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Enriching ethnographic studies with anchoring vignette methodology

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Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the methodology that was used for a study (Kamanzi forthcoming) entitled *Connectedness in evolution: The discourse of modernity on the ecosophy of the Haya people in Tanzania*.¹ The monograph is about the thesis that the discourse of modernity has rendered eco-centered ecosophies more exploitative of the environment. The thesis has been studied among the Haya people of Bukoba, in the northwestern part of Tanzania, using the banana plantation (*kibanja*) as space to understand their worldview over nature. Through some elements of modernity, particularly science and technology, the economy, Christian religion, and processes of urbanisation, the connectedness ethos, which is an expression of the eco-centred ecosophy of the Haya people, is in evolution towards an “I” and “we” centred ethos.

In order for the study to deal with the differential item functioning, which was discovered to be a major methodological challenge in the study, a “modified anchoring vignette methodology” was adopted. This paper suggests that this could be an important way to deal with issues of subjectivity when dealing with ethnographic research. The paper begins by giving some background information on how methodological issues became problematic from the start of the study. In another section it presents how the study *Connectedness in evolution* is linked to the differential item functioning challenge. The largest bigger part of the discussion is spent on a section that presents issues of how the study went about the DIF and the results from data. The paper winds up with a suggestion on the way forward for ethnography.

Background information

At a very infant stage of the study, I decided to consult an environmental philosopher² in order to give me suggestion on how I could go about the methodological aspects of the study. Among a few other things I wrote on the email, this is what I expressed to him:

... Find attached the abstract of my proposal. I would like to have an advice on the literature and methodology on such a project. When I was preparing the proposal, I read one of your works about the images of nature. I think that this is a kind of line of thinking that I would be engaged in. So, if you assisted me in proposing some of the literature and methodology around the subject matter, I would be grateful. ... (email exchange 17th July 2012)

¹ This is a publication in progress. The draft is done; it is out for peer reviewing.

² I acknowledge the enthusiasm of Professor Dr. Wouter de Groot of Leiden University who supported me intellectually and morally on this challenging study, particularly the methodological approach.

The philosopher after a week mailed back

You really have a nicely mindboggling research design! The great question is: What expresses what, what can you compare to what? Behind this is the great problem that people's ideas on nature are highly contextual, and therewith highly dependent on the research context. In a survey they say this, in an open interview they say that, in a focus group they say the next thing and through a ritual some other thing! Plus the physical context: On a mountain top they say this, back home with a coffee they say that. And, it's all true in the sense that all the time people are honest and authentic.

So, you can compare ecosophy expressed through old and new rituals. Or expressed in focus groups in 1960 and in 2010. Or expressed through local stories, old and modern. You somehow want to compare ritual with focus groups. It's a really nice proposal overall, but here is a methodological snag that I don't see bridged easily. Maybe you could try to capture change within the separate contexts. For instance, compare rituals as they used to be (old people know) with how they are now, and then try to flesh out to what extent this may express changes in ecosophy. Also compare the meanings/interpretations of these ritual as they used to be and nowadays. And for focus groups, you may discuss a set of (same) questions with groups of old and groups of young people. Or mixed young/old group from a most traditional with a most modern village. Or with one occupation (e.g. pure farmers) with new occupations (e.g. much migration, off-farm work). Also then, fishing out the ecosophy from the other aspects will not be easy, but at least you do it on a sound basis. And of course, you can compare the results from the rituals with those of the focus groups, etc. In the focus groups you may discuss what nature is, the values that nature has and how we should relate to nature. (email exchange 25th July 2012)

This was really a philosopher's response. Much as he suggested a way I could go about my methodology, I simply understood that my philosopher was in trouble as I was. The response of the philosopher had one fundamental insight, among many, the study involved so many subjective interpretations. His insight refers to what some researchers, for example Ravallion and Lokshin (2006), have termed as the "differential item functioning" (DIF). It is a "frame of reference" effect, which can lead to people in similar circumstances to give different responses to questions when there is no "real" difference, at least not from the researcher's perspective. The DIF includes the variation in personal scales on which respondents base subjective answers; it can also include the variation in which respondents understand the same questions (and therefore variations in how they respond).

