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Researcher Interaction Biases and Business Ethics Research: Respondent Reactions to Researcher Characteristics

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ABSTRACT. The potential for biased responses that occur when researchers interact with their study participants has long been of interest to both academicians and practitioners. Given the sensitive nature of the field, researcher interaction biases are of particular concern for business ethics researchers regardless of their preference for survey, experimental, or qualitative methodology. Whereas some ethics researchers may inadvertently bias data by misrecording or misinterpreting responses, other biases may occur when study participants' responses are systematically influenced by the mere introduction of researchers into the participants' environment. Although substantial empirical research has been conducted on the general topic of researcher interaction biases, none has focused specifically on business ethics research. In order to remedy this lack of empirical substantiation in the field, we review the related literature on researcher interaction biases, present an empirical example of how such biases can influence research results in an experiment assessing reactions to insurance fraud, and discuss the implications for business ethics research.

KEY WORDS: interviewer bias, methods bias, research methods, insurance fraud

Introduction

As the study of business ethics shifts toward more integrated theories and more rigorous testing of those theories, the research necessarily remains concerned with the investigation of humans as sellers, buyers, managers, employees, corporate citizens, competitors, etc. Although some modes of study in the field may avoid interpersonal contact (e.g., the use of unobtrusive observation), most methods of business ethics inquiry continue to involve interaction of varying degrees between researchers and the participants (subjects, respondents, and informants) that they study. Unfortunately, this interaction involves the possibility that data collected from study participants will be biased by the presence of the researcher(s) conducting the study. If these biases are systematic in their occurrence, study results may be compromised. Considering the importance of ethics in the current business environment, this is a relevant issue to managers, shareholders, and consumer groups, as well as to the researchers who work in this field.

Concern with the potential biasing of data in the study of business ethics has not gone unnoticed. For example, among other concerns, Crane (1999) identifies bias as imposing "significant limits on the scope and method of empirical work investigating morality in organizations" (p. 243). However, although the nature of the research methodology has been implicated to some degree regarding biases due to researchers' cultural misinterpretations (McDonald, 2000), respondents' social desirability (Randall and Fernandes, 1991), and researchers' gender stereotypes and theoretical perspectives (Fagenson, 1990; Stevenson, 1990), none of these examinations has specifically addressed how study participants may bias their responses based on reactions to researcher traits. As such, the examination of researcher interaction biases presents an opportunity to extend Vitell's (2003) suggestion that environmental factors influence ethical responses. In this case, the environmental factor is the introduction of the researchers themselves (cf. Hirschman, 1986) and the responses involve more than social desirability bias.

Researcher interaction biases

This area of study began during the 1950s when large-scale survey research was becoming popular,

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and for years focused almost exclusively on biases found in one-on-one interviews, thus often being referred to as "interviewer bias" (cf. Bader, 1948; Kahn and Cannell, 1957). However, in that researchers concerned with the study of business ethics take on a number of roles (e.g., interviewers, moderators, experimenters, facilitators, etc.), the systematic differences in collected data that are attributable to those collecting the data are more appropriately referred to as "researcher bias."

It has long been recognized that researcher characteristics may play two biasing roles (cf. Boyd and Westfall, 1955; Kahn and Cannell, 1957; see also Powell, 1987). First, researchers' characteristics may inadvertently affect results through biased research design or through biased recording, interpretation, or evaluation of participant responses. For example, Fagenson (1990) discusses how a researcher's gender-stereotyped theoretical perspective may bias research method choice and, ultimately, research conclusions. McDonald (2000) makes similar assertions with respect to how a researcher's cultural origin can influence not only conceptualization and research design, but also data collection, interpretation, and analyses.

Second, researcher characteristics may influence the responses of the participants being studied to the extent that the participants both perceive particular characteristic(s) and either consciously or subconsciously deem these characteristics to be relevant to the question(s) being asked or to the action(s) being performed. This article focuses on this latter role, the "interactive" researcher bias, which results from the introduction of the researcher into the respondent's environment. It should be noted that this interaction process is a two-way mechanism, in which respondents also may influence the actions or reactions of the researchers (Houston and Gremler, 1993; Kahn and Cannell, 1957). However, the discussion here is limited to the effects of researchers on respondent reactions and responses.

The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) present findings on researcher interaction biases, which may be relevant to business ethics data collection; (2) report the results of an empirical study demonstrating the potential for researcher interaction biases in a simple paper-based survey questionnaire; and (3) discuss the implications for those conducting and relying on business ethics research. It is noted that while there is no intent here to be critical of specific research efforts, all business ethics researchers must collectively and individually realize the importance of this methodological issue and address it in the published literature.

Researcher interaction bias and data collection methods

Researcher interaction bias could affect results in almost any data collection method that involves human interaction between researchers and their subjects of study. Although prior work has focused on in-depth personal interviews (Bailar et al., 1977), researcher interaction biases have been found in focus groups (Fern, 1982), telephone surveys (Cotter et al., 1982), mall intercepts (Hornik and Ellis, 1988), face-to-face pencil and paper questionnaires (Evans et al., 2003), mail surveys (Albaum, 1987), and even online studies (Evans et al., 2003). Qualitative methods that utilize naturalistic or humanistic inquiry (cf. Hirschman, 1986) are also at risk for influencing respondents' true behavior (e.g., ethical conduct in a business setting or disclosing opinions regarding ethical issues) if there is any interaction between the researcher and the respondents (Houston and Gremler, 1993). The same holds true for obtrusive experimental work (Rosenthal 1976). Indeed, even the growing use of secondary data in business ethics research is not exempt from systematic biases that may occur at the time of initial data collection (Cowton, 1998). In all of these instances of human interaction, the interaction bias is an issue whether the behaviors studied are answers to questions in a probing interview, observable behavior in a controlled experiment, open discussion in a focus group, casual conversation in a setting of naturalistic inquiry, or solicited responses on a self-administered questionnaire.

