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Assertiveness Bias in Gender Ethics Research: Why Women Deserve the Benefit of the Doubt

Marketing and Consumer Behavior

Saar Bossuyt[1] · **Patrick Van Kenhove**[1]

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Abstract Gender is one of the most researched and contentious topics in consumer ethics research. It is common for researchers of gender studies to presume that women are more ethical than men because of their reputation for having a selfless, sensitive nature. Nevertheless, we found evidence that women behaved less ethically than men in two field experiments testing a passive form of unethical behavior. Women benefited to a larger extent from a cashier miscalculating the bill in their favor than men. However, in three follow-up studies, we found that women did not necessarily intend to benefit at the expense of someone else. Women are less prone to speak up to a cashier than men are, even when the mistake is made in their disfavor. These results reveal that gender differences in assertiveness affect differences in unethical behavior.

Keywords Assertiveness · Behavioral experiments · Consumer ethics · Gender differences · Gender ethics · Social desirability bias · Unethical consumer behavior

Introduction

Gender is one of the most researched topics in the consumer ethics domain. Even though no consensus exists on which gender is the "most unethical," it is often presumed and found that women are more ethical than men (Ford and Richardson 1994; O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005). Women often get the benefit of the doubt because of their reputation for having a selfless, sensitive nature (Eckel and Grossman 1998; Vermeir and Van Kenhove 2007). Although some studies failed to find a gender difference, studies that have found a difference concluded that women are more ethical than men (Ford and Richardson 1994; O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005).

Although there may be some basis to the assumption that women are less likely to engage in unethical behavior than men, reasons exist to doubt the results of previous studies. In particular, the vast majority of these studies used questionnaires measuring ethical intentions or tolerance toward unethical acts (Ford and Richardson 1994; O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005). Unfortunately, questionnaires focusing on sensitive issues, such as unethical behavior, are very susceptible to socially desirable responses (Randall and Fernandes 1991; Dalton and Ortegren 2011). Dalton and Ortegren (2011) demonstrated that the relation between gender and moral decision making is mainly influenced by a social desirability response bias. In other words, women owe their ethical reputations to their tendency to answer in socially desirable ways.

Behavioral experiments are often considered to be a way to address the issue of socially desirable responding. Nevertheless, this study reveals that these experiments may not be free from bias. In two unrelated field experiments investigating a passive form of unethical consumer behavior, we observed that women behaved less ethically than men. However, three follow-up studies demonstrate that this gender difference in unethical behavior can be explained by a gender difference in assertiveness. This study emphasizes that there is more than meets the eye in gender ethics research and highlights the importance of controlling for gender differences in assertiveness.

✉ Saar Bossuyt
S.Bossuyt@Ugent.be

Patrick Van Kenhove
Patrick.VanKenhove@Ugent.be

[1] Department of Marketing, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Ghent University, Tweekerkenstraat 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: The next section overviews previous studies on gender differences in morality. It is followed by a comparison of results from recently conducted behavioral experiments. We then discuss the research methodology and results from three follow-up studies. This study concludes by reviewing the results and providing recommendations for future research in gender ethics.

Literature Review

The relation between gender and morality has received attention from many scholars in recent decades. In general, the results of these studies have been mixed. Reviews reveal that approximately 50 % of the studies found no significant gender differences (O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005; Ford and Richardson 1994; Loe et al. 2000). Interestingly, studies that have found significant differences all concluded that women are morally superior to men (O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005). For instance, various studies revealed that women have fewer intentions to engage in unethical behavior than men (Singhapakdi 1999; Cohen et al. 2001; Bateman and Valentine 2010; Valentine and Rittenburg 2007). Other studies indicate that women are less tolerant of questionable acts than men (Reiss and Mitra 1998; Atakan et al. 2008; Lindenmeier et al. 2012) or that women have a higher moral sensitivity than men (You et al. 2011; Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015; Simga-Mugan et al. 2005).

The idea of women being more ethical than men is mainly supported by studies on gender differences in personality. More specifically, most studies build on the gender socialization theory or the idea that men and women possess different traits and values that translate into different moral orientations (Roxas and Stoneback 2004; Eagly 1987; Vermeir and Van Kenhove 2007). According to this theory, women are characterized by communal traits, such as helping others and managing harmonious relations, whereas men are typified by agentic traits, such as assertiveness and competitiveness (Betz et al. 1989; Roxas and Stoneback 2004; Eagly 1987; Gilligan 1982). In addition, this theory posits that women are sensitive, other oriented, and likely to stick to rules, whereas men are rational, individualistic, and likely to break rules (Roxas and Stoneback 2004; Vermeir and Van Kenhove 2007). Consequently, the gender possessing the most ethical traits is considered the most ethical gender.

Although the gender socialization theory has been criticized (e.g., Walker 2006; Jaffee and Hyde 2000; Mason and Mudrack 1996), some studies have supported parts of the theory. First, several studies have demonstrated that women are more altruistic than men. For instance, Eckel and Grossman (1998) revealed that women act less selfish than men in double-anonymous dictator games. In addition, Erat and Gneezy (2012) revealed that women exhibit stronger altruistic preferences compared with men, in the sense that they are significantly more willing to tell lies that harm themselves a little but help others a lot (i.e., altruistic lies). In general, evidence reveals that women are more other oriented and empathetic than men (Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015; Klein and Hodges 2001). Second, a vast stream of literature exists on prescriptive and proscriptive gender traits. Women are supposed to be warm, unselfish, and sensitive to others, whereas men are expected to be assertive, competitive, and independent (Prentice and Carranza 2002; Rudman et al. 2012; Parks-Stamm et al. 2008; Rudman and Glick 2001). Women who exhibit more masculine traits are likely to receive backlash and are therefore encouraged to meet the prescriptive traits (Nguyen et al. 2008). In sum, even if women are intrinsically not morally superior to men, they face more external pressure to behave ethically.

