Busara Groundwork

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Before you wreck yourself: a guide to facing the hard truth that we are all one level removed

Busara

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MIT GOV/LAB

MIT Governance Lab is a research group and innovation incubator that aims to change practices around government accountability and citizen voice. MIT GOV/LAB's practitioner-in-residence program offers a tailored experience for practitioner partners to systematically reflect on their work and share lessons learned while also providing resources for exploratory research. mitgovlab.org.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

FMNR	Farmer-managed Natural Regeneration
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
SMS	Short Message Service
WEIRD	Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (a term established by Henrich et al. to describe systematic differences in human behavior based on cultural and institutional backgrounds)

Executive summary

If nothing else, remember these guiding principles:

If you are applying behavioral science in development contexts, be thoughtful to avoid creating and perpetuating biases. To be thoughtful, uncover the difference between what you expect and what is. Build meaningful partnerships where your partner gets as much out of the study as you do. And, no matter what, put the community's lived experiences at the center of your research process.

Introducing the guide

We have been talking about the WEIRD phenomenon in behavioral science research for a while–Henrich et al.s' argument that people from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) countries are systematically different from those from non-WEIRD contexts.[1] But no matter where you conduct your research and where you are from, we are all a little WEIRD. Maybe not by definition, but we are all one level removed in some way or the other - whether we are from a different community, different hierarchy, different culture and such.

The divide in behavioral science research is not as black and white as Global North and Global South, a power hierarchy exists everywhere - within the Global South, within various stakeholder groups and within all sorts of partnerships (and Henrich also clarifies that there is a lot of variation within the two categories he sets out). Itsi easy to feel overwhelmed and to believe researchers should only work in areas that they are 'from'. However, bringing together researchers across the world creates a richness of ideas, methods and perspectives, if done thoughtfully.

1 Henrich, J. (2020). The Weirdest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous. New York, NY, Penguin (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Henrich, J., S. J. Heine and A. Norenzayan (2010). "The weirdest people in the world?" Behavioral and Brain Sciences 61–135.

Before you wreck yourself. Facing the hard truth that we are all one level removed, is a practical tool to help researchers from around the world conduct more thoughtful behavioral science research in international development contexts.

The halls of conferences, partner meetings, and organizations are filled with stories about unexpected occurrences while conducting behavioral science research in the context of international development. You might hear about participants pretending to be married to participate in a study on intra-household bargaining, on-the-ground partners not being enthused by a novel intervention idea, or communities seeming disengaged and only going through the motions of a relatively short survey. However, these remain anecdotes — not captured in the published paper or synthesized for researchers to refer to. *Before you wreck yourself* attempts to bring together these learning experiences so no researcher feels unprepared to navigate new territories.

What can behavioral science do for international development?

International development suffers from a limited understanding of people's mindsets, behaviors, local needs, and viable solutions to their specific challenges. At Busara, we address this lack of understanding using a behavioral science approach that aims to understand and influence human behavior through the process of both observation and experimentation.

Uncovering the nuances of human behavior as it is relevant for those who are implementing programs is not straightforward. Usually, it requires a

partnership between researchers (academic or non-academic) and the agency or NGO that is implementing a program. To focus the research on a specific angle of human behavior, a research question is needed, which might get formulated collaboratively with the involved partners. Sometimes, the researchers will come up with a research question and then refine it with the implementing partner. The researchers then contribute their expertise in designing the research, while a local implementing partner contributes the expertise about the context in which the research is conducted.

This guide hopes to provide a thoughtful starting point to realize our own biases as researchers — how our context has shaped us and how that can get in the way of designing studies, how we can build more collaborative partnerships with on-the-ground organizations, and how we can listen to the needs of the community when it comes to research processes.

Is this guide for you?

This guide is for researchers, situated within an organization, who have some knowledge of concepts of behavioral science and are interested in solving problems for development outcomes in partnership with local NGOs or implementation agencies. For example, if you spend your time thinking about overcoming behavioral barriers to improving child immunization rates in rural Kenya, or how to encourage digital savings for low income families in Colombia using commitment devices or other behavioral interventions, you may find this guide helpful.

Do you find yourself asking any of these questions?

> ***The communities I want my project to serve end up in a ton of research studies, is there anything I can do so they feel appreciated?***
>
> ***I'm not from this particular culture or region, what perspective might I be missing?***
>
> ***I really want to know "what's the real problem here?" and "will the community be able to use my intervention?"***
>
> ***I wonder how I can build an effective collaboration with these partners? They seem great, but I have expertise to bring too.***

It is our hope that this guide proves to be a useful companion on your journey toward answering these questions and toward more thoughtful behavioral research.

What can you expect to take away from this guide?

