Research Impact Through Matchmaking (RITM): How and Why to Connect Researchers and Practitioners

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Abstract

Researchers and practitioners increasingly want to learn from each other and in some cases even work together to solve problems. Here I present results from a new evidence-based approach for connecting them, called *Research Impact Through Matchmaking* (RITM). This method leverages research on organizational diversity in order to initiate new working relationships between diverse people. In this paper I describe the method and present data from 37 initial matches between practitioners working at nonprofits and social scientists. To my knowledge, this is the first large N dataset describing how a variety of nonprofit practitioners value social science research. I also document the impact of these matches. Overall, this method and these results are helpful for researchers and practitioners who are increasingly faced with opportunities to forge new connections and introduce others across diverse spaces.

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Social scientists produce research that aims to understand, explain, and help solve society's most pressing problems. Practitioners have direct, field-based expertise on the nature of those problems and want to know what works.

Both groups are intensely curious. In some cases, they seek to establish extended relationships in which they work together to conduct field experiments (Karlan and Appel 2016, Butler 2019) and/or engage in research-practice partnerships (Coburn and Penuel 2016) and knowledge brokering (Dobbins et al. 2009).

Yet many practitioners and researchers do not have the need or capacity for extended interactions. Instead what they want, at least initially, is a single, high-impact conversation. These conversations can reveal powerful new ideas. For instance, the "creative spark" for studying the impact of social pressure on voter turnout came from a conversation between political scientists and a campaign consultant in Michigan (Green and Gerber 2010:332).

That said, both groups face intense demands on their time and belong to different social networks. Thus, to initiate new conversations what is needed is an evidence-based approach for matchmaking. In this paper I describe such a method, called *Research Impact Through Matchmaking* (RITM). It is rooted in research on organizational diversity because connecting researchers and practitioners involves initiating connections between strangers who have diverse forms of knowledge (and who are often diverse with respect to many other attributes as well).

The setting was as follows. As president of research4impact,[1] an organization dedicated to building connections between researchers and practitioners, I reached out to several practitioners' listservs in 2018 and invited them to share challenges they were facing in their work in which they thought research might be helpful. In response I would match them with a social scientist one-on-one. I targeted listservs composed of non-partisan, non-profit organizations with a mission to

remedy social ills. 37 practitioners responded over several months. In this paper I present details on the demand for, and the results of, these new relationships.

This paper makes two contributions. First, to my knowledge I present the first dataset that captures a wide variety of practitioners' perspectives on the value of social science research. Second, I describe the scientific foundations of RITM, give examples of its techniques, and present data on its impact. Even though many researchers and practitioners may not self-identify as matchmakers, they increasingly know others across these spaces (Butler 2019) and thus have many opportunities to broker connections. RITM provides an evidence-based framework for those who are formally part of matchmaking organizations (e.g. research4impact) as well as those who introduce others in the course of everyday interactions.

How do Practitioners at Nonprofits Value Social Science Research?

In 2018 I posted an announcement to five practitioner-oriented email lists inviting them to "learn about research that can help solve some of their organization's trickiest problems". The lists were composed of practitioners who work at non-partisan, nonprofit organizations with a public interest mission. They are advocates and organizers addressing social problems such as poor nutrition, climate change, child abuse, low voter engagement, low political knowledge, traffic congestion, pollution, and so on. The announcement asked them to fill out a brief online form. I would then follow-up for a more detailed scope call. Over a three-month period 37 people from 10 countries responded, and I connected them with researchers from 12 academic disciplines: public policy, public health, environmental studies, sociology, communication, economics, political science, psychology, law, business, city and regional planning, and human development.

I categorized their requests into four types of goals (see Table 1). Those in the first three were matched with researchers for a short (< 60 minutes) conversation. Those in the fourth were also matched for a short conversation, at least initially, though with a stated interest in a longer-term collaboration.

