Using a Vignette in Qualitative Research to Explore Police Perspectives of a Sensitive Topic: “Honor”-Based Crimes and Forced Marriages

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Abstract
This article examines how a vignette presented to participants during qualitative research interviews was successful in gathering information on the perceptions of 32 police officers and 14 civilians regarding “honor”-based crimes and forced marriages within the context of domestic violence. To my knowledge, this is one of the first methodological papers that presents the process of using a vignette with police on such a sensitive topic. This article offers a reflexive account of some of the methodological considerations I made when constructing the vignette that likely impacted its success. I describe the vignette, discuss how participants reacted to it, and present the themes that emerged to show how it was understood. I then emphasize how first responders engaged in the interview process with the vignette material and how this allowed for a rich, in-depth discussion on an understudied topic. Finally, I discuss the strengths and limitations of this method and make recommendations for future research.

Keywords
vignette, qualitative research, constructivist grounded theory, “honor”-based crimes, forced marriages, police

The vignette, also known as a scenario or situation, is a short story with hypothetical characters used in both quantitative and qualitative studies to elicit participants’ perspectives on difficult topics (Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2002, 2004; Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Sleed et al., 2002; Wilks, 2004). The vignette approach has been useful for social research in disciplines such as anthropology, education, nursing, psychology, social work, and sociology, but few scholars have discussed its development, use, and teachings in qualitative research studies (Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Hughes, 1998; Hughes & Huby, 2002, 2004; Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000; Sleed et al., 2002; Wilks, 2004). This study contributes to the existing literature about vignettes as a methodological tool for data collection in qualitative research by exploring the implementation and usefulness of a specific vignette as a complementary method to semistructured interviews with police officers and civilian members in Alberta.

Vignettes
The literature on vignettes notes that the scenario should be constructed to be somewhat believable (Barter & Renold, 1999; Bryman et al., 2012; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998). “It involves presenting respondents with one or more scenarios and asking them how they would respond if confronted with the circumstances depicted in the scenario” (Bryman et al., 2012, p. 95). In this case, I used a written narrative vignette (see Online Appendix) to examine the perspectives of police officers and civilian members on “honor”-based crimes (HBCs) and forced marriages (FMs) within the context of domestic violence (DV).

The vignette describes a father acting abusively toward his daughter after what he considers “dishonorable” behavior damages the family “honor” and reputation in the community. The daughter escapes to a friend’s place, where she expresses concern about the violence happening at home. The friend’s parents encourage her to call the police. Meanwhile, her father responds by arranging an FM to restore the family “honor.”

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The vignette ends with a series of questions, outlined in the Method section; I invited participants to reflect and share their insights by “thinking aloud” (Hughes & Huby, 2004). The vignette allowed me to examine participants’ attitudes about this type of violence and how they influence the response to Nina’s call.

Policing in a multicultural society in the 21st century requires training on situations similar to the vignette, regardless of the type of violence or the victim’s cultural background (Chan, 1997). Incidents like those in the vignette remain under-reported, as past research has indicated some victims are reluctant to approach the police (Hall, 2014). We lack data on the frequency of these cases, partly due to a lack of police awareness and investigation of these issues. Little research has examined the police perspective on HBCs and FMVs within the Canadian context. By engaging with the vignette, first responders shared what they would do in an HBC investigation. I was interested in their level of awareness of and attitudes toward similar situations and whether police were prepared to investigate HBCs.

I selected the vignette method because it is an effective way of gathering information when combined with other qualitative data collection methods like interviews, focus groups, and surveys (Barter & Renold, 2000; Bradury-Jones et al., 2014; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998). Vignettes may be used in triangulation with other techniques, especially semistructured interviews. Previous research has indicated the value of a multimethod approach in qualitative research designs (Barter & Renold, 1999; Bryman et al., 2012; Hughes, 1998; Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000).

Vignettes are also useful for examining attitudes and beliefs about complex topics such as aging (Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000), date rape (Sleed et al., 2002), disabilities (Rizvi, 2019), drug injections and HIV/AIDS (Hughes, 1998), drug use and treatment services (Jenkins et al., 2010), family obligations (Finch, 1987), parenting (Bradury-Jones et al., 2014), and violence among young people in care homes (Barter & Renold, 2000). In a recent study, Robinson et al. (2016) employed hypothetical scenarios to survey police officers’ perceptions of violent and nonviolent domestic abuse incidents in the USA and UK. To my knowledge, this is the first study to use a vignette method to elicit police perspectives on HBCs and FMVs within the context of DV in Canada.

