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How to Form Organizational Partnerships to Run Experiments*

Adam Seth Levine

Abstract

There is growing interest in bridging the gap between science and society. Fostering collaborations between academics and practitioners, such as partnering to conduct experiments, is an increasingly popular way to do that. Yet, despite the growing number of such partnerships, academics who are new to them often lack guidance about the considerations to keep in mind and the steps involved. This chapter fills that gap. I discuss the benefits, challenges, and goals of organizational partnerships, as well as provide a step-by-step guide for academics beginning new ones. Throughout, I emphasize the fact that such partnerships entail building new working relationships with people who have diverse forms of knowledge. As a result, both a *learning* mindset as well as a *relational* mindset are necessary.

11.1 Introduction

Many have called for bridging the gap between science and society in order to better understand, explain, and mitigate pressing social problems (Druckman and Lupia 2015; National Research Council 2012; Watts 2017). Central to this goal is

fostering collaborations between academics and practitioners (Nutley et al. 2007). An active research community across many disciplines has identified ways to do so, such as research–practice partnerships (Coburn and Penuel 2016), knowledge brokering (Dobbins et al. 2009), partnerships with aid organizations (Karlan and Appel 2016), and university extension programs (Chambliss and Lewenstein 2012).

Within political science, there has also been a long-standing desire to close this gap (George 1993). Experiments involving

organizational partnerships are an increasingly common way to do that. One recent study found that 62% of articles with field experiments published between 2000 and 2017 in *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Journal of Politics* entailed a partnership (Butler 2019).

Yet academics who are new to these partnerships lack formal guidance about what they entail, especially as process-related details rarely (if ever) appear in published work. Thus, learning has typically occurred via informal conversations and personal trial and error, both of which advantage some researchers and disadvantage others. The goal of this chapter is to fill this gap by providing a systematic overview of the process along with a detailed discussion of the opportunities and challenges. Although each partnership entails its own particular nuances, possibilities, and constraints, my aim is to provide an overview that applies broadly.

Throughout the chapter, I advocate a particular approach. When academics begin a new experiment, they naturally have what I would refer to as a *learning mindset*. They are focused on what they want to learn, how doing so will advance our collective understanding of the world and potentially lead to a new publication, and what an optimal and feasible research design might entail. Having a learning mindset is certainly important, yet I argue that academics also need to adopt a *relational mindset* when these experiments entail partnering with an organization. These partnerships entail *building relationships with people who have diverse forms of knowledge*. They are a form of civic engagement in which diverse individuals work together to better understand and ameliorate the problems facing their communities and society at large (Allen 2016). They produce private benefits for the participants, such as publications, funding, and so on. They also help to establish norms of collaboration between the research and practice communities, which is a public benefit.

My goal throughout the chapter is also to highlight illustrative examples. Yet

achieving this goal is more difficult than it may initially appear. Details about the inception of partnerships are typically unpublished, and in conversations with others I have often found that people struggle to recall exactly what happened. Thus, I will mostly be drawing from my own experiences forming partnerships. In addition, at various moments I will refer to examples of partnerships that I have helped create as president of research4impact (r4impact.org), a nonprofit organization that connects researchers and practitioners for many reasons, including to collaborate on experiments. Because of my matchmaking role within this organization, I have a unique window into relevant background information for various partnerships.

11.2 Definitions and Scope

For purposes of this chapter, I define *organizational partnerships* as academics working with practitioners (people in the nonprofit, government, and/or for-profit sector) in order to conduct experiments together. They are a type of formal collaboration that entails shared decision-making authority and a willingness to be held accountable to each other. During these partnerships, all parties are at least somewhat involved with the various stages of conducting an experiment: conceptualization, design, fieldwork, analysis, and dissemination of the findings. I acknowledge that academics and practitioners may partner to conduct nonexperimental research as well, but for the purposes of this chapter, I focus on situations in which new experimental data are the desired result. Note that this definition would not include consulting arrangements with a fee-for-service model. With organizational partnerships, typically no money changes hands – instead, the main "payment" for academics is a data set they can use in publications.

The primary audience for this chapter is academics who are just beginning to have (or are thinking about having) conversations with practitioners about partnering on an

experiment. I focus on the considerations and steps that are vital regardless of the partner, though it is worth noting that partnerships with government agencies often involve extra steps (e.g., contracting regulations), and partnerships that occur as part of a preexisting fellowship (e.g., the Office of Evaluation Sciences fellowship) may involve fewer. Due to space limitations, I will not discuss important normative questions about the purpose of social science and whether academics *should* be partnering with particular organizations on particular projects. Instead, I proceed under the assumption that readers are interested in "solving practical problems that outsiders would recognize" (Watts 2017, p. 3), and that they view a partnership as a good way to do that.

11.3 Why Pursue an Organizational Partnership?

In the next two sections, I discuss benefits and challenges. I start here with the benefits: Why pursue an organizational partnership? What goals do partners want to achieve?

The most fundamental answer is the same reason why academics choose to partner with each other on a research project: they are intensely curious and share underlying goals. For example, many academics and practitioners ultimately want to eliminate corruption, make government work better, reduce poverty, increase voter engagement, improve health, confront climate change, eliminate prejudice, reduce electoral fraud, and so on.

That said, even if they share the same underlying goals, they may have distinct professional reasons for partnering to conduct an experiment. Scholars (in their work) approach these topics by thinking about how studies can inform underlying theoretical questions and speak to mechanisms that are generalizable. Practitioners (in their work) approach these topics from the perspective of wanting to know what works and how new knowledge can directly inform their organizational policies and programs. So, for

instance, scholars interested in how to reduce corruption are often motivated by theoretical questions about institutional design and are mindful about how one individual intervention will add knowledge to a broader body of literature. Practitioners working to reduce corruption want to know, first and foremost, whether a given intervention works and if it is something that may be feasibly implemented on a broader scale.

