From research question to research design. Challenges of obtaining valid sensitive data

Work in progress

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Abstract

Prior studies have struggled with methodology when researching sensitive topics within social corporate responsibility (CSR) and business ethics. The aim of this paper is to point out the challenges in collecting sensitive data, and how to approach these challenges. More specifically the paper discusses the construct sensitive topics from three different approaches (1) treat of disclosure, (2) intrusiveness, and especially (3) social desirability. There is different research designs used to overcome such data collection problems. In this paper quantitative methods and qualitative methods are discussed. Results from literature review indicate that there are no true answers to which method gains the best results. Instead, it seems as degree of success is dependent upon situation, respondents in focus, and the nature of sensitive topics. However, there is some evidence that respondents concerns about self-exposure to others, such as interviewer, affect level of honesty in respondent's response. Also, respondent's concern about information ending up with an important third part potentially resulting in reprimands, also affects the respondent's willingness to answer the survey truthfully or at all.

Keywords: Methodology, sensitive topics, data collection, Social desirability, response bias

Introduction

Several studies address aspects of ethics and responsibility buyer-seller relationships. The body of studies includes such as; socially responsible buying (e.g. Maignan et al, 2002), responsible supply chains (e.g. Palazzo et al, 2005), business relationships and ethics (e.g. Svensson et al, 2008), ethical behavior in purchasing (e.g. Baker et al, 2006; Razzaque et al, 2002), and responsibility in buying behavior (e.g. Fearne et al, 2005).

All though many researchers argue that one of the largest limitations of their research containing perceptual data is to obtain valid and reliable data, little attention has been devoted to how we can optimize such quality in data. There have been a few researchers addressing concerns about methodology and data collection within business ethics (i.e. Crane 1999; Miyazaki et al, 2008). However, the focal theme has mainly been general methodology, and at the very best indirectly addressing how to approach sensitive topics. Thus, the question of central interest in this article concerns how researchers within business ethics and CSR can enhance the validity in data collection when studying sensitive topics. The psychology behind dealing with sensitive topics usually originates from 1) a fear that the sensitive information will end up in the hands of wrong person (threat of disclosure), 2) the perception that the questions itself is an invasion of their privacy (intrusiveness) or 3) an urge to answer in accordance to what is socially accepted (social desirability. When faced with sensitive questions, the respondent behaves in one of three ways; (1) refuses to participate in the research (survey response rate), (2) participates but not answering the sensitive questions (item response rate), or (3) misreports on sensitive questions, answering accordance to what they believe is socially expected (response accuracy). All together, such misreporting and failing to report, constitute a major source of error in research.

The aim of this paper is to point out the challenges in collecting sensitive data, and how to approach these challenges. The paper is structured in the following way: First, the psychology of confrontation of sensitive topics is addressed. More specifically, it will be described from three concept (1) social desirability, (2) intrusiveness, and (3) threat of disclosure. Next, the behavior of the respondents is discussed where strategies that respondents can take on in order to protect themselves from exposure on sensitive topics will be of focal interest. These strategies will be divided into three different components (1) response accuracy, (2) item response rate, and (3) survey response rate. Then, the practical implications of researching sensitive topics, namely different research strategies, or research designs, will be discussed in the light of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Finally, we conclude the paper.

Core constructs - The psychology of confrontation

Definitions of the construct *sensitive topics* have been scarce in the literature, and are often used as a self- explanatory construct (Renzetti et al, 1993; Ong et al, 2000). Renzetti et al (1993) define sensitive topics as "*one that potentially poses for those involved a substation threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding, and/or dissemination of research data"* (p. 5). Although no standard definition exist, Tourangeau et al (2000) includes different aspects they refer to as "*social (un)desirability of the answers, invasion of privacy, and a risk of disclosure of answers to a third party"* (p. 257). Thus, the concept of sensitivity is divided into three distinct aspects; social desirability, intrusiveness, and treat of disclosure. Together the three constructs of sensitivity lay the foundation for the psychology of being confronted with sensitive questions, and thus, constitute the base for investigating how to overcome these obstacles in research in a best possible way. Although social desirability is by far the most investigated phenomenon it is nevertheless important to also include *threat of disclosure* and *intrusiveness* in this article

to fully understand how respondents perceive questions on sensitive topics. These three constructs will be further addressed in the following.