Social Desirability Response Bias

In addition to the gender differences in personality discussed in the previous paragraph, another variable may explain why women appear to be more ethical than men. In particular, women are more prone to provide socially desirable answers than men (Bernardi and Guptill 2008; Bernardi 2006; Schoderbek and Deshpande 1996). This is relevant because most studies that investigated gender differences in ethical conduct used self-reported data, which are highly susceptible to a social desirability response bias (Bernardi 2006; Randall and Fernandes 1991; Dalton and Ortegren 2011). Dalton and Ortegren (2011) examined whether gender differences in ethical decision making can be explained by gender differences in socially desirable responding. Using 30 scenarios that were previously used in various studies on gender differences in morality, they demonstrated that the previously found gender differences largely disappear when controlling for socially desirable responding. These results suggest that gender differences in morality may not be as prominent as previously assumed.

To obtain a more impartial view of the relation between gender and morality, Dalton and Ortegren (2011) proposed several solutions to manage social desirability response bias. One obvious solution is to apply the same method but control for socially desirable responses by including Paulhus (1988) impression management scale in the analysis. In addition, Dalton and Ortegren (2011) advised the use of indirect, instead of direct, questioning. Another even more highly recommended solution is to investigate behavior instead of intentions. Besides resolving issues

with socially desirable responding, this method also resolves issues with belief–intention–behavior inconsistency (Sheeran and Abraham 2003). Most studies in the ethics domain measure intentions instead of actual behavior, whereas studies have shown that a significant gap exists between intentions and behavior (Vitell 2003; Sheeran and Abraham 2003). In conclusion, there is a need for more behavioral experiments in ethics research.

Behavioral Experiments

As discussed in the previous paragraph, several arguments exist in favor of conducting behavioral experiments in ethics research. In the next sections, we will discuss two unrelated field experiments that were conducted to investigate circumstances under which consumers were more likely to engage in unethical behavior. Although an investigation of gender differences was not the main purpose of these experiments, we tracked the participants' genders and found that women behaved less ethically than did men. In the next sections, we will discuss the design and results of these experiments.

Design

Two unrelated field experiments were set up to investigate the effect of certain retail environmental factors ("atmospherics") on unethical behavior. Each of the two experiments lasted for approximately 2 weeks. The second experiment was executed approximately a year after the first. Although the experiments were conducted for different research projects, the design was similar.[1] Specifically, a sales booth featuring small, inexpensive products was set up in the halls of several university buildings at a large Western European university. The booth was manned by two clerks: one operated the cash register and the other took care of supplies and tracked customers' characteristics. Each time a customer purchased something from the booth, the cashier made a mistake in the customer's favor. More precisely, the cashier stated, "That will be… euros please" and charged the customer approximately 20 % less than he or she actually owed. The other sales clerk tracked the customers' genders (1 = male, 0 = female) and whether customers reported the mistakes (1 = yes, 0 = no). Not reporting a cashier's mistake in one's favor can be seen as passively benefiting at the expense of others, thus serving as a form of unethical consumer behavior (Vitell and Muncy 1992; Fullerton and Punj 2004).

[1] In both experiments, the main effect of the environmental manipulation and the gender effect were significant. However, because there were no significant interaction effects, these manipulations are not discussed here in detail.

Results

Because the sales booths were set up in the same type of environment (university buildings), both experiments have similar sample constitutions. In particular, the sales booths' clienteles consisted of students and university staff.

We discovered a significant gender difference in each of the two experiments. In the first experiment ($N = 154$; 52 % female), significantly more females (43 %) than males (27 %) did not report the sales clerk's mistake (χ^2 (1, $N = 154$) = 4.04, $p = .04$, $V = .16$). In the second experiment ($N = 204$; 39 % female), nearly two-thirds of the female participants (65 %) did not report the sales clerk's mistake, compared with only 42 % of the male participants (χ^2 (1, $N = 204$) = 9.51, $p = .002$, $V = .22$). A meta-analysis of the two studies confirmed the direction and magnitude of the effect (Lipsey and Wilson 2001). The mean effect size (summary odds ratio) across the two studies was $-.81$ ($z = -3.62$; $p < .001$; 95 % CI [-1.26, $-.37$]). To our knowledge, these studies constitute the first behavioral evidence of females being less ethical than males.

Follow-up Studies

Because there is no previous literature showing a higher degree of unethical behavior in women than in men, it is difficult to explain the findings discussed above. For the same reason, it is difficult to draw hard conclusions. Inspired by the research of Dalton and Ortegren (2011), who examined gender differences in socially desirable responses to explain why men appear to be less ethical than women, we explore whether our results could be explained by a third variable. In the next sections, we will discuss three follow-up studies. Study 1a and 1b use picture-guided scenarios to gain deeper insights into consumers' thoughts when they are offered the opportunity to benefit from a cashier's mistake. Study 2 builds on these studies and seeks behavioral evidence for the results.

Study 1a

The purpose of Study 1a was to gain an overview of the thoughts and feelings of consumers faced with an opportunity to benefit from a mistake made in their favor. To this end, we conducted a qualitative study. Specifically, we showed participants a scenario in which a cashier miscalculated the bill in the customer's favor and asked them to complete the story with the customer's reaction.