11.3.1 What Benefits Do Academics Gain from Partnering with Practitioners?

The main benefit is the opportunity to answer a question that simultaneously has theoretical and practical significance. Academics who pursue partnerships care about the world and want their work to have impact. Partnering with an organization to design and implement a study can greatly increase the likelihood that the results will impact organizational practice, public policy, and attitudes of those outside academia (cf., Coburn and Penuel 2016). Working with a practitioner provides unique and powerful insights into what questions are most relevant from the perspective of real-world decision-makers.

Organizational partnerships also offer the opportunity to collect behavioral and administrative data that may otherwise not be feasible. For example, if scholars want to understand how well a mentoring intervention operates among rural workers in Kenya, it is likely more feasible (if not necessary) to partner with an organization that has the credibility to administer that intervention in local communities, along with the capacity, knowledge, and governmental authority to do so. Moreover, on-the-ground knowledge from organizational partners provides insights into subtle contextual features, like who should and who should not be part of the study population.

11.3.2 What Benefits Do Practitioners Gain from Partnering with Academics?

As noted above, practitioners are interested in partnerships when the results will speak

directly to what works and/or does not work (i.e., if the findings are directly relevant to how they can effectively achieve their goals). Practitioners may also appreciate the broader outlook of academics who often have more time and incentive to situate specific observations in a broader body of knowledge. They may also partner in order to satisfy funding demands, as funders sometimes want an outside party to evaluate claims of effectiveness. Lastly, in addition to these instrumental motivations, practitioners are often intrinsically motivated, just like scholars. The idea of producing new discoveries and knowledge can be exciting and fun!

11.3.3 *What Goals Do Organizational Partnerships Often Pursue?*

The experiments partnerships pursue typically have one of two main goals: to assess the impact of existing activities or to test a new idea that hasn't been tried before.

The first goal is to assess the impact of existing activities: How well are the things they are already doing working? In many cases, practitioners pursue this goal because they want to design a randomized controlled trial where one did not exist beforehand. For instance, one of the organizations that reached out to research4impact in 2018 to find a potential collaborator was looking to increase voter turnout. Based in the UK, this organization had already launched a new website that included user-friendly information about candidate positions, polling locations, and the like. It had been regularly tracking who visited the site, but "clicks on a website" are not the same thing as actually boosting voter turnout. The leadership wanted to think about how to conduct a randomized controlled trial within their website that would test whether the information they provided had a causal impact on voter turnout.

In that example – and this is true more generally for "impact assessment" experiments – the organization would be mostly responsible for supplying the research question (i.e., "Does this program work? What impact does this program have?"). The

academic would supply technical expertise about how to design the assessment, along with substantive knowledge of relevant literature and previous findings. Costs may be shared in a variety of ways, depending upon the amount and also the degree of post-intervention measurement.

The second broad type of partnership goal is to test a new idea that hasn't been tried before. On the organizational side, these partnerships may be valuable because practitioners want to explore entirely new ideas for furthering their mission and addressing problems. For example, one organization that reached out to research4impact was under contract with a government agency and tasked with testing new ways to design forms for social benefits that would reduce churn (i.e., people who lose aid for administrative reasons such as not completing paperwork and then have aid restored in the near future). Although the broad goal was predetermined, the practitioners leading the project were entirely open to new suggestions of what the forms could look like and also how to conduct the test. In this case, the organization was supplying on-the-ground expertise, as well as knowledge of the history of why the forms looked the way they did and why churn was a problem as a result. The academic partner was supplying both theoretical and technical expertise.

11.4 What Can Be Challenging about Pursuing Organizational Partnerships?

Organizational partnerships entail many benefits, yet realizing them typically involves overcoming some challenges as well. I discuss the main challenges in this section. Being aware of them in advance will help provide a firm foundation for success.

11.4.1 *Ensuring a Benefit Exchange*

Although alluded to in the previous section, I should mention this point here as well: a key challenge is ensuring that academics and practitioners both see clear benefits that align with their professional motivations and

incentives. For academics, this means making sure that the study answers research questions that speak to generalizable mechanisms and that contribute to a larger scientific discipline. When they assess the value of doing an experiment, they want to ensure high internal and external validity, as well as the ability to publish data regardless of the findings.

Most practitioners are happy to contribute to a body of scientific knowledge, but at the same time their top priority is typically to know what works. They are most likely to partner if doing so will produce a concrete product that will help them directly achieve their goals more effectively. Indeed, as Druckman (2000, p. 1568) notes, for practitioners "explanation is more of a curiosity than a quest: Answers to the evaluative question (Does it work?) take priority over answers to the explanatory question (Why does it work?)."

In the realm of experiments, this benefit exchange has a particular manifestation because academics and practitioners start with different orientations. Academics who are interested in conducting experiments want to directly observe behavioral or attitudinal change and be able to attribute it to a well-defined treatment, along with being able to calculate the size of the effect. To them, it seems natural to design an experiment that can isolate the impact of one or a small handful of potential manipulations on an outcome of interest. Yet the starting point for practitioners, especially if they do not have any experience with conducting experiments, is often to think holistically in terms of the wide variety of factors that might explain a particular outcome. This distinction underscores a point I will return to: when setting up new partnerships, academics should be prepared to be ambassadors for good research design (even if this means limiting the scope of what is studied).

A final point about the benefit exchange is that academics and practitioners may have different attitudes toward risk when conducting research. Many practitioners are risk-averse, especially about studying programs and/or policies that they are very committed to, have funding for, and have jobs that depend on. Yet academics may feel as though they have career incentives to make their name by criticizing something that has been done in the past. Aligning the benefit exchange when designing a study means being aware of these possibly conflicting motivations and ensuring that all parties are genuinely interested in the results (whatever they happen to be).