This guide includes learnings, anecdotes from experts, and suggestions for your own quantitative and qualitative research studies that apply behavioral science toward alleviating a challenge in international development. We cover three approaches that can contribute to more thoughtful behavioral science research:

1. ***Putting communities at the heart of your research - which has to do with the researcher's own mental model.***

2. ***A new pair of glasses. Frames to understand your own expectations - which covers relationships between the researcher and implementing organizations.***

3. ***Building a true research partnership - in which we talk about meeting communities where they are.***

We recommend you embrace these three approaches as you embark on your study. You can pick this guide up as you start thinking of behaviorally-informed solutions to move the needle for a development outcome, or when you are wondering why research implementation is not going as planned weeks after kick off.

How did we compile this guide?

As part of the practitioner-in-residence program at MIT GOV/LAB, I interviewed 24 experts from across 22 organizations in academia and practice and combined their insights with Busara's own experience of applying behavioral science for international development. Experts were selected through snowballing to represent a variety of perspectives — those working within government nudge units, to academics and those from behavioral science research organizations. Experts shared their experiences, perspectives, struggles, failures, learnings, and advice from running research

in areas from conflict ridden regions of Northern Nigeria to the legislative corridors of Lebanon. Interviews were conducted from September through November of 2022.

To adhere to confidentiality requests, we have masked the stakeholders in many stories.

Part 1 - Putting the communities at the heart of the research

The communities your research aims to benefit should be at the front and center of projects. All too often, ethics come as an afterthought; I would like that to be different.

At Busara, we have built a research panel of ~133,000 participants across both fixed and mobile labs around the globe, collaborated with 100+ academics, and partnered on over 90 papers. When we set up our lab, we adapted best practices from many WEIRD behavioral labs. We provided participants with a show-up fee as well as an incentive for participation, recruited them over the phone and provided short message service (SMS) reminders before the sessions, had counters for registration, and so on. However, in early 2020, we wondered whether adaptation was enough. Were our behavioral experiments placing excess costs on certain parts of the population as we hadn't designed for the household social norms at play that could influence participation?

We then conducted qualitative interviews with participants about their experience with Busara's lab in Nairobi, Kenya, and in Lagos, Nigeria, to better understand the difference between financial and non-financial costs for lab attendance. Participants were asked about the arrangements they made to come to the current session, including considerations for transport,

childcare, and outside obligations. Furthermore, they were asked about when they were notified to arrive, their time preference for when they wanted to show up, and how well we took this into account.

Interviews revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that women were more significantly burdened with childcare and household chores, and some even had to obtain permission from their husbands to attend. However, despite the impediments to fulfilling household responsibilities presented by the time of transport, most women were willing to bear an additional cost of taking a faster mode of transport or waking up earlier because they considered their research participation a job. We, however, were not accounting for the differential costs faced by different population sub-groups in our lab recruitment strategies.

Research sits on a knife's edge. It can be the best chance for a person to have their concerns and hopes conveyed to those who make decisions about their lives. Yet all too often, it does not feel like that for participants. It feels extractive and impersonal. My experience conducting numerous behavioral lab studies indicates that this is common. Researchers rely on the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for ethical processes. And, while the IRBs recognize the power structures that exist and are meant to serve as a check to the power imbalances between the researchers and the human subjects, these institutions that are set up to check power and its misuse do not operate in isolation from the power structures themselves.

Across the interviews, one overarching message echoed:

> ***Move from performative to transformative ethics:*** *Ethical practices can easily become bureaucratic routines, or check-box exercises, completed by abstract 'persons'. All researchers commit to the principle of Respect for Persons, drawn from the Belmont Report,[2] and should know and uphold the basic principles of what that means — consent, confidentiality, and so on. This is not enough. For a transformative approach to ethics, researchers must account for the actual lived experiences of real-life participants.*

This section provides starting steps for what a transformative ethics process that protects people's sense of recognition, agency, and equality could look like.

1.1 Toward more inclusive behavioral science

This section was written with specific contributions from Joel Mumo (Busara), Mareike Schomerus (Busara), and Tom Wein (IDinsight).

2 Office of the Secretary and The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979). THE BELMONT REPORT: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Move from performative to transformative ethics

Several recent pieces of qualitative research by IDinsight and Busara give clues for what a transformative ethical process might look like. Before the behavioral experiment is run, participants want fair warning,[3] allowing them to find childcare and make other arrangements before coming. Lab participants in Kenya tell us they want clearer ideas of what's coming up when they give consent[4] — and Indian farmers have made clear that good consent comes out of an ongoing relationship[5] of trust beyond a single encounter. Kenyan lab participants make clear that they want feedback[6] from the findings to allow them to fulfill the role they assume as community representatives. When we experimentally tested this in another part of Kenya, even a thoughtfully written text message[7] was enough to make a significant difference, such is the hunger for that feedback.

