



Narrating the Unspoken: Vignettes as a Method for Revealing Epistemic Violence in Field Research

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of the vignette method as a qualitative research tool for uncovering experiences of epistemic violence in fieldwork settings. Drawing on ethnographic research with waste pickers in Türkiye, it addresses a key methodological challenge: conventional interview techniques often fail to capture the complexity of epistemic oppression, especially when marginalized groups have internalized hierarchical knowledge systems. The vignettes—developed from preliminary interviews, participant observations, and written accounts by waste pickers—were intentionally varied in tone (positive, negative, neutral) and designed to remain open-ended. Used in interviews with 20 participants, they functioned not as structured prompts eliciting predetermined answers but as conversational catalysts. Delivered orally and informally, the vignettes encouraged participants to discuss sensitive topics—such as discrimination, epistemic exclusion, and societal devaluation—without the pressure and risk of direct personal disclosure. Findings show that while participants often refrained from explicitly addressing epistemic violence in direct questioning, they spoke more openly when responding to these hypothetical yet contextually grounded scenarios. The method revealed how waste pickers negotiate, resist, or internalize epistemic violence in their everyday interactions with municipal authorities, formal labor markets, and broader societal structures. It also exposed subtle moral distancing mechanisms through which society legitimizes their marginalization. The article argues that, when applied reflexively and ethically, the vignette method offers a flexible and epistemologically sensitive approach to documenting latent forms of epistemic violence. Beyond this case, it holds significant potential for social scientists seeking to investigate structurally silenced experiences across diverse contexts.

Keywords: Epistemic violence, vignette method, qualitative research methodology, waste pickers, marginalized communities

1. Introduction

Sustainable waste management, as a cornerstone of contemporary environmental policy, depends not only on technological solutions and formal infrastructure but also on the often-overlooked contributions of informal labour (Medina, 2000). In Türkiye, an estimated half a million waste pickers constitute an indispensable yet systematically overlooked component of the country's recycling and sustainability infrastructure (Sirkeci and Elbeyoğlu, 2019, p. 21). Operating entirely within the informal sector, they work without legal recognition, social protection, or institutional support, despite their central role in diverting recyclable materials from landfills and maintaining the urban waste cycle (Moreno-Sánchez and Maldonado, 2006, p. 374). The knowledge systems they develop—rooted in long-term, embodied practice—remain largely excluded from dominant epistemic frameworks. This exclusion not only undermines their credibility as knowers but also perpetuates a broader pattern of social, political, and institutional marginalization (Author, 2024).

The concept of epistemic violence provides a critical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Originating in Spivak's (1988) postcolonial critique and expanded by Fricker (1999, 2007) in the context of epistemic injustice, epistemic violence refers to the harm inflicted upon individuals in their capacity as knowers through mechanisms that silence, devalue, or erase their contributions to knowledge production. While the concept has been extensively theorized in philosophy, empirical research on epistemic violence remains scarce. This scarcity is largely methodological: the literature reveals a notable gap in how the concept can be operationalized in fieldwork and how researchers might ethically engage with disadvantaged groups (Bunch, 2015). Moreover, conventional interview formats common in qualitative research—especially when participants have a history of systemic exclusion from dominant knowledge systems—risk reproducing the very hierarchies and silencing practices they seek to document.

This methodological challenge was central to my fieldwork, conducted between 2023 and 2024 as part of my master's thesis. The research, carried out with waste pickers in Istanbul, aimed not only to document the forms of epistemic violence they encounter—discriminatory, testimonial, and distributive—but also to identify an ethically sound and contextually sensitive method for accessing these experiences. To this end, the study employed vignette methodology as an alternative to direct questioning. Vignettes—short, contextually grounded narratives—were used to prompt reflection without requiring participants to immediately disclose personal experiences, thereby reducing power imbalances in the interview setting. By embedding scenarios within the lived realities of waste collection, the method created conversational spaces in which participants could articulate experiences they might otherwise withhold due to mistrust, fear of repercussions, or perceived risks associated with disclosing sensitive information.

The aim of this article is to demonstrate, using data from my fieldwork, how storytelling-based methods can serve as a productive methodological approach to investigating epistemic violence in marginalized contexts. In doing so, the article contributes both to the growing literature on epistemic violence and to methodological debates in qualitative research, arguing that short-

story methodologies offer a replicable and ethically aligned tool for bridging the gap between abstract theoretical concepts and the lived realities of structurally silenced communities.

