

# Using Vignettes in Migration Research

## A Methodological Approach to Studying Migrants' Transnational Experiences

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### 1 Introduction

»This story is so true. It's like it's reading my mind. I had experiences that were similar to this. I have been living here (in Japan) for two years, but even after graduating from the language school, my Japanese is still not fluent... So I am not confident... Mr. Hung feels confident when he goes back to Vietnam. This is absolutely correct. I was very confident when I went back to Vietnam, I held my head very high... The story was correct!«

This was an expression from Tan, a young Vietnamese language student living in Osaka, Japan in response to a written vignette that described the situation of a Vietnamese migrant man – Mr. Hung, who possessed different social, sexual, and masculine statuses in Japan and Vietnam. The vignette was presented in an interview that I had with Tan in early 2020, as part of a study that explores male migrants' sexual and gender practices and subjectivities in transnational migration between Vietnam and Japan. After the vignette was introduced, our conversation became more open and richer in details as Tan often enthusiastically drew on his own experiences to demonstrate how he related to the vignette. We discussed topics such as sexual practices and dating experiences, which are likely to be considered sensitive or awkward to talk about for people who have just briefly met. These are also aspects that can be challenging to observe with ethnographic fieldwork or participant observation. Moreover, through his vignette reactions and responses, I was able to learn more about not only what Tan had gone through in his migration journey but also his perspectives on certain migration circumstances and social groups. In this case, the influences that the vignette had on our conversation

and interaction during the interview were obvious. They signified the positive methodological and epistemological effects of using the vignette technique in transnational migration studies that involve topics perceived to be more sensitive to discuss.

While vignette as a method is not new to scientific research and has proven credibility in eliciting perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and personal experiences in several study fields (Barter/Renold 1999, 2000; Finch 1987; Hughes/Huby 2004; Torres 2009), it has rarely been engaged with within transnational migration studies to explore migratory experiences and migrants' perspectives. Migration studies within the last few decades have taken on several epistemological and methodological turns (see the introduction to this edited volume) to amplify the understandings of contemporary migration, migrants' experiences, and the structures that condition them. To name a few: the transnational turn since the early 1990s advocated to look beyond the confinement of the nation-states to inquire into transnational actors, practices, and identities (Nowicka 2020; Portes et al. 1999). The mobility turn focused on the examination of not only human actors but also non-human infrastructures that condition different types of cross-border mobility as well as immobility (Sheller/Urry 2006). Then emerged the sexual and emotional turn, which encouraged the deviation from a reductionist assumption about migration motivation being mainly bound to economic betterment to explore the sexual and emotional dimension in migrants' experiences. Scholars who paid attention to such dimensions have established that sexuality and emotion are also powerful factors that not only trigger individuals' motivations and aspirations to migrate but also shape and facilitate the migration experiences (Mai/King 2009; Manalansan IV 2006). These developments in migration studies require not only more effective but also creative and sensible research tools and methods to better capture the diverse and multi-layered facets of migration contoured by increased transnationalism and the constant intersections of global and local forces. This paper seeks to contribute to the discussion on migration research methods by reflecting on the utilization of vignettes as a supplementary data collection method in studying male migrants' transnational experiences and negotiations of sexualities and masculinities. It first provides a review of vignette and its applications in existing scientific studies. The paper then brings forth background information on the research project on male migrants' transnational negotiation of sexualities and masculinities before elaborating on how vignettes could be suitably constructed and implemented in transnational migration studies, using the empirical examples

from the project. Through the subsequent discussion on the methodological connotations and the epistemological meanings of the technique, the paper argues that vignette can be a satisfactory supplementary inquiry technique not only in examining migrants' experiences, subjectivities, and perceptions but also to avoid common assumptions in migration studies.

## 2 The Vignette Technique in Social Sciences

Vignettes are text, images, or other forms of stimuli that describe specific circumstances to which research participants in a research project are asked to respond (Finch 1987; Hughes/Huby 2002). As a research method, vignettes have gained currency in many disciplines over the past five decades, such as education, occupational therapy, psychology, social work, sexual health, and nursing (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2014). One of the earliest definitions of vignettes dated back to the 1950s, when vignette was defined by Herskovits as a technique in the ethnographic investigation that directs and gives form to discussions with informants. It »consists, in essence, of devising, ad hoc, situations in the life of a people in terms of hypothetical persons, relationships, and events, which being in accord with the prevalent patterns of the culture« and the technique is used to »direct and give form to discussions with informants« (Herskovits 1950: 32). The majority of definitions of vignettes were, however, developed from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s. In one of the most well-known definitions of vignettes, they were conceptualized as »short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond« (Finch 1987: 105). The development and application of the technique in scientific research since then have broadened not only its purposes but also potential forms. For instance, Hughes saw vignettes as »snapshots about individuals, situations, and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes« (1998: 381). Some definitions went beyond the written form to include images, videotapes, and audiotapes as possible vignette forms (Johnson 2000; McKinstry 2000). In other words, researchers have been moving away from fixed, static definitions of vignettes and what they are comprised of to incorporate different forms and ways of implementation of vignettes in research. Among the literature to date, Skilling and Stylianides (2019) provided one of the most comprehensive conceptualizations of vignettes definition. In particular, they referred to vignettes as »written, visual or

