

# USING VIGNETTES FOR ASSESSING ETHICAL SENSITIVITY IN THE NATIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY STUDY



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## OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While using vignettes to measure ethical awareness and ethical sensitivity is quite common in ethics research (e.g. Artino, 2007; Löffström, 2012; Rissanen ja Löffström, 2014), it is not a common element in national research ethics and integrity (REI) surveys.

In Estonia, the first national REI survey among researchers evaluated issues related to FFP, QRP, training and REI infrastructure, the survey also included vignettes focusing on ethical sensitivity. Our aim was to find an answer to the following research question:

RQ: How is ethical sensitivity displayed among researchers who participated in Estonian national REI survey?

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Löffström (2012) indicates that ethical awareness 'describes the ability to recognize situations that pose potential ethical issues' and is the first step of ethical sensitivity (Rest, 1983). Ethical sensitivity involves also recognising the involved parties and considering different courses of action and their implications (Tammeleht, 2022).

Including ethical sensitivity measurement in a national REI survey enables to assess how to better implement the knowledge of guidelines and codes of conduct (Rissanen & Löffström, 2014).

## METHOD

An online survey was developed and carried out in Estonia in 2023. Overall, 354 responses were collected (Simm et al., 2024).

The part to evaluate vignettes was optional for respondents, still 328-332 people responded (depending on the vignette). The topics in the narratives were: (1) IRB approval after the study; (2) pressuring a research participant; (3) including a ghost-author in a manuscript; and (4) starting an intimate relationship with a subordinate/supervisor (vignettes from Artino, 2007).

The respondents were asked to use the following scale:

extremely unethical 1 2 3 4 5 6 not an ethical question

After each vignette it was possible to add a comment. About half of vignette respondents used this opportunity (between 113-135). In total, the vignettes elicited 491 comments which were analysed using qualitative content analysis. As measurement criteria we utilized the SOLO taxonomy (Biggs, 1999) to evaluate the levels of understanding visible in the comments.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted with MaxQDA programme and coding was carried out by 2 coders.

## RESULTS

As adding comments to the vignettes was optional, many responses were short and pertained to the answer the respondent had provided previously (the level of ethicality). For this reason, we considered all comments on the unistructural, multistructural, relational or extended abstract levels displaying ethical sensitivity.

We first measured the sensitivity with the Likert scale and the results indicated that for vignettes 1-3 more than half of respondents considered them to be very unethical or unethical (see Figure 1). Vignette 4 was considered ethical by the majority of respondents.

