Navigating "Insider" and "Outsider" Status as Researchers Conducting Field Experiments

Eunji Kim, *Vanderbilt University, USA*
Sumitra Badrinathan, *University of Oxford, UK*
Donghyun Danny Choi, *University of Pittsburgh, USA*
Sabrina Karim, *Cornell University, USA*
Yang-Yang Zhou, *University of British Columbia, Canada*

From textbooks and articles to seminars and online resources, advice on how to successfully design and conduct randomized controlled trials abounds (e.g., Gerber and Green 2012; Glennerster and Takavarasha 2013). Political scientists agonize over the research design, practitioner partnerships, and participant recruitment, to name only a few concerns. However, we rarely discuss those who conduct the field experiments: *us.* Even more rare 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] Although much has been written on identity and the ethics of field studies (e.g., Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018), this article explores how researcher identity shapes the implementation of field experiments.[2] The coauthors, all scholars of color, have found that in addition to the general difficulties encountered in field research, our identities in particular pose other challenges. Our expertise, objectivity, and status are doubted, occasionally met by muted enthusiasm from research participants.[3] When researcher identity defies the expectations of a typical profile of an academic affiliated with North American– or European-based institutions (i.e., particularly white and male), it has important implications for inferences drawn from field experiments.

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

This article reflects on the challenges and potential biases that may arise from a researcher's identity, highlighting our own experiences in the field. It is organized through discussions of the effects of researcher identity on institutional access,[5] participants, enumerators, and other surrounding actors. We describe the dilemmas that each of us has experienced in the field—from the streets of Bihar to a farmers' market in rural Pennsylvania and train stations in Berlin to police stations in Monrovia. We also present potential ethical biases and practical suggestions for the planning stages of field experiments.

RESEARCHER IDENTITY'S EFFECT ON INSTITUTIONAL ACCESS

A scholar's membership in a particular group based on visible, ascriptive characteristics is important in the degree to which a researcher can gain access to the institutional actors and enumerators who are crucial to field experiments (Haas et al. 2021). The actors involved in implementing a field experiment make judgments and inferences based on how a researcher presents (Tajfel et al. 1971). Indeed, in this early stage of research, nonwhite 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 result in a systemic denial of access to implementation.

We highlight two examples to illustrate this point. In one case, a female South Asian and a white male were working on the same topic at the same time. A United Nations (UN) division discerned 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 period, the same researcher was asked to pay a bribe to a UN leader because of historical legacies related to her ethnic heritage (i.e., the UN leader determined this 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 common, especially in more patriarchal cultures. These examples highlight the disproportionate burden that underrepresented groups—including minorities and women—must 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. Nonwhite and/or female researchers may

When researcher identity defies the expectations of a typical profile of an academic affiliated with North American– or European-based institutions (i.e., particularly white and male), it has important implications for inferences drawn from field experiments.

be considered insiders, for instance, if their gender, ethnicity, and race signal trust. For example, the same South Asian woman discussed previously was able to gain access to working with the security forces, whereas the white male had more problems.[7] When speaking to the police officers, she uncovered that this was partially because she was perceived as less threatening (to their masculinity) than a white male. In this case, however, the access granted was not necessarily due to the researcher being perceived as an "expert" but rather because her identity enabled trust. Thus, we emphasize that stereotypes also work in multiple directions (Zou and Cheryan 2017).

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

RESEARCHER IDENTITY'S EFFECT ON PARTICIPANTS

Researchers often are considered "outsiders" when they are not from the country or do not share racial or ethnic ties with participants. However, even when they are from the same country or ethnicity, there are ways in which they may not be perceived as sufficiently "insider" because identities are intersectional and context specific. For nonwhite scholars with limited ties to the communities that they study, simply making sense of how they may be perceived by study participants can prove to be a daunting challenge. For two of the coauthors who worked in a region that is historically and systematically dominated by white scholars (i.e., Sub-Saharan Africa), we perceive that we do not fit the expectations of the typical appearance of an academic with credentials from a "Western" university.

Government officials and politicians that we recruited as participants often looked bewildered in initial meetings with us, wondering 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 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. Nonwhite foreigners, not to mention nonwhite academics, seem to be much less common, especially outside of population centers where expatriates primarily reside. In addition to the general hesitance to engage with an atypical foreigner, participants may use heuristics about researchers' group membership and their position within the social hierarchy, adjusting their interaction with them to match their evaluation.