A number of attitudinal studies have also employed a range of hypothetical scenarios on threats to transgressions of “honor” codes, FM, homosexuality, infidelity, and “honor”-based killings (HBKs). Much of the existing research has been carried out with university students and the public, mainly to explore male and female perceptions compared to individualistic versus collectivistic cultural attitudes toward “honor”-based violence (HBV) and HBKs around the world (Caffaro et al., 2014, 2016; Dietrich & Schuett, 2013; Khan et al., 2018; Lowe et al., 2018, 2019; Mosquera et al., 2002; Shaikh et al., 2010; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Most of these studies used a factorial vignette design (Hughes & Huby, 2004), where participants answered questions using Likert-type scales. All but three included the hypothetical scenarios.

**Vignette Construction, Design, and Application**

The vignette in this qualitative study helped gather information about participants’ understanding of a sensitive topic. According to Barter and Renold (1999), a vignette serves at least three purposes, one of which is “to allow actions in context to be explored, [second] to clarify people’s judgements, and [finally] to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics” (p. 1). I knew I could not directly ask questions about attitudes regarding HBCs and FMVs, as some participants might be less willing to answer. However, a vignette would allow participants to openly express their attitudes and disclose information they might not otherwise reveal.

In qualitative studies, data sources for vignette construction may include findings from previous research, pilot interviews from an earlier phase of the study, real-life perspectives or events, actual scenarios, and literature reviews (Barter & Renold, 2000; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Rizvi, 2019; Wilks, 2004). I developed the realistic vignette storyline based on high-profile HBK cases that have occurred since 2000, such as the murders of Amandeep Atwal, Aqsa Parvez, Banaz-Mahmod, Jassi Sidhu, Shafiea Ahmed, and the Shafia sisters. Following the recommendations of the literature on HBCs and FMVs as well as on using vignettes in qualitative interviews, I employed a snapshot scenario as opposed to developmental vignettes, also known as staged vignettes, that build on one another (Barter & Renold, 1999; Bryman et al., 2012; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Jenkins et al., 2010; Wilks, 2004).

Due to time restrictions, I used only one version of the vignette along with six open-ended semistructured questions. Using one version prevented confusion (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2014; Finch, 1987) and fatigue (Hughes & Huby, 2004). Unlike in the anonymous telephone interviews conducted by Ahmad et al. (2004), I connected with potential participants before the interviews to facilitate the conversation and to explain the vignette process. Vignette studies have found open-ended questions to be useful, compared to fixed-choice responses or a set of predetermined statements (Finch, 1987; Hughes & Huby, 2004; Wilks, 2004) as they allow participants to interpret the vignette in different ways.

**Details of the Vignette**

The vignette and its included details were carefully designed. I considered variables such as the behavior, age, gender, and name assigned to the protagonist. I focused on alleged actions described in media reports of North American HBKs and included the term “rumors” to highlight community surveillance and gossip about behavior that might tarnish family “honor.” For instance, young women in Canada have been murdered by their family members for interracial dating,
wearing makeup or Western clothing, kissing in public, removing the hijab, and other actions associated with seeking freedom (Olwan, 2014). The vignette aimed to capture some of these behaviors and experiences, as well as how practices like FM are linked to notions of perceived “honor.”

I deliberately identified Nina as being 17 years old, as HBK victims in Canada have often been close to this age; examples include Aqsa Parvez (16), Amandeep Atwal (17), and the Sharia sisters Geeti (13), Sahar (17), and Zanib (19). There is little awareness and understanding of the pressures police and other service providers experience when trying to support young girls (Blum et al., 2016). I centered the vignette around a female protagonist to see how her gender shaped participants’ perceptions and views of violence against young girls and women, who are more likely to experience the type of violence described in the vignette (Aplin, 2017; Khan, 2018). However, young boys and men can also be at risk for similar forms of verbal abuse and coercion into marriage, especially in the context of homosexuality (Lowe et al., 2019).

I left out race, ethnicity, and social class markers, and I carefully selected the protagonist’s name to see whether participants would fill in details like race and ethnicity. Similar to other researchers, I considered assigning a culturally sensitive name (Ahmad et al., 2004; Bradury-Jones et al., 2014; Lowe et al., 2019; Rizvi, 2019), but I did not want to signal that this behavior occurs in certain cultural groups. I spelled the protagonist’s name “Nina” deliberately, as opposed to “Neena,” as this spelling is relevant cross-culturally.