2. Epistemic Violence: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

The concept of epistemic violence, first articulated by Spivak (1988) in her postcolonial critique of the “subaltern” condition, captures the ways in which dominant structures of knowledge production systematically silence, distort, or erase the perspectives of marginalized groups. For Spivak, epistemic violence is inseparable from broader histories of colonialism and power, operating not merely through overt suppression but also through the structural impossibility of certain voices being heard on their own terms. Building on this foundation, Fricker (2007, pp 1-27) situates epistemic violence within the broader framework of epistemic injustice, distinguishing between testimonial injustice—where prejudice undermines a speaker’s credibility—and hermeneutical injustice—where a structural gap in collective interpretive resources prevents experiences from being understood or communicated. Kristie Dotson (2011, 2014) extends this discussion by conceptualizing *epistemic oppression* as the “persistent and systematic exclusion of a group from participating in knowledge production,” highlighting how such exclusion is maintained through both structural conditions and everyday communicative practices. Of particular relevance here is Dotson’s notion of *situated silencing*, which occurs when a speaker is unable to convey knowledge to an audience due to contextual factors that block uptake—whether through willful ignorance, epistemic arrogance, or institutionalized communicative norms. This lens is especially useful in analyzing cases where the harm is not the absence of speech per se, but the structured impossibility of being heard.

Epistemic violence, contrary to common understandings of violence as a discrete, spectacular event or act, is a form of slow violence—a gradual and cumulative harm that is difficult to attribute to any single agent and often imperceptible to many, including its own victims (Pérez, 2019). This elusiveness makes it challenging to trace and to fully grasp, leaving it a marginal topic within the social sciences literature.

These conceptual insights point to a central paradox in studying epistemic violence: the very mechanisms that produce such harm—silencing, erasure, and the absence of shared interpretive resources—also obstruct the processes through which it can be identified, articulated, and recorded in research. Consequently, empirical inquiry into epistemic violence must contend with a dual challenge: on one hand, the phenomenon’s embeddedness in everyday structures of meaning that render it ordinary or invisible; on the other, the methodological risk that conventional research tools may inadvertently replicate the power asymmetries they aim to expose. This makes the choice of research design not merely a technical consideration but also an ethical and epistemological one, demanding methods that can navigate asymmetrical knowledge relations while enabling marginalised participants to speak on their own terms.

It is within this conceptual and methodological tension that my own fieldwork was situated. Drawing on this empirical basis, I found that researching epistemic violence in the field proved methodologically complex, shaped both by the nature of the phenomenon itself and by the socio-political realities of waste picking in Istanbul. As a form of slow, cumulative harm, epistemic violence often operates beneath the threshold of explicit recognition—not only for outside observers but frequently for those who experience it. Participants did not always

identify instances of silencing, misrepresentation, or the devaluation of their knowledge as forms of harm, and thus might not spontaneously narrate them in an interview setting. The challenge, therefore, was not simply to collect “accounts,” but to work within an interactional space where the very terms for naming such experiences were partial, contested, or absent.

This difficulty was compounded by deep hermeneutical gaps. Having been systematically excluded from dominant knowledge systems, many waste pickers lacked access to interpretive frameworks through which their experiences could be rendered intelligible in wider public or policy contexts. As a result, epistemic harm was often embedded in everyday routines and institutional encounters that appeared “normal” within their lived reality but whose structural violence became visible only through sustained, contextual interpretation.

Trust emerged as another significant barrier. Operating without legal recognition, waste pickers remain vulnerable to police intervention, municipal policies that criminalize informal recycling, and unstable relationships with intermediaries in the waste trade. In this climate of insecurity, many were understandably cautious when speaking with an outsider about issues that might have legal or reputational consequences. Even when rapport was gradually established, this underlying vulnerability shaped what could be disclosed and how.

Furthermore, the conventional question–answer format common in qualitative interviewing risked reproducing the very asymmetries of power and voice that the study sought to interrogate. Such formats can implicitly position the researcher as the legitimate questioner and the participant as the object of inquiry, reinforcing epistemic hierarchies between academic and experiential knowledge. In preliminary interviews, some participants offered what they perceived to be “acceptable” or “safe” answers—aligning their narratives with institutional expectations or public stereotypes—rather than engaging deeply with the harms they had experienced. This dynamic not only constrained the depth of the data but also posed an ethical problem: by structuring the encounter in a way that shaped responses, the research risked compounding the silencing it aimed to expose.

Finally, directly asking about experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or erasure carried the risk of retraumatization. For some participants, revisiting these moments brought back feelings of shame, anger, or hopelessness associated with past incidents of stigmatization. This underscored the need for a research approach capable of engaging with epistemic harm without compelling participants to relive it in ways that might be distressing or destabilizing.

