Building Personal or Interpersonal Initiative? How Psychologically and Culturally Wise Interventions Help Reduce Extreme Poverty in Niger

Catherine Thomas
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“Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means”

- Amartya Sen (2000)
Emerging literature on agency-building interventions in anti-poverty efforts in LAMIC

Brief, psychologically targeted interventions on aspirations and agency
(e.g., Bernard et al., 2023; Orkin et al., 2023; review by Serra, 2022)

Multi-session, psychologically targeted trainings
(e.g., Personal Initiative, self-efficacy)
(e.g., Campos et al., 2017; Ghosal et al., 2022; Lang et al., 2023; McKelway, 2021; Sedlmayr et al., 2020)

Multi-session soft skills trainings (e.g., goal setting, problem solving, decision-making)
(e.g., Acevedo et al., 2017; Azevedo et al., 2013; Chioda et al., 2021)
Failure of an agency-building intervention in LAMIC context

Eight-minute self-regulation intervention raises educational attainment at scale in individualist but not collectivist cultures

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Edited by Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, and approved February 27, 2017 (received for review July 19, 2016)

- A motivational intervention focused on setting personal goals and planning worked robustly for U.S. students
- Yet it failed to motivate students in India and China

Indian students, compared to US:
  - Saw personal goals as secondary to fulfilling social demands and obligations
  - Were more motivated by relational goals
Interdependence in the Global South

“In the African epistemic worldview, the person is ontologically part of the social firmament, as the dichotomy between the individual and the social is indistinguishable.”

In contrast to a “self-creating view of agency” in which “the person is abstracted from social context and considered as the centre of his or her own awareness and intentional actions... negotiated agency involves engaging in joint decision making and being responsive to expectations and demands of relational others in a network of interconnectedness.”

Two models of self and agency

**Independent Model**

The “I” self
- Individual and separate
- Unique
- Influencing and free to choose
- Free from tradition, history, & place
- Equal to others

**Interdependent Model**

The “We” self
- Relational and connected
- Similar
- Adjusting and co-regulating
- Rooted in tradition, history, & place
- Ranked in hierarchies

Advancement of personal interests, preferences & goals matter most

Fulfillment of social roles, obligations, & norms matter most

Possible tensions for agency interventions in more interdependent contexts

“Will being ambitious prevent me from fulfilling my social obligations or cause tension in my relationships?”

“If I try new behaviors, will others see me as disrespectful or immoral?”
Culturally wise interventions

Social psychological interventions that attend to how people’s **subjective construals** vary according to the cultures in which they are embedded. Specifically, they offer subjective construals of an opportunity to **align with**, rather than conflict with, **cultural selfways, goals, and values**

(Hoff & Stiglitz, 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012 Walton & Wilson, 2018)
Designing and Testing ‘Culturally Wise’ Psychological Interventions to Support Women’s Economic Agency in Niger


Thomas, C., Premand, P., Bossuroy, T., Sambo, S., Markus, H., & Walton, G., forthcoming
Context

West Africa

Rural Niger

Woman selling pre-prepared food around the village
Economic and socioecological context

Participant population: Women from lowest income households in rural areas of Niger

- Predominantly Muslim
- High fertility rate (7 births/woman)
- Low formal education (0-1 yrs)
- Low mobile phone saturation (approx. 16%)
- Distance to nearest market is 77 minutes by foot
Sociocultural Context

Interdependent cultural context

Agree that ‘it is important to take into account the opinions of other members of your community when making a decision’

90%

Would rather be seen as respectful to others than as economically successful

71%
“What Drives Women’s Economic Success?”

Respondent sample
“What Drives Women’s Economic Success?”

Respondent sample

Participants (Niger)

Niger: $\chi^2 (3, N = 1,216) = 223.78, p < .001$
"What Drives Women’s Economic Success?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Interdependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants (Niger)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-initiative</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard work</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connections</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacefulness</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Respondent sample**
- Participants (Niger)
- Predictions (US)

**Chi-Square Tests**
- **Niger**: $\chi^2 (3, N = 1,216) = 223.78, p < .001$
- **US**: $\chi^2 (3, N = 302) = 51.25, p < .001$
“What Drives Women’s Lack of Economic Success?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Interdependent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not planning for the future</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not being persistent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tension in the household</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not respecting others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondent sample
- Participants (Niger)
- Predictions (US)
"What Drives Women’s Lack of Economic Success?"