[Table 1 Goes Here]

Afterwards I shared this coding with five professionals who have each worked in advocacy and organizing for at least fifteen years. All of them verified that it resonated with their personal experiences. Although this dataset is surely not representative of all practitioners that could benefit from connecting with a social scientist (it is difficult to imagine how one would define this population), it does describe how a wide variety of practitioners value social science research. I describe each category below.

1. To receive an overview of a large research literature

This was by far the most common request: practitioners wanted a curated overview of a large body of literature. Typically the person who reached out was leading a new initiative within the organization. While they could search online for relevant information, doing so entailed severe concerns about volume and quality. A more efficient starting point would be a personalized conversation with a subject matter expert, in which they could learn about existing research most relevant to their goal. For example, one person was part of an organization that was starting to give grants to local communities to spur civic engagement. She needed an overview of the latest research on links between civic engagement and public safety. A second person wanted to learn about research encouraging people to take public transportation and/or use bikes instead of

driving. Summing up his experience with a conversation like this, a third practitioner said: “We got a dose of years’ worth of research expertise in a 45 minute phone call.”

2. To make an immediate evidence-based decision

Some practitioners were facing an immediate decision in their work and wanted to ensure it was informed by evidence. For instance, one person who worked for a membership-based organization needed to measure members’ political ideology. His question pertained to survey methodology – what is the most effective way to measure how conservative or liberal someone is? Another person posed a survey question pertaining to networks of social movement leaders: What is the best way to measure individuals’ social ties within a group? A third person was expanding her organization’s get-out-the-vote efforts and needed to learn about messages that resonate with low-propensity voters.

3. To gain ideas about how to measure impact

Some practitioners were seeking advice about how to measure the impact of their existing work. Such questions arise internally within mission-driven organizations as well as externally from donors. In each case they were already collecting some outcome data, but it did not always align most closely with their theory of change. If the initial conversation with the researcher went well then they were typically open to a longer-term research collaboration.

For example, one person worked for an organization that had developed a new app to encourage healthy eating behavior. It was easy to measure the number of users, but the organization’s goal was ultimately to change behavior. She wanted to talk with a researcher about possible behavioral measures. Another example came from someone who worked for an

organization that provided online information about polling locations and candidates. He already had web traffic data, yet wanted to assess the site's impact on other outcomes such as turnout and political trust.

4. To collaborate on a new project

Some practitioners reached out because they were interested in collaborating with a researcher on an entirely new project. In each case they already had organizational, financial, and/or administrative resources in place, and were looking to work with a researcher that would bring research skills and credibility. Unlike the previous category of respondents who only wanted to evaluate current programs, these practitioners expected to formulate hypotheses in partnership with the researcher. For example, one person was looking to develop and test new ways of designing government forms for social benefits. Someone else wanted to brainstorm and test creative ways to raise awareness of economic insecurity among college students.

RITM: An Evidence-Based Matchmaking Method

I developed RITM as the matchmaking procedure. It focuses on the initial set-up – establishing a firm foundation for a successful working relationship, whether that relationship lasts for one conversation or extends beyond that. RITM answers the question: What is the best way to initiate working relationships between diverse people?

On the one hand, conversations between diverse individuals can produce more creative and effective decision-making (e.g. Sommers 2006) by surfacing a much broader set of perspectives and task-relevant knowledge (Galinsky et al. 2015, Page 2017). At the same time, people do not always feel comfortable sharing what they know, especially if status differentials are

present (Stasser and Titus 2003), and diverse teams can produce interpersonal conflict (Galinsky et al. 2015).

RITM maximizes the likelihood of informational gains and minimizes the possibility of tension and self-censorship. For matchmakers it entails three steps: conducting a scope call, recruiting a match, and then introducing the researcher and practitioner.

Scope call

RITM begins with a scope call to learn more about the goals of the person who initiated the match. In what follows I assume this is the practitioner (as that was the case with the 37 matches described earlier), though the method would apply to researcher-initiated matches as well.

