

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

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

[ASL22@cornell.edu](mailto:ASL22@cornell.edu)

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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 interactions 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. I partner with a US-based civic association to 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 information during the interaction and (b) value practitioners' knowledge. 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.

Word Count: 3,522

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 in order to discuss how and whether research findings are useful in a particular context. These interactions are examples of *informal* collaborations in which people with diverse forms of knowledge engage in a dynamic interaction that entails sharing information, being open to learning from others, and being mindful of the boundaries of what they know (Murray 1998).

From the perspective of researchers, directly interacting with practitioners in this way is beneficial for two reasons. One is that it can produce powerful new research ideas (Green and Gerber 2010). This can, in turn, lead to more *formal* collaborations in which they work with practitioners on a shared project with mutual ownership and decision-making authority. The second reason is that direct interactions increase the likelihood that practitioners use research findings to inform their decision-making. Scientific findings often do not speak for themselves, yet interactions enable a two-way flow of information that sharpens their relevance (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 a new formal collaboration (Levine 2020). They also need to perceive researchers as trustworthy -- that is, as having aligned rather than competing interests (Lupia 2014).

Building on this work, in this paper I argue that there is another set of factors that matter, which are relational considerations. To see why, first note that a large literature in social psychology finds that people quickly and unconsciously apply stereotypes to evaluate others. These stereotypes exist along two broad dimensions: competence and warmth (Fiske et al. 2002). In part, these dimensions capture the factors mentioned above – the perception that the other person has relevant knowledge (competence) and has the intent to help rather than harm (warmth). Yet in addition to trustworthiness, warmth also reflects relational considerations regarding whether the experience of interacting with the other person is enjoyable (i.e. what some authors refer to as the other person’s friendliness/likeability; Leary 2010, van Dijk et al. 2017).

As applied to the context in this paper, there is good reason to believe that practitioners may be uncertain about whether interacting with researchers will be an enjoyable experience. For instance, a 2019 survey of Americans found that 43% agreed that research scientists “feel superior to others” (Pew Research Center 2019). This finding echoes long-standing anti-intellectual currents in American public opinion (Gauchat 2012).<sup>1</sup> For instance, Hofstadter (1966:273,275) noted that “applied science would have been immensely useful to farmers” in the Nineteenth Century, yet there was great “resentment” toward interacting with those who advocated using scientific methods to improve farming. Hofstadter (1966) also observed that many outside the scientific community raised 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. These examples echo interviews with nonprofit practitioners I conducted in 2017 to better understand their hesitations about engaging with researchers (see the online appendix for more details). Two of the specific reasons why they thought that the

experience might not be enjoyable reflected concerns about (1) whether researchers would be interested in hearing about what they know and (2) how much researchers would respect their time constraints by efficiently sharing only the most practice-oriented information.

Taken together, recent and historical work suggests that practitioners may not automatically perceive that connecting with researchers will be an enjoyable experience, especially for two main reasons. Based on these considerations, I hypothesize that they will be more interested in connecting when they believe that the scientists will (a) value practitioners' knowledge and (b) efficiently share what they know.<sup>2</sup> To test these hypotheses I conduct a field experiment in which a large group of practitioners was given the opportunity to speak with a scientist about research related to their goals. I find that their desire to connect increases after receiving information that the scientist would be engaging in either of these two ways.

This finding contributes to a growing evidence base across the social sciences on how to connect researchers and practitioners, including in education (Penuel and Gallagher 2017), management (Bartunek 2007), public health (Cargo and Mercer 2008), and public understanding of science (Brossard and Lewenstein 2009). All of these other authors suggest that relational considerations are vital by noting the importance of mutual respect. Yet several questions remain unresolved, which the present study aims to address. First, to my knowledge previous work does not systematically study the formation question by comparing those who connected with those who had the opportunity to connect but chose not to. Second, and along these lines, when the argument is that both sides need to be “mutually respectful” it may be unclear how to explicitly put that into practice. Doing so requires operationalizing what it means to be mutually respectful in a given context. Lastly, the present paper also makes a methodological contribution, as to my

knowledge this is the first field experiment to study the conditions under which new relationships between researchers and practitioners arise.

### **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 been important for 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. These findings suggested that leaders would gain value from connecting with a researcher who could provide a bespoke overview of findings on political participation and social movements that pertain to volunteer commitment.

### 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 conversation with a social scientist about new research on mobilizing and organizing volunteers.