![Bar chart showing the percent of participants in Niger not planning for the future, not being persistent, and experiencing tension in the household compared to predictions for the US.](chart.png)

**Niger: $\chi^2 (3, N = 1,216) = 232.40, p < .001**
“What Drives Women’s Lack of Economic Success?”

**US:** $\chi^2 (3, N = 302) = 112.65, p < .001

**Niger:** $\chi^2 (3, N = 1,216) = 232.40, p < .001
Multi-level culturally wise interventions to build women’s economic agency

- Community-level film and discussion (role modeling women’s economic agency)
- Group-based life skills trainings (e.g., goal setting, problem solving)
- Individual-level construal of women’s micro-entrepreneurship
Policy Experiment Design: 3 Treatment Conditions Versus a Control Condition (N=4,712)

1. Capital Package
   - $310 unconditional cash

2. Psychosocial Package
   - Community film event
   - 1-week life skills training

3. Full Package
   - $310 unconditional cash
   - Community film event
   - 1-week life skills training

4. Control: Monthly stipend of approx. $39

Follow up surveys at 1yr and 2 yrs
1. Community film event

- The story of Amina models new behavior of women’s entrepreneurship (Bandura, 2009; Paluck, 2009)
Réalisé dans le cadre du Programme de Protection Sociale Adaptative dans le Sahel, Banque Mondiale.
Film situated women’s business as a way to advance community and family goals, including respect of elders and generosity to others.
1. Community film event

- The story of Amina models new behavior of women’s entrepreneurship (Bandura, 2009; Paluck, 2009)
- Followed by a community discussion to build consensus in supporting new behavior (Lewin, 1952)
2. Life skills trainings

- Taught skills like goal setting, interpersonal communication, and problem solving (e.g., Chioda et al., 2021)

Tied personal skills to community values and goals
Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata.
Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE,
Model controls for randomization strata
Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Packages with Psychosocial Interventions Reduced Poverty at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Packages with Psychosocial Interventions Reduced Poverty at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Packages with Psychosocial Interventions Improved Food Security at 2 Years

Cluster robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Cost-Effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program benefit-to-cost ratio by condition</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychosocial package</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full package</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital package</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Assuming impacts dissipate 50% annually
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

* Also showed a significant marginal effect of psychosocial interventions (Full – Capital)

![Diagram showing effects on intrapersonal outcomes with significant differences between control and psychosocial conditions.](image-url)
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

**Intrapersonal Outcomes**
- *Self-Efficacy*
- *Optimistic Future Expectations*
- *Mental Health*

**Relational Outcomes**
- *Participation in Collective Action*
- Social Support
  - *Control Over Earnings*
  - Social Norms (Desc & Presc)
  - *Social Standing*

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**Economic Mechanisms**

- ↑ Effort and productivity in business
- ↑ Future-oriented investments
- ↑ Social capital: more mentors, access to markets and information
- ↑ Engagement in business by other HH members

* Also showed a significant marginal effect of psychosocial interventions (Full – Capital)
Embedded Mechanisms Experiment Design:
Additional Intervention Versus No Intervention (N=2,628)

1. Capital Package
   - $310 unconditional cash

2. Psychosocial Package
   - Community film event
   - 1-week life skills training

3. Full Package
   - $310 unconditional cash
   - Community film event
   - 1-week life skills training

Second video - Independent Initiative
Second video - Interdependent Initiative
No second video

Survey at 1yr
Independent Initiative: Self-Advancement and Self-Direction

Video

20 sec clip of 4 min video, drawings by Constant Tonakpa

Guided exercise
Independent Initiative: Self-Advancement and Self-Direction

Video

• Identify effective entrepreneurial strategies
  “How did Amina become a standout entrepreneur?”

• Visualize and set personal goals
  “What changes would you like to see for your future?”

• Problem solve around possible obstacles to goals
  “What could stand in the way? How could those obstacles be overcome?”

Adapted from Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2015; Kizilcec & Cohen, 2017) and Personal Initiative training (Campos et al., 2017)
Interdependent Initiative: Collective Advancement and Social Harmony

20 sec clip of 4 min video, drawings by Constant Tonakpa
Video

Guided exercise

• Identify effective social strategies
  “How did Amina help her family in her activities?”

• Visualize and set collective goals
  “What changes would you like to see for your future? How would these help your family and village?”

• Problem solve around possible social obstacles
  “If a woman’s husband was resistant to her engagement in business, what would you advise her to say to her husband?”

20 sec clip of 4 min video, drawings by Constant Tonakpa
Economic outcomes at 1 year

Economic Composite Index (Business Outcomes, Food Security)

Effect size (std. to control group)

Independent Initiative vs Control
Interdependent Initiative vs Control

Robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Economic outcomes at 1 year

Economic Composite Index (Business Outcomes, Food Security)

Effect size (std. to control group)

Independent Initiative vs Control

Interdependent Initiative vs Control

Robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Interdependent Initiative condition drives economic impacts

Robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Psychosocial outcomes

Intrapersonal: Optimism for Economic Mobility

Relational: Quality of Household Relationships

Robust SE, Model controls for randomization strata
Both Initiative conditions increase intrapersonal outcomes

Robust SE,
Model controls for randomization strata
Interdependent Initiative condition improves both intrapersonal and relational outcomes

Intrapersonal: Optimism for Economic Mobility

Relational: Quality of Household Relationships

Robust SE,
Model controls for randomization strata
Conclusion

• Agency interventions that are ‘culturally wise’ in this interdependent context accounted for an expanded model of agency

• An emerging field at the intersection of behavioral science, cultural psychology, and development economics can identify ways to address multi-dimensional poverty across different cultural contexts
Thank you!

