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‘On a Hot Day in the Field . . . ’

The Art of Writing Ethnographic Vignettes

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Abstract

Long-term and in-depth ethnographic fieldwork is at the very heart of almost every anthropological study. Whilst in the field, the researcher engages deeply over a long period of time with informants and their lifeworlds. These intense encounters form the basis for the analytical results of the study and as such must be processed and made accessible for the prospective reader. Many ethnographers do so by using ethnographic vignettes. Vignettes are narrative descriptions of particular scenes, placed within the main text. The name might suggest that they are mere adornments, but they should rather be understood as tools by which to grasp analytical conclusions. Through them, the reader shares the experiences of the researcher and can even indirectly witness important moments of insight. But how does one write a good vignette? What should it entail? This paper addresses these questions by reviewing the literature on vignettes and drawing on the author's own experiences.

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'On a Hot Day in the Field . . .' The Art of Writing Ethnographic Vignettes

Svenja Schöneich

Introduction

The engine of the bus suddenly starts roaring and a thick cloud of exhaust fumes rises into the air, increasing the sweltering heat that engulfs me. I hastily grab my backpack and squeeze through the narrow doors. As soon as I have taken a seat, the bus starts to move. I stand up and wave goodbye to the people who accompanied me to the station. I was part of their community and even their family whilst staying with them during my field research, and now I suddenly feel a painful melancholy. I look at my tightly filled backpack containing the tangible yield of my fieldwork. Interviews, maps, copies of historic documents, survey forms, notebooks full of fieldnotes, and many, many photographs, all waiting to be sorted, analysed, and eventually made sense of. I have already ordered large parts of my material, but now the hard part begins: transforming dialogues, ideas, memories, and research protocols into a dissertation. Thinking about the months of writing ahead of me, I already feel like I am beginning to lose touch with my research site. Fortunately, I have my fieldnotes, which will help me remember and get back into particular situations. I remember some of the key moments during the field research when I realised certain connections, or I suddenly found explanations for things I had not understood before. To write up the text which will become my dissertation, I will have to think about possible ways of integrating these situations into the narrative. The people who came with me to the bus stop have disappeared from view and I sit down to enjoy the draft of fresh air from the open window. I think about my experiences in the community and start visualising some of the moments that helped me gain insights as the bus rumbles down the dirt road on the way to the city and away from what has been my home during the fieldwork.

Ethnographic meaning is something that emerges within what Jasmin Mahadevan (2012: 119) identified as an ethnographic triangle. This triangle consists of researcher, field, and audience. To generate meaning, the writer needs to invite the audience to share the experiences made in the field, which enables the reader to properly understand and partly retrace the analytical processes that led to the results. Many authors increase accessibility to their papers or books by integrating small descriptive passages into their analytical text. These 'vignettes' should serve not only as adornment but should support the analysis by making it more accessible to the reader. Vignettes come

into being as evocative little stories, illustrating the theoretical approach in a rhetorically effective way (Erickson 1986: 150). In his textbook on qualitative methods and writing, Frederick Erickson (1986: 140–150), for example, defines vignettes as ‘a vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time’. Many scholars who engage with ethnographic writing consider this definition comprehensive and accurate and often refer to Erickson’s discussion of vignettes (see, for example, Wilks 2004; Humphreys and Watson 2009; Jacobsen 2014; Jarzabkowski et al. 2014; Kandemir and Budd 2018).

Through vignettes, the audience is invited to witness certain situations in the field. Vignettes illustrate moments of insight that then serve as the basis for the subsequent abstract analysis. These moments might appear unspectacular at first, describing brief encounters or everyday occurrences. Yet, they are generally events that had an important impact on the generation of knowledge. Rosalie Stolz (in this special issue) calls them fleeting moments and suggests that they can be captured particularly well by narrative elements in ethnographic writing. Vignettes are one such narrative element, allowing these fleeting moments to be illustrated as a story. Vignettes can thus contribute to conserving ethnographically rich moments of fieldwork for the reader (Stolz this issue). They also assist with finding a balance between avoiding a crisis of representation in the narrative and producing a long self-reflective essay (see, for example, Erickson 1986: 150; Jacobsen 2014: 41; Jarzabkowski et al. 2014: 280; Miles and Huberman 1994: 83; van Maanen 2011: 132).

