Why Do Practitioners Want to Connect with Researchers? Evidence from a Field Experiment

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Abstract
Researchers often want to increase the broader societal impact of their work. One way to do that is to discuss research findings directly with practitioners. Yet such conversations are voluntary and do not regularly arise, which raises a key demand question: Under what conditions do practitioners want to connect with researchers? In this paper I show that relational considerations affect these decisions – that is, what practitioners expect the interaction will be like. In collaboration with a US-based civic association I conduct a field experiment. I find that chapter leaders in this association are more likely to speak with researchers after learning that the researchers will (a) efficiently share their findings during the conversation and (b) value practitioners' expertise. The results provide actionable guidance for how researchers should approach practitioners, and also demonstrate one powerful way that social science evidence can inform efforts to bridge research and practice.

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Researchers have a long-standing desire to increase the societal impact of their findings (Sides 2011, Skocpol 2014, Nyhan et al. 2015, Bowers and Testa 2018). One way to do that is to directly interact with practitioners. From the perspective of researchers, such conversations are beneficial for two reasons. One is that they produce powerful new research ideas and in some cases even lead to collaborations (Green and Gerber 2010). The second is that they increase the likelihood that practitioners use research findings to inform their decision-making. Scientific findings often do not speak for themselves, and so conversations are important because they enable a two-way flow of information to determine how findings may be useful in specific decision-making contexts (Nutley et al. 2007).

The importance of interactions, along with the fact that they are typically voluntary, raises a key demand question: Under what conditions do practitioners want to connect with researchers? Past work suggests several factors that matter. They need to perceive that researchers offer practically-useful information (Druckman 2015), such as an overview of a large research literature, evidence that will help them make an immediate decision, ideas about how they can better measure their impact, and/or ideas for collaborating on a new project together (Levine 2019). They also need to perceive researchers as trustworthy -- that is, as having aligned rather than competing interests (Scheufele 2014, Lupia 2014). This latter criterion is especially salient for practitioners who work on sensitive and/or controversial topics.

Building on this work, in this paper I argue that there is another set of factors that matter, which are relational considerations. When people are choosing whether to interact with someone else, they often care about what the interaction will be like. They care about whether the other person will be engaging during the conversation by actively valuing others' knowledge and efficiently sharing what they know (Baumeister and Leary 1995, Leary 2010).

There is good reason to believe that practitioners might not, *ex ante*, believe that researchers will be engaging in these ways. For instance, at least in the United States, although the public generally views researchers as very competent, they do not view them as especially warm (Fiske and Dupree 2014). A 2019 survey of Americans found that 43% agreed that research scientists "feel superior to others" (Pew Research Center 2019). These views echo long-standing anti-intellectual elements in American public discourse. Many outside the scientific community raise concerns about whether scientists are interested in efficiently communicating what they know with those who are busy and whose immediate goal is practical decision-making (Hofstadter 1966).

Based on these considerations, I hypothesize that practitioners are more interested in interacting with scientists when they believe that the scientists will (a) efficiently share what they know and (b) value practitioners' knowledge.[1] To test this hypothesis I conduct a field experiment in which a large group of practitioners (chapter leaders in a US-based civic association) were given the opportunity to speak with a researcher about research related to their goals (increasing the number of committed volunteers in their chapters). I find that their desire to connect increases after receiving information that the researchers would be engaging in either of these two ways.

I should underscore that my contribution here is not to argue that it is important for researchers to be engaging (as opposed to the opposite) when interacting with practitioners, as that argument is long-standing. Instead, my contribution is to leverage the psychology of relationship-building to operationalize what it would mean to be engaging in this context, and then to test the impact of communicating that information to practitioners at the moment they are deciding whether to interact with a researcher.

I also aim to make a methodological contribution. To my knowledge this paper is the first use of a field experiment to study the conditions under which new relationships between researchers and practitioners are initiated. This is the case within political science as well as other disciplines such as management (Bartunek 2007), public health (Dobbins et al. 2009), education (Coburn and Penuel 2016), and communication (Brossard and Lewenstein 2009) that are also interested in strengthening linkages between research and practice.

Field experiment testing the importance of relational factors

For this experiment I collaborated with a national civic association based in the United States. This organization increases public awareness of one of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change. It is based in Washington DC yet has a chapter structure that includes at least one chapter in almost every congressional district across the country. Federated civic associations like this one have long had powerful influences on raising awareness and advocating for new solutions in the public sphere (Han 2014). Having a strong group of committed volunteers in each chapter is central to this work.

