


INTRO SLIDES



Deep Dive Session 3

Aspirations, Agency, and Mental Health: Strategies for Addressing Psychosocial Constraints for Poverty Reduction

Catherine Thomas, University of Michigan
Nathan Jensen, University of Edinburgh
Andres Moya, Universidad de los Andes

Session Roadmap

1. What are psychosocial constraints?
2. How might psychosocial constraints undermine program impacts? (Nathan Jensen)
3. What are 'best bet' solutions for boosting agency and aspirations?
4. Promising area for future research: Mental health (Andres Moya)
5. Take-aways

Why focus on psychosocial constraints?

- Material approaches are often necessary but not sufficient, especially for reaching some subpopulations
- Psychosocial constraints can reduce take up and effectiveness of programs and undermine economic mobility through their effects on decision-making and behavior

Behaviors that can be undermined by psychosocial constraints:

- Take-up of programs
- Effort (e.g., productivity)
- Engagement and performance in skill building (e.g., trainings, academic achievement)
- Behavior change (e.g., use of chlorine)
- Future-oriented investments (e.g., savings, investments in child education and productive assets)
- Risk-taking (e.g., taking out a loan)

Nathan Jensen

Anti-poverty Graduation program did not show impacts for those depressed at baseline

	Treatment Waves 1-2		Treatment Waves 3-4	
	<i>Not</i>	<i>Depressed</i>	<i>Not</i>	<i>Depressed</i>
	<i>Depressed</i>		<i>Depressed</i>	
<i>Women's Business Assets (\$PPP)</i>	209*** (23.1)	93 (45)	137*** (26)	55 (54)
<i>Household Income (\$PPP)</i>	121*** (39)	-21 (76)	2.9 (43)	4.1 (91.2)
<i>Women's Savings (\$PPP)</i>	56*** (7.6)	51 (15)	25*** (8.5)	17 (17.8)
<i>Observations</i>	1385			

Notes: Average baseline values: Women's Business Assets \$46, Household Income \$817, Women's Savings \$11. Regressions include baseline levels of the dependent variable. Standard errors for the average treatment effects are clustered at the community level. *** p<0.01, **p<0.05, * p<0.1

How can we address psychosocial constraints?

3 Best Bets for building aspirations and agency

1. Empowering, inclusive narratives of aid

"Community Empowerment"



"Poverty Alleviation"

instead of



2. Role models and visualization exercises



3. Life skills trainings in goal setting



Andres Moya

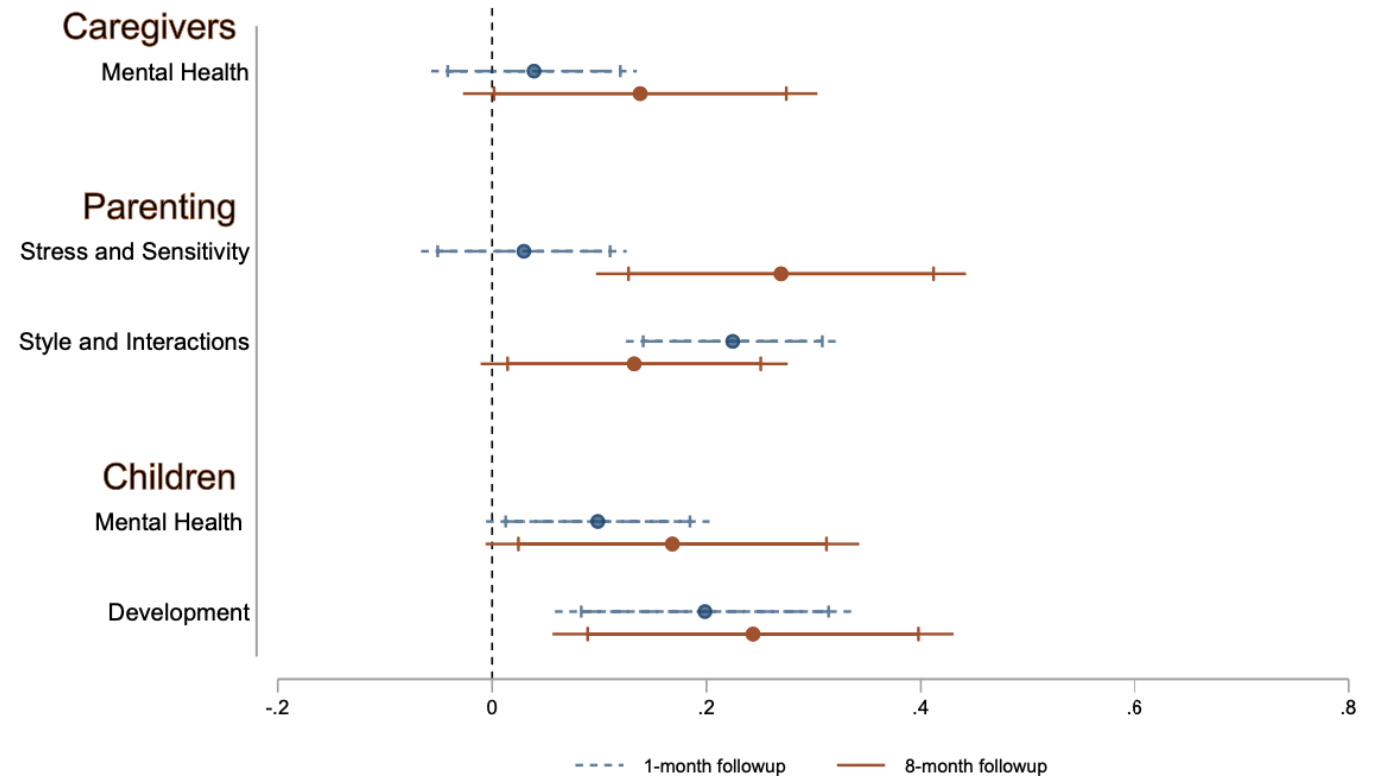
A promising area for future research: Mental health care

Semillas de Apego

Caring for the caregiver in conflict-affected areas: Addressing caregiver mental health to promote early childhood development




Main Results : 8-month followup



Note: 95% and 90% confidence intervals reported.

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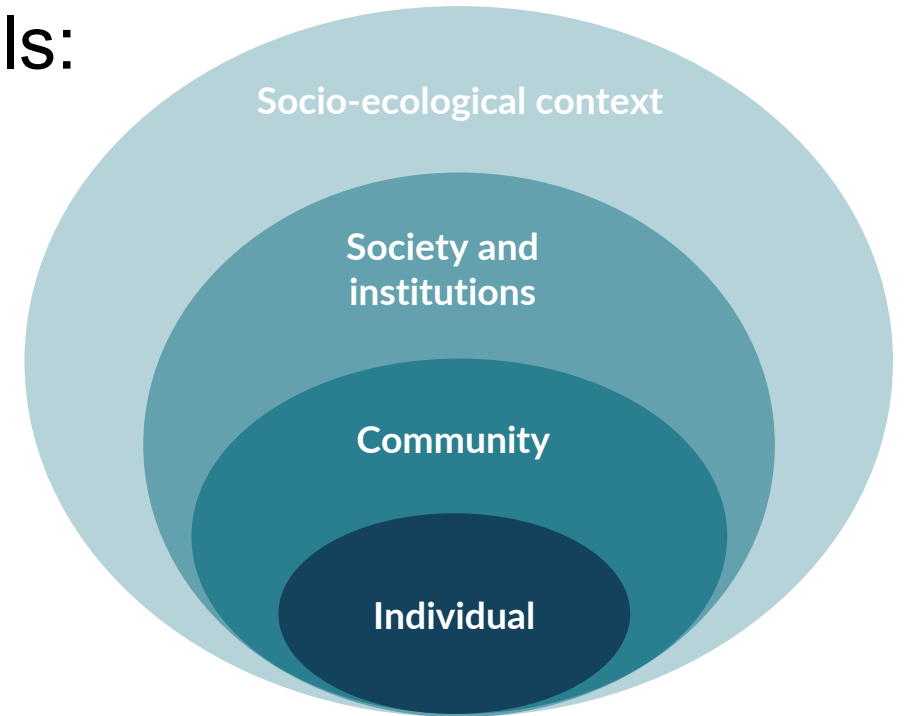
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1. What are psychosocial constraints?