3. Methodological Rationale for the Vignette Approach

In qualitative research, vignettes are short, carefully constructed narratives—either fictional or drawn from real-life contexts—that are presented to participants to stimulate discussion, reflection, or interpretation. Rather than asking direct questions about the participant’s own life, the researcher offers a scenario that mirrors the social, cultural, or ethical dynamics under study. This indirect mode of engagement allows participants to respond without feeling compelled to disclose personal experiences, reducing the risks of self-censorship, defensiveness, or retraumatization (Barter and Renold, 1999; Hughes and Huby, 2002; Murphy et al., 2023).

Barter and Renold (1999) identify three principal functions of vignettes in qualitative inquiry: first, facilitating the exploration of situational contexts and the identification of influential variables through the interpretation of actions and events; second, eliciting individual judgments—often in relation to moral dilemmas—by inviting participants to articulate their evaluative reasoning; and third, enabling the discussion of sensitive experiences by framing them in relation to the “normality” embedded in the vignette.

Sampson and Johannessen (2020) further emphasise that vignettes can foster rapid rapport and trust, thereby creating the conditions for rich, detailed, and candid reflections, particularly in interviews where relational proximity must be established quickly. This methodological potential has been substantiated by comparative studies synthesising diverse research applications and analytical approaches, which demonstrate that vignettes can yield realistic and otherwise inaccessible insights, especially in contexts where direct questioning might inhibit disclosure (O’Dell et al., 2012; Gourlay et al., 2014; Erfanian et al., 2020). It is also emphasised that vignettes can create a certain degree of distance between the researcher and the participant, helping to surface sensitive topics and thereby facilitating the exploration of potentially distressing, embarrassing, or morally contentious issues (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber, 2014). The flexibility of the vignette format enables participants to accept, contest, or reinterpret the scenario, thereby revealing their interpretive frameworks, moral reasoning, and tacit knowledge.

In my research, the vignettes were developed from multiple sources: insights gained during preliminary interviews, observations conducted through participant observation, and selected excerpts from publications in which waste pickers in Türkiye narrated their own experiences. Nine vignettes were intentionally varied in tone—some depicting positive scenarios, others negative, and some neutral—yet all were deliberately designed to remain open-ended. Rather than employing them as prompts that demanded specific responses or resembled moral dilemma problems, I used the vignettes primarily as facilitators to encourage dialogue. The aim was to avoid reverting to a conventional question–answer hierarchy that could reinforce asymmetrical dynamics between researcher and participant. Accordingly, none of the interviews followed a format in which I read a story from paper and awaited the participant’s answers for transcription. Instead, I narrated the vignettes informally, deliberately avoiding reading aloud, and invited participants to share their thoughts with prompts such as, “What do you think about this situation?” or “How would you describe what happened here?” This approach allowed participants to respond in their own words, shaping the conversation in ways that reflected their priorities and interpretive frameworks. Follow-up questions I had planned were then introduced organically, in response to the flow of the discussion, with the explicit aim of maintaining the atmosphere of an open conversation. In this sense, the vignettes in my fieldwork functioned not as structured, lengthy questions but as conversational stimuli designed to foster genuine engagement and elicit insights that might not have emerged through more formal interviewing techniques.

Below, I present one example each of a positive, a negative, and a neutral vignette, drawn from the set of nine scenarios I employed during interviews with 20 participants in my fieldwork.

The first example, a negative vignette, emerged from the following guiding question: How are the routine, embodied actions of waste picking—practical, embodied expressions of a situated knowledge system—perceived by those outside the occupation? Do such practices elicit negative reactions? This question arose from two sources: repeated emphasis during preliminary interviews on the negative responses waste pickers often receive, and a striking passage in a written account where waste pickers shared their own experiences. In both cases, participants underscored that these reactions seemed to target the very core of their occupational practice, rather than external factors.

The vignette I designed to explore this issue was as follows:

“A waste picker spots a discarded soft drink bottle on the ground. He picks it up, crushes it to reduce its size, and drops it into his sack. A passerby, observing this, asks why he did that. The picker explains that compressing bottles allows him to fit more PET and other plastics into the sack. The passerby dismisses this explanation, calling the practice unnecessary and pointless.”

In interviews, I deliberately presented this scenario without reading it verbatim from paper, narrating it in a conversational tone and asking open-ended prompts such as, “What do you think about this situation?” or “Have you ever experienced something like this?” The responses revealed multiple layers of meaning. Many participants recognised the scenario immediately, linking it to similar experiences in which their occupational routines were questioned or mocked. This allowed them to share not only the factual details of such interactions but also the emotions—frustration, resignation, or indifference—that accompanied them.

