

What Constitutes a Field Experiment in Economics?

by

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ABSTRACT

Experimental economists are leaving the reservation. They are recruiting subjects in the field rather than in the classroom, using field goods rather than induced valuations, and using field context rather than abstract terminology in instructions. We argue that there is something methodological fundamental behind this trend. Field experiments differ from laboratory experiments in many ways. Although it is tempting to view field experiments as simply less controlled variants of laboratory experiments, we argue that this would be a serious mis-characterization. What passes for “control” in laboratory experiments might in fact be precisely the opposite if it is artificial to the subject or context of the task. We propose five factors that can be used to determine the field context of an experiment: the nature of the subject pool, the nature of the commodity, the nature of the task or trading rules applied, the nature of the stakes, and the nature of the information that the subjects bring to the task.

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