

Navigating ‘Insider’ and ‘Outsider’ Status as Researchers Conducting Field Experiments

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From textbooks and articles to seminars and online resources, advice on how to successfully design and conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) abounds (e.g. [Gerber and Green, 2012](#); [Glennester and Takavarasha, 2013](#)). We agonize over the research design, practitioner partnerships, and participant recruitment, to name a few concerns. But rarely do we talk about those who conduct the field experiments—*us*. Even rarer is a discussion on how researcher identity can have *methodological* consequences, particularly when a researcher is from a background traditionally underrepresented in academia ([Soedirgo and Glas, 2020](#); [Thompson, 2009](#)).¹ While much has been written on identity and the ethics of field studies ([Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018](#)), this article is an exploration of how researcher identity shapes the implementation of field experiments.² We the co-authors, all researchers of color, have found that aside from the general difficulties encountered in field research, our identities in particular pose additional challenges, with our expertise, objectivity and status doubted, occasionally followed by muted enthusiasm by research participants.³ When researcher identity defies the expectations of a typical profile of an academic affiliated with North American or European-based institutions (white and male, in particular), it has important implications for the inferences we draw

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from field experiments.

Our identities also bring up important ethical concerns. As researchers leading projects, particularly ones that involve human experimentation, we are in positions of power and privilege. This article is in conversation with recent reflections on the ethics of conducting field experiments (e.g. Teele et al., 2014; Desposato, 2015; Humphreys, 2015; Slough, 2019; Davis, 2020). We hope to add to this rich literature a deeper consideration of research positionality, particularly from the perspective of non-white scholars.⁴

In this article, we reflect on the challenges and the potential biases that can arise from a researcher's identity, highlighting our own experiences in the field. We organize this essay by discussing the effects of researcher identity on institutional access,⁵ participants, enumerators and other surrounding actors. In doing so, we underscore the dilemmas that each of us has experienced in the field—from the streets of Bihar to farmers' markets in rural Pennsylvania, train stations in Berlin to police stations in Monrovia. We also discuss potential ethical biases and practical suggestions for the planning stages of field experiments.

Researcher Identity's Effect on Institutional Access

Researchers' memberships in particular groups based on visible, ascriptive characteristics play an important role in the degree to which one can gain access to institutional actors and enumerators who are crucial to field experiments (Haas et al., 2021). The actors involved in implementing a field experiment make judgements and inferences based on how the researcher presents (Tajfel et al., 1971). Indeed, in this early stage of research, non-white researchers and/or women may not be perceived as equally credible as their white male peers, making them more likely to face hurdles in communicating with institutions. These perceptions of researchers threaten to reproduce inequities among scholars of color if they mean a denial of access to implementation on a systemic basis.

We highlight two examples to underscore this point. In one case, a female South Asian and a white male were working on the same topic at the same time. A UN division found the white male to be a credible expert on the topic but not the female South Asian, and provided an opportunity for

collaboration to the former but not the latter.⁶ In another incident during the same time, the same researcher was asked to pay a bribe to leadership in the UN because of historical legacies related to her ethnic heritage (the UN leader could tell her ethnic heritage from her name). She managed to conduct the research without paying the bribe, but her access to certain populations was severely restricted by the same UN leader.

In other cases, gender can attenuate efforts to collaborate with institutions in more subtle ways. Instances of institutional partners assuming that a female researcher does not know the topic, and consequently making changes to the tone, content and even the text of a survey instrument during an intervention are all too common, especially in more patriarchal cultures. These examples highlight the disproportionate burden that underrepresented groups—including minorities and women—have to bear, including the unequal costs to time and effort involved in securing a project.

However, not all aspects of a researcher's minority status are disadvantageous. Non-white/and or female researchers may be considered insiders, for instance, if their gender, ethnicity, and race signal trust. For example, the same female South Asian above was able to gain access to working with the security forces, whereas the white male had more trouble.⁷ When speaking to the police officers, she uncovered that it was partially because she was perceived as less threatening (to masculinity) than a white male. Here, however, the access that is granted is not necessarily due to the researcher being perceived as an "expert," but rather because her identity enabled trust. Thus, we underscore that stereotypes also work in the multiple directions (Zou and Cheryan, 2017).