oral stimuli, aligned with relevant research paradigms and methodologies, reflecting realistic and identifiable settings that resonate with participants for the purpose of provoking responses, including but not limited to beliefs, perceptions, emotions, effective responses, reflections, and decision making» (Skilling/Stylianides 2019: 2-3). While the contents presented in the vignettes are most of the time fictional and simulated, they could also be adapted from actual situations or a mixture of fictional and non-fictional elements.

In the past, vignettes were predominantly employed in psychological and health-related research that dealt with topics considered to be sensitive such as sexual and mental health, HIV/AIDS, drug injections, stigmatization, or violence (Gourlay et al. 2014; Hughes 1998; Hughes/Huby 2002; Leighton 2010; Nosanchuk 1972). However, the technique was mostly used in combination with quantitative methods and within the context of developed societies in the West. As the discussion on scientific methods and inquiry techniques developed over time, more flexible ways of thinking about the implementation and the merit of vignettes as a data collection tool also emerged (Torres 2009). Consequently, vignettes started to gain currency in other disciplines in social research such as education, cross-cultural research, or the study of identities, emotions, and social status in contexts other than the developed world (Barter/Renold 2000; Hughes/Huby 2004). Barter and Renold (1999) pointed out the three main advantages of using vignettes in social research: (1) allowing actions and occurrences in context to be examined, explored, and interpreted, (2) clarifying individuals' opinions, beliefs, perceptions, or even judgments, and (3) providing a less personal and thus less threatening way to inquire or discuss sensitive, difficult-to-discuss topics with research participants. While vignettes have previously been applied mostly as parts of quantitative surveys, scholars have also realized the benefits of this technique when employed in qualitative research paradigms. In particular, vignettes have been utilized as an ice-breaker to facilitate discussion during interviews or as a complementary technique to enhance the scope and range of qualitative data collection. In terms of presenting research findings, vignettes have also been employed to illustrate emblematic situations, experiences, or personas that can be considered as representatives of the studied phenomena (Jacobsen 2014; Meier-Lorente-Muth-Duchêne 2021).

While vignettes have been employed in several fields within social sciences, the technique has rarely been discussed as a method by migration scholars. A few exceptions include Turper (2017) who employed vignettes in a quantitative experiment on anti-immigrant sentiments in the Netherlands

and Torres (2009) who used this method to explore the construct of successful aging among Iranian immigrants in Sweden. The epistemological and methodological turns in the field of migration studies and the expanded scholarly understandings of contemporary migration within the last three decades have necessitated the need for methodological approaches that can better capture the dynamic facets in cross-border human mobilities. New methods of multi-sited ethnography, mobile method, or social network analysis, for example, have been developed and considered as new toolkits to assist researchers in studying the phenomenon of migration and its influences on individuals, communities, states, and the likes (Marcus 1995; Mayorga-Gallo/Hordge-Freeman 2017; Ryan/Dahinden 2021; Weiß/Nohl 2012). This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation on methods in migration studies by exploring and discussing the implementation of written vignettes in qualitative migration research. It argues that this technique can greatly benefit the aforementioned developments in migration studies, especially the sexual and emotional turn. The paper also tackles one of the biggest skepticisms concerning vignette as a method that questions whether participants' vignette responses could be accounted for their lived experiences and real-life behaviors. In particular, because vignettes bring out beliefs, opinions and perspectives from the participants based on a snapshot situation experienced by (an)other individual(s), researchers have been raising doubts about the method's ability to reflect research participants' actual decision-makings and actions under the same scenario in real life (Hughes 1998; Parkinson/Manstead 1993; Wilson/While 1998). Some scholars even framed such a discrepancy as the complicated relationship between the »vignette world and the real world« in which research participants' vignette responses are not directly comparable to real-life actions (Barter/Renold 1999; Torres 2009). However, such a possible mismatch is unavoidable in several other qualitative methods that allow research participants to be selective in telling their interpretation(s), experience(s), and self-presentation(s). This paper shows that the vignette method can even help bring out reality by providing subtle approaches and entry points to the discussion of research participants' lived experiences.

