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Into the wild: Field research can increase both replicability and real-world impact[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Field research has the potential to substantially increase both the replicability and the impact of psychological science. Field methods sometimes are characterized by features – relatively high levels of participant diversity, relative lack of control over extraneous variables, greater focus on behavioral dependent variables, less room for researcher degrees of freedom, and lower likelihood of publication bias – that can increase the veracity and robustness of published research. Moreover, field studies can help extend psychological research in valuable ways to applied domains such as health, law, education, and business. Consequently, field studies, especially those that integrate an applied perspective, can provide information directly relevant for tackling important social problems. Incorporating field data into lines of basic research can increase not just the replicability, but also the relevance and impact of one's science.

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1. Introduction

As researchers, most of us want to do work that is both replicable and impactful. Whether or not our work achieves these goals is undoubtedly influenced by the type of research designs we choose to adopt. When making decisions about what kinds of designs to pursue, researchers consider many different factors. Some methods, such as those involved in laboratory experiments, increase the rigor and control with which one can test hypotheses. Other methods, such as those used in qualitative research, allow researchers to delve deeply into rich narrative data sources provided by small numbers of participants. Still other methods, such as those involved in applied field research, allow researchers to evaluate questions of immediate relevance to solving important social problems. Indeed, every research design comes with its own unique set of strengths (and limitations).

This article describes a number of methodological features that, when incorporated into a line of research, may enhance both replicability and impact. Although these features are found in a range of different research settings (e.g., experimental, observational, laboratory, field), they may be especially common in field research. Consequently, this article presents arguments for integrating into programs of research a greater focus on collecting data in the field. Field research, particularly that which adopts an applied focus, provides researchers with valuable opportunities to deliver on social psychology's potential to make a real difference in facing some society's most recalcitrant problems including health disparities, climate change, ethnic prejudice, and economic

inequality (e.g., Klein, Shepperd, Suls, Rothman, & Croyle, 2015). When it incorporates features that increase the robustness of its findings – features that are the focus of this article – field research has the potential for dramatically increasing both the replicability and the impact of social psychological science.

2. Replicability and impact: complementary goals

Social psychological studies have been criticized in recent years for lacking replicability. Many factors have contributed to the current situation, including the use of questionable statistical practices, incentive structures in the publication system that reward positive results and “perfect” patterns of data, and the fact that some empirical findings may replicate only under certain circumstances (Giner-Sorolla, 2012; Ioannidis, 2005; John, Loewenstein, & Prelec, 2012; Maner, 2014; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011; cf. Stroebe, in this issue).

A range of recent papers provide valuable suggestions aimed at evaluating and increasing replicability (e.g., Fabrigar & Wegener, in this issue; Sagarin, Ambler, & Lee, 2014; Sakaluk, Williams, & Biernat, 2014; Schaller, in this issue; cf. Finkel, Eastwick & Reis, 2015). Although producing research that is replicable is an important goal, however, it is not our only goal. One goal that at times has gotten lost in the chorus of voices involves the real-world impact and relevance of our science. Some would argue that an important function of social psychology is addressing real-world social problems such as climate change, public health, racial and ethnic prejudice, terrorism, and the growing divide between the haves and the have-nots. This article describes ways in which field research methods can increase the replicability of social psychological research, while also enhancing its real-world impact.

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The issues of replicability and impact are independent but also inherently hierarchical. A set of findings cannot be impactful if the findings are not replicable, but research certainly can be replicable, but not impactful. The relationship between replicability and real-world impact is analogous in some ways to the relationship between reliability and validity. Reliability (in the psychometric sense) comes first: a particular self-report measure, for example, cannot be valid if the items that comprise it do not hold together in a coherent way. But researchers usually are not satisfied with demonstrating a measure's reliability; they also need to show that it is valid and conceptually meaningful. The same goes for scientific impact. Demonstrating that a set of findings is replicable is not enough; those findings also need to advance the field, and one way to do that is to bear upon some substantive problem or issue in the world.

