

CHAPTER 5

The Practicalities of Running Randomized Evaluations: Partnerships, Measurement, Ethics, and Transparency

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Abstract

A number of critical innovations spurred the rapid expansion in the use of field experiments by academics. Some of these were econometric but many were intensely practical. Researchers learned how to work with a wide range of implementing organizations from small, local nongovernmental organizations to large government bureaucracies. They improved data collection techniques and switched to digital data collection. As researchers got more involved in the design and implementation of the interventions they tested, new ethical issues arose. Finally, the dramatic rise in the use of experiments increased the benefits associated with research transparency. This chapter records some of these practical innovations. It focuses on how to select and effectively work with the organization running an intervention which is being evaluated; ways to minimize attrition, monitor enumerators, and ensure data are collected consistently in treatment and comparison areas; practical ethical issues such as when to start the ethics approval process; and research transparency, including how to prevent publication bias and data mining and the role of experimental registries, preanalysis plans, data publication reanalysis, and replication efforts.

Keywords

Data collection; Ethics; Field experiments; Partnerships; Research transparency

JEL Codes

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Economists have known for a long time that randomization could help identify causal connections by solving the problem of selection bias. In chapter “The Politics and Practice of Social Experiments: Seeds of a Revolution” by [Gueron \(2017\)](#) and [Gueron and Rolston \(2013\)](#) describe the effort in the United States to move experiments out of the laboratory into the policy world in the 1960s and 1970s. This experience was critical in proving the feasibility of field experiments, working through some of the important ethical questions involved, showing how researchers and practitioners could work together, and demonstrating that the results of field experiments were often very different from those generated by observational studies. Interestingly, there was relatively limited academic support for this first wave of field experiments ([Gueron and Rolston, 2013](#)), most of which were carried out by research groups such as MDRC, Abt, and Mathematica, to evaluate US government programs, and they primarily used individual-level randomization. In contrast, a more recent wave of field experiments started in the mid-1990s was driven by academics, initially focused on developing countries, often worked with nongovernmental organizations, and frequently used clustered designs.

A number of critical innovations spurred the take-off of field experiments, particularly in academic circles. Some of these were theoretical: They included understanding how to maximize power from limited sample sizes ([Imbens, 2011](#); [Bruhn and McKenzie, 2009](#)); how to use randomized control trials (RCTs) to measure externalities ([Miguel and Kremer, 2004](#)); the diffusion of information ([Duflo and Saez, 2002](#); [Kremer and Miguel, 2007](#)); equilibrium effects ([Crépon et al., 2012](#); [Mobarak and Rosenzweig, 2014](#)); and parameters in network theory ([Chandrasekhar et al., 2015](#); [Beaman et al., 2013](#)).

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