Even though vignettes have become an integral part of contemporary ethnographies, the process of developing them is not always explicitly explained or reflected upon. This paper addresses ethnographic vignettes as stylistic devices as well as analytic tools that help the reader comprehend the conclusions presented by the author. First, I reflect on the different uses of vignettes in ethnographic writing. I then elaborate on different forms of vignettes and their position within a text by presenting examples of texts where vignettes have been used. In the third section I propose some practical advice on how vignettes can be developed and written up and finally wrap up the paper with some final reflections.

Using vignettes in ethnographic writing

Vignettes can be used in different ways, depending on purpose and scholarly discipline.¹ In ethnographic writing, however, vignettes display real events

1 Unlike in ethnographic writing, qualitative social science uses vignettes as research method: researchers construct little stories that are integrated into surveys or qualitative interviews and shown to interviewees as fictional scenarios on which to reflect or comment. They can also serve as entry point to

which occurred in the field, usually inserted into passages where the author emphasises a certain analytical insight. Another common moment when vignettes are employed is when a new topic or thematic section is introduced, as in the opening paragraph of this article (see also Jacobsen 2014). Ethnographic vignettes generally describe something that happened in a certain moment. The boundaries of the event are usually not clearly defined. Vignettes can represent, for example, dialogues, a solitary instant of reflection, or a description of an event with many protagonists. They thus function as *narrative windows* through which the reader becomes a witness to the events. To do this, vignettes often employ the 'momentary style' (Erickson 1986: 150) of writing that aims to give the reader a feeling of being present. I, therefore, suggest framing vignettes as *narrative scenes* one would expect to read in a novel or to see in a theatre or movie, albeit in prose.

Etymologically, the word *vignette* denotes an architectural ornament, usually of leaves and tendrils, and this is a second form in which researchers may employ them: as adornments to their texts (Dumont 1992: 1). Erickson (1986: 150) argues that the stylistic form of the vignette goes back to the training in rhetoric in ancient Greece, where orators were encouraged to include descriptive passages in their speeches to persuade audiences that the orator was speaking the truth about real events. This purpose is similar to that of the vignette in contemporary ethnographic texts. Erickson (1986: 150) ascribes a threefold function to this use of the vignette: 'rhetorical, analytic, and evidentiary'. First, by pulling readers into the scene, the vignette captures their attention and presents an interesting and at times refreshing anecdote within the academic text to function as practical illustration. Thus, the vignette serves a rhetorical purpose. Second, the vignette exemplifies the underlying, more abstract analytical concepts of the text and thus serves an analytical purpose. Third, the vignette bears witness to the ethnographic setting, as well as the analytical assumptions the author presents as the truth. In this function, it fulfils an evidentiary purpose (see also Jarzabkowski et al. 2014: 276).

The vignette also supports a certain didactic approach of letting the reader come to the same analytical conclusion as the researcher did. Vignettes can thus enable the reader's co-reflection on the data, even up to the point of acting as 'co-analyst of the study' (Jacobsen 2014: 41). However, even though the idea of the reader becoming the researcher seems tempting at first, the analytical effort is still the task of the author. Vignettes represent little stories that can be explored by the reader, using the analytical tools provided by the author. In this manner the reader does not merely need to follow the author's conclusions but can retrace the steps on their own. To allow the reader to do

complex research questions or a new topic section (for example Barter and Renold 2000; Hughes and Huby 2004; Jenkins et al. 2010; Kandemir and Budd 2018).

so, vignettes should not be presented without contextualisation. They should thus complement, not replace, the analytical narrative (Erickson 1986: 150).

