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Translating social science for peace: Benefits, challenges, and recommendations

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Abstract

There is a growing push within the social sciences to conduct translational science that not only advances theory but also achieves real world impact. The goals of this paper are (1) to encourage scholars to engage in translational science by conducting research that responds to pressing social challenges, and (2) to provide concrete recommendations on how to incorporate such practices into their research programs. To do this, we bring together perspectives of academics and practitioners who have experience merging science with practice. We begin by defining what translational science is, describing the benefits of engaging in translational science for peace and conflict studies, and highlighting past research that has done this successfully. Next, we describe various aspects of conducting translational science, such as how researchers can partner with non-academic stakeholders to create social impact and advance scientific theory, and how they can disseminate findings for public impact. We also address key challenges researchers might face when conducting translational research and provide practical tips that social scientists can use to effectively to engage in what we coin the “Bruneauian” approach for how to address such challenges. Specifically, we focus on the skills needed for study design and deployment, how researchers can sensitively interact with vulnerable communities, statistical and methodological considerations, logistical challenges, and how to develop relationships with practitioners. Finally, we conclude with a practitioner’s perspective on how to foster these types of relationships.

Keywords: translational science, interventions, community partnerships, peace studies

Public Significance: Here we make the case for translational science that not only advances theory but also achieves real world impact. We highlight the importance of using science to address pressing social challenges and offer guidance to those who are charged with addressing them.

Translating social science for peace: Benefits, challenges, and recommendations

"Our goal should be more dramatic than just doing good science, although that's important and wonderful and good. But we have the potential to do more—the potential to walk through darkness and spread light. And the nice thing is that this force is in us and communal—it's not owned. And the best way to activate a communal force is to be a community."

—Emile Bruneau at a meeting with researchers and practitioners in 2019

Academia can be very insular. Oftentimes researchers develop research questions to advance scientific theory and methodology, with less focus on the external validity and relevance of their research. In instances when research is directly applicable to real-world settings, researchers might face challenges in translating their research to practice and then disseminating their findings to communities that can most benefit from them. However, there is a growing push within the social sciences to conduct translational science that symbiotically advances theory and achieves social impact (e.g., Bardo & Pentz, 2012; Bar-Tal & Hameiri, 2020; Levine & Matias, 2021; Moss et al., 2019; Paluck, 2012; Paluck et al., 2021; Schalet et al., 2020). This approach was at the heart of Emile Bruneau's (who passed away in 2020) research philosophy—to create meaningful science by listening to the voices of communities and tailoring research questions to understand and address the main challenges they express. It also goes back to one of the pioneers of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, whose full-cycle research approach modeled how scientific theory could be advanced through field research methods (e.g., Lewin, 1946).

Here, we present a "Bruneauian" research philosophy, which values the input of practitioners and community members when developing research questions and puts emphasis on conducting translational research to simultaneously maximize social impact and advance psychological theory.

To advance a “Bruneauian” approach to translational science, this paper is guided by two core goals. First, we seek to encourage social scientists to engage in the Bruneauian approach by conducting translational research. Second, we aim to provide concrete recommendations for how scholars can incorporate such practices into their research programs. Throughout this paper, we focus on how a translational social science research program can be used to reduce suffering and conflict, promote peace, and foster social change.

To demonstrate how translational science can be conducted in partnership with communities and practitioners, we highlight examples of research that has done so effectively, paying tribute to work by Emile Bruneau and his colleagues. We discuss potential benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to conducting translational science and provide concrete recommendations for how scholars can effectively build translational research programs. Because academic-practitioner research must be fruitful for non-academic partners as well, we also share perspectives from practitioners on how to approach these relationships.

Defining Translational Science and Its Benefits

Translational science involves the translation of basic science from the laboratory to the field to achieve real-world impact, while simultaneously leveraging real-world insights to enhance theory (see Lewin, 1951). At its core, translational science is a marriage between researchers and those whose needs researchers hope to address in their work. Thus, conducting translational science requires that researchers engage with communities to learn about the issues they face. Doing so enables researchers to make connections between the difficulties communities experience and existing theory with the goal of using theory to develop research questions to address these challenges.

There are several benefits to engaging in translational science from both scientist and community-building perspectives. First, researchers can engage in research that has direct impact on vulnerable communities. Specifically, they can implement interventions with strong theoretical and scientific merit in communities that can most benefit from them. Sometimes this means that communities will be able to directly benefit from interventions that have already undergone rigorous scientific testing in less applied settings. For example, Mousa (2020) drew upon intergroup contact theory to create a contact intervention that brought together Christians recently displaced by ISIS and Muslims to play soccer. Results indicated that those assigned to the heterogeneous team of Christian and Muslim soccer players had reduced levels of prejudice and discrimination toward fellow outgroup soccer players. This intervention program had a sizable impact, as effects lasted for up to six months following the intervention program.

