set out as the theoretical backdrop to this research, with

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health and health inequalities being the target 'objects' or outcomes being studied. The objective of the developed method was to ease the participants into a life course conceptual framework, which was unfamiliar to most of them, and to facilitate their ability to constructively contribute their own knowledge to a broad, interdisciplinary research question. As such, this has also proved to be a useful methodology for teaching life course theory, or life course approaches in diverse higher education settings (education, health, economics etc.).

The methodology centres on using what we will describe as vignettes, or descriptive case histories. Vignettes have been defined as "brief stories or scenarios that describe hypothetical characters or situations, to which participants are asked to react" (Martin, 2006). Vignettes have also long been used in research, with different purposes. In the social sciences they have been used in the context of factorial survey research to study human judgements, including normative judgements, positive beliefs and individuals' estimations of their own actions in taking different methodological approaches (Wallander, 2009). Used as research tools in the social sciences they often consist of "text, images or other forms of stimuli to which research participants are asked to respond" (Hughes & Huby, 2002). In clinical settings, vignettes have been used to summarise longer case histories to exemplify, illustrate, or simulate processes and conditions within health care settings. They are used in medical teaching and clinical quality control where practitioners are asked to evaluate or react to case histories or case studies describing the medical history and pathological context of patients (Peabody, Luck, Glassman, Dresselhaus, & Lee, 2000).

Here we define vignettes as a family of narrative qualitative forms, where a person or situation is briefly and evocatively described. Using vignettes in life course and longitudinal research brings a narrative focus to an individual life. A vignette can maintain the key chronological features of the life course, but simplifies the complexities of life course trajectories, processes and forms. Elliott describes using vignettes constructed from quantitative cohort data to summarize vast amounts of life course data collected over time (Elliott, 2008). Such a use of vignettes may facilitate an analysis of population-level group life courses by exemplifying a life course 'type' through a vignette (Kelly-Irving, 2007). Vignettes may also be used as tools to produce new knowledge where "respondents in quantitative or qualitative studies may be asked to perform a task, such as ranking, rating, or sorting vignettes into categories, or projecting themselves into a vignette situation, to imagine what a vignette character would or should do or feel" (Martin, 2006).

In the setting described here participants were asked to create a vignette, and to subsequently deconstruct a vignette, and through these activities derive generalizable principles, rules, processes or hypotheses contributing towards the given research or teaching objective, from their own underlying assumptions and disciplinary knowledge. This produced interdisciplinary research knowledge within the framework of a project. The method has also become a

valuable pedagogical tool used to teach undergraduate and postgraduate participants about life course theory. In this paper we will describe the general aims of the developed method. An example will be used to describe the vignette method and workshop setting itself. A prototype of a vignette and its analysis by participants will be shown. Finally we will discuss our experiences of using this method and its strengths and weaknesses in the context of both research and teaching.

2. Methods

The method we describe here had the following general aims, which can be adapted to different specific research and teaching settings:

1. To use a group activity to lead participants into understanding the life course conceptual framework (Elder, 1999) in relation to health (Ben-Shlomo & Kuh, 2002).

a. Via practical group work the participants grasp the premise of life course theory

b. Via interactions between group members the participants are confronted with their underlying assumptions and concepts from different disciplines.

2. To identify the potentially generalizable mechanisms and processes within the life course framework by working together as a (an interdisciplinary or mixed) group

2.1. Stage 1. Small group activity: constructing a vignette—general notions of the life course

Participants are divided into small groups of up to five individuals. If the group is interdisciplinary, it makes sense to check that no one group over represents a discipline. Similarly, if participants have different nationalities, it is best not to allow one nationality to congregate together in a group. Each group is asked to write a one page (one side of A4) vignette describing an individual. Depending on the specific aims of the research or teaching activity more detailed instructions can be provided to the participants. Below we provide an example where instructions were prepared and handed out to each group (Table 1). The instructions briefly defined a vignette, how to construct it, and gave each group some information about the hypothetical person whose vignette they were asked to write. The participants were given a time limit for writing their vignette (in our example they had 40 mins), and the session convenor circulated between groups to assure that the activity was moving along. Once the vignettes have been written legibly the activity is stopped, and a volunteer from each group may read out their vignette to the whole class.

2.2. Stage 2. Small group activity: deconstruct and analyse a vignette—life course principles and constructs

The groups were then asked to exchange vignettes and work together to analyse a new unfamiliar vignette that they had not

Table 1
Group activity instructions example.

Please write a one page vignette with your group
What is a vignette?
It is "a short evocative description, an account, an episode"
How should we construct our vignette?
With the other members of your group, write a vignette describing a person with a health state in adulthood. Some descriptors of their life have been provided below. Describe their life history including key elements important for understanding their adult health state
Caution! Your handwriting needs to be legible!
Group 1. Write your vignette based on the following:
A 63 year old man, married, overweight, a skilled manual worker, running a small family business. A 1st generation immigrant, homeowner. Diagnosed 5 years ago with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

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