These calls begin with an "opener" that prompts the practitioner to speak first. People are more willing to share information with others who explicitly signal that they want to listen and be helpful (Miller et al. 1983). The opener invites them to share more details about their organization, their role within it, and how research could be helpful.

Ensuring that the practitioner speaks first is also vital because of conversational dynamics. As Pickering and Garrod (2004) show, individuals engaged in dialogue often pursue "interactive alignment" in which they align their language with what was said beforehand. During the scope call this helps ensure the matchmaker is using similar language as the practitioner, and also minimizes the unintentional use of jargon such as "experiment" and "subjects".

As the conversation proceeds, follow-up questions should be affirming and responsive to the information being shared. People are more willing to share detailed information with those who explicitly demonstrate interest and offer positive feedback (Taylor et al. 1969).

After a while it is important for the matchmaker to recap the practitioner's goals in his/her own words. This forces a higher level of active processing (Petty et al. 1995), thus ensuring that the matchmaker can accurately describe the goals when recruiting a match. Practitioners are then asked to share the "ways in which what was said were either inaccurate or correct". Survey researchers find that question-wording affects the kinds of considerations that are salient when people answer them (Tourangeau et al. 2000). Deliberately phrasing the question in this way encourages practitioners to canvass both types of considerations and also reduces the likelihood that they "go along to get along" (Chen et al. 1996) by not offering corrections.

Lastly, the matchmaker needs to avoid pressuring people into a match prematurely. The final question should be whether they "are ready for a match or want to wait for a while" while also noting that it is "totally understandable if they want to wait". This statement leverages normative language to legitimize the option of waiting. In my case, 5 of the 37 practitioners decided to wait.

The match

After the scope call the matchmaker recruits a researcher with topical expertise who is likely to enjoy speaking with and learn from the practitioner. They are then formally introduced via email.

The success of the match depends upon not just *who* is recruited, but also *how* they are recruited and *how* they are introduced to each other. In advance of diverse conversations people often think about what they are going to say (Loyd et al. 2013), and how the conversation is framed affects this pre-meeting elaboration (Vorauer et al. 2009). The emails to recruit researchers and formally initiate the match should employ the following three strategies.

1. State each person's unique expertise

People in groups often do not share unique task-relevant information that they bring to the conversation, and others may not carefully consider it even when they do share it (Stasser and Titus 2003). Moreover, status differentials exacerbate these patterns. When people join task-oriented groups they enter with performance expectations. They are based on "shared cultural beliefs" that accord certain individual characteristics with "greater social worthiness and competence" and are impactful because:

> "The greater the expectation advantage of one actor over another, the more likely the first actor is to be allowed chances to perform in the group, the more likely she is to speak up and offer task suggestions while the second actor hesitates, the more likely she is to have her suggestions positively evaluated, and the less likely she is to be [influential] when there are disagreements (Ridgeway 2001:357)."

In the United States, for example, there are several individual characteristics that frequently inform status judgments, including educational attainment, occupation, gender, and race (Ridgeway 2001). Many researcher-practitioner matches are likely to differ along some of these lines.

One way to reduce the impact of status differentials is to communicate each individual's expertise to the entire group upfront. As Sunstein and Hastie (2015:112) write: "If a group wants to obtain the information that its members hold, all group members should be told, before deliberation begins, that different members have different, and relevant, information to contribute." This method increases the likelihood that each person shares his/her unique information and that others incorporate it to the broader conversation (Stasser et al. 1995). For this reason, recruitment and match emails should include short paragraphs that explicitly identify each person's task-relevant expertise. They should also minimize biographical details, thus talking

about expertise in terms of what people have done (e.g. they have done research on x) and not who they are (e.g. that they are a professor).

