

“Expanding That Story:” How Nonprofit Leaders Portray the Population They Serve

Sarah Koth

James Madison University

Author Note

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Abstract

This research aims to understand how nonprofits leaders portray the populations they serve, specifically populations in low-economic status who receive material resources. Previous literature exploring the nonprofit sector considers volunteers and their experiences, although leaders set the tone for the organization's language, and ultimately the quality of service. Five nonprofit organization (NPO) leaders from different organizations participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews that lasted between 33 to 72 minutes. Questions inquired about their average week on the job, their contact with clients and volunteers, and how they want the public to view the population they serve. Accounts showed that nonprofit leaders consider their clients as individual cases, and their primary strategy includes storytelling when addressing clients, engage volunteers, and construct their role in the organization as well as the community.

Keywords: Nonprofit; leaders; quality; service; recipients; population; language

How Nonprofit Leaders Portray their Recipients

Origins of the nonprofit sector date back over ten thousand years ago (Grobman, 2015). This sector answers unmet societal demands that the government and private sector overlook or are unable to provide satisfactory resources (Grobman, 2015). This global sector of business provides a wide range of services; according to Zhuang, Saxton, and Wu (2014), “citizens everyday rely on [the nonprofit sector] to help deliver programs and services in the arts, education, health care, the environment, sports, professional associations, humanitarian services, and countless other areas” (p. 470). I will focus on the nonprofit sector within the United States and organizations that serve financially disadvantaged or uneducated populations.

Like all companies, NPOs market their services with the goal to gain loyal supporters. Each brochure, online website, and representative speaker shapes the organization, its mission, and whom it serves. Walsh (1994) critically analyzed the methods that public service organizations use to convey their message. He stated that since language influences the way individuals think, the service sector should consider the impact they have on public opinion. Further, narratives floating around service organizations attempt to evoke emotional response because it draws attention and empathy. Barker and Gower (2010) also observed the importance of emotional storytelling in organizations, as it allows individuals to connect to the mission. When speaking about those they serve, NPOs create a story about such populations.

This qualitative study explores how nonprofit leaders describe their population. Research on nonprofits has left a void concerning descriptions and language in relation to populations served. Exploring this will provide insight to the sector’s leaders and their attentiveness to how they present their population. Service leadership includes empathic communication and, the general public may gain a new understanding of the organization's recipients.

Community Building in Nonprofit Organizations

Fundamentally, NPOs work to serve those in need (Grobman, 2015). While consumers perceive nonprofits as more mission-oriented and “warm,” they view for-profits as more competent (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010). This quantitative study shows how the stereotypes of NPOs play into consumers’ perceptions and may ultimately affect the purchases and investment. Researchers urge for more studies concerning public perception, collaboration, and internal communication values in the nonprofit management field (Liu, 2011). How the organization portrays those they serve may shape the community’s attitude as well as individual’s attitudes toward the population, which may affect the funding, community partnerships, and loyal volunteers.

Creating a mutually beneficial relationship with the community requires the organization to know the local culture, including needs and perceptions. Many organizations in the sector work for social justice, and leaders should use such a position to advocate for their population (Grobman, 2015). The primary area of focus for this paper considers charitable organizations that offer material assistance, such as food pantries. While there are national and local food pantries that work toward hunger relief, those in need of such services often do not use them (Fong, Wright, & Wimer, 2016). Reasons include physical barriers, such as long lines, monetary and time cost, as well as other recipients’ “pushing and rudeness” (Fong et al., 2016, p. 84). However, intangible barriers such as culture-based understandings also deter individuals from seeking services (Fong et al., 2016). When talking about their clients’ needs, the organization builds a framework through which to view the population. If the NPO stigmatizes the recipients, consciously or not, the general public may reiterate and intensify it (Gelb, 2008). Leaders should be mindful of their language and the implications (Gelb, 2008). NPOs heavily depend on

discourse to convey their mission, connect with the public, and serve their population well.

Leaders build a narrative of their served population as a group, and this language should remain consistent throughout the organization. Shaefer (2015) found that shared leadership creates a balance of power in NPOs that allows leadership to create trust and accountability. All leaders should have a system that cultivates these characteristics (Shaefer, 2015). The majority of leaders tend to learn through experience on the job (Boehm & Staples, 2006). Meetings “followed by reflection, discussion, and analysis, along with feedback from other group members and leaders” help raise the quality of work (Boehm & Staples, 2006, p. 91). NPO workers bring their own perspectives and experiences to the job. Creating a diverse, inclusive narrative for those they serve demands a cohesive leadership body.