Of importance here is whether current and future business ethics research might be affected by the risk of researcher interaction biases. A brief examination of Volumes 60–64 (2005–2006) of the *Journal of Business Ethics* shows a variety of research methods and approaches used, including in-depth, structured, semi-structured, and intercept interviews, as well as face-to-face, phone, mail-back, mail, e-mail, and online surveys. Out of 66 studies in those volumes that reported interactive data collection, 14

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employed some manner of interview technique, 48 administered some type of survey, and several others used student projects. (Note that some studies used multiple methods.) The relevance of researcher interaction biases for the current state of business ethics research is thus clear from a methods perspective. However, there are also questions concerning the types of responses that are affected by these biases.

Several studies have found that questions dealing with attitudes are more likely to be influenced by researcher interaction biases than are factual questions (Collins and Butcher, 1982; Pol and Ponzurick, 1989), yet research investigating social desirability bias suggests that fact questions (e.g., reports on how much recycling a firm does) can be biased as well (Randall and Fernandes, 1991). In that business ethics research inherently deals with issues that are sensitive and sometimes controversial, it is likely that the types of inquiries being made are ones that would be prone to the biases addressed here.

Types of researcher interaction biases

Researcher interaction biases can be classified into three categories based on the various researcher characteristics to which respondents may react, namely, psychological characteristics, physical characteristics, and background characteristics (see Appendix). This categorization has its roots in a portion of Kahn and Cannell's (1957) "model of bias in the interview," which suggests certain relationships between researcher and respondent characteristics in an interview setting, but can be applied to a variety of data collection methods.

Reactions to psychological characteristics of the researcher

The individual personality of the data collector has long been targeted as a potential source of bias in business research (cf. Boyd and Westfall, 1955). However, the potential biasing effects of researchers' psychological characteristics are possible only when these characteristics are manifest through overt behaviors perceptible by respondents. In that these overt behaviors often are not consciously demonstrated, data collectors themselves frequently are unaware of their own biasing characteristics.

Communication between researchers and respondents is obviously an invaluable aspect of the data collection process, but one that may be affected by respondents' perceptions of researcher personality traits. For example, in a study of personality differences, McAdams et al. (1984) found higher levels of in-depth communication when respondents were in the presence of researchers who appeared friendlier by demonstrating higher levels of smiling, laughing, and eye contact. Also, Rogers (1976) reported that "warm" (person-oriented and friendly) researchers elicited more consistent data than "cool" (task-oriented and businesslike) researchers. This suggests that data collectors who are more friendly and personable will tend to elicit a greater amount of, and better quality, information from respondents.

Data collector attitudes toward the issues being studied are often cited as potential biases in the data collection process. Bailar et al. (1977) found links between response rates and interviewers' attitudes (see also McKenzie, 1977). In a related vein, studies on the effects of researcher expectations and impressions have suggested that data collection is often biased toward confirming initial impressions (Phillips and Dipboye, 1989; see also Singer et al., 1983), perhaps through unintentional cues given to the participants by the data collectors. Other attributes, such as researcher interest, motivation, enthusiasm or energy level, and style of presentation or interaction may also have effects on participant responses (cf. McDonald, 1992; Rogers, 1976). When investigating the potential biasing effects of researcher psychological characteristics, the difficulty often lies not only in detecting problematic individual or group characteristics (ideally before full data collection begins), but also in determining how best to eliminate or explain any biases that are found.

Reactions to the physical characteristics of the researcher

Researchers' physical characteristics are more easily detected than their psychological ones. As a result, these characteristics have been widely studied in the social science and public opinion literature. It is noted that, while psychological attributes and perceived background characteristics (discussed later) may be hidden to some degree from participants, physical characteristics are in many instances undis-

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guiseable. These characteristics are important to business ethics research in that a number of ethical issues arise that involve physical attributes of employees and consumers, such as those dealing with gender, race and ethnicity, age, and other attributes (e.g., sexual harassment, pay inequality, inappropriate targeting and profiling, and discrimination).

Gender

The effects of researcher gender on participant responses have been studied for a number of topics and data collection methods. One factor often shown to be an obstacle for business ethics research — respondents' willingness to disclose information — has been shown to be affected by differences in researcher-respondent gender pairings. However, these studies have found conflicting evidence as to the direction of such effects. For example, in a study of attitudes and opinions, McGuire et al. (1985) found that men disclosed more to male interviewers while women disclosed equally to male and female interviewers. Fletcher and Spencer (1984), however, found that only females displayed greater openness while engaged in same-gender pairings. In another study, Fletcher (1983) reported that male respondents formed different expectations depending on the gender of the researcher, and even formed different response strategies based on their beliefs. Thus, some understanding of respondents' tendencies to react to certain stereotypical beliefs is useful in determining the degree or direction of potential biases.

Regarding business ethics, there is a large literature on the effect of participants' gender on views of and/or intention to engage in unethical business practices. While some literature exists which finds no difference in the moral reasoning or ethical judgments between men and women (e.g., McCuddy and Peery, 1996; McDonald and Kan, 1997; Stanga and Turpen, 1991), the preponderance of the extant literature has found females to be less accepting of unethical business practices than males (e.g., Luthar et al., 1997; Sims et al., 1996; Weeks et al., 1999) and less likely to engage in these behaviors themselves (Betz et al., 1989; Sims et al., 1996; Stedham et al., 2007). Various reasons have been proposed for why a gender effect might or might not exist (such as a differing approach to moral reasoning or difference in gender or social roles rather than purely biological sex, for example; Franke et al. 1997; McCabe et al., 2006; Stedham et al. 2007). However, as yet, none of this literature indicates how a participant's gender might interact with a researcher's gender in producing potentially biased ethical judgments.

