

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

Adam Seth Levine  
Associate Professor of Government, Cornell University  
President, research4impact

Forthcoming in *PS: Political Science and Politics*

September 9, 2019

## Abstract

Researchers and practitioners increasingly want to learn from each other and sometimes 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 new connections between practitioners working at nonprofits and social scientists. To my knowledge, this is the first large N dataset describing reasons why a variety of nonprofit practitioners value social science research. I also document the impact of these matches. Overall, this paper provides actionable guidance for individuals looking to initiate their own new connections (i.e. to match themselves) and/or to broker new connections between others.

Adam Seth Levine is an Associate Professor of Government at Cornell University. He may be reached at [ASL22@cornell.edu](mailto:ASL22@cornell.edu). For feedback and intellectual inspiration I owe many thanks to Carina Barnett-Loro, Jake Bowers, Dan Butler, Bryce Corrigan, Liz Gerber, Don Green, Hahrie Han, Dan Hopkins, Brendan Nyhan, Michael Silberman, and Amber Wichowsky. I also thank the Rita Allen Foundation and Sage OCEAN for generous funding that made this project possible.

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 researchers and practitioners 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).

In this paper I describe a new evidence-based approach for initiating conversations across diverse spaces. I call this method *Research Impact Through Matchmaking* (RITM). It is rooted in research on organizational diversity because, at a fundamental level, connecting researchers and practitioners involves initiating new working relationships between strangers who have diverse forms of knowledge (and who are often diverse with respect to many other attributes as well).

I applied RITM in the following setting. As president of research4impact,<sup>1</sup> 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 connect 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. Here I present details on the demand for, and the results of, these new relationships.

I aim to make two contributions. One is that, 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.

This paper has wide applicability. I identify several reasons why practitioners may wish to connect with researchers. Each reason provides a potential basis for both to initiate their own new connections (i.e. match themselves) and/or broker new connections between others. My description of RITM then provides actionable guidance for how to achieve these goals.

### **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 identify several reasons why 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 people who reached out were leading a new initiative within their 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 who would bring new ideas, research skills, and credibility. Unlike the previous category of respondents who only wanted to evaluate current programs, these practitioners expected to formulate new 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.

#### **Research Impact Through Matchmaking (RITM)**

I developed RITM as a method for initiating new connections across diverse spaces, such as between the aforementioned practitioners and researchers. RITM 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 new working relationships between diverse people? It is useful for individuals initiating their own new connections (i.e. matching themselves) and/or brokering connections between others.

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. It entails two main steps: conducting a scope call and then making an introduction. The scope call techniques are useful for individuals initiating their own new working relationships as well as those brokering new ones between others. The techniques for making introductions are useful when brokering new relationships.

In what follows I discuss details of how I applied RITM during the 37 matches described earlier (i.e. from the perspective of someone who conducted outreach to practitioners and whose goal was to broker new relationships between them and researchers other than myself). That said, each of the relationship-building techniques discussed is easily adapted more broadly.

### Scope Call

My use of RITM began once practitioners responded to my email list outreach. The purpose of the scope call was to learn more about their goals. I began with an “opener” that prompted 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 invited them to share more details about their organization, their role within it, and how research could be helpful.

Ensuring that the practitioner spoke first was 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 helped ensure I was using similar language as the practitioner, and also minimized my unintentional use of jargon such as “experiment” and “subjects”.

As the conversation proceeded, follow-up questions were 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 was important to recap the practitioner’s goals in my own words. This forced a higher level of active processing (Petty et al. 1995) and helped ensure accurate understanding. I then asked practitioners to share the “ways in which what I said were either inaccurate or correct”. Survey researchers find that question-wording affects the kinds of considerations that are salient when people respond (Tourangeau et al. 2000). Deliberately phrasing the question in this way encouraged practitioners to canvass both types of considerations and also reduced the likelihood that they would “go along to get along” (Chen et al. 1996) by not offering corrections.

Lastly, during the scope calls I was careful to avoid pressuring practitioners into a match prematurely. I asked whether they “are ready for a match or want to wait” while also noting that it is “totally understandable if they want to wait”. Here I was leveraging normative language to legitimize the option of waiting. In my case, 5 of the 37 practitioners decided to wait.

### Making the Introduction



After the scope call my next step was to recruit a researcher with topical expertise who was likely to enjoy speaking with and learning from the practitioner. Then I formally introduced them via email.

The success of an introduction like this 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 interaction is framed affects this pre-meeting elaboration (Vorauer et al. 2009). For this reason, RITM entails the following three techniques when brokering new relationships.

### *1. State each person's unique expertise*

People often do not share unique task-relevant information that they bring to a 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 conversations they enter with performance expectations. These 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 [influenced] 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). Researcher-practitioner relationships differ along at least 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, my recruitment and match emails included short paragraphs that explicitly identified each person's task-relevant expertise. I minimized biographical details, thus talking about expertise mostly 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 allowed me to frame the match as an opportunity for both the researcher and practitioner to learn from one another (i.e. by stating that they will "enjoy talking to one another" and both "learn a lot."). As Galinsky et al. (2015) note, 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*

In my emails I took care to re-state the goal of the initial conversation (based on what I learned during the scope call) to ensure that it was 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 techniques when making introductions and, along with the scope call, provides 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 (in which 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, comparing demand among those who receive alternative outreach messages (perhaps via an RCT), and comparing outcomes among those who benefit from the evidence-based RITM method versus other matchmaking approaches (also perhaps via an RCT).