3 Shipow, A. and A. Singh (2020). "Is your data inclusive? Optimizing results by eliminating the hidden costs of research participation." The Busara Blog https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/is-your-data-inclusive-ddd59933f108.
4 Nyaga, R., A. Wanjiku, R. Wambua, C. Juma, J. Mumo and T. Wein (2022). Prioritizing dignity in practice: Understanding research dignity from the participant perspective. https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/prioritizing-dignity-in-practice-74d86b65c867.
5 Wein, T., M. Blair and N. Mungomba (2022). Dignity Report 2022: Gathering Allies Worldwide, IDinsight.
6 Mumo, J. (2021). Seen but not heard: Ethical considerations for inclusive research in the Global South. https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/seen-but-not-heard-c70db0554926.
7 Wein, T., M. Schilling, P. Hammond, J. Mumo and C. Juma (2022). Value and validation: How feedback enhances the quality of research outputs. https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/value-and-validation-113750e7c0ad.

Here are some starting questions to ask yourself as you set up your behavioral study:

- ***Beyond fulfilling IRB requirements, have you thought deeply and taken advice about the experience of participants? How will you ensure that this is a respectful, safe and generous study?*** *Best practice would be to conduct an inception focus-group discussion with participants from your larger potential participant pool. Share your upcoming study with them and ask them how to make the research process a respectful one for their specific community, and then use those insights to contextualize your research process itself.*

- ***How have you adapted consent procedures to ensure participants will be able to make a truly informed decision about their participation, bearing in mind their context and capabilities?*** *Telling participants that the study is about uptake of products relating to sexual and reproductive health is often not sufficient, as they report feeling shocked when they then get to the sensitive questions around the study. Offering further definitions while maintaining research integrity works well to mitigate this shock. Examples of the types of questions that a participant may encounter during a study also help in giving them the ability to make an informed decision.*

- ***Can participants genuinely opt out? What procedures will you follow?*** *Plan for five percent of your participants preferring to opt out once the study has started, and have processes in place that still provide them*

with a show-up fee and incentive, allow them to leave without other participants raising eyebrows, and follow up with them after with a message of thanks.

- ***What procedures do you have in place for sharing results after the study with your study participants? If you have no such procedures, what justifies this decision?*** *Upon conclusion of your preliminary analysis, share the headline findings with the research community that participated. These do not need to be time or resource intensive — even simple text messages can go a long way. Here's a sample text message from one of Busara's messages that increased self-reported felt respect in the participant group:*

  The SMS (sent in both English and Kiswahili) read: "*In February you participated in our research on CFA's and forests in Kenya. Thank you for participating, your insights were very valuable to us! We have reported the following to Safaricom, KFS and other stakeholders: 1. The digital solution can provide more knowledge on conservation through training and information sharing. 2. More transparent and predictable financial incentives for dedicated CFA members can speed up tree-planting. Safaricom and KFS took this seriously and are considering the best solutions. Please share these findings at your next CFA meeting.*"

- ***If you are hiring temporary enumerator staff, are there actions you can take to support their comfort and growth during and beyond this project?*** *Practically, this could look like providing childcare facilities*

to enumerators who require it to be available for the study hours, or money or vouchers to access formal childcare elsewhere. Although these might be informal or temporary contractors, providing certificates and references could help them with future employment. Maintaining solid feedback on each enumerator could help the data collection organization institute performance feedback processes and rewards for the enumerator groups.

- ***Have you onboarded other researchers and partners on your team to value dignity and ethics as well?***

Stories from the field

Uncovering real participant experience

A set of qualitative reflections with past participants of Busara's lab in Nairobi highlighted that while participants generally had a positive research experience, there were two major pain points. In participating in research, they felt themselves to be community representatives — but how could they fulfill that role if they did not receive feedback on the study's results? And second, how could they give meaningful consent to this process, when consent forms were so bureaucratic?

Read more on the full experience a participant goes through and where they raise concern in this blog on "Prioritizing dignity in practice"[8] by Busara.

For more on ethical considerations for inclusive behavioral science research, read "Seen but not heard"[9] by Busara.

For more on operationalizing dignity in development, read "Dignity in practice"[10] by The Dignity Project and IDinsight.

8 Nyaga, R., A. Wanjiku, R. Wambua, C. Juma, J. Mumo and T. Wein (2022). Prioritizing dignity in practice: Understanding research dignity from the participant perspective. https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/prioritizing-dignity-in-practice-74d86b65c867
9 Mumo, J. (2021). Seen but not heard: Ethical considerations for inclusive research in the Global South. https://medium.com/busara-center-blog/seen-but-not-heard-c70db0554926.
10 Wein, T., H. Lanthorn and T. Fischer (2022). DiGNiTY in Practice: an attempt to define and operationalize a complex construct (Briefing Paper, IDinsight.