As another benefit, translational science allows researchers to build on the foundations of basic science to promote peace, foster social change, and address the challenges communities face. Researchers learn about the needs within vulnerable communities (e.g., intergroup conflict, prejudice, discrimination) and use insights from science to address those needs. For example, Bruneau et al. (2022) discovered that a main inhibitor of non-FARC Colombians' support for ex-FARC Colombians' reintegration processes was the perception that ex-FARC Colombians are unwilling and unable to let go of their violent ways and peacefully reintegrate into the Colombian society. In response, they partnered with local filmmakers to develop a series of media interventions that aimed to address this belief and promote reintegration and acceptance of ex-FARC combatants into society. They found that exposure to a media intervention humanizes FARC ex-combatants and increases support for peace and reintegration—effects that persisted at

least 10-12 weeks post-exposure, and affected both attitudes (e.g., support for reintegration policies) and behavior (e.g., donations to organizations supporting ex-combatants).

While applying insights from the social sciences can offer tools to reduce conflict and promote peace, it is important to recognize that many social scientific theories are not yet developed or tested enough to be directly implemented in diverse field settings or to address certain societal challenges (Bar-Tal & Hameiri, 2020; Paluck et al., 2021). In these instances, it is important for researchers to understand the limits of science and draw on the expertise of stakeholders, including the lived experiences of communities and insights from practitioners, to co-design testable interventions. Indeed, the strength of a translational science research approach is that it involves more than the application of tried and tested interventions—it also leverages natural contexts where translational research is conducted to enhance theory and scientific understanding itself. Consider, for example, Mousa's (2020) intergroup contact intervention described above. By testing for intergroup contact effects in the field and in a setting with high levels of intergroup conflict, Mousa's field study provided an ecologically valid window into the ways in which intergroup contact can facilitate more positive intergroup relations in real life, and also into the potential limitations of intergroup contact (Paluck & Clark, 2020). While Mousa found that playing on a mixed soccer team positively changed behaviors within the context of soccer, the intervention did not change behavior in other contexts. Additionally, results were mixed in terms of attitudes. These findings contribute to our understanding of intergroup contact theory. The same can be said about other translational interventions, which allow researchers to test scientific theories in field settings to determine whether effects observed in laboratory settings can be scaled in the real world. In turn, research in such settings helps us to hone our

theories. In this sense, translational science offers key advantages for the development and testing of scientific theory (cf. Paluck et al., 2021).

Spectrum of Ways to Conduct Translational Science

There are several ways for researchers to get involved in translational science, and involvement varies based on desired outcomes. When a strong evidence base already exists in the scientific literature, it might be most appropriate to disseminate research findings to audiences that can help to implement and scale insights for impact. For example, researchers might consider sharing findings in the form of op-eds or policy briefs, or present at practitioner conferences. However, in many cases, such as when the efficacy of theory-informed interventions is less clear or may be improved, researchers may instead seek to strengthen the evidence base by co-developing and testing interventions with communities and practitioners. We note that these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however caution is warranted to ensure confidence in research insights that are broadly disseminated.

Dissemination

Op-Eds for Popular Audience and Policy Papers. One of the most popular ways to translate science for social impact is by writing an op-ed (i.e., opinion article featured in a newspaper, magazine, etc.) for popular audiences. This requires the translation of scientific research for lay audiences and provides researchers with the opportunity to consider the implications and applications of their research to real-world situations. These pieces can focus on explaining a single study (e.g., Pasek & Moore-Berg, 2020), or they might take a broader approach and aggregate across several different research findings in the field (e.g., Bruneau, 2018; Falk, 2021). With either approach, the research can be already published, or it might currently be undergoing peer review.

One consideration when writing an op-ed is the type of audience the scientist would like to reach (i.e., vulnerable communities, practitioners, policymakers) and the breadth of outreach the scientist would like to have (i.e., local, national, international). This will allow the researcher(s) to tailor science translation to the appropriate outlet. Potential outlets include mainstream news outlets, NGO websites, research digest outlets, websites and magazines that cater to policymakers, politicians, or diplomats, etc. Each of these outlets present different opportunities and challenges. For instance, mainstream news outlets can have wide audiences, including vulnerable communities, NGOs, and policymakers; however, news outlets can be selective in what they choose to publish and often have rigorous guidelines for publishing articles. As another option, NGOs often publish op-eds that feature research that their organization sponsored or participated in (e.g., Argo & Jassin, 2021; Beyond Conflict, 2020). These pieces are often geared toward practitioners working in this space and allow for the direct translation of research to those engaged in community outreach. Yet outreach in these outlets might be more limited in scope as they rely on the NGOs' networks for dissemination.

