



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.

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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.

Research shows that vignettes are particularly good at investigating how people think they *should* react in a given situation, but not necessarily how they will respond (Carlson, 1996; Kiyonari et al., 2000). As Parkinson and Manstead (1993, p. 310) put it, “[P]eople are right in the ‘thick of things’ in real life, whereas they’re always detached or detachable from the stories they read”. Although laboratory research might also fall short of capturing how people will act in natural surroundings, engaging in situations in the laboratory may better simulate “natural” interactions. Control and engagement are key. Kiyonari et al. show that experimental participants behaved differently when in situations where they felt like they faced “serious consequences” versus a “truly trivial decision task” because of an “illusion of control” (2000, p. 425). Similarly, Rashotte (2003) finds that people use different types of information in forming impressions based on whether the stimulus is visual or written. These findings suggest that vignettes may not offer a suitable parallel to naturalistic observation or even laboratory experiments.

2.4. Affect control theory

To explore the discrepancy between vignette and laboratory experiences, we use the same metric Rashotte (2003) used to measure differences in affective responses to visual and written stimuli – Affect control theory (Heise, 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988). Affect control theory, or ACT, begins with the assumption that actors label the social world around them with culturally bound meanings and those labels evoke affective meanings (Heise, 1979). ACT quantifies these affective meanings using Osgood et al. (1957) three universal dimensions of affective meaning—evaluation (e.g., good or bad), potency (e.g., powerful or powerless), and activity (e.g., fast or slow). According to the theory, all social concepts evoke evaluation, potency, and activity sentiments to varying degrees. While social concepts may be universal (e.g., the role of “mother”), the sentiments assigned to these concepts are products of culture (Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2006). These culturally bound sentiments about a given target are called fundamental sentiments. For example, the fundamental sentiment of mother in the United States is good, powerful and moderately active (Heise, 1979). Although this may not be every person’s individual experience with his or her mother, or the sentiment about mothers across cultures, it is the common sentiment within the United States when discussing mothers generally. Consistent with symbolic interaction, the basis of the theory, people are thus able to communicate more effectively when they share these same sentiments about social concepts than they would be if they had to continually explain what the concepts mean (MacKinnon, 1994; Mead, 1934).

Using these culturally specific, yet widely-shared, fundamental sentiments as a baseline, ACT is able to consider what emerges in interaction to understand how people interpret events. The theory argues that people attempt to maintain consistent understandings across situations, meaning that people attempt to align their fundamental sentiments and their transient impressions to maintain a knowable social world (MacKinnon, 1994, p. 22). This is not always possible. Deflection is the discrepancy between the fundamental sentiments and the transitory impressions. Emotions often serve as a signal of the deflection (Averett and Heise, 1988; Smith-Lovin, 1988). In an effort to alleviate the negative emotions experienced, an individual might reconstruct the event. She may redefine the behavior or other aspects of the situation, perhaps shifting her definition of the actor or the object or by adding contextual cues that help explain the behavior. This redefinition process is largely unconscious, as is the calculus that spurs it; however Nelson (2006) finds that people are more likely to redefine the behavior than the actor or the object.

While we are not concerned here with how subjects redefine situations, we are interested in how participants in the vignette and laboratory experiments experience the alternative dispute resolution processes in qualitatively different ways. We expect that transient impressions about the process and participants that are formed in the laboratory will diverge from the fundamental sentiments about such targets more than they will for participants who imagine the situation while reading a vignette. Therefore, experiences in the laboratory are more likely to cause deflection than those who experience the process through vignettes. This deflection likely affects individuals’ affective and cognitive reactions to the dispute resolution process and fellow participants. To compare the affective responses of those who read the vignettes with those who engage in conflict resolution in the laboratory, we use regression to compare the rates of deflection of the two groups. Deflection is the squared difference between the transient impression and the fundamental sentiment (Heise, 1979).