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 in East and Southern African countries. The active involvement of East Asian donors in the infrastructural development across Africa influenced participant perceptions that the coauthor likely would be connected to those networks that would grant 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" about where these development initiatives would locate.[10]

In a similar context, the female coauthor of East Asian descent was asked repeatedly, "But where are you really from?"—even after responding 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 a suspicion of witchcraft. Thus, she adjusted and improved her survey design and consent script—ultimately more transparent—but it was her identity that prompted the initial suspicion.[11]

In other instances, outsider status can elicit more participation during periods of heightened polarization when academics typically are politicized as biased. For instance, a Korean female researcher's "foreign" status made strollers at

a farmers' market in rural Pennsylvania more willing to participate in experiments; she was not viewed as a partisan academic from a "liberal" university.[12] However, it is worth noting that this varying degree of participant willingness affects the composition of the respondent pool and, therefore, the external validity of inferences that we draw from these responses. This even can undermine the internal validity of the design if the reluctance is correlated with treatment assignment. Even for those who chose to participate, their

factorial design was unresponsive to the female graduate-student researcher who was attempting to coordinate across multiple vendors. This resulted in a major clerical error in which numerous participants could not be tracked across treatment arms.[16]

Conversely, being an outsider may be helpful in situations where insider status is perceived as biased. In our experience, this has been the case when the experimental study was in a volatile setting or a contentious period, such as an ongoing

...understanding how identity shapes our access and our interactions with participants and other partners as well as navigating between outsider and insider status are integral for ensuring the successful and ethical implementation of field experiments.

perception of the researcher's identity potentially may affect their willingness to answer truthfully to certain questions, to make inferences about what the researcher wants to see in the responses, or to provide answers that seem socially desirable.

Insider status also can help researchers to connect with participants. We highlight an example of South Asian female identity in the field. Participant recruitment often involves negotiating with the (usually male) head of household to seek permission for the woman to leave the house (i.e., to join a focus group in privacy). Therefore, the researcher's identity was perceived as more credible than an older, especially white male would have been. One respondent told the researcher, "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 manifested in typically older and female participants inviting the researcher in for a cup of tea.[13]

Finally, we recognize that researchers often work with vulnerable populations such as victims of political violence, refugees, and people living in poverty.[14] A researcher's identity shapes interactions with these populations as well. For example, these individuals may 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, which means that interactions are laden with similar power dynamics of which researchers must be mindful (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Lewis et al. 2019).

RESEARCHER IDENTITY'S EFFECT ON ENUMERATORS AND OTHER ACTORS

Outsider status also may 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 highlight two examples. Without consulting the lead researcher, a graphics designer in charge of creating pamphlets for respondents included an honorific title of respect for a politician that he personally supported for one treatment arm. This could have led to systematic differences across treatment groups.[15] In another instance, a vendor who was integral in disbursing a treatment in an experimental

election. In these contexts, local police might be hesitant to provide the necessary permissions required to conduct field research because party workers might not trust an enumerator knocking on their door, mistaking them as members of the opposing parties. Being an outsider can protect researchers against political operatives who assume they are there for political purposes and can help in securing permissions by convincing local officials that the project is for research value alone.

In summary, we emphasize that across these situations, understanding how identity shapes our access and our interactions with participants and other partners as well as navigating between outsider and insider status are integral for ensuring the successful and ethical implementation of field experiments.

CONCLUSION: SUGGESTED PRACTICES AND BROADER CONSIDERATIONS

We conclude with practical suggestions and considerations to which we as individual researchers and collectively as a field can be more attuned. Table 1 offers suggestions for addressing

Table 1
Practical Suggestions

Institutional Access	Make contact early to set expectations. Spend time on developing relationships. Rely on institutional affiliation. Introduce yourself using your credentials.
Research Participants	Learn as much as possible about local context. Lean on local partners for interactions with participants. Conduct ethnographic work with research participants to build trusting relationships.
Surrounding Actors	Make a list of all actors who might be involved in implementation. Have responses ready for answering questions about your identity. Lean on local research partners as much as possible.

....

Politics Symposium: *Field Experiments*

....

Table 2

Questions Researchers Can Address in the Planning Stages and Pre-Analysis Plans

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?

challenges that may arise with institutional access, research participants, and surrounding actors. We believe that it is important to begin the research process by making early contact with partner organizations and enumeration teams so that expectations can be defined. Building long-term relationships with partner organizations and local research teams can alleviate prior biases over time (on both sides). We also suggest that researchers lean on institutional affiliations, including home universities but also local institutions, to gain credibility. Unfortunately, scholars of color often must showcase their credentials more than white scholars to signal credibility. Regarding study participants, researchers of color should learn as much as possible about the local context (e.g., Are there hostilities with certain countries such as China or India?) and rely on local enumerators to interact with participants where possible (Pérez 2021). Regardless of the level of preparation, however, scholars should be ready to address comments and questions about their identity, such as "Where are you *really* from?"