Social desirability

Social desirability is defined as a desire to hide or deny socially undesired behavior and attitude, and to proclaim desired behavior or attitude normative accepted in the respondent's society (i.e. Kuncel et al, 2009; Randall et al, 1993; Smith, 2007). Hence, social desirability is the tendency of respondents answering in what they believe is socially acceptable rather than disclose their true attitude or behavior. In a research context sensitive questions basically ask if the respondent ever violated social norms of their society, and the respondent might then have a tendency to either underestimate what they would do in an undesirable situation or overestimate what to do in a desirable situation (Chung and Monroe 2003). Many studies containing sensitive topics have been challenged with threat of social desirability. This challenge has become a widely investigated phenomenon in general (Uriell et al, 2009; Tourangeau et al, 2000; Richman et al, 1999; Taylor, 1961), and seems to be the most discussed phenomenon in methodological discussions of sensitive topics within the field of business ethics (Chung et al, 2003; Randall et al, 1991). Crane (1999) argues that the existence of social desirability limits the scopes and methods that can be used when empirically studying the morality in organizations. Steenkamp et al (2010) states that social desirability "*phenomenon introduces extraneous variation in scale scores, which compromises the validity of marketing survey data*" (p. 199), and when encounter the sensitive nature of business ethics research social desirability present a greater threat to the validity of the data collection than in other organizational research (Randall et al, 1991). Chung and Monroe (2003) found that the more unethical action the higher degree of social desirability responses. Crane (1999) and Steenkamp et al (2010) emphasize the complexity and limitations of the phenomenon *social desirability* exposes in research on sensitive topics.

In literature the construct has been given plural appellations i.e. socially desirable responding (Zerbe et al, 1987; Steenkamp et al, 2010)), social desirability distortion (Richman et al, 1999), social desirability response bias (Holbrook et al, 2006), response distortion (Potosky et al, 1997) to mention a few.

In organizational theory the construct of *social desirability* is believed to consist of two independent dimensions (Randall et al, 1993); 1) characteristics of items or 2) aspect of personality (i.e. Crowne et al, 1960). Item characteristics itself influences the social desirability effects, and researchers supporting this notion, argues that the sensitivity is situational and related to the item in question, and therefore the motivation to answer as believed is socially acceptable, relates to specific questions in surveys (Paulhus, 1984). Tourangeau et al (2000) argue that sensitive question provoke can be situational "*it depends on the presence of an interviewer, the topic in question, and the facts about the respondent's conduct or attitudes. Change any of these and the motivation to misreport will be reduced."*(p. 257). Opposite, researchers who believe social desirability is a personal trait, explains this as people's need for social approval and to conform to norms of their society (i.e. Taylor, 1961). The search of a definition of social desirability as personal characteristics has led to the attempt of developing a social desirability scale, i.e. Marlowe-Crowne (Crowne et al, 1960), which seeks to identify such personality traits. This trait can be furthered divided into levels of (1) unconscious tendency to claim positive attributes and deny undesirable, and (2) a conscious or deliberate attempt to pose oneself as favorable as possible (Schoderbek et al, 1996).

Paulhus (1984) made this distinction between unintentional *self-deception* and intentional *impression management*. Whereas self-deception explains how people more or less

instinctively deny their own fault, thus actually believing his or her positive self-report, is impression management a deliberate presentation of a false front, a strategy where people answer in order to present themselves strategically "good" or "bad". Zerbe et al (1987) found that *"the scales marking the impression management factor resulted in significantly higher scores under public as opposed to anonymous administration, while scores on scales that marked the self-deception factor were not significantly higher"* (p. 254).