3. Data and methods

In order to compare the deflection experienced by reading the vignette versus the deflection occurring from participating in the laboratory experiment, we first had to locate fundamental sentiment ratings for our targets of interest – the participants (e.g., mediator, person involved in mediation) and processes (e.g., mediation) in dispute resolution. Although researchers using ACT typically rely on INTERACT’s online dictionary, a data set of fundamental sentiments across time and cultures, we needed to collect our own ratings as our items of interest have yet to be included in the dictionary.³ Therefore, our data collection for this project was divided into three distinct parts – the collection of fundamental sentiments, a vignette experiment, and a laboratory experiment. We describe each in detail below.

³ The dictionary does include the behavior “negotiates with,” which is close to our interest. However, for comparability across ADR approaches and for clarity we choose to collect data for all three approaches with a focus on the processes rather than behaviors.

3.1. Fundamental sentiments

3.1.1. Design and procedures

To collect individuals' fundamental sentiments – the affective perceptions individuals have about objects, situations, or people separate from the particular situation – we sent out an online survey to people who were interested in being part of a laboratory experiment but were ultimately unable to participate due to scheduling or time constraints ($n = 82$). Survey respondents were randomly assigned to one of three topics—negotiation, mediation, or arbitration—by the survey software and were asked to rate the evaluation, potency, and activity of the particular process and the people involved. This data provides an important baseline from which we can compare deflection rates in the vignette and laboratory experiments.

3.1.2. Measures

We used seven bipolar 9-point scales to determine the evaluation, potency, and activity of the type of dispute resolution (Heise, 1979). The evaluation scales consisted of two questions asking respondents to rank the target from infinitely bad to infinitely good, and infinitely awful to infinitely nice. The potency scale examined whether the respondent thought the target was infinitely little to infinitely big and infinitely powerful to infinitely powerless. The activity scales examined whether the respondent felt the target was infinitely fast to infinitely slow, infinitely noisy to infinitely quiet, and infinitely young to infinitely old. We recoded these variables from -4 to 4 so the higher number indicates a more positive evaluation, potency, or activity rating. From these scales we determined individuals' fundamental sentiments about negotiation, mediation, and arbitration.

3.1.3. Baseline sentiments

Table 1 reports the means and descriptive statistics for the components of the three types of dispute resolution. As the ratings suggest, people tend to view negotiation as slightly good (0.92). In mediation, generally people thought of the process as both slightly good and powerful (1.26 and 1.13, respectively), and the mediator as good as well. Individuals saw both the arbitration process and the arbitrator as slightly powerful (1.17 and 1.25, respectively).

3.2. Vignettes

3.2.1. Design and procedures

To replicate a common method of collecting vignettes, administering them in large classes, we distributed short scenarios describing a situation and an accompanying questionnaire measuring affective responses to students in sociology and business classes in the spring of 2008 ($n = 328$).

Each vignette had three parts (a sample vignette is included in Appendix A). The first described the conflict between two former business partners the respondent and Taylor⁴ – who were engaged in alternative dispute resolution. The scenario simply said that the subject and Taylor have been in business for three years, but that it is no longer working out. Both parties believe they deserve more than the other and are trying to acquire assets for their next business venture. This summary of the conflict was identical across all three conditions.

The second part of the vignettes explained the procedure the respondent and Taylor would use to divide the assets. These processes – negotiation, mediation, and arbitration – and their descriptions were what varied across conditions. These conditions were randomly distributed to respondents. In negotiation, the business partners divided each type of asset one at a time, exchanging offers and counter offers until all assets were divided. In mediation, the business partners divided each type of asset individually, like in negotiation, but exchanged the offers and counter-offers through a mediator. In other words, the mediator acted as a go-between, relaying messages to the other partner. Like in negotiation, the business partners still decided the final distribution of assets. In arbitration, the arbitrator, not the business partners, made the final decision regarding the division of assets. Both the subject and Taylor had the opportunity to make suggestions about the division of each type of asset to the arbitrator, but the arbitrator decided what the final distribution will be.