They had one week to respond, at which point they were matched with a researcher.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I only focus on the inception stage (i.e. the take-up rate). That said, it is worth noting the broader significance of what transpired. Practitioners who responded engaged in a one-on-one conversation in which they and a researcher worked together to define the issue vis-à-vis the local community and discuss how existing research on volunteer commitment could be useful in their local context. In some cases there were follow-up conversations as well. Group leaders experienced direct impact via substantial increases in volunteer commitment and action-taking (Levine 2019). The researcher, meanwhile, gained vital first-hand knowledge about challenges associated with implementation – that is, why for group leaders “knowing what to do” is distinct from “feeling comfortable doing it”.

### 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. This boosted credibility by signaling her belief that the researcher would be trustworthy and share practically-useful information.

Figure 1 depicts the baseline email message (with several parts redacted here to avoid identifying information).

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]

*Figure 1: Reproduction of email invitation in baseline group*

Note that I 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 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 experience was enjoyable and thus test my key hypothesis ("efficiently share what they know" and "value others' expertise"). The third included extra information about what those previous practitioners had learned ("more details about shared information"). 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 others’ expertise” paragraph read as follows:

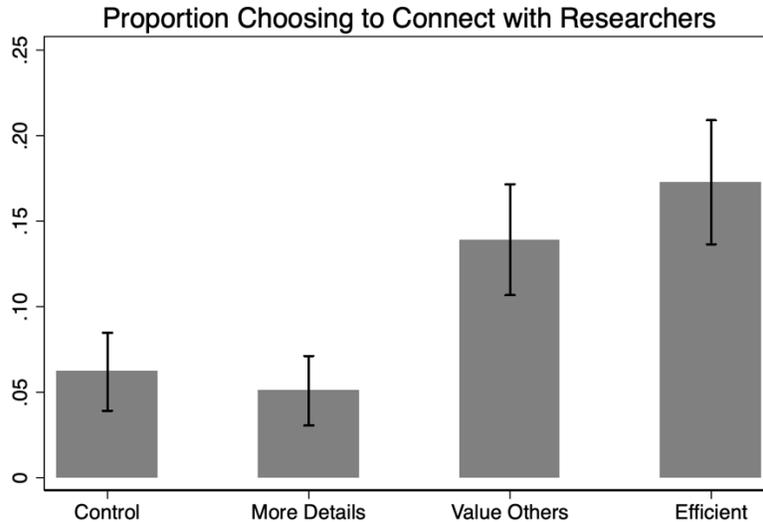
Previous participants reported that it was an extremely pleasant and affirming experience. They said that the researchers they spoke with were kind, respectful, genuinely interested in their work, and very clearly wanted to learn about their organizations.

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. Figure 2 provides a graphical summary across all four groups. Overall, 10.5% (48 out of 456 group leaders) chose to connect. 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 others’ expertise” message (16 people). In addition, only 5.1% of respondents (6 people) chose to connect after receiving “more details” about the content of what they would talk about.



*Figure 2: Behavior in field experiment, by experimental condition (including +/- 1 SE). There were 113 people in the Control group, 118 in the “More Details” group, 115 in the “Value Others” group, and 110 in the “Efficient” group.*

The difference in proportions test comparing the control group and “value others’ expertise” is significant ( $p=.05$ ; all tests are two-tailed), as is the test comparing the control group with those who received the “efficiently share what they know” message ( $p=.01$ ). I also find that the average take-up rates in the “value others’ expertise” and “efficiently share what they know” groups are statistically indistinguishable ( $p=.49$ ). This provides evidence in support of the broader theoretical point that what matters is communicating that the experience will be enjoyable, and that these are two ways to effectively do so in this context.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, I do not find evidence that providing more details increased the take-up rate relative to the control group ( $p=.71$ ).<sup>5</sup> One possible reason is because, although this information was germane, it included terms that may have been more difficult to process. When presented with a description of a novel behavior, people use “ease of processing” as a heuristic for the ease of engaging in that behavior,

which in this case may have suppressed demand even though the information was goal-relevant (Song and Schwarz 2008).