I limited the textual information by writing the vignette in three short paragraphs; previous research indicates that vignette length varies (Barter & Renold, 2000; Finch, 1987; Hughes & Huby, 2004). At 264 words long, the vignette allowed participants enough time to engage with the situation and keep it interactive to hold their interest (Barter & Renold, 1999; Bradury-Jones et al., 2014; Hughes & Huby, 2004). I described key elements (e.g., Western lifestyle, rumors, FM) in the vignette storyline to allow participants to reflect on the issues behind the text.

Some of the language might have influenced participants’ responses to my questions. However, I chose words carefully to highlight the vocabulary used in media portrayals of actual cases of HBCs, HBKs, and FM. Unlike the media, I chose not to use words like “honor” in the text, as I worried about labeling the scenario and leading responses. I also avoided identifying the situation as solely a case of DV, HBC, or FM as I did not want to cause discomfort or influence how participants viewed and defined the violence. Participants might also have been unfamiliar with these terms. I did include the term “FM,” as its specific tone framed the context of the incident. Participants were encouraged to conceptualize the violence using their own vocabulary so I could see how they highlighted specific words (e.g., threats) in the vignette and described the situation in specific ways (e.g., family dispute, “honor,” or DV). I wanted to understand if and how the term “honor” would be applied.

Research Methods

The study was conducted with law enforcement agencies in Alberta from 2015 to 2017.

Participants and Criteria for Inclusion

I recruited participants through gatekeepers in law enforcement, snowball sampling, and word-of-mouth techniques. The sample consisted of police officers and civilian members connected to policing services and/or law enforcement agencies in Alberta, in both rural and urban settings. I did not include a set number of years of experience in policing as part of the criteria for either group (police officers or civilian members), and I assured participants that previous experience or knowledge of the research topic was not required. The general criteria allowed police officers of varying ranks and civilian members to participate in the study with or without any prior experience or knowledge.

The Sample

Data were drawn from 46 participants, including 32 police officers employed at Calgary Police Service (8), Edmonton Police Service (11), Royal Canadian Mounted Police “K” Division (9), Integrated Threat and Risk Assessment Centre (3), and the Ministry of Alberta Justice and Solicitor General (1). The 14 civilian members were employed by Calgary Police Service (3), Edmonton Police Service (7), Royal Canadian Mounted Police “K” Division (1), Integrated Threat and Risk Assessment Centre (1), and the Ministry of Alberta Justice and Solicitor General (2). Sociodemographic data are combined to protect confidentiality. Participants included 22 males and 24 females aged 25–68, with ethnic origins including Caucasian (38), South Asian (5), Indigenous (1), and mixed race (2). Participants had completed high school (3), taken some post-secondary classes (2), or completed a college diploma (12) or an undergraduate (22) or graduate (7) degree. The 32 sworn police officers are organized by lower/junior rank (14; 3 frontline patrol officers, 3 general duty officers, and 8 constables in specialized units) and upper/senior rank (18; 7 sergeants including staff sergeants, 5 detectives, 1 investigator, 4 corporals, and 1 detachment commander). Police officers served in a wide variety of positions, from patrol divisions, community policing sections as a school resource officer, to specialized investigation teams as a detective or threat assessor. I recruited from some, not all, of the various divisions, districts, and detachments represented within the law enforcement agencies. The specialized teams and areas, among others, included Child Protection, Crime Prevention, Domestic Violence, Diversity and Recruitment, Human Resources, Serious Crime, Surveillance, and Victim Service Units. The 14 civilian members’ positions varied from frontline victim service advocates, intake and threat assessors, outreach and crisis workers, social workers, psychologists, senior advisors, project coordinators, supervisors, managers of specialized units, and dispatchers such as...
911 call operators. Pseudonyms have been assigned and job titles or specialized areas are not used to protect the participants’ identities. No participants withdrew from the study.

**Administration of Vignette**

The Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta approved this study. Participants provided written consent before the interviews took place. In total, I conducted 46 interviews (4 by telephone and 42 face-to-face), which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The vignette discussions ranged from 20 to 30 min in length, including debriefing time. I e-mailed the vignette to participants one day before the interview to give them time to read it but also limit potential communication with others. However, it is possible that participants reviewed the vignette with others before the interview.

The vignette focused the interviews on a specific context. Both groups of interviewees received the same vignette and open-ended questions so I could compare and contrast the perceptions of police officers and civilian members to understand how multiple perspectives “to the characters or context of a vignette” can coexist (Kandemir & Budd, 2018, p. 6). Participants’ interpretations of the incident impact how they view and define violence, which is important as there is no consistent way police respond to or treat these cases. Interpreting multiple views and varying perspectives on the same phenomenon is necessary to understand a challenging topic.