The final section of the vignette included the outcome of the division of the assets. In all conditions the outcome disadvantaged the subject to the same degree (with the subject receiving 42% of the overall assets).⁵

3.2.2. Measures

After reading the vignettes, the subject was asked to complete a questionnaire that primed them to consider their thoughts and feelings about Taylor, the process, the outcome, and the third-party if one was present. Respondents then rated the process and participants across the same categories (people and processes) and dimensions (evaluation, potency, and activity) that we collected fundamental sentiments for, giving us transient impressions of those targets.

⁴ We chose a specific name to make the scenario seem more realistic. After pre-testing three names (Chris, Morgan, and Taylor), Taylor resulted in the most diverse set of assumptions about the gender of the business partner. Even while using Taylor, a majority of both men and women believed Taylor was a man, likely because of the context of the business scenario.

⁵ We chose to focus on unfair outcomes both because this perception is common among those involved in disputes and because individuals who are dissatisfied with their outcomes are more likely to work to cognitively unpack the experience (Kidd and Utne, 1978; Melli, 1991).

Table 1
Fundamental sentiments.

| | | Negotiation (n = 32) | | Mediation (n = 26) | | Arbitration (n = 24) | | |
|-------------|--|----------------------|------|--------------------|------|----------------------|------|--|
| | | | SD | | SD | | SD | |
| Person | E | 0.50 | 1.17 | −0.46 | 1.33 | −0.21 | 1.02 | |
| | "Person Involved in Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration" | | | | | | | |
| | P | 0.27 | 0.89 | 0.10 | 1.04 | −0.52 | 0.71 | |
| | A | −0.11 | 0.68 | −0.08 | 0.82 | −0.15 | 0.77 | |
| Process | E | 0.92 | 1.00 | 1.26 | 1.50 | 0.63 | 1.01 | |
| | "Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration" | | | | | | | |
| | P | 0.53 | 0.91 | 1.13 | 1.25 | 1.17 | 1.18 | |
| | A | −0.56 | 0.71 | 0.15 | 1.06 | −0.19 | 1.05 | |
| Third Party | E | | | 1.42 | 1.18 | 0.69 | 1.58 | |
| | "Mediator/Arbitrator" | | | | | | | |
| | P | | | 0.73 | 1.23 | 1.25 | 1.04 | |
| | A | | | −0.35 | 0.74 | −0.20 | 1.18 | |

3.2.3. Transient impressions, vignettes

Table 2 shows the means and descriptive statistics for our targets of interest. Because there were two distinct people in this scenario, rather than collecting affective responses to "person involved in negotiation", we asked respondents to rate specifically both "yourself during the process of negotiation" and "Taylor during the process of negotiation". As the ratings suggest, transient impressions of the targets after reading the vignettes were quite neutral, much like the fundamental sentiments. The only significant rating was respondents' perceptions of the arbitrator's power (1.25).

3.3. Laboratory experiment

To gauge the transient impressions of those who actually experienced the back and forth nature of social exchange, we created a laboratory experiment that simulated the dispute resolution processes described in the vignettes. This allowed us to measure our outcomes of interest in a controlled environment, where outcomes and information were consistent with those presented in the vignettes.

3.3.1. Design and procedures

The laboratory experiment involved 116 undergraduate students. Subjects were enrolled as students in one of three sister schools at the time of their participation and were recruited with flyers posted throughout campus and an advertisement that ran in the student newspaper. Upon arrival at the laboratory, subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions—negotiation, mediation, or arbitration. In each condition, the subjects arrived with between three and five other students, and were then placed in separate cubicles outfitted with a desk and a computer. They were told that they would not know which of the other students they would be interacting with and they would not see those students again.