There are different strategies to assess social desirability in surveys: First, you can pretest your survey trying to detect items that are of high risk of being exposed to social desirability (Tourangeau et al, 2007). In this case you use two contrast groups, instructing one of the groups to fake good on presumably sensitive items, thus respond in a way that present themselves in best possible manner. The second group does not get any instructions. Items that differentiate strongest between the two groups indicate greatest measure of social responsibility. Second, researchers recommend including survey instruments in order to be able to make a statement about social desirability in the actual research (i.e. Sandal et al, 2005; Moon, 1998). Two of the most used scales are (1) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) (Paulhus, 1984), which yield two scales, namely impression management and self-deceptive enhancement, and (2) the Marlowe-Crone Social Desirability Scale, which is a more general measure of social desirable responding (Crowne et al, 1960). Although not perfect, taking precautions, such as those two examples mentioned above, can help the validity and reliability outcome of the research.

Intrusiveness

Some questions are plainly perceived as an offensive invasion of privacy (Tourangeau et al, 2000).The questions contain information that are perceived as inappropriate or taboos. Such questions is not necessarily dependent upon a situation but is rather considered upon the content of the topical questions. Thus, it is not the answer itself that represents the sensitivity, but rather the actual question. In relation to social desirability, it is the item characteristics that are the focal point (i.e. Randall et al, 1991; Steenkamp et al 2010). Tourangeau et al (2000) mention, among other factors, income and religion as possible themes of intrusive questions. Intrusiveness can also be a barrier when using interviewer where the interviewer feel that he or she becomes intrusive by asking personal questions and therefore hesitates whether he or she should leave the question unasked. For example, Einarsen (2004) experienced that when using interviewers at festivals with the objective to collect information about festival visitors, the question of household income had a significant lower response rate than all other questions. When asked, some of the interviewers admitted to have left out the question because they felt that they broke informal rules of what is accepted to ask others about. Thus, the interviewer perceived the question itself as an intrusiveness behavior, and in turn affecting| response rate and quality of data. It is therefore important to educate interviewers in the importance of collecting such sensitive information.

Threat of disclosure

When the respondent considers the seriousness of the outfall should the information fall into the hands of a third party (Tourangeau et al, 2000), i.e. superiors, it is referred to as *threat of disclosure*. In practice, the respondent most likely hesitates to answer truthfully or at all if the he or she expects hard reprimands should the information be reviled. Such fear of disclosure can lead to underreports or inaccurate reports in surveys (Horm et al, 1996), threatening the validity of the data. In some cases where the probability that a third person could get the respondents survey information, the respondent are intimidated to lie rather than refuse to answer (Horm et al 1996). Furthermore, a survey of youths shows that the higher degree of

privacy the respondent experience when completing the survey, the higher positive responses are toward sensitive questions (Horm et al, 1996). Even more complex, in social and health studies researchers have found systematically differences in overreporting and underreporting on sensitive questions related to who were present. For example, the respondents overreported on certain questions when having peers present, and opposite, underreported when having authority figures present (Aday et al, 1995).Such phenomena could also arise at a work place giving different response behavior when having colleagues versus management present. Researchers usually declare a confidentiality policy in the beginning of a survey ensuring the participant's privacy, however, research on the effect of such declaration has shown mixed result (Singer et al, 1995). On the contrary, under some circumstances it can even make the respondent more worried and increase respondent's unwillingness to participate (Singer et al, 1992). Also, Horm et al (1995) suggested that "*broad promises of anonymity or confidentiality are perhaps less important to honest reporting by youths than are assurances of privacy from immediate threat of disclosure to parents*" (p.144). Similar, this might be transferable to sensitive topics where employees are concerned with the possibility to have management or others revealing the respondent's responses.