When speaking to civilian members, I needed to adjust the vignette questions to the participants’ roles; for example, certain questions did not apply to victim support advocates or managers of a specialized unit. Analyzing the data while collecting it also allowed me to compare and contrast the data from both groups, to modify the vignette questions, and to update my interview guide (Birks & Mills, 2015).

The six open-ended questions asked participants to describe what was happening to Nina and how they might respond to the scenario or a similar situation:

1. Describe your initial thoughts about what is happening in the scenario.
2. What parts of the vignette stood out to you, and why?
3. How would the police respond to the scenario, and what influences their response?
4. How comfortable would law enforcers (police officers) feel in investigating and reporting similar situations?
5. What experiences or situations have you heard of that are similar to the one presented in the scenario? If so, tell me more about them.
6. What else concerns you about this scenario? Any other comments?

I used probes to allow participants to elaborate. Participants were also given the option not to answer some of the questions.

**Data Management and Analysis**

Participants’ responses to the vignette method were gathered and analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology as described by Charmaz (2006). CGT allowed me to explore the phenomenon inductively, given the lack of existing research on this topic from the police perspective, to understand the themes emerging from the data and how participants would respond to the hypothetical scenario. A CGT approach allowed me to explore themes and a practical meaning-making process, specifically, to recognize complex decision-making and investigative processes (Barter & Renold, 2000) influenced by participants’ definitions of violence and other factors. I was concerned with how participants would interpret and draw subjective meanings from the vignette (Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000) since they may comment from their own viewpoint, the protagonist’s, or a third person’s (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Rizvi, 2019). I wanted to hear how participants felt after reading the scenario and how they would address similar cases in their work.

In CGT, data collection and analysis occur concurrently in a nonlinear process. I applied the constant comparative method for coding and analyzing responses, which allowed me to identify potential emerging themes, including any similarities and differences, across the two groups. Open, focused, and theoretical coding followed to allow the potential core category, overarching themes, and patterns to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). I used NVivo 11 qualitative software to organize the emerging codes and my reflexive and analytical thinking processes (e.g., memo writing and a record of my field notes).

**Findings and Discussion**

The qualitative analysis uncovered how participants engaged with the situation and experiences of the characters in the vignette. The five themes are “Positioning,” “Being Transparent,” “Portraying Reality,” “Containing Enough Information,” and “Filling in the Details” with the vignette. Excerpts from the transcripts illustrate some of the themes as well as the methodological concerns about using vignettes.

**Positioning**

At the start of each interview, I informed participants that I would first ask sociodemographic and background questions before steering the conversation toward the vignette. The positioning and introduction of a vignette are important, as it can serve as an icebreaker for interview questions (Barter & Renold, 2000; Finch, 1987; Hughes & Huby, 2004; Kandemir & Budd, 2018). I intentionally placed the vignette at the beginning of the interview after I established rapport with the participants and they shared their background and experiences as police officers or civilian members. Participants seemed highly engaged and comfortable referencing pieces of the vignette
both during our discussion of it and in response to the unrelated, semistructured interview questions.

In the interviews, some participants returned to the vignette on their own, and I recognized that the vignette discussion may have influenced some of their responses. To create some distance, I used probes such as “leaving the vignette,” “looking past the vignette,” and “thinking past the vignette” to help ensure that the data were not just guided by the vignette method.

**Being Transparent**

The vignette impacts the researcher–participant interaction and creates space for a two-way conversation. In CGT, the reflexive researcher also plays an integral part in the research process and construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006). While I informed participants that I had constructed the vignette and it was not real, many participants felt it was. I responded by sharing my identity as a CGT researcher, which influenced some of my methodological decisions in constructing the hypothetical scenario. Although the vignette did not reference specific DV, HBC, or FM cases, but its specific tone and elements led my participants to think of actual investigations. For example, one senior police officer asked:

Kyle: 
The researcher here, is this based on a real incident?

Interviewer: No.
Kyle: 
Because it, ah doesn’t sound at all that unusual. [Laughter].

I also reminded participants that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the vignette questions; the questions were simply an opportunity for them to share their viewpoints (Finch, 1987; Hughes & Huby, 2004; Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000).

The CGT approach allowed me to take into account the mutual co-construction of knowledge, the emergence of ideas, and the researcher–participant relationship that formed through the vignette discussion. I built rapport and trust with participants through fruitful discussions over the vignette, which allowed them to feel safe during the interview to disclose any thoughts, opinions, and emotions they encountered. In my experience, discussing how I constructed the vignette, without a preference for specific responses, strengthened trust and the participants’ willingness to talk freely.

