

How to know if we are ethically conducting field research

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**Joint work with Rebecca Littman (UIC),
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tl;dr

**We want to minimize costs/harms,
maximize benefits of research**

But it's hard to predict them!

→ **Ask scholars, ask participants,
& build experimental evidence**

Ethical goals

1. Respect for persons
2. Beneficence
3. Justice

Need to know:

Harms, costs, benefits to participants, community, & society

The status quo

How do we know?

- 1. Ask our colleagues**
- 2. Ask local experts**
- 3. Ask participants**

**Experts are not good at
forecasting reactions of others**

**Academics →
reactions to research**

**Clinical psychologists →
patient mental states**

**Development practitioners →
reactions to anti-poverty
programs**



Ask participants

Pilot test with cognitive interviews

**Ask potential participants and
key local stakeholders**

Reactions to Research Participation Questionnaire

1. Participation

I like the idea that I contributed to science.

I was glad to be asked to participate.

Include in future testing: I felt I could stop participating at any time.

Recommended new item: Participation was a choice I freely made.

2. Personal Benefits

I gained insight about my experiences through research participation.

I gained something positive from participating.

I found participating beneficial to me.

I found participating in this study personally meaningful.

3. Emotional Reactions

The research raised emotional issues for me that I had not expected.

I experienced intense emotions during the research session.

I was emotional during the research session.

The research made me think about things I didn't want to think about.

4. Perceived Drawbacks

The study procedures took too long.

Participating in this study was inconvenient for me.

I found participating boring.

I found the questions too personal.

Include in future testing: Knowing what I know now, I would participate in this study again if given the opportunity. (Reverse score)

Include in future testing: Had I known in advance what participating would be like I still would have agreed to participate.. (Reverse score)

5. Global evaluation

I think this research is for a good cause.

I believe this study's results will be useful to others.

I was treated with respect and dignity

I trust that my replies will be kept private.

Include in future testing: I understood the consent form.

Forecasting our own reactions is hard

We are bad at predicting how we will feel in future – and especially how others feel

Wilson & Gilbert, 2003; Eyal, Steffel & Epley, 2018

Estimating causal effects of research is hard

What would my anxiety level be if I
didn't participate? What if I did?

Cognitive shortcut: my anxiety now

Our proposal

Our proposal

**Estimate causal effects of
research on participants using
randomized experiments**



Application
Asking about
violent victimization

Three studies in Nigeria, 2018–20

**Part of RCTs on other topics
(Boko Haram reintegration, farmer-herder conflict)**

Ethical risk:

Asking about past victimization → retraumatize

Research mode:

**Face-to-face survey (2018), face-to-face with phone
followup (2019), phone (2020)**

Experimental design

Group	Block 1	Block 2
Treatment	Violence	Mental health
Control	Mental health	Violence

Analysis plan

Meta-analytic average effects

Subgroup effects

Test for harmful effects

Overall main effects from random effects meta-analysis

Anxiety



Depression



PTSD index



-0.2

0.0

0.2

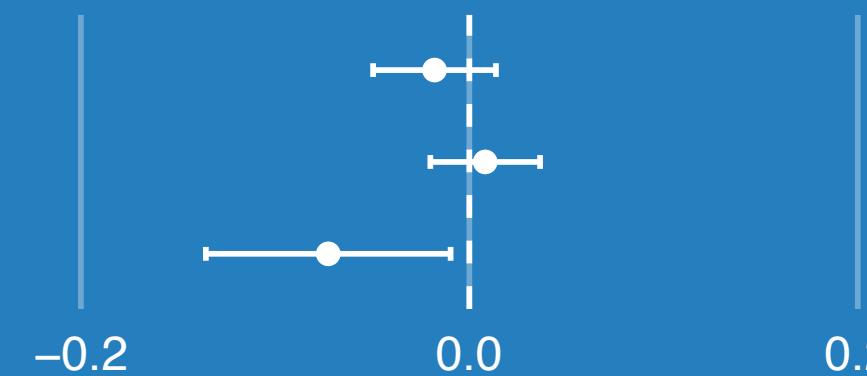
Study main effects

Maiduguri

Anxiety

Depression

PTSD index

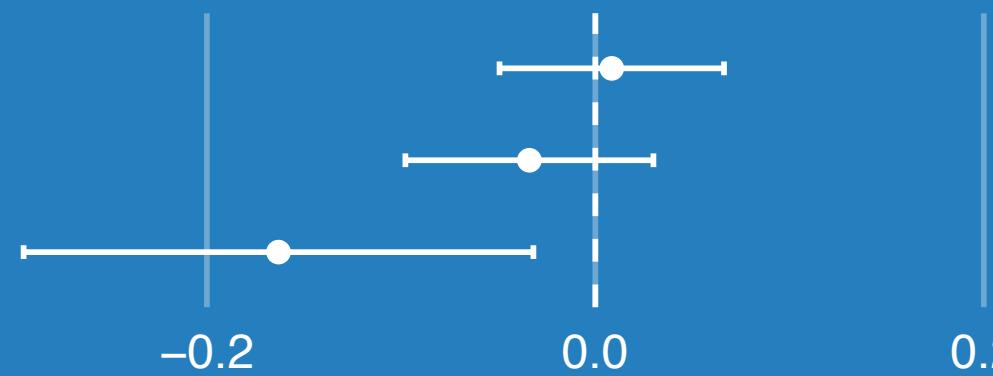


Kaduna 1

Anxiety

Depression

PTSD index

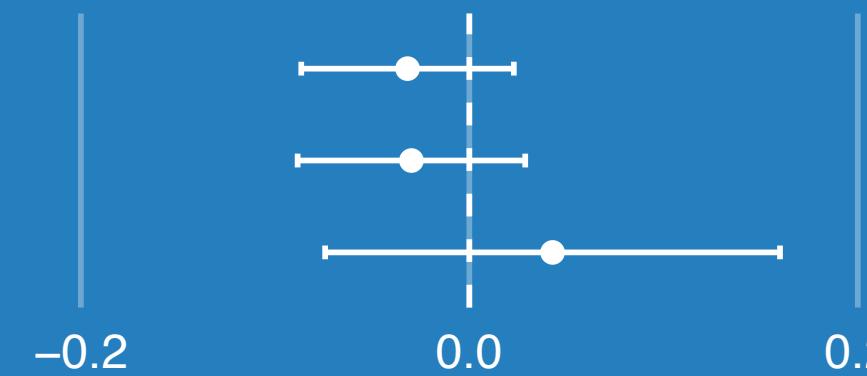


Kaduna 2

Anxiety

Depression

PTSD index



Estimated treatment effect and 95% confidence intervals
(Standardized effect size)

Cautions:

Immediate measurement

Clinical measures → slow to move

No participant reactions

Where do we go now?

This design

**Randomly-assign study
component**

Survey experiment design

Learning about ethics at each research stage

Sampling: Inclusion in the study

Protocols: Intensity of consent procedures

Assignment: Costs to being excluded

Treatments: Researcher involvement

Measurement: Being asked questions

Dissemination: Sharing the evidence

...

How to use this evidence

Forecast harms, costs, benefits

Monitor for actual harms

Tailor mitigation measures

Next steps for our team

Systematic review

Coordinated experiments

Enumerator experiment

Joint with Hannah Baron (Brown), Sandra Ley
(CIDE), Andrés Moya (UniAndes), Elayne Stecher
(UCLA), and Lauren Young (Davis)

Next steps for you

Use evidence to inform decisions

Ask participants before, after

Add experiments to your studies