### 3 Research Project Background

This research employed vignette as one of the inquiring methods for data collection in examining the intersection of transnational migration, sexuali-

ties, and masculinities among male-identify Vietnamese migrants in Japan. Within the past ten years, the number of Vietnamese migrants residing in Japan has been rapidly increasing (the population grew more than eight times within eight years from 2012 to 2020 (Ministry of Justice 2020)). Taking up close to 60 percent of the total tally of Vietnamese migrants in Japan is the group of Vietnamese men, most of whom migrate as technical trainees<sup>1</sup>, student migrants who enroll at Japanese language schools or Japanese higher education institutions, and high-skill labors who commonly work in Japanese IT or trading companies. While feminist approaches to migration have created stimulating platforms for the studies of different aspects in migrant women's experiences, male migrants have still been considered to be »rational decision-makers« who migrate to better the livelihoods of their families and therefore examined only in the labor and economic spheres (Hibbins and Pease 2009). Although the economic aspiration is an obvious motivation to migrate to Japan of many Vietnamese men, this project aims to deviate from the framing of transnational migration as being merely economic-oriented and respond to the call for more studies on Asian male migrants' sexualities and masculinities (Baas and Yang 2020) by inquiring into the sexual and gender dimensions of their migration journeys. Such a focus would allow deep understandings of migrants' social incorporation, and the unfolding of social relations and structures of oppression, freedom, agencies, and hierarchies that contour migrants' negotiation of sexual and gender practices and behaviors (Gorman-Murray 2009). Specifically, the project investigates the meanings and effects of transnational migration on migrant men's sexual and gender practices, subjectivities, and vice versa, as well as how Vietnamese men negotiate their sexualities and masculinities accordingly.

The project employed a qualitative approach and conducted close to twelve months of fieldwork in both Japan and Vietnam. In addition to the recruiting method of snowballing, I took part in several social events for Vietnamese migrant communities in Japanese cities with high concentrations of Vietnamese

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- 1 The Technical Intern Training Program in Japan was established in 1993 with the aim of providing training and transferring skills and technologies from Japan to other developing countries through the flows of human resources. Foreign workers who take part in the three-to-five-year program are referred to as technical trainees/interns and work mostly in industries that require hard manual labor such as the agricultural, fishery or construction industries. As of 2020, Vietnamese was the largest group of technical trainees in Japan, with 218,727 registered individuals (Ministry of Justice 2020).

such as Tokyo, Saitama, Osaka, and Kyoto to diversify the group of research participants. These events ranged from big and mid-sized social gatherings like musical concerts, community gatherings, end-of-year and new year parties to more private occasions such as home-cooked dinners. The participation in such mixed social events allowed me to get to know Vietnamese migrant men of different social, age, and occupational backgrounds. The recruitment of research participants also happened on the social media platform of Facebook as this is the most popular social media site among not only Vietnamese migrants in Japan but also Vietnamese internet users in general (McCauley et al. 2016) (for social media as method and object of knowledge see also Gutstein et al. in this volume). Specifically, advertisements with information about the research project were put onto several Facebook groups of Vietnamese migrants living in Japan. Being mindful of the potential limitation of methodological nationalism in migration studies, which is the tendency to consider the state as the boundary for the unit and scope of analysis (Weiß/Nohl 2012), the project employed a multi-sited ethnographic approach. Fieldwork was subsequently conducted also in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam as these are the common return cities among former Vietnamese migrants in Japan. As the Covid-19 pandemic broke out when the fieldwork was still in process, interviews were shifted from face-to-face to online via participants' preferred communication platform (Facebook, Skype, Zoom, Line Chat, Facetime). Although online interviews were more challenging for building rapport, they permitted the widening of research participants' geographical locations in both Japan and Vietnam.

In total, I carried out interviews with 69 men, of whom 52 were in Japan and 17 had returned to Vietnam at the time of interviews. Among these men, 22 identify as non-heterosexuals (self-identify bi-sexual or homosexual), while the rest (47) identify as heterosexuals. Their ages ranged from 20 to 72 years old (the average age of research participants was 27 years old in Japan, and 34 years old in Vietnam). The length of these men's stay in Japan ranges from six months to 52 years. Research participants' occupations vary from students studying in Japanese language schools to post-doc researchers, from technical trainees working on construction sites or butcher shops' floors to high-skilled workers or company managers. Interviews were conducted with the method of life-history interview, which explores participants' life course perceptions and reflections (Plummer 2001). All of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, during which participants were presented with one written vignette and asked to comment on from their perspectives. One of the

main reasons for this project to adopt the vignette technique as complementary to life-history interview was the potential sensitiveness of the research topic. In particular, while many Vietnamese nowadays can easily talk about sexual practices, preferences, or identities with close friends, they would still restrain from discussing these topics in more serious, formal contexts or with strangers. Moreover, it usually takes a considerable amount of time for researchers to build up rapport with participants until they can effectively collect data on such topics with methods such as participant observation or interview. The vignette technique, therefore, was employed to pave ways to discuss with migrants about their negotiation of sexual experiences, gender subjectivities, experiences of discrimination, and judgments on other fellow migrants during the life-history interview in a subtle yet time-efficient way. The following text is the English translation of the employed vignette:

»Hung has been living in Japan for three years. Before going to Japan, Hung used to have a love partner in Vietnam, but they two broke up because of the long distance. Although he lives in a busy and vibrant Japanese city, Hung always feels lonely. His daily life revolves around studying, working, and then going back to the apartment which he shares with two other people. Hung is studying at a mechanical vocational college and has three simultaneous part-time jobs to pay for the tuition fee, living expenses and to send remittances to his family back home. Because of such a busy schedule, Hung does not have much free time. Whenever he has time, Hung would connect with family and friends via Facebook. His friends in Vietnam usually jokingly say that Hung went to Japan to look for a Japanese lover, but Hung thinks he has no such a chance. Not only does he feel unconfident with his Japanese language skills, but he also thinks a Vietnamese migrant is not going to be *ninki* (popular) among Japanese people. He also thinks sometimes Japanese people look down on *gaijin* (foreigner) like him. Hung goes back to Vietnam once per year to visit his family and friends. Only during such trips that Hung feels more confident and respected since he earns more money than most of his friends back home. Because he is living abroad and sends remittances back home regularly, people think that he is a responsible and successful man. Moreover, many are also sexually interested in him. Hung's confidence, however, disappears when he goes back to Japan«.

In this vignette, the story of the main protagonist does not have an ending, and the pronouns used to refer to his former partner and potential partner are gender-neutral. Research participants were asked to comment on the si-



tuation described in the vignette with no time limit to prepare or respond. As part of the qualitative interview, the vignette played an important role in shaping the direction of the conversation and thus contributed a vital part in producing the research outcomes. How the vignette could have such effects is dictated by the ways in which it is designed and implemented in the research.

#### **4 Constructing and Implementing Vignettes in Transnational Migration Studies**

The process of constructing suitable vignettes for any given research project takes time and resources (Miles 1990). On the one hand, carefully formulated and appropriately applied vignettes can offer opportunities to elicit rich responses from participants and allow deeper understandings of the research topics. On the other hand, insensitive or unrealistic vignettes might lead to negative reactions or hyper hypothetical answers from interviewees, which could entail important information yet also risk deviating from respondents' lived experiences. Many factors hence should be taken into consideration when formulating and utilizing vignettes including the internal validity of their appropriateness to the research topic, the kinds of participants involved, the interest relevance authenticity, and the timing of the vignettes in encounters (Hughes/Huby 2004: 37). More specifically, Bradbury-Jones et al. (2014) identified seven methodological considerations in vignette development: data sources, appropriate format and length, the ability to capture reality, congruence, data collection contexts, presentation, and from which perspective interviewees are asked to respond. A more systematic guide for vignettes construction could be found in Skilling and Stylianides's »vignette framework« (2019), which introduces three key elements for vignette formulation – conception, design, and administration. Drawing from this framework, the following section discusses suitable approaches to formulating and administering suitable vignettes for transnational migration research.

The first key element in the vignette framework is conception, which includes the vignette's functions, its ability to encapsulate the intended research topic(s), and the balance between realistic and hypothetical elements presented in the vignette. In particular, the first question to ask when considering using vignettes in a certain research project is whether it makes sense to employ the technique or not. It is commonly agreed that one of the vignettes'

main purposes is to provide entry points to what can be complicated research questions as they selectively present important elements of the research topic. The technique has proven to be valuable in gaining deeper insights into participants' relationship with the particular phenomenon that lies at the heart of the research and paving a worthwhile route to the exploration of particular elements in individuals' lives (Hughes 1998; Hughes/Huby 2004). As transnational migration and migrants' transnational experiences are inherently complex, the vignette technique can provide a path to learn more about specific aspects of these phenomena. In order to do this, the content of the vignette should be able to capture the key points of the intended research topic(s). For example, the vignette used in my research featured contents that were related to matters of changing sexual and social statuses as the result of transnational migration, masculine performances, ethnic discrimination and migrants' daily life in Japan. All of these were key subjects that I wanted to further explore in participants' lived realities as the interview continued.