In conclusion, these discussions between researchers illustrate the complexity of which social desirability represents when dealing with sensitive topics and how intricate the procedure of developing an instrument that comprehends such dilemmas is. In action, the psychology behind the core constructs or rather the behavior that such constructs compel, results in destructive response strategies. The following section will address such response strategies and attempt to suggest techniques to eliminate the use of such.

Respondent behavior

According to empirical studies, respondents practice of managing sensitive questions (i.e. threat of disclosure, intrusiveness and social desirability), are manifested in three different response strategies.; 1) answer falsely on the sensitive questions, leading to reduced *response accuracy*, 2) only answering questions who are not sensitive, which leads to reduction in *item response rate*, and 3) the informant decides not to participate at all in the survey, which leads to reduced *survey response rate*. These three different strategies affect validity and quality of data in several ways and might also set distinct limitation to the possible use or analysis of the data.

Response accuracy - How can response accuracy be improved?

When dealing with sensitive questions respondents might answer incorrectly, by not letting the answer reflect his or her true attitude or behavior, leading to an underrepresentation of values that measures social undesirable items and an overrepresentation of social desirable items (i.e. Kuncel et al, 2009; Tourangeau et al, 2000). Such misreporting is probably the best documented in methodology research within sensitive questions (i.e. Tourangeau et al, 2007). Such deliberate misreporting as overreporting and underreporting are defined as systematic error (Tourangeau et al, 2000). After studying research executed on sensitive topics Tourangeau et al. (2000) argued that as the sensitivity of the topics rises, the quality of the responses decreases. The situation can also affect the response accuracy; Aday et al (1995) found that the characteristics of the interview setting impacted the degree of over- and underreporting on sensitive questions. Therefore, it is vital to find design strategies that cope with sensitivity. Ganster et al (1983) viewed this as challenging, pointing out that such under- and overreporting can result in contaminating data, affecting the correlation between the dependent and independent variables giving a suppressor effect (hide the real correlation), a spurious effect (higher correlation) or a moderator (altering the relationship between the

variables) effect. Similar; Fernandes et al (1992) reported 63 percent of some sort of social desirability biases in the 90 relationships examined for social desirability response effects, concluding that the most frequent effect was of the moderating model.
It is possible that such motivation for misreporting also occur in CSR or business ethics research, i.e. in questions regarding use of company regulation or legal documents as a foundation for decision-making.

Item response rate - How can item response rates be improved?
One way of coping with sensitive topics is to not answer such questions. The respondent can agree to participate in the survey, however, may leave some questions unanswered. Thus, item response rate refer to the percentage of item non-responses each respondent leaves in the survey. Item non-response is the least researched missing rates problems.
Researchers have tried to come up with recommendations on how to overcome this problem.

1. *Positioning of the items*: Researchers have debated about whether or not the positioning of the sensitive item in question will affect respondents' tendency to refuse answering such items. Galestic et al (2009) found that the respondent used less time responding to questions further back in the questionnaires than questions ahead. Thus, item nonresponses can be due to failure or fatigue. Therefore, the item response rate and quality of the answers (at the open-ended questions) decreased towards the end. It is therefore vital that researcher consider which items are most important in relations to accurate and none missing responses when designing the survey and thus logical sequence of the items.
2. *Bogus pipe line*: In stimulant research and research on sexuality (i.e. Alexander et al, 2003), a method called *bogus pipeline* has been used in order to reduce misreporting. This method is a procedure where the respondents believe the actual truth will be exposed anyway, and as a result, answers truthfully (Nederhof, 1985). In stimulant habits research, for example, the respondent believe there will be a blood test in order to detect if the respondents answers is align with the blood test result (Tourangeau et al, 2000). Although this method is, at least in theory, possible to use in life style and stimulant research, it is hard to imagine such method within organizational research.
3. *Randomized response technique (RRT) or unmatched count technique (UCT)*: There are some empirical approaches, such as RRT and UCT, whose aim is to provide absolute anonymity and confidentiality to respondents. This anonymity is provided in RRT by giving respondent one of two randomly selected items where the researcher have no possibility to trace which of the respondent has been assigned. In short the UCT protect the anonymity of the respondents by giving them plural statements and indicate how many of those statements is valid for the respondent (for more information see Dalton et al 1997; Nederhof 1985; Ahart et al 2004).
4. *Research design:* It seems to be differences within missing data depending on which research design used. Wood et al (2006) found that there was a greater data missing in paper-pencil surveys as in online computer conditions (with experimenter presence), especially at the end of a long survey. As electronic surveys are becoming more important in data collections as the technology develops it is important to further investigate the quality of these two collection methods