Poverty is multi-dimensional

Beyond financial scarcity, poverty often entails:

- Unpredictability and shocks
- Conflict and violence
- Low education
- Vulnerability to predatory actors
- Limited opportunities
- Discrimination
- Social marginalization



In turn, these features of poverty impose psychosocial constraints on individuals, i.e., constraints on their human capital and social capital

What are psychosocial constraints?

- Lower sense of agency



What are psychosocial constraints?

- Lower sense of agency
- Lower aspirations



PC: Catherine Thomas

What are psychosocial constraints?

- Lower sense of agency
- Lower aspirations
- Greater stigma and discrimination



Medium @kainatlaqat84

What are psychosocial constraints?

- Lower sense of agency
- Lower aspirations
- Greater stigma and discrimination
- Limited social capital and networks



What are psychosocial constraints?

- Lower sense of agency
- Lower aspirations
- Greater stigma and discrimination
- Limited social capital and networks
- Greater rates of depression and stress



Why focus on psychosocial constraints?

- Material approaches are often necessary but not sufficient, especially for reaching some subpopulations
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Behaviors that can be undermined by psychosocial constraints:

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- Risk-taking (e.g., taking out a loan)

2. How psychosocial constraints may undermine program success

Nathan Jensen

(insert Jensen slides)

3. 'Best Bet' Solutions

How can we boost aspirations and agency to better support participants and increase program impacts?

Best Bet 1: Building aspirations and agency through **empowering, inclusive narratives**

Psychosocial constraint: Aid can be psychologically threatening and reinforce the stigma of poverty

- Aid can, implicitly or explicitly, convey that recipients are helpless or ‘lesser than’



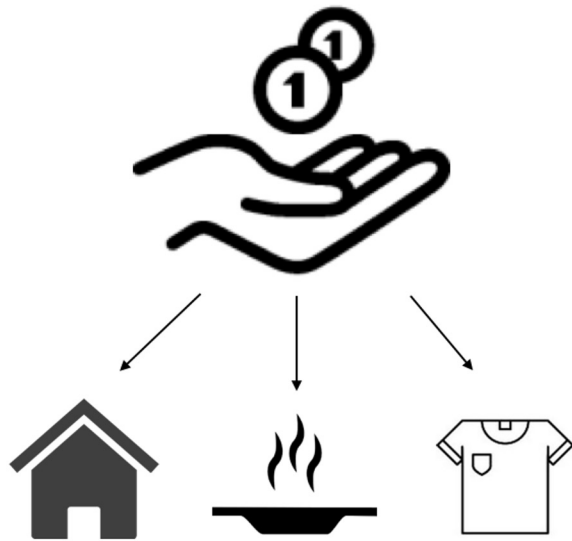
Best Bet 1: Building aspirations and agency through **empowering, inclusive narratives**

1. **Inclusive, agency-based narratives**

Study Design

Lab-in-the-field experiment: N=565 low-income participants in Nairobi, Kenya were given 400 KSH (two days wages) and randomly assigned to one of three aid organization narratives

I. "Poverty Alleviation"



II. "Individual Empowerment"



III. "Community Empowerment"



“The goal of this Poverty Alleviation Organization is to alleviate poverty and reduce financial hardship among the poor”

I. “Poverty Alleviation”



Deficit-focused

II. “Individual Empowerment”



III. “Community Empowerment”



“The goal of this Individual Empowerment Organization is to enable individuals to pursue personal goals and become more financially independent”

I. “Poverty Alleviation”



II. “Individual Empowerment”



Independent Agency

III. “Community Empowerment”



“The goal of this Community Empowerment Organization is to enable people to support those they care about and help communities grow together”

I. “Poverty Alleviation”



II. “Individual Empowerment”



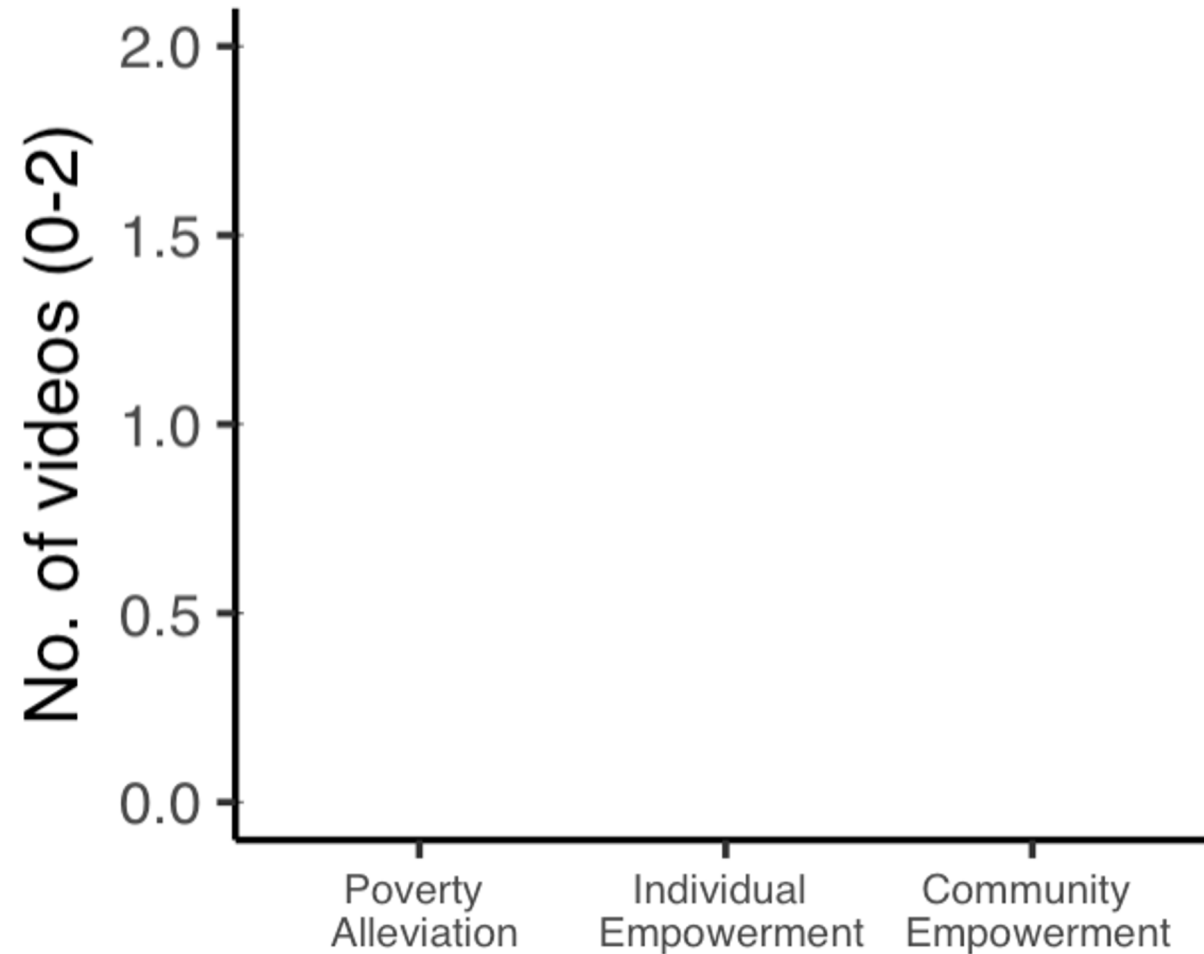
III. “Community Empowerment”