Another way to disseminate research is to write a policy brief that recommends specific changes to existing policies based on scientific research (for a comprehensive overview of how to write a policy brief, see Center for Health Economics and Policy, n.d.; see also Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2011; Kritz, 2009; Sunstein, 2017). Policy briefs typically occur upon completion of the research and can be published in specialized segments in academic journals, specific outlets that are geared toward policy makers, and by independent organizations that focus on policy change. They allow researchers to consider how their work can be used to inform policies and are geared toward policymakers and those who utilize research to enact local, national, or international policy change. For example, Van Bavel and colleagues (2020)

highlighted ways social science research can be used to inform policy enforcement (e.g., social distancing rules) during the COVID-19 pandemic. They describe research on psychological processes that underlie behavior (e.g., threat responses) and provide actionable recommendations for framing of policies to maximize behavioral compliance.

As with both op-ed and policy brief approaches, researchers should be cautious about how they frame their research and the promises their research holds. That is, the research might not have external validity beyond the sample and context that was tested, or it might not have been replicated to confirm its effects. Therefore, researchers should consider the “readiness” of their research by developing workflows that maximize the accuracy of their data (IJerman et al., 2021), focus on replicating their results in the field with unique samples and populations (Bardi & Zentner, 2017), and refrain from making bold claims that speak beyond the applicability and generalizability of their data (IJerman et al., 2021; Paluck et al., 2021). However, researchers should also consider the counterfactual: in the absence of their recommendations, how are policymakers and practitioners currently making decisions and designing their programs? This will help researchers balance making general recommendations and claims about their research while refraining from overexaggerating the promises that their research holds.

Attending or Facilitating Peacebuilding Conferences. Attending or facilitating a peacebuilding conference with practitioners and community members can be another effective way to translate science to practice. Within the practitioner community, there are a variety of conferences devoted to social change that welcome presentations from researchers (e.g., Basal Peace Forum, <https://basel-peace.org>). For instance, the Alliance for Peacebuilding Conference brings together international peacebuilders who focus on reducing conflict and promoting peace in their communities (<https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org>). This one-week conference has

a variety of sessions and workshops aimed at fostering collaborations among those engaged in social change. As another example, the United Nations hosts an annual conference that highlights both research and field work aimed at reducing conflict across the globe (<http://www.osi-genevaforum.org/Conflict-Mediation-and-Resolution-for-Peace-and-Development-Annual.html>). These conferences welcome academics who translate their research and allow for discussion on how their research can translate to other contexts and be actioned in policy and practice. Further, they can be an excellent opportunity to disseminate research to, and form collaborations with, practitioners in the field.

Likewise, within the academic community, organizations such as The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI; <https://www.spssi.org>) and the Society for Community Research and Action (<https://www.scra27.org>) host conferences that emphasize translational science. These conferences focus on research that connects theory with practice to address pressing social issues and provide researchers with resources to maximize the impact of their research. Similarly, organizations, such as SPSSI, host specialized events (e.g., Congressional Seminars, Policy Workshop and Advocacy Days) that focus on connecting academics with practitioners and policymakers to enact change within the community.

Another potential opportunity is to facilitate workshops or mini conferences that bring together academics, practitioners, and other key stakeholders involved in peacebuilding to discuss developments in their respective fields. For instance, in 2018 and 2019, researchers from NYU partnered with the organization Beyond Conflict to organize a one-day workshop that brought together researchers, practitioners, teachers, and community leaders to discuss diversity education. These leaders shared their experiences and approaches when promoting equity education in their respective fields. Afterwards, all attendees engaged in small group workshops

to brainstorm ways to connect research with practice to develop field interventions aimed at promoting diversity early childhood education (for the research that resulted from this process, see Rizzo et al., 2022; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021).