Instructions on the computer informed them that they would be dividing assets with "Person X",⁶ their former business partner and that another student may act as a mediator or arbitrator (if present in that condition). Like in the vignettes, we told the subjects that their goal was to accumulate as many assets as possible to use toward a future business venture. The subjects were meant to, and did, assume that the roles of Person X and the third-party were played by one of the other students in other cubicles. In reality, the Person X and the third party (when present) were computer-simulated actors pre-programmed to act in controlled ways.⁷ Specifically, the computer simulations were programmed to, in the process of many rounds of exchange, allocate less than half the amount of assets to the subject (42%, on average). After the experiment was complete, each student was debriefed individually and paid for their earnings.

3.3.2. Manipulations

To manipulate level of third-party intervention in the laboratory experiment, we varied both the instructions and the actual procedure of the experiment depending on condition (negotiation, mediation, or arbitration). The instructions for each process were largely identical to the corresponding instructions in the vignette conditions. We again varied the third-party intervention by using three different levels of intervention: no intervention in the negotiation condition, a low level of intervention in the mediation condition, and a high level of intervention in the arbitration condition.

Those involved in negotiation believed that the computer was programmed to deliver their offers and counter-offers directly to Person X. There was no mention of a third party. In mediation, with low levels of third-party intervention, the subjects were told that they sent the requests to the mediator who would then relay them to Person X. On each round of a division opportunity in these conditions subjects were able to make an offer – a proposed division of the current asset – to Person X by sending it through the computer/mediator. After submitting this offer they were told what Person X had simultaneously suggested. To agree on a division decision, both disputants had to make offers and requests that matched or choose to accept a previous proposed division. If no agreement was reached on a round, then a new round of offers began. The mediated and unmediated negotiations continued across rounds until a decision was reached, or until five rounds were

⁶ While we used "Taylor" in the vignette experiment to add realism, the experiment was a realistic experience as it is.

⁷ This allowed greater experimental control over the outcomes of the dispute resolution procedures, which is a variable that often complicates findings from field research in this area.

Table 2
Transitory impressions, vignettes.

| | | Negotiation (n = 80) | SD | Mediation (n = 78) | SD | Arbitration (n = 80) | SD |
|---|---|-------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| Self "Yourself During the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration Process" | E | 0.66 | 1.28 | 0.44 | 1.10 | 0.66 | 1.38 |
| | P | -0.14 | 1.40 | -0.64 | 1.43 | -0.85 | 1.28 |
| | A | -0.03 | 0.80 | -0.07 | 0.76 | 0.08 | 0.90 |
| Exchange Partner "Taylor During the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration Process" | E | -0.69 | 1.18 | -0.58 | 1.11 | -0.63 | 1.40 |
| | P | 0.74 | 1.38 | 0.47 | 1.31 | 0.48 | 1.38 |
| | A | 0.39 | 0.76 | 0.22 | 0.84 | 0.48 | 0.88 |
| Process "Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration" | E | -0.32 | 1.24 | -0.45 | 1.13 | -0.66 | 1.17 |
| | P | 0.56 | 1.49 | 0.31 | 1.39 | 0.61 | 1.51 |
| | A | -0.06 | 0.72 | -0.40 | 0.92 | -0.05 | 0.82 |
| Third Party "Mediator/Arbitrator" | E | | | -0.09 | 1.09 | -0.65 | 1.47 |
| | P | | | 0.83 | 1.41 | 1.25 | 1.63 |
| | A | | | -0.21 | 0.78 | -0.02 | 1.01 |

up. If disputants were unable to agree on a division in five rounds, the assets were sent to auction and were sold for one quarter of their value (of which the subject received half). Ultimately, the disputants in each of these conditions decided on the final division of the assets.

In arbitration, with higher levels of intervention, the disputants sent requests to the arbitrator who then made the final decision on how to divide the assets. Subjects made a proposed division of the current asset to the arbitrator. Simultaneously, or so the subjects were told, Person X sent a proposal to the arbitrator. Once both proposals had been submitted, as the arbitrator deliberated, the subject was able to see Person X's proposal. After a brief amount of time, the arbitrator decided on the division of that asset and informed each of the disputants of their decision. The asset was then divided based entirely on the arbitrator's decision.

