

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRAMES AND REMINDERS ON FIELD AGENT PERFORMANCE IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: EVIDENCE FROM A FIELD EXPERIMENT IN RURAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of behavioral levers in improving field agents' performance under a new government policy in rural India. This research provides causal estimates on boundaries of prosociality and the extent to which agents' willingness to perform for self, outweighs prosociality. The enquiry evaluates the impact of outcome salience and frames on agent performance through a field experiment undertaken with 1,460 participants, randomized into different cohorts. The treatments administered upon the agents, either make public or private benefits associated with high-performance, salient. The results inform the design of incentive structures and advocate the use of nudges as low-cost tactics in policy implementation.

INTRODUCTION

- Why do agents invest costly effort? Especially when financial incentives are low or non-existent
- Can agent performance be improved through a behavioral route?
- Can agent prosociality be leveraged by making task outcome salient? Can this affect agent decision making and task performance?
- I examine the performance of field agents using a set of randomized field experiments to provide causal estimates on the efficacy of both reminders and frames

CONTEXT

- The investigation is situated in the context of volunteer agents under the national rural sanitation policy in India
- The policy was introduced to tackle to massive public health crisis arising out of poor sanitation; primarily due to limited ownership of toilets in rural India
- The policy attempts to provide each household with incentives to construct a toilet, and this process is demand driven
- The policy mandates un-incentivized volunteer agents towards the task of influencing household-level decision-making by 'motivating' them towards demanding a toilet
- The task performed by the agents is effort intensive, un-incentivized, un-monitored and the outcome /success is difficult to deduce
- However, few toilets have been built, and fewer are in use, while the public health crisis continues

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND & EVIDENCE

- Incentives have traditionally served as a tool for improving agent performance^{1,2}; however, when incentives fail, framing has been proved to be a powerful tool to improve the performance of agents^{3,4}

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND & EVIDENCE

- Evidence in the domain of non-financial incentives has documented a variety of ways to improve agent performance: awards^{5, 6}, task salience⁷, beneficiary identity salience⁸ etc.
- But, poor performance need not imply the unwillingness to work. Reminders have been proven to be effective in the domain of finances⁹, medication adherence¹⁰, agriculture¹¹, and higher education¹² etc.
- Based on the literature in these domains, I combine the learning from framing effects and reminders in order to leverage field agent prosociality towards performance improvement

METHODS

- The randomly selected group of agents (N=1460) from across four districts in western India were divided across five cohorts
- Baseline checks ensured that the groups were balanced across the five cohorts
- The subjects received a monthly reminder for 3 months. Each of the four cohorts received a unique message or no message at all. These messages were framed to carry different aspects/frames related to task performance
- The outcome variable was derived from the administrative data on the toilet

HYPOTHESES

H1= Agents who receive a monthly reminder perform better

H2 = Agents who are promised an award perform as well as agents who receive a simple reminder

H3a = Agents who receive positively framed messages about public health benefits of performance, are better performers

H3b = Agents who receive negatively framed messages about public health outcomes are better performers

construction figures



No Message



Award



Public Health (gain)



Public Health (loss)



Basic Reminder



Basic Reminder



Basic Reminder



Basic Reminder

RESULTS

- Pilot results corroborated with the proposed hypotheses. Field workers are prosociality motivated to perform: outcome salience, and negatively framed outcome salience contribute to improving agent performance
- The data collection was concluded in August 2016, and the analysis is underway
- The qualitative investigation revealed several loopholes in policy implementation in agent identification and task performance

DISCUSSIONS

- Agent prosociality is a strong determinant of task performance, and this can be leveraged, particularly in the provision of public goods
- Framing and reminders can successfully alter agent decision making and *nudge* the agent towards performance of mandated activities
- Framing and reminders present a low-cost measure to improve agent performance in policy implementation, especially so in low resource settings

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