Part 2 - A new pair of glasses: frames to understand your own expectations

At Busara, we ran a study in Nairobi during the Covid-19 pandemic on how households were managing the cognitive load of childcare. We ran four waves of the study within a one-year period. In interviews, the male parents would give us different ages for the same child in different rounds of the survey, which led to consistent questions on data quality from our academic partners. It turned out that male parents within our sample were not always clued in on their child's age. No one in my team was surprised by this and pointed out that birthdays were not momentous occasions — I had internalized that they were.

As researchers, we have our own set of assumptions that we then hold our research to. Uncovering and overcoming these is the second part of conducting more thoughtful research. The foundation of behavioral science highlights that the journey from intent to action is not linear — we do not always behave in predictable ways, and we make decisions through various heuristics and fall prey to various biases. When we try to address myopic thinking while designing a commitment savings product for farmers, we acknowledge and account for the fact that farmers are biased. However, we often miss a crucial part — that researchers are biased too. The purpose of this section is to share advice on where and in what ways we need to be

self-aware of our own expectations and biases and actively work around them to develop thoughtful research.

Based on expert experiences, it is important to try to interrogate your assumptions as a researcher.

- ***How can you uncover the biases you are bringing to your research question and intervention design? How can you work with your partners' biases too?*** *Plug and play models do not work in international development — recognizing your own assumptions and checking them constantly is key. Even if you are partnering with local organizations, they have their own biases. Very often folks from local organizations can also be one level removed from the intended end population. Lastly, not only can partners be slightly removed from your end context, they also have their own mental models and biases that affect whether they agree with your research agenda, agree to partner, and actually buy into your research findings.*

  Related to this point, it is important to think about how you have defined success in this project. Level setting your own and your partners' expectations, and knowing that you are going to fail many times and at many points is the only shield that will keep you from giving up. A ton of unexpected challenges can come up — from political changes, natural disasters, and change of staff within your partner organization to something as fundamental as rain and electricity outages — even if you have done this many times before.

- ***What do you expect to do within your project partnership?*** *You will have to wear many hats and take on many perspectives — researcher, manager, problem solver, administrator, mentor. Are you prepared for this? I have consistently observed that in development research, the actual behavioral intervention design and experimental design is only about 20 percent of the project's work. A lot of time and effort will go into understanding your partners' needs, understanding their capacity and incentives, mentoring local teams, and empathizing with on-the-ground difficulties.*

2.1 Checking assumptions

Which biases are you bringing to your research question and intervention design? Do you believe you cannot fail?

While conducting formative research on the behavioral barriers at play and designing workshops to create your behavioral intervention, use these pointers to assess whether your own worldview might be shaping your study:

- ***Conduct lots of formative qualitative research before building your final research question*** *to truly understand how the social norms and cultural context shapes the behavioral barriers communities face. Understanding the context you are coming into is most important — be ready for many of your assumptions to turn out to be inaccurate. Formative findings, often based on just a small number of qualitative interviews, can be analyzed in rigorous ways to give maximum insight into how a research question needs to be framed, what contextual*

factors the researcher needs to consider, and how to choose the right people to participate in a future experiment.

- ***Practice implementing spot checks on yourself — what are your own assumptions?*** *How are your assumptions affecting what you are communicating with partners? Are you asking leading questions or are you leaving room for new knowledge? Are you building off assumptions you have about the context or are you allowing your partner to question the core of your research question? If you have a team of co-researchers, build a cognitively diverse red team[11] that constantly challenges your ideas and assumptions.*

- ***Plan to fail.*** *A realistic rule of thumb for research implementation, effect size, and results would be to expect everything to work half as well as you expect it to and prepare plan Bs early. Beware of your own optimism bias — just because you have worked in the area well before, does not mean it will always be so smooth! You are not immune from externalities.*

Here is a story from one of our experts of when researchers and local partners' assumptions caused them to overlook a contextual factor at play.

11 Red teaming is the practice of rigorously challenging plans, policies, systems, and assumptions by adopting an adversarial approach.

Stories from the field

Can edutainment videos promote a growth mindset for children in grades four to six?

A policy and international research team in the Western Cape Government in South Africa conducted a study on building a growth mindset within students in primary and high schools (grades 3,4,8 and 9). The intervention involved watching animated videos to teach children how to incorporate a growth mindset. The videos were in English. The researchers spent a lot of time with the school officials discussing translating the videos into Afrikaans or isiXhosa, but translations were expensive and the team was budget constrained. Additionally, local partners felt given a switch to English instruction in grade 3, the children would be able to understand the videos.

However, for high school students the videos worked well, but in the lower grades English was not well understood. The younger children did not clearly understand the videos, and the researchers had to go back and dub them into local languages for the scale-up.