11.4.2 Establishing a Coalition of Support

When it comes to research, one of the main benefits for academics is being able to set their own agenda and deciding how to allocate their time and which projects to work on. Yet, for practitioners, research projects may not be part of their job description. They have other responsibilities and often are embedded in a larger organizational structure. A new research collaboration may require that academics help build a coalition of support among several decision-makers within a partner organization. Adding to this complexity is a concern about staff turnover, which is especially threatening for experiments with long-lasting treatments, long-term follow-ups, and/or replications. Thus, while this challenge of establishing a coalition of support may often seem like a burden, I encourage academics to view it as helpful for insulating the experiment from organizational changes.

11.4.3 Overcoming Language Differences

Experiments entail a certain vernacular – internal validity, external validity, treatment, random assignment, spillover, blocking – that is highly familiar to academics but may sound daunting to others. Academics should be prepared in advance to clarify what these words mean and why they matter not just for designing a sound experiment, but also for practitioners' goals (i.e., we would not be able to learn something about what works unless we ensure that the experiment has high internal validity, etc.).

11.4.4 Aligning Timelines

Another key challenge is that academics and practitioners often work on different

timelines. Designing and carrying out research projects takes time. Academics often do not face immediate deadlines and want to take the time necessary for rigor, such as conducting a pilot study prior to the full experiment. Yet practitioners' work may be focused on responding to changing circumstances in the world, or at the very least may be far more closely tied to world events like elections, major policy announcements, and national emergencies. Research, quite simply, is often not the highest priority.

That said, the large majority of experiments I have conducted with organizational partners proceeded quickly and smoothly. In fact, my first five (with three different nonprofits – two local and one national) moved from initial conversations to data collection within four months. However, academics should be prepared for the possibility that unexpected and uncontrollable events may cause delays. For example, starting in June 2016, I began a partnership with a national organization. During that summer and into the beginning of the fall, we pilot tested various treatments for an experiment that was initially planned to start in winter 2017. However, after Trump's election in November, my organizational partner had to indefinitely pause our project in order to devote staff resources to newly emerged funding threats. The partnership did not resume until late April 2017, and ultimately data collection did not begin until May 2018. Fortunately, however, there was enough support for the study at all levels of the organization that we were able to move forward even after a lengthy delay. The upshot of these examples is that collaborations may not be ideal if academics face a strict, impending deadline. If at all possible, academics should build plenty of buffer time into their timelines.

11.4.5 Establishing a New Working Relationship

Academics and practitioners are generally part of very different social networks. This means that, even if they have a friend or colleague in common, they are unlikely to personally know each other in advance. Establishing a new working relationship between strangers can be nontrivial. Academics want to ensure that practitioners are committed to the project and all of the specific procedures involved with conducting a sound experiment. Practitioners are often mission-driven and want to ensure academics are committed to their goals, value expertise other than their own, and will be pleasant to interact with (Levine 2020). These latter two points reflect the fact that, as a whole, academics are viewed as highly competent but not always as very friendly or warm (Fiske and Dupree 2014).

In sum, I have identified five challenges that new partnerships need to tackle in order to be successful: ensuring a benefit exchange, establishing a coalition of support, overcoming language differences, aligning timelines, and establishing a new working relationship. I will discuss how to do so in a step-by-step guide later in the chapter.

11.5 Ethical Considerations

Chapter 7 in this volume discusses ethical considerations to consider with experiments in general. In this section, I briefly discuss ethical considerations as they relate specifically to experiments with organizational partners.

One set of ethical considerations that academics should keep in mind relates to the partnership itself. First, academics should minimize harm. They must be mindful that organizations are very concerned about how they are represented in print, due to funding concerns and also, in some cases, physical safety concerns. These considerations affect all aspects of the project, including the conceptualization, design, implementation, and (especially) dissemination of results. Another aspect of minimizing harm is perhaps less obvious. Partnerships often involve a large investment of scarce organizational resources, and academics need to make sure that the study is really worth it. They should not strive to simply causally identify something because it

is possible, but instead ensure that doing so answers a question that it is truly important to answer.

Another ethical concern relates to transparency, as the value of scientific results lies in their transparent procedures and ability to be replicated. Take care to ensure that all implementation procedures are clearly documented and followed. Doing so helps avoid situations in which feelings of obligation toward the organization and/or one's desire for future collaboration get in the way of transparent and honest academic practices.

In addition, there are two data-related ethical concerns that should be agreed upon in advance (and, as noted later, codified in writing prior to data collection). One is about data ownership. Oftentimes partners agree that data collected are jointly owned by both of them. That said, academics will need to make sure they have the right to review and publish study details, data, and findings. The second is about the plan for dissemination – how the data and findings will be shared, including the kinds of write-ups that will be produced (in addition to academic papers, perhaps policy briefs, or presentations for funders, etc.). Key parts of the dissemination strategy will include deciding whether the partner organization may be named in print and whether specific partners will coauthor particular documents. My own view is that organizations should choose whether to be anonymous in publications, but not whether academics publish the findings.

Lastly, I wish to note that ethical questions may also arise regarding human subjects (i.e., the design and implementation of the intervention). The key issue is that academics may apply different ethical standards to their work than their organizational partners. For instance, they may differ regarding the acceptability of deception and their ability/desire to obtain informed consent. They may also differ as to whether it is ethically defensible to study the impacts of interventions that have "major, direct, and possibly adverse effects on the lives of others" (Humphreys 2011, p. 1). They may raise different questions surrounding the extraction of a control group that remains untreated. In these situations, researchers should strive to reduce risks and costs to subjects. They will also need to decide what ethical grounds, if any, justify their participation (Humphreys 2011, and Chapter 7 in this volume provide helpful guidance for such judgments).