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Film: Damel Dieng

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Thank you!
Q&A
Condition
- Control
- Capital
- Psychosocial
- Full
Impacts on Women’s Entrepreneurship at 2 Years

Percentage of women owning or managing a business

Condition
- Control
- Capital
- Psychosocial
- Full

Cluster robust SE,
Model controls for randomization strata
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

**Correlations with Business Revenues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Effect Size (std. to control group)</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrapersonal Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td></td>
<td>$r = 0.11^{***}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic Future Expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td>$r = 0.07^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td></td>
<td>$r = 0.05^{†}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>$r = 0.17^{***}$</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>$r = 0.14^{***}$</td>
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If a woman’s husband was resistant to her engagement in business, what would you advise her to say to her husband?

Respondent: “I would advise her to negotiate with her husband and explain to him the advantages of business development for the education of their children and the well-being of their household”
Summary

• Findings suggest an alternative **construal of women’s entrepreneurship**, one based in interdependent motivations and relational processes, in addition to independent ones

• Culturally wise interventions in this context accounted for interdependent agency, specifically **social harmony, respect, and collective advancement**

• Future directions: Provide **stronger evidence for culture match** hypothesis by testing moderation of independent and interdependent interventions across more independent and more interdependent groups
Models of self and agency across cultural contexts

**Independent model**

- Self is construed as independent and autonomous
- Agency entails pursuing self-advancement via personal initiative and self-direction
- More practiced in Western and higher income contexts

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Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

Intrapersonal Outcomes

Self-Efficacy

Optimistic Future Expectations

Effect size (std. to control group)
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

**Intrapersonal Outcomes**
- Self-Efficacy
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**Condition**
- Control
- Psychosocial
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

<table>
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<th>Intrapersonal Outcomes</th>
<th>Relational Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

Intrapersonal Outcomes

- Self-Efficacy
- Optimistic Future Expectations
- Mental Health
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

### Intrapersonal Outcomes
- Self-Efficacy
- Optimistic Future Expectations
- Mental Health

### Relational Outcomes
- Participation in Collective Action
- Social Support
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- Social Standing

Condition
- Control
- Psychosocial

Effect size (std. to control group)
Effects of Psychosocial Condition on Psychosocial Outcomes at 1 Year

**Economic Mechanisms**

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**Economic Mechanisms**
- ↑ Effort and productivity in business
- ↑ Future-oriented investments
- ↑ Social capital: more mentors, access to markets and information
- ↑ Engagement in business by other HH members
Interdependent Initiative condition increased other household members’ economic engagement as well

• Among a randomly selected subsample of households (N=457):

  • Interdependent Initiative condition:
    • Household-owned and -managed businesses showed significantly greater business engagement and marginally greater business performance

  • Independent Initiative condition:
    • Directionally positive but not significant
Plausible Mechanisms
Parallel Mediation

Interdependent Initiative versus Control

Quality of household relationships

Economic composite index

Total effect (c)

0.11*

Direct effect (c’)

0.06

Optimism for mobility

0.12*

0.13***

0.15**

0.26***

Dotted lines represent correlations
Psychological (self-focused) and social (other-focused) outcomes

[Diagram showing effect sizes for psychological and social outcomes with stars and plus symbols indicating significance.]

Condition
- Personal Initiative
- Interpersonal Initiative

Effect size (std. to control group)
Self-Efficacy
(e.g., “I am confident that I could deal well with unexpected events”)

Social status
(e.g., respect from others)
Economic Outcomes
- Daily consumption/adult eq.
- Food security
- Household total revenue
- Beneficiary total revenue

Psychosocial and Women’s Empowerment Outcomes
- Mental health
- Self efficacy
- Social cohesion and community closeness
- Control over earnings
- Control over household resources

This figure summarizes treatment effects presented in Extended Data Tables. It focuses on main outcomes and shows treatment effects standardized in the control group (for ease of interpretation). Each line shows the OLS point estimate and 95% confidence interval for that outcome. Dotted lines show results 6 months post-intervention. Solid lines show results 18 months post-intervention.
“Theirs is a world in which a defining feature of people is that they have formed a web of indebtedness, a network of obligations that prove their capacity to maneuver in a world of relentless uncertainty.”

Models of self and agency across cultural contexts

**WEIRD Independent model**
- Self is construed as independent and autonomous

**Interdependent model**
- Self is construed as interdependent and embedded

Culture match, over mismatch, in construals of situations and opportunities has been shown to increase motivation and performance in WEIRD contexts

(e.g., Covarrubias et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2012; Whillans et al., 2015)

Findings suggest a different way of construing women’s entrepreneurship, one based in interdependent motivations and relational processes, in addition to independent ones.
Future Directions to Address Limitations

• Provide stronger evidence for culture match hypothesis:
  • Conduct studies across more independent and interdependent countries or groups within countries and assess moderation by self-construal to assess relative effectiveness of independent and interdependent approaches across these groups
  • Power to detect differences across treatment conditions, at least in complementary lab studies
It’s not just what I want. It’s what we want. As a family, together.