Through this vignette, I was able to observe how waste pickers framed their own knowledge systems in relation to external perceptions. Some reacted defensively, asserting the efficiency and necessity of their practices; others expressed a pragmatic acceptance of public misunderstanding, framing it as inevitable. In all cases, the vignette served to elicit narratives that moved beyond abstract descriptions of stigma toward concrete, situated accounts of how epistemic devaluation plays out in everyday street encounters. This in turn illuminated how occupational expertise—rooted in embodied, repetitive action—can become a target of epistemic violence when viewed through an uninformed or dismissive lens.

The second example, a positive vignette, was inspired by another written account in which a waste picker described her pursuit of the right to express herself and the role of artistic creation in that process. One of the underlying motivations behind such platforms where waste pickers share their own narratives is precisely to defend this right—to create spaces within their own knowledge systems where self-expression becomes possible. This aspiration, and its potential for empowerment, formed the basis of the following vignette:

“A female waste picker writes a short story about her experiences and the lessons she has learned while collecting waste. The story is considered highly educational and is later published in a municipal magazine on recycling.”

When I introduced this vignette during interviews, I observed a notable shift in tone compared to responses to the negative scenario. Participants often smiled or leaned forward, signalling interest and emotional investment. Several respondents connected the story to their own creative capacities—whether in the form of storytelling, poetry, or photography—that had

rarely found an outlet beyond their immediate social circles. Others used the vignette as an opportunity to discuss the importance of public recognition, not only as individuals but as contributors to the city's environmental and cultural life.

This vignette also prompted reflection on the intersections between epistemic recognition and broader forms of social inclusion. Participants imagined how municipal or community platforms could validate their experiential knowledge, challenge dominant stereotypes of waste pickers, and promote a more nuanced understanding of their work. For some, the scenario triggered pride in their ability to educate others; for others, it underscored the gap between such ideal outcomes and their current realities. In either case, the vignette opened a conversational space in which participants could articulate aspirations, envision more equitable relations with institutions, and connect their daily labour to broader narratives of sustainability and social contribution.

The third example, a neutral vignette, was designed to explore one of the most critical and sensitive themes in my research: attitudes toward and perceptions of the formal legal framework governing waste management. The skeletal idea for this scenario was inspired by a written account from waste pickers themselves, yet my preliminary interviews underscored the need for caution. I had observed that this topic elicited widely divergent opinions among participants, often reflecting personal experiences with municipal authorities, NGOs, or policy initiatives. Anticipating such diversity of perspectives, I intentionally framed the vignette in an open-ended manner, avoiding any pre-determined outcome or evaluative stance.

“Several waste pickers consider a newly drafted regulation on waste management in Türkiye to be insufficient from their perspective. They decide to write their own version of the regulation. In doing so, they argue that any policy on waste and recycling should incorporate the knowledge and experience of waste pickers.”

When shared in interviews, this vignette generated varied and sometimes unexpected responses. Some participants welcomed the idea of co-authoring regulations, framing it as an opportunity for institutional recognition and collaborative governance. Others, however, expressed scepticism, citing distrust of policymakers or doubts about whether their voices would ever be genuinely considered. A smaller number regarded such involvement as unnecessary, believing that their daily practices already operated independently of legal structures.

This range of reactions revealed the complexity of epistemic positioning in relation to formal governance. The vignette enabled participants to articulate not only their stance toward specific policies but also their broader views on legitimacy, authority, and the role of experiential knowledge in decision-making processes. By avoiding a prescriptive narrative, the vignette functioned as a genuinely open platform—one that allowed divergent viewpoints to surface without steering the discussion toward a single normative direction. This, in turn, underscored the methodological value of open-ended scenarios in facilitating dialogue around contested and politically charged issues without foreclosing interpretive possibilities.

4. Results

The vignette-based interviews generated a rich set of narratives that illuminated multiple, intersecting forms of epistemic violence experienced by waste pickers in Türkiye. Across the nine vignettes developed for this study, participants articulated experiences that ranged from moments of exclusion and devaluation to instances of recognition and agency. While each vignette addressed a distinct thematic focus—from occupational stigma to creative self-expression, from interactions with formal governance structures to environmental knowledge—together they mapped a complex epistemic landscape shaped by entrenched social hierarchies and structural inequalities.

Analysis of the data revealed three overarching forms of epistemic violence—**discriminatory**, **testimonial**, and **distributive**—which often overlapped in practice. These categories emerged not as rigid typologies but as heuristic tools to capture recurring patterns across participants' accounts.