The philosopher's insight led to three fundamental questions for the study. The first question was related to how I was to get to know the traditional ecosophy from the people who are already influenced by the discourse of modernity. The second question was related to the questions: What if the meaning of questions as designed by me the researcher differed from how the respondents interpreted or understood the questions? And thirdly, how was it going to be possible for me to analyze empirical data if the different respondents understood questions differently due to their contextual backgrounds?

In this reflection, I deal with a question of how I addressed the differential item functioning in the study. In the following section, I present how the study, *Connectedness in evolution*, rendered itself to the DIF.

Connectedness in evolution and DIF

The first thing that was established in the study was the Haya worldview. It was studied by getting to understand the organization of the *Kibanja* (popularly known as the

banana plantation). In the *Kibanja*, a number of issues were established: 1) that the *Kibanja* itself was central to the lives of the Haya people; 2) that everything found in the *Kibanja* is situated within a hierarchy; 3) that everyone found in the *Kibanja* had a totem and taboos, and; 4) that traditional birth attendants have been important people in the lives of the Haya people.

These were important observations from the secondary and primary data about the worldview of the Haya people, established from the *Kibanja*. The *Kibanja* was taken as a traditional setting and the traditional birth attendant was taken as someone practically dealing with assisting people to give birth traditionally. So, what came out was taken to be traditional, giving clues to a traditional ecosophical position, expressed in those four issues.

However, these observations are neither right nor wrong, on the one hand, and it cannot be taken for granted that each of the respondents understood what they meant very well, on the other hand. To make matters worse, the perception of the respondents in terms of the extent to which they agreed with them was necessary in order to have a general outlook of the extent to which the people now share the basics of the traditional ecosophy. So, the DIF in the study was based on, one, the subjectivity of the statements themselves, two, the different levels of understanding of the observations, and three, the subjectivity in the levels of agreement with the observations.

Going about DIF: Modified anchoring vignette methodology

In order to deal with the DIF with respect to subjective questions, there are studies related to the methodology developed by King and Wand (2007). They developed a method of correcting for DIF by including “anchoring vignette” questions into the survey and using the responses to those questions to rescale the subjective welfare responses. Anchoring vignettes are (usually brief) descriptions of hypothetical people or situations that survey researchers can use to correct otherwise inter-personally incomparable survey responses. Anchoring vignettes are being used simply because survey questions are a function of the actual quantity being measured along with a good dose of interpersonal in-comparability.

The idea underlying anchoring vignettes is to measure directly, and then re-scale responses to generate comparability across respondents. Respondents are asked for self-assessments of the concept being measured, along with assessments, on the same scale, of each of several hypothetical individuals described in anchoring vignettes. As the actual levels for the people in the vignettes are, by definition, invariant over respondents, the only reason answers to the vignettes will differ over respondents is interpersonal in-comparability. Such approach is able to correct the self-assessments.

I, actually, participated in one of the experiments in Tanzania in 2008, *Anchoring Vignettes in Subjective Welfare: Experiments in Tanzania and Tajikistan*, in order to evaluate the feasibility of using anchoring vignettes to correct for the bias resulting from respondents differing scales (Himelein & Beegle, 2008). In developing the vignettes in this work, it was clear that the vignettes must be constructed in a culturally specific context, thus underscoring the centrality of cultural backgrounds in addressing the way in which respondents give answers to subjective questions.

Having in mind this anchoring vignette methodology, I simply posed to myself a question: What sense could the anchoring vignette methodology make to this research that involves subjectivity? At the beginning I thought that I was going to adopt the anchoring vignette methodology wholly, and therefore at some point have some

statistical processes in order to correct the DIF. Much as the geographical area for the survey was relatively small, in fact a single village, and the people were culturally homogeneous, all Haya by ethnicity, my respondents were heterogeneous in terms of sex, age, education, and experiences with traditional practices. Of course, these were enough elements to construct subjectivities in the self-assessment on agreement or not on issues regarding the *Kibanja*, the hierarchy of beings, totems and taboos, and the traditional birth attendant. However, I thought that aiming at using anchoring vignettes for the purpose of correcting their self-assessments in such a small geographical area and with such a cultural homogeneity was an exaggeration. Still, I thought statistical gymnastics with ethnography might lead me into serious methodological analytical problems. So, I dropped the idea of wholly adopting the traditional use of the anchoring vignette methodology, and went in for a modified anchoring vignette methodology.

