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Vignettes: An Alternative Qualitative Method for Studying Mixed-Heritage Individuals with Limited Heritage Language Abilities

Mahanita Mahadhir[a*], Nor Fariza Mohd Nor[b], Hazita Azman[b]

[a*]*College of Foundation and General Studies, Universiti Tenaga Nasional, 43009 Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia.*
[b]*School of Language Studies and Linguistic, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43650 UKM, Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

Abstract

A study was carried out to determine the suitability of vignettes as an alternative method to elicit data on the perceptions of mixed-heritage individuals regarding their inability to speak their heritage languages and range of communication strategies that they employed to compensate their limited abilities. The high level of intrusiveness of the earlier chosen observation method, as cited by participants, prompted the use of vignettes, which known to be less-intrusive and non-threatening. Thus, in this pilot study, vignettes were administered together with a semi-structured interview. Participants responded to vignettes which featured experiences of mixed-heritage individuals who were limited by their lack of heritage language proficiency and recalled the strategies that they used to overcome their communication problems. Findings showed that despite being disappointed with their limitations in using their heritage languages, the participants employed certain strategies to solve their communication problems. The discussion presents advantages of vignettes in terms of its ability to generate valuable data which is otherwise difficult to obtain, in a shorter time. For verification purposes, participants' responses to vignettes were cross-referred with past studies.

Keywords: qualitative method; vignettes; mixed-heritage people; heritage legitimacy; communication strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mixed-heritage individuals are off-spring of couples who inter-marry across ethnic or racial lines. The literature on mixed-heritage people, have mainly focused on the issues that they face such as racism, stigmatization and alienation from their parents' heritage groups (Kich, 1992; Romo, 2011; Root, 1999; Wilt 2011; Yancey & Lewis, 2009). These issues dominate the lives of mixed-heritage people because they are biologically and culturally juxtaposed between two or more distinct groups (i.e. ethnic or racial), complete with different language, customs and traditions (Yancey & Lewis, 2009).

As a result, mixed-heritage people are continually faced with the dilemma of proving their legitimacy and loyalty to their heritage groups in many social contexts, even more so within their maternal and paternal families. Legitimacy, in this context, refers to the possession or practice of cultural elements of the heritage groups in one's daily activities such as ability to speak heritage language, choice of clothing, customs or celebrations, food preference, choice of friends, dating/marriage partner and even facial features (Hall & Turner, 2001; Khanna, 2004; Wallace, 2001). These credentials are considered as proofs of cultural loyalty leading to inclusion of an individual as a legitimate member within the heritage groups (i.e. ethnic or racial) to which he or she is linked to. As such, the ability to speak one's heritage language is one of the cultural credentials that allow mixed-heritage individuals to claim legitimacy within their parents' heritage groups (Khanna, 2004; Root 2001).

However, the situation complicates further because not all of them are able to speak their heritage languages due to rejection, stigmatization and limited cultural exposure (Wallace, 2001; Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Other factors

[*]Corresponding author.
E-mail: mahanita@uniten.edu.my

in mixed-marriage families that displaces heritage languages include the choice of using more practical languages (i.e. languages that are spoken by the parents) as well as the shift to languages that possess prestige, education or economic value within the society (David, 2003; David & Nambiar, 2002; Kow, 2003).

The existence of mixed-heritage individuals with limited heritage language proficiency foreshadows two aspects. Firstly, as the mixed-heritage population grows in Malaysia, heritage languages will possibly lose their importance as a means of qualifying for heritage group membership; and secondly, other alternative "cultural credentials" (Wallace, 2001, p. 99) may be prioritised over heritage languages. Nonetheless, in order to overcome their limited ability to communicate using heritage language in the family context, they coped by using certain verbal and non-verbal communication strategies (Canale and Swain, 1980).

1.1 Vignettes and studies on sensitive respondent groups

Vignettes are "short scenarios or stories in written or pictorial form" (Renold, 2002, p. 3) which participants respond to using a series of open-ended questions about the character in the story (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Past research, mainly from the fields of social work, health and psychology, have utilised vignettes to study potentially sensitive topics among certain groups of people. These include research on violence among children and young people (Barter & Renold, 2000; Barter, Renold, Berridge & Cawson, 2004); children's perspectives of emotional difficulty (Dixon, Murray and Daiches, 2012); rehabilitation of children and youths with cerebral palsy (Teachman & Gibson, 2012); social workers' ethics (Wilks, 2004); drug-users, HIV risks and drug-treatment decision-making (Hughes, 1998; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney & Neale, 2010) and health issues among older people (Brondani, MacEntee, Bryant and O'Neil, 2008).