Discriminatory epistemic violence operated through the systematic devaluation of waste pickers' situated, practice-based expertise. Participants frequently described how their sensory and experiential knowledge—such as interpreting waste by its sound, smell, or texture—was dismissed as “unprofessional” within dominant waste management discourses. This form of devaluation extended beyond technical competence to encompass their social identity, with occupational practices often met with stigma or ridicule.

Testimonial epistemic violence appeared in the undermining of participants' credibility, the silencing of their voices, and the conditional nature of being heard. Many described having to continually justify their knowledge, perform respectability, or adapt their speech to align with perceived standards of legitimacy. In some accounts, participants conveyed a deep sense of futility in speaking at all, as their contributions were routinely ignored or overshadowed by those in positions of institutional authority.

Distributive epistemic violence reflected the structural manipulation of the conditions under which knowledge could be produced, shared, or accessed. This included limited opportunities for education, the spread of misinformation about their work, and exclusion from decision-making processes that directly affected their livelihoods. Participants emphasised that such exclusion was not incidental but embedded in regulatory, municipal, and enforcement frameworks that defined “expertise” in ways that precluded their own.

While all nine vignettes contributed to identifying these patterns, three are presented here as illustrative examples. The **negative vignette**—depicting public reactions to a waste picker's occupational practice—elicited stories of humiliation and invisibility, revealing how stigma and epistemic exclusion intersect. The **positive vignette**—centred on a waste picker's creative writing being published—prompted reflections on recognition, self-expression, and the politics of voice. The **neutral vignette**—imagining waste pickers drafting their own regulation—surfaced divergent views on governance, legitimacy, and the feasibility of institutional engagement.

Crucially, the vignette method's open-ended format allowed participants to respond without the constraints of a strict question–answer hierarchy. This not only facilitated the discussion of

sensitive issues but also enabled participants to articulate complex, sometimes contradictory positions. Across the corpus, the method functioned as both a data-generating tool and a catalyst for reflexive engagement, making visible the nuanced ways in which epistemic violence permeates daily life, professional identity, and collective agency among waste pickers.

Conclusion

This study has examined the manifestations of epistemic violence in Türkiye through the lived experiences of waste pickers while advancing vignettes as a methodological tool for exploring such complex and power-laden phenomena. Drawing on nine carefully crafted vignettes—grounded in preliminary interviews, participant observations, and written testimonies—the research revealed how discriminatory, testimonial, and distributive forms of epistemic violence intersect in everyday practices, institutional arrangements, and public discourses. These findings illustrate the systemic nature of such violence, where the devaluation of practical knowledge, the silencing of lived experience, and the exclusion from decision-making processes mutually reinforce one another in sustaining epistemic marginalisation.

The vignette approach proved particularly effective for engaging with these dynamics. Designed to be open-ended and thematically varied—ranging from positive to negative to neutral scenarios—the vignettes encouraged participants to engage with sensitive topics on their own terms, free from the constraints of hierarchical question–answer formats. This methodological choice was not only a narrative device but also an epistemological intervention, enabling the articulation of tacit knowledge, interpretive frameworks, and moral reasoning that might otherwise remain hidden. The flexibility of the vignette format allowed participants to accept, contest, or reinterpret each scenario, revealing how they navigate structural inequalities and knowledge hierarchies in everyday life.

Several limitations of the study must be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a specific urban and cultural setting, and its qualitative scope limits the generalisability of the findings. My positionality as researcher inevitably shaped the framing of the scenarios and may have influenced the nature of participants' responses. In addition, the reliance on in-person interviews may have excluded perspectives from individuals unable or unwilling to engage in such settings.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a dual contribution. Substantively, it expands our understanding of how epistemic violence operates in marginalised contexts. Methodologically, it demonstrates the potential of vignettes to navigate the paradox of researching phenomena that both silence and erase their own traces. By allowing for open-ended engagement and shifting interpretive authority toward participants, vignettes offer a way to access forms of knowing that conventional methods may fail to capture.

Future research could build on this methodological insight by testing the vignette approach in other contexts of epistemic violence, exploring comparative and cross-cultural applications, or developing participatory processes in which research participants themselves co-create the scenarios. Such directions would further refine the method's capacity to address the ethical and epistemological challenges inherent in researching power-laden silences and marginalised knowledges.

Ultimately, the vignette method, when applied reflexively, holds promise not only for generating richer empirical accounts but also for contributing to the broader pursuit of epistemic justice—making visible that which dominant knowledge systems are structured to keep unseen.

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