Table 1 presents two logistic regressions. Model 1 includes only dummy variables for the three treatment groups. Model 2 also controls for three pre-treatment variables that were available to me based on data supplied by my partner organization: sex of group leader (male or female) and location (from which I could infer the political party of their congressional delegation, a key cleavage of climate politics in the United States).<sup>6</sup> The results in Model 1 mirror those mentioned above -- practitioners are far more likely to choose to connect when they receive information that the researchers will efficiently share what they know or that the researchers will value their expertise. A Wald test indicates that the two coefficients representing this addition of relational language are statistically indistinguishable ( $p=0.49$ ). Moreover, once again I do not have evidence that these patterns were simply the result of providing additional information about others' previous experiences, as information about details to be discussed did not significantly affect behavior. These results are also robust to the inclusion of control variables, as noted under "Model 2" in the table, in which I also find some evidence that female group leaders were more interested in connecting than male group leaders.

**Table 1. Demand to Connect with Researchers**

|                                 | <b>Model 1</b>    | <b>Model 2</b>   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <b>"More Details" Condition</b> | -0.21<br>(0.57)   | -0.29<br>(0.58)  |
| <b>"Value Others" Condition</b> | 0.89**<br>(0.47)  | 0.85*<br>(0.48)  |
| <b>"Efficient" Condition</b>    | 1.15***<br>(0.46) | 1.13**<br>(0.47) |
| <b># of Republican Senators</b> |                   | 0.32<br>(0.20)   |
| <b>Republican Rep</b>           |                   | -0.57            |

|                            |          |          |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|
|                            |          | (0.36)   |
| <b>Female</b>              | 0.57*    | (0.32)   |
| <b>Constant</b>            | -2.72*** | -3.03*** |
|                            | (0.39)   | (0.47)   |
| <b>lnL</b>                 | -146.98  | -148.52  |
| <b><math>\chi^2</math></b> | 12.93    | 18.83    |
| <b>N</b>                   | 456      | 448      |

Table entry is the logit coefficient with standard error below.

DV: Decision to connect with researcher, 0 (No) or 1 (Yes)

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed z-tests

## Conclusion & Future Work

Relational considerations matter when people with diverse forms of knowledge have the opportunity to interact with each other. Here I show how this insight can help explain when practitioners choose to connect with researchers. I find evidence that those who wish to initiate new conversations with practitioners can benefit from explicitly conveying (a) how they will efficiently share what they know and (b) that they are interested in and value the expertise of the practitioners they wish to speak with.

That said, as with any individual experiment, the degree to which these results generalize requires further research. For instance, my partner organization held generally favorable attitudes toward science and of the value of using science to further their mission (as evidenced by their decision to partner with me on this project). Yet even here relational concerns were a barrier. But what would happen in situations where there might be greater resentment toward academic knowledge and/or of academics more generally (c.f. Hofstadter 1966, pages 273-275)?

To explore these and other critical questions, the theoretical foundation in this paper provides a useful starting point, along with several other theoretically-informed premises that are fundamental when connecting people with diverse forms of knowledge such as researchers and practitioners. One is that they often start off as strangers, and strangers are often hesitant to

interact with each other (Epley and Schroeder 2014). A second is that status-based stereotypes impact how people value the knowledge that others bring to the table and, in turn, how people perceive the relevance of their own knowledge (Ridgeway 2001). Third, the capability and opportunity to engage in new connections is unevenly distributed. All of these premises provide a useful starting point for investigating other factors that influence (a) the formation and success of new connections, and (b) how institutions can help facilitate them. For instance, whereas the present paper focuses on a key aspect of how people perceive potential collaborators, future work should study people's perceptions about themselves (e.g. Do they feel like they have relevant knowledge to share, and also the time to share it?; Do they worry about whether they understand the relevant cultural norms for interacting with a stranger?). Future work can also benefit from studying interventions in a survey setting where it is possible to directly measure theoretically-relevant attitudes, such as how enjoyable people believe an interaction would be and how they expect to feel during it.

Overall, this paper underscores the need and opportunity to build new relationships between researchers and practitioners. An expanded evidence base will greatly accelerate the societal impact of political science as well as other social science research.

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## ONLINE APPENDIX

### Other sample & data collection details

Based on information provided by my partner organization, I had measures of three pre-treatment variables: the sex of the group leader (coded 1 for female; 0 for male) and whether the congressional delegation where the group is located is Republican or not (coded as 0, 1, or 2 for Senate, and 0 or 1 for House).

The organization has chapters in most, but not all, congressional districts, and some districts have more than one chapter. That is why these numbers are close, but not exactly the same as, the overall partisan distribution in Congress.

