Research in Organizational Behavior xxx (2017) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Organizational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/riob

Innovation with field experiments: Studying organizational behaviors in actual organizations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Field experiment
Organizational context
Causality
Organizational theory
Behavior

ABSTRACT

Organizational scholarship centers on understanding organizational context, usually captured through field studies, as well as determining causality, typically with laboratory experiments. We argue that field experiments can bridge these approaches, bringing causality to field research and developing organizational theory in novel ways. We present a taxonomy that proposes when to use an audit field experiment (AFE), procedural field experiment (PFE) or innovation field experiment (IFE) in organizational research and argue that field experiments are more feasible than ever before. With advances in technology, behavioral data has become more available and randomized changes are easier to implement, allowing field experiments to more easily create value—and impact—for scholars and organizations alike.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2017.10.004
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Please cite this article in press as: O.P. Hauser, et al., Innovation with field experiments: Studying organizational behaviors in actual organizations, Research in Organizational Behavior (2017), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2017.10.004

Introduction

> "The general objectives of the Academy shall be therefore to foster: [. . .] (b) greater understanding by executive leadership of the requirements for a sound application of the scientific method to the solution of managerial problems." (Editor's preface to first issue of *Academy of Management Journal*, 1958, 1(1): 5–6) (Dauten, 1958)

Organizational scholars have always sought to bring scientific and practical methodologies to the study and practice of management. And in the last 50 years, organizational researchers have made great strides towards uncovering organizational behavior in practice using a set of established tools. On the one hand, scholars have conducted field research: qualitative scholars work in organizations, observing and describing first-hand real behavior in a real organization. Quantitative researchers have applied advanced statistical models to empirical datasets, often in combination with longitudinal employee surveys. Some of the most important organizational constructs has arisen from field research, such as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), trust and psychological contracts (Malhotra & Lumineau, 2011; Robinson, 1996; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1989), newcomer socialization (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007), and individual-organizational fit (OReilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). One reason these methods have had such an impact in the field is that they put emphasis on the value of organizational context (Cappelli & Sherer, 1991; Johns, 2006; Mowday & Sutton, 1993).

On the other hand, other organizational researchers—in an often non-overlapping set—have begun to test causality of organizationally relevant phenomena. For example, how does power affect propensity to participate and take risks in negotiations (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007)? What are the conditions that cause unethical behavior to arise (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Gino & Pierce, 2009; Gino, Krupka, & Weber, 2013), and what effect do honor codes and signatures have on ethicality (Kettle, Hernandez, Sanders, Hauser, & Ruda, 2017; Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011; Shu, Mazar, Gino, Ariely, & Bazerman, 2012; Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, 2015)? To what extent do binding and non-binding contracts affect cooperative behavior and trust in groups (Hauser, Rand, Peysakhovich, & Nowak, 2014; Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002)? How do unstructured interviews influence interviewer perceptions of candidates (Dana, Dawes, & Peterson, 2013)? These researchers have largely relied on university laboratories or online platforms to design experiments with tight control over the decision environment where they can exogenously vary a variable of interest (Weick, 1967). Laboratory research places a premium on the causal nature of those findings.

Here we highlight a research method that bridges the gap between field context and causality: field experiments. For the purposes of this review, and in keeping with previous scholars (Eden, 2017; Harrison & List, 2004; List, 2011; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001), we broadly define field experiments as:

> *Studies that induce a change in a randomly selected subset of individuals (or teams, or units) within their natural organizational context, and compare outcomes to a randomly selected group for which the change was not introduced.*

We argue that field experiments are an excellent tool for researchers keen on both context and causality – this is because field experiments are a method of *causal* inquiry within *real organizational contexts*. This not only allows researchers to ground their work within actual managerial practice but also learn "what works" based on causal inference.

This paper does not introduce field experiments as a new method. Indeed, field experiments have been around for several decades, and the call for implementing them widely became part of a more general push for evaluative practices in the 1960s when pressure was mounting on public authorities to provide evidence for the outcomes of social programs (Suchman, 1968). Until that point, experimental randomization with the aim of establishing causality was seen as the purview of the natural sciences or, within the social sciences, to be conducted in the laboratory. Thus Donald Campbell, an early pioneer of the fieldexperimental method in the administrative sciences, argued in his famous essay "Reforms as Experiments": "Experiments with randomization tend to be limited to the laboratory and agricultural experiment station. But this certainly need not be so. (. . .) We need to develop the political postures and ideologies that make randomization at [individual, unit and higher] levels possible." (Campbell, 1969, p. 425). The constraint, it seemed, was whether randomization for experimentation would be acceptable on a political or ideological front, rather than whether it was a useful methodology for answering questions on organizations.

Campbell's vision of an "experimenting society" (Campbell, 1991) was echoed further in organizational scholarship: Barry Staw coined the analogical term "experimenting organization" (Staw, 1977), and Gerarld Salancik proposed that qualitative research ought to engage in "field simulations" (Salancik, 1979). And while field experiments have subsequently been used to study organizational behavior and advance theory, many scholars (e.g., Scandura & Williams, 2000; Shadish & Cook, 2009) have lamented the fact that field experiments remain underutilized in organizational scholarship relative to other field research methods and relative to other scholarly fields. This remained largely true in the field of organizational behavior in spite of the many excellent introductions and review articles that have been written over the years. (For interested readers, we recommend Campbell (1969) and Staw (1977) for an introduction as to why organizations should randomize; Eden (2017) and King, Hebl, Botsford Morgan and Ahmad (2013) for a thorough review, especially surrounding sensitive topics in organizations; and Harrison and List (2004) for describing the continuum between laboratory and natural field experimentation. Relatedly, we recommend readers interested in the "mechanics" and "how to's" of carrying out their own first field experiment to the many helpful guides that exist on the topic, such as Boruch and Wothke (1985),Eden (2017), Gerber and Green (2012), Glennerster and Takavarasha (2013), Hauser and Luca (2015a), Ibanez and Staats (2016), King et al. (2013) and List (2011). So, if field experiments are not a recent invention, why are they not more prevalent in organizational behavior?

In this paper, we focus on making the case for why field experiments matter specifically for *researchers in organizational behavior* and why they matter *now*. Field experiments have a reputation for being "hard to pull off" – but with changes in technology, availability of digital data, and a shifting culture of experimentation in organizations, we believe that they are now easier than ever to carry out and create value—and impact—for organizational scholars and practitioners alike.

To aid organizational scholars in conducting more field experiments, we also provide what we hope is a useful taxonomy of field experiments based on their function in organizational scholarship. We believe that the "method needs to fit the question", both across different types of research methods (e.g., ethnographic, survey, lab experimentation, field experimentation, etc.) as well as within the same type of research method, like field experimentation. We hope that this paper will help readers become familiar with the type of field experiment that is best suited to their research questions, whether they are covertly testing if things work as they are believed to; making changes to an organizational process; or innovating within an organization.

Field and laboratory research

Organizational research methods vary widely. For the purposes of this short review, we distinguish between two broad classes of commonly used methods: those grounded in empirical data in the external world; and those aimed at establishing causality within a controlled laboratory or online framework. (For a deeper treatment of field-based versus manipulation-based methods, see Chatman and Flynn (2005)'s full-cycle research model.)

Field-based researchers have worked with and in organizations to understand how incentives, leadership style, and organizational constraints affect the behavior of employees and managers in organizations. Their work may be primarily qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994;

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