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## Journal of Economic Behavior &amp; Organization

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jebo](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jebo)

# On the norms of charitable giving in Islam: Two field experiments in Morocco<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 14 February 2014

Received in revised form 11 May 2015

Accepted 11 May 2015

Available online 20 May 2015

## Keywords:

Charitable giving

Islam

Social pressure

Priming

Religion

Field experiment

## ABSTRACT

Charitable giving is one of the major obligations in Islam and a strong Muslim norm endorses giving to the needy, but discourages public displays of giving. We report the results two field experiments with 534 and 200 participants at Moroccan educational institutions to assess the effects of this moral prescription on actual giving levels in anonymous and public settings. Subjects who participated in a paid study were given the option to donate from their payment to a local orphanage, under treatments that varied the publicity of the donation and the salience of Islamic values using either Arabic or French instructions. In the salient Islamic treatment, anonymity of donations significantly *increased* donation incidence from 59% to 77% percent as well as average donations for religious subjects from 8.90 to 13.00 Dh out of possibly 30 Dh. These findings stand in stark contrast to most previous findings in the charitable giving literature and suggest to reconsider potential fundraising strategies in Muslim populations.

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## 1. Introduction

Fundraising organizations and charities often use strategies that involve the public display of the identity and the generosity of their donors. In many cases, they are well advised doing so, as the success of these strategies has been shown in numerous studies. One rationale for this success is that people have a desire for social recognition, being perceived as generous persons. It is however unclear to what extent this desire for reputation towards others—which by many scholars is argued to be a general human phenomenon, rather than a cultural trait<sup>3</sup>—is governed by a set of implicit or explicit norms

<sup>☆</sup> We would like to thank Alexia Gaudeul, Stephan Klasen, David Reinstein, Holger Rau as well as participants of the Experimental Research Seminar at the Universidad de los Andes, Bogota, the participants of ASREC 2013, SEEDEC 2013 and the Global meeting of the International Economic Society for helpful discussions and comments. Mosatafa Lambarraa, Mohammed Kadiri, Ismael Saber, Hamdoun Hassan and Abed al hay Al Ghorba provided excellent research assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Labarraa is grateful to the financial support of the Courant Research Center for Poverty Equity and Growth at the University of Göttingen..

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Riener is grateful to the financial support by the Deutsche Forschungs Gemeinschaft under the grant RTG 1411..

<sup>3</sup> Samek and Sheremeta (2013) even claim that “[...] there is agreement among researchers and practitioners that recognizing contributors has a positive effect [...]”.

that endorse or condemn the public display of generosity. We investigate the effects of an explicit Islamic religious prescription of charitable giving that, on the one hand endorses charitable giving as a good deed and in the same sentence opposes a social approval motive for the good deed. For this we conducted two field experiments that varied the visibility of individual donations and the salience of the social norm. We see this study as a step in better understanding the nature of charitable giving and the role of reputation in Islamic societies.

Charitable giving is one of the major obligations of a devout Muslim. Although Islam constitutes—with more than 1.57 billion believers—one of the major world religions, remarkably little is known about the functioning of the system of charitable contributions within Muslim societies and whether it is comparable to charitable giving in the Western world. Two forms of charity in Islam can be distinguished: a mandatory form called *Zakaah*<sup>4</sup>, that is comparable to a redistributive tax system, and a voluntary form called *Sadaqah* which is closer to charitable giving as understood in the economics literature and so far remains nearly unstudied.<sup>5</sup> *Sadaqah* comes from the word *sidq* (sincerity), which is truthfulness in realizing declared belief by action (Al Qardawi, 2011). It serves as a sign of sincerity of faith (Ash-Shawkani, 1788, 2/399). *Sadaqah* is governed by a set of codified rules where the religious value of the donation varies with publicity: *Sadaqah* must be done sincerely to please Allah only and not out of gaining praise or recognition from others (which is known as *riya'*). The Qur'an, makes this point in 2:264, which reads in English as follows:

“O you who believe! Do not render vain your charity by reminders of your generosity or by injury, like him who spends his wealth to be seen of men and he does not believe in Allah nor in the last Day.”<sup>6</sup>