Below are summaries of these three attributes across the entire sample (N=456 group leaders):

52.4% female, 47.6% male

211 group leaders (47.1%) live in states with 0 Republican Senators  
87 group leaders (19.4%) live in states with 1 Republican Senator  
150 group leaders (33.5%) live in states with 2 Republican Senators

239 group leaders (53.1%) live in a House district represented by a Democrat  
211 group leaders (46.9%) live in a House district represented by a Republican  
*[Note that these numbers do not add up to 456 because some chapters are located in US territories with limited/no congressional representation.]*

The table below demonstrates that there was balance on all three of these variables. The table shows the mean value for each variable as well as the p-value from a one-way ANOVA test.

|                          | <b>Control</b> | <b>“More Details”</b> | <b>“Value Others”</b> | <b>“Efficient”</b> | <b>p-value</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Female                   | 0.52           | 0.55                  | 0.50                  | 0.53               | 0.87           |
| # of Republican Senators | 0.80           | 0.93                  | 0.87                  | 0.85               | 0.75           |
| Republican House member  | 0.50           | 0.46                  | 0.42                  | 0.50               | 0.61           |

### Further details regarding data collection:

--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.

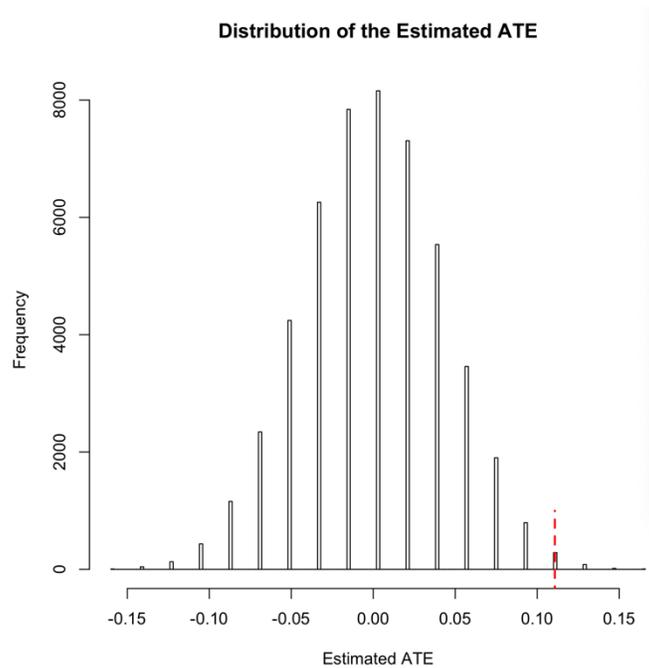
-- One person received the “efficiently share what they know” message and set up an appointment, but then did not answer the phone at the scheduled time. That person is not counted as choosing to connect in the main results.

## Further details of randomization inference

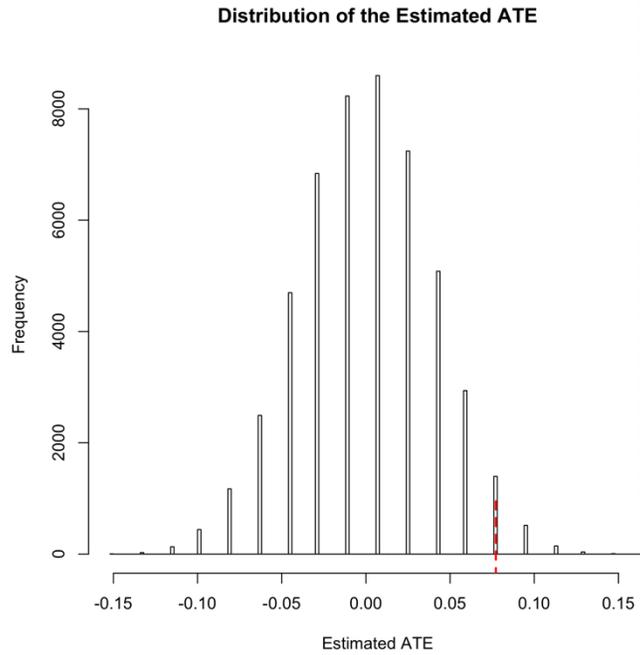
Each of the paper’s main results comparing treatment groups to the control are robust to randomization inference (Aronow and Samii 2012) as follows:  $p=0.02$  for comparison between baseline and “researchers will efficiently share what they know”;  $p=0.08$  for comparison between baseline and “value others’ expertise”;  $p=0.93$  for comparison between baseline and “more details about information shared”.