**Portraying Reality**

Elements of the scenario were interpreted as mirroring reality. For instance, a civilian member, Trina, said the vignette was “very realistic.” The literature emphasizes that vignettes are to be viewed as realistic and believable when used (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998).

Kyle, a senior police officer, shared how he unpacked the vignette by thinking about training he received on identifying HBV risk factors. He recognized that the vignette is similar to true stories of young women murdered in the name of “honor” in Canada, as well as to cases used in PATRIARCH risk assessment tool training. I was able to respond to Kyle’s observations because I had attended PATRIARCH training after developing this vignette. The PATRIARCH tool, developed in Sweden, has been validated with Swedish police to improve investigations (Belfrage et al., 2012), and training has been offered in Canada and internationally. The training case examples come from actual assessments of HBCs, where scenarios are summarized to identify perpetrator risk factors and victim vulnerability factors, which might drastically change the level of risk.

The PATRIARCH training case examples and the vignette I constructed are low-risk scenarios with behaviors that could escalate quickly to high-risk situations leading to HBKs, but HBKs are not the only form of HBCs. This study’s vignette included perceived acts of dishonor by a daughter and emphasized the hidden relationship, family threats, coercion into an FM, and attempt to seek help. The PATRIARCH checklist could apply to this vignette to assess risk levels for patriarchal violence where “honor” is the motive (Belfrage et al., 2012). Combining the vignette with the PATRIARCH tool could bridge the gap between research and practice and help collect more specific data on interventions and risk assessments when training professionals on HBC and FMs, so the attention is not only on HBK cases.

Both police officers and civilian members commented on how the vignette resembled real cases included in their training. When constructing the vignette, I made sure to include elements similar to actual cases, such as the Shafia case, which had significant Canadian media coverage. Hughes and Huby (2004) stress that if “situations presented in vignettes appear hypothetical rather than realistic then responses may be answered in a similar, hypothetical fashion” (p. 40). Several participants said they could see the situation happening in Alberta. For example, one civilian, Nancy, suggested that it was very “common” to police, as opposed to the general public’s perception.

Nancy: Ah yeah, it’s an interesting situation. [Laughter]... good vignette you’ve come up with. But, you know, I see it happening in real life. You know, we see files like this [...] not the exact same situation, but I do see that we do deal with everything like that. And how it’s probably more common than people think.

Interviewer: You say it is more common than what people think, can you tell me a bit more?

Nancy: I think people just, when you’re not dealing with—just the regular public who has no experience with this, at all. Like, they think it’s probably rare for you know, forced marriages or, maybe people think arranged marriages.

Some participants shared their involvement with similar investigations. One senior police officer, Andrew, explained:

I’ve also dealt with similar type situations. Where there’s cultural pressure for a young lady, or a woman, to act in a certain manner, and when they don’t, there’s the violence or threat of violence that happens as a result.
The vignette allowed participants to comfortably disclose similar incidents and situations, from their own experience and that they had heard of from others, that influenced what they would do or not do.

The vignette was also meaningful to participants who indicated they had little to no experience with related cases, as it allowed them to become familiar with situations they might encounter. Some participants expressed how the scenario was believable and they could see it happening in real life. When I asked if the police would deal with the FM aspect, Nathan, a senior police officer, replied: “[...] ultimately, we would. Whether we’re directly or indirectly involved, I don’t know. It’s a very good question. It hasn’t happened to me. And given that question, in a real scenario, I’d struggle with this because I’d be like, oh boy.”

The vignette provided a starting point for participants to think out loud about how it made them feel and how police need to become aware of this type of violence, which can evoke emotion. Angie, a junior police officer, explained, “I think it would be a little more anxiety provoking just in that, I haven’t especially had many cases like this, if any, really. So, you know, always the not knowing, are you doing it right? Are you doing the right things? [...] that you can be doing? You know?”

Similarly, Elizabeth, a senior police officer, expressed: “I can’t imagine how I would feel if my dad said ‘I wish you were dead.’ So I just think we have to look at the totality of this, like, there’s a lot of emotion [which] makes things messy.” Participants reflected from their points of view and openly expressed their emotional responses, including gaps in their knowledge of HBCs and FMs.

Nonetheless, discussing the hypothetical scenario was less threatening for participants (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987; Jenkins et al., 2010) than being directly asked about their perspectives on or responses to HBCs and FMs. The vignette offered a way for me to ask questions about the topic without participants feeling pressured to disclose any involvement with similar cases. However, similar to the literature (Barter & Renold, 1999; Finch, 1987; Wilks, 2004), the selective information and absence of specific details shaped how the participants perceived the scenario as they decided how to follow up on Nina’s initial police report. The ambiguity also allowed participants to bring in ideas and practices from the police culture they work within to address my questions about the vignette. A few participants drew on their experiences with DV cases, similar situations, and training that contained elements of HBCs and FMs.

