MOVING TOWARDS DIGNITY:
Using Inclusive and Equitable Fundraising Language to Dismantle Philanthropy’s White Savior Narrative

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NPA 622: Nonprofit Data Analysis - Capstone
Spring 2021
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THE WHITE SAVIOR NARRATIVE

“...what ails philanthropy at its core is colonialism. Almost without exception, funders reinforce the colonial division of Us vs. Them, Haves vs. Have Nots, and mostly white saviors and white experts vs. poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk people (take your pick of euphemisms for people of color).”

- Edgar Villanueva, Decolonizing Wealth
**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this research is to better understand how using **inclusive**, **equitable** and **dignity-focused** fundraising language can ultimately contribute to dismantling philanthropy's **white savior narrative** and how frontline fundraisers can play a critical role in **shifting philanthropy’s power dynamics**.

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<th>Research Question 1</th>
<th>Research Question 2</th>
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<td>Can nonprofit fundraising teams thoughtfully abandon notions of white saviorism and fully embrace inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused language without compromising revenue or relationships?</td>
<td>How does fundraising language impact donors’ affinity for programs and services and their understanding of their role in the giver/recipient relationship or partnership?</td>
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METHODS AND APPROACHES

Qualitative Research Methods

► Literature Review
► Content Analysis
► Interviews
LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding White Saviorism
- good intentions are not good enough

Examples of Saviorism
- NAACP - shifting priorities to accommodate donor interest

Donor Motivations and Effective Fundraising
- Passion for the cause, personal connection, impactful content
- Relationships, relationships, relationships

“Imagine we’re in a boat that’s rapidly sinking. We need to work together to bail out the water, fix the leaks, and get everyone into life jackets. Now imagine there are passengers who want to help. They mean well; they’re just not used to handling buckets or duct tape or whatever. You go to one and he says, “Hi, I know you need someone on bucket duty, but that’s not what I’m passionate about. My passion is to send flare signals!” (Nevermind that flares have already been sent). Another says, “I don’t mind bailing out the water, but metal buckets make me feel warm and fuzzy because they remind me of my childhood growing up on a farm. You only have plastic ones; I’m going to sit this one out” - Vu Le, 2021
LITERATURE REVIEW Cont.

Philanthropy’s Power Dynamics
- *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*, Edgar H. Schein: *help isn’t always helping*

Defining Inclusive and Equitable Language
- **Words matter** - people centric (people facing homelessness vs. homeless people)
- Storytelling that avoids exploitation

Centering the Community in Fundraising
- “Community-Centric Fundraising” movement
- Active listening

The NDN Collective - Indigenous led, building Indigenous power
DATA ANALYSIS:
Content Analysis Key Findings

- 20 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations with missions related to equity, social justice or human rights
- 20 annual report leadership letters
- Why annual report leadership letters?
- 22 total questions in codebook
- 35 leadership individuals represented
- Some included a headshot, which gave an indication of racial/ethnic identity (made assumptions)
- 19 appear white, 7 appear non-white and racial identity is unavailable or unclear for 9
DATA ANALYSIS: Content Analysis Key Findings Cont.

Description of Beneficiaries

- 6 letters describe program beneficiaries in a generally positive light
- 7 letters describe program beneficiaries generally negatively often referencing neediness
- 2 did not have any description or reference to program beneficiaries or the community
- 5 were either mixed, unclear or neither positive nor negative

➔ Overall positive tone, but letters largely portray program beneficiaries as needy
➔ Leadership individuals mostly depict their organization as the savior
DATA ANALYSIS:
Content Analysis Key Findings Cont.

Race/Ethnicity of Leadership Signer and Description of Beneficiaries

- 10 letters have a single white signer, multiple white signers or majority white signers
  - 2 describe beneficiaries positively
  - ONLY 1 letter mentions equity, references dignity and describes beneficiaries positively

- 3 letters have a single non-white signer or multiple non-white signers
  - 3 describe beneficiaries generally positively
  - Sample size is extremely small, but it is hard to ignore these results!
DATA ANALYSIS: Interview Themes & Conclusions

7 semi-structured interview conversations:
3 frontline fundraisers
2 nonprofit leaders with expertise in DEI
2 board members/donors

- Savior imagery / savior narrative does not inspire donors to support and does not equate to sustainable change or philanthropy
- Savior narrative, disparaging language can turn off donors

- Fundraisers have power in donor relationships and can influence donor perception
- Nonprofit sector organizational leadership must set the tone internally and externally:
  - Mission, values and language that do not perpetuate saviorism
  - Empower fundraisers to center the community within donor relationships
IMPLICATIONS

- We can honor our communities with the inherent dignity that they deserve without compromising revenue or relationships for our organizations.