11.6 So You Want to Partner! What Are the steps?

Having provided a general discussion of the benefits and challenges of organizational partnerships, as well as several ethical considerations to keep in mind, I now describe the process in more detail. An overview appears in Box 11.1.

Academics who want to collaborate typically start with some ideas about a topic and an eagerness to refine those ideas and have them challenged in conversations with a potential partner. As Penuel and Gallagher (2017, p. 36) state, "Each partner must be willing to have the aims of joint work at least partly shaped by the other partner." With that in mind, the steps are as follows.

> **Box 11.1: Steps in an organizational partnership.**
> *(Note: some steps may occur concurrently, as noted in the text.)*
>
> 1. Have an initial conversation with a potential partner.
> 2. The "dating phase" (ascertain partner's willingness and capacity and discuss what an experiment would entail).
> 3. Put plans in writing.
> 4. Secure institutional review board approval.
> 5. Acquire funding (if necessary).
> 6. Collect data (including a pilot study if desired/feasible).
> 7. Analyze data and present results.
> 8. Follow up and possibly do another study together.

11.6.1 Step 1: Have an Initial Conversation with a Potential Partner

There is no single best way for potential partners to initially meet each other. Sometimes academics find potential partners via their own preexisting connections through family and friends, sometimes they are introduced via advisors and other colleagues, and sometimes they attend gatherings where they know that many other practitioners will be in attendance (e.g., professional association meetings). They may also cold contact organizations that they are interested in working with. New connections may also arise via social networks or via organizations like research4impact, Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP), the MIT GOV/LAB, and Scholars Strategy Network (SSN). Academics may also consider publishing op-eds about existing work, as these may lead practitioners to reach out and want to learn more.

Overall, in my experience, initial conversations may be proposed by either academics or practitioners. If academics initiate contact, they should be clear and upfront about why they are specifically interested in working with *that* organization. Focus on its goals, values, and strategic priorities, along with how your interests, values, and skills align and could be useful. For academics, it is often too easy to frame initial conversations in terms that are most familiar – research questions rooted in the academic literature – and not in terms that are likely to resonate with practitioners. Resist doing so. During these initial conversations, the goal is not to overwhelm potential partners with lots of details about what a study could look like. Rather, the purpose is to establish rapport, learn as much as possible about the organization, and try to identify shared values that can underlie a partnership going forward.

During these initial conversations, academics should adopt a relational mindset by using techniques that demonstrate interest in building a working relationship with potential partners. A relational mindset is important because it helps overcome two common problems that often arise in task-related conversations between people

with diverse forms of knowledge. One is self-censorship, in which the people we are speaking with do not feel comfortable sharing what they know and any concerns that they have (Galinsky et al. 2015; Stasser and Titus 2003). The second is that we may (automatically and unconsciously) enter these conversations with stereotypes about who is an "expert" with important knowledge to share. These status-based stereotypes mean that we may not equally recognize everyone's task-relevant knowledge (in the United States, for example, those with less formal education, women, and racial minorities are often accorded lower status; Ridgeway 2001).

Box 11.2 provides an overview of several relationship-building techniques that can help ease self-censorship and reduce the impact of status-based stereotypes.[1] I discuss each of them below and in Step 2.

First, use "openers" (Miller et al. 1983), in which you invite practitioners to talk about their organization's history, mission, programs, goals, and previous experiences interacting with researchers/research institutions.

Box 11.2: Helpful relationship-building techniques.

- Use "openers."
- Practice responsiveness.
- Be affirming.
- Use metacognitions.
- Engage in self-disclosure.
- Acknowledge over-time dimension to relationship.
- Use legitimation rhetoric.
- Provide reasons.
- Phrase questions in a way that avoids socially desirable answers.

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1 To be sure, academics reading this chapter may also not feel comfortable sharing what they know, and they may also be the target of negative status-based stereotypes by potential partners. Although my discussion in this chapter is addressed to academic readers (i.e., What can they do to minimize self-censorship among practitioners? What can they do to reduce the impact of status-based stereotypes on their own judgments?), my hope is that all partners would employ these techniques as part of a relational mindset.

Take care to directly respond to what they say (Leary 2010) with respectful follow-up questions that reflect curiosity. One way to demonstrate curiosity is to use metacognitions (Petty et al. 1995), which entail asking people to reflect upon how and why they do what they do ("How did you decide to design the program that way?"). One way to demonstrate respect is to directly affirm what they say, rather than quickly judging it and/or trying to explain it away (Edmondson 1999). For example, suppose you are speaking with people from the National Audubon Society about climate change. They are likely to talk about climate change specifically in terms of its impact on birding and bird conservation. Being responsive in this case means tying responses directly to that concern ("I do not know much about the impact on birds in coastal climates. Please tell me more about that ..."), rather than more general considerations about climate change. It also means affirming the belief that the impact on birds is important, as opposed to rushing to the judgment that some other climate change impact should be the focus of the conversation.

In addition, listen for emotional responses – "of confusion, concern, or excitement" (Penuel and Gallagher 2017, p. 41) – and pay attention to unfamiliar language and procedures. These are moments either to respond to right away or to refer back to later on, both for clarification and also to further demonstrate that you are responsive, affirming, and curious.

Academics should also be prepared to clearly state what they personally want to learn from a partnership, along with relevant background details such as why they care about the topic, what led them to be interested in researching it, and why they are sympathetic to the practitioners' mission. From a relational perspective, this type of self-disclosure helps establish both trust and liking, which make others more comfortable sharing their own personal information (Miller 2002).

In short, a relational mindset entails being interested, not just interesting. Kindness, respect, and actively demonstrating interest in and commitment to the organization's work and its unique identity are vital. A relational mindset helps establish a level of equity in which all parties talk about, acknowledge, and value the knowledge that everyone brings to the table.