In this instance, working with the first layer of local partners, school teachers and staff, was not sufficient. This research team suggests always speaking to a few participants from the final target audience and having them comment and critique your research question, identified barriers, behavioral intervention, and implementation plan, wherever possible. This upfront investment can save money in the future.

Wallet, what wallet?

Researchers from the World Bank and ideas42 were working on testing whether the sunk cost fallacy replicates within populations in Nairobi. The questions were framed something like, "Imagine that you have purchased a ticket to see a movie where admission is Ksh. 200 per ticket. As you enter the theater, you open your wallet and realize that you have lost the movie ticket. Will you still pay Ksh. 200 from your wallet for a ticket for the movie?"

As they piloted the question, the most typical answer the team was getting from research participants was not whether they would buy the ticket or not, or even (as they had anticipated) whether Ksh.200 was a realistic price. Rather, it was "But.. what are you talking about? We don't have a wallet."

The team learned quickly that people interpret measures through their own lens and lived experience. And something that researchers might consider universal (using a wallet) might not apply to everyone. Piloting measures many times over is important to ensure relevance and comprehension.

How can you work with your partners' biases too?

While discussing the behavioral barriers you are looking to solve with your potential partners, use these questions to guide your conversation:

- ***Start by trying to make local connections.*** *If you are working in South Africa, knowing a South African person is probably not enough. Try building a learning opportunity with someone from the neighborhood you want to work in.*

- ***Try not to anchor meetings with partners.*** *Let them speak first and listen carefully. Ask yourself whether you are falling prey to confirmation bias.*[12] *Are you only hearing what fits with your pre-existing beliefs? Similarly, if someone proposes a "fact" or conclusion, ask them if they have evidence, even anecdotal, to support their conclusion.*

12 Confirmation bias is the tendency to search, interpret, and recall information in a way that aligns with our pre-existing values, opinions, or beliefs.

- ***Ask your partner how the research results will be interpreted.*** *Does your partner have a preconceived idea of the findings, or are they truly open to what you find? Can you employ an informal commitment device that signals your partner is ready to use the evidence that comes out of your work? This could be a conversation early on about how findings could go either way and in which you ask partners to verbally pledge that they are willing to work with the study findings.*

Here is a story from one of our experts about how partners would not budge from the results they expected, even when the researchers brought in evidence to the contrary.

Stories from the field

Can behavioral interventions replace "conditionality" in cash transfers in Madagascar?

For years, ideas42 worked with government officials on conditional cash transfers for low-income populations in Madagascar. They spent significant effort at first to help officials buy into the idea of testing whether behavioral interventions along with unconditional cash transfers could perform as well as conditional cash transfers. This required overcoming the natural skepticism

about beneficiaries' ability to change their behavior despite there being no strings attached to the cash they receive. But over time, as the government got more exposure to the idea of behavioral interventions and approaches, they came to see its value and are now the most vocal supporters of the work. Despite the initial resistance, the results of a multiyear evaluation validated their courageous investment in beneficiaries' ability to exercise their own agency.

The team knows these types of mindset barriers are difficult to solve entirely and can catch any researcher off guard. They recommend coming up with a way for partners to informally commit to discussing the new findings. This could be as simple as an upfront conversation on what the partners will do if the results are contrary to their expectations and building a plan for how they would use the findings.

2.2 Managing your own expectations: research will not be all behavioral science

What do you expect to do within this project partnership?
Designing an experiment and applying a behavioral approach is not enough. Researchers must also understand partner needs, capacity and incentives, mentor local research and implementation teams, as well as constantly adapt to various on-the-ground challenges. Most experts do not expect this or are not fully prepared for it – I certainly was not

Now that you know this upfront, here are some questions to ask yourself so you are better prepared and can plan your time accordingly.

- ***How are you setting up your team?*** *Do you believe experience with behavioral science or experiments is sufficient, and the rest can be learned on the job? You will need more than quantitative skills and behavioral science knowledge in your team. Hire for qualitative, quantitative, data, and design expertise. Look for flexible and talented individuals — strong communicators, project managers who can manage up, people who know how to hack bureaucracies, and people with a sales mindset who can get partner buy-in. I would go so far as to recommend prioritizing atypical skills such as curiosity, patience, and self-awareness over hard quantitative skills that can be learned on the job.*

- ***Can you use a behavioral design approach for the project engagement itself?*** *In an inception workshop with your partners, you could have all stakeholders sketch out their own user journey[13] of participating in a research collaboration that marks the barriers and levers they face at each point. Then, use the journey mapping to role-play what an effective collaboration might look like.*

- ***Do you know what terms your partner is averse to hearing?*** *Many partners turn away as soon as they hear about randomized controlled trials or randomized controlled trials (RCTs), as they associate RCTs with lengthy and expensive research. Behavioral is not all about RCTs anymore — many other approaches can come under the behavioral umbrella. Try aligning with your partner's speech and be flexible in how you frame the work — "customer experience," "reducing administrative burden" — different words resonate with different partners. You will have to invest time and effort in finding what language works.*

13 Coursera (2023). Creating User Journey Maps: A Guide. https://www.coursera.org/articles/creating-user-journey-maps-a-guide.