A women's organization looking to better understand whether information about contraception leads to more contraction use might be more willing to engage a female researcher because the participant matter requires understanding what it means to be a woman. Or, a group looking to develop interventions to reduce racial animosity may welcome researchers who know what it feels like to be discriminated against. In our experience, while the same facets of identity served as a disadvantage with institutional access due to power dynamics, they can help us connect better with participants.

Researcher Identity's Effect on Participants

Researchers are often considered “outsiders” when they are not from the country or do not share racial or ethnic ties to participants; however, even when they from the same country or ethnicity, there are still ways in which they may not be perceived as “insider” enough, since identities are intersectional and context-specific. For non-white scholars with limited ties to the communities they study, simply making sense of how they may be perceived by study participants might prove a daunting challenge. For two of the coauthors of this article who have worked in a region historically and systematically dominated by white scholars (sub-Saharan Africa), we perceive that we do not fit the expectations of what an academic with credentials from “Western” universities typically look like.

Government officials and politicians that we each recruited as participants often looked bewildered in initial meetings with us, inquiring as to why a person of putatively East-Asian heritage with unaccented English had appeared instead of a white man or woman. The dissonance between their expectations of what an academic with “Western” credentials should “look” like would elicit doubt, resulting in either a reluctance to engage with the researcher, or muted enthusiasm about sharing information and further contacts. Moreover, in contexts in which the increasing number of Chinese migrants was generating suspicion and hostility, sharing racial and phenotypical traits often exacerbated this reluctance.⁸ Citizen participants often signaled similar surprise. Non-white foreigners, let alone non-white academics, seem to be much less common, especially outside of population centers where expatriates primarily reside. Aside from the general hesitance to engage with an atypical foreigner, participants may make heuristics about the group membership of the researcher and their position within the social hierarchy, adjusting their interaction with researchers to match their evaluations.

These tendencies manifested in different ways across study contexts. When the male East-Asian coauthor was in the field in Eastern Germany, local enumerators warned him that his presence at the study sites would not go unnoticed, potentially leading participants to adjust their behavior as they interacted with other minority groups.⁹ Yet the same coauthor found that he elicited an entirely different reaction from participants altogether in East and Southern African countries. The active involvement of East Asian donors in the infrastructural development across Africa influenced participant percep-

tions of the likelihood that the coauthor would be connected to the networks that would grant them access to public goods and services. Calls for pecuniary assistance on top of the compensation for their participation in the study were not infrequent, as were requests to connect their community leaders with Asian government entities “who makes decisions” as to where these development initiatives would locate.¹⁰ In similar contexts, the female coauthor of East-Asian descent was repeatedly asked “But where are you really from?” even after describing that she was of American nationality from an American university. She was informed by her research team during piloting that her presence coupled with the use of randomization and other experimental survey techniques led to some suspicions of witchcraft. Thus, she adjusted her survey design and consent script for the better – they were ultimately more transparent, but her identity played a role in prompting these initial suspicions¹¹

In other instances, outsider status can elicit more participation during times of heightened polarization when academics are typically politicized as biased. For instance, a Korean female researcher’s “foreign” status made strollers in a farmers’ market in rural Pennsylvania more willing to take part in experiments; she was not viewed as a partisan academic from a “liberal” university.¹² But what is worth underscoring is that this varying degree of participant willingness affects the composition of the respondent pool, and therefore the external validity of the inferences that we can draw from these responses. It can even undermine the internal validity of the design if such reluctance is correlated with treatment assignment. Even for participants who chose to participate, their perception of the researcher’s identity may potentially affect their willingness to answer truthfully to certain questions, make inferences about what the researcher wants to see in the responses, or provide answers that seem socially desirable.