In addition, vignettes were often employed in combination with other methods like interviews and focus groups (Barter & Renold, 2000; Maclean; 1999) and are known to be useful in eliciting participants' experiences, accounts of practice and factors influencing them (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In various studies, they have been used as an "ice-breaker" (Hazel, 1995, p. 2), to elicit general perceptions, attitudes and beliefs (Finch, 1987; Renold, 2002), to compare perceptions of disparate groups (Barter & Renold, 1999) as well as to end interviews (Rahman, 1996).

This paper addresses the methodological concerns in the field of mixed-heritage people and their families which calls for alternative methods that can facilitate efficient gathering of reliable data (Wilt, 2011). It expands earlier research using vignettes on two aspects. Firstly, it utilises vignettes as a data collection method to investigate the experiences of mixed-heritage people, a sensitive group who often faced rejection, discrimination and accused of divided loyalties due to their links to multiple heritage groups (Yancey and Lewis, 2009; Romo, 2011; Root 2001). Secondly, it explores the use of vignettes as the alternative method for data collection, replacing the method of observation, which was rejected by the participants for being too intrusive.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the use of vignettes was integrated with semi-structured interviews (Renold, 2002) to enhance the reliability of the qualitative data collected (Barter & Renold, 1999; Hughes, 1998). As earlier highlighted, vignettes were chosen as a data collection method for two favourable reasons. Firstly, when compared to the observation method, the use of vignettes was less intrusive. Throughout the process, the participants and the researcher were able to maintain a comfortable distance in discussing sensitive issues (Barter & Renold, 2000). Secondly, as the handed-out vignettes were written based on the perspective and experience of others (Hughes, 1998), commenting on them was reportedly to be less-threatening for the participants as compared to talking straight-forwardly about their personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The vignettes used in this study were developed based on actual experiences of mixed-heritage individuals. Details of the scenario were derived from past interviews carried out by the researcher, as well as published case studies on mixed-heritage individuals with limited proficiency in their heritage languages (Pao, Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997; Shin, 2010; Wallace; 2001). Care was also taken to ensure that the content of the vignettes was plausible and meaningful to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Hence, female participants were given vignettes with female main characters, and male participants were given vignettes with male main characters.

A total of five participants age between 20 to 24 years old were recruited for this pilot study. They comprised three males and two females who were students from a tertiary institution located in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. The participants' heritage background is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Parents' Heritage Background, Participants' Heritage-Identification and Heritage Languages that They Lacked Proficiency

Participants	Father's Heritage Background	Mother's Heritage Background	Participants' Heritage-Identification	Heritage Language(s) that Participant Lacked Proficiency
A	Indian	Punjabi	Indian-Punjabi	Tamil
B	Indian-Punjabi	Indian	Indian-Punjabi	Telugu; Punjabi
C	Ceylonese	Filipino	Ceylonese-Filipino	Ceylonese Tamil; Tagalog
D	Indian	Dutch-Malay	Situational	Telugu; Sundanese
E	Indian	Malay	Indian-Malay; situational	Tamil

Prior to the vignette-responding sessions, semi-structured interviews were carried out to elicit information on demographics, family and heritage background, languages spoken in the family and extended families, perceptions on inability to communicate using heritage language as well as relationship between participants and their extended families. During the vignettes session proper, the participants were asked to reflect and write short notes on their thoughts, feelings and actions with regards to how they dealt with each of the scenarios in the vignettes. They then rely on these notes when responding to the open-ended questions at the end of each vignette.

A total of seven vignettes were piloted in this study. Each vignette depicted a typical scenario faced by mixed heritage people who are unable to communicate using their heritage languages. The scenarios ranged from the inability to reach out to heritage groups at a deeper level, insecurity, confusion, suspicion towards heritage group members, exclusion from heritage group members, parental decision in limiting exposure to heritage language and opting to demonstrate heritage group membership through other means. Below is a sample vignette that was administered to the participants.