It was clear that participants were still looking for more detail (see Hughes, 1998), and several stated that it would help them analyze Nina’s situation more comprehensively. Participants also hoped for more details to identify where they should focus their attention and investigation. What happens next? Does Nina agree to the FM? Are other daughters at risk of an FM? Participants expressed concerns about the vulnerability of female siblings. Riya, a senior police officer, said:

[The vignette] doesn’t give you much information. So, you know, I would like to have known more background. I would have liked to know if they’ve had other daughters that have been married off, you know, forced marriages. Would like to know [the] background of the son, what, you know. So, there’s not a lot of information. But it definitely does cause me concern for her safety, you know?

Due to the limited details provided, participants had to imagine what would happen to Nina if she went ahead with the FM. Several participants predicted that her husband would mistreat her. Nicole, a civilian member, expressed how “[...] being forced into a marriage is not going to be, you know, the place where it sounds like she’s going to be necessarily happy, either.” Leah, a senior police officer, echoed,

[...] if she goes through with this [FM], so now she’s going from, [brother and dad] being abusive to maybe this guy being abusive. And probably a fairly decent chance of it. And so, you know, here’s a life of being trapped in this marriage that, if not abusive, may be quite loveless.
While the vignette allowed participants to elaborate on some of Nina’s future challenges, I could have included additional details, such as the ages of the boyfriend and brother, details on Nina’s relationship status and how long she had dated the boy she kissed at the movie theatre, who called the police, and who reported Nina’s actions. These details may have changed the participants’ interpretations of the vignette and their reactions.

The vignette presented a snapshot of a given situation and did not offer much information on what happened next, but it allowed participants to consider potential responses. Many participants said their actions would depend on other factors (e.g., whether Nina cooperates with the police), as well as on their organization’s definitions of violence (Barter & Renold, 2000; Finch, 1987). Participants wanted to gather more information from Nina and other individuals in the scenario.

When I constructed the vignette and selected the protagonist’s name, I deliberately left out the family’s background, as I did not want to suggest that these acts are associated with particular communities or cultures. Riya, a senior police officer, pointed out how

[...]

... we don’t know what the background is for the family. We don’t know how long they’ve been in the country. We don’t know what, or if—maybe they were born and brought up here. [...] If she’s the second generation of her family, already born and brought up here.

Similarly, another participant noted that the vignette did not reference the boyfriend’s ethnicity. Participants were aware that Nina and the boyfriend may or may not share the same cultural background and that might be a concern. Mason, a junior police officer, explained elements of cultural safety when he told me he was

[...]

scared for the safety of the boyfriend. Is the family, now, going to go after the boyfriend? [...] Is the other family going to be upset, now, because now their family’s not going to be marrying her? [...] [I]t’s the trickle-down effect. How many people will be upset?

Participants worried about the boyfriend and the level of risk to him from Nina’s family and his own.

While I composed the vignette to include various characters, this study predominantly focused on the experiences of women, who are at greater risk of this type of violence. However, as the comments above illustrate, participants tried to gather more information to identify the level of risk to others as it influenced their decisions and actions. My decision to focus on one vignette and present a female protagonist allowed me to determine whether participants thought other characters, especially men, were at risk. More knowledge and research on secondary victims is needed, as several participants conceptualized the boyfriend, brother, and mother as being at risk. Police must be prepared to protect and support all victims of this crime.

**Filling in the Details**

The absence of facts in the vignette led participants to fill in the details, revealing important information on how police may lead an investigation or ask specific questions. Some participants inserted details when responding to my questions (Finch, 1987; Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Sleed et al., 2002). Some assumed Nina had a younger sister, which created a different narrative. For example, a senior police officer, Sheldon, mistook the wedding preparations described in the vignette to be for a sister, not for Nina, and was concerned for the sister’s well-being. Other participants wondered about Nina’s relationship with a sister, as well as her place in the family birth order. The vignette did not include any mention of female siblings, so it’s not clear how participants developed these beliefs.

These reflections may demonstrate how an investigation might be misled based on assumptions or misunderstandings, and they also explain how police think about handling the potential impact of the scenario on siblings. Participants were concerned about Nina’s actions directly or indirectly affecting other siblings, particularly young girls, which supports the need for police to interview siblings in these situations.