Design

We created a scenario allowing participants to imagine themselves being faced with the opportunity to benefit

from a cashier's mistake to gain insight into the mental processes of the customers who participated in our field studies. Participants entered the lab room and read the following instructions on the computer screen:

> In a few moments, you will see a picture-guided story about a customer in a grocery store. Look at the pictures and read the accompanying text carefully. In the end, you will be asked to complete one of the text bubbles. There is no right or wrong answer. Do not overthink your answer; just write down what comes to your mind. This survey is fully anonymous; the only information that will be asked is gender and age. Please answer truthfully

Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: a scenario with a male cashier or a scenario with a female cashier. We created both scenarios to achieve a general overview of the potential reactions. The respondents continued with the experiment and saw pictures of a simulated store environment. The first picture showed either a male or a female customer browsing the shelves, guided by the text, *"A man (woman) is going to the store to buy frozen pizza. He (She) browses the shelves and decides to buy a pizza Quattro Stagioni."* The next picture showed the customer reaching a checkout counter manned by either a male or a female cashier. This picture was accompanied by the text, *"The pizza costs €4.99. The man (woman) continues to the checkout counter to pay. The cashier calculates the bill."* The final picture showed the cashier saying, *"That will be €3.99 please."* The text bubble for the customer was empty and the guiding text stated, *"The cashier clearly made a mistake while calculating the bill and undercharged the customer € 1. According to you, how is the customer going to react? Do not overthink your reaction; answer what comes to your mind. There is no right or wrong answer."* We used indirect questioning to avoid socially desirable responses (Rest 1986; Arnold and Ponemon 1991; Dalton and Ortegren 2011). In particular, instead of asking the respondent directly how they would react, we asked how the customer in the scenario would react.

Results

Seventy-six students (46.1 % female; $M_{age} = 20.45$, $SD_{age} = 1.05$) participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants' reactions could be categorized into four main groups. The first main group of reactions we observed could be described as "opportunistic reactions." Respondents, both male and female, saw the cashier's mistake as a windfall. The way they saw it, the customer in the scenario got a discount and should not waste the opportunity to take advantage of it. These respondents did not seem to consider the potential negative consequences for the cashier.

> That's a windfall! The customer pays the €3.99 and goes home. (Male, 20)
> The customer does not report the mistake. Everybody has good luck once in a while. (Male, 20)
> Yes, saved €1! The customer can use this to buy a can of Coke from the vending machine. (Female, 20)
> The customer is pleased with the €1 discount and decides to remain silent. (Female, 21)

We labeled the second group of reactions as "neutralizing reactions." In particular, some participants (both male and female) placed the blame on the cashier or the store and not on the customer. These participants applied "neutralization techniques," which are mental techniques that help consumers justify their norm-violating behaviors (Sykes and Matza 1957; Strutton et al. 1994). In this case, participants mainly applied the "denial of responsibility" technique ("It's not my fault the cashier made a mistake"), the "denial of injury" technique ("€1 is not a big loss for the store"), and "condemning the condemners" ("The reverse—being charged too much—also happens all the time") (Strutton et al. 1994).

> The customer pays and leaves the store. €1 is not such a big loss for the store. (Female, 20)
> The customer reasons that there are often mistakes made in his disfavor as well. (Female, 20)
> The cashier should pay attention; it's not the customer's fault. (Male, 20)

The third group of reactions could be labeled "honest reactions." Various participants, both male and female, stated that the customer in the scenario would report the mistake. Some participants even added that it is "one's duty to be honest." Others indicated that the customer will be honest because he or she does not want the cashier to get into trouble.

> The customer thinks it is one's duty to be honest and reports the mistake. (Male, 21)
> The customer reports the mistake and asks the cashier whether there is something wrong with the pricing on the shelves. (Female, 21)
> The customer will report the mistake. He does not want the cashier to get into trouble. (Male, 28)

Finally, we also observed a group of doubting, not-daring reactions. These participants reported that the customer in the scenario knew something was wrong but was not sure if he/she should react. Instead of focusing on moral components, they mainly concentrated on the customer's confusion after being confronted with the cashier's mistake. Interestingly, these reactions were largely seen in female participants.

> The customer wonders whether this is the correct price, but decides to remain silent. (Female, 20)
> The customer is in doubt: Should I report this or pay €1 less?" (Female, 20)
> The customer is confused but decides to leave the situation as is. (Female, 20)

Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to obtain a general overview of the thoughts and feelings customers experience when a cashier miscalculates the bill in their favor. To this end, we showed participants a picture-guided story describing this situation and asked them to complete the story with the customer's reaction. We observed four main groups of reactions: opportunistic reactions, neutralizing reactions, honest reactions, and doubting reactions. The group of doubting reactions differed from the three other groups in two main ways. First, these participants expressed more feelings of insecurity and confusion, while the other participants uttered reactions that were more straightforward ("the customer reacts this way because…"). Second, we noted that these reactions were mostly expressed by female participants.

Relating these findings to results from the field experiments in which women were less likely to correct a cashier's mistake in their favor than were men, women might not have reported the mistake because they were not sure if and how to react. When a cashier miscalculates a bill, a customer has only a few seconds to realize the cashier has made a mistake and decide what to do about it. If more women have doubts and feel insecure about the situation than men, it seems plausible that we observed more women than men not reporting the mistake. Whether women are more likely than men to take a passive stance in ambiguous situations thus seems worth investigating.