Closely linked to the formulation of the vignette is how research participants perceive it. The information portrayed in the vignette should be concrete enough to resemble the reality of particular situations. When constructing vignettes for transnational migration research, it is important to make sure elements frequently encountered in migrants' lives such as transnational practices and identities, changes in social statuses, social (im)mobilities, or conflicting sense of belonging are represented. A realistic positioning of the content within social contexts in both sending and receiving societies is also desirable in a carefully designed migration vignette. However, vignettes should also be abstract or hypothetical to a certain extent so that participants have enough freedom to form their interpretations and understandings of the vignette content. In some cases, researchers can consider imbuing a degree of ambiguity, hypothetical twists, or even a moral dilemma into the vignette content to elicit more fruitful responses from and discussion with participants (Poulou 2001). Nevertheless, if the vignette's content appears to be too unrealistic or unrelatable for the readers, their responses might also be hypothetical and less likely to reflect actual experiences (Bradbury-Jones et al. 2014). Consequently, there should be a balance between realistic and hypothetical elements in the vignette content so that participants perceive it neither as an unrealistic story nor a too narrowly framed scenario. In the vignette that I employed, the story took place in both Japan and Vietnam and mentioned constant transnational connections with friends and family. While the topics of ethnic discrimination, shifting sexual and social status, masculine

performances and expectations were not explicitly pointed out in the stimuli, there were enough cues about them for participants to catch. Moreover, although the vignette details were hypothetical and in some ways appear to be exaggerated (for example when the protagonist was described as being sexually attractive in Vietnam), they were formulated based on real-life situations. Before starting the fieldwork, I constructed the first version of the vignette based on extensive reading of the literature on migrant men's sexualities and masculinities in Japan, Vietnam and different contexts, as well as stories and experiences shared by migrants or former migrants on Facebook groups and blogs for Vietnamese migrants in Japan. The content of the vignette also benefited from pilot interviews and the knowledge I had gained from a previous research project on Vietnamese students in Japan. After formulating the vignette's first version of the vignette, I sent it out to two male Vietnamese friends in Tokyo to ask for their opinions on the piece. One of them was working for an organization that represented the Vietnamese migrant community in Japan, and the other was working at an organization that managed Vietnamese technical trainees in the Tokyo Metropolitan area. Due to the nature of their jobs, these people had met and been in contact with several Vietnamese male migrants in Japan, and therefore could provide insights to better the vignette. In short, researchers should calculate the vignette's content based on the research purposes, the kinds of data that are being sought, findings from existing literature, background knowledge in combination with expert consultations.

The second key element in the »vignette framework« is design, which refers to vignettes' presentation, length, setting, and terminology, as well as participants' perspectives. In principle, the vignettes should be presented concisely, straight to the point, and without lengthy openings. While researchers can choose between close and open endings for the vignette, I employed a vignette with an open ending. The story of the protagonist in the vignette was deliberately left unfinished and there was no indication about what would happen next. This approach allows more space for imagination and discussion without narrowing down the scope of the conversation. Other technical considerations include the vignette's length and the linguistic style of the vignette or the kind of vocabularies/terminologies used in the stimuli. It is often suggested that a standardized written vignette should last from 60 to 200 words to maintain the reader's interest. However, vignettes' length should be determined based on the language and the contexts in which they are written and situated. The vignette presented in this paper consisted of 285 words and

was written in Vietnamese, except for two Japanese words: »gaijin« (foreigner) and »ninki« (popular). These Japanese words were employed to provide a sense of familiarity as these words have been commonly used by or familiar with foreign migrants in Japan. Although the vignette was longer than the aforementioned standard length because it went into several aspects of the protagonist's life, no participant showed signs of impatience or having difficulty understanding the vignette's content. Moreover, the vignette wording should be formulated in a way that is as inclusive as possible toward the group of research participants, especially when researchers work with individuals who share the same migrant status but are dissimilar in terms of social class, sexual, gender, ethnic, or national identities. When possible, researchers could consider constructing different vignettes for different groups of research participants (for example separate vignettes for male and female participants, heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, individuals of different ethnic groups etc.). Otherwise, using neutral linguistic elements in the vignette such as neutral nouns, pronouns or adjectives could be a solution to make the vignette more relatable and inclusive for participants of different backgrounds. In my research, while only one vignette was used for both heterosexual and non-heterosexual men to maintain consistency across interviews, the personal pronouns used to refer to the protagonist's former partner or possible partners were gender-neutral so that participants could relate to the story regardless of their sexual orientations.