It is possible that the vignette phrasing suggested that Nina had a sister, but perhaps the participants simply exercised their investigative skills. They were aware of the potential for multiple victims in a family and did not want to overlook this possibility. Leaving out any mention of a sister revealed how their knowledge was constructed and reinforced that other girls and women might be at risk.

Participants gave different meanings to the situation, conceptualizing the violent behavior in diverse ways. Language also influenced the participants’ interpretations of and responses to the vignette, even without any reference to DV or HBC. During the vignette discussions, some participants emphasized elements of the text, focusing on certain words, such as “Western lifestyle brings shame,” “threatens to kill the boyfriend,” “conservative,” and “forced marriage.” These words elicited different responses and led participants to fill in details while reflecting on how they would respond, based on their roles as police officers or civilian members. A junior police officer shared how language can trigger perceptions and a particular understanding of the violence:

Emily: And I definitely am concerned about this, the language of, ‘I wish you were dead.’ There are elements of this vignette that definitely suggest that it could be an honor crime. It could be related to that. So that would need to be considered.

Interviewer: So what elements are those?

Emily: Well, [father] seems [to be] concerned about how this is going to be seen within the community. And it seems like, and, I’m careful about the patriarchal violence thing because it is really specific to patriarch [laughter]. But that, that seems to be what’s happening here. With the father and the brother and, so I’d be concerned about making sure that she has support and a safe place to stay. Then
you’ve got the family stating that there are no concerns. And then you’ve got this concern as well about possibly a forced marriage. Which, I understand, there’s new legislation about forced marriages. So that’s another thing that needs to be looked into and investigated.

While I was mindful of the language used in the vignette, some of the vocabulary provided unintended contextual information. In future research, I would replace “Western lifestyle” with “lifestyle,” as the qualifier may have triggered certain responses (Hughes & Huby, 2004).

The interviews clarified that some participants reacted to the vignette by focusing on culture, identity, and belonging. My careful consideration of the spelling of Nina’s name did not prevent some participants from trying to identify her cultural or ethnic identity. One senior police officer said:

Nathan: I immediately, after reading this, just based on the scenario, based on the information presented, I [...] thought that it was East Indian. Indian culture. And, I mean, it could be a different culture. Absolutely. But, ah that’s, so, it’s interesting you ask me did I, would I want to know that. Well, I didn’t, because I already, in my mind, formulated that it was an East Indian family. Without even knowing that.

Interviewer: And, I guess, what lead you to form that thought?
Nathan: The name. [And] the actions and the statements of the brother. The actions and statements of the father. The actions and statements of the mother. The arranged marriage. Yeah. That’s—because, I’m not super worldly, but, I don’t know too many other cultures.

Participants racialized Nina as they tried to identify her background, presuming she was from an ethnic minority group and referencing specific cultural backgrounds (e.g., “East Indian”) and countries of origin (e.g., Pakistan). Cristeen, a civilian, commented: “[...] I mean, it doesn’t say what the background is, but I’m going to assume that it’s an immigrant family.”

One senior police officer made assumptions about cultural identity and alluded to differences between Canadian values and those of other societies.

[...] You have a family with [an] ethnic background. If I am to see this, as a family from, in this case, I believe it’s Pakistan, it says? If I’m not sure, well, let’s say if it’s a Pakistani or Indian family. [The] family moves over here with their values from that country.

Stereotypes shaped his perceptions of the actions as common practices in “other” cultures (e.g., South Asian or Middle Eastern), not in Canada.

When I asked participants whether it was important to know details such as culture, race, and religion, Ruth, a civilian, replied: “I think they’d be very important. [...] I mean, when you learn about certain cultures, you learn about their common traditions and customs and family guidelines, rules. Roles, within the family. You know, their, their perception on dating, those kind of things, right?” This comment exemplifies the need to understand different cultures, socialization processes, and family dynamics when responding to an incident. Barbara, a senior police officer, explained:

I’m curious. But it doesn’t change their beliefs. [Do] you know what I’m saying? So I’m curious what, what they are, but no. As far as the facts, [...] that doesn’t matter. It’s just that the belief systems that they have. Because they’re, they’re skewed belief systems, I believe, anyway. I guess, you know that they just develop in their internal family over the years. You know what I mean, it’s just like you, know, the Crown doesn’t advocate violence, you know?

