



The Effects of Agency Frames on Resource Allocation: Moral Motives for Giving and Receiving Aid

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Background and Objectives

One of the most effective ways that the government can address income inequality is through benefits programs that provide aid to people with lower-incomes (Bailey et al., 2020). However, public support for and use of these programs is consistently low (Bhargava & Manoli, 2015). For instance, one in five eligible Americans are not receiving federal food assistance, which amounts to about \$28.5 billion of unclaimed benefits (USDA, 2018; 2023). Individual attitudes and behaviors of two key groups may be central to addressing these issues. In this research, we label one group as “givers”, or those who decide on the distribution of benefits, including policy makers who design these programs, voters, and workers who deliver the benefits. We consider the second group to be those who are eligible to receive benefits (“receivers”), who must seek them out and navigate complex program requirements (Bertrand et al., 2006; Linos et al., 2022). The context determines a person’s group (i.e., a person may be a giver in one setting and a receiver in another, depending on the context). To improve support for and participation in these programs, this project aims to change **narratives**. Narratives are the stories that people use to make sense of the world, and narratives about poverty may shape people’s attitudes towards benefits programs and perceptions about who supports and participates in these programs (Poo & Shafir, 2018). Changing the existing narratives may help ensure that these resources reach eligible participants with dignity and combat inequality.

Relevant Behavioral Concepts

Behavioral scientists study when and why different groups of people have **different motivations** for a common goal (Bryan et al., 2021). Different motivations may inform which narrative is most effective at improving support for and participation in government benefits programs. One potential difference between givers and receivers is their **model of agency**, which are frameworks informing beliefs about what is considered moral and societally acceptable (Markus & Kitayama, 2003).

- We propose that givers may follow an **independent model of agency** and hold the belief that people should pursue personal goals and be financially independent (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Givers may be more likely to adopt this model because givers have access to and control over resources (Stephens et al., 2011). People who adopt this model may be particularly susceptible to the influence of negative, stereotypical narratives that participation in government benefits programs makes people lazy or dependent on the government, which are widespread for programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; Bullock et al., 2003; Gilens, 1999). Instead, if givers thought participation in government programs promoted financial independence and was evidence for a strong work ethic, support for these programs may align with an independent model of agency.

- We propose that receivers may have an **interdependent model of agency** that prioritizes supporting ones' community (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Adoption of this model of agency may result from experiences with **scarcity** (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013), where limited access to resources leads people to form and maintain tight-knit communities (Carey & Markus, 2016). People who follow this model may be particularly sensitive to the anticipated shame, or **stigma**, that is associated with participation in programs like SNAP (Bisset & Coussins, 1982), because maintaining group harmony is a priority under an interdependent model. Instead, if potential receivers believe that participating in programs can improve their communities, for instance, by reducing stress for family members, this may align participation with an interdependent model of agency.

Understanding the differences between givers and receivers may help identify opportunities to improve support of and participation in benefits programs.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. What is the effect of framing benefits as supporting independence or interdependence on willingness to give and receive aid?
 - a. **Hypothesis 1A.** Givers are more likely to support benefits when the resource is thought to improve receivers' individual goal pursuit and independence (i.e., an independent model of agency).
 - b. **Hypothesis 1B.** Receivers are more likely to seek out benefits when the resource is thought to improve receivers' community and connection (i.e., an interdependent model of agency).
2. Do givers know how to frame the advantages of receiving benefits in a way that motivates potential receivers to seek the benefits?
 - a. **Hypothesis 2.** Givers may incorrectly predict that describing benefits as advancing individual goals will encourage people to seek out benefits, when, in reality, describing the benefits as advancing community-oriented goals is most effective.

Sample

This project is in collaboration with the [Center for Healthy Communities \(CHC\)](#), which, among other public health efforts, oversees outreach and food assistance services on college campuses and community-based organizations across California. Data collection will occur with CHC's existing campus staff partners who help students apply for food benefits, income-eligible students and their households, and caseworkers in all 57 counties who determine eligibility for those benefits. Approximately 5,500 people from these groups will be recruited to participate in surveys, interviews, and experiments. This project will also collect data from online gig economy platforms, like [Amazon Mechanical Turk](#) and [Cloud Research Connect](#). About 4,500 workers, including both potential givers (e.g., voters) and receivers (e.g., people participating in government benefits programs) will be recruited to complete surveys for payment.

Methods

This project will rely on surveys and interviews to understand existing narratives about giving and receiving benefits. Then, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in online and field settings will examine the effect of the narrative-change interventions on attitudes and behaviors. RCTs involve randomly assigning participants to different treatments and then comparing responses across treatments.

- In Phase 1, online participants will experience a SNAP simulation exercise about the process of submitting and renewing applications¹ to examine whether demonstrating receiver agency in the application process changes givers' attitudes towards receivers and support for SNAP.
- With CHC, Phase 2 of the research will draw from qualitative data and field surveys about receiver barriers and motives to access SNAP. This phase will also leverage online and field RCTs to examine the effect of different narratives on receivers' attitudes towards and willingness to accept benefits.
- Phase 3 will involve field surveys and online experiments to examine whether givers' predictions of what motivates receivers to seek out benefits align with the findings from Phase 2 regarding receivers' actual motivations.

Practice and Policy Implications

The first pillar of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) 2024 State Outreach Priority](#) is to improve food access for underserved populations and reduce barriers to SNAP, like stigma (Johnson, 2023). This research directly supports this priority by studying the process of giving and receiving food assistance. In diagnosing current barriers and testing interventions, this project will both contribute new information about existing policies and may directly affect attitudes and behaviors regarding the provision of SNAP. Since SNAP is one of several social programs that suffers from low support and take-up, insights from this research could inform improvements to programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Medicaid. By understanding and changing the narratives about government benefits, this research seeks to identify why these programs lack support and participation and develop solutions to help create a more equitable society.

¹ Online participants may read about a current recipient of SNAP benefits and the steps that this recipient took to access and renew benefits, like submitting proof to fulfill the work hours requirements in a given state.

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