The last key element in the »vignette framework« is administration, which alludes to the processes of piloting and handing out the vignette to research participants. There is always a risk in which the vignettes might trigger negative responses or reactions from the research participants, especially when the stimuli are not carefully prepared, piloted and implemented (Gourlay et al. 2014). Piloting the vignette thus plays a crucial part in validating its credibility and impacts during the interaction. Sometimes, the finest version of a vignette only comes after a few interviews when the researcher figures out what works and what does not with the vignette's content, design, or presentation. Instruction is also important in making sure that research participants understand what is expected from them. In my research, the vignette was given out to interviewees in printed form during face-to-face interviews, and as a chat message during online interviews. Participants were explained that the story was formulated based on stories on the Internet, and asked to give their opinions on the situation of the protagonist from their perspectives in whichever order they preferred (from general impression to specific points

or vice versa). As previously mentioned, vignettes could be used as an ice-breaker in qualitative interviews. Although there is little doubt that vignettes, once presented at the beginning of the interview, could warm up conversation and build up rapport, they could also frame participants' responses within topics mentioned in the stimuli. As a result, the timing of when presenting the vignette to participants should be flexibly considered based on the expected topic(s) of discussion and the interactions between the two parties. In my research, the vignette was handed out either in the middle or toward the end of the conversations, after participants had shared general information such as migration motivations, experiences of living in Japan, home visits in Vietnam. It was mostly introduced before the researcher and the participants started discussing aspects that are more personal such as sexual, intimate relationships, masculine expectations, subjectivities, and practices. Since the vignette mentioned such topics, participants' responses regarding these matters were used as venture points to further inquire and explore the sexual and gender dimensions in their migration journeys. If participants had revealed their sexual and gender experiences before the vignette was presented, the vignette was handed out toward the end of the interviews. Participants' vignette responses in these cases either confirmed or elaborated more on what they had shared before. Most of the time, participants reacted positively to the vignette and exclaimed that it described what had been experienced by many other Vietnamese migrant men in Japan, including themselves. Follow-up questions subsequently focused on the commonalities between participants' experiences and the one described in the vignette. There were, however, a few participants who found the vignette did not resonate with their personal experiences. With such a vignette response, follow-up questions focused on the reason(s) why they did not find the vignette relatable and the differences between their experiences and the described situation.

Another important point that needs to be aware of in the administration of the vignette is the existence and interaction of multiple positionalities from the part of both the research participants and the researcher. Positionality takes place in the context of social practices in which identity markers, as well as the intersubjective, organizational, and representational conditions for one's existence are performed. Anthias (2008) sees positionality as a space at the intersection of structure (through the presentation of social positions or social effects and their outcomes) and agency (through the practice, meaning, and process of social positioning). Consequently, positionality is considered both as a set of identity traits as well as the social practice of positioning (Shinoza-

ki 2012). Such a contemplation leads to two dynamics when it comes to how positionalities could affect participants' vignette responses. First, because positionality is a product constructed from the intersection of different factors such as social class, ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, and sexuality, research participants' vignette responses have to be viewed in tandem with how they convey aspects of participants' positionalities. Second, the vignette administration process is also an interaction between the positionalities of the research participants and the researcher. As a carrier of a set of identity markers, the researcher, therefore, should constantly reflect on the intersubjective and representational meanings of these identity traits in juxtaposition with those of research participants, and how they could affect participants' vignette responses. This means »turning the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation« (Berger 2015: 220). My positionality as a male Vietnamese researcher affiliated with a German university who had lived and done research in Japan did affect the interactions between me and the participants, and hence their vignette responses in my research. For example, several men used the phrase »you might know already that ...« when expressing their opinions on the vignette. This phrase implied that they considered my positionality to be either an expert or insider one, and assumed that I would easily understand what they had said/were about to say. Such an assumption thus influenced the length of the responses and how participants elaborated on their expressions.

## **5 Discussion: Methodological and Epistemological Connotations of The Vignette Technique in Transnational Migration Research**

Even though the advantages and alleged shortcomings of using vignettes in social sciences have previously been examined, this paper aims to discuss them in the context of transnational migration research. It suggests that the method can work very well in qualitative transnational research on the ground of its epistemological and methodological implications. The first contribution is that vignettes could be constructed to elicit and capture migratory experiences with regards to spatial and temporal variances. A big advantage of this method is that the vignette's content is not necessarily bound to certain spaces

and times. As migrants' lives nowadays are subjected to not one but several socio-cultural contexts and institutions, the vignette could reflect or point out such a transnational connection and lifestyle. In this sense, the technique transcends national and cultural boundaries and offers researchers the opportunity to overcome the challenges of methodological nationalism. Moreover, by alluding to life events that happened in different periods, the vignette encourages research participants to reflect on changes and experiences over time. The method, therefore, offers an apparatus to address the temporal nuances in migration. As aforementioned, the vignette was presented to participants in my research before the interview started addressing the topics of sexualities and masculinities. Not only did the vignette create a smooth passageway to the topics, it also reassured and empowered participants to a certain degree. For instance, Tan – the participant introduced at the beginning, shared that he had similar experiences to the vignette character and felt happy that he was not the only one feeling unconfident with the status as a Vietnamese migrant in Japan. Tan then stated that he always looked forward to returning to Vietnam permanently because like the vignette character, he received more respect and attention from other people when he visited home from Japan. In this case, the vignette provided Tan with a platform to elaborate on the reasonings for certain migration behaviors, decisions, and aspirations. Moreover, whether in the case of Tan who could relate very well to the vignette, or the cases of participants who did not feel the same, vignette proves to be a useful elicitation technique because it sheds light on how participants position themselves to project certain self-images.