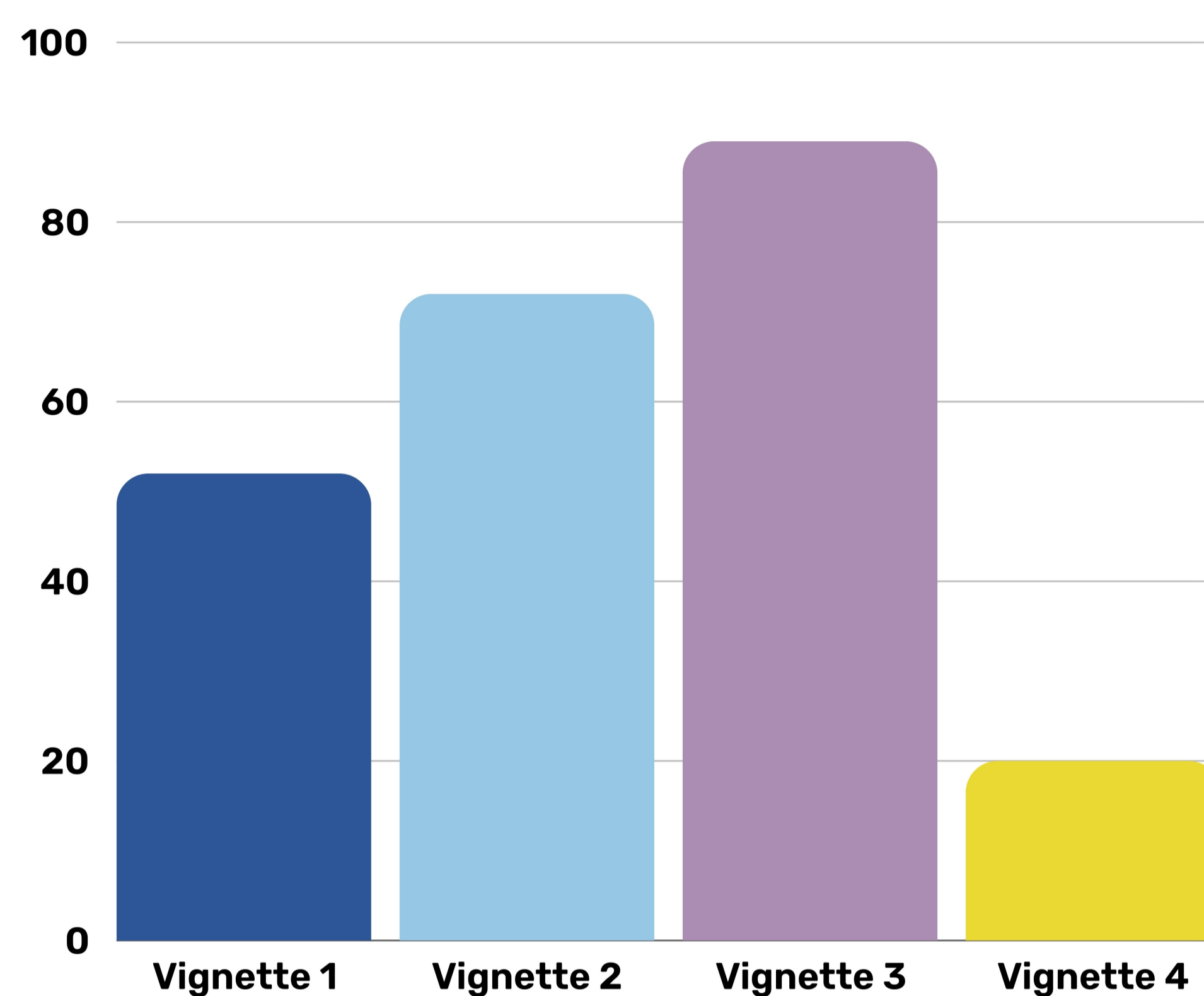


Figure 1. Unethical behaviour identified in the vignettes by the respondents.

We then evaluated the open answer comments by respondents to pinpoint the levels of understanding of the topics in each vignette. For example, Figure 2 displays the SOLO levels for vignette 2. This analysis showed that about 30% of respondents had misconceptions of the central topic in the vignette.