In this article, we recognize that the line between "insider" and "outsider" status is blurry, contextual, and intersectional. A researcher from India conducting an experiment in India

identity in the pre-analysis plan. We recommend that the questions in table 2 and a discussion about researcher identity should be a requisite of our pre-analysis plans. These self-reflective discussions—particularly identifying power imbalances and possible areas for miscommunication and misidentification—before going into the field can guide both the ethical considerations and the threats to implementation.

Furthermore, scholars who conduct field experiments should draw on existing qualitative work that addresses researcher identity. Although this article is 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 also should draw on feminist methodologies (e.g., Henry 2003; Lewis et al. 2019; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Wolf 2018) as well as 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.

Finally, we champion efforts to diversify the discipline by creating more opportunities (e.g., funding projects, fostering collaborations between Global North and Global South insti-

> *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.*

may still be considered an outsider because she is from another state, her gender identity, and her affiliation with a non-Indian institution. Moreover, because the default of what an academic looks like generally is presumed to be male and white, in many (if not all) research contexts, female and researchers of color will be considered (and made to feel like) outsiders.

If insider/outsider status is not a simple binary designation, then how do we navigate how we might be and how we want to be perceived once we are in the field? We must consider and be transparent about these questions in the planning stages prior to implementation of the field experiment.

To be clear, these practical suggestions are not only for scholars of color but also discipline wide. We believe that all researchers should address certain questions regarding their

tutions, and diversifying editorial boards) for scholars from underrepresented backgrounds. Thus far, field experiments overwhelmingly are conducted by white outsiders; however, even as nonwhite researchers, we recognize that many of us are privileged outsiders to the contexts that we study.

It is our hope that this article will 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

1. Existing research discusses the role of researcher identity in field research (Henderson 2009; Townsend-Bell 2009). This article focuses on the role of perceived researcher identity in field experiments.

2. For discussions on their impact on field experiments, see the symposium organized by Davis and Michelitch (forthcoming) and the articles included in this symposium.
3. For a recent paper examining how group membership affects scholars engaged in the study of LGBTQ politics, see Harrison and Michelson (forthcoming).
4. Although it is not about conducting field experiments, we highly recommend the Bouka (2015) study.
5. See also Haas et al. (2021).
6. See Karim and Beardsley (2017) for research to which this fieldwork contributed. The coauthor is not the person referenced.
7. See Karim (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
8. See Arriola et al. (2021) and Lieberman and Zhou (2020) for articles to which this fieldwork contributed.
9. See Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis (2019) for an article to which this fieldwork contributed.
10. See Choi (2018) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
11. See Zhou (2019) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
12. See Kim (Forthcoming) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
13. See Badrinathan (2021) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
14. See also Herman et al. (2009) for an in-depth treatment on how to promote the well-being of vulnerable populations participating in field research.
15. See Badrinathan (2021) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.
16. See Lyall, Zhou, and Imai (2020) for research to which this fieldwork contributed.

REFERENCES

Arriola, Leonardo R., Donghyun Danny Choi, Justine M. Davis, Melanie L. Phillips, and Lise Rakner. 2021. "Paying to Party: Candidate Resources and Party Switching in New Democracies." *Party Politics*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068821989563.

Badrinathan, Sumitra. 2021. "Educative Interventions to Combat Misinformation: Evidence from a Field Experiment in India." *American Political Science Review* 115 (4): 1325–41. DOI:10.1017/S0003055421000459.

Bouka, Yolande. 2015. "Researching Violence in Africa as a Black Woman: Notes from Rwanda." Washington, DC: American University, Institute for Security Studies. Working Paper.

Choi, Dong-Hyun. 2018. "Severed Connections: Political Parties and Democratic Responsiveness in Sub-Saharan Africa." Berkeley: University of California. PhD Thesis.

Choi, Donghyun Danny, Mathias Poertner, and Nicholas Sambanis. 2019. "Parochialism, Social Norms, and Discrimination Against Immigrants." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (33): 16274–79.

Coffey, Amanda. 1999. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Cronin-Furman, Kate, and Milli Lake. 2018. "Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 607–14.

Davis, Darren W., and Brian D. Silver. 2003. "Stereotype Threat and Race of Interviewer Effects in a Survey on Political Knowledge." *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (1): 33–45.

Davis, Justine M. 2020. "Manipulating Africa? Perspectives on the Experimental Method in the Study of African Politics." *African Affairs* 119 (476): 452–67.

Davis, Justine M., and Kristin Michelitch. 2022. "Field Experiments: Thinking Through Identity and Positionality." DOI:10.1017/S1049096522000671.