Vignettes in ethnographic practice: their role, position, and length

How authors approach the endeavour of writing vignettes often differs according to their individual style and the objective of the narrative. One of the first and most prominent examples of the usage of narrated scenarios with an analytical purpose is Max Gluckman's essay 'Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand', which was published in two parts in 1940. In this essay, which became known as the 'Bridge paper', Gluckman describes and analyses various events – which he calls *social situations* – that took place on a single day in 1938 in what was then northern Zululand. What has become a classic in the anthropological repertoire at the time represented an important and novel methodological contribution to anthropology (Cocks 2001: 738). How Gluckman defines a social situation is very similar to Erickson's definition of the vignette. He states: 'They are the events he [the anthropologist] observes and from them and their inter-relationships in a particular society he abstracts the social structure, relationships, institutions, etc., of that society' (Gluckman 1940b: 150). Yet Gluckman's example does not strictly qualify as a typical ethnographic vignette in the contemporary sense due to the role the described situations play in his analysis. He virtually dissects each part making up the events, constructing his findings based on what happened in each described scene. Where vignettes usually illustrate findings that are the result of a more comprehensive analysis, including additional data, Gluckman placed his scenarios at the centre of his text (see Humphreys and Watson 2009: 46).²

Another difference between Gluckman's social situations and vignettes is the question of length. Gluckman's detailed description of a social situation takes over a large part of the text and thus acts as its main component rather than as the useful, yet minor illustration that the vignette usually provides. Gluckman first presents a scene in length and then engages in a detailed analysis. A good vignette, in contrast, should be understood as a *miniature version* of a social situation that enables the reader to retrace the author's insights through the narrative but does not represent the main text. There are other examples of the vignette that resemble Gluckman's approach, in regard to length and position. In *Visayan Vignettes: Ethnographic Traces of a Philippine Island*, Jean-Paul Dumont (1992: 1) presents an account of his fieldwork through 'a plurality of images – vignettes – that superimpose

2 Gluckman's (1940a, 1940b) approach later became known as the situational analysis or extended-case method, which was then further developed by the Manchester School. A situational analysis represents the first step of ethnographic analysis, based on the paradigm of arriving at the general through the dynamic particularity of the individual case (Evens and Handelman 2005: 1).

themselves upon each other'. He interprets them as 'fragmented realities' (Dumont 1992: 1) which he renders accessible to the reader as narrative bits of text. His approach thus also centres the analysis around rather lengthy fieldwork vignettes.

Often vignettes are used right at the beginning of a text to introduce the topic and let the reader dive right into the issue, as I did for this paper. Alice Jacobsen (2014: 37) similarly uses a vignette to represent a 'close up of actors and interactions' to start her text. Vignettes can, however, also be positioned later in the text to support the author's previous analytical conclusions. Tom Perreault (2015), for example, places two vignettes of individual scenarios in the last third of his essay on public consultation processes in Bolivia, following a discussion of the legal and situational framework and his analysis. He thus uses the vignettes in an illustrative way later in the narrative to support his argument. These examples illustrate how vignettes can vary and take different roles and positions within ethnographic texts. But how can vignettes be constructed and written up?

From fieldnotes to vignettes

As stated before, the main sources for vignettes are the experiences of the researcher in the field.³ When returning from the field, an anthropologist has usually collected several different types of material in the form of interview transcriptions, observation protocols, and fieldnotes. Vignettes, by contrast, present already processed data, where particular situations are selected and carefully described in order to embed direct quotations into broader narratives or put them into context. The main source of such data are usually fieldnotes (Erickson 1986: 150; Ghodsee 2016: 58; Jarzabkowski et al. 2014: 277).

