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Minding the gap: Meaning, affect, and the potential shortcomings of vignettes ☆

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ABSTRACT

Despite an ongoing debate over the validity of vignettes, little research has explored either why, or in what research areas, the vignette method may be particularly problematic. In this paper, we draw on Affect Control Theory (ACT) to directly investigate the difference between vignettes and a more experiential method in research on social exchange and alternative dispute resolution. Using ACT's affective dimensions of evaluation, potency, and activity, as well as its concept of deflection, we compare the affective responses of participants in two types of experimental simulations – vignettes and a laboratory experiment. Results suggest that a more tangible experience, like that present in our laboratory experiment, leads to greater deflection, therefore increasing the intensity of emotion and altering affective meanings. We argue that these findings could have important implications for research, particularly in areas exploring affective and cognitive outcomes of interaction.

1. Introduction

The debate over the use of vignettes in exploring social phenomena has a long history in the social sciences [see, for instance, the exchange between Faia (1980) and Rossi and Alves (1980)]. Many argue that vignettes – detailed scenarios presented to subjects, where they are an actor or observer (Rashotte, 2003) – are an efficient, and effective, way of collecting data about how people would act in situations that are outside of the purview of other methods because of their sensitive nature, prohibitive cost, or infrequent occurrence (Hughes, 1998; Lee, 1993; McKeganey et al., 1996). Others suggest that vignettes may fail to capture important nuances of social experience (Carlson, 1996; Parkinson and Manstead, 1993). Despite the contentious nature of this debate, vignettes continue to be employed across a range of disciplines. Rather than speculating on the difference between vignettes and other, more experiential, methods, in this paper we directly confront this methodological issue. Drawing on affect control theory (Heise, 1979; MacKinnon, 1994), we explore the affective meanings generated by individuals in two simulated experimental situations – one where subjects imagine a situation by reading a vignette and another where participants experience the same scenario in a laboratory experiment. By considering the meanings generated by these experiences and the affective responses the two experimental manipulations elicit, we begin to unpack specific issues generated by the use of vignettes.

While vignettes are used in a variety of fields – including, but not limited to sociology, psychology, business, and health sciences – here, we choose to specifically address their use in research on social exchange and alternative dispute resolution. As these areas increasingly focus on affective and cognitive outcomes of interactive processes (e.g., conflict, affect, and perceptions of procedural fairness), they rely on an ability to recreate interaction experiences. To simulate the interactions,

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researchers have used both vignettes and laboratory experiments. However, they have not systematically explored the differences between the two experimental methods.

Here we draw on affect control theory to examine the degree to which meanings of, and affective responses to, negotiation, mediation, and arbitration processes differ on three affective measures—evaluation, potency, and activity (Osgood et al., 1957)—depending on the experimental manipulation. Before presenting these results we first provide a brief review of the use of vignettes in research on exchange and alternative dispute resolution and a primer on affect control theory. After these we offer a detailed account of our data and methods and then present our findings. We follow our results section with a brief discussion and a conclusion that suggests implications of our findings and potential avenues for future research to explore.

2. The use of vignettes in social exchange and alternative dispute resolution

2.1. Vignettes

Vignettes are an inexpensive methodological tool that prompt respondents to consider a hypothetical situation or scenario (Alexander and Becker, 1978). They are used a variety of ways – on surveys, to supplement interviews, and to collect experimental data both inside and out of the laboratory. Here we focus on vignettes that ask individuals to imagine *experiencing* a particular situation (e.g., Eylon et al., 2000; Hegtvedt, 1988, 1990; Sinaceur and Tiedens, 2005).[1] This type of vignette, meant to somehow mimic lived experience, is most likely to spark concern among researchers. Many question the degree to which such vignettes can achieve the spontaneity, experience, and reality of a real situation (Hughes, 1998; Parkinson and Manstead, 1993) and question the validity of vignette research (Faia, 1980; Gould, 1996). Despite these concerns, vignettes are still used in a variety of areas that depend on their ability to simulate social interaction, including research on social exchange and alternative dispute resolution.

2.2. Social exchange

Social exchange theory, which focuses on the forms, causes, and consequences of repeated exchange between individuals or groups, has a rich tradition of experimental methods (Molm and Cook, 1995). While most of the research in social exchange occurs in the laboratory, across computer networks, there is a history of vignette research in the area as well. For example, Hegtvedt used vignettes and an exchange framework to explore evaluations of self and other in exchange (1988), emotional reactions to inequality (1990), and perceptions of power and fairness (Hegtvedt et al., 1993). Using vignettes to gauge expectations, Sprecher (1992) explored individuals' predicted emotional and behavioral reactions to inequity in close relationships. More recently, Kiyonari et al. (2000) measured the activation of a social exchange heuristic by comparing laboratory and vignette experiments.

2.3. Alternative dispute resolution

Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) includes any resolution process that serves as an alternative to litigation. While, in practice, negotiation is the most prevalent type of alternative dispute resolution (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2000), mediation and arbitration – both of which include a neutral third party who intervenes in the process—are the most common formal processes in discussions of ADR.

Mediation can take many forms, but often represents a process whereby an intermediary relays requests, offers, and information between two disputing parties so the parties are not required to directly interact. The role the mediators play can vary. Some mediators counsel, others suggest points of compromise, and still others merely act as go-between to avoid having the parties interact directly. While the mediator may have a say in the way the dispute resolution occurs, the disputing parties decide the final outcome (Wall et al., 2001). In practice mediation is often non-binding, so parties may choose whether to comply with the final agreement.

Arbitration, on the other hand, is generally binding, requiring parties to fulfill the agreed settlement. Arbitration also comes in many forms, but generally involves two parties presenting their case to an arbitrator who considers the evidence and makes a ruling. The fact that it is the arbitrator, not the disputing parties, who makes the final ruling, is the important feature of arbitration.

Current research on alternative dispute resolution has employed a variety of methods, including laboratory experiments, vignette experiments, and natural observation. Influential early work began in the laboratory (Thibaut and Walker, 1975, 1978), but current experimental research is more likely to use vignettes (e.g., Eylon et al., 2000; Sinaceur and Tiedens, 2005).[2] We assert this is a trend that warrants further consideration.

[1] These differ from vignettes which present a particular configuration of characteristics for comparison purposes, like the work of Jasso and her colleagues (e.g., Jasso and Milgrom, 2008; Jasso and Rossi, 1977; Jasso and Webster, 1999) which varies key attributes of hypothetical individuals (e.g., age, race, education, experience, marital status, etc.), using Rossi's factorial survey method (Rossi and Anderson, 1982), to explore perceptions of just compensation, or those that ask individuals to imagine observing an event (e.g., Rashotte, 2003; Smith-Lovin, 1987).

[2] Although the laboratory has fallen out of favor in studies of dispute resolution – largely to make room for vignettes, the growth of natural observation of dispute resolution, and surveys of participants – using experimental methods in this research allowed us to compare the vignettes to a more experiential method while keeping significant control over the situation. Specifically, we were able control for the history the participants brought in, the conflict of interests, the outcome, and other variables that fluctuate outside of the laboratory.