Previous research on gender differences in personality consistently found men to be more assertive than women (Feingold 1994). In addition, various studies indicated that women who appear to act assertively are bound to face backlash from their peers (Prentice and Carranza 2002; Rudman and Glick 2001; Rudman et al. 2012; Amanatullah and Morris 2010). Moreover, various studies have indicated that "modesty" is a prescribed gender trait for women and a proscribed gender trait for men (Parks-Stamm et al. 2008; Moss-Racusin et al. 2010). Taken together, it appears that women are less encouraged to speak up to others than are men. It would thus make sense that we observed fewer women than men speaking up to a cashier. Paradoxically, this would mean that men's more assertive and aggressive nature, often claimed as the reason why they would be intrinsically less ethical than women, would cause them to show more ethical behavior than women in ethical dilemmas that require action. In our next study, we sought additional quantitative evidence for this presumption.

Study 1b

The purpose of Study 1b was threefold. First, we sought quantitative evidence of the findings of Study 1a. In particular, we wanted to determine which reactions to a cashier miscalculating the bill in a customer's favor would be the most prevalent and whether women were more likely to express doubting, non-daring reactions than men. Second, we wanted to investigate the effect of personality variables, such as assertiveness and socially desirable responding, on participants' reactions to the scenario. Finally, we wondered whether respondents believed the gender of the cashier had an effect on the likelihood of reporting a miscalculation. To fulfill all these requirements, we conducted a more extensive, quantitative version of Study 1a. We used the same picture-guided story, but instead of letting participants answer an open-ended question, we presented them with a list of reactions and let them indicate how likely they considered each of these reactions to be. Thus, we could quantify the results from Study 1a.

Design

To quantify the results from Study 1a, we created a different measurement tool. Based on the answers to the open-ended question in Study 1a, we generated a list of 15 potential customer reactions in the scenario (see Appendix). More specifically, we included four neutralizing, four opportunistic, four honest, and three doubting reactions in the list. Participants indicated how likely they considered each one of these reactions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not at all likely") to 5 ("Very likely"). Finally, the responses were combined into four constructs: an "opportunism" construct ($\alpha = .89$), a "neutralization" construct ($\alpha = .74$), an "honesty" construct ($\alpha = .84$), and a "doubting" construct ($\alpha = .71$).

The design was very similar to that of Study 1a. Participants came into the lab room and sat in front of a computer. They received the following instructions:

> In a few moments, you will see a picture-guided story about a customer in a grocery store. Look at the pictures and read the accompanying text carefully. In the end, the customer will be confronted with a certain event. You will see a list of potential reactions and will be asked to indicate how likely each one of these reactions is. There is no right or wrong answer.

> Do not overthink your answer; just answer what comes to your mind. This survey is fully anonymous, so please answer truthfully!

Participants were randomly assigned to a scenario that featured either a male or a female cashier. They read the same picture-guided story about the customer buying frozen pizza as in Study 1a. However, the final picture was accompanied by slightly different text:

> The cashier clearly made a mistake while calculating the bill and undercharged the customer €1! According to you, how is the customer going to react? Click on the 'next' button to see the list of potential reactions of the customer. There is no right or wrong answer. Do not overthink your answer; just answer what comes to your mind.

On the next page, participants were presented with the list of 15 reactions accompanied by the following instructions: *"Indicate on a scale from 1 ("Not at all likely") to 5 ("Very likely") how likely each of these reactions is."*

Finally, after completing some filler tasks, participants also completed two additional scales: Rathus (1973) assertiveness scale and Paulhus (1988) impression management scale. The assertiveness scale was included to investigate the presumption expressed above in the discussion of Study 1a. More specifically, we wanted to explore whether gender differences in assertiveness could explain gender differences in the doubting reactions. We opted for Rathus (1973) scale because it contains many items that deal with situations similar to the one described in our experiments. In addition, we removed five of the 30 items that were less applicable (see Appendix for an overview of the removed and retained items). Participants rated 25 items on a scale from −3 ("very uncharacteristic of me, extremely non-descriptive") to 3 ("very characteristic of me, extremely descriptive.") After changing the signs of reversed items, the 25 items were summated into an assertiveness index (Cronbach's $\alpha = .81$) (Rathus 1973). The impression management scale was included to verify whether participants' answers were colored by social desirability response bias (Dalton and Ortegren 2011). Participants indicated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "not true"; 4 = "somewhat true"; 7 = "very true") the extent to which they agreed with each of the 20 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$). After adjusting the scores on the reversed items, the total impression management score was determined by adding the number of statements that received a "6" or a "7" (Paulhus 1988).

Results

In all, 260 students (46.1 % female; $M_{age} = 20.45$, $SD_{age} = 1.05$) participated in the study. Before analyzing gender differences, we started with a general overview of the reaction constructs. In particular, we conducted one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to investigate whether respondents considered one group of reactions more likely than others. The results showed a significant effect of type of reaction on considered likelihood (F (2.26, 585.27) = 101.17,[2] $p < .001$). Contrasts revealed that opportunistic reactions ($M_{Opportunistic} = 3.82$, $SD_{Opportunistic} = .82$) were considered significantly more likely than neutralizing reactions ($M_{Neutralizing} = 3.41$, $SD_{Neutralizing} = .83$; F (1259) = 80.33, $p < .001$). Neutralizing reactions were considered significantly more likely than doubting reactions ($M_{Doubting} = 3.17$, $SD_{Doubting} = .79$; F (1259) = 11.74, $p = .001$). Finally, doubting reactions were considered significantly more likely than honest reactions ($M_{Honest} = 2.57$, $SD_{Honest} = .79$; F (1259) = 68.69, $p < .001$). In sum, opportunistic reactions were considered the most likely and honest reactions were considered the least likely.