Expanding the evidence base

Evaluating the Efficacy of an NGO Program and/or Content. Translational science could also involve partnering with NGOs or international organizations to evaluate the efficacy of their existing programs and materials (Bar-Tal & Hameiri, 2020; Hameiri & Moore-Berg, in press). For example, Bruneau and colleagues (2021; Study 3) partnered with the NGO Soliya to examine how their semester-long virtual contact program between college students from the U.S. and the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region affected attitudes and perceptions of outgroup members. Here Soliya developed program curriculum and infrastructure and coordinated program logistics, while the researchers used scientific methodology to evaluate the efficacy of the program. After conducting rigorous scientific testing, the researchers found that the virtual contact program successfully reduced non-Muslim Americans' dehumanization of Muslims. As another example, Bilali & Vollhardt (2013) assessed the efficacy of Musekeweya (New Dawn), a Rwandan radio drama developed by the NGO Radio La Benevolencija that aims to prevent violence and promote reconciliation following genocide. Just like Bruneau et al. (2021), these researchers evaluated the efficacy of the radio program following development and deployment and found that it improved intergroup relations through a variety of psychological processes (e.g., perspective-taking, Bilali & Vollhardt, 2013; see also Baron et al., 2021; Bilali, Vollhardt, & Rarick, 2016; Paluck, 2009; Paluck & Greene, 2009; Staub, 2019). In these examples, the authors investigated whether already existing intervention programs developed by practitioners resulted in improved intergroup relationships.

However, not all NGOs deploy large-scale field interventions. Instead, they might develop specific content—such as videos or pamphlets—for local deployment—such as on their websites. Evaluating such media content can also provide a fruitful opportunity for translational science (see Hameiri et al., 2016). For instance, Moore-Berg et al. (2022) partnered with Muslim advocacy NGOs to curate a series of videos used in the field to reduce Islamophobia. These videos ranged from informational videos about Muslims in America to comedy segments featuring Muslim comedians to interviews with Muslim rights activist. Importantly, these videos were developed based on the intuition of practitioners and had not previously undergone rigorous scientific testing to evaluate their efficacy. Following video curation with practitioners, the researchers assessed the efficacy of the videos at reducing Islamophobia with an intervention tournament (Hameiri & Moore-Berg, in press; see also Bruneau et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2014, 2016; Milkman et al., 2021). After assessment, the researchers provided key insights from testing to the practitioners to help them with future content development and curation.

These approaches to translational science have several benefits. First, both approaches build off of existing intervention infrastructure. The interventions are already developed and deployed by the practitioners in the field; therefore, the researchers can devote their resources to developing rigorous methodology to test the efficacy of the intervention program (Bar-Tal & Hameiri, 2020). Second, this approach allows for a synergistic relationship between practitioners and researchers. The intervention program is developed based on the expertise of practitioners who are trained professionals in community building and the intervention assessment is developed based on the expertise of the researchers who are trained professionals in program evaluation.

Partnering with an NGO during design and implementation of research. As a final example of how to conduct translational science, researchers might partner with practitioners from the beginning of intervention development to create an intervention together. This approach draws on the researchers' theoretical and methodological expertise and on the practitioners' community building expertise from the beginning of intervention development (for examples, see Blattman et al., 2017; Kalla & Broockman, 2020; Littman et al, 2021; McKeown et al., 2022; Paluck, 2009; Scacco & Warren, 2018).

This approach has been successfully deployed in the sciences. For example, Littman et al. (2022) partnered with a Nigerian TV station to develop a storyline in the latest season of the popular show *Dadin Kowa*, which has over 38+ million viewers. The researchers worked with the show's scriptwriters and producers to develop the storyline, which featured the budding friendship between a Christian woman and a Muslim woman and aimed to reduce interreligious conflict between Christians and Muslims. During script development, the researchers provided their scientific expertise on theoretical approaches to conflict resolution and the scriptwriters provided their creative expertise on narratives and TV production. The researchers assessed whether *Dadin Kowa* reduced interreligious conflict with a pre-post quasi-experimental design. Results indicated that those who watched the inter-religious storyline expressed significantly less prejudice toward outgroup members, as compared to those who did not watch the storyline.

As another example, Scacco & Warren (2018) partnered with the NGO Community Action for Popular Participation to examine whether a sustained contact intervention in an educational setting improved intergroup relations between Christians and Muslims in conflict-prone regions in Nigeria. Over the course of 16 weeks, participants engaged in cooperative activities in either a homogenous or a heterogeneous religious classroom. Here the researchers

utilized their scientific expertise on intergroup conflict and contact theory to shape the curriculum developed by educators based on their education expertise. Although the contact intervention program did not reduce prejudice between Christians and Muslims directly, participants in the heterogenous classroom showed significantly less discrimination toward outgroup members than those in a homogenous classroom (a finding the researchers attribute to higher levels of discrimination in the homogenous classroom).