Interdependent Agency

Outcomes

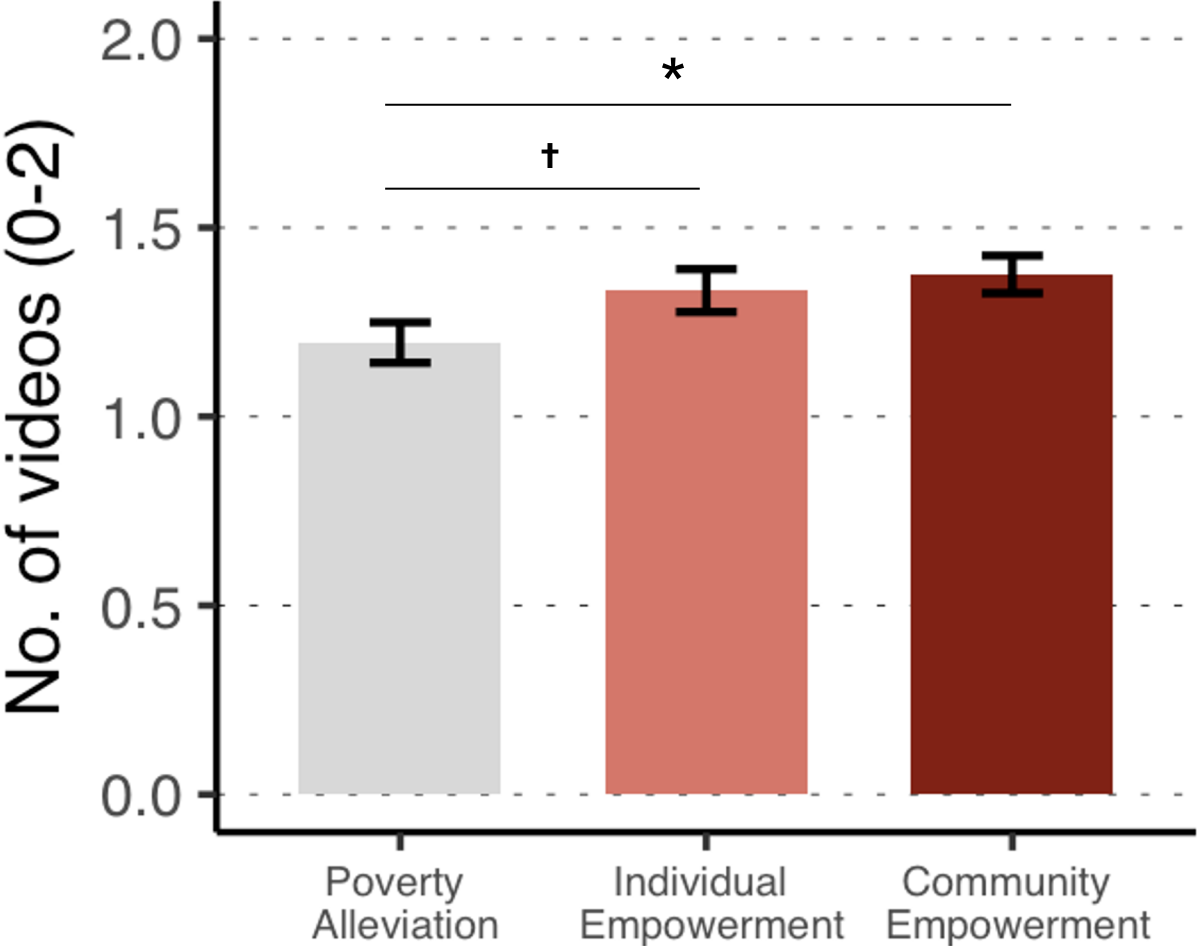
Interest in Building Business Skills



(N = 565)
Error bars
are 95% CI

'Community Empowerment' significantly increases skills building behavior

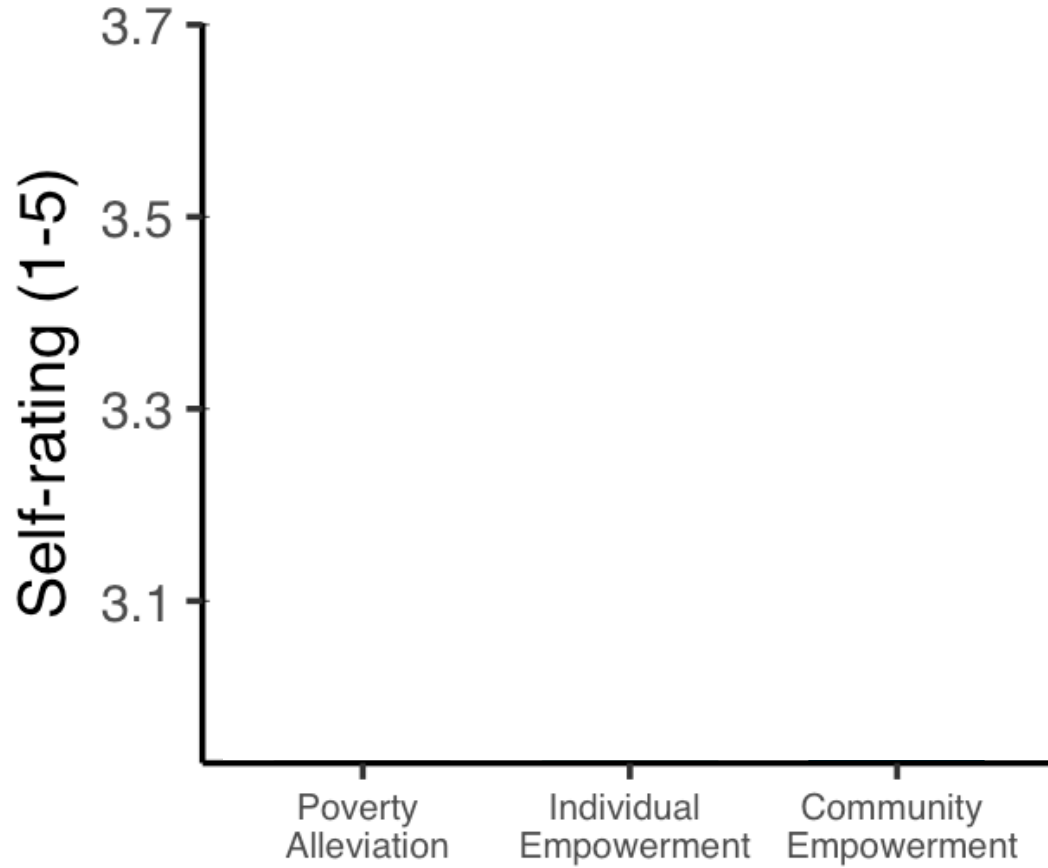
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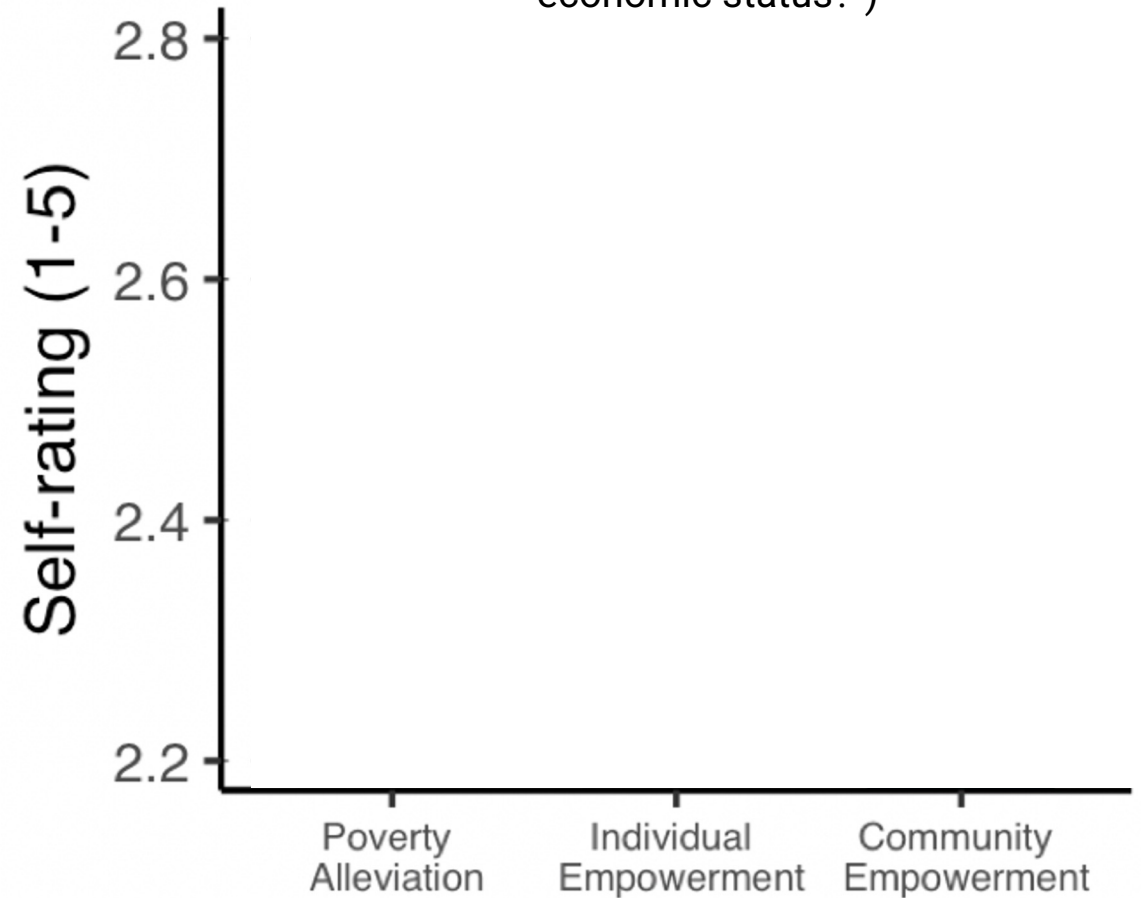
Self-efficacy