Next, we examined gender differences within these reactions. We ran four ANCOVAs (analysis of covariance) on opportunism, neutralization, honesty, and doubting, respectively, with gender as the between-subjects factor and socially desirable responding (impression management) as the covariate. This latter was included as a covariate because previous research highlighted the need to control for social desirability response bias in research on gender differences in ethics (Dalton and Ortegren 2011; Bernardi 2006; Randall and Fernandes 1991; Bernardi and Guptill 2008; Schoderbek and Deshpande 1996). Our results also confirmed this need; we observed that women ($M_{female} = 4.77$, $SD_{female} = 2.72$) were more inclined to provide socially desirable answers than men ($M_{male} = 3.80$, $SD_{Male} = 2.56$; t (258) = 2.95, $p = .004$). First, we did not observe a significant effect of gender on opportunistic reactions after controlling for socially desirable responding (F (1257) = 2.71, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .01$). Second, the effect of gender on neutralizing reactions after controlling for socially desirable responding was also not significant (F (1257) = 1.03, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .004$). Third, we noted that gender had a significant effect on honest reactions after controlling for socially desirable responding (F (1257) = 3.94, $p = .048$, $\eta^2 = .015$). Interestingly, women ($M_{female} = 2.47$, $SD_{female} = .76$) were less likely than men to believe that a customer facing the opportunity to benefit from a cashier's miscalculation would react honestly ($M_{male} = 2.66$, $SD_{Male} = .82$). Finally, and most importantly for this study, gender significantly impacted doubting reactions after controlling for socially desirable responding

[2] Mauchy's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity was violated (X^2 (5) = 143.55, $p < .001$). Therefore, we look at the adjusted F values (Greenhouse-Geisser correction).

(F (1257) = 4.19, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = .016$). Specifically, women ($M_{female} = 3.29$, $SD_{female} = .80$) were more likely than men ($M_{male} = 3.07$, $SD_{Male} = .78$) to believe that the customer in the scenario did not know how to handle the situation and did not dare to correct the cashier.

As proposed in Study 1a, we explored the effect of assertiveness on gender differences in not responding to a cashier who miscalculated the bill. Confirming the results of previous studies, we found a significant gender difference in assertiveness. On average, men ($M_{Assertiveness} = 6.26$, $SD_{Assertiveness} = 15.74$) were significantly more assertive than women ($M_{Assertiveness} = -3.89$, $SD_{Assertiveness} = 15.06$); t (258) = −5.29, $p < .001$). Subsequently, bootstrap tests (Preacher and Hayes 2004) were conducted to assess the simple mediation models. The analysis showed that female participants were more likely than male participants to believe that someone was confused, and they did not dare to correct the cashier because of their lower assertiveness level (ab = −.08; 95 % CI [−.16, −.02]). This confirms the presumptions of Study 1a.

As discussed earlier, there is a stream of literature on the impact of prescriptive and proscriptive traits on gender differences in personality. More specifically, men and women consider the importance of possessing certain traits when they complete personality questionnaires and tend to provide answers that "fit" their gender role (Feingold 1994). Because assertiveness is a more masculine trait, women might consider it more socially acceptable to be unassertive. Consequently, the answers to the assertiveness scales could be colored by socially desirable response bias. We ran an additional mediation analysis (bootstrap tests) to verify whether this was the case (Preacher and Hayes 2004). The analysis showed that gender differences in assertiveness scores were not significantly mediated by socially desirable responding [ab = .60; 95 % CI (−.07, 1.4)]. Because the previous results were not contaminated by a social desirability bias, we can conclude that men are more assertive than women and that this explains why women are more likely than men to believe a customer would not correct a cashier who miscalculated a bill.

Finally, we investigated whether the gender of the cashier affected participants' reactions. More specifically, we explored whether participants believed a customer would react differently depending on the cashier's gender. We ran four ANCOVAs on opportunism, neutralization, honesty, and doubting, respectively, with participant's gender and cashier's gender as the between-subjects factors and impression management as the covariate. However, none of the analyses yielded significant results. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions based on these results, they provide a first indication that the gender of the cashier who miscalculated the bill does not have a significant effect on customers' reactions.

Discussion

The results from Study 1b largely confirmed the findings from Study 1a. First, we found quantitative evidence that opportunistic reactions were considered the most likely and honest reactions were considered the least likely by both men and women. Second, we observed that women were significantly more likely than men to believe that a customer who faces the opportunity to benefit from a cashier's mistake does not know how to handle the situation and therefore does not respond. Moreover, we found that this gender difference could be explained by a gender difference in assertiveness, with women generally being less assertive than men. In addition, we confirmed that the gender difference in assertiveness could not be explained by a gender difference in socially desirable responding. These results strengthen our thesis that the women in the field experiments described earlier did not intend to benefit from the cashier's mistake; they simply did not dare to correct the cashier.

Third, we noted that men were significantly more likely than women to believe a customer would report to a cashier that he or she miscalculated the bill in his or her favor. This finding is quite ambiguous. It could mean that men are actually more honest than women and that they are consequently more inclined to believe this is a likely option. However, the result could also be explained by the fact that women are better at assessing the ways in which people will react (Klein and Hodges 2001; Meyers-Levy and Loken 2015). As explained in the previous paragraph, opportunistic and neutralizing reactions were generally considered to be most likely, and honest reactions were generally considered to be least likely. It is thus likely that women were better at predicting these results than men. Either way, the results are interesting and deserve further investigation.