Much has been written on fieldnotes during ethnographic fieldwork (for example, Emerson et al. 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Hoey 2014; Kalthoff 2013; Wolfinger 2002). Erickson (1986: 150) describes the vignette as 'a more elaborated, literarily polished version of the account found in the fieldnotes'. Yet not all fieldnotes will become vignettes and the first step is to carefully choose the fieldnotes that are suitable for this purpose. The crucial part for writing a vignette is the process of converting the fieldnotes into meaningful text. Fieldnotes are usually written down immediately after a situation has occurred and contain many bits of text which must be modified or cut out to turn them into vignettes (Ghodsee 2016: 33; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 196–197). In the first place this means removing abbreviations, explaining certain concepts, and adding or expanding background information from one's own memory as long as it is fresh (see Erickson 1986: 150–151).

3 In some exceptional cases vignettes have also been used as a method for autoethnography (see Humphreys 2005).

Whilst Kristen Ghodsee does not use the term *vignette* in *From Notes to Narrative* (2016), her detailed instruction on how to incorporate descriptions of events and dialogues into the text reads as practical advice on how to construct vignettes. According to her, the task is to choose a suitable vignette from the notes, depending on which aspect of the analysis is represented, emphasised, or illustrated (Ghodsee 2016: 58). This requires interpretative work. Before the most appropriate vignette can be identified, the author must have established an interpretative account that is to be communicated to the reader (Jarzabkowski et al. 2014: 277–278). Once this theoretical approach is determined, a situation can be identified through which that particular insight was gained in the field and the style and length of the final vignette can be determined. To do so, the author should go back to the fieldnotes and search for a scene which represents that topic and results. Subsequently, decisions on details and style have to be taken. For a dissertation of several hundred pages, a vignette can well be several pages long, whilst one paragraph might already be too long for a brief research paper.

There are more questions that need to be asked. Should, for example, the vignette contain dialogue? In the vignettes in my own dissertation (Schöneich 2020), dialogue is often part of the described scene and should therefore be integrated into the vignette to make it understandable. If audio recordings of a certain situation exist, the vignette can draw on these to help the author stay closer to the original wording. Should, to pose another question, the vignette contain a form of inner monologue? In that case, self-reflective notes on and memories of personal impressions in the field can be helpful. If the researcher has kept a personal diary during the field research, it is possible to look there for inspiration. Finally, in a third question, could the vignette include a photograph, perhaps to support descriptions of place or landscape? The complexity of an event contains more information than a researcher could possibly ever write down; one which becomes more concise during the interpretive process. Written descriptions might highlight some features and omit others, depending on the analytical message the author wants to convey. Also, descriptions in vignettes are generally much denser than fieldnotes and do not provide the large amount of background detail that the field notes contain. Here photographs could indeed be of assistance to capture aspects that words could not do justice to.

Final reflections

The art of writing reflects a writer's personal experiences and is thus shaped by their own writing style. Vignettes allow for creativity and increase the readability of the often rather sober academic papers. However, it can also pose a risk of allowing a text to drift from an academic analysis into an anecdotal description.

After returning from fieldwork, memories soon become anecdotes the researcher tells colleagues and friends. They become stories worth telling. In my own experience of writing ethnographic texts, there is often that story that one really wants to tell the reader, even before one's analysis is complete. It may then happen that, after examining the data and identifying new analytical and theoretical connections, this specific story is not significant anymore; the vignette, intended to illuminate a particular situation, is no longer suitable for illustrating the analytical contribution. This can happen when the contribution itself has changed or when the researcher realises that a certain event was not as enlightening as originally assumed. At the same time, other fieldwork memories may appear in a new light. At this point it can be helpful to return to the interviews and fieldnotes. Sometimes other situations come to mind that are much better suited as vignettes than the one originally considered as insightful. Considering all these aspects, vignettes significantly enrich a text because they provide not only a personal note but also an ethnographic detailing of the theoretical contribution, thus improving the comprehensibility of the ethnographic text.

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