Non-response bias has also been connected to the gender of the researcher or data collector, with several studies finding that females elicited higher response rates than males in telephone surveys (Groves and Fultz, 1985), mall intercepts (Hornik, 1987) and even mail surveys (Bean and Medewitz, 1988). Finally, in the context of non-verbal behavior, gender has also been shown to have a significant impact on responses. For example, Hornik and Ellis (1988) reported significant increases in response rates, particularly for female interviewers, when interviewers touched and gazed at potential respondents in a mall intercept study.

Race

A growing number of studies are being published that focuses on racial and ethnic differences in the realms of consumer affairs (e.g., Cornwell et al., 1991) and attitudes toward business ethics (e.g., Swaidan et al., 2003). Other ethics-related studies have investigated the effects of race as a factor in advertising (Whittler, 1991) and business strategies (Webster, 1990). And while some research has found no or trivial effects of race on ethical judgments or tests of integrity (Deshpande et al., 2006; Ones and Viswesvaran, 1998), one study found that race of a news subject did affect journalists' ethical reasoning (Coleman, 2003). The proliferation of this research increases the need for investigating and understanding race-of-researcher effects on data collection processes (Cox, 1990).

The race of the researcher (as a data collector) is often regarded as a potential biasing factor only when the research concerns race differences or racial issues. In addition, it has generally been accepted that response items for which race is a salient characteristic are more likely to be affected by this type of bias than are "non-racial" items (Cotter et al., 1982). Yet, the predictability of which items may be biased is not certain. For example, Anderson et al. (1988) found race-of-interviewer biases for what many would consider to be a non-racial issue, reports of voting behavior, demonstrating that even items that

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are not overtly racial in nature may be affected by race bias.

In studies dealing with race and ethnicity, typical findings suggest a "deference theory," that respondents seek to avoid offending the researcher or interviewer, particularly for items concerning the *researcher's* race (Finkel et al., 1991; Reese et al., 1986; Webster 1996). In reference to this issue, Hyman (1954) noted that "it has usually been felt that where the interviewer and respondent are sharply contrasted in their group membership characteristics there is likely to be an affective reaction with unfavorable consequences [i.e., less valid data], and that where they are similar in characteristics, the opposite [i.e., more valid data] consequently will occur" (p. 153). Although much of the research on the effects of the race of data collectors on the responses of their subjects finds differences between same- and opposite-race pairings, the determination of which type of pairing elicits the "better" (i.e., more truthful) response has yet to be determined (cf. Groves, 1987). Indeed, Anderson et al. (1988) found social desirability biases to be more prevalent for same-race pairings than for opposite-race pairings. This less truthful self-disclosure may be due to the fact that greater familiarity can lead to increased salience of normative standards, and thus less disclosure for sensitive items (Mensch and Kandel, 1988), a clear concern for business ethics research.

Age and other characteristics

Although empirical research in this area is limited, several studies have investigated the potential for researcher interaction biases due to age of the researcher. Singer et al. (1983) found older interviewers to have higher response rates, yet experience in interviewing did not elicit similar results. Freeman and Butler (1976), however, found older data collectors to elicit more variance in responses than younger data collectors. Some research has found age to be a significant determinant of ethical decision making and/or behavior (e.g., Babakus et al., 2004; McDonald and Kan, 1997; Ruegger and King, 1992), although the results were not always in the same direction, while other research has looked instead at the impact of time on the job or years in school, rather than explicitly at age (e.g., Borkowski and Ugras, 1992; Luthar et al. 1997; Sims, 1996). Again, though, this does not indicate how participants of any age would respond to researchers of different ages.

Due to differences in processing abilities of children and the elderly (cf. John and Cole, 1986), data collection in situations that deal with a variety of respondent or interviewer ages should be examined for age-of-interviewer effects. Other researcher physical characteristics that may be considered as potential influences on participant responses include size and body shape, physical attractiveness, physical disabilities, and researcher-respondent similarities (see Barnes and Rosenthal, 1985). Recent reports (Judge and Cable, 2004; Roehling, 1999) that height, weight, and physical attractiveness affect employment and income suggest that investigating these factors from a business ethics perspective could increase the salience of these attributes in the researchers conducting such studies.

Reactions to perceived background characteristics of the researcher

Perceived background characteristics differ from physical characteristics in that background characteristics are less obvious and may be controlled or disguised in most circumstances. Unlike psychological characteristics, background characteristics often represent cultural or experiential attributes that can be associated with certain subgroups through verbal or non-verbal cues of the researcher. The interactive bias may result from respondents reacting to stereotypes of the perceived characteristic(s) in question. Examples of these characteristics are the researcher's social class, level of education, extent of training or competency, group-related values and beliefs, ethnic identification, and sexual orientation. These characteristics may be portrayed via actions, words, clothing, hairstyles, adornments, or other cues that respondents find salient.

Many facets of background characteristics seem to be intertwined within the social reality of the respondents under study, and respondents often react based on what they perceive to be a stereotypic characteristic (perhaps a cultural or group orientation) of the researcher. For example, indicators of social status, such as education and income, have been shown to influence research outcomes (Bailar et al., 1977).

