

Organizational Identity and Positionality in Randomized Control Trials: Considerations and Advice for Collaborative Research Teams

I. Introduction

Social scientists are increasingly conducting field experiments with a variety of external partners, including nonprofit, nongovernmental and political organizations, government bureaucracies, survey research firms, and technology companies like Facebook and Twitter. Field experimentalists interested in voter mobilization, for example, have collaborated with partisan organizational partners (OPs) that aim to garner support for their candidates (e.g., Panagopoulos 2013; Preece et al. 2016; Panagopoulos et al. 2017); non-partisan OPs focused on mobilizing under-represented minorities or young voters (e.g., Nickerson 2007; Bedolla and Michelson 2012); governments that can deliver registration or mobilization information directly to voters (see Malhotra et al. 2012; Hopkins et al. 2021); news media organizations that disseminate treatments intended to inform voters (e.g., Haenschen and Jennings 2019); and institutions of higher education that deliver information to student populations (e.g., Bennion and Nickerson 2016). Between 2000-2017, roughly 62% of field experiments published in *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, or *Journal of Politics* involved some kind of external partnership (Butler, 2019).

Working with external organizations brings benefits as well as challenges (Davis and Michelitch 2021). These partnerships help facilitate research on critical questions, but these relationships can also be extensive: in addition to implementing the intervention, partners can play an active role at every stage of the research process, ranging from funding support to data collection. Inattention to the power and social structure in which organizations are embedded can create practical challenges for research design, implementation, and ethics.

We focus on field experiments and the role of “organizational positionality,” an organizational partner’s position in relation to the social and political context in which they operate. We draw on a diverse set of experiences across different research contexts to describe how an organization’s funding sources, political allegiances, scope of operations and mandate, legal status, identities, and reputation shape their goals and incentives, as well as how they are perceived by and interact with others involved in the research process (see Kapiszewski et al., Chapter 7; Davis and Michelitch 2021). We also highlight how a failure to consider organizational positionality can undermine research credibility and produce negative social outcomes. We conclude by offering some suggestions for how researchers can successfully navigate organizational positionality.

Prior work based on qualitative field research (e.g., Dean et al. 2018) has largely focused on aspects of individual identity, particularly the role of researcher identity and positionality (Foote and Bartell 2011; Rowe 2014; Savin-Baden and Major 2013), as opposed to organizational positionality. Similarly, existing scholarship on field experimental ethics has traditionally revolved around compliance with the Belmont Report principles, but issues stemming from the positionality of organizational partners do not necessarily overlap with Institutional Review Board considerations (Gueron 2002; Humphreys 2015).

We extend these ongoing debates by focusing on how divergences between an organizational partner's goals and incentives and those of researchers can create practical and ethical challenges. In so doing, we also hope to address the recent call by Soedirgo and Glas (2020) for “active reflexivity”—the continuous interrogation of positionality at all stages of the research process—which builds on the notion that positionality can affect “the totality of the research process” (Holmes 2020, p.3).

II. Defining Organizational Positionality

Like existing definitions of individual positionality, we define organizational positionality as the organizational partner's social and political position in the context in which it operates. Just as individual positionality can vary with aspects of researchers' identities (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014; Fujii 2017; Marsh et al. 2017; McCorkel and Myers 2003; Sikes 2004), we argue that organizational positionality in the research context can also vary with OP features that affect its goals, experiences, and broader incentives.

Instead of focusing on how positionality arising from individual identity can impact the research process (see other articles in this symposium by Kim et al. 2021; Hartman et al. 2021; and Harrison and Michelson 2021), we hone in on aspects of an OP *as a whole* that may affect its interactions with researchers and participants and the research process. These features, as we discuss below, may include an OP's funding source(s), its mission, where the OP is based and whether it is international or local, its political allegiances (or lack thereof), whether it is a government agency or NGO, and its role in the study itself. When these features lead OP goals and incentives to diverge from those of the researchers or participants, this can present practical and ethical challenges in the research process.

III. Divergence in Identity, Goals, and Incentives

First, the political and/or ideological convictions of an OP can constrain the scope of feasible research questions. For example, partisan electoral organizations might seek to leverage a researcher's position as a technical expert to conduct experiments that yield high internal returns

to the organization (or the “movement”) at the cost of low social returns for researchers and the broader community. Non-partisan organizations might similarly seek to leverage a researcher’s reputation and institutional affiliation to conduct a program evaluation to satisfy external funders. Failure to identify these realities early on can create downstream conflict between the ideologies, goals, and motivations of the researchers and their OPs at crucial stages of the research process.