Insider status may also sometimes help connect with participants. We highlight an example of South Asian female identity in the field. Because participant recruitment often involved negotiating with the (usually male) head of household to seek permission for the woman to leave the house (to join a focus group in privacy), the identity of the researcher was perceived as more credible than an older, particularly white male would have been, with one respondent even saying “you look so young and unassuming; I am not sure I would have been able to leave to talk to you otherwise.” On several other occasions, this also manifested in (typically older and female) participants inviting the researcher into

the household for a cup of tea.¹³

Lastly, we recognize that researchers often work with vulnerable populations such as victims of political violence, refugees, people living in poverty.¹⁴ Researcher identity shapes interactions with such populations as well. For example, these individuals might have more exposure to diverse groups of people because they interact with aid agencies, humanitarian organizations, and peacekeepers. They may view researchers in the same way that they view humanitarian workers. This means that interactions with researchers are laden with similar power dynamics that one needs to be mindful of (Cronin-Furman and Lake, 2018; Lewis et al., 2019).

Researcher Identity's Effect on Enumerators and Other Actors

Outsider status may also lower the confidence that enumerators have in researchers, leading them to take control of aspects of the design and planning in ways that the researchers had not intended. We underscore two examples here. A graphics designer in charge of creating pamphlets for respondents edited in an honorific title of respect for a politician he personally supported for one treatment arm without consulting the lead researcher. This could have potentially led to systematic differences across treatment groups.¹⁵ In another instance, a vendor that was integral in disbursing a treatment in an experimental factorial design was unresponsive to the female graduate student researcher trying to coordinate across multiple vendors. This led to a major clerical error in which a substantial number of participants could not be tracked across treatment arms.¹⁶

On the other hand, being an outsider may be helpful in situations where insider status is perceived as biased. In our experience, this has been true when the experimental study was in volatile settings or contentious periods, such as an ongoing election. In these contexts, local police might be wary of providing the necessary permissions required to conduct field research; party workers might be mistrustful of enumerators knocking on doors and mistake them to be members of opposing parties. Being an outsider can protect the researcher against political operatives assuming one is there for political purposes, and it can help in securing permissions by convincing local officials that the project is for research value alone.

In sum, we stress that across these situations, understanding how identity shapes our access and our interactions with participants and other partners; and navigating between outsider and insider status has been integral in ensuring the successful and ethical implementation of field experiments.

Conclusion: Suggested Practices and Broader Considerations

We conclude with practical suggestions and considerations that we as individual researchers and collectively as a field can be more attuned to. Table 1 provides suggestions for addressing challenges that might arise with institutional access, research participants, and surrounding actors. We believe that it is important to begin the research process by making contact with partner organizations and enumeration teams early, so that expectations can be set. Building long-term relationships with partner organizations and local research teams can help prior biases soften over time (on both sides). We also suggest that researchers should lean on institutional affiliations, including home universities, but also local institutions, in order to gain credibility. Unfortunately, scholars of color often have to showcase their credentials much more so than white scholars in order to signal credibility. When it comes to research participants, POC researchers should learn as much as they can about the local context (e.g. are there hostilities with certain countries like China or India?), and rely on local enumerators to interact with participants where possible (see also Pérez 2021). Regardless of the level of preparation, however, scholars should be ready to address comments and questions about their identities such as “where are you *really* from?”

Institutional Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make contact early to set expectations Spend time on developing relationships Rely on institutional affiliation Introduce yourself using your credentials
Research Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn as much about local context as possible Lean on local partner for interactions with participants Conduct ethnographic work with research participants to build trusting relationships
Surrounding Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a list of all actors that might be involved in implementation Have responses ready for answering questions about your identity Lean on local research partners as much as possible

Table 1: Practical Suggestions

Throughout this essay, we recognize that the line between “insider” and “outsider” status is blurry,

contextual, and intersectional. A researcher from India conducting an experiment in India can still be considered an outsider because she is from another state, her gender identity, and her affiliation with a non-Indian institution. And in many (if not all) research contexts, since the default of what an academic looks like is still presumed to be largely male and white, then female and POC researchers will be considered (and made to feel like) outsiders.