As both examples show, working in collaboration with local implementing partners (e.g., local NGOs) can lead to informative large scale field intervention studies and access to populations difficult to reach. These studies are typically much larger than studies conducted in the laboratory and might be better able to reliably test for hypothesized effects (Paluck et al., 2021). However, this approach comes with challenges, and can often be very costly in terms of both time and money. There are important considerations that researchers should make prior to engaging in this type of research, which we describe below.

Practical Considerations When Engaging in Translational Science

Conducting translational science requires skills that scientists should consider before engaging in this type of research (see below for a brief review; for a comprehensive overview of practical skills needed, see Moss et al. 2019). Even researchers equipped with the necessary skill set might not know how to connect with NGOs or communicate their research effectively to relevant audiences. Moreover, even researchers who partner with NGOs might not be fully aware of the needs of practitioners in these relationships. In this next section, we provide practical considerations for conducting translational science research.

Study design and implementation. As a first consideration, field experiments tend to be more complicated to design and conduct than controlled experiments in the lab. For instance,

unlike laboratory research which often relies on online convenience samples or undergraduate populations, field experiments tend to be conducted in person with community-based samples (although this is not always the case). Most social scientists do not receive training in how to develop sampling strategies for this type of research or design research protocols that involve teams of local interviewers conducting in-person or phone interviews. Therefore, researchers will need to learn how to conduct field research in person with community-based samples and be aware of potential complications that might arise when doing so. For example, if researchers want to recruit representative samples for field experiments, they can engage in certain sampling techniques to mirror random selection and assignment as closely as possible (e.g., see Bilali, 2022). As an illustration, to collect baseline data of a random sample of participants, Scacco & Warran (2018) conducted a detailed mapping exercise to identify neighborhoods in their study area, and then utilized a random walk design to randomly select homes within neighborhoods and participants within households. Similarly, to facilitate random condition assignment, Paluck (2009) used a group-randomized design to randomly assign communities to either the treatment (i.e., radio program) or control (i.e., no radio program) conditions. These communities were initially selected based on a series of demographic items selected to represent modern-day Rwanda political, ethnic, and regional breakdowns.

Importantly, researchers should spend time learning about any community-specific needs in the targeted communities prior to sampling. For example, when collecting data in sensitive regions, it might make sense to contact local community leaders or village chiefs to ask for their permission to work with their community. Yet in other settings, researchers might need to receive letters of permission from regional authorities. In both instances, researchers should only work with communities in which they have explicit approval to do so. And after approval, it

might then be most fruitful for researchers to first develop rapport with community members prior to surveying them as well as work with local researchers to help maintain those positive relationships. This can help maximize compliance with research protocols and allow for greater impact of the research program.

Interacting and working with vulnerable communities. As another consideration, researchers should take extra care when designing their surveys and experiments when interacting with vulnerable populations. For instance, there might be certain religious or cultural taboos that researchers should be aware of ahead of study development and deployment (see Moss et al., 2019 and Webb-Gannon, 2017 for case studies of working with vulnerable populations; see also Acar et al., 2020). Additionally, the researchers' own identities might impact participants' willingness to participate in the research and trust of the researchers (Uluğ et al., 2021). Further, researchers should consider whether their survey needs to be translated and whether, once translated, the measures carry the same connotation as initially intended and the scales translate to the new context. To overcome these challenges, researchers should work with local implementation partners to understand the cultural/religious context and to develop culturally sensitive methodology. For example, when conducting field studies investigating conflict between Christian, Muslim, and Hindus in Fiji, Pasek et al. (2020) partnered with Fiji's Ministry of iTaukei (indigenous) Affairs and assembled teams of local research assistants from each ethno-religious group they studied, who they engaged in focus groups and with whom they co-designed culturally sensitive and contextually relevant studies. In some cases, Pasek et al. (2020) abandoned questions they meant to ask after learning that there were no culturally appropriate ways to ask them. These community members and local officials also helped to facilitate access to communities, such as by arranging meetings with village leaders and guiding

the researchers through local customs, such as the *Sevusevu*—a process whereby outsiders (e.g., the research team) gain permission to enter and work with community members. These examples highlight the importance of partnering with community members and those with local expertise, as opposed to researchers parachuting in from the outside.