Barbara’s comment encourages police to focus on an anti-racist approach to assessing the concerning behaviors depicted in the vignette, as opposed to the culture-blaming discourse. Similarly, Steven, a senior police officer, explained:

I don’t think it matters what their culture or race [is]. It just matters on what their views on, on honor and stuff like that is. And shame brought to the family. I think if we [...] stereotype someone just on their religion or race or whatever, then that’s when you run into issues, right? You have to ask the right questions and then see what they’re, and normally it’s from her, [Nina], that you’re getting it from, right? [...] And just be open and not make your own assumptions on what’s going on. Right? You have to be open to what they’re telling you, not what you’re coming into the situation as.

Steven also believed that police must approach the situation by understanding culture without judgment. His comment demonstrates the concept of cultural relativism. Some participants did not try to fill in details because culture does not cause violence. Patriarchy exists in all cultures regardless of race or religion. Thus, the vignette allowed some participants to emphasize how behaviors should be addressed and assessed for risk without being ascribed via assumptions to a particular culture, religion, or community.

Conclusion

Vignettes are useful tools; my participants shared how valuable it was to participate in research using a unique method to unpack a complex and nuanced topic. Participants interacted with the storyline while sharing the emotional impact it had on them. The vignette helped them make sense of a situation while they worked through their understandings of HBCs and FMs within the context of DV.

The vignette also increased some participants’ knowledge and awareness of HBCs and FMs. The vignette design allowed me to capture their responses in a way that is useful for studying a difficult topic, as we need to understand how police officers and civilian members without experience might respond. HBCs and FMs are important to study, and the vignette could help develop relevant prevention and intervention efforts.
Limitations

Although this study responded to a gap in the literature, it has a few limitations. However, the shortcomings are outweighed by the lessons that can be applied to future studies.

Some scholars have critiqued vignettes for not fully capturing reality, thus raising concerns about the validity of the findings (Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Wilks, 2004). As noted, both police and civilian participants thought the vignette was realistic and reflective of the cases they had seen or could potentially encounter. However, the single vignette in this study does not represent the majority of HBCs, nor does it capture the full range of reasons women are murdered in the name of so-called honor in Canada; it is merely one example.

Next, although vignettes are useful, their weakness is that they are not real (Bryman et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2010; Wilks, 2004). This study only examined what participants said they would do, not what they actually did. Hughes and Huby (2004) assert that no research method can accurately portray real-world scenarios, but Barter and Renold (1999) argue the opposite. In this study, some police officers responded to the vignette based on similar real-life experiences. Nevertheless, given the sensitive topic, some participants without relevant experience may have felt the need to respond in a socially desirable way and thus may not have been honest (Barter & Renold, 1999; Hughes, 1998).

Despite how careful I was with not providing the vignette too far in advance of the interviews, some participants may have discussed the material with others before their interviews. It is also possible that individuals who had already participated in the study told other participants how they responded to the questions.

Finally, though researchers usually pilot vignettes before administration (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000; Wilks, 2004), I did not pretest whether the vignette was realistic and appropriate before giving it to the participants. If I had piloted the vignette with a police officer and a civilian not included in the sample, I could have adjusted the scenario before administering it to the groups. Since I did not pretest the vignette and follow-up questions, they may suffer from researcher bias.

Implications for Training

Despite these limitations, the vignette offered an opportunity to understand police intervention in HBC cases. Training is required to increase awareness; police must recognize that situations like Nina’s could be dire and that they require a thorough investigation and available supports. This study could affect how police decide to implement training around HBV and FMs, and while the PATRIARCH risk assessment tool helps, it requires specialized education and training that is not accessible for all police officers and civilian members. Based on these findings, the vignette could be a valuable training tool. Existing training on HBCs and FMs could incorporate this vignette, modify it based on the lessons from this study, or develop a similar scenario. Training with a vignette would allow police officers and civilian members to think through intended actions and interventions. Scenario-based cases help make education and training more interactive and might increase motivation to participate in training. As many participants expressed, HBC and FM training is not mandatory.

Additionally, an interactive educational session on how to respond to similar situations may reduce the uncertainty expressed by both civilian members and police officers.

Future Research

Future qualitative research should explore how HBC and FM training with vignettes may increase recognition and proactive responses in frontline professionals, victim support organizations and activists, academics, researchers, government, and policy makers. Comparing vignette responses across the different groups might also facilitate future collaboration and raise awareness of HBCs. A coordinated response could help prevent HBKs and also encourage those at risk to report their experiences early.

Qualitative researchers should consider reporting methodological concerns and participants’ reactions to vignettes (Kandemir & Budd, 2018; Rizvi, 2019; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000), as well as including the vignettes themselves in appendices. There is still a need to discuss how scenarios are constructed and implemented and whether they are useful in research studies on DV, HBC, and FM. Reflections on the development, implementation, and use of the vignette will advance the approach in future qualitative research studies.

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