Each chapter is led by one or more leaders. The organization conducts an annual survey of these group leaders, and in recent years they (a) frequently report wanting more new ideas for how to mobilize and organize volunteers and (b) lament the fact that they are incredibly busy and do not feel like they have much time to devote to this goal (even though they would like to). These findings suggested that leaders would gain value from a conversation with a researcher who could provide a tailored overview of findings on how to boost volunteer commitment (e.g. relevant findings from the political participation and social movements literatures). These survey responses also suggested severe capacity limitations, and so we believed that offering a single

conversation would be ideal rather than mentioning the possibility of any longer-term, ongoing relationship.

Experimental Procedure

The study took place in January 2019. My organizational partner provided me with the list of 828 group leaders across the country. From that list I randomly chose one leader from each chapter (if a chapter only had one leader, then I chose that person, whereas otherwise I randomly chose one of them). This procedure produced a sample of 456 group leaders. Next, these 456 leaders were randomly assigned to receive one of four emails (described below) inviting them to have a single, short conversation with a researcher about new research on mobilizing and organizing volunteers.[2] They had one week to respond to schedule a conversation, at which point they were matched with a researcher.[3] In this paper I only focus on the inception stage (i.e. the take-up rate).

Treatments

Group leaders were randomly assigned to receive one of four invitations. The *baseline message* emphasized the content of what they would learn: they were being offered the opportunity to have a conversation with a researcher about new work related to boosting volunteer commitment. The message was sent and signed by a member of the climate organization's national staff, which was important for signaling source credibility. I also chose to present the opportunity as the climate organization partnering with a matchmaking organization that would do the actual matchmaking. While having a second organizational partner (this matchmaking organization in addition to the climate organization) was not strictly necessary, we believed it further enhanced the message's credibility and was therefore worthwhile.

The baseline message read as follows (with bold text corresponding to what respondents saw, and several parts redacted here to avoid identifying either my climate organization partner or the matchmaking organization):

> Hello [Group Leader],
>
> We wanted to start off the new year with an exciting opportunity for our group leaders!
>
> **Want to strengthen your volunteer base** as we gear up to [build awareness of climate change and one possible response to it]?
>
> If so, you're in luck! We're partnering with [matchmaking organization], allowing any interested group leader to talk to an expert about the latest techniques for volunteer engagement, and how you can apply them in your chapter.
>
> **[Matchmaking organization] connects organizations with social scientists eager to share research on how to recruit new volunteers and further engage existing ones.** They've already connected over 40 volunteers and staff with researchers from across the country.
>
> **Interested?** Just send a quick note to [email address] by this [date] if you wish to take part.
>
> Include your name, email address, and a one-line note saying you're interested. Then [individual associated with matchmaking organization] will respond to schedule a 30 minute phone conversation at a time that's convenient for you.
>
> Your participation in this opportunity can help [climate organization name] improve its training and operations as we gear up for supporting our volunteers throughout the country in this critical year ahead.
>
> Thank you for all you do,
>
> [Director of volunteer engagement for climate organization]

The other three messages included an extra paragraph in the middle, immediately before the paragraph that starts with "Interested?". These messages were similar in format – they each referenced the experiences of other practitioners who had been matched by the matchmaking organization in the past. Two of these messages stated different ways in which the scientists were

engaging during the conversation. They test my key hypothesis (these are the "efficiently share what they know" and "value their expertise" paragraphs). The third included extra information about what those previous practitioners had learned (this is the "more details about shared information" paragraph). This third message helps rule out an alternative hypothesis that simply providing *any* extra information on participants' previous experiences affects take-up rates. The "efficiently share what they know" paragraph read as follows:

> Previous participants reported that it was an extremely efficient experience. The researchers acknowledged that folks are busy and don't have time to keep up on all the latest research they might wish to. So the name of the game is *efficiency* – they provide a concentrated dose of "news you can use".

The "value their expertise" paragraph read as follows:

> Previous participants reported that it was an extremely pleasant and affirming experience. They said that the researchers they spoke with were kind, respectful, genuinely interested in their work, and very clearly wanted to learn about their organizations.

Lastly, the "more details about information shared" paragraph read as follows:

> Previous participants reported that it was an extremely informative experience. The researchers shared a wide variety of new techniques for providing emotional support to volunteers (such as using legitimation rhetoric, memory heuristics, and self-disclosure). They also shared many techniques for deepening volunteers' commitment to a cause (such as new ways of eliciting commitments, providing reasons, and citing social proof).

