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

Eunji Kim* Sumitra Badrinathan † Donghyun Danny Choi‡
Sabrina Karim§ Yang-Yang Zhou¶

From textbooks and articles to seminars and online resources (e.g. Gerber and Green, 2012; Glennerster and Takavarasha, 2013), advice on how to successfully design and conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) abounds. We agonize over the research design, practitioner partnerships, and participant recruitment to name just a few concerns. But we rarely talk about those who conduct the field experiments—*us*. Even rarer is a discussion on how the researcher's identity have *methodological* consequences, particularly when a researcher is from a background traditionally underrepresented in academia (But see Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Thompson 2009).[1] We the co-authors, all researchers of color, have found that our identity has posed additional challenges—with our expertise, objectivity, status doubted, occasionally followed by muted enthusiasm for participating in experiments. 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 from field experiments.

In this article, we reflect on these 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 reviewing the effect of researcher identity on institutional access and enumerators, participants, other surrounding actors, and the decision of the study site, highlighting the dilemmas that each of us have experienced

*Corresponding Author. Assistant Professor of Political Science, Vanderbilt University. eunji.kim@vanderbilt.edu
†Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of Oxford. sumitra.badrinathan@politics.ox.ac.uk
‡Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Pittsburgh. dannychoi@pitt.edu
§Assistant Professor of Government, Cornell University. smk349@cornell.edu
¶Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of British Columbia, yangyang.zhou@ubc.ca

in the field—from the streets of Mumbai to farmers' markets in rural Pennsylvania, elementary schools in Kagera to vocational schools in Kandahar, and train stations in Berlin to police stations in Monrovia. We also discuss potential ethical biases that our identities bring up, and the steps to be taken moving forward in the planning stages of the field experiment.

Researcher Identity's Effect on Institutional Access and Enumerators

Researcher identity plays an important role in the type of and degree to which researchers gain access to institutional actors and enumerators that are often crucial to field experiments. But 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.

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 white male but not the female South Asian.[2] In other cases, gender can attenuate efforts to collaborate with institutions in more subtle ways. Instances of enumerators 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 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 serve as an disadvantage. Non-white/and or female researchers may be considered insiders, for instance, if their gender and race signal trust or perceived stereotypes might work in their favor. 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.[3] 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 their identity

enabled trust. As such, stereotypes also work in the either direction as mentioned above, where the partner organization may not perceive the researcher as credible due to implicit biases.

Researcher Identity's Effect on Participants

Researcher identity also structures the nature of the interaction between researcher and the experimental participants. For non-white/POC scholars with limited ties to the communities they study, simply making sense of how they are perceived by study participants might prove a daunting challenge. For two of the coauthors of this article who study a region (sub-Saharan Africa) traditionally dominated by white scholars, it was only after multiple interactions with different participant pools that we came to realize that we defied the expectations of what an academic with academic credentials from "Western" universities should look like.

Government officials and politicians that we recruited as participants often looked bewildered in initial meetings with us, often 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, and resulted 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.[4] 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.[5] 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 perceptions 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.[6] In similar contexts, the female coauthor of East-Asian descent was repeatedly asked "But where are you really from?" She was informed by her research team during piloting that her presence plus the use of randomization and experimental survey techniques led to participants questioning whether there was witchcraft involved in the research.[7]

Granted, in other instances, the outsider status can elicit more participation during the 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.[8] 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.

Researcher Identity's Effect on Surrounding Actors

Identity itself is a subjective notion: while ascriptive characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion and place of origin can influence how one is perceived, prescriptive characteristics can be just as salient. Conducting research on behalf of a university that is different from the field site can sometimes affect perceptions of identity. In developing countries, especially, this can manifest in notions of

incredulity towards researchers who are considered outsiders. Often such notions can shadow ascriptive markers of identity, making one an outsider in one's own country despite similarities in language, ethnicity, or nationality.

This outsider status can lower the trust that enumerators and project managers can have in the researcher, resulting in them assuming control of aspects of the design and planning that could systematically affect certain treatment arms. We underscore here two examples. A graphics designer in charge of creating pamphlets for respondents edited in an honorific title of respect for a politician he supported – but systematically with one treatment arm alone without consulting the lead researcher. On further discussion, the designer expressed the idea that politicians were to be addressed with adequate respect.[9] In another instance, staff members of a vendor that was integral in disbursing a treatment in a factorial design were 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.[10] Hence the desire for enumerators and field organizers and managers to make changes to RCT designs in order to help "outsiders" can sometimes affect research.

But these effects do not preclude the impact of outsider identity on those not connected directly to the project. Oftentimes, dealing with bureaucrats, police forces, and political workers could cause delays in the onset of a field project, especially when such a project is conducted in volatile settings or contentious times, such as an ongoing election. 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. In strained situations such as these, being perceived as an outsider can be an advantage: it can protect against political operatives assuming one is there for nefarious purposes, it can help in securing permissions for field work by convincing local police that the project is for educational and research value alone. Thus, the same factors that lead project managers to put less stock in one's opinions as an "outsider" can also play to one's advantage when dealing with actors not directly involved with research. In sum, we stress that outsider identity can have dual effects in the field.

Conclusion: What Questions Remain?

Given the complexities outlined in this essay, what are some considerations that we as individual researchers and collectively as a field should be more attuned to? 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. An American researcher of Chinese descent in Tanzania or a researcher of Korean descent in rural Pennsylvania is an outsider not only because she is not from the region, she stands out from her peers who are majority white researchers. A South Asian researcher in sub-Saharan Africa is clearly an outsider but might be perceived as less threatening than a white male in some contexts.

Thus, 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. As pre-analysis plans (PAPs) for experimental work become increasingly standard, we can build into them a discussion on researcher identities and positionality by asking ourselves the following questions in Table 1. 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 other ethical considerations.

Implications for positionality	How might my identity affect my approach to this research? Am I the best person to conduct this research? What advantages/disadvantaged 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 1: Questions researchers can address in the planning stages and our pre-analysis plans.

Next, what other literatures can researchers conducting field experiments learn from to help prepare? 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. We should look to

feminist methodologies (e.g. Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Wolf, 2018), 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.[11] What lessons can we draw from these approaches to research to inform experimental scholarship?

Lastly, as POC researchers, we strongly believe in 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 traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. Thus far, field experiments are overwhelmingly conducted by (white) outsiders—though even as non-white researchers, many of us are still outsiders to the contexts we study.

Academia is diversifying, and the profile of an average field researcher in political science will soon change. Each of the authors of this piece has had to learn on our own in the field, with the textbook advice on field experiments written by those who were less likely to face the challenges that we faced—ranging from the way that institutions treat us to the willingness of participants. It is our aspiration that this article can help guide other field researchers of color or at least make them feel seen. Both as an "insider" and "outsider," or as someone in between, researchers' identities are an inescapable aspect of field experiment. We hope that we all better learn how to negotiate these status for social science, while those scientific endeavors to expand the boundaries of field experimental research do not come at the expense of compromising who we are.

Notes

[1]Existing 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 researcher identity in field experiments.

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

[3]See Karim (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

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

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

[6]See Choi (2018) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

[7]See Zhou (2019) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

[8]See Kim (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

[9]See Badrinathan (Forthcoming) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

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

[11]See present volume's article "Intimate Experiments: Making the Personal Political in Experiments on Gender and Sexuality"

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