> Ali is a mixed-heritage person. His father is an Indian man, whereas his mother is a Malay lady. At home, he mainly speaks Malay and English with his parents and siblings. His father's heritage language is Tamil but Ali's knowledge of Tamil is limited to only a few words. One day, he was playing table-tennis with his paternal cousins. While playing, some of his cousins spoke Tamil to each other. Deep down, he was frustrated because he was not able to understand what they were saying to each other. He pretended to be occupied with the game, but actually he was listening carefully to what they were saying to each other. He tried to pick out words that he could understand. He often did this. If he catches any familiar words, he will use these words combined with other relevant information at the time to figure out what they were talking about. Sometimes, he got it correct. Other times, he got it wrong. Due to this, he constantly feels that he is like an outsider. He has to be alert whenever he is around his Indian relatives. He does not want to miss out on anything that is going on in the family but he often feels left out from their communication because he is not able to speak or understand their language. ©2014 Mahanita
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> a. What do you think is Ali's problem?
> b. Have you experienced a situation like this in your family? How did you react?

3. FINDINGS

Vignettes became the alternative subsequent to participants' refusal to co-operate with the researcher who wanted to use observation as one of the main data collection methods. During the initial stage of the research, some of the participants rejected the use of observation citing the high level of intrusiveness and made this their reason to drop out from the pool of participants. After changing the data collection method to vignettes and explaining its nature to the remaining participants, they agreed to co-operate.

Thematic analyses of the vignettes revealed that the participants value their social identity as members of their heritage groups as all of them expressed their sense of belonging to both their maternal and paternal heritage groups. Participants A and B claimed to be Indian-Punjabis and whereas Participant C said that he is a Ceylonese-Filipino. As for participant E, she also perceived herself as a member of both paternal and maternal heritage groups, namely Indian and Malay. Interestingly, participants D and E reported that there are times when they would switch to an identity depending on the group of people who are around them at the time. For example, if they are surrounded by more Indians at the time, they will accentuate the Indian aspects of their identity and attenuate the Sundanese or Malay identities.

This finding is interesting in the sense that, despite lacking heritage language mastery these mixed-heritage participants still perceived themselves as belonging to their heritage groups. This finding contradicts one of the main points of the Social Identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) which posited that members who perceived themselves as part of a social group will associate themselves with characteristics, attributes and norm of the group.

However, they were clearly disappointed with themselves due to their inability to communicate using their heritage languages. In their responses, they expressed feelings such as "regret" (participant A); "lost" ("participant B); "left out" (participant C); "sad" and "confused" (participant D); and "difficult to fit in" (participant E). As a result, these feelings conjured doubts in the participants as to whether they are legitimate enough to be accepted as heritage group members (Shin 2010, Wallace, 2001). However, because of the value they place on their heritage group membership, they did not surrender all too easily and relied on communication strategies to compensate their minimal proficiency in their heritage languages.

The most frequently used communication strategy was the interactional strategy of appealing for help (Dornyei & Scott, 1997) and was reported to be used by participants B, C, D and E. This strategy seemed to solve the participants' communication problems straight-forwardly without much interruption to the on-going interaction. To quote participant E, "I usually ask my cousins if I don't understand what my aunt is saying to me. It's easier that way." The high frequency of use of this strategy may be attributed to convenience and availability of relatives such as aunts, cousins or grandparents during the communication to offer or get help from.

Another common strategy used by participants B, D and E was the compensation strategy (Oxford, 1990). When using this strategy, participants admittedly pretended to be doing something else but were actually listening carefully for linguistic clues for instance simple words or formulaic expressions provided by other interlocutors in the surroundings. In addition, participants B and E also relied on non-linguistic clues (Oxford, 1990) such as interlocutors' body language and gestures. The use of these compensation listening strategies shows that despite lacking proficiency in their heritage languages, the participants are actively sourcing out clues to bridge the communication gap and enhance their general understanding. According to participant E, "I relied on this strategy to outsmart my paternal relatives, especially when they think I don't know what they are talking about. Then I surprise them by joining what they were talking about." However, relying on this strategy, participants B, D and E admitted that they only have about 50% chances of being correct at guessing what was being talked about.