*[Table 2 Goes Here]*

To conclude, conversations between researchers and fill an important need. They provide private benefits such as knowledge gained. They also contribute to a broader norm of interaction, a public benefit.

For researchers, these working relationships 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), they 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 as well as extended to provide support beyond the initial match.

## **Bibliography**

Bowers, Jake, and Paul Testa 2019. "Better Government, Better Science: The Promise of and Challenges facing the Evidence-Informed Policy Movement." *Annual Review of Political Science* 22:28.1-28.22.

Butler, Daniel M. 2019. "Facilitating Field Experiments at the Subnational Level." *Journal of Politics*. 81: 371-376.

Chen, Serena, David Shechter, and Shelly Chaiken. 1996. "Getting at the Truth or Getting Along: Accuracy- Versus Impression-Motivated Heuristic and Systematic Processing." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 262-275.

Coburn, Cynthia E., and William R. Penuel. 2016. "Research-Practice Partnerships in Education: Outcomes, Dynamics, and Open Questions." *Educational Researcher* 45: 48-54.

Dobbins, Maureen, Steven E. Hanna, Donna Ciliska, Steve Manske, Roy Cameron, Shawna L. Mercer, Linda O'Mara, Kara DeCorby, and Paula Robeson. 2009. "A Randomized Controlled Trial Evaluating the Impact of Knowledge Translation and Exchange Strategies." *Implementation Science* 4.

Ely, Robin J., and David A. Thomas. 2001. "Cultural Diversity at Work: The Effects of Diversity Perspectives on Work Group Processes and Outcomes." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46: 229-273.

Galinsky, Adam D., Andrew R. Todd, Astrid C. Homan, Katherine W. Phillips, Evan P. Apfelbaum, Stacey J. Sasaki, Jennifer A. Richeson, Jennifer B. Olayon, and William W. Maddux. 2015. "Maximizing the Gains and Minimizing the Pains of Diversity: A Policy Perspective." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10: 742-748.

Green, Donald P., and Alan S. Gerber. 2010. "Introduction to Social Pressure and Voting: New Experimental Evidence." *Political Behavior* 32: 331-336.

Han, Hahrie, and Neil Stenhouse. 2015. "Bridging the Research-Practice Gap in Climate Communication: Lessons from One Academic-Practitioner Collaboration." *Science Communication* 37: 396-404.

Karlan, Dean, and Jacob Appel. 2016. *Failing in the Field*. Princeton University Press.

Miller, Lynn Carol, John H. Berg, and Richard L. Archer. 1983. "Openers: Individuals Who Elicit Intimate Self-Disclosure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44: 1234-1244.

Nutley, Sandra M., Isabel Walter, and Huw T.O. Davies. 2007. *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services*. Bristol: The Policy Press.

Nyhan, Brendan, John Sides, and Joshua Tucker. 2015. "APSA as Amplifier: How to Encourage and Promote Public Voices within Political Science." *PS*, 90-93.

Page, Scott E. 2017. *The Diversity Bonus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Phillips, Katherine W. 2017. "What is the real value of diversity in organizations? Questioning our assumptions." In Scott E. Page, *The Diversity Bonus*. Princeton University Press.

Pickering, Martin J. and Simon Garrod. 2004. "Toward a Mechanistic Psychology of Dialogue." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27: 169-226.

Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2001. "Social Status and Group Structure." In *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes*, Ed. Michael A. Hogg and R. Scott Tindale.

Sides, John. 2011. "The Political Scientist as a Blogger." *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 267-271.

Skocpol, Theda. 2014. "How the Scholars Strategy Network Helps Academics Gain Public Influence." *Perspectives on Politics* 695-703.

Sommers, Samuel R. 2006. "On Racial Diversity and Group Decision Making: Identifying Multiple Effects of Racial Composition on Jury Deliberations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90: 597-612.

Stasser, Garold, and William Titus. 2003. "Hidden Profiles: A Brief History." *Psychological Inquiry* 14: 304-313.

Stasser, Garold, Dennis D. Stewart, and Gwen M. Wittenbaum. 1995. "Expert Roles and Information Exchange during Discussion: The Importance of Knowing Who Knows What." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 31: 244-265.

Sunstein, Cass R., and Reid Hastie. 2015. *Wiser*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Tourangeau, Roger, Lance J. Rips, and Kenneth Rasinski. 2000. *The Psychology of Survey Response*. Cambridge University Press.

Vorauer, Jacquie D., Annette Gagnon, and Stacey J. Sasaki. 2009. "Salient Intergroup Ideology and Intergroup Interaction." *Psychological Science* 20: 838-845.

*Table 1: Goals of Nonprofit Practitioners*

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

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

*Table 2: Summary of RITM's Impact*

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

---

<sup>1</sup> research4impact is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building connections between researchers and practitioners. I co-founded it with Don Green and Jake Bowers in 2017.