If insider/outsider status is not a simple binary designation, how do we navigate how we might be perceived and how we wish to be perceived once in the field? We need to be making these considerations and being transparent about them prior to implementation of the field experiment, in the planning stages.

To be clear, these are not considerations for only POC scholars. Rather, we believe there are discipline-wide considerations, beyond the practical suggestions for POC scholars mentioned above. We believe that all researchers should address certain questions regarding their identity in the pre-analysis plan. We recommend that the questions in Table 2 and a discussion around researcher identity should be built into our pre-analysis plans. Having these self-reflexive discussions before going into the field, particularly around identifying power imbalances and possible areas for miscommunication and misidentification, can help guide both the ethical considerations and the threats to implementation.

Implications for positionality	How do my own biases and perceptions affect my approach to this research? Am I the best person to conduct this research? What advantages/disadvantages does my identity provide me? As an “outsider,” can I identify opportunities for collaboration with “insiders”?
Implications for power dynamics	How am I planning to identify myself? How might I be perceived by all involved stakeholders? What might those perceptions imply for power dynamics?
Addressing misidentification	I believe I am an insider/outsider for X reasons, what happens if I am not perceived this way? What problems might (mis)perceptions around my identity create methodologically and ethically? How open do I want to be, and (how) should I correct misperceptions of my identity? If I do not correct misperceptions, is that deception and can it be ethically justified?

Table 2: Questions researchers can address in the planning stages and our pre-analysis plans.

Second, scholars who use field experiments should draw on existing qualitative work that addresses researcher identity. Although this essay is a part of a larger discussion on positionality and field experimentation, many of these questions about insider/outsider identity in research are not new (e.g. Davis and Silver, 2003). We should draw on feminist methodologies (e.g. Ramazanoglu and Holland,

2002; Wolf, 2018; Henry, 2003; Lewis et al., 2019), and work on ethnography, participant-observation, and other types of field research (e.g. Coffey, 1999; Fujii, 2017) that center intersectionality and power dynamics in research.¹⁷

Finally, we champion efforts to diversify the discipline by creating more opportunities (e.g. funding projects, fostering collaborations between Global North and Global South institutions, diversifying editorial boards) for scholars from underrepresented backgrounds. Thus far, field experiments are overwhelmingly conducted by (white) outsiders — though even as non-white researchers, we recognize that many of us are still privileged outsiders to the contexts we study.

It is our aspiration that this article can help guide other researchers of color or at least make them feel seen. We believe that we can expand the boundaries of field experimental research in ways that do not come at the expense of compromising who we are.

Notes

¹Existing research discusses the role of researcher identity in field research (i.e. Henderson (2009), and Townsend-Bell (2009)). Here, we focus on the role of perceived researcher identity in field experiments.

²For a variety of discussions on their impact on field experiments, see the symposium organized by Davis and Michelitch (N.d.) and individual articles included in the symposium.

³For a recent paper examining how group membership affects scholars engaged in the study of LGBTQ politics, see Harrison and Michelson (2021).

⁴Although not about conducting field experiments, we highly recommend Bouka (2015).

⁵See also Haas et al. (2021).

⁶See Karim and Beardsley (2017) for research to which this fieldwork contributed. Co-author is not the person referenced.

⁷See Karim (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

⁸See Arriola et al. (2021), and Lieberman and Zhou (2020) for articles to which this fieldwork contributed.

⁹See Choi, Poertner and Sambanis (2019) for publication to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹⁰See Choi (2018) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹¹See Zhou (2019) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹²See Kim (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹³See Badrinathan (2021) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹⁴See also Herman et al. (2009) for an in-depth treatment on how to promote the wellbeing of vulnerable populations participating in field research.

¹⁵See Badrinathan (2021) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹⁶See Lyall, Zhou and Imai (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

¹⁷See present volume's article "Intimate Experiments: Making the Personal Political in Experiments on Gender and Sexuality."

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