There are also specific ethical considerations that the researchers should be aware of when working with vulnerable populations. Some examples include preventing potential psychological harm that participants might experience while engaging in the research, ensuring informed consent is tailored to the specific context, and protecting the research team from the psychological demands of conducting field research (for suggestions on how to overcome these challenges, see Moss et al., 2019; see also Campbell & Morris, 2017). In conflict settings, researchers also need to ensure that they take the safety of their local interviewers and respondents very seriously. For example, when working on a study on the reintegration of former Boko Haram members in Northeast Nigeria, Blair et al. (2021) worked closely with the security team from their NGO partner, Mercy Corps, daily. In addition to a comprehensive security analysis before the study began, Mercy Corps' security team checked on the safety of the communities the research team planned to visit every morning before they set out. Therefore, it might be more challenging to work with vulnerable populations versus working with traditional W.E.I.R.D (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) populations.

Additional ethical considerations. When engaging in translational science, several ethical considerations must be made. As noted in the prior sections, field research can yield complicated designs that require attention to community-specific needs, especially when working with vulnerable populations. Researchers must be mindful when engaging with these populations to

ensure that they are doing no harm (physically or mentally), obtaining appropriate informed consent (either written or oral depending on the situation), communicating the findings in a just and cautious way (e.g., not overselling/overpromising social sciences, representing the populations fairly, etc.), and protecting the data on secure servers or databases (for a complete review of ethical considerations and guiding principles see American Anthropological Association, 2012; American Evaluation Association, 2018; American Psychological Association, 2016; American Sociological Association, 2008; Siriwardhana et al., 2017).

An additional ethical consideration researchers should make when engaging in translational science is addressing the psychological impact/toll this work can take on the researchers involved. It could be that close involvement in this research leads to more care for the research, and as a result, greater impact. But on the other hand, such involvement could lead to psychological harm. For instance, field research in conflict regions may be particularly difficult if the researcher and/or research assistants employed are partial to one side of the conflict (for a case study, see Moss & Hajj, 2020). In these instances, the identity of the researcher might influence administration of the project and/or the research might affect the mental health of the research teams (e.g., Thompson, 2013; Moss & Hajj, 2020; Moss et al., 2019). Thus, in addition to considering the psychological toll of the research on the participants, the researchers should also consider its effect on all those involved in the research program, including research assistants, students, the principal researchers themselves, and local partners (e.g., fixers, translators, enumerators). Efforts should be made to minimize such harm (e.g., mentoring programs with research teams doing similar work; see Moss et al., 2019), especially in contexts where psychological support services are not readily available

Statistical and methodological skills. In addition to sampling considerations, there are various statistical and methodological skills that are necessary when dealing with field data. For example, field experiments may have more complicated research designs than a typical study conducted in a lab or online setting. Additionally, field research often yields messier data than controlled laboratory experiments. Specifically, in many instances, researchers hire local interviewers to survey people in the field, which can lead to unorganized data, missing data, and potentially falsified data (this is especially likely in situations when the researcher is not in the field directly monitoring data collection). This may require researchers to spend a large amount of time cleaning data, considering how to handle missing data, and recognizing when data has been falsified (by carefully monitoring data collection and looking for any unusual patterns, such as data collection that occurs at an unusually fast past or at strange times). Indeed, in recent years various tools have been developed to help researchers manage these methodological issues (see e.g., Gomila et al., 2017).

Logistical considerations. There are also several logistical considerations that researchers should make when conducting field research. For instance, like with any experiment, things might go wrong, and researchers need to be prepared for how to handle these situations. These errors can range from technical errors (e.g., issues with computer software used for inputting data) to compliance issues with enumerators/surveyors (e.g., inputting falsified data) to difficulties with hiring and training enumerators/surveyors. As another consideration, engagement in this type of research can be expensive, and some funders might be less receptive to funding applied research. This might be especially true if the research is conducted on a socially sensitive topic or if the research is viewed to be politically driven. Researchers might also face logistical challenges of obtaining research permits in each context and ensuring the

safety of the research team and participants in dangerous settings (see Moss et al., 2019). One solution to learning how to navigate these logistical challenges could be to find research collaborators (potentially from other universities and/or disciplines) who have experience working in these settings. Another potential solution could be partnering with practitioners and/or local, reputable organizations who have experience conducting field experiments. But how might researchers develop these relationships with practitioners?