2. Describe the conversation as a mutually beneficial learning opportunity

Focusing on each person's task-related expertise also facilitates framing the match as an opportunity for both the researcher and practitioner to learn from one another (i.e. the matchmaker should note that they will "enjoy talking to one another" and both "learn a lot."). As Galinsky et al. (2015) note, group leaders should ensure that a diverse work group "is framed inclusively, highlighting the benefits" for everyone involved. Ely and Thomas (2001:266) echo this point, noting that leaders should encourage group members to work within a "cognitive frame" that explicitly values the opportunity to learn from each other. They observed that a "learning" frame produced high-functioning work groups in which members were more likely to feel valued and report that the group was successful.

3. Re-state the goal of the conversation

Each email should re-state the goal to ensure that it is always common knowledge. As Phillips (2017:241) writes, "Having a common goal is one of the most important prerequisites for success in groups…repeat it often." This provides an opportunity to explicitly convey not just that each person has expertise, but also how that expertise is useful for achieving the conversation's goal. It also provides a clear benchmark for post-conversation evaluation.

In sum, RITM leverages these three strategies, along with the scope call, to provide a strong foundation for initiating new working relationships between diverse people.

Assessing RITM's Impact

I applied RITM to the 37 practitioner-initiated requests mentioned earlier, and then assessed the matches in several ways (see Table 2). First, for the 9 practitioners that wanted to talk about collaborating on a new project, 7 (78%) had proceeded to the design and/or data collection stage as of this writing. Six involve new data collection (likely randomized controlled trials) and one involves analyzing administrative data. In the other two cases the researcher and practitioner spoke amicably several times but could not agree on a mutually-beneficial project.

In addition, there were 30 requests for conversations on other topics, of which 25 asked to be matched after the scope call (the other five chose to wait for various reasons). I was able to find matches for 24 of them. Afterwards I followed up with practitioners and asked if the conversation provided useful information addressing their current needs. Two did not respond, and I learned that misconnects had occurred in four other cases (where the practitioner and researcher never spoke). Of the 18 that connected and responded, 94% responded affirmatively and noted that they would be using the information going forward. I also asked the researchers if the conversation was worthwhile. Here again 94% reported that it was, using terms like "gave me lots of ideas," "helpful," and a welcome opportunity to reflect on "what we know and what we don't know". Overall, this feedback provides strong initial evidence that RITM provided direct and immediate mutual benefits. Future work would benefit from applying it with an even wider range of practitioners, as well as comparing outcomes among those who benefit from the evidence-based RITM method versus other matchmaking approaches (perhaps via an RCT).

[Table 2 Goes Here]

To conclude, matchmaking and the conversations that result fill an important need. For academics, they compliment other forms of engagement such as blogging (Sides 2011), writing policy briefs (Skocpol 2014), and performing public service (Bowers and Testa 2019). As external bodies such as donors and governments increasingly demand evidence of research impact (Nyhan et al. 2015), these conversations represent one way for research to influence decision-making outside the academy (Nutley et al. 2007) and for practitioners to efficiently learn what works. Lastly, as interest in academic-practitioner relationships grows (Han and Stenhouse 2015, Butler 2019) RITM principles may be applied to other kinds of matches with a variety of other practitioners and also extended to provide support beyond the initial match.

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Table 1: Goals of Nonprofit Practitioners

Goal 1: To receive an overview of a large research literature	*20*
Goal 2: To make an immediate evidence-based decision	*3*
Goal 3: To gain ideas about how to measure impact	*7*
Goal 4: To collaborate with a researcher on a new project	*9*

(Numbers do not add up to 37 because two practitioners stated multiple initial goals.)

Table 2: Summary of RITM's Impact

Among those matched for a short conversation (goals 1-3 in Table 1):	
% of practitioners who said the conversation provided useful information to address current needs	*94%*
% of researchers who found the discussion worthwhile	*94%*
Among those matched to talk about a possible collaboration (goal 4 in Table 1)	
% who began a collaboration	*78%*

[1] I co-founded it with Don Green and Jake Bowers in 2017.