Lastly, here are two final thoughts to keep in mind during the initial conversation. One is that it is helpful to get into the habit of keeping written records of communications (including summaries of phone conversations). These notes serve as important memory heuristics for everyone involved, and they also are useful in case of staff turnover or discrepancies down the line. The second is that, assuming the conversation is proceeding well, take care to explicitly signal that you wish to continue interacting (Clark and Lemay 2010). Signaling an over-time dimension may involve asking the partner for his/her preferred next steps, mentioning your own, and suggesting a particular timeframe.

11.6.2 Step 2: The "Dating Phase": Ascertain Partner's Willingness and Capacity and Discuss What an Experiment Would Entail

Ultimately, academics are looking for a partner who is both "willing and able" (Karlan and Appel 2016, p. 40). Ascertaining both of these attributes often involves lots of questions and many conversations. If the initial conversation from Step 1 seems promising, then follow-ups should delve more deeply into what a partnership might look like. A relational mindset remains vital, as there is still much to learn, talk about, and agree upon.

Partner willingness refers to whether a partner genuinely wants to learn something new related to their programs and goals, knowing full well that the study may not turn up what they would hope. Typically, academics are able to ascertain this willingness naturally during the conversations, though there are two specific topics they will want to bring up.

One is about what an experiment would actually involve (i.e., designing treatments, randomizing, recruiting a sufficiently large number of study participants, designating a

control group, etc.). During these conversations, academics may need to establish their credibility as a clear and confident advocate for good research design, as the technical details of experimentation may be unfamiliar to partners. Be prepared to potentially explain topics such as causal inference, statistics, internal validity, external validity, instrument design, attrition, spillover, blocking, and so forth in an intuitive, nontechnical manner that is tied to the partnership's goals. From the perspective of a relational mindset, academics should also be prepared to explicitly provide reasons that justify and explain design decisions (Bastardi and Shafir 2000) – so, rather than saying, "We need to do x," instead saying, "We need to do x because of reasons a, b, and c."

It is likely that many aspects of experimental design and procedures will raise concerns and questions. Given a relational mindset, hopefully partners feel comfortable raising them. Yet academics can also prompt them in several ways. One way to prompt sharing of concerns is to use legitimation rhetoric that acknowledges and validates the concerns they may have (Levine et al. 2019). One way to prompt questions is to ask them in an inviting manner. Instead of asking, "Is everything clear?" consider asking, "What questions do you have for me?" The latter phrasing signals that you expect the other individual to have questions, which is a reasonable assumption when discussing the technical details of experimentation with those who are unfamiliar with them. It also signals that a lack of clarity is entirely understandable.

As conversations proceed (and often before a decision to partner is officially made), academics may get asked to provide an overview of a literature or other aspects of experimental design not unique to the specific study. Be prepared for the possibility of some kinds of "public service" along these lines. You will need to decide for yourself how much you are willing to do before an organization officially decides to partner.

The other aspect of partner willingness refers to whether the partner is open to the possibility that the experiment reveals something they view as unfavorable (such as a null result). Academics should raise this difficult possibility upfront. One way to do so is to talk about the option of what an extended research program might look like. This signals that you are open to the possibility of a long-term relationship, which is helpful for a variety of substantive reasons (e.g., shortening the relationship-building steps for subsequent experiments). It also helps set expectations. If you decide to partner and then obtain an unexpected or unwanted result on the first experiment, then having spoken about a broader research agenda helps situate that result and the need to build on it together, rather than seeing it as the final word. Academics can also couch this discussion in terms of the importance of a "culture of testing," which avoids a black-and-white "this works and this doesn't" mindset. These conversations also provide useful moments to advocate for a pilot study (discussed further in Step 6).

In addition to partner willingness, academics will need to ascertain *organizational ability*. This means assessing capacity to conduct an experiment. New research projects are typically not the place to develop entirely new programs. For example, if implementing the experiment will require an army of volunteers, then the partner should have a volunteer program already in place. Also along these lines, academics will want to ask about partners' previous experience with data collection, recordkeeping, and partnering. They will want to make sure that the partner has experience working with the target population for the study – for instance, that they have access to an appropriate setting for testing the impact of the intervention at an appropriate time and one that is safe and technically feasible given the necessary infrastructure (working phone lines, Internet access, passable roads, etc.).

When asking potentially sensitive questions like these about organizational capacity, it is helpful to phrase them in such a way that legitimizes less socially desirable responses (e.g., acknowledging that capacity may be lacking; Tourangeau et al. 2000). This is another aspect of a relational mindset that

helps minimize self-censorship. So, for example, rather than asking, "Please tell me about the staff that could help out," instead ask, "Please tell me about the staff that could help out, as well as if you think that you may not have enough staff or volunteers and we'll need to get more." The former question implicitly signals that you expect there to be enough staff, whereas the latter question acknowledges that there may not be. Being mindful of how you ask questions like these is vital because it is nontrivial for practitioners to respond. They are probably not used to being peppered with questions like these from an "outsider," and it takes time and energy to respond.

Along these same lines, be mindful that partnerships often entail asking staff members and/or volunteers to do things they are not used to doing and are outside their job description. This may entail manually delivering the intervention, tracking subjects, auditing and entering data, and managing staff (Karlan and Appel 2016). That is why researchers should take care, as much as possible, to seek buy-in among organizational leaders, as well as among those who are on the front lines of implementation (at the very least, take care to explicitly acknowledge the extra/different workload and make sure that it is feasible).

Another question about organizational ability relates to funding. Academics should inquire about whether outside funding is necessary and/or whether it is already in place (and, if so, what does the funder require?). If funding is not already in place, then who are the likely funders and how long may it take to secure funding?