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Researcher association with certain political, religious or social groups also may, if perceived, affect subject responses. For example, affiliation with various types of sponsors has been found to affect response rates in mail surveys, and even the quality of responses (Albaum, 1987). It is suggested that although a certain affiliation may not be salient to a researcher who experiences it as a part of everyday life, it may, depending on the issue being investigated, become salient to the respondent to the degree that responses are biased. Vitell and Paolillo's (2003) findings that religiosity plays a significant role in consumer ethics highlights the importance of this type of potential bias. An example might be interviewers who are investigating attitudes on moral or political issues that unintentionally bias responses due to an inadvertent display of a religious symbol or official insignia. Respondents' beliefs or values that accompany this perceived association with a certain group may be a source of the potential bias. In a similar vein, Fern (1982), in a study concerning women's roles in military organizations, reported that some focus group moderators were incorrectly perceived by focus group participants to be military recruiters, which may have influenced the study's results.

Ethnic, national, and regional identification or orientations are other characteristics that may be seemingly perceived by the respondent. This is of particular concern considering the calls for increased cross-cultural business ethics research (e.g., McDonald, 2000; Vitell, 2003), especially if such research attempts to evaluate ethical attitudes or judgments that involve cultures outside of the respondents' cultures. Indeed, much recent ethics research has found differences in ethical judgments both by self-reported intranational culture (Lopez et al., 2005) and by country or national origin (e.g., Babakus et al., 2004; McDaniel et al., 2001; Simga-Mugan et al., 2005; Su 2006; Tsalikis et al., 2002).

Of importance as well is that, although often inappropriately interchanged with race, *ethnicity* has been described as a sometimes "situational" variable that may be present at different levels of intensity (Deshpande et al., 1986; Stayman and Deshpande, 1989; see also Webster, 1990). Situational cues that make ethnicity more salient either to the data collector or to the respondent may influence the responses to certain items. For example, DeRosia (1991) suggests that accents of telephone interviewers are cues that may decrease response rates and bias responses. Of related interest is that foreign sources in cross-national mail surveys have also been found to impact response rates (Ayal and Hornik, 1986).

Complexity of researcher interaction biases

The effects of researchers on the respondents they investigate are complex, and to suppose that all these effects can be identified, much less controlled, would be unreasonable. Inherent in any study that investigates these effects are also situational variables (location, distractions, comfort, etc.) that may interplay with the already complicated mixture of researcher-respondent interaction biases.

It is important to realize that due to the limited nature of programmatic research in this area, it is often difficult to predict the direction of biases that may be encountered, as illustrated by the conflicting findings in the gender- and race-pairings studies previously cited. In addition, estimating and evaluating these biases is often a formidable task in itself (Tucker, 1983). It is also important to note that there are a number of other studies not cited here that failed to find hypothesized researcher interaction biases, illustrating both the difficulty of detecting biases and the situational nature of such effects.

Despite the stated complexity of researcher interaction effects, and limited prior research specifically applied to the business ethics arena, we seek to clarify and advance the literature with an empirical study. By demonstrating the potential impact of these biases within a business ethics survey scenario, we clearly show that researcher interaction biases affect a variety of methodologies, such as survey or experimental research, not just interview-based research, and that the problem is particularly germane to the field of business ethics. We now present the results of a business ethics study that illustrates how research results can be affected by subject responses to a researcher characteristic. Specifically, we report on an investigation into perceptions of the ethics of consumer insurance claim padding while manipulating the ethnicity of the insurance agent who is potentially affected by the consumer actions in the scenario. The ethnicity of the researcher collecting the data is also manipulated.

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Empirical study

One of the recent trends in business ethics research appears to be the welcome increase in cross-cultural and cross-national studies. As mentioned previously, McDonald (2000) admonishes researchers to consider that the culture (or nationality or ethnic identification) of the researcher can influence both the conceptualization and the methodology used to examine ethical issues across cultures (or nationalities or ethnicities). In this case, however, we focus on how respondents might react to ethnicity cues that are potentially made pertinent by ethnic references in experimental materials, or by involvement with researchers of different ethnic backgrounds, or by the interaction of the two.

In order to examine the potential for researcher ethnicity characteristics to influence a study's results, we conducted a study investigating beliefs of fairness and ethical behavior with respect to an insurance claim padding scenario (Dean, 2004). The topic of insurance dishonesty was chosen for several reasons: (1) it is reported to be the second largest white collar crime (in dollar value) in the U.S. (Carris and Colin, 1997) yet has received very little attention in the ethics area (Dean, 2004); (2) there have been recent calls for more rigorous empirical work specifically in the field of insurance dishonesty (Brinkmann, 2005; Brinkmann and Lentz, 2006); (3) insurance rates for homeowner's insurance in the local geographic area, where the study was conducted are relatively high and claims on homeowner's insurance policies for the regional area have been at record amounts over the past few years (making this an involved issue for potential subjects); and (4) the local geographic area offers a high degree of ethnic diversity across both insurance agents and insurance customers.

Prior research

Prior work regarding insurance claim padding by Dean (2004) investigated how particular characteristics of the insurance agent, insurance company, and the policyholders would influence respondents' views of whether the policyholders' inflated claim amount was fair and ethical. Specifically, Dean (2004) presented a written scenario to respondents that manipulated (1) the policyholders' relationship with the insurance agent, (2) the corporate benevolence of the insurance company, and (3) the occupation and wealth of the policyholders. Examining the policyholders' fairness to the agent and company, as well as ethicality of the policyholders' actions and the amount of money that respondents felt should be awarded to the claimants, he found no effects for his sample of undergraduate business students (average age 21.4 years). Dean (2004) based his work partially on Tennyson's (1997) findings that attitudes toward insurance fraud can be influenced by negative perceptions of insurance institutions, as well as the social environment for fraud. This, coupled with Brinkmann's (2005) view that claimant decisions to behave dishonestly are being tied to situation circumstances, suggests that there may be conditions under which attitudes toward an insurance agent or firm will influence ethical evaluations of insurance fraud.