These problematic will be further addresses later in this article.

Survey response rate - How can unit response rate be improved?
When respondents completely refuse to participate at the survey it is called unit nonresponse (Tourangeau et al, 2000). Researchers report that response rates on surveys are decreasing (e.i. Groves, 2006, Singer et al 1993; Olbrook, A.L., 2006). One explanation is related to

sensitive topics and how these are approached. Several scholars investigating phenomena within business ethics and morality issues report difficulties in effectively reach potential participants in studies (e.g. Park, 2005).
Different approaches of asking sensitive questions have been studied in hope of finding the ideal path to obtain a large enough response rate in surveys, allowing researchers to confidently generalize research finding. Some researchers recommend placing sensitive questions at the end of the questionnaires, minimizing the risk of respondents quitting before finishing (Wood et al, 200&). However, on this subject researchers are still debating whether or not this has a valuable outcome (see Tourangeau et al, 2007, for further discussion).

The topic itself can lead the respondent to not take part in the survey. Therefore, doing research on topics such as corporate social responsibility or business ethics, can act as a deterrent even before the respondent becomes familiar with the heart of the matter. However, some researchers (i.e. Heberlein et al 1978) suggest that it is topic interest rather than topic sensitivity that determines whether the respondents participate at all. Furthermore, another plausible cause for low survey response rate can be related to the perceived length of the survey (Galestic et al, 2009), and low survey response rate can therefore be a result of perceived cost of participating rather than related to the sensitivity of the topic.
A further explanation for respondents' reluctance to answer might be concern about the confidentiality (Tourangeau et al, 2000; Singer et al, 2003). One strategy to avoid such dilemma is to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the survey (Tourangeau et al, 2000, Ong et al 2000). Ong and Weiss (2000) stresses the importance of not consider anonymity and confidentiality as interchangeable, anonymity being a condition where the researcher has no possibility of knowing the identity of the respondent, while confidentiality refer to traceability of the respondent in the recorded data material. Singer et al (2003) tested a hypothesis that "*attitudes about privacy and confidentiality influence respondent behavior*" (p. 369). However, they fund this to be small, but statistically significant, to whether the respondent returned the questionnaire, and that attitude did explain larger variance of nonresponse than demographic characteristics did. Thus, ensuring privacy of a survey might somewhat increase unit response rate. However, the drawback of this strategy is that by assuring the respondent's privacy it might paradoxically lower response rate (Singer et al, 1992). The logic behind such behavior might simply be that the researcher make the respondent conscious to a dilemma the respondent had not given any thoughts to prior to this declaration. Therefore, it is important that researchers evaluate whether their survey contain topics that are of such sensitivity that it requires insurance of confidentiality. Opposite, there is also a concern that respondents do not read the confidentiality claim, thus leaving a question of its usefulness. However, studies have found some evidence that confidentiality assurances regarding sensitive questions do have an effect (Singer et al, 1993).

In conclusion, destructive response strategies do constitute a sever threat when developing research surveys on sensitive topics. Hence, it is important to incorporate actions to counteract in order to enhance the response quality. The following chapter will discuss how sensitive topics affect quantitative and qualitative approaches, and what actions can be initiated in order to surmount such difficulties.