(5 items, e.g., "In this moment, how much do you feel capable of making progress towards your goals?")



Perceived stigma

(5 items, e.g., "How much do you feel that other people make judgments about you based on your economic status?")



Best Bet 1: Building aspirations and agency through **empowering, inclusive narratives**

1. Inclusive, agency-based narratives:

- “Community empowerment” vs “poverty alleviation” narrative of aid increased economic agency and reduced stigma in the lab in Kenya (Thomas, Otis, et al., 2020)
 - Replication: Increased take-up of food stamps and reduced stigma in the field in US (Brody et al., 2024)
- “It’s not your fault” vs “help households in need” increased take-up of housing assistance in US (Lasky-Fink & Linos, 2023)

2. Reflecting on strengths:

- Prompting individuals to reflect on successful personal experiences and personal values increased take-up of welfare program info and success in reemployment in US (Hall et al., 2013; Pfrombeck et al., 2023)
- Prompting Middle East / African refugees to reflect on how their experiences helped them acquire skills for success increased their academic course completion (Bauer et al., 2021)

✔
“Community Empowerment”



✘
“Poverty Alleviation”



VS



VS

You’re not alone and it’s not your fault.

Because of COVID-19, many Denver residents need a little extra help right now.

You’re not alone.

The City and County of Denver has many programs to support residents in need.

VS

Pitfall: To mitigate victim blaming, should acknowledge structural reasons for poverty in addition to individuals’ agency to use program well (Hoyt & Burnette, 2020)

Best Bet 1: Building aspirations and agency through **empowering, inclusive narratives**

1. Inclusive, agency-based narratives:

- “Community empowerment” vs “poverty alleviation” narrative of aid increased economic agency and reduced stigma in the community



Communicate that program participants are seen as capable, resourceful agents rather than helpless, needy beneficiaries

2. Reflective

- Prompting participants to reflect on their experiences and personal values increased take-up of welfare program and success in reemployment in US (Hall et al., 2013; Pfrombeck et al., 2023)
- Prompting Middle East / African refugees to reflect on how their experiences helped them acquire skills for success increased course completion (Bauer et al., 2021)

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Pitfall: To mitigate victim blaming, should acknowledge structural reasons for poverty in addition to individuals' agency to use program well (Hoyt & Burnette, 2020)

Best Bet 2: Building aspirations and agency through **role models and visualization exercises**

Psychosocial constraint: Limited exposure to different life paths and low hope for change

Best Bet 2: Building aspirations and agency through **role models and visualization exercises**

1. **Role models** (Serra, 2022)

RCT of the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program

3 Treatment Conditions Versus a Control Condition (N=4,712)



Bossuoy, Goldstein, Karimou, Karlan, ..., Thomas, ..., 2022, *Nature*



Community film event

- The story of Amina who models the counter-normative behavior of women's micro-entrepreneurship



The grain loft is empty.



"When the rhythm changes,
the dance has to match."



You are here!



It's not just for enriching ourselves but
for being useful to the village







Community film event

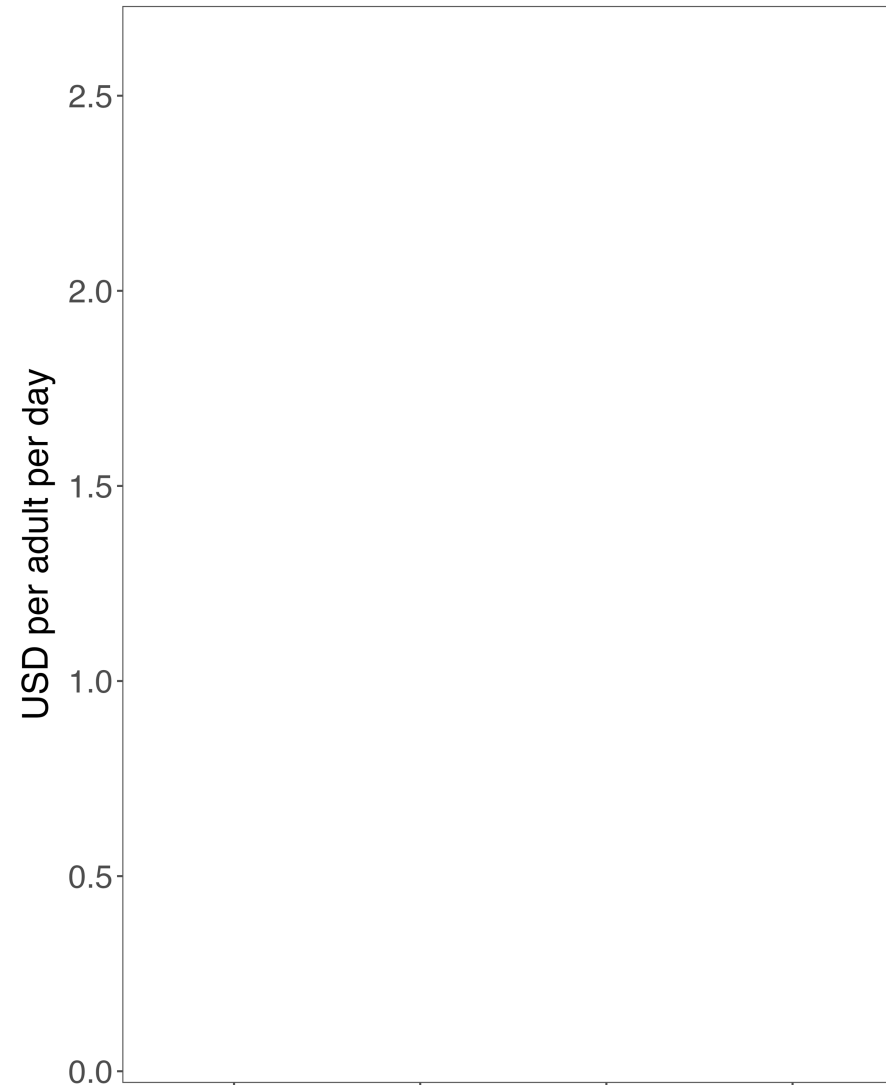
- The story of Amina who models the counter-normative behavior of women's micro-entrepreneurship
- Followed by a community discussion to relate film to community values and build consensus in supporting new behavior

Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

Consumption

Condition

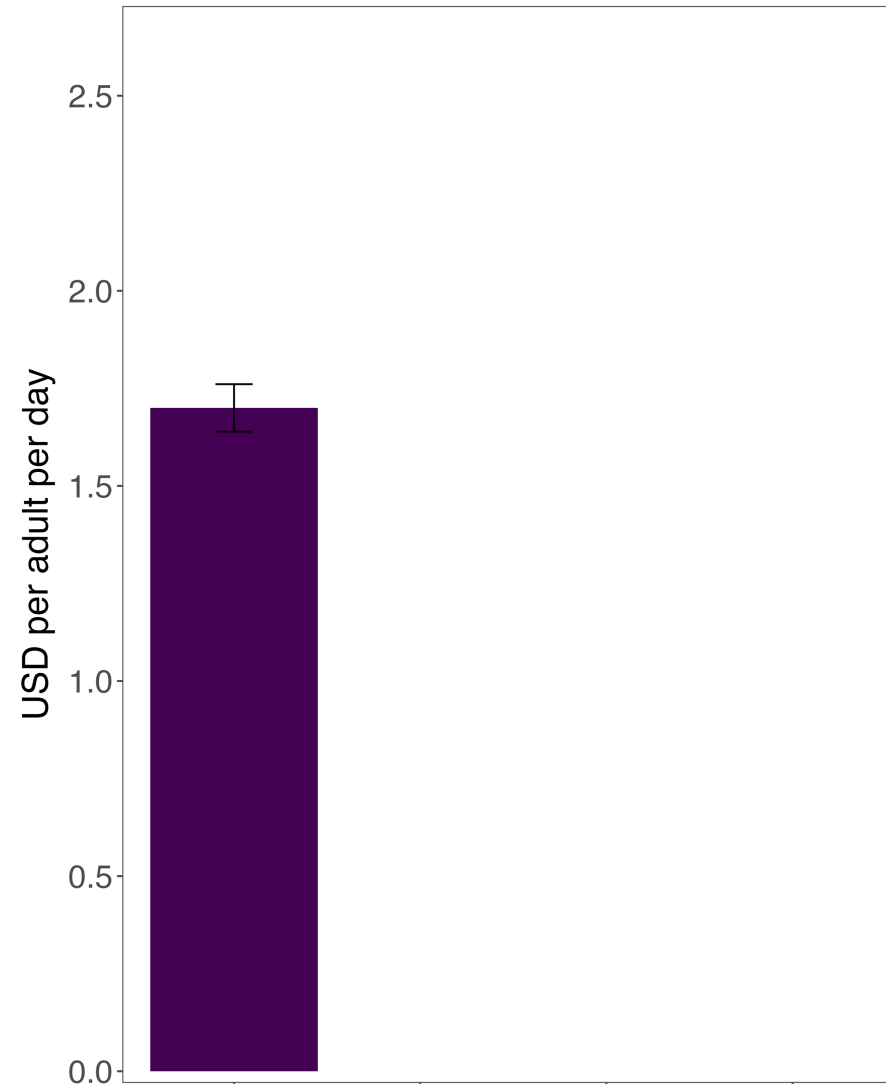
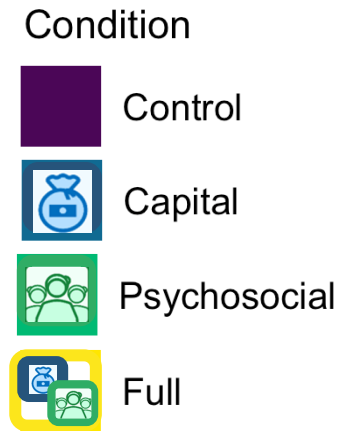
-  Control
-  Capital
-  Psychosocial
-  Full