One concern is that some of the changes the field is generating to deal with issues of replicability may inadvertently reduce the potential for impact. For example, the widespread reliance on Mechanical Turk allows researchers to collect large samples quickly and easily and so helps address the important issue of statistical power. However, because such methods sometimes rely on having "professional" participants provide hypothetical responses to imagined scenarios, lines of research that depend heavily on such methods may be less impactful than those that include more immediate and direct measurement of actual behavior from naïve participants. The press for larger samples may also lead researchers to rely on self-report measures instead of measurement of behavior. One can often collect many self-report data relatively quickly, but measuring the way individuals actually behave in response to a particular situation can be more time-consuming. Nevertheless, self-report data, especially in the form of imagined responses to hypothetical scenarios, often only weakly predict behavior (e.g., Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009; Sheeran, Abraham, & Orbell, 1999) and so may not be overly informative when behavior is the true outcome measure of interest. Some would argue that measuring actual behavior is essential for maintaining the health of our field (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). This is an important point: as a field, we should not focus on replicability to the detriment of impact.

Consistent with Cialdini's (1980) view of "full-cycle social psychology," programs of research might ideally include a combination of rigorous theory testing, controlled laboratory methods to identify underlying mechanisms, and applied field research to assess how psychological phenomena unfold in natural contexts. The integration of field methods provides valuable opportunities to tackle questions of great importance to society. This ultimately means getting out of the lab, directly measuring behaviors relevant to important real-world issues, and connecting with people in fields such as medicine, education, law, and business. Such an approach can also further the field's goals pertaining to replication: field research is particularly amenable to features that make it more replicable than studies relying on laboratory or online methods alone. Thus, collecting data in the field can achieve two goals simultaneously — it can enhance real-world impact and it can increase replicability.

3. Using field research to increase replicability

The following sections describe methodological features that may enhance the replicability of published research.¹ These features can be incorporated into many different types of research designs, but are especially common in field studies. Field studies can be operationally defined as observational or experimental studies that take place in settings such as schools, homes, the workplace, and health clinics — mundane settings in which people lead their lives naturally and that are not designed for the purposes of research. Field studies are valuable

¹ When I refer to replicability I am referring to forms of both direct and conceptual replication. Although there are important differences between the two, most of the issues discussed pertain to both forms of replication.

in part because they afford opportunities to examine psychological and behavioral processes as they unfold in ordinary contexts (Cialdini, 1980). Nevertheless, field settings do not constitute a bounded category of research design. One might characterize research settings as existing on a continuum, with field settings such as the aforementioned at one end and studies occurring exclusively in the laboratory on the other. The remainder of the continuum reflects many other manner of research setting including archival studies, retrospective self-reporting of experiences from the field, and data conducted via social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

Studies toward the field end of the continuum are sometimes characterized by features that, all else being equal, may enhance their replicability. Field methods often: (1) use participant samples that are diverse; (2) exert less control over extraneous variables; (3) focus on the direct measurement of behavioral dependent variables; (4) allow for fewer researcher degrees-of-freedom that can hinder replicability and (5) are less likely to produce research literatures that suffer from publication bias (see Table 1).

Not all field studies are characterized by these features, because studies inevitably vary in their specific methodological details. Moreover, such features may also be present in other types of designs (e.g., laboratory research), particularly if researchers exert effort to incorporate them into their work. Thus, field studies are not inherently more replicable than other types of designs; they are more replicable to the extent that they incorporate features such as these into their design. When these features are incorporated into a line of field research, however, the result can be a highly replicable and impactful piece of science.

3.1. Participant diversity

Studies that rely on field methods can involve participant samples that are more diverse than those used in the lab. Laboratory studies often make use of undergraduate participant samples that are relatively homogenous. At the very least, those samples consist of participants who are all students at the same university, most of whom are of similar age and who have elected to sign up for an undergraduate psychology course. Similarly, many studies conducted via online data collection platforms (e.g., MTurk) consist of participant samples that have

Table 1

Field studies sometimes provide a number of advantages that increase the replicability of psychological science.

Replicability issue	Feature of field research	Advantages
Participant diversity	Field studies often employ samples that are highly diverse	Findings derived from diverse samples are more robust and may be more likely to replicate across other samples than those derived from homogenous samples
Presence of extraneous variables	Field studies usually entail less control over extraneous sources of variance	Effects demonstrated under uncontrolled circumstances should be more robust to contextual factors than those in which such factors are held constant
Measurement of behavior	Field studies often focus on directly measuring behavioral dependent variables	Behavioral DVs in field studies are relatively robust to variables that might moderate the intention-behavior gap, and thus may be more replicable (and impactful)
Researcher dfs	Field studies sometimes focus on fewer DVs; entail less daily control over data collection	Field studies may leave relatively less room for researcher dfs
Publication bias	Field studies tend to be high-investment, less likely to be relegated to the file drawer	Field studies may be less likely than other types of research to suffer from publication bias

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