A final consideration related to organizational ability is that these conversations are likely to reveal constraints that affect what experimental designs are feasible. Academics may need to think creatively about how to design around them, perhaps by asking a different question, using standard tools in the experimental design toolkit, and so on. For example, in 2018, I conducted a study of civic leadership. Initial conversations with my organizational partner focused on trying to evaluate the impact of its preexisting

leadership training program, yet it became clear that we would be unable to randomize who attended. What we could randomize, however, was whether participants received additional mentoring after the training session. As a result, we shifted the question from one focused on evaluating the impact of the large training session to one focused on evaluating the impact of one-on-one mentorship.

Overall, my advice is that academics should be both enthusiastic as well as cautious during the "dating phase." Again, the overall goals are to ascertain *partner willingness* and *organizational ability*. The back-and-forth that occurs can be long and entail uncertain payoffs. This is something that all academics, and especially untenured scholars, need to consider. That said, a good indication that conversations are moving toward a partnership is when both partners are willing to talk about specifics: what the intervention might look like, the context in which it will be delivered, each partner's responsibilities for conducting the experiment, timing, budget, and so on. The opposite, which could be a lack of responsiveness in general (e.g., not promptly returning emails), an unwillingness to discuss specifics, and/or palpable differences in enthusiasm across levels of the organization, is worrisome. There is no clear line for when researchers should politely walk away from a potential partnership, but at the very least they should always be prepared to do so.

11.6.3 Step 3: Put Plans in Writing

If conversations reveal a mutually beneficial research question and feasible study design, then the next step is to codify everything in writing. Box 11.3 provides an overview of what should be written down. The goal is to lay out in very clear terms what will happen: outline the design of the study, how it will be implemented, the responsibilities of each partner throughout the process, how data will be collected, how results will be presented and disseminated, and when the partnership will end. Putting everything in writing helps ensure that everyone is on the same page

and that partners feel mutually accountable to each other. It also offers a reference point in case misunderstandings arise later on.[2]

Box 11.3: What should be put in writing ahead of time?

- Statement of each partner's goals.
- Statement of each partner's roles and responsibilities (treatment design, implementation, data collection, pilot study, etc.).
- Details on study funding and timing.
- Data ownership (including right to review and publish study details, data, and findings).
- Plan for dissemination of data, findings, and write-ups (including how/whether the organization's name may be used in print).
- Process for ending partnership.
- Declaration of any conflicts of interest.

Putting things in writing is a key make-or-break moment, as it can involve difficult conversations if you need to secure funding, resolve timeline differences, talk about who will have access to the data and in what form afterwards, and discuss safety concerns. While not typically written down, this step is also a valuable moment to talk about any infrastructure that might be necessary to make the partnership move smoothly (such as check-in routines, use of shared documents, and so on).

These conversations are also vital in light of one of the challenges mentioned earlier: in the process of gaining approval on the organizational side, academics often learn more about who the relevant stakeholders are. Obtaining their approval adds time upfront, but also helps to build a coalition of support.

A key part of any written document will describe data ownership and dissemination plans. On the former, partners frequently decide that data collected are jointly owned by both of them. That said, academics will need to ensure that they have the right to review and publish study details, data, and findings. On the latter, partners will also need to speak about dissemination plans (including data and write-ups). This includes the form that the write-ups will take (e.g., typically something other than an academic paper) and how and whether the partner's name may be used in print (as well as any other identifying information). Practitioners are intensely mission-driven, and so understandably they are very concerned about how their movement and/or organization will be portrayed in print. Moreover, depending upon the nature of the work (e.g., if it involves studying electoral fraud, anti-corruption measures, democracy promotion, and so on), there is the possibility for political sensitivities that will also affect whether the organization wants its name used in print. For these reasons, I mentioned earlier in the ethics section that organizations should choose whether to be anonymous in publications (though not whether academics publish the findings).

Written partnership plans can take several different forms. Sometimes they can entail exchanging emails with relevant details and having all parties explicitly respond with their agreement. Other times they can involve more formal documents such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or perhaps a binding contract that is sent via university counsel (although MOUs carry a degree of seriousness and mutual respect, they are not legally binding).[3] Academics and partners should decide together which type of document they prefer. Academics should also check with others at their university to see if it has any specific requirements.

Regardless of the particular written form, the underlying point is the same: it is important to put the broad outlines of what the partnership will entail and the responsibilities of each partner in writing. Yet any document will not be the be-all and end-all. Many final decisions will come afterwards, and partners

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2 Lipovsek and Zomer 2019 provide several examples of the types of questions that partners may wish to ask each other when putting plans in writing.

3 Organizations may also ask academic partners to sign a nondisclosure agreement.

will face unforeseen circumstances. That is why communication lines must be open. The relational mindset described earlier is helpful for when unforeseen circumstances do occur, so that partners feel comfortable raising questions and concerns and have had practice being responsive to each other.

Lastly, in addition to written partnership plans, this is also the point in the process when academics will want to file preanalysis plans describing the hypotheses they plan to test and how the data will be analyzed. Preanalysis plans offer an additional form of commitment and expectation setting, among other benefits.

11.6.4 Step 4: Secure Institutional Review Board Approval

Parts of Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6 are likely to occur in tandem rather than sequentially. The institutional review board (IRB) process is unlikely to be unique to organizational partnerships per se, though it is possible that some university IRBs will have particular follow-up questions about the organization itself. For instance, they may ask about its goals and tax status[4] (e.g., to ensure that university funds are not being used for a research project that will directly benefit a partisan organization). Lastly, note that sometimes university IRBs decide they do not need to review research proposals if the organization is collecting the data as part of its mission. Nevertheless, my advice is for academics to always to request IRB approval just in case.

11.6.5 Step 5: Acquire Funding (If Necessary)

As noted above, conversations about funding should start well before Step 5, and in particular well before the decision to move forward and put everything in writing. That said, I

include it as Step 5 because formal funding applications (if needed) may only arise once partners have officially decided to work together.