Stories from the field

Framing matters, of course!

Researchers within one of the governmental nudge units[14] really struggled with engaging other officials to work with them. The researchers had brilliant ideas that could reduce bureaucratic costs and increase citizen engagement with government communications. However, they found that whenever they mentioned "behavioral science," no one would listen to them, and they were pigeon-holed into "innovation," a bundle of concepts the government ignored. The researchers then started investing time in figuring out how to frame their behavioral intervention ideas and found that language such as "reducing administrative burden" and "working on customer experience" helped build internal allies for their work.

For more on the right talent, read "So you want to start a behavioral science team..." by Jason Hreha.[15]

14 Requested anonymity
15 Hreha, J. (2019). So you want to start a behavioral science team.... https://medium.com/@jhreha/so-you-want-to-start-a-behavioral-science-team-df6819f61d1.

Part 3 - Building a true research partnership

One of the main barriers we faced while working on a farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) with a partner was that the farmers lacked understanding of the technicalities involved. Our partner was keen on providing capacity strengthening to the farmers, and together we designed a training intervention to tackle this across seven countries. We designed and implemented training interventions over and over to explain the technicalities of FMNR and provide demonstrations on how to implement the idea. However, the training did not have the intended outcome of increasing adoption of FMNR within farmers. As behavioral scientists, we were convinced there were other behavioral issues at play, such as farmers' inherent motivation to understand and implement FMNR. However, we could not convince our partners that this barrier was worth exploring, as they were keen on their pre-designed intervention of training. We failed to align on what the partner was really looking for (validating their idea of training) and continued thinking we could convince them to look further after training failed to improve outcomes. The endeavor ended up being quite a waste of time and resources.

No development challenge is solved in isolation. Oftentimes, researchers have a range of partners, such as international and local non-government organizations (NGOs), co-researchers, governmental agencies, research

organizations, data collection partners, implementation organizations, and private sector partners. However, preparing yourself and your research team to build a strong research partnership[16] with these organizations is easier said than done. Tensions often rise when the goals of the research are not well-aligned with partner goals. The purpose of this section is to share advice on building the groundwork for relationship development.

Across the interviews conducted for this guide, experts highlighted two key ingredients to building strong relationships for behavioral science research:

- ***Are you and your partners aligned on the values and definitions at play?*** *Aligning with partners on their foundational definitions of evaluation, testing, rigor, and behavioral science is vital. For example, if by evaluation, you mean an RCT, does your partner think the same thing? Or do they believe a survey assessment is sufficient? Similarly, many behavioral science for development questions are value- and culture-laden in some way. You might be required to create intention or shift a strongly held social or cultural norm, not solely focus on filling an action-intention gap. It might require creating intention — think family planning, sexual and reproductive health, intimate partner violence. Knowing what your partner will and will not work on within these topics is also important.*

16 When we say research partnerships, we refer to researchers (wherever you might be based) working with partners for academic or non-academic research.

- ***Are you helping your partner reach their goals too?*** *To set up your partnership for success, ask and anticipate! Ask your partners what could be helpful for them, what kind of rigor they need to make decisions from the data, and what sort of problem solving they might need from you. We often forget that while we are busy establishing causality, correlational data and simple facts can be useful to partners as well.*

3.1 Sort, don't sell: navigating different value systems and beliefs

Are you and your partners aligned on the values at play?
Try to find partners whose definitions of what constitutes impact, testing, and learning align with yours. You may need to have some conversations about using a particular approach or method, but general alignment will increase your likelihood of partnership success.

Below are a few methods you can use to check if you and your partner are aligned:

Push for alignment on foundational definitions: Check for definitional alignment by asking whether your partner has a research and learning team or have collaborated on exploring behavioral barriers and testing interventions before. If they do not have a team or worked on exploring the behavioral lens before, make sure to set some time aside for workshopping what this looks like. Take them through what methodology you plan to use,

what a pilot is, what pilot data can be used for, as well as how confidently the final findings can be framed. More qualitative discussions on these will ensure you are not in a situation where the partner wants to use pilot findings for presentations to funders!