Developing partnerships with practitioners. One way researchers can connect with practitioners and NGOs is by sending cold emails to organizations of interest (specifically to the monitoring and evaluation team, research liaison, and/or program officer). In these emails, the researchers should introduce themselves and mention the services that they can provide to the NGO. Services might include providing the NGO with descriptive data and final reports to be used for the translation of research (for an example, see Beyond Conflict, 2020), offering cost-sharing or total cost coverage of data collection, and/or providing intervention ideas that have theoretical and scientific promise. (Note: If the researcher is offering an intervention idea, they should be transparent about whether the intervention has been tested and effective in similar contexts and be clear that the intervention might not be effective in the intended context.) Smaller organizations may be more likely to respond to cold emails than larger organizations, and soft introductions via other researchers who work with NGOs and practitioners might provide the most successful opportunity to connect with NGOs.

Another way to connect with NGOs is to respond to an open call to be an assessor. An assessor is hired by the NGO to evaluate ongoing programs within the NGO. In these instances, the NGO might be open to the researcher publishing findings from this partnership; however, publication of the data should be discussed during relationship formation (including whether the

NGO would be comfortable with publishing null or unfavorable results). Further, there could be opportunities as an assessor to build in the researcher's own work or study into ongoing organization programs.

With each of these outreach approaches it is important to recognize that practitioners might have some initial resistance to partnering with researchers. This could be because they previously had bad experiences working with researchers or simply have not worked with researchers previously. To overcome such barriers, researchers should (1) provide practitioners and NGOs with concrete examples of other organizations in the field that have used a more scientific approach (including material produced) in their field work, (2) use practitioner-focused language when describing research and avoid scientific jargon that might alienate practitioners, (3) demonstrate an understanding of practitioner values and needs, and (4) express how the practitioners/NGOs can be involved as partners in the research (e.g., co-development of research questions). This open dialogue can be helpful when fostering a healthy relationship between the practitioners and researchers.

When connecting with NGOs and practitioners it is also important to stay abreast of what is occurring in that space. To do this, researchers should seek out reports by NGOs about ongoing and past projects. These are often listed on their websites and highlighted in newsletters and/or publications produced by the organization. Another way to learn about NGOs is to look at peer-reviewed publications of applied research to see which are the organizations that researchers work with and how they work with them (for examples, see Bruneau et al., 2021; Bilali et al., 2013, 2016; Scacco & Warren, 2018; Staub, 2019). Finally, through conversations with NGOs, researchers can learn about the needs of the NGO.

Once the line of communication is open with the practitioners, it is important for researchers to consider the language that they use when communicating (c.f. Schalet et al., 2020). Specifically, the researcher should strive to use lay language that is easily understandable and avoid using scientific jargon and complicated statistical terms. Translation of research can be challenging, so communicating research and ideas in ways that are not condescending is key to fostering a healthy relationship. Further, there might be some stigmatized words or phrases in the practitioner world that are considered ordinary in the science world. As one example, the terms “randomized controlled trial” or “experiments” could be considered taboo by some humanitarian groups that contend that all participants should receive the treatment condition and that no one should be left without treatment (i.e., no empty control group; Wolfe, 2020). Thus, the researchers should be considerate about the language they use when describing methodology and should take extra care to explain how the methodology can be successful in the field or suggest potential alternative research methods that can yield a rigorous assessment while catering to the practitioners’ values and needs (e.g., randomized rollout designs; see Gerber & Green, 2012). For example, when trying to get an organization on board with the idea of randomizing participants into treatment and control conditions, it often does not work to explain the science behind randomization and causal inference. Instead, it can be more effective to emphasize that an NGO will not be able to give their program to everyone in need, no matter how much they would like to. This means that they will need to make decisions about who to include in their programming. A lottery can be a transparent and fair way to select who gets to participate in a program now. And, as an added benefit, researchers can compare the people who are selected to those who are not and learn how the program affects those individuals.

Researchers should also spend time at the beginning of their relationships with practitioners and NGOs identifying goals and red lines/boundary conditions (i.e., conditions that both parties are willing (or not) to compromise on). The end goal of the research might be the same, but the incentives for the research might not be aligned. For instance, there could be differences in ethical guidance for engaging with program beneficiaries and differences in perspectives on if, when, and how the research should be disseminated. The NGO, for instance, might want to release the findings of the research as soon as they are collected, but the researcher might not feel comfortable releasing results until they are peer reviewed. As another example, the researchers might be interested in publishing null or negative findings, but the NGO might not feel comfortable releasing such results. As a final example, practitioners and researchers might have different ideas about what the research methodology should look like (i.e., what type of sampling methodology should be used, randomization of sample) and project timelines (e.g., length of time it takes to get IRB approval, to conduct detailed pilot testing, to collect survey data, etc.). Thus, the researchers and practitioners should consider what goals are aligned and misaligned prior to beginning their partnership and should discuss strategies (potentially via a MOU, or memorandum of understanding) with the NGO on how to overcome such differences. If there are places where the goals or needs are misaligned and neither party is able to compromise, it can be best to amicably terminate the partnership before both the researcher and practitioner invest too much time.