While some partnerships may require new external grants and substantial funding, it is important not to overstate this point. There is often a misconception that experiments with organizational partners involve substantial expenses incurred by researchers, which can deter those who are just starting out. Yet that need not be the case, and often is not, for two reasons. First, some experiments do not require any new out-of-pocket expenditures at all. Instead, they may just require a small change in organizational procedure, such as randomizing something that was not previously being randomized. Second, for experiments that do involve new out-of-pocket expenditures, the organizational partner may already have a grant that covers research expenses.

For example, I conducted experiments with four different organizations between 2016 and 2018. All of these cost $0 from my research account. Two experiments involved randomly assigning something that had not been randomly assigned in the past. In the other cases, the organizations had preexisting grants for research expenses. To be sure, I have also conducted experiments in which I have spent some money from my personal research budget or applied for small grants on my own to cover expenses, but that has definitely not always been the case.

11.6.6 Step 6: Collect Data (Including a Pilot Study If Desired/Feasible)

Academics need to be actively involved during the implementation and data collection phase. One key aspect of this concerns the randomization. Speaking from personal experience, it is easy for randomization to proceed incorrectly. If at all possible, academics should try to conduct the randomization themselves and provide the implementing partner with a list of who receives the control and treatment.

Another important consideration is whether to conduct a pilot study (and, just like with funding discussions, this should

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4 This point is especially relevant when partnering with nonprofits, as some are partisan and some are nonpartisan. A detailed discussion of the differences between the various types of nonprofits (501c3s, 501c4s, political action committees, etc.) is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the following website provides a brief overview as a good starting point: www.opensecrets.org/527s/types.php.

be discussed when writing up partnership plans, if not before). Pilot studies (along with spending time in the field ahead of time) are valuable ways to learn about the context, test the feasibility of particular treatments and instruments, and spot problems early on. Sometimes pilot studies can involve many iterations. For instance, I was involved with a door-to-door canvassing experiment that entailed pilot testing various treatments for a total of six months before the final design was agreed upon. In this case, the pilot studies were valuable not only for research purposes, but also for organizational capacity building, as my partner's staff were heavily involved with designing the pilot and ascertaining feasibility (i.e., what kinds of treatments its volunteers were able to deliver on voters' doorsteps). Ultimately, the design of the intervention very much reflected their extensive locally rooted expertise along with knowledge drawn from the academic literature.

Prior to the full-study implementation, academics must remain mindful that partnerships often entail asking frontline staff, volunteers, and supervisors to engage in new tasks that are not part of their core job descriptions (to echo a point I mentioned earlier when discussing organizational ability). They will need to be clear, and make sure that others within the organization are clear, about why the study must be implemented in a certain way. Keep in mind that from the perspective of organizational staff (and possibly some leadership as well) academics are "outsiders," and it is likely that at least some people will see the research project as being run by "outside experts." In addition to having explicit support from organizational leadership, researchers can establish credibility by making sure that every aspect of the rationale for the implementation is made clear. People are more likely to voluntarily comply with a request when they receive reasons for it (Langer et al. 1978).[5]

As implementation proceeds, partners should be in constant communication with

updates in order to ensure that matters are proceeding smoothly and data are being recorded consistently, completely, and accurately. Academics are used to thinking about technical failures that can arise with research designs (e.g., insufficient statistical power, poorly worded survey instruments, attrition, noncompliance), yet with partnerships there are many implementation challenges that may arise as well (e.g., staff and volunteers not following protocols correctly; for a detailed overview, see Karlan and Appel 2016, chapters 4 and 5). Be sure to maintain a relational mindset by, for example, phrasing check-in questions in ways that invite concerns to be raised and are not accusatory (as noted earlier in Step 2).

Lastly, before data collection closes, partners may ask for updates and/or they may have directly observed field successes and challenges. It is possible to become discouraged at this point, which can lead to disengagment (or worse). Academics cannot wholly avoid this, yet that is why, during Steps 2 and 3, academics should talk openly about the possibility that the results may not be as expected. This point underscores how academics need to work to ascertain whether the partner is genuinely willing to learn something new and possibly unexpected by completing the experiment.

11.6.7 Step 7: *Analyze Data and Present Results*

Once data collection is complete, then the next step is the analysis and write-up. Sometimes academics do the analysis on their own, whereas other times partners work together. Either way, how those results will be disseminated should have been discussed earlier in the process (see Step 3). At least initially, practitioners often want a short presentation, memo, or policy brief. They are happy to cite a peer-reviewed paper later on, but may not want to wait for it. And in any event, they often value something that is shorter and more focused on the takeaway message of "what works," stripped of the formality associated with situating results in an existing academic literature.

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5   In some cases, partners may consider more concrete incentives for staff and volunteers as well.

Academics should again be prepared for a variety of reactions to the findings. There may be different levels of emotional investment in the project, especially if it involves an impact assessment (i.e., if it involves directly evaluating the impact of an organization's existing program, which has direct implications for people's jobs and livelihoods). This is why difficult conversations about unexpected findings are vital during earlier steps in the process.

11.6.8 Step 8: Follow Up and Possibly Do Another Study Together

Continue talking about the data and results, as interaction helps both partners collectively make sense of them. Unless there has been great staff turnover, one main benefit of continuing to work together is that relationships are already in place. In addition, it is also often easier to implement longer-term experiments with preexisting partners.

11.7 Detailed Example: An Organizational Partnership to Study Donation Decisions

Having discussed the benefits, challenges, and steps of organizational partnerships in general, in this section I describe one example at length. I discuss several specific details of how the partnership arose and identify broader themes that the example illustrates. This example is not necessarily the most representative, but I choose to focus on it because it was my first one. My hope is that reading about the origin story of my first partnership will be especially useful for readers who are brand new to this kind of work.