Do not partner if your values do not align: An underappreciated source of conflict is when you do not align on broader values. Look out for institutional values such as commitment to learning or fail and iterate — these are signs of alignment. More culturally-laden values, such as beliefs about contraception or homosexuality, can be harder to align on. In an ideal world, the researchers would open a dialogue with the partners and come to a shared worldview incorporating both sides — that would be revolutionary. Realistically, this can be really tricky and riddled with power differences. If you are new to the space, expert advice is to work with those partners whose broader values align with yours, and set up some empathy building exercises (some Busara favorites are Back to Back Drawing[17] and practicing Active Listening[18]) to get to know your partners better.

Here is a story of when identifying different values changed the course of a project and what researchers wish they had done differently.

17 Therapist Aid Back-to-Back Drawing Activity. https://www.therapistaid.com/therapy-worksheet/drawing-communication-exercise.
18 Martins, J. (2022). Listening to understand: How to practice active listening (with examples). https://asana.com/resources/active-listening.

Stories from the field

Sexual health, cool. But there's a boundary.

Sexual health is an important topic within the youth of Kenya. MIT professor Sally Haslanger and colleagues from D-Lab worked with a community partner in Western Kenya on youth empowerment through sport. The partners are actively committed to improving knowledge of sexual health and hygiene, prevention of teenage pregnancies, and expanding availability of women's menstrual health products. In the region, sexual education emphasizes abstinence and abortion is ruled out; many in the community also believe that insertables such as tampons and menstrual cups compromise virginity. In one discussion of period poverty, the D-lab team suggested tampons and menstrual cups as options for menstrual hygiene, but after discussing the significance of virginity with the partners, they shifted their approach to focus on the production and distribution of reusable menstrual pads.

This is a tricky place to be — you do not want to sound preachy or push your own beliefs, and you do need to respect the beliefs of your local partners. Haslanger advises that according to D-Lab's approach to community partnerships, knowledge gained by

working with local partners should benefit the partners and they should be credited. For centuries, colonial partners have extracted value from communities all over the world - responsible research and intervention should aim to avoid this.

3.2 How to help your partners reach their goals

Are you helping your partner reach their goals too?
In addition to exploring partner expectations and values, experts also stressed the importance of understanding partners' priorities and how they align with the research needs. This is less about whether partners are aligned on the values of behavioral science and testing, and more about whether there is practical alignment on the feasibility and usefulness of the study itself.

Here is a set of questions you can ask your partners to maximize your understanding of what your partners' priorities are and assess feasibility of the partnership:

- ***Does the proposed study fit within your partners' strategic plans for the year?*** *Are you talking to the person who is responsible for meeting the milestones in the strategic plan? For many partners, maintaining the integrity of treatment and control groups is not on their list of priorities, and rightly so. Plan for this by setting aside mental bandwidth, time,*

and other resources to proactively engage with your partner, build a common understanding of what is realistic and feasible, and decide who will hold responsibility for each stage of implementation.

- ***What data is useful to your partner?*** *Then imagine having the same conversation with your partner six months later. What data will be useful to your partner then? Chances are, you are collecting a lot of data on behavioral patterns already, and sharing will be a marginal effort. Sharing averages and correlations can help build goodwill and buy-in from your partner, as you have documented the behavioral problem in a way they can understand. Try to anticipate what the partner might ask for later and get it ready now.*

  How will the results of the study be used by your partner? If impact is important to you, assess whether your partner is ready to make decisions based on the outcomes and whether they are willing to design a pre-policy plan as a commitment to using the evidence.

- ***Are their field teams on board with the idea and partnership?*** *On-the-ground teams are the ones you will actually work with to identify the behavioral barriers, co-design behavioral interventions, and test them out. If they don't believe in the purpose of the research, getting their attention and time will be hard, no matter how much their management pushes for it.*

  What will happen if your point of contact changes? Would the new contact see value in your study question and behavioral approach as well? Plan

for what will happen if your partner's team changes — will you be given someone new to work with? Will you have to convince them of the value of behavioral science? Is the organization, not just your point of contact, bought into your approach? If you will have to start from scratch if the team changes, maybe this isn't the right partnership for them and you.

- ***How can you set up communication channels with various parts of the partner's team?*** *Depending on the length of your project, request for a monthly or quarterly meeting with the rest of the team within your partner organization, such as the field teams, the implementation teams, and sales teams. Use these to share results of your study and engage in sense-making activities. Hold yourself accountable to the true partnership!*

Here are two stories of when researchers realized they hadvnot truly included their partners' goals and made the necessary course corrections to make the engagement successful.

Stories from the field

Tell us everything!

A certain professor, who chose not to be named, and his colleagues were running an RCT to learn about the impacts of a pension

scheme with the government. The researchers were only focused on the experimental component and shared information with their government partner accordingly. However, the partner was interested in "facts about the world" from the data and wanted to know the percentage of elderly who were depressed, who live alone, and who should receive a pension but do not. This was a simple lift for the researchers — they had all the data, but were so hyper focused on evaluation results that it did not occur to them that they should share it with the partners. Once they did, the relationship seemed to improve as they were not only able to provide quicker insights to the partner, but they were also able to adjust the partner's priors on what the data might show.