Desposato, Scott. 2015. *Ethics and Experiments: Problems and Solutions for Social Scientists and Policy Professionals.* Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2017. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach.* Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Gerber, Alan S., and Donald P. Green. 2012. *Field Experiments: Design, Analysis, and Interpretation.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Glennerster, Rachel, and Kudzai Takavarasha. 2013. *Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Haas, Nicholas, Katherine Haenschen, Tanu Kumar, Costas Panagopoulos, Kyle Peyton, Nico Ravanilla, and Michael Sierra-Arevalo. 2021. "Organizational Identity and Positionality in Randomized Control Trials: Considerations and Advice for Collaborative Research Teams." Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University. Working Paper.

Harrison, Brian, and Melissa Michelson. 2022. "LGBTQ Scholarship: Researcher Identity, RCTs, & Ingroup Positionality." *PS: Political Science & Politics*. DOI: 10.1017/S1049096652000038.

Henderson, Frances B. 2009. "'We Thought You Would Be White': Race and Gender in Fieldwork." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 291–94.

Henry, Marsha Giselle. 2003. "'Where Are You Really From?': Representation, Identity, and Power in the Fieldwork Experiences of a South Asian Diasporic." *Qualitative Research* 3 (2): 229–42.

Herman, Biz D., Amma Panin, Elizabeth Wellman, Graeme Blair, Lindsay Pruett, Ken Ochieng' Opalo, Hannah M. Alarian, Allison N. Grossman, Yvonne Tan, Alex Dyzenhaus, and Nicholas Owsley. 2009. "Field Experiments in the Global South Assessing Risks, Localizing Benefits, and Addressing Positionality." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 291–94.

Humphreys, Macartan. 2015. "Reflections on the Ethics of Social Experimentation." *Journal of Globalization and Development* 6 (1): 87–112.

Karim, Sabrina. 2020. "Relational State Building in Areas of Limited Statehood: Experimental Evidence on the Attitudes of the Police." *American Political Science Review* 114 (2): 536–51.

Karim, Sabrina, and Kyle Beardsley. 2017. *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping: Women, Peace, and Security in Post-Conflict States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kim, Eunji. Forthcoming. "Entertaining Beliefs in Economic Mobility." *American Journal of Political Science.*

Lewis, Chloé, Alfred Banga, Ghislain Cimanuka, Jean De Dieu Hategekimana, Milli Lake, and Rachael Pierotti. 2019. "Walking the Line: Brokering Humanitarian Identities in Conflict Research." *Civil Wars* 21 (2): 200–227.

Lieberman, Evan, and Yang-Yang Zhou. 2020. "Self-Efficacy and Citizen Engagement in Development: Experimental Evidence from Tanzania." *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 9 (1): 46–63. DOI:10.1017/XPS.2020.47.

Lyall, Jason, Yang-Yang Zhou, and Kosuke Imai. 2020. "Can Economic Assistance Shape Combatant Support in Wartime? Experimental Evidence from Afghanistan." *American Political Science Review* 114 (1): 126–43.

Pérez, Efrén O. 2021. *Diversity's Child: People of Color and the Politics of Identity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. 2002. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Slough, Tara. 2019. "The Ethics of Electoral Experimentation: Design-Based Recommendations." New York: Columbia University. Working Paper. http://taraslough.com/assets/pdf/eee.pdf.

Soedirgo, Jessica, and Aarie Glas. 2020. "Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53 (3): 527–31.

Tajfel, Henri, Michael G. Billig, Robert P. Bundy, and Claude Flament. 1971. "Social Categorization and Intergroup Behaviour." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1 (2): 149–78.

Teele, Dawn Langan, et al. 2014. "Reflections on the Ethics of Field Experiments." In *Field Experiments and Their Critics: Essays on the Uses and Abuses of Experimentation in the Social Sciences,* ed. Dawn Langan Teele, 115–40. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Thompson, Marshall. 2009. "Research, Identities, and Praxis: The Tensions of Integrating Identity into the Field Experience." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 325–28.

Townsend-Bell, Erica. 2009. "Being True and Being You: Race, Gender, Class, and the Fieldwork Experience." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (2): 311–14.

Wolf, Diane L. 2018. *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork.* Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.

Zhou, Yang-Yang. 2019. "How Refugee Resentment Shapes National Identity and Citizen Participation in Africa." *2018 APSA Annual Meeting Paper.* Washington, DC: American Political Science Association.

Zou, Linda X., and Sapna Cheryan. 2017. "Two Axes of Subordination: A New Model of Racial Position." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 112 (5): 696.