Second, the role of the OP in the study—where researchers are technical experts and the organizational positionality of OPs are implementers with local knowledge—can lead to disagreements about the design and implementation of field experiments. For example, Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo, and Rand’s (2019) community policing experiment in New Haven, Connecticut, was well-received when proposed to the New Haven Police Department (NHPD). This was, in part, because “community policing” had long been core to NHPD’s operations and their organizational position relative to other city agencies, the New Haven public, and the wider sociopolitical environment of U.S. policing. As a result, leadership embraced using technical experts in an attempt to scientifically validate community policing and its effect on public attitudes. However, the researchers still met some initial resistance to conducting the intervention across the entire city, and they had to jettison a more complex design that randomly assigned interactions based on officer race and gender. Because the organization’s position was one in which building trust was central to its relationships with local residents, NHPD argued it was more appropriate to target specific districts where NHPD believed trust was lowest, and that it made little sense to have officers “randomly” interact with residents outside of their patrol districts. Ultimately, a compromise was reached: officers were not taken out of their local districts to randomize the race and gender of officers during police-civilian interactions but interactions would be randomly assigned to households across the entire city.

Additionally, a mismatch between an OP’s long-term mission and researchers’ goals and incentives can also present challenges. For example, prestigious publication outlets do not incentivize the reporting of “null results,” and researchers generally aim to maximize the likelihood of finding effects when designing and implementing studies with OPs. Sometimes, these short-term incentives do not align well with the longer-term mission of implementing organizations. Take Kumar et al. (2018), an impact evaluation of NextDrop, a social enterprise in Bangalore’s water sector that was reliant on water utility employees for program implementation. Though the authors hypothesized that providing employees with incentives would increase the probability of programmatic success, NextDrop was reluctant to do so because it did not anticipate being able to continue payments after the study concluded. NextDrop had little desire to implement monetary incentives if they adversely affected the organization’s mission of developing a sustainable solution in Bangalore’s water sector, even if those incentives were likely to generate short-term program success and a positive experimental effect. Similarly, NHPD’s initial reluctance to deliver treatments in both high-trust and low-trust

areas was not intended to frustrate causal identification, but to pursue NHPD's organizational goal of efficient resource allocation.

When an OP's goals and incentives diverge from those of the study population, this can raise ethical challenges as well. In particular, researchers and OPs with goals unrelated to those of the study population may promote interventions that seek to change participants' behavior in ways that participants may not have requested or wanted. For example, Bryan et al. (2021) partnered with International Care Ministries, an evangelical Protestant anti-poverty organization, to measure the effects of a religious education program on "ultrapoor" Filipino households. They found that the intervention, in addition to generating positive effects on income, also changed the religious identity of members of the study population.

An OP's goals and incentives relative to the study population are particularly important to consider when OPs are in positions of power vis-à-vis study participants. In such a situation, the OP's relative power can pose a barrier to the elicitation of informed and uncoerced consent if respondents feel compelled to participate in the study for fear of reprisal or losing access to material benefits. This was an important concern for Haim, Ravanilla, and Sexton (2021) when partnering with the Philippine National Police to evaluate a program that offered leaders in conflict-affected villages access to government programs. Leaders concerned about their personal safety might have felt compelled to participate for fear that they would otherwise lose protection from the government and leave their communities exposed to rebel attacks. Perceptions about OPs' identities or reputation also have the potential to influence outcome measures that rely on participants' self-reports or other behaviors.

Partnerships with researchers can even affect, or alter, OPs' goals and incentives, potentially raising other, ethical challenges. Coville et al.'s (2020) controversial study, conducted in partnership with the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company (NCWSC), provides a useful example. At the researchers' direction, NCWSC randomly enforced water shut-offs in very poor communities across which NCWSC typically exercised forbearance when individuals were unable to pay their water bills. As a result, communities lost water access when they might not have had the experiment not been conducted. When the goals and incentives of researchers and OPs are prioritized over those of the population under study, high-impact interventions may come at the expense of the needs and desires of the participant population.

Finally, when studies potentially impact or are conducted in collaboration with multiple actors beyond the researchers, OP, and citizens, competing goals and incentives can also raise ethical issues. In some instances, experimental researchers must grapple with the difficult task of maintaining impartiality between competing actors, such as the state and organized armed groups. Helping the state achieve its goals necessarily disadvantages organized armed groups, and possibly the communities under their influence. For example, Haas and Khadka (2020) evaluated a program

in Somalia that aimed to increase women's demand for state and customary forums for justice, at the expense of courts run by militant group Al-Shabaab, even as the latter was reported under the status quo to perform better in a number of areas, such as the enforcement of verdicts. Scholars have sometimes framed such interventions as "state-building" or "countering violent extremism," but in many contexts it is unclear who the "good" and "bad" actors are.