In the fall of 2011, I was studying why it is difficult to organize people facing economic insecurity. Based on the existing literature, I suspected that people would pay more attention when it is clear how an organization's work connects to their own personal situation, but at the same time I theorized that some of the common ways that organizations personalize issues might actually be self-undermining. For example, using language

about the increasing cost of healthcare might successfully personalize the issue, yet it might also make people feel poor and thus less likely to believe that they can afford to spend money (and even time) on politics.

I had already tested this idea via survey experiments, but the context was somewhat artificial for studying action-taking, and I was interested in shortening the distance between the research design and the behaviors I aimed to learn about (see Chapter 12 in this volume on this point). Thus, I wanted to conduct an experiment in a more naturalistic environment, such as giving people the opportunity to take action supporting a real organization working to reduce economic insecurity.

While I was aware of many organizations working on a variety of economic insecurity issues, I faced constraints that are common for people who are new to partnerships: I did not have any preexisting relationships with staff at these organizations and I was worried about how long it might take to actually collect data. I was hoping to field this experiment by spring 2012 in order to remain on track with a book manuscript that had a sensitive deadline (in this case, largely stemming from my tenure clock).

Given these constraints, I believed that working with a small local nonprofit would be best, as I thought it would be easier to gain access to decision-makers. Given the lack of a large bureaucracy, I also hoped that they might be more amenable to a quick timeline. That said, two potential challenges with small nonprofits are that they are less likely to have preexisting grants that could cover research costs and staff are likely to be stretched especially thin.

I started asking friends and colleagues in my small city (Ithaca, NY) if they were involved with any local organizations that they thought might be interested. After several conversations, one friend suggested I contact the Ithaca Health Alliance (IHA), a small local nonprofit that provides health care services and conducts community engagement on health issues. She thought its leadership might be interested because, like many others, they sometimes used personalized language about economic insecurity

in order to build their base of support. I was hoping that they might be interested in working together to study whether this rhetoric was unintentionally harmful (and, if so, what alternatives would be better).

Given IHA's governance structure, she told me that I would likely need approval from both the executive director and also the president of the Board of Directors. The executive director was busy with grant proposals and day-to-day responsibilities, and the Board president was a volunteer with a separate full-time job. Fortunately, I was able to schedule brief meetings with them by January 2012. Our initial conversations were very much getting-to-know-you affairs, focused on personal interests, goals, and values and what the benefit exchange of a partnership would look like. They were also especially interested in knowing about some of the existing literature on this topic. Logistics came later on, and I knew that the "dating phase" was progressing well when they invited me to draft a short written proposal to review. I proposed a very simple two-group experiment, with one control group and one treatment group, in which we would send donation solicitation letters with varying language to potential new supporters.

During the "dating phase," they raised several questions. For example, after I shared my survey-based findings on self-undermining economic insecurity rhetoric, they asked why another study was even necessary. In response, I communicated why I thought it was important to study this question in a more natural setting. Plus, I took care to highlight the obvious benefit: IHA clearly stood to gain from anyone who responded to our solicitation letters, and I was very clear that any language we used in the letters would have to be approved by all parties (thus, while I began our initial conversations with a broad idea, the final study design was a product of everyone's input). In the process, I also learned a lot about how the organization worked – to what extent they relied on individual donors, how that had changed over time, and why avoiding self-undermining rhetoric was important to them.

Another set of conversations focused on resources. There was no ready-made email list we could freely use for this study. Instead, we would need to do cold mailings with paid postage. I calculated that we would need to send out approximately 3000 of these letters. Via small grants and some money from my preexisting research account, I was able to contribute $2000, which covered the large majority of the costs. IHA had a very small budget, but was willing to pitch in to cover some remaining costs (such as letterhead and envelopes) and commit a small amount of staff time. They were worried about devoting scarce volunteer hours to this study, and so I agreed to do all of the envelope stuffing, stamping, and sealing myself. Lastly, although we discussed the idea of a pilot study, we decided against it given that: (1) the solicitation language was (for the most part) fairly straightforward and (2) we did not expect implementation challenges associated with simply mailing letters and completing standard data entry as responses came in.

Ultimately, the executive director and Board president agreed that partnering was worthwhile, and the study was fielded in March 2012. We found that rhetoric focusing on skyrocketing healthcare costs was indeed self-undermining. The data were high quality, and observing behavior in the real world was both exciting and directly relevant to practice. I published the results as part of a book on the politics of economic insecurity (Levine 2015). Meanwhile, IHA gained many new supporters. I also created a separate memo and talk to present to the IHA leadership, per our MOU. I then continued to be in contact with them after the study was over to discuss other possible solicitation strategies, and as it turned out, we partnered on two other experiments.

Stepping back from the specific details, this example underscores several attributes that were helpful with moving the partnership forward without lengthy delay: an organization without a large bureaucratic structure, an organization with supportive decision-makers, and a study that did not require new fundraising. At the same time, two attributes arguably added some time

and uncertainty during the "dating phase": having to build new working relationships from scratch and ensuring a benefit exchange (i.e., ensuring the design was theoretically meaningful and could likely pass peer review and also ensuring it was consistent with the organization's existing outreach and goals). Overall, the result was an experiment that was a nice example of use-inspired research that advances fundamental understanding (Stokes 2011).

11.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an approach and a procedural toolkit. The approach underscores the importance of not only adopting a *learning mindset* when engaging in organizational partnerships, but also a *relational mindset* that reflects the fact that you are building new working relationships with individuals who have diverse knowledge. This mindset is woven into the step-by-step guide to partnering. Although organizational partnerships certainly entail some challenges, they also offer an exciting opportunity to learn together and to study important behaviors in the real world.

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