3.3.3. Measures

After participating in the resolution procedures, subjects completed a questionnaire and ratings identical to those used in the vignettes. This primed them to consider their thoughts and feelings about Person X, themselves, the process, the outcome, and the third-party (if one was present) and to rate the process and participants across the same categories (people and processes) and dimensions (evaluation, potency, and activity) that we collected fundamental sentiments for, giving us transient impressions of those targets. The same seven, 9-point bipolar variables were to tap the affective meanings for the targets. These seven variables were collapsed into the three corresponding scales, one for evaluation, one for potency, and one for activity. All scales range from -4 to 4.

3.3.4. Transient impressions, laboratory

Table 3 reports the means and descriptive statistics for the transient impressions of those who engaged in a resolution process. Unlike the ratings reported for the fundamental sentiments and impressions stemming from the vignettes which were generally neutral, here we see a shift to stronger affective responses. In negotiation people see themselves as slightly good (1.09), Person X as quite bad (-1.84), and negotiation as a slightly bad (-0.99) and inactive (-1.13) process. Mediation shows similar affective responses, with those in this condition rating themselves as quite good (1.81), Person X as quite bad (-1.68), and the third party as slightly inactive (-0.92). With regard to the mediation process, those who experienced it in the laboratory saw it as both slightly bad (-0.86) and slightly inactive (-1.18). Finally, in arbitration, respondents felt that they lacked power (-1.33) and that the third party was quite bad (-1.75) and quite powerful (1.64). Their feelings about Person X were more neutral, but they felt the process was both bad (-1.25) and slightly inactive (-1.08).⁸

4. Results

To determine whether the difference between the deflection caused by the vignette and that from of the experiment is statistically significant we ran regression analyses, regressing method on deflection scores (with vignette as 1, laboratory as 0). Using this analysis, a positive score indicates that the deflection score for the vignette is larger than the deflection score for the experiment; a negative score, on the other hand, suggests that respondents in the vignette conditions felt less deflection than those in the experiment.

4.1. Negotiation

The regression results in Table 4 suggest that there was little difference in deflection across the methods for negotiation. However, differences in deflection on the perceptions of the exchange partner in negotiation are statistically significant

⁸ It is important to note that the laboratory experiment involved computer-mediated communication which is standard in experimental research to control for status cues. We would expect even higher rates of deflection if face-to-face methods were used.

Table 3
Transitory impressions, laboratory experiment.

| | | Negotiation (n = 40) | SD | Mediation (n = 40) | SD | Arbitration (n = 36) | SD |
|--|---|-------------------------|------|-----------------------|------|-------------------------|------|
| Self "Yourself During the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration Process" | E | 1.09 | 1.47 | 1.81 | 1.17 | -0.26 | 1.09 |
| | P | -0.63 | 1.20 | -0.68 | 0.92 | -1.33 | 1.24 |
| Exchange Partner "Person X During the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration Process" | A | 0.23 | 0.85 | 0.46 | 0.87 | 0.81 | 1.04 |
| | E | -1.84 | 1.44 | -1.68 | 1.20 | -0.50 | 0.85 |
| Process "Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration" | P | 0.35 | 1.40 | 0.43 | 1.24 | 0.13 | 0.93 |
| | A | -0.49 | 1.10 | -0.33 | 1.01 | -0.81 | 0.83 |
| Third Party "Mediator/Arbitrator" | E | -0.99 | 1.05 | -0.86 | 1.29 | -1.25 | 1.04 |
| | P | -0.19 | 1.08 | -0.04 | 1.31 | -0.11 | 1.54 |
| | A | -1.13 | 0.87 | -1.18 | 1.02 | -1.08 | 1.12 |
| | E | | | -0.20 | 0.97 | -1.75 | 1.38 |
| | P | | | -0.39 | 1.55 | 1.64 | 1.12 |
| | A | | | -0.92 | 0.88 | -0.68 | 1.09 |