Circumlocution, miming and feigning understanding (Dornyei & Scott, 1997) were also among the communication strategies that participant D reported to be using. According to her, she employed them on a trial and error basis. For example, she started off using simple Malay words when communicating with her maternal relatives who are Sundanese and live in Indonesia. However, if she faced difficulty in getting her meaning across, then she moved on to use circumlocution. But if that did not work either, she will resort to miming. She explained that miming was her last choice of strategy because there was no other way of making her maternal relatives understand what she wanted to say. In response to another vignette, she recalled her paternal aunt spoke Telegu, too much and too fast to her. In that situation, she simply feigned understanding what was said to her. She confessed, "I couldn't cope with what she was saying to me because she was talking too fast. But I cannot tell her I don't understand what she was saying to me, can I? *Malu lah* (It would be too embarrassing)."

4. DISCUSSION

This preliminary study found that the use of vignettes is an advantageous alternative method to study mixed-heritage people and their legitimacy issues. Used as a complementary method to semi-structured interviews, vignettes were able to elicit participants' perceptions of their lack of proficiency in heritage language, their disappointments and how this phenomenon affects them in claiming their heritage group membership. Through

the use of vignettes, the participants were able share the range of communication strategies that they employed to overcome the problems they faced due to their inability to communicate using heritage languages. Without the use of vignettes, obtaining these data would have been nearly impossible or requiring a longer data collection period.

The authenticity of the vignettes enabled a majority of the participants to identify with the characters' sense of loss, self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy for not being able to communicate in their heritage languages. Throughout the pilot sessions, commenting on the vignettes from the third person point of view, created a non-threatening context (Braun & Clarke, 2013) for them. This non-threatening context helped them to open up, express their frustrations, feelings of rejection and share some embarrassing experiences regarding their lack of proficiency in their heritage languages when communicating with their maternal and paternal family members.

For verification purposes, the responses of the participants were cross-referred against past studies on mixed-heritage people. These studies reported similar trends where the participants claimed to feel that they were not qualified to claim legitimate membership of their heritage groups because they were not able to speak their heritage languages (Pao, Wong and Teuben-Rowe, 1997; Shin, 2010 and Wallace, 2001). However, the participants in this pilot study differed in the sense that they acknowledged and were able to accept these feelings as part and parcel of their lives and proactively utilised the range of communication strategies to make up for it.

Based on all their responses, it is clear here that despite minimal proficiency in their heritage languages, the participants employed various communication strategies in English and/or Bahasa Melayu to communicate with their family members. In doing so, they were able to build a closer relationship and a sense of belonging to their heritage groups which could be interpreted as the building blocks to establishing their legitimacy.

The participants mainly relied on communication strategies such as appeal for help, circumlocution, miming and also feigning understanding to salvage the interactions with their family members. In addition to that, they also relied on compensation strategies where they would either listen for linguistic clues or look out for non-linguistic ones. Studies from the realm of ESL or EFL teaching and learning have long reported of similar range of strategies being used by low proficiency students (Bailey, 2010; Bialystok, 1990; Tarone, 1980). But in this case, the use of these strategies could be interpreted as their effort in claiming legitimacy within their heritage groups even though they are unable to speak their heritage languages. Interestingly, the high instances of appealing for help could also mean that the maternal and paternal relatives were tolerant and flexible with regards to the participants' inability to communicate using the heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

This pilot study has shown vignettes to be a valuable and less-intrusive technique that can elucidate the experiences of mixed-heritage people who are unable to use their heritage languages to communicate with their maternal and paternal relatives. The vignettes approach was also found applicable for investigation on the range of communication strategies used by these participants to compensate for their lack of heritage language proficiency. Through the use of vignettes, the study was able to generate quality data which enabled deeper understanding of the psychological challenges that faced by mixed-heritage individuals in qualifying for heritage group membership. Additionally, the data was obtained in a relatively shorter time as compared to, for example, the observation method.

An important limitation of vignettes is verifying the validity of what participants say or believe against their actual behaviour in real life. In this study, this limitation was addressed to a certain extent, by comparing and contrasting their responses with what has been reported in previous studies on mixed heritage people and communication strategies. Also noted was the inability of the method to elucidate the full range of communication strategies used by the participants, possibly because they were only asked to retrospect based on the scenario given in the vignettes.

As for future studies, the observation method is still the preferred option for data collection to capture real-life interactions of mixed-heritage individuals with paternal or maternal family members. The method would be able to reveal the 'moment-to-moment' fluidity in how mixed-heritage people claim their legitimacy within their heritage groups. However, for such a study to be possible, a committed, willing and open group of participants is necessary.

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