Results

My outcome measure is the take-up rate in response to each of the four messages. Overall, 10.5% (48 out of 456 group leaders) chose to connect.[4] 6.2% of people who received the baseline message did so (7 people), as compared with 17.3% (19 people) who received the "researchers will efficiently share what they know" message and 13.9% who received the "value their expertise" message (16 people). In addition, only 5.1% of respondents (6 people) chose to

connect even after receiving more information about the content of what they would talk about. A summary of these results, along with statistical comparisons, appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Practitioners' Desire to Connect with Researchers

Experimental Group	Take-up Rate	Statistical Comparison to Baseline
Baseline message	6.2% (n=113)	---
Baseline message + Researchers will efficiently share what they know	17.3% (n=118)	p=.01
Baseline message + Researchers value their expertise	13.9% (n=115)	p=.05
Baseline message + Researchers will share these kinds of details	5.1% (n=110)	p=.71

N=456. F=4.31, p<.01. p-values in table are based on two-tailed z-tests. They are robust to randomization inference (Aronow and Samii 2012) as follows: p=0.02 for comparison between baseline and "researchers will efficiently share what they know"; p=0.08 for comparison between baseline and "value their expertise"; p=0.93 for comparison between baseline and "more details about information shared".

As shown in the table, practitioners are far more likely to choose to connect when they receive information that the researchers will be engaging during the conversation. There is evidence that invitations signaling that researchers will efficiently share what they know increase practitioners' desire to interact, along with evidence that invitations explicitly stating that researchers will value their expertise also have a positive effect. Moreover, we do not have evidence that these patterns were simply the result of providing additional information about others' previous experiences, as additional information about the research findings to be discussed did not significantly affect behavior.

Conclusion

Relational considerations help explain why practitioners choose to directly interact with researchers. As a result, those who wish to initiate new conversations with practitioners will benefit from explicitly conveying how they will be engaging during the conversation. In this paper, I found evidence that two ways of doing so are to convey that you will efficiently share what you know and also that you will be interested in and value the expertise of the practitioners you are speaking with.

Whereas in this short paper I only focused on the inception question, past work finds that even single conversations can increase practitioners' use of research (Levine 2019), including both what Weiss (1979) calls conceptual use (changing how practitioners think about the challenges they are facing) and instrumental use (directly applying the findings to their work). Conversations are also entry points for discussing the possibility of a research collaboration.

Methodologically, the research design underscores the value of using field experiments to study ways to improve and encourage researcher-practitioner relationships. That said, as with any individual experiment, the degree to which these results generalize requires further research. Fortunately, this experimental design is fully transportable, and several avenues for future work would be fruitful. First, while this study tested the impact of two relational messages, future studies could examine others. For instance, if researchers know in advance that practitioners have other concerns apart from how efficiently the information is presented, such as those stemming from previous negative experiences, then they may choose to explicitly acknowledge those concerns and identify ways that the new interaction will be different. The present study also focused on scientific findings (about how to boost volunteer commitment) that are relatively

non-controversial. Future studies could focus on scientific topics that are contentious and in which we might expect initial perceptions of trust to be lower.

Future work could vary other contextual attributes. While the present study occurred in collaboration with one large multi-site organization, future studies could involve an equal number of organizations that are not connected. In addition, while the present study offered the opportunity for a single conversation and focused on the inception question, future studies could advertise the opportunity for more extended relationships and thus study downstream consequences (For example, When do conversations with researchers increase the use of testing and evidence-seeking within the organization?). Doing so would be consistent with calls for more "opportunities and mechanisms for the regular exchange and synthesis of information and ideas" between researchers and practitioners (National Academies 2017:9). Lastly, future work could also examine outreach activities to other types of non-scientists, such as public policymakers, to see if they are sensitive to the same kinds of relational concerns or not.

This long list of potential future work underscores the need and opportunity to build a wider evidence base on how to initiate and sustain new relationships between researchers and practitioners. For academics, these relationships yield powerful private benefits, including new research ideas (Green and Gerber 2010) and a higher likelihood of influencing practitioners' decisions (Nutley et al. 2007). They also contribute to a broader norm of interaction, a public benefit. The upshot is that we accelerate the societal impact of political science as well as other social science research.

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[1] I use the terms "scientist" and "researcher" interchangeably in this paper.

[2] I randomly selected 39 respondents to receive emails first, just to test for any unexpected and/or unwelcome responses (none were observed). The other 417 respondents received their emails three days later.

[3] In order to streamline the matchmaking process (and because of my own personal knowledge of the relevant research literature) the matchmaking organization matched all respondents directly with me for the thirty-minute conversation.

[4] One additional person (who received the "efficiently share what they know" message) set up an appointment, but then did not answer the phone at the scheduled time. That person is not counted as choosing to connect.