Below are the null distributions of these randomization-based inference results, along with the estimated ATE marked as the dotted line.

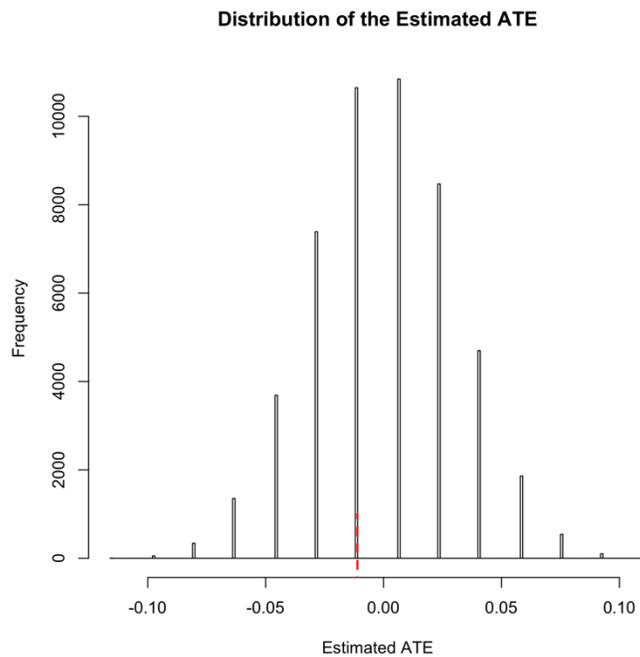
Comparing the control group and “efficiently sharing what you know”:



Comparing the control group and “value others’ knowledge”:



Comparing the control group and the “more details” group:



Citation:

Aronow, Peter and Cyrus Samii. 2012. “Ri: R Package for Performing Randomization-Based Inference for Experiments.”

### **Further details on the relevance of relational concerns and the motivation for the treatments in the field experiment**

The paper's focus on relational concerns stems from existing published work as well as my own original research that is part of a forthcoming book [citation omitted]. As part of that work, I interviewed 45 researchers and nonprofit practitioners between July and December 2017 who had joined an online platform devoted to building connections between the two groups. This included 28 practitioners and 17 researchers. In each of these cases, although they had joined the platform by building a profile, they had not initiated any new informal (or formal) collaborations on their own. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand why not.

My research design was thus an example of an “extreme” case selection methodology (Gerring 2017) because my interviewees had already demonstrated a high degree of capacity and motivation to connect. They had also voluntarily taken advantage of the opportunity afforded by the network to build a profile to (ostensibly) initiate new connections. Thus, there would be good reason to expect them to initiate new connections, yet they still did not.

As part of this research I invited respondents to “Please tell me about some the reasons why you haven't yet connected via the platform.” One of the most striking findings was that of the 28 practitioners I interviewed almost three quarters mentioned relational concerns that reflected uncertainty about what the experience of interacting with the researcher would be like. Some of these were about whether the researcher would value what they have to say, such as one person who said: “Are they really going to care about what I have to say?” In other cases practitioners mentioned being under severe time constraints and being concerned that it would take too much time to figure out how research could be helpful to them: “I'm really busy and I worry that I'll just learn about lots of details that aren't relevant to my work.”

Overall, these interviews underscored the importance of relational concerns – the fact that people care about what the interaction will be like. More specifically, they also helped motivate why it made sense to operationalize these concerns in the two ways that I did for the field experiment in this paper.

Citation:

Gerring, John. 2017. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. Cambridge.

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<sup>1</sup> While there are growing ideological differences in trust in the scientific enterprise, even as recently as 2010 only 50% of liberals expressed “a great deal” of confidence in the scientific community (Gauchat 2012).

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms “scientist” and “researcher” interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> In order to streamline the process (and because of my own personal knowledge of the relevant research) all respondents were matched with me.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the importance of comparing across treatments, see Gelman and Stern (2006). In addition, I am able to reject the null hypothesis of no difference in the following cases: comparing “more details” and “value others’ experience” ( $p=.02$ ) and comparing “more details” and “efficiently share what they know” ( $p=.003$ ).

<sup>5</sup> Results robust to randomization inference (see appendix).

<sup>6</sup> The appendix includes more details regarding these pre-treatment covariates.