Table 4
Regressions of EPA deflection scores on vignette (vignette = 1).

| | | Negotiation | Mediation | Arbitration |
|--|-------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| Self "Yourself during the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration process" | Total | -1.08 | -3.64*** | -0.85 |
| | E | -0.79 | -4.51*** | 1.47** |
| | P | -0.11 | 1.16 | -0.42 |
| | A | -0.18 | -0.29 | -1.14** |
| Exchange partner "Taylor/Person X During the Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration process" | Total | -2.27*** | -1.89 | 2.96** |
| | E | -4.69*** | -1.64** | 1.30** |
| | P | 0.20 | 1.27 | 1.61* |
| | A | -0.50 | -0.46 | 0.05 |
| Process "Negotiation/Mediation/Arbitration" | Total | -1.41 | -4.07** | -4.30*** |
| | E | -1.66* | -1.96* | -1.58* |
| | P | 0.55 | -0.48 | -1.39 |
| | A | -0.29 | -1.64*** | -1.33*** |
| Third Party "Mediator/Arbitrator" | Total | | -2.16 | -2.95** |
| | E | | -0.08 | -3.88*** |
| | P | | -1.63* | 1.25* |
| | A | | -0.46 | -0.33 |

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.*** $p < .001$.

($b = -2.27$, $p < .001$), with the deflection experienced with regard to evaluation ratings of the partner serving as a driving force in this ($b = -4.69$, $p < .001$). In addition, subjects evaluated the process less positively after engaging in the laboratory simulation rather than simply imagining the process ($b = -1.66$, $p < .05$).

4.2. Mediation

There are more significant differences in mediation. Results suggest that the differences between the vignettes and laboratory on total levels of deflection for both self and process in mediation are statistically significant ($b = -3.64$, $p < .001$ and $b = -4.07$, $p < .01$, respectively), and that this is driven by higher evaluations of self ($b = -4.51$, $p < .001$) and lower perceptions of activity ($b = -1.64$, $p < .001$) in the laboratory experiment. Interestingly, while it did not lead to significantly larger levels of total deflection, there was also significantly more deflection ($b = -1.64$, $p < .01$) felt in the laboratory with regard to evaluation of exchange partners. Partners in the laboratory were perceived as quite bad (-1.68) but were situated between neutral and slightly bad (-0.58) in the vignettes. Subjects in the laboratory evaluated the mediation process less positively than respondents who read the vignettes ($b = -1.96$, $p < .05$) and felt that the mediator was less powerful than those reading the vignettes imagined ($b = -1.63$, $p < .05$). Both of these differences were statistically significant.

4.3. Arbitration

Table 4 suggests that arbitration has a slightly different pattern than the other two processes. The deflection levels (not shown) regarding perceptions of self in the vignettes and laboratory are nearly identical to one another (5.19 and 5.28,

respectively). However, the differences in deflection regarding perceptions of the exchange partner are reversed from the other two processes, with higher rates of deflection being experienced in the vignettes with respect to the exchange partner (6.13) than in the laboratory (3.16).

The differences between methods in affective responses to the exchange partner, process, and third party are all statistically significant. There is significantly more deflection experienced regarding perceptions of the exchange partner in the vignettes than in the laboratory ($b = 2.96, p < .01$), driven in part by the deflection caused by lower evaluations of Taylor than Person X ($b = 1.30, p < .01$). Subjects in the laboratory reported significantly more deflection in their views of the arbitration process than those who read the vignettes ($b = -4.30, p < .001$) because of the difference between assumed and experienced potency of the, albeit simulated, arbitration process ($b = -1.33, p < .001$) and the lower evaluations in the laboratory ($b = -1.58, p < .05$). Finally, respondents to the vignette experienced much less deflection regarding their perceptions of the arbitrator than those who participated in the lab experiment ($b = -2.95, p < .01$), largely because of the statistically significant difference in deflection experienced regarding evaluation of the third party ($b = -3.88, p < .001$) and perceptions of potency, which were higher in the laboratory ($b = 1.25, p < .05$).