Priorities, priorities, priorities

Policy analysts at the Policy Unit in the Western Cape Government were examining how to influence decision-making of senior officials within the government. After numerous conversations with these officials and presentations on how decision-making should happen, the team had to change their strategy. They started to invite officials to workshops and user-focused brainstorms. These sessions enabled officials to generate their own ideas and solutions. They would often draw similar conclusions as the researchers, but without researchers telling them what to do. This was a big

learning moment for the team that they have incorporated in their work since — the need to align on topics that are top of mind for partners, involve partners in the problem solving process, and then embed behavioral science into programmatic budgets and plans.

For more guiding questions, read How to Have Difficult Conversations / A Practical Guide for Academic-Practitioner Research Collaborations[20] by MIT GOV/LAB. For more on building strong feedback loops, read Feedback 101[21] by Feedback Labs. For more on formalizing research partnerships, read Formalize research partnership and establishing roles and expectations[22] and Assessing viability and building relationships[23] by J-PAL North America.

20 Lipovsek, V. and A. Zomer (2020). How to have difficult conversations: A practical guide for academic & practitioner research collaborations (Version 2). Cambridge, MA, MIT GovLab.
21 Feedback Labs (not dated). What do people want? Are we helping them get it? If not, what can we do differently? Feedback 101, Feedback Labs.
22 Geraghty, L., L. Feeney and A. Marlowe (not dated). Formalize research partnership and establish roles and expectations, J-PAL.
23 O'Toole, E., N. Giga, L. Feeney, K. Gannon, L. Geraghty and J. Binder (not dated). Assessing viability and building relationships. https://www.povertyactionlab.org/resource/assessing-viability-and-building-relationships, J-PAL.

Conclusion

The behavioral science community had one resounding hope for the future: embedding thoughtful behavioral literacy within teams across governments, United Nations agencies, international NGOs, NGOs implementation agencies, service providers, and so on. Today, behavioral approaches seem to be an afterthought. Behavioral scientists are brought in to "fix" a broken solution rather than prevent a broken solution from being implemented.

By increasing behavioral literacy within organizations, a behavioral lens is injected as part of the project design for both creators and implementers. An increased behavioral literacy could be achieved by having in-house behavioral scientists on teams within each organization. Whatever the future looks like, as the behavioral approach spreads and takes roots far and wide, it only becomes more important that we demand more thoughtful approaches to this science. I hope this guide takes you a step further on that journey.

List of experts interviewed

1. Alexandra De Filippo (formerly The Behavioural Insights Team)
2. Allison Zelkowitz (Save the Children International)
3. Ammaarah Martinus (UNESCO, formerly Western Cape Government)
4. Elana Safran (Office of Evaluation Services, U.S. General Services)
5. Evan S Lieberman (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
6. Faisal Naru (Policy Innovation Center, The Nigerian Economic Summit Group)
7. Frank Schilbach (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
8. Gauri Chandra (Oxford University, Ashoka University)
9. Jake Bowers (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Evidence in Governance and Politics)
10. Josh Martin (formerly Beyond Conflict, ideas42)
11. Joshua Dean (University of Chicago)
12. Kelly Bidwell (Office of Evaluation Services, U.S. General Services)
13. Lily L. Tsai (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
14. Lula Chen (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
15. Marc Shotland (IDinsight)
16. Melanie Kim (PwC)
17. Nabil Saleh (Nudge Lebanon)
18. Neela Saldanha (Yale University, Ashoka University)

19. Rebecca Wolfe (University of Chicago, formerly MercyCorps)
20. Rekha Balu (Federal Equity Initiatives)
21. Sally Haslanger (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
22. Saugato Datta (ideas42)
23. Todd Rogers (Harvard University)
24. Tom Wein (IDinsight)

Busara Groundwork
THOUGHT PIECE

About Busara

Busara is a research and advisory organization, working with researchers and organizations to advance and apply behavioral science in pursuit of poverty alleviation. Busara pursues a future where global human development activities respond to people's lived experience; value knowledge generated in the context it is applied; and promote culturally appropriate and inclusive practices. To accomplish this, we practice and promote behavioral science in ways that center and value the perspectives of respondents; expand the practice of research where it is applied; and build networks, processes, and tools that increase the competence of practitioners and researchers.

About Busara Groundwork

Busara Groundwork lays the groundwork for future research and program design. As think pieces, they examine the current state of knowledge and what is needed to advance it, frame important issues with a behavioral perspective, or put forward background information on a specific context.

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