Finally, we also explored whether the gender of the cashier making a mistake in the customer's favor affected the customer's reaction. In particular, we investigated whether the participants in our sample believed a customer would react differently to a male cashier compared than to a female cashier. We could not find any significant effect of the cashier's gender. We can thus conclude that women are equally reluctant to respond to both male and female cashiers.

Study 2

Study 2 was conducted to find behavioral evidence for the presumption that women do not intend to benefit from a cashier miscalculating the bill in their favor but are less inclined to speak up in ambiguous situations because they are generally less assertive than men. Therefore, we added

an extra condition to the sales booth experiments discussed in the literature review in which the cashier makes a mistake in the customer's disfavor. If women do not correct a cashier who makes a mistake in their favor because they are less assertive than men, they should also not correct a cashier that makes a mistake in their disfavor.

Design

We created a lab store containing a shelf with six food products and a checkout counter. The shelf included apples (€0.50), cans of sparkling water (€0.60), cereal bars (€0.70), mints (€0.50), cans of cola (€0.60), and chocolate bars (€0.70). We included more than one product and different price levels to avoid suspicion about the true purpose of the experiment. For instance, it seems more plausible for a cashier to miscalculate the bill in a store that features different price levels compared with a store where every product has the same price. The cashier would randomly make a mistake in the customer's favor, by charging him or her €0.20 less, or in the customer's disfavor, by charging him or her €0.20 more. To ensure that customers would notice they received the wrong amount of change, the cashier would say out aloud, "Product X, that is €Y, so you receive €Z change."

Participants entered a room adjacent to the lab store. They read instructions on a computer screen explaining that they were participating in a shopping experiment on the effect of shelf positioning on product choices. Participants were given a €1 coin and were instructed to go to the lab store, select one product, and check it out with the cashier. They could keep the product they purchased and the amount of change they received. After visiting the lab store, participants were instructed to go back to the adjacent room to participate in unrelated experiments and to sign an attendance sheet.

Sample

In all, 341 participants participated in the experiment, and 59 were excluded from the sample for two main reasons. First, some participants did not understand the instructions well and chose two products instead of one. Second, although we tried to plan the experiment such that only one person at a time arrived at the store, sometimes two participants arrived at the store together. We investigated how sound-proof the door of the lab store was and noticed that people waiting outside could clearly understand conversations inside the store. All the participants described above were charged the correct amount instead of too much or too less. The final sample comprised 282 participants from our consumer panel (59.6 % female; $M_{age} = 21.90$, $SD_{age} = 3.89$). Half of the participants were charged lower than the amount they owed; the other half of the participants were charged higher than the amount they owed.

Results

As can be seen in Fig. 1, significantly more women (72.29 %) than men (53.45 %) did not report that the cashier had made a mistake in their favor (χ^2 (1, $N = 141$) = 5.30, $p = .021$, $V = .19$). These results replicate the findings of the field experiments discussed above. Nevertheless, we observed similar results in situations during which the cashier made a mistake in the customer's disfavor. Significantly more women (63.53 %) than men (41.07 %) did not report the cashier's mistake (χ^2 (1, $N = 141$) = 6.87, $p = .009$, $V = .22$). The proportions of men and women not reporting the miscalculations were similar across conditions. In particular, the percentage of female participants not reporting the miscalculation in their favor (72.29 %) was not significantly different from the percentage of female participants not reporting the miscalculation in their disfavor (63.53 %), (χ^2 (1, $N = 168$) = 1.48, $p = .224$, $V = .09$). Similarly, the percentage of male participants not reporting the miscalculation in their favor (53.45 %) was not significantly different from the percentage of male participants not reporting the miscalculation in their disfavor (41.07 %), (χ^2 (1, $N = 114$) = 1.75, $p = .186$, $V = .12$).

Discussion

This study was conducted to confirm the role of assertiveness in explaining gender differences in passive unethical behavior. More specifically, if it is truly assertiveness that explains why women are less likely than men to report miscalculations, the direction of the miscalculation, either in the customer's favor or in the

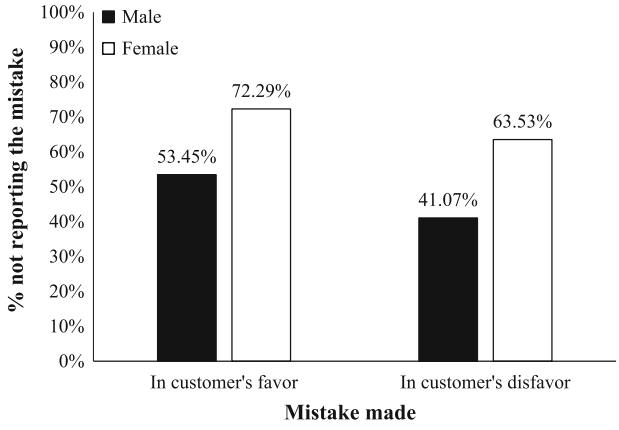

Fig. 1 Percentage of participants not reporting the cashier's mistake

customer's disfavor, should not matter. The results confirmed that regardless of which condition they were in, significantly more women than men did not report the miscalculation. This indicates that the women in the field experiments described in the literature review did not necessarily intend to passively benefit from the cashier's mistake. Instead, women were less inclined than men to respond to the cashier due to a lower level of assertiveness. In sum, this study illustrates that gender differences in assertiveness may affect the results of behavioral experiments testing passive forms of unethical behavior.