I decided to construct the anchoring vignettes that I would present to all the respondents of the FGDs and the structured questionnaire. The anchoring vignettes reflected the reality of the four observations from the Haya worldview as established from the *Kibanja*. The constructed anchoring vignettes were used in testing the levels of agreement with the traditional ecosophy through the structured questionnaire; they were also used to prompt more questions to explain the agreements/disagreements with the traditional ecosophy through the FGDs.

With regard to the *Kibanja* as central to the lives of the Haya people, the anchoring vignette was:

The life of the Haya people takes place in a *Kibanja*. In the *Kibanja*, we find *Mushonge* where live people live. We also find *Kituulo* where dead people live. The bananas in the *Kibanja* sustain people's hunger; the medicines in the *Kibanja* maintain people's health. It is in the *Kibanja* that we celebrate our birthdays, marriage, and death.

With regard to the observation that everything found in the *Kibanja* is found within a hierarchy, the anchoring vignette was:

Everything stems from God. God left our ancestors to manage us, and we to manage animals and plants. God and the spirits live where nobody sees; we live here on earth; the unborn children live with us, but we cannot see them normally. All that God created is good: We use it for our goodness. We only have to be careful not to transgress taboos.

With respect to the observation that everyone found in the *Kibanja* has a totem and taboos, the anchoring vignette was:

Everybody of us has a totem, which is a friend; this is a sister and brother who can always save our lives. Again, everybody must avoid taboos because once they are transgressed, they hurt.

Finally, with regard to traditional birth attendants being important people in the lives of the Haya people, the anchoring vignette was:

Ma Koku is a traditional birth attendant. She inherited this work from her mother. She provides services to pregnant women and children. She uses herbs and spirits to treat different illnesses. One of her major tasks is to perform traditional birth rituals. Many people go to her; women go there when they are pregnant for medicine; some women go there to deliver; some people take there their babies for medicine and check up; men go there to for their diseases.

The anchoring vignettes guided the respondents of the structured questionnaire as well as the respondents of the focus group discussion. They were meant to give

opportunity to all the questionnaire respondents for a self-assessment that was based on the same understanding of the observations spoken about; for the focus group discussion respondents, they made them discuss over the same thing. My working assumption was that once the vignette is read to the respondents, there is no need to later adjust the assessments and explanations as they have already internally adjusted themselves after listening to the vignette; I was not interested in the respondents' non-adjusted assessments or explanations, but the adjusted ones because these were comparable. It is for this matter that I never got into statistical analysis to adjust the subjective responses.

Let me give an idea of the results from the questionnaire using the anchoring vignette methodology on the four observations and how the results were presented. With regard to the *Kibanja* being central to the lives of the Haya people, many respondents disagree, as can be seen in the following table.

Table 1 Perceptions with *kibanja* functions

	Disagree %	Agree%	Total % (No.)
Haya depend on the <i>Kibanja</i>	90	10	100% (166)
Haya live in a <i>Mushonge</i> (traditional house) in the <i>Kibanja</i>	97	3	100% (166)
Haya are buried on the <i>Kituulo</i> in the <i>Kibanja</i>	45	55	100% (166)
Bananas in the <i>Kibanja</i> are important food for Haya	86	14	100% (166)
Traditional medicines in the <i>Kibanja</i> are important for Haya	79	21	100% (166)
Birth, marriage, and death celebrations in the <i>Kibanja</i> are important celebrations among the Haya	56	44	100% (166)
Mean percentage	46	25	

The mean percentage taken from the functions of the *Kibanja* for the Haya people show that those in disagreement with the functions are more than those in agreement. Thus, more respondents disagree with the central functions of the *Kibanja*. From the focus group discussions, reasons as to why the *Kibanja* is no more central were given.

The *Kibanja* is no more important as it is getting smaller and smaller and it is being incorporated in the urban structure of streets and plots:

How many people have the *Kibanja*? If one has one, it is already small as it has been divided and divided and divided; you cannot do much in such *Kibanja* nowadays (Women, FGD, September 2010)

Last year and this year, we have registered our *Kibanja* as a plot. We were told to do so by the authorities because they said our village is counted as a street in this Municipality. So, what I know is that in some years to come, the *Kibanja* will be subdivided the more to have small plots for town inhabitants (Women, FGD, September 2010)

It is general agreement that there are almost no *Mushonge* any more in the Haya families for reasons of having no experts to construct them, feeling of backwardness, and space.