5. Discussion

Our results suggest that vignette and laboratory experiment simulations are not experienced in the same way. As hypothesized by others (e.g., Faia, 1980; Hughes, 1998), actually engaging in a process (even a simulated one), with or without a third party present, is experienced quite differently than imagining it. We suggest that this difference in experience is linked to the importance of emotion in interpreting events (Averett and Heise, 1988). It may be particularly difficult to generate “life-like” emotions from vignettes (Parkinson and Manstead, 1993), in part because vignettes may not challenge fundamental sentiments in the same way that a more tangible experience might⁹ or because respondents are less likely to put themselves in the situation or realize personal significance (Kiyonari et al., 2000; Lazarus, 1991).

For example, in both the vignettes and laboratory, our subjects received less than half the assets (42% of the total). While this knowledge in the vignettes was enough to incite self-serving attributions (Cohen, 1982; Utne and Kidd, 1980) and cause evaluations of self to increase, it was those who actually “experienced” the disadvantage and the conflict (Hegtvedt and Killian, 1999; Molm et al., 2006), whose evaluations shifted significantly, likely as they looked for someone to blame to protect their conception of self (Thompson and Loewenstein, 1992). In mediation, this meant that those in the laboratory went from viewing others involved rather neutrally to perceiving themselves as quite good and Person X as quite bad. In arbitration, because involvement in the process made salient the influence of the arbitrator in the negative outcome (Hassebrauck, 1987), negative evaluations shifted significantly from the exchange partner to the third party. The fewest shifts, and therefore least deflection, occurred in negotiation. However, even in negotiation, as in mediation and arbitration, those in the laboratory evaluated the processes less positively than those who imagined engaging in them with the vignettes. Although the affective responses we focus on here are not an important aspect of all vignette research, they are integral in social exchange and alternative dispute resolutions. Conflict and emotion cue important attribution processes (Hegtvedt and Killian, 1999; Lawler 2001) that may influence perceptions of interactional and procedural fairness, as well as general positive regard (Molm et al., 2003, 2006).

6. Conclusion

This article explored the degree to which different methodological techniques used to study social exchange processes in alternative dispute resolution result in different affective responses to those situations. Although not a standard affect control theory (Heise, 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988) study, we drew on ACT insights and the measures of evaluation, potency, and activity central to the theory. By attending to rates of deflection, which are tied to meaning and emotion, we found significant differences between affective responses to vignette and laboratory experiments, two common methodological techniques in social exchange and alternative dispute resolution. In general, we find that the laboratory experiments resulted in greater deflection than the vignette experiments and assert that this could be an important factor in the validity of vignettes in research areas like these.

This significant difference is particularly striking given the rather conservative test of our laboratory experiment. With previous research suggesting that vignettes are good at measuring how people *should* react in a given situation, but not necessarily how they will respond (Carlson, 1996; Kiyonari et al., 2000), one needs to consider experimenter effects (Rosenthal, 1966). Our laboratory experiment could still be tapping into a lot of “should” behavior.¹⁰ In addition, if one thinks of a continuum of engagement that is connected to deflection, it is possible that rates of deflection could be greater in a face-to-face laboratory experiment (versus ours which was computer simulated) and even more pronounced in “real life” situations outside the laboratory, where disputants have a history.

⁹ Certainly there are vignettes that challenge fundamental sentiments in research on affect control theory, when such is done intentionally. For example, Nelson (2006) study of the reinterpretation of bizarre events, where, in one typical deflection-evoking vignette, “a grandmother chased an addict”.

¹⁰ Good research design takes into account issues of validity and reliability in measurement, as eliciting honest – and accurate – responses from subjects is an issue across methods and research areas in the social sciences.