As such, we replicate a portion of Dean's (2004) study and extend it by manipulating several ethnicity factors to show that attitudes toward the agent can indeed impact ethical evaluations and, more pertinent to the current exposition on researcher interaction biases, how a key researcher characteristic can affect the findings of the study. Specifically, we use Dean's (2004) manipulation of the policyholders' relationship with the insurance agent (good vs. bad), and couple that with a manipulation of the ethnicity of the agent described in the scenario (Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic) as well as a manipulation of the ethnicity of the "researcher" who is administering the data collection effort (also Hispanic vs. non-Hispanic).

As with Dean (2004), we expect that respondents will be more likely to consider the insurance padding scenario to be unethical and unfair (and thus bestow a lower award amount) when a negative relationship (versus a positive one) is portrayed between the policyholders and the insurance agent. However, we expect this effect to be more prevalent when the ethnicity of the agent does not match that of the researcher who interacts with the respondents. This proposition is based on the prior work mentioned previously that suggests respondents will react more favorably, or in this case more "ethically," when the person of interest (in this case the insurance agent being affected by the fraudulent activity) has characteristics similar to those of the researcher (Finkel

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et al., 1991; Reese et al., 1986; Webster 1996). The perceived ethical behavior in this case would involve disregarding the policyholders' opinion of their insurance agent when making a fairness judgment. In other words, a negative policyholder–agent relationship should not result in respondents rating the insurance-padding incident to be fairer, less unethical, and deserving of a higher award amount, *unless* there is a mismatch between agent and researcher ethnicity.

Methodology

The study was conducted as a between subjects experimental design with random assignment of participants to each experimental condition. As with Dean (2004), respondents were first presented with a brief description of insurance claim padding, which described it as taking place "when a consumer purposely inflates or overstates the actual value of a loss when making a claim with the insurance company." Respondents were then presented with two items assessing general tolerance for insurance claim padding; this was done to test for similar tolerance across all experimental conditions. The items (from Dean, 2004) stated, "Consumers may have justifiable reasons for inflating the claimed value of a loss," and "I am tolerant of consumers who inflate their insurance claims." These, and other scaled items discussed subsequently, were each followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored with "Strongly Disagree" and "Strongly Agree."

These items were followed by a written scenario, which included the policyholder–agent relationship and agent ethnicity manipulations. The scenario (see Dean, 2004) began with:

> While on a recent trip, a young couple had one of their suitcases stolen. They filed an insurance claim under their homeowner's insurance, but they made their claim for $3,000 instead of the actual loss of about $500. The couple feels justified in "padding" the insurance claim. They believe that insurance companies set their rates based on the assumption that people will "pad" claims, and even so, they are just trying to recover insurance premiums they have already paid.

The policyholder–agent relationship was manipulated by describing how the agent had handled the initial paperwork for setting up the policy, whereas the agent's ethnicity was implied by manipulating the agent's name. Note that Dean (2004) used non-Hispanic names for the young couple ("Bill and Susan Watson") and the insurance agent ("Ted Graves"). Two of the four manipulation scenarios are presented below:

> Their claim will be processed through the office of Carlos Santiago, their local insurance agent. The couple is very happy with Carlos because of the efficiency with which his office processed the initial paperwork setting up their policy, and because Carlos is very cooperative and polite. [Positive relationship, Hispanic agent.]

> Their claim will be processed through the office of Charles Jameson, their local insurance agent. The couple is very unhappy with Charles because his office made a mess of the initial paperwork setting up their policy and because Charles is very uncooperative and rude. [Negative relationship, non-Hispanic agent.]

Researcher ethnicity was manipulated by using two trained researcher confederates. One was Hispanic and introduced himself as Miguel Rodriguez (a pseudonym) and spoke with a noticeable Spanish language accent (similar to much of the local Hispanic population), while the other was non-Hispanic and introduced himself as Michael Robertson (another pseudonym) and spoke without any noticeable U.S. regional accent. Each confederate claimed ownership of the research study that he was administering ("this is a study I'm conducting on insurance padding for a university research project") to ensure a connection between the researcher and the study. After briefly instructing the students to read the instructions and follow the directions, each confederate stated that once the study began he would not be able to answer any questions. An assistant passed out the surveys and collected them. This procedure for administering the survey was important because the confederates were not privy to the hypotheses or even to the contents of the scenarios until all data were collected.

After reading the scenarios, subjects answered two items (from Dean, 2004) assessing whether the couple's claim padding actions represented fairness toward the agent ("The couple would be acting fairly towards the insurance agent if they inflate their

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claim to some extent," and "The couple would be treating the insurance agent in a just manner if they 'pad' their claim by some amount"). They also answered two items (from Dean, 2004) assessing the perceived ethicality of the padding behavior ("The couple violated an ethical principle by 'padding' their insurance claim," and "It is morally wrong for the couple to inflate their insurance claim"). This was followed by an open-ended item reading, "Knowing the facts, how much money do you think the couple should be awarded on their claim? Write in a dollar amount from $0 to $3,000." Finally, an item was presented to ascertain the policyholder–agent relationship manipulation ("The relationship between the couple and their insurance agent would be best described as..." anchored with "Bad" and "Good"), followed by several demographic items.

Sample, analyses, and results

The sample consisted of non-traditional (mostly working) undergraduate students from evening courses. Following the suggestions of Brinkmann (2005) and Brinkmann and Lentz (2006), only students who had purchased homeowner's or renter's insurance participated in the study. This resulted in an older sample (age mean was 29.3 years and ranged from 19 to 56) than that of Dean (2004) and, presumably, one more experienced with insurance.