Positioning is a multi-layered and situational mechanism in which individuals' selves and identities are navigated, produced, and negotiated within social interactions as people commit practically, emotionally, and epistemically to identity-categories and discursive practices of self-presentation (Davies/Harré 1990: 47). Positioning theory provides a comprehensive approach to study the construction and negotiation of identities in different interactional contexts and has been well engaged with by scholars who conduct narratives study or (auto)biographical research (Deppermann 2013). The theoretical and empirical understandings of positioning as a concept have been enlarged with not only the diversification of data sources that researchers work with such as audios, videos, or small stories embedded in the narratives (Bamberg/Georgakopoulou 2008) but also the emergence of similar concepts like »stance« (du Bois 2007) or »positionality« (Anthias 2008) which also aim to explain how individuals situationally legitimize and orient their actions and different

aspects of their identities. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) identified three levels of positioning: (1) story level (how the characters are positioned to one another in the »there and then« of the story world), (2) interaction level (how the speaker positions to the audience in the current encounter), and (3) self-identity level (how the speaker positions to dominant discourses, larger social structures). This paper argues that vignettes could help understand research participants' positioning on all three levels. In particular, by contemplating and commenting on the vignette, research participants position themselves to the character(s) in the stimuli's content and put forth comparisons between their experiences and the experiences of the character(s). Such a practice is in line with the story level of positioning. Therefore, it might be more informative when participants are asked to respond to a vignette from their perspective (what do you think about/do in this situation?) in comparison to when asked to respond from the perspective of a vignette character (what would you do if you were this person? What should/can this person do?). In addition, participants' vignette response is situated within the interactional context of the interview, in which they position themselves to the researcher. The process of positioning at the interaction level is highlighted in this social action as research participants project facets of their identities to shape and negotiate how they want to be perceived by the researcher. Moreover, participants' responsive engagement with the vignette shows how they draw on and position themselves to dominant social structures and discourses. For example, a research participant responded: »I think a lot of Vietnamese men in Japan have similar experiences like this. But I am not like this person or many other Vietnamese guys here (in Japan). Why do I have to feel unconfident because I am a Vietnamese migrant? Why is sending money back regularly a thing to be confident about?«. This man's response signified how he positioned himself away from not only the vignette character but also the »similar experiences« of »many other Vietnamese guys«. In other words, he drew on popular discourses associated with Vietnamese migrant men in Japan (being unconfident about their migrant status, feeling good and confident when sending remittances regular basis) to differentiate himself. Through such positioning, this person not only countered common assumptions that are usually internalized or associated with people of similar origins or ethnic, national groups but also gave way to the presentation of aspects of his identity and experiences that distinguish him from other fellow migrant men. As a result, participants' responsive positioning to the vignette acts as departure points from which life



events, lived experiences, and their senses of self can be further empirically examined.

In addition, vignettes could give researchers the »approachability« and »credibility« which refer to being perceived as non-threatening and trustworthy respectively (Mayorga-Gallo/Hordge-Freeman 2017). A strong advantage of the vignette technique is the ability to touch on sensitive, hard-to-discuss topics as it allows research participants to negotiate or regulate the distance between them and the situation portrayed in the stimuli. It should be noted that transnational migrants are likely to be subjected to different forms of discrimination or traumatic experiences when migrating from one social context to another. By not inquiring with direct questions and giving participants more agency in voicing their opinions or sharing their stories, the technique provides a delicate and non-intrusive approach to examine more sensitive dimensions in migrants' lives such as sexuality, gender, post-migration degraded status, or discrimination, which might be more difficult to be brought out by research methods like participant observation, closed surveys or questionnaires (Kandemir/Budd 2018). Consequently, it provides a more subtle epistemological exploration of the experiences of migrants who belong to allegedly more vulnerable groups such as those who are undocumented, victims of human trafficking or mistreatments, children migrants, or queer migrants. With regards to the researcher's reliability, the vignette technique helps negotiate or overcome the positionality dichotomy of »insider-outsider« commonly observed in transnational migration studies (Carling et al. 2014; Shinozaki 2012). The insider position implies that the researcher shares the knowledge of the studied group thanks to this person's presumably deep familiarity and affinity with the culture, language, ethnicity, nationality, or religion of the research participants. On the contrary, a researcher considered to be an outsider is presumed to not possess common heritages with the researched population and therefore might not be able to yield easy and fine-grained data (Nowicka/Cieslik 2014). Because both positionalities have disadvantages that can negatively affect the research outcomes and methodological approaches if not critically reflected on, blurring this »insider-outsider« binary is crucial. While this is not an easy task, this paper argues that vignettes could be employed to negotiate this dichotomy. Specifically, a researcher who is not considered to be an »insider« of the researched group (for example in the case of a non-migrant researcher researching a migrant group) could gain an entry or alternative credibility to this status by presenting a vignette that reflects accurate, expert knowledge of the researched population. As a result,