It is important to note that the idea that there is a significant difference between being in a situation and imagining it is, in many ways, counter to assumptions of affect control theory (MacKinnon, 1994; Robinson and Smith-Lovin, 2006). However, we argue that two processes are at play. The first is *intensity* of emotion. While the emotions experienced may be similar (Heise and Calhan, 1995), the intensity of emotion is not. With emotions an important piece in the cognitive and affective outcomes of exchange (Lawler, 2001), such intensity is an important outcome.

Second, the two exchange processes with a neutral third party are situations that many students may be unfamiliar with. Familiarity, in many ways, is central to an individual's ability to effectively imagine a hypothetical scenario and to accurately determine their likely response to it (Finch, 1987; Neff, 1979). Consistent with this we find the least deflection in negotiation, a process most students have some type of experience with (Bazerman et al., 2000). However, we argue that it is not just students who suffer from an inability to anticipate how contentious mediation might be or how potent an arbitrator is in the arbitration process. Research shows that these misconceptions are common throughout the population (Walker, 2002; Wall et al., 2001). The importance of intensity of emotion and public misconceptions about these processes suggest that vignettes may be problematic for research in both social exchange and alternative dispute resolution.

While we argue that that the deflection experienced in the laboratory caused individuals to experience strong emotions and alter their interpretation of events, we did not test this directly. Future research in affect control theory should explore the effects of this deflection on the specific emotions that individuals experience (Heise and Calhan, 1995) and how these events may be redefined (Nelson, 2006), while those interested in social exchange or alternative dispute resolution should consider the implications of method for how fair or just the process, outcome, and other party is perceived to be (Collett, 2008). More work should also be done that specifically tests the differences between vignettes and experiments and explores the mechanisms behind these differences (see Kiyonari et al., 2000 for an example).

Our results also suggest that care should be taken in choosing a research method. While pre-testing is a vital aspect of any research, many pretest within a particular research method. For some, it may be worth pre-testing across method, to illuminate potential pitfalls related to methodological decisions. Those choosing to use hypothetical scenarios can test the ACT profiles of key actors or events for their pretest subjects against those in the Interact dictionary. Such concerns are particularly relevant for those whose outcomes rely on a significant level of engagement with the vignette scenario. Vignettes may be a quick and inexpensive way to collect data, but this efficiency is moot if researchers and practitioners are misled by their results. Our findings here suggest that care should be taken in considering both their use and the effect they might have on conclusions drawn from research and more work should be done to determine when vignettes are a reliable means of collecting data.

Appendix A: Sample vignette (negotiation)

A.1. Please consider the following scenario

You and Taylor have been in business for three years. It is not working out and you are both ready to move onto new business ventures. There are a number of assets (e.g. supplies, parts) left from the business to divide between you. You feel that you have contributed more to the business and deserve a larger share than Taylor. Taylor believes the opposite and is asking for a larger share.

It is important to you that you accumulate as many assets as possible because you plan on trading your assets in for their cash value at the end of the division process. You will use the cash to begin your next business venture. You are unsure of Taylor's future plans and do not know if they include trading the assets for cash or using them in the future.

To divide these various assets, you and Taylor engage in a negotiation process. You divide the assets one at a time until all of them have been liquidated. In this negotiation process you and Taylor exchange offers (e.g. how many sprockets you get, how many Taylor gets). After considering the offers, you each make counteroffers. These offers and counteroffers continue until the two of you agree on a division of the asset. This decision is final, and the asset is divided accordingly. This process begins again with each new asset and the negotiations continue until you and Taylor have divided all the assets.

At the end of the negotiation process you add up your assets and compute their value, preparing to trade them in. Taylor decides to do the same. You compare the value of your assets to the value of Taylor's accumulated assets and realize that you received less than half the total value of the assets. You acquired only 42% of the value. Taylor on the other hand, has 58%.

Consider for a moment how you would feel in this situation, and then please continue onto the next page.

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