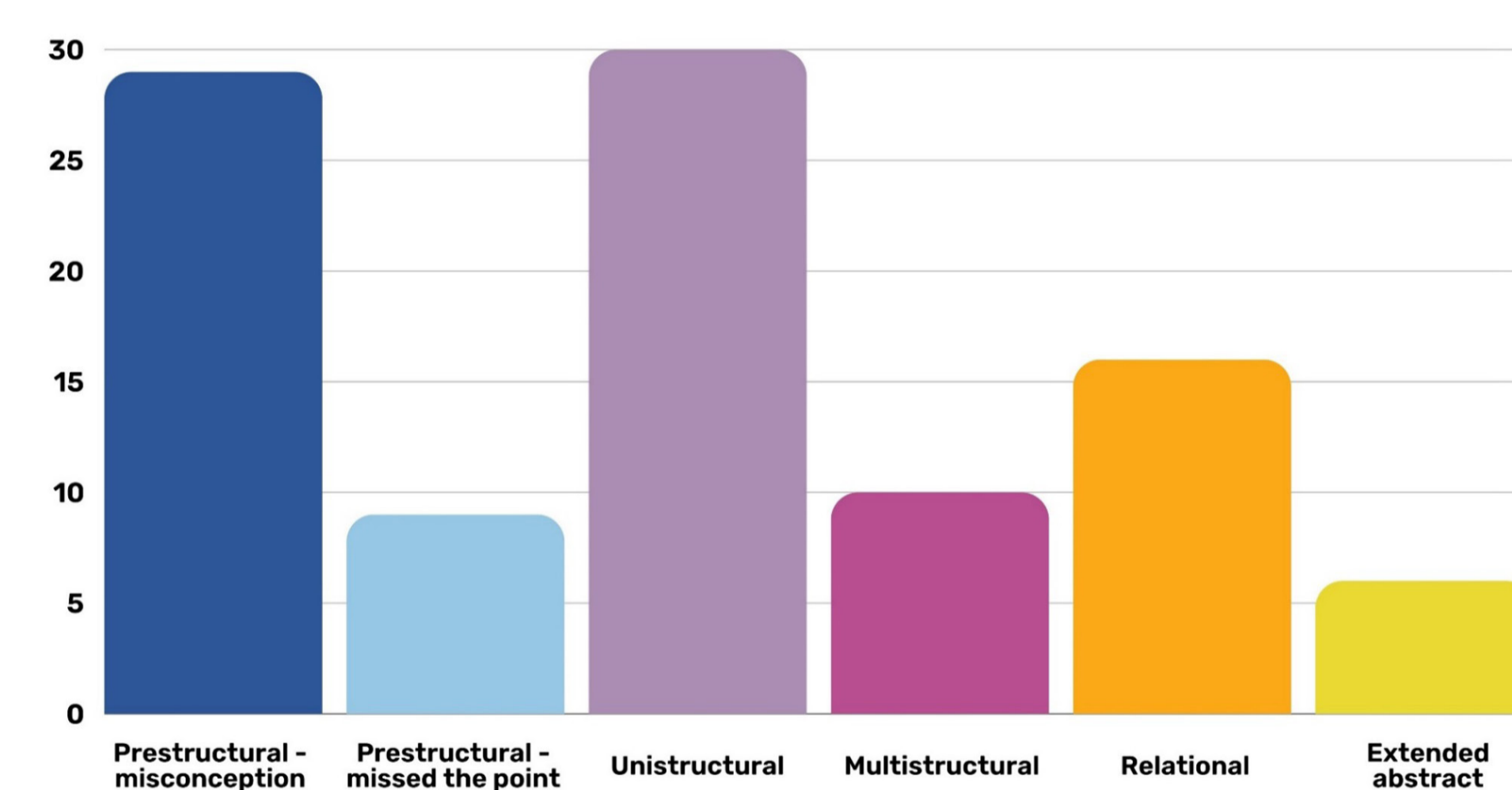


Figure 2. Levels of understanding (SOLO levels) in individual comments provided to vignettes.