Practical implications – suggested solutions

In general, the opinions about which approache is the best to collect data, are an object for a vivid and ongoing discussion. While the positive qualities of quantitative approach is the potential to collect information from a large sample of the population, the qualities of

qualitative approach is the possibility of collecting rich details in the data, gaining deeper information about focal questions.
The degree to which respondents are willing to give (correct) information on sensitive questions has to be carefully considered when selecting research methodology. This chapter will discuss how respondents can react to sensitive topics taking common response strategies into consideration. For the purpose of this paper, only personal interviews and focus groups will be discussed as quantitative approaches. Traditional modes of administration of quantitative approach are questionnaires, which in this paper will focus on traditional paper-pencil administration and computerized administration. Sensitive topics has also been researched through experimental design, however, this method will not be addressed in this paper.

Quantitative approaches
When comparing survey methods of computerized and paper-pencil questionnaires, the findings of social desirability biases, response rates and response accuracy has varied (i.e. Kim et al, 2008). Richman et al (1999) found that computer-administered surveys generated lesser social desirable response biases than paper-pencil did. Wood (2006), on the contrary, did not find such differences. Since these studies have been carried out with such long time difference (1999 and 2006), it can be questioned whether the society's enhanced use of computers and internet has become a larger and more vital part of everyday life, and thus, respondent's perception of such instrument has been altered. Recently, however, the results from Kim et al (2008) compare computerized surveys to paper-pencil surveys, supported prior findings of computerized approach gaining higher disclosure of sensitive topics than paper-pencil questionnaires. It might be noteworthy though to mention that Kim et al used a computer method called ACASI which is one among many computer methods available nowadays (see i.e. Tourangous et al, 2007, for further discussion on computerized methods). Kim et al (2008) defines ACASI as "*Computer-assisted self-interviews present the questions on the computer screen and sometimes include a digitally recorded voice that participants can listen to through headphones"* (p. 256). Therefore, the different computerized methods can presumably disclose different amount of sensitive information. Tourangeau et al (2007) did a meta-analysis on 14 studies using either computerization or paper self-administered questionnaires. Tourangeau et al attempted to summarize quantitatively the effect of the two different modes of administrating questionnaires (for details see Tourangeau et al, 2007). The study found that there was "*non-significant tendency for computerized self-administrations to elicit more socially undesirable responses than paper self-administration*" (p. 867), and that the increase in reporting sensitive information on computerized self-report relative to paper-pencil administration might depend upon other variables. Also worth mention is errors due to the length of the questionnaires. Research indicate that longer surveys, compared to shorter ones, have more missing data and lower unit response rate (Stanton et al, 2002; Wood et al, 2006).

Ong et al (2000) did a research on what impact anonymity in questionnaires has on responses to sensitive questions. They investigated assurances of privacy and normalization of the subject at focal in sensitive items, meaning give information about i.e. behavior and present it as ordinary behavior. Results showed that normalization did not influence response accuracy, and opposite, privacy did. Thus, trivializing sensitive topics in surveys is likely to not have any effect enhancing the data quality. Schoderbec et al (1996) found that impression management and overreporting had a significant impact in spite of assurances stating the questionnaire being an anonymous survey. One explanation for this might be that the respondents simply do not rely on anonymity guarantees, suspecting that surveys can be

traced through coding schemes of questionnaires, post address if sent by mail, or is electronic traceable if e-mailed (Dalton et al 1997) Thus, it might not be speculative to argue that to guarantee privacy, reassuring the respondents that he or she is impossible to trace in the data collection for the researcher or anybody else, might be more successful than both normalization of sensitive topics or anonymity assurances in questionnaires.