Cluster robust SE,
Model controls for
randomization strata

Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

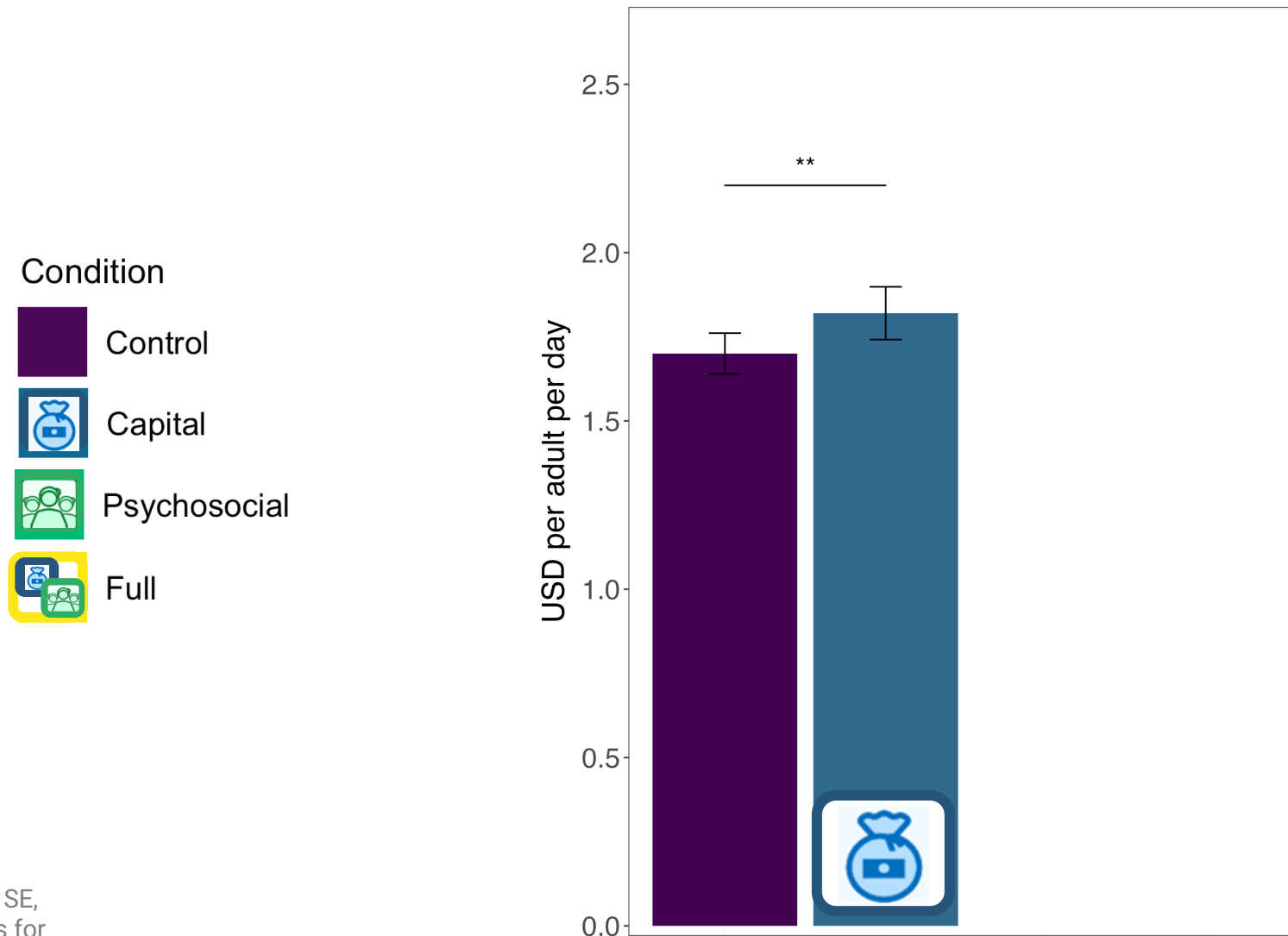
Consumption



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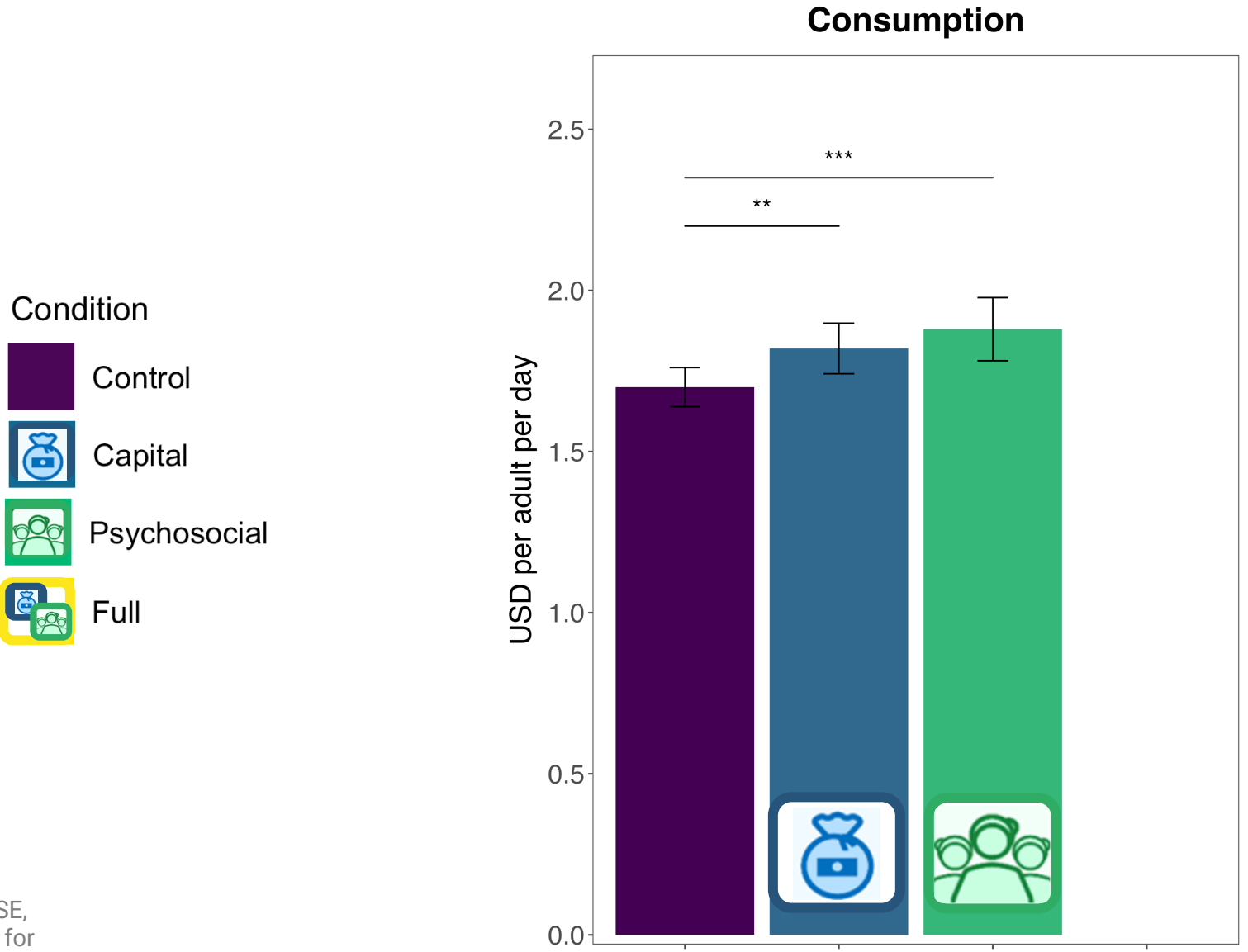
Impacts on Household Poverty at 2 Years

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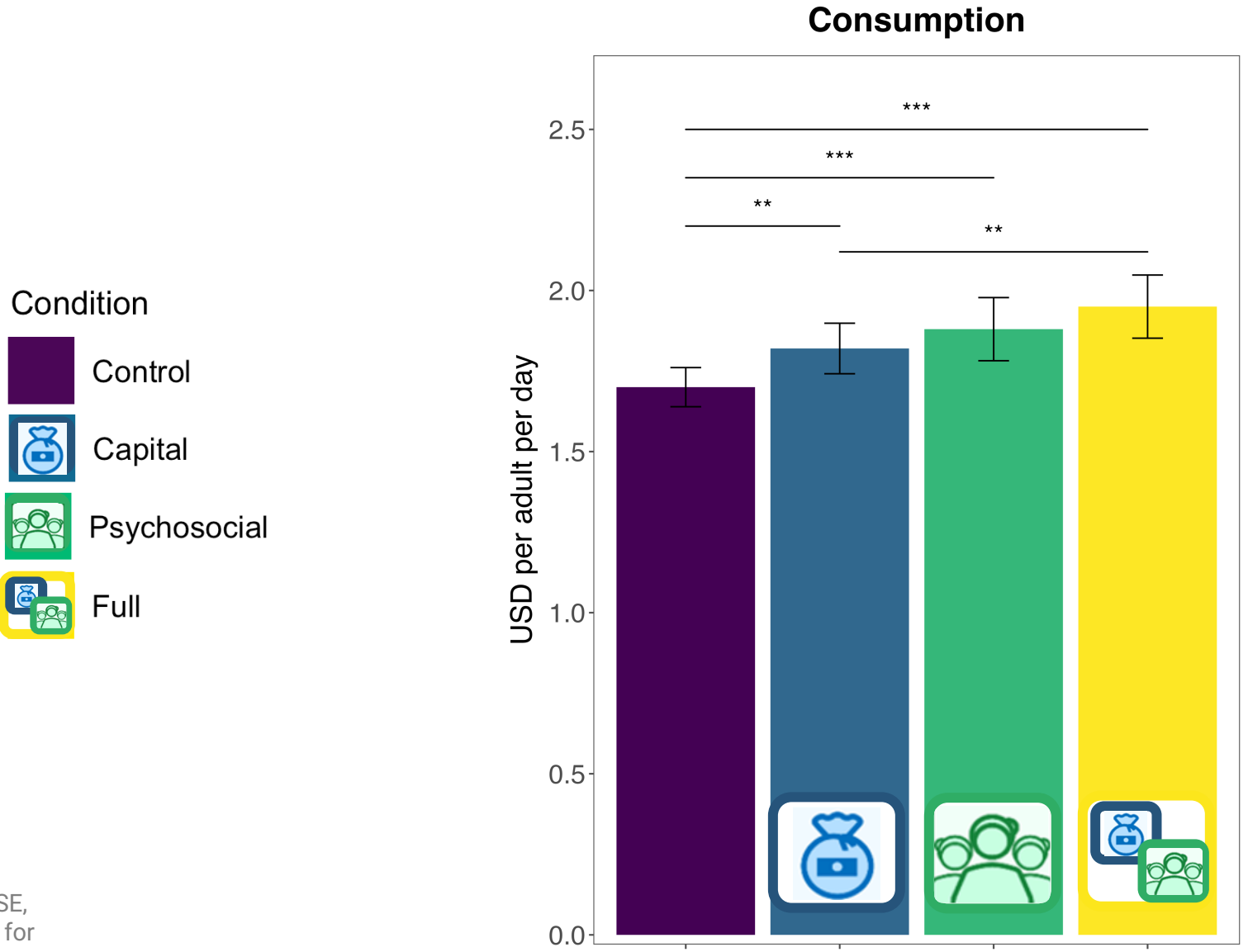
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Packages with Psychosocial Interventions Reduced Poverty at 2 Years