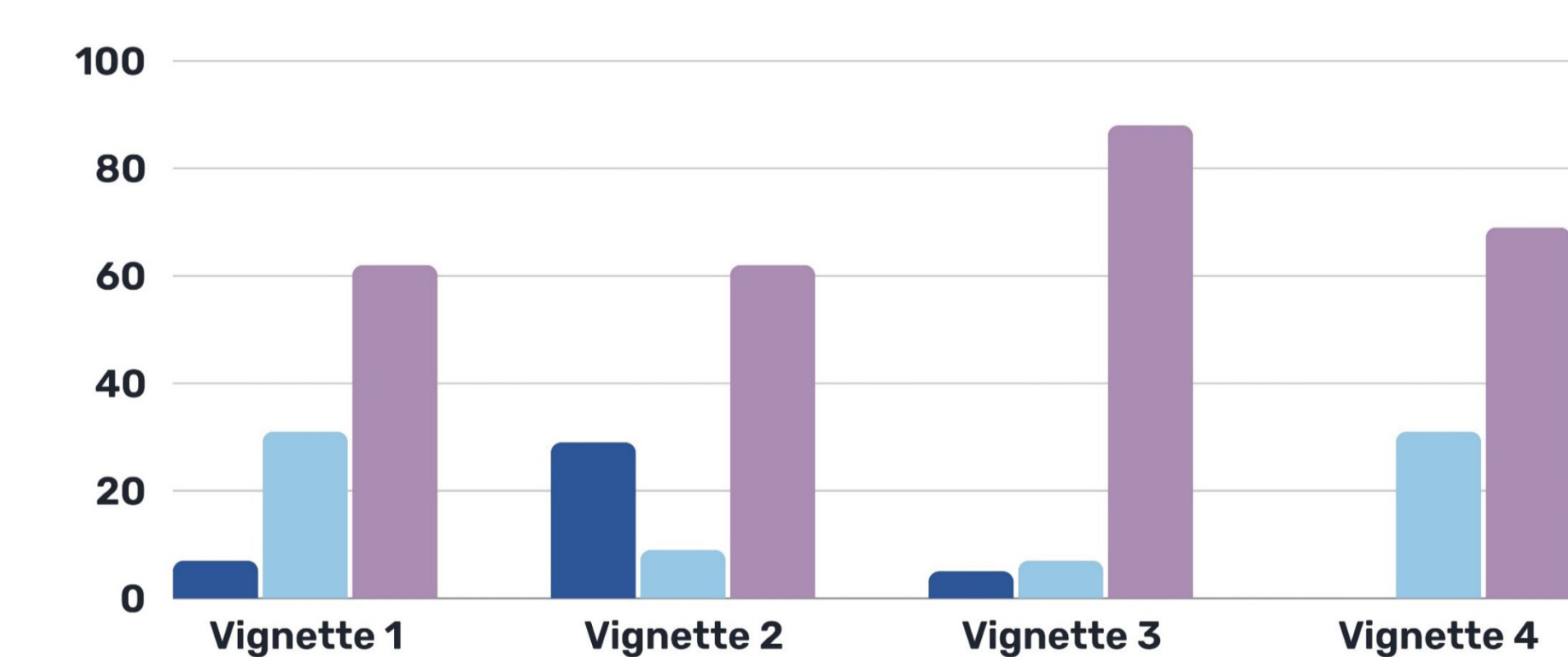


Figure 3. Levels of understanding (SOLO levels) in individual comments per vignette.

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Open answers provided more detailed information about ethical sensitivity of researchers. When the Likert scale results indicate that the sensitivity might have been relatively low, then the open comments show that about 70% of respondents display ethical sensitivity and the main problem may lie in missing the point in the vignette (30% of respondents had not understood the situation) (see Figure 3). In addition, Figure 3 displays that about 30% of respondents had misunderstood the topic in vignette 2 while in vignettes 1 and 4 they had missed the point.

## CONCLUSIONS

As a result of the research, we found that vignettes elicited numerous comments from the participants which in itself may indicate ethical sensitivity. From the vignettes presented to participants, three were evaluated to be unethical by majority of participants in the Likert scale. In addition, SOLO-level analysis indicated sensitivity in more detail and revealed gaps in understanding. When distributing prestructural level into two: misconception and missing the point, vignette 2 indicated the misconception being more dominant, whereas for vignettes 1 and 4 missing the point was dominant. We also speculate that respondents who had misconceptions about the topic actually display some ethical sensitivity.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results indicated that narrative-focused vignettes are effective in eliciting ethically sensitive thinking and motivating considerable number of responses. They also reveal gaps in understanding and provide input into future training needs.

This indicates, narrative-based vignettes are promising also to be used in REI training as they facilitate ethical thinking. They also seem promising to harmonize the understanding of REI in the scientific community.

We also outline a set of recommendations for measuring ethical sensitivity in REI surveys:

- Vignettes can be integrated into REI surveys to measure ethical sensitivity;
- Analysing both selected level of ethicality as well as open answers may reveal where the misconceptions or gaps may lie.

As a limitation, we are aware that the SOLO taxonomy is mainly used to evaluate learning outcomes while open-ended responses are situational reflections and not learning outcomes per se.

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