General Discussion

This study advances knowledge about gender differences in unethical behavior. The motive for this study was the surprising observation that women showed a higher degree of passive unethical behavior than men in two unrelated field experiments conducted for other research purposes. This finding contrasts with prevailing research stating that women are more ethical than men. Three follow-up studies indicated that the results from the field experiments could be explained by gender differences in assertiveness. More specifically, in the first two studies, we discovered that women do not necessarily intend to benefit from a cashier miscalculating the bill in their favor. Due to a lower level of assertiveness, women are less sure than men in terms of if and how they should respond in this situation. The third study provided behavioral evidence for this presumption, demonstrating that women also remain silent when a cashier miscalculates the bill in their disfavor. These results have major implications for various fields of research.

Contributions

First, this study makes both methodological and theoretical contributions to the field of gender differences in ethics. With regard to the methodological contributions, we applied a method that is very rare in research on gender differences in ethical behavior, namely behavioral experiments. As described earlier, most studies on gender differences in ethics use surveys measuring intentions instead of experiments testing behavior (O'Fallon and Butterfield 2005). Dalton and Ortegren (2011) indicated that this is not the ideal way to test gender differences because survey research is highly susceptible to social desirability bias. Behavioral experiments are often proposed as a valid alternative to survey research; however, the current findings demonstrate that there are issues with this method as well. To begin with, it is not easy to test unethical behavior. Active forms of unethical behavior are seemingly impossible to test because the behavior is considered very extreme (Vitell and Muncy 1992). Passive forms of unethical behavior, such as the one tested in this experiment, are much easier to test. However, our findings indicate that the results can be affected by the participants' assertiveness levels. Future studies investigating passive forms of unethical behavior should take gender differences in assertiveness into account.

The study also makes some theoretical contributions to the field of consumer ethics. In particular, it deepens insights into one of the most researched questions in the field of consumer ethics: which gender is the most unethical, male or female? Although this paper does not provide a final answer to this question, the results add to the idea that there are no intrinsic gender differences in (un)ethical behavior. More specifically, these results and the results from previous research indicate that gender differences are either explained by third variables, such as assertiveness (this study) or social desirability response bias (Dalton and Ortegren 2011), or that they are context- or situation-dependent. Asking which gender is the most unethical thus seems to be the wrong question. Instead, future research should focus on the conditions under which gender differences appear.

Second, the findings from this study also add to the literature on gender differences in personality. In particular, we confirmed that gender differences in assertiveness genuinely exist, with women generally being less assertive than men. Women do not just appear to be less assertive than men because they want to provide answers that fit prescriptive gender traits. We discovered that this gender difference in assertiveness remains robust after controlling for social desirability bias. Although women are more prone to providing socially desirable answers than are men, this bias does not seem to contaminate the results.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, this study also provides interesting managerial implications. First, these findings highlight the need for an error-free checkout system. Although the vast majority of stores use electronic scanning devices that should help avoid miscalculations, such systems are not error free. In particular, scanning devices may miss one or more items because of technological issues, which leads to mistakes at the checkout register if customers do not respond. In addition, waiters in bars and restaurants may also make mistakes while calculating the bill. Even though the mistakes are often small, they may cause extensive hassle for retailers. Second, these findings may also be interesting from a managerial perspective. More specifically, the results add to the stream of literature on the influence of gender stereotypes on negotiation behavior. Women often take a less assertive stance in negotiations to avoid backlash (Amanatullah and Morris 2010; Small et al. 2007). Similarly, the female participants

in our sample could have acted less assertive because they wanted to live up to the stereotype of women being "nice" (Rudman and Glick 2001).

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations provide avenues for future research. First, the scope of this research was limited to a specific kind of unethical behavior, namely passively benefiting from a cashier's mistake. Although we believe our results can be generalized to other forms of passive unethical behavior, what the results signify for active forms of unethical behavior is less clear. Vitell and Muncy (1992) classified a number of unethical acts based on perceived (il)legality and harm. Active forms of unethical behavior were seen as more harmful than passive forms; however, the latter were considered more harmful than two rather active forms of unethical behavior: "deceptive but legal" practices and "no harm, no foul" practices. Future research could focus, for instance, on a category of active forms of unethical behavior considered less severe than the passive forms and investigate whether men and women are equally inclined to engage in these forms of unethical behavior. For instance, one of the "deceptive but legal practices" appearing in the classification by Vitell and Muncy (1992) is "breaking a bottle of salad dressing in a supermarket and not doing anything about it." It seems obvious that both men and women *consider* this wrong, but how would they *react* if it happened? Given our findings about women "not daring to correct a cashier making a mistake," it could be that women are less inclined to take action than men. On the other hand, it could be that other gender differences in personality cause men and women to be equally as likely to take action. Future research could focus on a broader range of unethical behavior and elucidate the relationship between gender and morality.

Second, although we established the role of assertiveness in explaining gender differences in passive unethical behavior, additional variables may be worth investigating. Regulatory focus is one of these variables. As described by Higgins (1998), people regulate the approach of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (i.e., the basic hedonic principle) either with a prevention focus, which is, among others, characterized by a sensitivity to avoid negative outcomes and an insurance against errors of commission, or with a promotion focus, which is characterized by a sensitivity to approach positive outcomes and an insurance against errors of omission (Higgins 1998; Crowe and Higgins 1997). Although there is no evidence for a general gender difference in regulatory focus, a promotion focus has been related to typically masculine traits, such as risk-seeking behavior (Byrnes et al. 1999; Gino and Margolis 2011; Charness and Gneezy 2012) and an independent self-construal (Lin and Raghubir 2005), while a prevention focus was related to the opposite, typically feminine traits (e.g., risk avoidance and an interdependent self-view). Applying this logic to the results of the current study indicates that women could be less inclined to report the mistake because they were not sure who made the mistake, and they wanted to prevent an error of commission (reporting the cashier made a mistake when they did not actually remember the correct price), while men were more inclined to report the mistake because they wanted to prevent an error of omission (not reporting that the cashier made a mistake when he or she actually did).