a good vignette can support the process of gaining credibility, liability, and building rapport with research participants.

Last but not least, once carefully constructed and implemented, vignettes could have positive effects on the interaction between the researcher and research participants. Similar to the example from the beginning of this paper, many migrant men signified that the presented vignette spoke to them and expressed their positive impression of me as the researcher who could find a relatable story. Such an impression then fostered an ideal environment for further conversation and two-way discussions between me and the research participants. In addition, via participants' vignette responses, the researcher could have more insights into participants' lives, social and world views, and could thus formulate suitable follow-up questions to continue the interviews with. At the same time, participants are also given more agency in shaping the research agenda by deciding on what and how they want to react to the vignette. In this sense, the vignette technique supports a decolonial approach to knowledge co-production in transnational contexts by shifting from »studying about« to »thinking with« migrant research participants (Mignolo/Walsh 2018). Furthermore, it contributes to the epistemological understanding of how research findings can be generated and reflected in ways that can circumvent dominated norms, assumptions, and conflicted interests and values.

## 6 Conclusion

No research method can truly reflect the reality of people's lives and »each application of a research method is only one way of understanding the complexity of the social world« (Hughes/Huby 2004: 47). This paper shares the same view on research methods and sees the advantages of utilizing different inquiry techniques in collecting data for scientific research. While the paper exhibits various benefits of the vignette technique in studying transnational migration, it is also aware that vignette is not a sufficient research method on its own. Rather, vignette can fully extend its potentials when combined with other methods that have proven legitimacy in the field such as qualitative interviewing. Not only does the technique support the blurring of taken-for-granted dichotomies and assumptions in migration studies but it also can improve field interactions by granting approachability and credibility. Moreover, as my research has illustrated, studies that deal with topics such as sexuality, gender, or post-migration discrimination, downward mo-

bility can benefit from the vignette technique thanks to its subtle approach. In particular, by giving research participants the ability to negotiate not only the distance between themselves and the situation(s) described in the vignette content but also the research inquiry, the technique provides a non-intruding way to data collection and conducting research that respects individuals' to share information. This could be handled by the ways in which the vignette is constructed as well as introduced to the research participants, which have been discussed above. As a result, the technique can be utilized for the studies of other aspects in cross-border human mobilities that also require delicate approaches such as undocumented, irregular migration, human trafficking, or migration trauma.

Whilst this paper presents various advantages of vignette as a method in transnational migration studies, it also urges researchers to be aware of the technique's shortcomings. One risk of the vignette technique is that it could reemphasize certain assumptions when constructed and utilized incorrectly (Miles 1990). This could happen when the researcher formulates and employs the vignette without sufficient reflection, correct information, or background knowledge of the researched population. In order to circumvent such a risk, an adequate reading of literature as well as piloting and reviewing from peers and experts on different versions of the vignette should be carried out. Constant reflection on the positionalities and the process of positioning from both the researcher and the research participants during the formulation and implementation of the vignette is another factor that needs to be taken seriously. Furthermore, similar to other qualitative methods that attempt to explore social behaviors and lived experiences through narratives such as narrative interviews, the vignette method does not guarantee the ability to bring out absolute truth since what people say might differ from what they do. However, even if the vignette responses do not align with participants' lived experiences, they still tell the researcher useful information about how research participants want to present and position themselves. As a result, researchers should pay sufficient attention to nuances and positionalities in participants' vignette responses to navigate not only further interactions between the two parties but also the process of data analysis. Given the presented advantages and shortcomings, this paper argues that the most effective use of the vignette method in transnational migration studies would be in conjunction with other qualitative and ethnographic research methods like qualitative interviews and ethnographic participant observation. Such a combination could provide several benefits while compensating for the limitation(s) of using re-

search methods in isolation, and therefore further and deepen our understandings of contemporary transnational migration.

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