All analyses used a 2 (policyholder–agent relationship) × 2 (agent ethnicity) × 2 (researcher ethnicity) ANOVA model to evaluate the data. Also, each set of 2-item measures (for tolerance, fairness, and ethicality) was averaged (coefficient alphas of .71, .87, and .89, respectively). Preliminary tests showed that the *a priori* tolerance for padding behavior was similar for all cells with no main effects or interactions being significant (Mean = 3.72, all p's > .65). Also, examination of the manipulation check showed that the policyholder–agent relationship manipulation worked as planned, with only that main effect being statistically significant ($F = 129.5$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .65$) and in the expected direction. Although not controlled explicitly, the distribution of age and gender across experimental cells did not differ.

Analysis of the perceived fairness of the couple's actions toward the agent indicated a three-way interaction ($F = 5.13$, $p = .025$, $\eta = .16$) as illustrated in Figure 1. Specifically, when the non-Hispanic researcher was present, policyholder–agent relationship had no effect for the non-Hispanic agent, but did have the proposed effect on the Hispanic agent (i.e., the couple's actions were perceived as fairer when a negative policyholder–agent relationship existed). However, when the Hispanic researcher was present, the effects were reversed: there was no effect for the Hispanic agent, but the proposed effect was present for the non-Hispanic agent. Thus, when the researcher and the agent matched in terms of ethnicity, there were no effects for the policyholder–agent relationship, just as in Dean (2004) and the couple's actions were viewed as universally unethical. Prior work in researcher interaction biases would suggest that this lack of

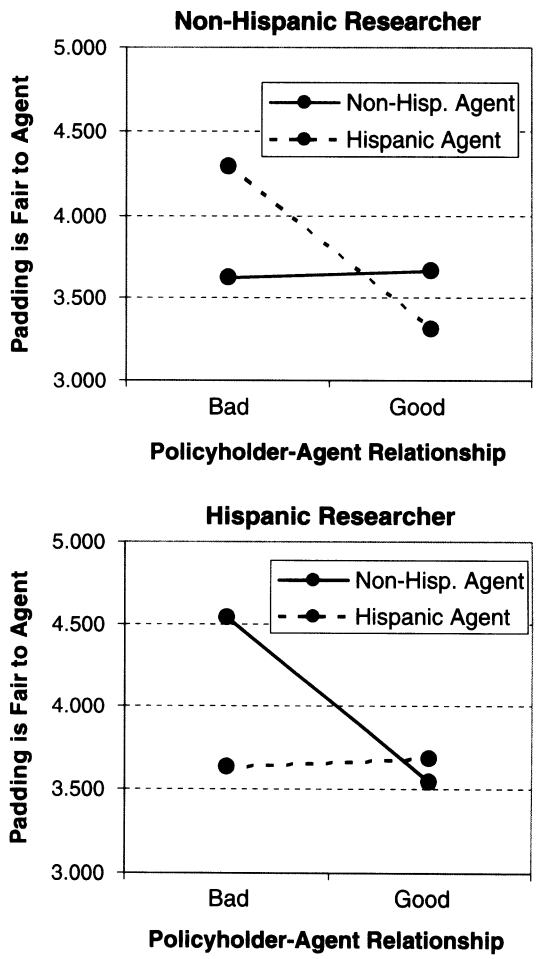

Figure 1 Researcher interaction biases and perceived fairness.

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effect reflects a deference effect toward the researcher's ethnicity. Yet, when ethnicity did not match, the effect hypothesized originally by Dean (2004) was present.

Analysis of the ethicality measure did not reveal the same three-way interaction, but did indicate a two-way interaction between researcher ethnicity and agent ethnicity ($F = 8.53$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .21$) such that matched ethnicity resulted in evaluations that labeled the couple as more unethical than unmatched ethnicity. Specifically, for the Hispanic researcher, the couple was rated as more unethical when the agent was Hispanic (mean 5.17) than when the agent was non-Hispanic (mean 4.05; $F = 11.90$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .33$). But when the researcher was non-Hispanic, there was no statistically significant difference in how the couple was rated for the non-Hispanic (mean 5.14) versus Hispanic (mean 4.96) agent.

Finally, the analysis of the monetary claim award that should be granted mirrored that of the fairness variable in that a similar three-way interaction resulted ($F = 6.52$, $p = .01$, $\eta = .19$). For matched ethnicity between the researcher and the agent, the policyholder–agent relationship had no effects on the amount awarded. Yet for unmatched ethnicity, the negative feelings toward the agent resulted in a higher award than did the positive feelings. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

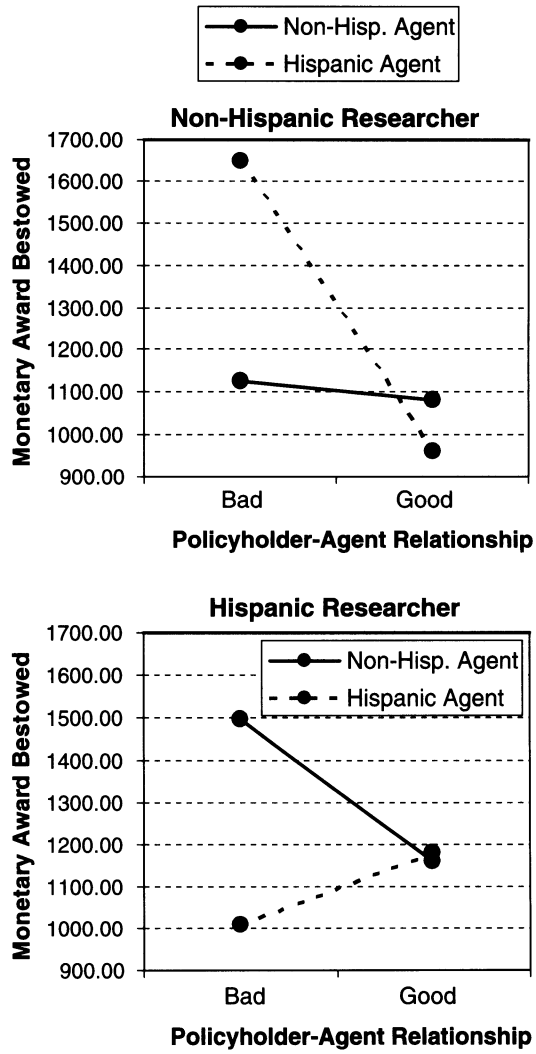

Figure 2 Researcher interaction biases and amount of monetary award bestowed.