- We can use inclusive and equitable fundraising language and still generate results.

- We can give a voice to the communities we represent and still provide a meaningful experience for our donors.

- We can do better fundraising and facilitate better philanthropy.

“We need a fundraising model in which we respect donors and build strong relationships with them, but one that they are not the center of. The community we serve and benefit from must be centered.”

- https://communitycentricfundraising.org
"Do whatever it takes to close the gift."

DONOR-CENTRIC FUNDRAISING

- **savior narrative**: donor dictates interests and philanthropic goals; fundraiser finds programs to match those interests
- Program beneficiaries’ needs are shared with nonprofit but not adequately communicated to the donor

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MNA MASTER OF NONPROFIT ADMINISTRATION
Community-Centric Fundraising\(^1\): enables communities to advocate for their needs instead of shifting to donor interests.

\[\text{DIGNITY-FOCUSED FUNDRAISING}\]

\[\text{POW}ER\]

\[\text{DONOR} \quad \leftrightarrow \quad \text{FUNDRAISER} \quad \leftrightarrow \quad \text{COMMUNITY}\]

\(^1\) http://communitycentricfundraising.org
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDRAISERS:
Inclusive, Equitable, Dignity-Focused Fundraising

- Be thoughtful with fundraising language
- Prioritize unrestricted funding

- Don’t be afraid to talk to donors about programs such as cash transfers
- Develop authentic donor partnerships that align with organizational values
LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

My opinions and experiences are from the perspective of a major gifts specialist and a white, cisgender, straight woman.

- This research is extremely limited in scope compared to the vastness of this topic
- My focus is on language and communications through a major gifts fundraising lens
- There are many, many individuals talking about white saviorism in philanthropy

With more time & resources:

1. Conduct a deeper analysis of relevant literature
2. More examples of organizations that are centering the community in fundraising - there are many!
3. Content Analysis is limited: ideally conduct a more comprehensive content analysis of significantly more organizations’ mission, vision, website, collateral, fundraising materials, etc.
4. Interview more fundraising experts who are successfully centering the community
5. How does nonprofit organizations’ internal DEI work impact external communications/partnerships?
6. Are there differences between individual donors, foundations, corporate donors, major donors, etc?
REFERENCES


Stephanie Sheehan, MNA - Master of Nonprofit Administration - Capstone Project

**SUMMARY**
The white savior narrative allows for donors to act out of emotional response and dictate programs and services based on their own interests. By shifting to a more inclusive and equitable approach and by centering the community in our fundraising strategies, we can generate results while honoring program beneficiaries with dignity and respect.

**PURPOSE**
The purpose of this research is to better understand how using inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused fundraising language can ultimately contribute to dismantling philanthropy’s white savior narrative and how frontline fundraisers can play a critical role in shifting philanthropy’s power dynamics.

**RESEARCH**
RQ1: Can nonprofit fundraising teams thoughtfully abandon notions of white saviorism and fully embrace inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused language without compromising revenue or relationships?

RQ2: How does fundraising language impact donors’ affinity for programs and services and their understanding of their role in the giver/recipient relationship or partnership?

**METHODS**
**Literature Review**
**Content Analysis:** 20 annual report leadership letters
**Interviews:** 7 semi-structured conversations

**CONTENT ANALYSIS KEY FINDINGS**
20 annual report leadership letters revealed:
- Majority of letters portray an overall positive tone, but do not mention equity, reference dignity/honor in relation to program beneficiaries and largely describe program beneficiaries as needy
- Leadership individuals mostly depict their organization as the savior

**RESULTS**
> Donors do not need to hear savior narrative.
> Fundraisers can continue to generate results and center the community.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDRAISERS**
Inclusive, Equitable, Dignity-Focused Fundraising
1. Be thoughtful with fundraising language
2. Prioritize unrestricted funding
3. Don’t be afraid to talk to donors about programs such as cash transfers
4. Develop authentic donor partnerships that align with organizational values

**REFERENCES**