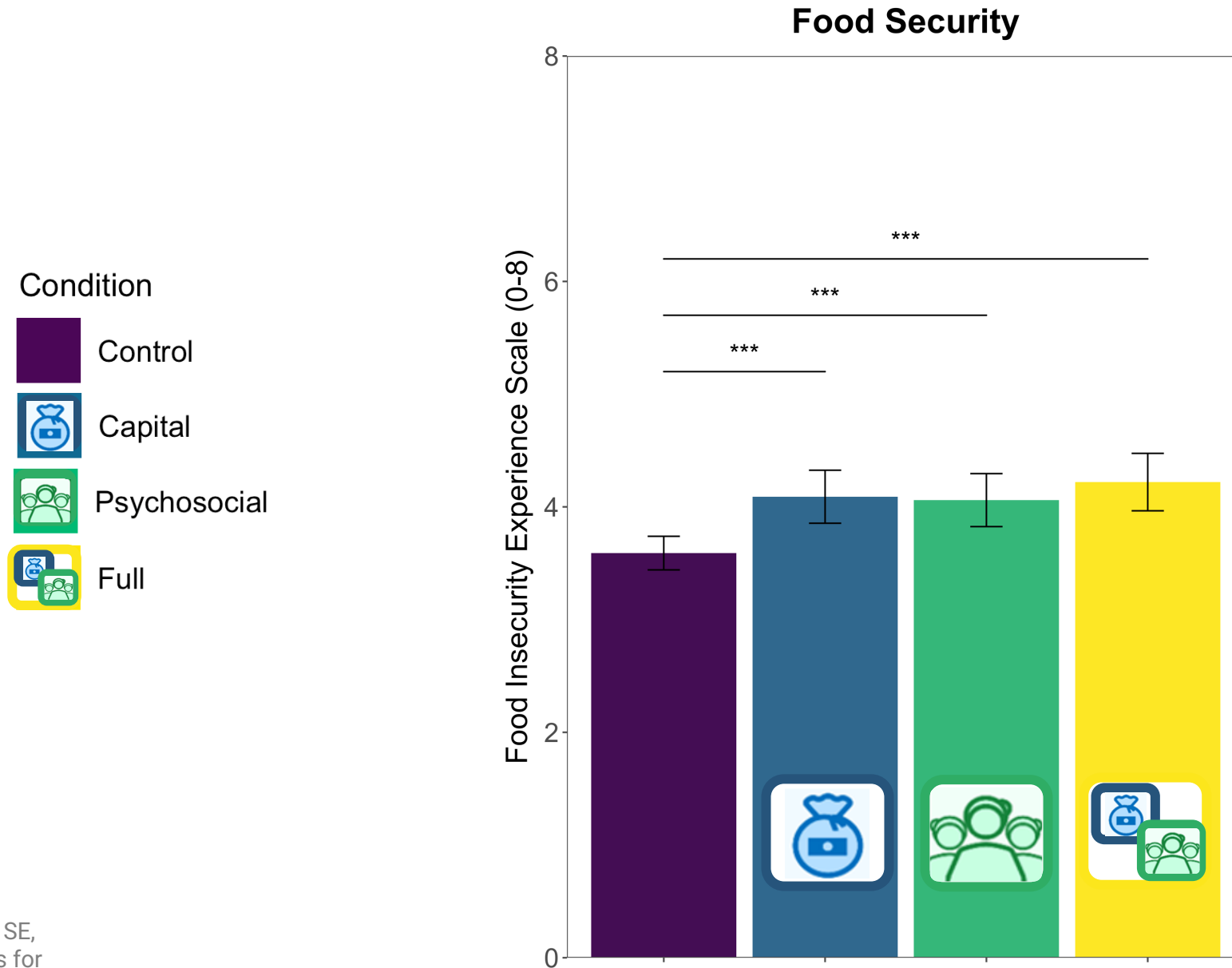
Cluster robust SE,
Model controls for
randomization strata

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

Program benefit-to-cost ratio by condition



Psychosocial package

3.0



Full package

2.1



Capital package

1.3

* Assuming impacts dissipate 50% annually

Best Bet 2: Building aspirations and agency through role models and visualization exercises

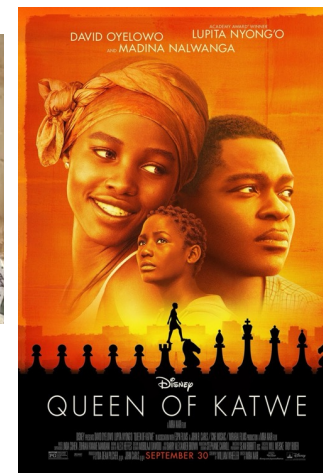
1. Role models (Serra, 2022)

- Community event with film that role modeled women's micro-entrepreneurship was part of highly cost-effective anti-poverty program in Niger (Bossuroy,...Karlán,...Thomas, et al., 2022)
- Video documentaries of local success stories increased investment in child education and agriculture in Ethiopia (Bernard et al., 2023)
- Inspiring film about aspiring female student increased educational performance and attainment, particularly for girls, in Uganda (Riley, 2024)



2. Visualization exercises

- Aspirations visualization & goal planning workshops cost-effectively increased investments, savings, and living standards in Kenya (Orkin et al., 2023)
- Visualizing alternative healthier futures increased use of chlorine, reduced child diarrhea, and increased savings (John & Orkin, 2022)
- Teaching visualization increased entrepreneurial success and savings in Columbia (Ashraf et al., 2022)



Pitfall: Aspirations should not be too high, unrealistic, or unrelatable (McKenzie, Mohpal, & Yang, 2022)

Best Bet 2: Building aspirations and agency through role models and visualization exercises

1. Role models (Serra, 2022)

- Community event with film that role modeled women’s micro-entrepreneurship was part of highly cost-effective anti-poverty program in Niger (Bossuroy,...Karlan,...Thomas, et al., 2022)
- Video of a woman who started a business inspired other women to start businesses
- Inspiring performance by a local artist



Show participants that change is possible and engage them in envisioning optimistic (but realistic) futures

2. Visualization

- Aspirations for increased investments, savings, and living standards in Kenya (Orkin et al., 2023)
- Visualizing alternative healthier futures increased use of chlorine, reduced child diarrhea, and increased savings (John & Orkin, 2022)
- Teaching visualization increased entrepreneurial success and savings in Columbia (Ashraf et al., 2022)



Pitfall: Aspirations should not be too high, unrealistic, or unrelatable (McKenzie, Mohpal, & Yang, 2022)

Best Bet 3: Build aspirations and agency through **life skills trainings in goal setting**