Discussion

This article sought first to review the available literature on researcher interaction biases, particularly the findings likely to impact business ethics research. We focused on the more "interactive" researcher bias, in which the presence of the researcher in some way impacts respondents' actions or responses, and demonstrated that researchers' psychological, physical or background characteristics each have the potential to bias results. Moreover, these characteristics — whether a "warm" vs. "cool" personality, age, race, gender, or even social class — have the potential to impact results across a variety of research methods. While higher levels of interaction between researchers and participants (such as in depth interviews or focus groups) would likely lead to greater potential for researcher interaction bias, the bias has been found even in seemingly less obtrusive methods such as mail surveys (Albaum, 1987) and online studies (Evans et al., 2003).

In fact, we then showed, through an empirical study, that even an event as seemingly innocuous as the mere introduction of a researcher with particular characteristics during the administration of a pencil and paper survey instrument can have profound effects on a study's results. We found respondents' judgments about the fairness and ethicality of consumer insurance claim padding, as well as the suggested dollar amounts to be awarded in a claim, differed depending upon whether the researcher had either a Hispanic or non-Hispanic last name and accent.

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In particular, for both fairness and the claim amounts awarded, we found that the policyholder–agent relationship did not matter when the researcher and the agent were matched in ethnicity (both Hispanic or both non-Hispanic), and the padding behavior was judged to be universally unfair. The relationship with the agent did have an impact when the ethnicities were mismatched (with lower monetary awards and judgments of fairness when the relationship was good than when it was bad). We demonstrated, therefore, that researcher interaction bias can indeed present a problem, even at the level of an ethnic-sounding name and with a very low level of interaction between researcher and respondent. Thus, calls for less survey methodology and more interactive methods (e.g., Crane, 1999) suggest that future business ethics research will be at even greater risk for researcher interaction biases.

Another concern is the environment in which we now collect data. The changing composition of country-specific, region-specific, and global populations suggests that an even greater emphasis be placed on, at the very least, the potential influences of researchers' physical and background characteristics on participants' responses, and under which situations these effects become relevant. For example, the growing populations of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans in the United States (Wellner, 2003) may be a determining factor of U.S.-based business ethics research in the years to come. Although much recent research has examined business ethics across and within certain racial and/or ethnic groups (see, for example, Deshpande et al., 2006; Janjuha-Jivraj, 2003; Swaidan et al., 2003), very little has been done to understand methods effects in this area (cf. McDonald, 2000). Other growth patterns, such as longer lifespans and workspans (Wellner, 2003) and significant increases of women in the paid workforce, may have additional implications and may require reexamination of studies reporting characteristics and behaviors of "typical" respondents. That minority groups may often be under-represented as researchers and/or data collectors necessitates a continued evaluation of race, gender, and ethnicity interactions when conducting business ethics research.

From a substantive perspective, more national and international attitudes toward business ethics are becoming intertwined with political, social, and environmental issues that may or may not conform with local or global industry, governmental, and individual practices. A tendency to respond in a socially desirable manner is likely influenced by the degree to which respondents feel that a researcher can or cannot understand their points of view and will or will not reject them. Studies that are specifically at risk are those that involve topics that may make particular researcher characteristics salient to the respondent. For example, investigations regarding ethical issues surrounding discriminatory practices, workplace diversity, target marketing, and pay inequalities seem likely to fall prey to interactive biases. Other risk factors include the characteristics of the respondents being studied. For example, elderly respondents have been found to be more susceptible to researcher interaction biases than younger respondents (Groves and Magilavy, 1986). It is important, however, to understand that some degree of interactive effect likely will be present in most data collection situations, and that uncovering and explaining systematic biases will be beneficial to researchers.

Managing researcher interaction biases

A number of suggestions have been given by various authors regarding how to manage certain types of researcher interaction biases. The following is a short list of possible considerations that might serve as starting points for researchers who determine that the potential for such biases is present in their studies.

Less interaction

Although even small amounts of interaction (such as the ethnicity of a name on a mail survey regarding cross-cultural business ethics practices) may influence respondent reactions (cf. Ayal and Hornik, 1986), less interaction likely will result in less interaction bias. While this perspective might lead to the suggestion of mail or email data collection methods, response rates and lack of depth often limit their usefulness.

More interaction

While perhaps not intuitively the answer to less bias, researchers who interact more with their respondents may arrive at a level of trust and understanding

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such that respondents are more forthcoming and their responses are more honest (Hirschman, 1986). Such a tactic would likely be most useful for qualitative methods that seek to gather rich data from relatively few sources and for topics which require this high level of trust in the researcher.

More observational methods

The avoidance of interaction bias by using observational methods is strongly encouraged. For example, Crane (1999) recommends the content analyses of external and internal organizational communications as a manner of assessing organization members' views on certain ethical issues. Electronic monitoring (such as computer work time vs. time spent on non-work computer activities) is another method by which behavior can be unobtrusively observed and perhaps compared to self reports of the same behavior. Even actual monitoring of, for example, recycled materials (as compared to self-reports) offers researchers a way of circumventing the researcher-respondent interaction dilemma (cf. Reilly and Wallendorf, 1987). The researcher must be aware, however, that obtrusive observation (even if disguised) may still elicit biased behavior from respondents based on their observation of the data collector.