Qualitative approaches

One of the main differences reported to contribute to misreporting sensitive information in interviews and focus groups is the presence of an interviewer or others, such as other respondents or bystanders. In research investigating whether the interviewer has to be present shows, although not clearly, that an interviewer's physical presence does not appear to be of importance (Tourangeau et al, 2007), what matter is "*the threat that someone whom the respondent reports… will learn something embarrassing about the respondent or will learn something that could lead them to punish the respondent in some way*" (Tourangeau et al, 2007, p. 870). Further, the data quality can be affected by the management or bystanders not necessarily physically present in the respondent's room, but the threat of having them nearby. In practice, this present possible implications in organizational research to whether arrange focus groups at work places. The possible threat of management nearby can affect the outcome. Taking it further, even filling out self-administered questionnaires, paper-pencil or computerized, the presence of an allegedly important bystander can be perceived as a threat.

Personal interviews are a highly used method in data collection when richness in data is of high importance. A pitfall in using interview as an approach to collect data on sensitive topics, is the inevitable and extended interaction between the interview and the respondent. Thus, characteristics of the interviewer such as psychological, physical and background can have an impact on responses (Miyazaki et al 2008). Holbrook et al (2006) tested whether indigenous interviewers was better in gaining sensitive information than in-house interviewers. The theory behind this hypothesis was that respondents are more trustful and feel less uncomfortable if the interviewer has similar background to the respondent. The findings showed, on the contrary, that the in-house interviewers obtained higher degree of honest responses on sensitive topics, and the indigenous did not obtain better cooperation with the respondents. Holbrook et al proposed two factors for this result; (1)the in-house interviewers has more training and experience than indigenous, and more importantly (2) there is a greater social distance between in-house interviewers and the respondent, and as a result, respondents are more comfortable to respond on sensitive topics.

Wutich et al (2010) did an analysis comparing the degree of responses produces on sensitive topics (competence, risk and gatekeepers) in focus groups versus open-ended self-administered questionnaires. The analysis indicated that when moderate sensitive topics respondents reported similar responses both focus groups and questionnaires, but on highly sensitive topics less information was provided in focus groups than on open-ended questionnaires. However, focus groups provide more information on highly sensitive topics if such discussion could yield constructive contribution to an urgent problem. As a result, Wutich et al (2010) recommended multimethod research when collecting data on sensitive topics. Further, Aday et al (1995) suggest that the composition of the interview setting can also in itself influence response biases i.e. overreporting on certain behavior in the presence of peers, and on the contrary, underreporting in the presence of authority figures. In practice, conducting a focus group in an organizational setting on business ethics can give different results depending of the composition of respondents and researchers.

Concluding remarks

The sensitivity of your topics may reduce reliability and validity in collected data. Since business ethics is by nature sensitive topics, researchers within this field will be confronted with the challenges of conducting valid data.

The various research designs have strengths and weaknesses depending on subject in focus, situation and desired respondents. It is therefore important to devote time and effort to find strategies that handles sensitive topics when planning a new research. Since no method by itself can fully cover for biases in the data collection, taking on a triangulation approach could be a more successful (Crane 1999).

Prior research show that the psychology of sensitive questions relates to social desirability, intrusiveness and threat of disclosure. Together these constructs leads to a fear of exposing feelings and behavior that could potentially trigger socially reprisal from society.

Another challenge of getting respondents to answer truthfully is not only a matter of desire to answer in a socially desirable manner, acting unethical in decision-making processes might in fact be a question of illegal behavior. As a result, the motivation to misreport is not due to social desirability but to avoid legal consequences (Tourangeau et al, 2007).

The majority of knowledge on how sensitive topics affect data collection sources from research within sensitive behaviors in life styles and health fields, i.e. drug use and sexual behavior (Tourangeau et al 2007; Kim et al 2008; Alexander et al 2003). Although such knowledge is to a certain degree universal, it is important in the future to gain more knowledge about how sensitive topics affects the quality of data collection specifically related to business ethics research.

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