IV. Suggested Practices

Actively reflecting on positionality in relation to both OPs and those under study at every stage of the research process encourages researchers to proactively identify and address the practical and ethical challenges that may arise when collaborating across organizations with different identities, goals, and incentives. We provide a few strategies and "lessons learned" for the design, implementation, and analysis stages of field experiments conducted with OPs (see also, Humphreys and Weinstein 2009; Levine 2021; List 2011).

We first recommend that any field experiment conducted with an OP be designed to be *mutually beneficial* for the researcher and the OP. At the design stage, for example, researchers and OPs can have an open discussion anchored to a simple question: is the experiment worth doing, even if the estimated treatment effect is indistinguishable from zero? If the answer is no, then we recommend re-considering whether it is worth investing limited time and resources in the subsequent stages of the project. Experiments that are conducted without establishing a mutual understanding about the potential costs and limitations for all parties involved raise important problems that fall outside the scope of standard ethical guidelines (see Gueron 2002; Humphreys 2015 for further discussion).

Second, immersive fieldwork and pilot studies can both inform the experimental design and alert researchers to potential issues that might arise from differences in the identities and positionalities of OPs, research participants, and other actors involved in the research process. Peyton et al. (2019), for example, used insights that emerged from qualitative fieldwork (participant observation and officer interviews) to inform their experimental design and outcome measurement, and continued this work during the intervention by observing police-civilian interactions ("treatments") delivered in the field. Similarly, Haim, Ravanilla, and Sexton (2021) spent a year conducting multiple pilot studies and holding group discussions with target respondents in conflict-affected communities before rolling out their intervention.

Third, taking time to *explain* the logic behind random assignment is essential, and researchers should not assume that concerns OPs raise about experimental designs stem from an aversion to random assignment (see Peyton 2013). In the community policing experiment, for example, Peyton et al. (2019) had to abandon their initial plan to randomly assign officers based on their race and gender, not because the OP was inherently opposed to randomization, but because allowing officers to operate within their districts aligned with professional incentives to build

trust and rapport with residents who might later cooperate with police. Once researchers amended their design such that officers could stay in their home districts, NHPD leadership became key advocates for randomization of treatment across the entirety of the city. Researchers should also consider following Haim et al. (2021) by running smaller pilot studies with OPs that both lay the groundwork for more significant projects and build mutual trust between parties (see also List 2011).

Concerns about randomization can also be alleviated by waitlisting participants for a control group. For example, in a randomized trial of a legal aid program in Liberia (Sandefur and Siddiqi 2013), the implementing OP and researchers felt it would be unethical to deny individuals access to paralegal services. As a solution, participants randomly assigned to the control group were guaranteed paralegal access after a three-month period.

Fourth, researchers should consider enlisting local collaborators or working with OPs already embedded in the local community. They should also look to discourage partners from participating in any activities that could not be maintained as part of a longer-term strategy. Shutting off water in slum areas, for example, was not part of NCWSC's long-term strategy for a sustained presence in Nairobi; recognizing this fact early could have helped to attenuate the ethical concerns raised by the study. Though working with such embedded organizations can come with practical challenges such as an aversion to randomization or imperfect program implementation, Usmani et al. (2018) provide evidence that embedded organizations have superior local information and better program implementation than non-embedded organizations.

Finally, drafting a pre-analysis plan or memorandum of understanding in collaboration with the OP offers several potential benefits. This document can be used to create a shared understanding of the hypotheses to be tested and a timeline for the intervention, and provide early opportunities to resolve misalignment of goals between researchers and the OP. This process can also promote norms of transparency that build trust between the OP and researchers, and allow researchers to incorporate the positionally-situated expertise of their organizational partner. Perhaps most importantly, the document forces the parties to articulate exactly which analyses will be performed and why. This “ties the hands” of both parties and can help insulate the data analysis process from pressure to publish results that cast positive light on the organization or help the researcher land a publication in a top journal.

Perhaps the most impactful (and simultaneously most difficult) way to minimize practical and ethical problems arising from the misalignment of incentives and goals across researchers, OPs, and study populations is to broaden the scope of researchers' incentives. Such efforts include editorial willingness to publish “null results” that nonetheless teach us something about important political, social, and economic processes (Duflo 2017). Researchers can also take care to embed

questions of program implementation in a study that may further improve the publication prospects of a null result.

V. Conclusion

We hope this discussion highlights some of the challenges that may arise from differences in the identities and positionalities of researchers, their organizational partners, and research participants. With greater awareness of how different organizationally-grounded assumptions, pressures, and biases can influence the research process, researchers will be better equipped to avoid potential pitfalls. Further, we urge researchers to consider our suggestions for how they might encourage successful collaborations. In particular, we advise researchers to engage in “active reflexivity” at all stages of the research process to help incorporate the unique identities and positions of OPs and research participants.

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