A Practitioner's Perspective on Translational Science

A partnership between academics and practitioners brings many advantages in the eyes of the latter. For a practitioner, the opportunity to apply the scientific method to projects gives true meaning to the oft-overused term “evidenced-based.” Practitioners collaborating with academics

can use the scientific method to test hypotheses and verify if and which programs lead to the stated outcomes and expected results. They also gain access to rigorous program evaluations, which can result in data-driven learning of the best ways to improve future program development and implementation and maximize impact. Below we highlight the observations and perspectives of practitioners who have worked with researchers to translate science.

First, some researchers note that even when there seems to be a synergy with practitioners, they are not added to the project team. Often this is because practitioners face circumstances that limit the choice of researchers they can contract. Practitioners do not often know in advance what funding they will receive, and upon approval of funding, they need to quickly contract support. Practitioners thus tend to choose academics they previously worked with and who are already pre-approved or registered with their organization. Another important consideration is the amount of paperwork needed to register new consultants as part of a project, particularly from international organizations such as the United Nations and government agencies, which can deter researchers from applying. Some government entities only employ contractors with security clearances and obtaining clearance can take more time than practitioners can afford. Thus, these entities tend to use the same group of registered consultants.

As another consideration during partnerships, practitioners and academics work under different timelines and obligations. Deliverable timelines for practitioners are strongly influenced by fund availability, itself set by donors and which practitioners often cannot control. These deadlines do not always align with the academic year, which can present a challenge, as practitioners face donor obligations to yield results according to a set timeline. Compressed project timelines can also make it difficult to create rigorous research plans and obtain IRB approvals. In addition, practitioners and academics often speak different languages—the terms,

knowledge base, and key theoretical frameworks they use are not often aligned. Thus, it is important to make sure that everyone is on the same page regarding the goals, methods, outputs, and timelines for the collaboration.

During project implementation, friction can appear when decisions need to be made. For example, practitioners often use different standards of evidence to draw conclusions than researchers (e.g., different standards for causality and generalization of data). Practitioners also tend to care less about methodological issues than academics. One potential exception is that some practitioners (and donors) are uncomfortable with using randomized control trials (RCTs) due to concerns that they could exclude people in need from receiving effective interventions. There are many ethical ways to design RCTs in programming settings, but careful use of language and clarity around design are important to ensure proper buy-in.

Perhaps some of the greatest challenges happen when research results become available. Practitioners may have sensitivities to certain language or may not be willing to publish certain findings. This can be resolved by working to understand those sensitivities, identifying red lines up front, and creating advanced agreement on outputs, data, and information. For example, practitioners need to respond to constituent and partner interests in ways that academics might not be used to, which can influence how they work and what they say in public. Importantly, practitioners need to understand what research results mean in relation to a project. For instance, practitioners must understand what the data mean for programming and how results can be applied to learning to create greater impact. Since practitioners use results to report to funders and primary audiences (e.g., other practitioners), all scientific concepts need to be translated for lay audiences.

Lastly, the idea of success often differs for practitioners and academics. For academics, success may be publication in top scholarly journals and recognized contribution to scientific knowledge. For practitioners, success often lies in communicating their impact with donors, partners and the public, and obtaining more funding to expand programming.

All these issues can be addressed through advanced discussion and planning for fruitful collaboration—leading to more impactful programming. As more impact means a greater difference in the lives of beneficiaries, more partnerships struck between academics and practitioners could lead to a real change on important global issues.

Conclusion

Although significant strides have been made to incorporate translational science into the social sciences, barriers still exist that might deter researchers from engaging in such research. However, when engaged in, translational science can both propel science forward and have lasting impact on involved communities (for notable examples, see Chang et al., 2019; Kalla & Brockman, 2020; Lowe, 2020; Mousa, 2020; Staub, 2019). We encourage researchers to engage in translational science by listening to the needs of communities, utilizing scientific theory and methodology to help address those needs, partnering with practitioners and NGOs who have direct experience and expertise with working with vulnerable communities, and/or communicating their findings to lay, policy, and practitioner audiences. It is only once we fully recognize and incorporate translational science into our research programs that we can fully incorporate the Bruneauian approach and begin to create the strongest science that uses research to foster social change.

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