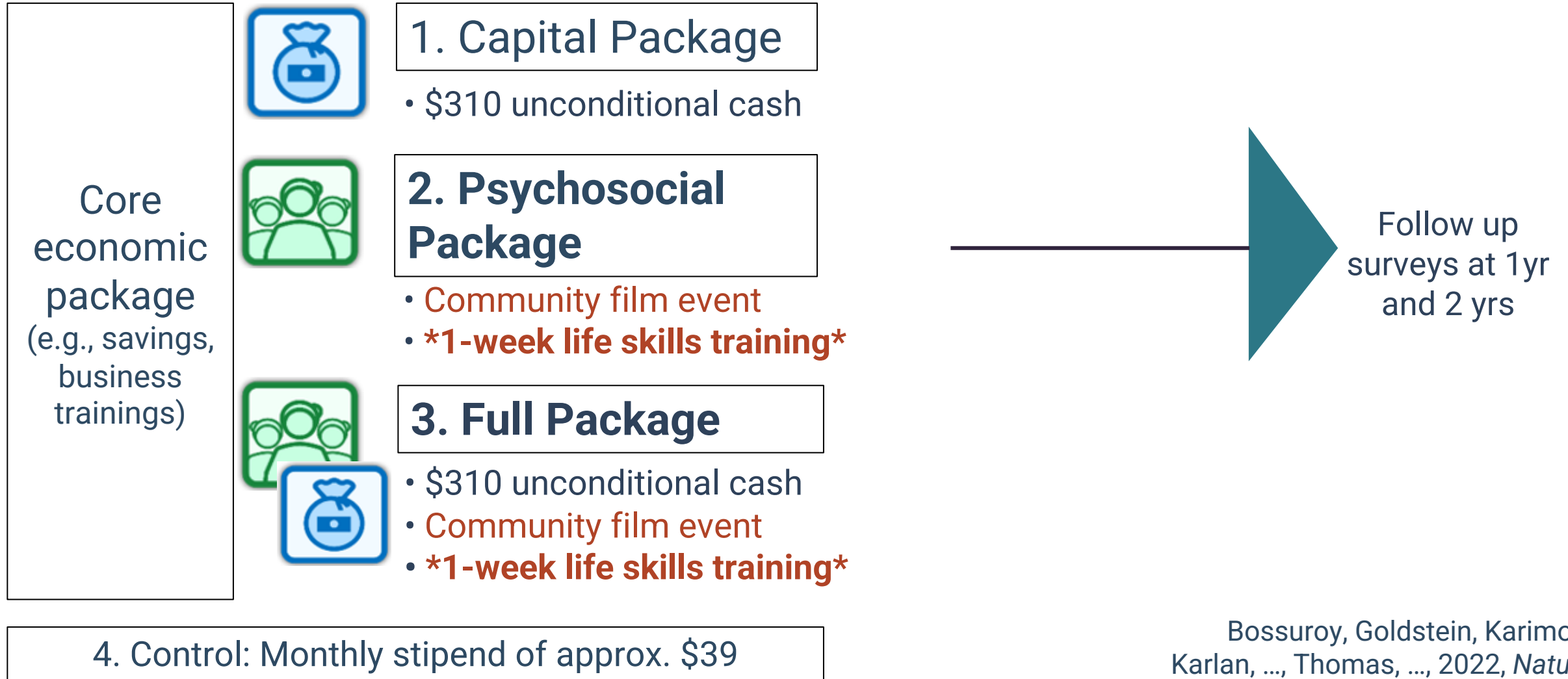
Psychosocial constraint: Limited education to build soft skills

Best Bet 3: Build aspirations and agency through **life skills trainings in goal setting**

1. **Life skills trainings in goal setting and initiative**

RCT of the Sahel Adaptive Social Protection Program

3 Treatment Conditions Versus a Control Condition (N=4,712)



Bossuoy, Goldstein, Karimou, Karlan, ..., Thomas, ..., 2022, *Nature*



Life skills trainings

- Taught skills like goal setting, decision-making, problem solving, and interpersonal communication

Best Bet 3: Build aspirations and agency through life skills trainings in goal setting and initiative

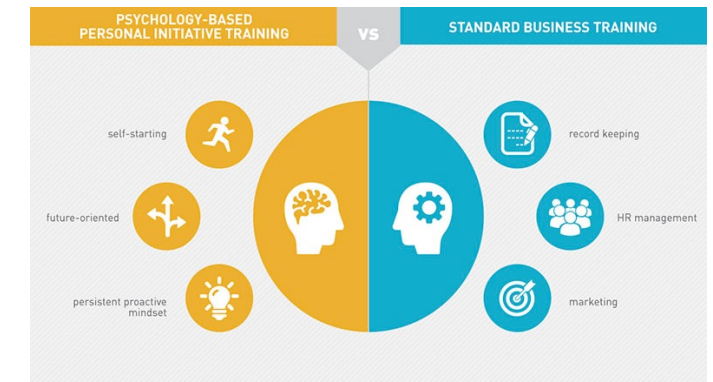
1. Group-based trainings in goal setting and initiative

- 1-week life skills trainings, including goal setting, was part of highly cost-effective anti-poverty program in Niger (Bossuroy, ...Karlán, ...Thomas, et al., 2022)
 - Follow-up of 1-session goal setting and initiative exercises further increased economic outcomes (Thomas et al., in prep)
- 2-day life skills workshop in goal setting and interpersonal communication increased women's income in Rwanda (Lang, Soule, & Tinsley, 2023)
- 9-session training to build self-efficacy increased women's employment in India (McKelway, 2021)
- "Personal initiative" training outperformed traditional business training in boosting business profits in Togo (Campos et al., 2017)



Meeting	GSE Treatment
#1	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story: woman's GSE beliefs helped in building home • Discussion: introduction to GSE
#2	Talents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion: talents • Activity: identify our own talents • Activity: we can do things we think we cannot (tablet sketchpad task)
#3	Character Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion: character strengths • Activity: identify people in our lives with strengths • Activity: identify our own strengths
#4	Talents, Strengths, and Success <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity: identify times we felt proud or successful • Activity: identify talents and strengths that led to our successes
#5	Goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity: guided reflection • Story: woman pursued goal of learning to sew • Discussion: understanding goals
#6	Goal Planning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity: strategy for goal planning • Overview of three-step strategy • Visualize three-steps in last story • Apply strategy to our goals, using worksheet
#7	Problem Solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story: woman overcame obstacles in rice sowing • Discussion: problem-solving mindset • Activity: anticipate obstacles to our goals and brainstorm solutions
#8	Putting It All Together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story: girl set exam goal, made plan, and identified own abilities to use • Discussion: importance of recognizing abilities in pursuing goals • Activity: identify abilities to use to reach our goals
#9	Conclusion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion: summarize curriculum

Pitfall: Not tailoring to socio-economic and cultural context can limit effectiveness (Kizilcec & Cohen, 2017; Thomas & Markus, 2023; Thomas et al., in prep)



Best Bet 3: Build aspirations and agency through life skills trainings in goal setting and initiative

1. Life skills trainings in goal setting and initiative

- 1-week life skills trainings, including goal setting, was part of highly cost-effective anti-poverty program in Niger (Bossuroy, ... Karlan, ... Thomas, et al., 2022)
- 2-day community-based training in rural India (Langston, 2017)
- 9-session training for women's self-employment in India (McKelway, 2021)
- "Personal initiative" training outperformed traditional business training in boosting business profits in Togo (Campos et al., 2017)

Teach goal setting and initiative as key life skills



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Pitfall: Goals and goal pursuit processes needs to be tailored to socio-economic and cultural context (Kizilcec & Cohen, 2017; Thomas et al., *in prep*)



4. Promising area for future research: Mental health

Andres Moya

(insert Moya slides)

Example intervention points for psychosocial programming

Program communications

Convey participants as capable, resourceful agents in program names, mission statements, scripts, flyers, SMS, etc.

Media / Films

Show films of role models like them who have succeeded in a particular domain; show films that model visualization & goal setting

Guided discussions

In community, small group, or 1-on-1 sessions, prompt visualization of aspirations and discussion of goals and goal pursuit strategies

Self-guided exercises

Send prompts/exercises to reflect on goals and goal pursuit strategies through digital communication channels (e.g., WhatsApp)

In-person trainings

Add life skills trainings sessions on goal setting, initiative, and visualization

Take-aways

1. **Material resources may not be sufficient to benefit all program participants**
2. **Addressing psychosocial constraints can make programs more effective and cost-effective**
3. **Psychosocial programming can range from light-touch to intensive**
4. **Beware of pitfalls: Programming needs to be tailored to cultural and socioeconomic context**
5. **Future research should assess the addition of mental health care**



Academics to Engage for Intervention Design and Evaluation

Please reach out to OCE for help matching

- Catherine Thomas (Univ of Michigan)
- Andres Moya (Univ de los Andes)
- Nathan Jensen (Univ of Edinburgh)
- Dean Karlan (Northwestern / USAID)
- Patricia Andrews Fearon and James Walsh (The Agency Fund / USAID)
- Sara Constantino (Northeastern Univ)
- Greg Walton (Stanford Univ)
- Kate Orkin (Oxford)
- Emma Riley (Univ. of Michigan)
- Madeline McKelway (Dartmouth)