Third, some limitations were related to methodological issues. To begin with, our samples were not culturally diverse. Nearly all the people who participated in our experiments were born in the same Western European country. This raises questions about generalizing the findings because previous research indicates that gender differences may be culturally determined (Costa et al. 2001; Hofstede 1980, 1998). In general, gender differences in personality are expected to be more pronounced in masculine countries (Hofstede 1998; Costa et al. 2001). Because assertiveness is a typically masculine trait, our results could have been even more distinct in masculine countries and less distinct in feminine countries. Future research should focus on these cultural differences and investigate whether the effects disappear or become more pronounced in other cultures.

Next, recently much attention has been paid to the concept of gender. Some researchers have argued that gender is a continuous instead of a binary variable (Knaak 2004; Johnson and Repta 2012). In particular, these studies argue that gender is multilayered and context-specific and thus hard to measure by a simple male/female question. For instance, one of the strategies Knaak (2004) proposed to redefine gender involves considering gender as an active concept and as an outcome of social forces. More specifically, gender is not considered as a solid, unchangeable attribute but rather as following from the activities a person undertakes. This reasoning is consistent with our arguments presented above. The question is not simply which gender is the most unethical but rather which aspects of a person's identity cause him or her to behave more or less ethically in certain situations. Even though we did not measure gender on a continuum, we measured the aspects that were relevant to the specific behavior we investigated (Johnson and Repta 2012). Future research on gender differences in ethics should consider these recommendations and view gender as more than a male/female distinction.

Appendix: Study 1b

Based on participants' answers to the open-ended question in Study 1a, we created a list of potential reactions of a consumer faced with a cashier miscalculating the bill in his or her favor.

Opportunistic

The customer thinks "Saved € 1" and does not respond.

The customer thinks "That's a windfall" and does not respond

The customer thinks "I'm lucky" and does not respond

The customer thinks "Yes! A mistake made in my favor" and does not respond

Neutralizing

The customer thinks "It's only € 1, that's not a huge loss for the store" and does not respond

The customer thinks "The cashier should pay attention" and does not respond

The customer thinks "It's the store's responsibility that such mistakes do not happen" and does not respond

The customer thinks "The reverse, paying too much, happens as well" and does not respond

Honest

The customer responds "U made a mistake, it's € 4.99"

The customer responds "I believe it was € 4.99, could it be that you made a mistake?"

The customer feels guilty and tells the cashier (s)he made a mistake.

The customers thinks "It is my duty to be honest" and tells the cashier (s)he made a mistake.

Doubting

The customer feels uncomfortable with the situation and does not dare to respond.

The customer is quite sure the price was € 4.99 but does not dare to react.

The customer is surprised and does not know how to handle the situation. (S)He does not dare to respond.

Assertiveness Scale

Below, we present Rathus (1973) Assertiveness scale (the items with an asterisk are reverse coded). Items 1, 2, 8, 15, and 29 were not used in this study because they were less applicable to the situation under investigation. The items used in this study are printed in bold.

1. Most people seem to be more aggressive and assertive than I am.*
2. I have hesitated to make or accept dates because of "shyness."*
3. **When the food served at a restaurant is not done to my satisfaction, I complain.**
4. **I am careful to avoid hurting other people's feelings, even when I feel that I have been injured.***
5. **If a salesman has gone to considerable trouble to show me merchandise which is not quite suitable, I have a difficult time in saying "No."***
6. **When I am asked to do something, I insist upon knowing why.**
7. **There are times when I look for a good, vigorous argument.**
8. I strive to get ahead as well as most people in my position.
9. **To be honest, people often take advantage of me*.**
10. **I enjoy starting conversations with new acquaintances and strangers.**
11. **I often do not know what to say to attractive persons of the opposite sex*.**
12. **I will hesitate to make phone calls to business establishments and institutions*.**
13. **I would rather apply for a job or for admission to a college by writing letters than by going through with personal interviews.***
14. **I find it embarrassing to return merchandise.***
15. If a close and respected relative were annoying to me, I would smother my feelings rather than express my annoyance.*
16. **I have avoided asking questions for fear of sounding stupid.***
17. **During an argument, I am sometimes afraid that I will get so upset that I will shake all over.***
18. **If a famed and respected lecturer makes a statement which I think is incorrect, I will have the audience hear my point of view as well.**
19. **I avoid arguing over prices with clerks and salesmen.***
20. **When I have done something important or worthwhile, I manage to let others know about it.**
21. **I am open and frank about my feelings.**
22. **If someone has been spreading false and bad stories about me, I see him (her) as soon as possible to "have a talk" about it.**
23. **I often have a hard time saying "No."***
24. **I tend to bottle up my emotions rather than make a scene.***

25. **I complain about poor service in a restaurant and elsewhere.**
26. **When I am given a compliment, I sometimes just don't know what to say.***
27. **If a couple near me in a theater or at a lecture were conversing rather loudly, I would ask them to be quiet or to take their conversation elsewhere.**
28. **Anyone attempting to push ahead of me in a line is in for a good battle.**
29. I am quick to express an opinion.
30. **There are times when I just cannot say anything.***

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