Where do you find the *Mushonge* now? The houses that look like a *Mushonge* are actually houses that people have them that way because they are poor. They cannot afford modern houses. And these are not *Mushonge*; they simply resemble them because of the grass on the roof. Even constructing a *Mushonge* needs expertise, which we do not have now. There are few experts for the *Mushonge* now. And again, you need space for this. Do you think these plots can accommodate a *Mushonge* now? (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

But who is for a *Mushonge* now? We are talking about good houses with cement and bricks and iron roofs, others even tiles, and you are thinking of a *Mushonge*? That is gone time; let the old guys keep their *Mushonge*. Actually, you do not find any *Mushonge* closeby if not at that home of the *Mbandwa* and at the king's palace in another village. ... Anyway, I would not like to have a *Mushonge* in my street (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

Many people have good feelings of being buried at home. They say that they belong there; that is where their ancestors are

But why should I get buried in Dar or in a cemetery or Kishenge? Do I not have a family, where I was born, where my parents are? Even if I am far away, they will have to bring me back: Let them get a bus or let them hire a plane and take a boat to make sure that I am buried at home (Youths, FGD, September 2010).

You saw or heard that when they were constructing this road here, they exhumed some of the dead bodies. They were to pay highly and we had to re-bury these people in our new homes. Home is home; that is where one has to get buried; a dead person is till your person; he is just waiting for you and you need to take care of him nearby you; and he needs to take care of you also (Woman, FGD, September 2010)

On the bananas, the respondents are very pessimistic: The varieties are not nice and bananas do not pay off any more.

Bananas are over: They are sick; there are new varieties, which are not nice at all. But again, who eats bananas as such: They have become quite expensive. ... and with the kind of work we do, the bananas you eat now are like water. You cannot eat bananas and you go to construct a house; bananas nowadays are too waterly (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

And you cannot distinguish sweet bananas from green bananas. Even the cooking bananas now are ripened and taken as sweet bananas. Even the sweet bananas are being cooked and you eat them very hard. It is terrible with bananas here (Woman, FGD, September 2010)

How many people work in the Kibanja now? Very few. Many people go in town for employment and to engage in businesses which pay more. Or even when they are at home, they have a table outside to sell something. The Kibanja is not enough any more to provide for the family. The Kibanja has become too small to pay off (Woman, FGD, September 2010)

There is some good feeling about traditional herbs

Look at that tree, Omulinzi, it is very strong medicine for so many diseases, especially *Mushana*³; like its name, it will always protect you. Its life does not end when you cut it, boil it, and drink it; its life gets into you and if you were going to be attacked by a disease, you

3 This is common way of talking about fevers among the Haya people; sometimes this word refers to malaria fever. Literally, *Mushana* means sun. It is believed that malaria happens when it is the dry period or when there is a lot of sunshine. Actually, the belief is logical in that during the rainy season when the Haya people hardly get hot days and see a clear sky, it is when there are no mosquitoes. Immediately after the rainy seasons, the sun is out and the mosquitoes get where to breed and with favorable temperatures they come out to bite people and cause malaria fever, and hence the name, *Mushana* (sun) to signify the fevers when there is sunshine

are protected. ... and that is how many traditional herbs operate (Woman, FGD, September 2010)

Much as there is some good feeling, still traditional herbs are accompanied by problems: Distances to fetch them, business mentality, and cheating.

We used to have lots of herbs in the Kibanja. But they are dying because we have to plant so many other crops for food. We also used to get herbs from nearby forests and swamps. But now, my dear, forests and swamps are no more there: They have been cleared for houses or cultivation of tomatoes and other vegetables. So, we have to go very far to fetch medicines, and most of the time we do not get all we want.

You see this medicine we are pounding now? We collected it yesterday. We moved the whole day from morning to evening. This is what we got. There are so many kinds of inside here. Some treat malaria, others bring appetite, others clean your kidneys, other clean your bladder, other add blood, and so on and so on. But, if you really want to get good medicine, you need to go very far nowadays, and most of the time you will not get everything you need. ...

