

Moral Suasion in the Field: Leveraging the Language of
Promising for Job Search in Egypt
Project Summary and Future Steps

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1 Motivation and Project Summary

Recent evidence from behavioral studies in development economics has shown that “soft” (legally non-binding) enforcement devices based on reputation and social signaling can play a role in improving the behavior of agents in a variety of domains such as increasing the chance of meeting savings goals (Breza and Chandrasekhar, 2019), completing scheduled vaccination sessions (Karing, 2018) or creating better sanitation habits (Bakhtiar et al., 2021). Understanding when and why such soft enforcement devices can influence behavior is all the more important in settings where weak institutions hamper formal contracting and where trust in agencies of the state is low (Sánchez de la Sierra, 2021, Martinez-Bravo and Stegmann, 2021, Lowes and Montero, 2019). In this project, I propose to study a moral nudge, **the adoption of a promise**, and to understand the extent to which this moral nudge can be used to improve agents’ labor market search behavior as well as the mechanisms underlying its effect.

An existing body of experimental literature both in the field and in the lab has demonstrated that people fulfil their informal commitments despite the absence of legal or monetary penalties for reasons such as reputational concerns (Breza and Chandrasekhar (2019), Karing (2018), Bakhtiar et al. (2021)), guilt, psychosocial costs of lying or preferences for keeping one’s word (Breza and Chandrasekhar (2019); Karing (2018); Bakhtiar et al. (2021); Ellingsen and Johannesson (2004); Charness and Dufwenberg (2006); Vanberg (2008)). The present project examines the policy relevance of these findings, in particular by identifying which commitments are perceived as more binding than others and why. Houser and Xiao (2011) have shown correlationally that more explicit statements of intent are associated with a higher probability of following through on one’s

intent, although it is unclear whether the relationship is causal: people may choose a commitment expression based on their ex-ante likelihood of fulfilment.

In this project, I design a field experiment in a policy-relevant setting to test whether different verbiages of expressing a commitment can *causally* affect the probability of commitment fulfilment and the potential use of such verbiages as policy nudges. In particular, I test whether *the moral strength* of an uttered commitment makes the commitment more binding. I vary the moral strength through varying the language used to extract a commitment: “Will you be able to?” vs “Can you promise?”. I hypothesise that the latter extraction method increases an agent’s likelihood to fulfil the commitment due to the presence of a promise-fulfilment norm that is associated with the verbiage “I promise” based on previous philosophical, linguistic and religious studies.¹

I situate my study in Egypt and nudge job-seekers into committing to watch a video tutorial on using an online website for job search and submitting a feedback form to evaluate their experience on the website. Recruiting participants for job fairs and job training programs is very common with NGOs as well as research institutions in developing countries and it is also frequent to ask participants to explicitly commit to attending the event through a sign-up or a verbal confirmation.² Yet, personal conversations with J-PAL MENA office in Cairo and the implementing NGO have revealed that only 30% of applicants offered an interview or directly offered the job conditional on completing additional paperwork attend the interview or take-up the offer, respectively. Similar patterns are observed in other developing country contexts (Abebe et al. (2021), Abebe et al. (2020), Osman et al. (2021)). Qualitative evidence suggests this is because job seekers procrastinate rather than because they face better outside options. Thus, increasing the moral salience of the initial commitment they give to the job search agency to take the process seriously may drive them to follow through and proceed with the job search process.

I run a small pilot with 81 participants that have previously attended a job search training program with the partner NGO and find suggestive evidence that asking for a commitment through “Can you promise to fill out the job search experience form?” increases the rates of filling out the job search experience feedback form by 51% relative to the control phrase of “Will you be able to fill out the job search experience form?” (18 p.p. increase from 35% fulfilment in control to 54% in treatment, p-val=0.103). I

¹Searle and Searle (1969) consider the verb “to promise” as the strongest form of commitment in the English language while Kant (1787) considered promise-fulfilment as a categorical imperative, an unconditional moral obligation. The norm of promise-fulfilment also has religious roots; in Chapter 16th of the Qur’an, Allah forbids Muslims to break confirmed promises. Whatever the origins of the norm, evidence from psychology suggests that people adhere to it from very early age (Kamngiesser et al., 2017).

²As my sample of participants has already undergone a job training program with a different organization, this makes my setting even more natural as people are used to being asked for a commitment in these contexts and effects are less likely to be affected by the novelty or weirdness of the exercise.

also find that respondents are less likely to give an explicit yes to the promise-question compared to the control question (62% vs 41%), which suggests that people perceive the promise commitment as more binding and want to give themselves flexibility by not committing strongly.

I also finding suggestive differences in the timing of feedback form submissions between control and promise conditions. While almost half of the valid submission in control are submitted within the first two hours, the timing is more evenly distributed in the promise treatment. The finding for the control is consistent with [Bhattacharya et al. \(2020\)](#) who show through a lab experiment that people are most likely to provide effort closest to the time they make an announcement of their effort provision, which the authors interpret as people experiencing strongest psychosocial costs of lying closest to the time they make a commitment. This suggests the promise commitment operates through channels different from basic psychosocial costs of lying as people fulfil their promises even further away from the time they make the commitment.

Finally, I do not find any effects on actual job search account opening on the website. Only about 5% of people open an account in the pilot sample. After further consultations with local partners, the explanation could be that people are in general wary of providing their personal data and information online and so the use of promises may not be an appropriate policy tool in online job search contexts.

That is why, I have established a partnership with a new employment NGO in Cairo that provides in-person consultations and matches job seekers with companies. Implementation of the pilot experimental design is planned in partnership with this new NGOs in the upcoming months with the data collection expected to finish before my graduation at Stanford in June 2024.

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