Computer administration

The use of computers as data collection tools has also been suggested to eliminate certain researcher interaction biases. For example, Evans et al. (2003) found that race-based interactive biases were eliminated by moving data collection from a laboratory setting to an online setting that excluded the data collector. Researchers should nonetheless exercise caution because biased responses (comparing computer administration to personal interviews and self-completion) still have been reported using these methods (Liefeld, 1988). In addition, the use of computers to alter or control interviewer behavior has been successful for a variety of data collection methods, particularly for controlling feedback and probing — common sources of researcher interaction biases (Groves and Magilavy, 1986).

Number and diversity of data collectors

Using a small number of data collectors may create the opportunity for one data collector to strongly bias results, as each collects a larger percentage of data (Singer et al., 1983). Thus, increasing the number of interviewers may average out extreme cases of certain potentially biasing characteristics. A similar method would involve the purposeful varying of targeted data collector characteristics in an attempt at reducing the chance of a particular characteristic having dominating effects. However, although such a method might aid researchers in detecting and controlling for certain biases that result from *differences* between data collectors, biases caused by characteristics that are *common* to the majority of data collectors may go unnoticed.

Multiple data sources

Crane (1999) suggests that the use of multiple methods, such as comparing archival or observational data with self reports, will aid in checking for potential biases. He also advocates the observation of non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions during interviews) to assist in assessing self report accuracy.

Pretesting

Although pretesting has commonly been accepted as a means of improving a data collection instrument, the method of data collection and the interviewers to be used can also be pretested. For example, Hunt et al. (1982) advocated using interviewers of varying levels of competency in the pretest phase as a means of investigating potential interviewing problems. This can be taken a step further to test for various biases that may be suspected, so their elimination or control can be facilitated. Post-pretest debriefing of respondents would be useful for assessing whether respondents themselves were aware of any biasing factors.

Training

Data collectors can be instructed or trained to neutralize certain gender, ethnic, or regional cues, particularly in telephone studies (Pol and Ponzurick, 1989). Also, role-playing has long been used as a method for training interviewers (cf. Kahn and Cannell, 1957), and may be used to identify potential biasing characteristics so that they may then be controlled or examined.

Regardless of the techniques or methods used in the attempt to eliminate or control researcher interaction biases, many will still occur. Pol and

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Ponzurick (1989) recommend pre- and post-collection evaluation to examine for interviewer effects. It is suggested here that effects should be evaluated on an individual basis (to detect individual data collector biases), as well as on a researcher characteristics basis (to detect possible categorical biases). Upon finding interactive effects, the researcher must then decide whether such biases may harm the main goals of the study in question.

Conclusion

Although a reasonable body of literature exists concerning researcher interaction biases, its attention in the business ethics field has been virtually non-existent. Even work dealing with social desirability bias often discusses this bias in general terms and not with respect to particular researcher characteristics that may invoke or exacerbate those biased responses. In that the understanding and detection of researcher interaction biases is of key concern to business ethics research, it is important to realize that the intuitive actions of researchers are often not sufficient to rid the data collection process of unnoticed biases. With the exception of unobtrusive observational techniques, such as electronic monitoring, most data collection methods currently used in business ethics research are susceptible to a variety of interaction biases. Moreover, although several methods for testing or controlling these biases have been suggested, it is recognized that a number of factors may bias the collection of data at any one time, and ultimate control over all factors is typically impractical. Indeed, there is a clear deficiency in techniques that confidently deal with this issue.

Researchers should recall that the purpose of exposing and evaluating interactive biases is to facilitate the purity of the data that are collected. Much of the past and present research follows traditional lines of thinking that only characteristics that are deemed salient to the respondents are in danger of biasing responses. Problems occur, however, in that what the respondents perceive as being salient is often unknown, thus the need persists for investigating potential biases as well as understanding their effects on the results we report.

Notes

[1] Respondent reactions may be verbal or non-verbal and may include both intentional as well as unintentional communications, all of which may be observed and recorded by the researcher.

[2] Characteristics or cues *from* the researcher may also be verbal or non-verbal communication to the respondent (intentional and/or unintentional) which may be perceived by the respondents and affect their responses.

[3] The researcher may also react to certain characteristics of the respondent, interpreting or perceiving respondent reactions and/or behaviors in a biased manner, based on those respondent characteristics. These interaction biases may fall into the same characteristic categories as described in this appendix, except respondent characteristics would be influencing researcher reactions. Intervening issues might include the researcher's own characteristics, prejudices, biases, etc.

Appendix

Types of researcher interaction biases

Respondent (subject/interviewee/informant/participant) Reactions[1] to Researcher[2] Characteristics:[3]

A. Respondent reactions to perceived researcher psychological characteristics.

   1. Researcher interest, motivation, enthusiasm, energy level
   2. Researcher personal attitudes, opinions, beliefs, values, viewpoints
   3. Researcher friendliness, seriousness, concern, empathy
   4. Researcher style of presentation or interaction
   5. Researcher expectations, impressions, assumptions about the study or the respondents

B. Respondent reactions to perceived researcher physical characteristics.

   1. Researcher gender
   2. Researcher race

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3. Researcher age
4. Researcher physical attractiveness
5. Other physical characteristics (e.g., height, weight, size and body shape, physical disabilities)

C. Respondent reactions to perceived background characteristics of the researcher.

1. Researcher social class, education, income, socioeconomic status
2. Researcher ethnicity, ethnic, national, and regional identification or orientation
3. Researcher group membership (e.g., political, religious, civic, or social groups)
4. Researcher training, competency, credibility

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