But I know so many people who sell herbs. Most of those who do it have ended up cheating people. Because they want money, they tell lies because they have to advertise their medicine: They can say that a medicine treats one hundred diseases or if you take it even you can be cured of AIDS. They tell people lies. This is dangerous. And God can never bless you for that. ...

Because of the money that the herbs are getting now, some people are just harvesting a lot of herbs to store for customers. So, there is over-harvesting; some herbs such as Akaramata, which used to be in people's plantations, is no more there; you cannot get it in plantations. People have harvested it; they are hiding it so that when someone comes with blood problems they can sell it to him/her. The same applies to Mbazi Marwa, where do you get it now? People are pruning it to sell it. Money is becoming a problem in this service of assisting to cure people with herbs (Woman, Case study, September 2010)

The celebrations have mixed feelings; in actual fact, there is general agreement that the celebrations are welcome; they are nice because they put people together. However, when it gets to different practices/rituals that are performed within these celebrations, that is when there are differences of opinions:

I have problems with the different rituals that the Haya people have when children are born, especially the twins; this goes to some marriage practices, especially in the bedrooms; I am not sure whether these are good rituals. Most of them are superstitious: They call ancestors; they use charms; they speak strange words; they take you to the banana plantations. I think this is superstition (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

Actually, instead of doing all these rituals for a newborn in order to heal or avoid health problems, why don't you go to hospital? When you perform them you are like gambling. Why should you fear animals and plants because they are a taboo for a pregnant mother? (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

I do not want to say much, but most of the rituals are satanic; that is why they are hidden; they cannot be done in the open; they would not comply with what the Bible says. ... I think that the priests are right to attack them (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

On the hierarchy in the universe, many respondents agree with the hierarchy, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 2 Perceptions over hierarchy of beings

	Agree%	Neutral%	Disagree %	Total % (No.)
God and spirits live in the invisible space	67	27	6	100% (166)
Animate and inanimate live in the visible space	78	18	4	100% (166)
Pregnancies and minerals live in the visible invisible space	80	16	4	100% (166)
Mean percentage	75	20	5	

This hierarchy corresponds to the spaces in which the different beings live: God and the spirits live in the invisible space; the animate and inanimate live in the visible space, but some of them because they are yet to be born as they live as pregnancies and others are minerals to be excavated, they live in the visible invisible space. There are reasons for the agreement.

On whether everybody has a totem, 141 (85%) of the people disagreed, 5 (3%) were neutral, and 20 (12%) disagreed; similarly that we needed to avoid taboos, 96 (58%) disagreed, 5 (3%) were neutral, and 65 (39%) agreed. This implies that there are more people who think about the effectiveness of taboos than the effectiveness of totems. And there are reasonings behind these perceptions.

No connection at all. A brother or sister is born with you and that is it. ... As it was already said before, issues of totems are superstitions only, nothing else. And that is how witch people do their things: They make you think of funny things like totems and you believe in them. You people, tell me: For a normal person who thinks properly, how can he say that this tree is my brother or sister and therefore my totem? (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

But still some people think totems are there and they are very important in taking care of clans.

Some animals are our relatives. The Baihuzi have a “snail” as their good sister; the Bankango have “grasshoppers” as their bad sister; the “Basingo” have fish as their bad brother. Omushasha is medicine, but there is a clan called Abashasha; these are relatives. Sometimes you are not aware about your relative, but it is important to know that your relative is there. Once you come to know the relative, you become very happy. And these relatives are important in our clans. That is why we come from different clans. ... (Women, FGD, September 2010)

You can create relationship with animals: Treat them well and they become your relatives, they will never hurt you; mistreat them and they will always be bad to you. Even plants, they can know their friends and enemies. Someone takes a certain herb, she is not healed; another one takes it and she is healed. Why? One might be a friend and another one an enemy (Women, FGD, September 2010)

There are still many people take taboos seriously. An example of taking them seriously was expressed in the focus group discussions with women, who generally shared and agreed on experiences like the following:

Taboos are very important; if you fail to observe them, you can get hurt. If you look at a dead cow, for example when you are pregnant, you can give birth to a dead baby. There are certain foods you do not have to take because of yourself and the baby. Why should you pass under a tree and you have to bend? This is not good for your back; and if you fell down, you can hurt yourself and the baby. Why should you eat “nsenene”; if your baby grew fat in your stomach, how would you push him/her out? (Women, FGD, September 2010)

They used to tell me not to take a lot of salt and eggs, and not to have frequent sex with my husband when I was pregnant. Well, I disobeyed; I gave birth to a very unhealthy baby and she passed away after delivery; at the time of birth she was already tired, she could assist herself to come out (Women, FGD, September 2010)

However, some people, especially in the focus group discussion with young men and women, taboos were considered as an old-fashioned way of dealing with reality:

I have heard about taboos, but I think that this is a very old way of looking at things. When I was growing they told us, even till now some parents still tell us, that in our clan it is a taboo for men to eat fish. Once you ate it, your skin would begin peeling off the skin. To be honest, I eat, and some other brothers of mine eat fish, but I have not seen anybody peeling off the skin. It is upon you to follow the taboos or not, but I think it was an old way of doing things (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

It was a taboo to walk at night, yes, but there was no electricity in those days. So, people were afraid of meeting bad people and animals. Again, there was not much work at night. Nowadays, my friend, it is at night when everything gets busy; that s when you meet friends and you go to the bar to drink. It is when we discuss business. Do not go out to day and you will die poor, I can assure you (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

Yes, again those days there were problems for women. They could rape you at night. But now, I think that such things are gone. After all, when you hang out at night you are with your friends, and most likely your boyfriend (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

On the question as to whether the traditional birth attendants are of assistance to the people, the following table summarises the results:.

Table 4 Perceptions of assistance from traditional birth attendants

	Disagree %	Neutral%	Agree%	Total % (No.)
Agreement with traditional birth practices assisting women to get pregnant	54	6	40	100% (166)
Agreement with traditional birth practices assisting women to deliver	49	6	45	100% (166)
Agreement with traditional birth practices assisting babies to grow into healthy human beings	71	5	24	100% (166)
Mean percentage	58	6	36	

Thus, looking at the key areas in which the traditional birth attendants offer services, more respondents are in disagreement with the assistance from the traditional birth attendant. Thus, the Haya people do not believe any more in the roles of the traditional birth attendants. However, still people go there, but they hide:

My friend, some people still go, but they hide because they fear their priests to hold them off the sacraments. Others fear because they would not want to be associated with some of these things that are called backwardness. They go for rituals. Again, it is difficult to know because people can go in the evening or at night. They are afraid of being seen (Women, FGD, September 2010)

And the youths confirm this too:

But I do not know many people who go there. What I know is that, even when people go there, especially to the Mbandwa, they do not go there openly; they have to hide from people who can talk ill about them. The fear is that they can tell the priests who can scold them and give them penitence. (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

Actually, people may not go to the traditional birth attendants because they know some of the rituals and they do them at home:

I think that many still do these rituals at home. Many women might not be experts as such of the rituals, but they know something and that is what is done. For example, when a child grows teeth, I do not need to go to the traditional birth attendant; I know what I should do and that is it. (Women, FGD, September 2010)

On what kind of people go there, the young men and women think that it is the poor and old people:

Sick people who are poor and who cannot afford to go to a hospital or dispensary because they stay far from it or do not have money to go and pay there. ... (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

People who still believe in traditional things. And most of such people are old people. Some of us have gone to the birth attendants because our mothers took us there; some rituals have been done on us because we did not know what was being done; it is our mothers who took us there (Youths, FGD, September 2010)

Which way for ethnography?

Ethnography as the study of cultures through close observation, reading, and interpretation, has as basic methodological procedures rotating around three kinds of data collection: Interviews, observation, and documents. These data collection methods, in turn, produce three kinds of data: Quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents, which can come to a single product, a narrative description.

I think that in ethnography, sometimes one would like to have a subjective feel of an opinion or observation, not from an individual, but from a rather bigger population. It is here that the anchoring vignette methodology would be of help. Establishing a general overview is important; this general overview can still be clarified with other ethnographic data collecting procedures in order to capture the processes and rationales behind.

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