Although a similar prescription exists in the Christian Bible,<sup>7</sup> recent literature on charitable giving in the Americas and Europe does not provide evidence that this rule has behavioral consequences. In a laboratory experiment (Rege and Telle, 2004) show that revealing names in a public good context increases giving, similarly (Andreoni and Petrie, 2004) find that lifting anonymity in public goods games—which they interpret as a proxy to charitable giving—increases contributions. These findings have been corroborated in various field experimental setups. Soetevent (2005) in a study in the Netherlands showed an increase of 10% in giving in churches when open baskets were used however the increase faded over time, Alpizar et al. (2008) show that open donations increase donation incidence by 25% in a field study on voluntary contributions to a National Park in Costa Rica. Using non-experimental field data, (Meer, 2011) shows that charitable solicitations done via friends and acquaintances increase the probability of giving and the overall amount of the gift. Besides the literature on reputation towards humans, there is a growing body of literature on the fear of punishment or the expectation of rewards in afterlife. Atkinson and Bourrat (2011) using cross-country survey data show that beliefs about the permissibility of moral transgressions are tied to beliefs about supernatural monitoring and punishment (see Johnson and Krüger, 2004). In economics, recent work by Levy and Razin (2014) incorporates self signaling according to their religious belief in a model of social cooperation.

We organized two field experiments<sup>8</sup> around a remunerated survey<sup>9</sup> in several educational institutions in the region of Fez and Meknes in Morocco in October 2010 and November 2011. In the first experiment 534 subjects participated in 6 treatment conditions. After filling out the survey, they could donate from their payment to a local, known orphanage under different between-subject treatment conditions, that varied the extent of anonymity of the donations, the salience of the norm and the possibility to choose the extent of anonymity. In the second experiment, we varied the salience of the norm, our variable of interest here was whether subjects wanted to make their donations public or anonymous.

Identifying the causal effect of culture is a major challenge, as exogenous variation of culture is hardly feasible. We approach this problem using a technique known as priming. This technique was developed by social psychologists and recently found entry in the economics literature (see for example Matthey, 2010 or Benjamin et al., 2010b). Priming is thought of as making a particular feature of a subject's identity salient by reminding him or her of the identity.<sup>10</sup> We exogenously vary the salience Islamic and Western values that are both present in most of Moroccan society. As a reminder of Islamic identity we use Arabic, while to remind of Western identity we used French in the questionnaire that preceded the donation decision. Arabic is an ideal transport of Islamic values through its intimate connection with Islam as religion.

<sup>4</sup> There are several economic studies on *Zakaah* and its redistributive effects (see for example Jehle (1994) for a study on Pakistan.) and its moral and religious dimensions (Kuran, 1995)

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception the recent work by Singer (2008, 2006) who sheds light on the relevance of charitable giving in Islamic societies from a historical perspective.

<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an affirms: “Those who believe, and do deeds of righteousness, and establish regular prayers and regular charity, will have their reward with their Lord: On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (2:277). Other religious writing make this rule even more precise stating that the reward for alms giving in afterlife in secret is *seventy times* that of giving publicly (Al-Baydawi, 1899). Next to the prescription on anonymous giving there are basic rules involved with donating, emphasizing the religious function of charity: A Muslim must always donate in the name of God alone. All money donated must come from a legitimate source (money that has been stolen or earned unethically does not count toward *sadaqah*). All excess wealth is seen as Allah's ownership in Islam. However, it is left to the individual to decide how much they are willing to give back to Him in the form of charity.

<sup>7</sup> In Mathew 6, 3–4 in the New Testament it says: “But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret shall recompense thee.” (Bible, American Standard Version)

<sup>8</sup> In the terminology of (Harrison and List, 2004) we will refer to it as field experiment as participants were not aware that they were part of an experiment.

<sup>9</sup> The survey was about entrepreneurial activities and aspirations among students, which is another pressing social problem in Morocco, but unrelated to charitable giving.

<sup>10</sup> One can think of identity as a concept that is attached to a set of beliefs and values.

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