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Methodological issues in whistle-blowing intentions research: addressing the social desirability bias and order effect bias

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Abstract

The issues of social desirability bias and order effect bias are common problems in ethics. Methodologically, these two problems may weaken the study's validity and reliability thus, making the results of the study invalid. Utilizing vignettes in whistle-blowing research may further add to these problems as the case scenario in the vignettes may enhance respondents' social desirability bias and the sequence of presentation order of vignettes may then present the problem of vignettes' order effect bias. The paper addresses these two problems by statistically examining the effects of these two types of bias within the study of whistle-blowing intentions.

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1. Introduction

Whistle-blowing is one of the challenging topics to be studied (Patel, 2003) within the ethic study areas. Patel (2003) further posited that researchers can only examine their respondents' whistle-blowing behavioural intentions rather than observing their actual behaviour. Studies have acknowledged that other types of research design such as interview, field-experimental and longitudinal survey design may not be workable in whistle-blowing research. Although some researchers recognise that it is essential to measure actual whistle-blowing behaviour in order to understand whistle-blowing tendencies (Miceli, Near, Rehg, and Van Scotter, 2012), it is however not practical in social science research. Miceli and Near (1988, p. 277) assured that, "... because of obvious ethical concerns, one cannot randomly select employees to witness manipulated wrongdoing in order to determine which individual or

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situational characteristics are associated with whistle-blowing”. Even if the study be carried on, no participants may be willing to be identified and responded to the survey. Such situation may then make the study’s data become even invalid (Miceli and Near, 1988)

Whistle-blowing intention refers to respondents’ likelihood to report (un)ethical behaviours represented in hypothetical vignettes. The use of multiple vignettes is common in research investigating respondents’ whistle-blowing intentions (see Sonnier, 2013; Trongmateerut and Sweeney, 2013). Hypothetical scenarios or vignettes allow researchers to approach sensitive issues by posing hypothetical situations to which the participants may respond. The approach of using vignettes is considered as appropriate and effective for acquiring data in whistle-blowing studies (Gundlach, Martinko, and Douglas, 2008) and it provides a more realistic context for the respondents (Reidenbach and Robin, 1990). Despite its wide usage, studies acknowledged its limitations. Brennan and Kelly (2007) and Xu and Ziegenfuss (2008) reported that hypothetical scenarios are not able to capture the exact real world information making the validity and generalisability of findings of a study to be questioned. Miceli, Near and Dworkin (2008) were uncertain whether respondents who responded in a hypothetical situation would actually act if they are facing the real situation. Furthermore, if these respondents did respond, they would then possibly be susceptible to social desirability bias (Miceli et al., 2008), a type of bias that researchers need to address. Apart from social desirability bias, the problem of vignettes order effect bias also needs to be tackled too. The use of multiple set of vignettes may present bias, should the sequence of presentation order of the vignettes are not examined. These two forms of bias need to be controlled for in order to enhance the validity of any ethics study. The purpose of this study is to statistically examine the effect of this problem in whistle-blowing intentions by utilising a set of vignettes from previous studies.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Social Desirability Bias*

Studies examining sensitive behaviour may be distorted by social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013) especially a study that examines individual’s likelihood to whistle-blow on corporate wrongdoing. Social desirability bias refers to, “... respondents give a “normative” response or a socially acceptable answer rather than a honest answer” (Neuman, 2006, p. 285). To be specific, an individual may have the propensity to understate (overstate) situations that could be regarded as culturally undesirable (desirable) behaviours (Bernardi and Guptill, 2008). It can clearly be identified that, majority of studies failed to control this type of problem in ethics research (Bernardi and Guptill, 2008; Krumpal, 2013) as such this could affect the validity of these studies, should the bias is not controlled for (King and Bruner, 2000; Nyaw and Ng, 1994).

There are three types of approaches to minimise the social desirability bias issue in a study of whistle-blowing intention. First, the study may assure the anonymity and confidentiality of information provided by its respondents (King and Bruner, 2000). Second, in utilising the vignettes, respondents need to be asked in a first-person approach – as if they are the actor being described in each vignette. This is contrary to Patel’s (2003) study who used a third-person approach. The main reason why the first person approach is chosen is mainly due to Malaysian respondents are multi-racial. If the actor in the vignettes are of different ethnicity from the respondent (either as Ahmad - Malay, Lim - Chinese or Raju - Indian) that could easily harm the validity of the survey. The use of first-person approach may also avoid gender bias, as the sample names mentioned earlier (Ahmad, Lim or Raju) are all referring to male actors. There could be a possibility that the gender of the whistle-blower interacts with the gender of the wrongdoer (Miceli, Near, and Dozier, 1991), thus making the study invalid especially when gender is also a variable of interest. The final measure is by asking two additional questions following each vignette. The two questions are: (1) “Rate the likelihood YOU would report to internal parties in your organisation”, and (2) “Rate the likelihood that YOUR COLLEAGUES would report to internal parties in your organisation”. This is consistent with the method adopted by other studies examining the respondents’ likelihood of whistle-blowing behaviour (Patel, 2003; Zhang, Chiu, and Wei, 2009). The difference of means data between these two questions shall account for the magnitude of social desirability bias (Cohen, Pant, and Sharp, 1996).

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