Nonprofit Leaders and their Audiences

NPOs should consider their recipients and how their services contribute to the greater public (Grobman, 2015). Studies on how the leaders perceive the needs and wants of their recipients are relatively scarce, yet communication between organizations and their populations proves vital. Information such as recipient characteristics can help organizations concretize their idea of population members, which may help the organization to make more beneficial programs (Guo, 2012).

Quality service means considering the needs of clients as well as collaborating with other NPOs. Organizations may not be client-oriented in their services to the best of their ability because of the lack of input from their clientele (Beltramini, 1981). Factors such as not having access to the Internet or email, the inability to meet with leaders, and other barriers may keep individuals in the population from offering constructive criticism. As Beltramini (1981) suggests, the public service organization may not be aware of client preference and may not create an

environment in which clients may recognize and tend to personal needs. How leaders frame clientele may affect partnership development. Compared to the business sector, nonprofits are seen as using "both" languages, describing how talking to the recipient required using the "mission statement terminology" rather than "business terminology" (Sanders, Harper, & Richardson, 2015, p. 6). Viewing their service through the lens of their population could alter their understanding and agendas (Fong et al., 2016). Doing so creates an empathetic environment and promotes understanding between the service providers and the recipients; rather than encouraging a dependency, this strategy endorses interdependence. Preventing dependency may have the most benefits in the long run and also avoid the subconscious ideas of superiority over those in need.

Along with stigmatization of the needy client, NPOs should address the bias of do-good volunteers (McAllum, 2014). A case study of two social-justice-oriented NPOs displayed how volunteers and staff members viewed their clients differently (Chen & Collier, 2012). The volunteers used negative phrases when considering the client, including "disadvantaged people that suffer economically, mentally, or whatever," while the staff members described them as "hardworking" and "appreciative" (Chen & Collier, 2012, p. 51). By encouraging self-awareness in volunteers, NPO leaders may strengthen the entire community.

Leaders need to be professional when speaking with volunteers, particularly about organizational matters that involve recipients (Grobman, 2015). Along with these strategies, they should also consider the perspectives of members and donors to create effective communication strategies (Fong et al., 2016). NPOs that address poverty tend to begin with programs that involve handing out supplies (Lupton, 2011). However, this idea of "betterment" and "immediate relief" create a dependency on the organization, and, long-term, this strategy

hurts those the volunteers intend to help (Lupton, 2011, pp. 165-168). Rather than NPO leaders implementing this strategy, they should work with volunteers and staff to create developmental activities for the community to strengthen itself (Lupton, 2011). The top leaders create an atmosphere for volunteers and staff to learn how to communicate with and about their recipients.

NPOs focused on social-causes hold unique power in their language, which needs further exploration (Mitra, 2013). Leaders should be mindful of naming outcomes, procedures, and groups within their dialogue, as certain vocabulary may bring out injustice or misrepresented power dynamics (Mitra, 2013). For instance, McAllum (2013) noted that volunteers described how over-emphasizing the concept of “helping...puts people on unequal footing” (p. 95). These power dynamics within the organization could allude to social movements in the community. Furthermore, Boehm and Staples (2006) describe that NPO leaders tend to act according to the organization’s mission and vision rather than specific matters.

Organizational Communication Strategies

NPOs may involve aspects of social work such as their justice orientation and goals to empower. Organizational administrator that held a Master’s in Social Work implemented empowering strategies and engaged clients in political activities more so than other areas of study (Hardina & Montana, 2011). This method of communicating with recipients involved supporting the “client efforts to alter their sociopolitical environments” (Hardina & Montana, 2011, p. 254).

Employee perception of top leaders affects organizational communication strategies (Latting, Beck, Slack, Tetrick, Jones, Etchegaray, & Silva, 2008). Managers who supported “learning and innovation” developed higher quality services (Latting et al., 2008). This method would raise workplace, strategic problem solving skills, and ensure a clear message to the

community (Shaefer, 2015). If leaders implement empowering strategies through each level of the organization, the vocabulary would offer a consistent, mindful message to further the mission.

Those that work with stigmatized groups face challenges that can become harder if the organization's leaders fail to communicate a positive message. Tracy and Scott (2006) investigated the implications of "dirty work," which describe jobs that are generally avoided. This work is usually described as "tainted physically, socially, or morally" (Ashforth and Kreiner as cited in Tracy & Scott, 2006, p. 9). "Dirty work" tends to involve stigmatized groups, for example, social workers or domestic workers. To lessen the dirtiness, workers can use techniques such as reframing, recalibrating, refocusing, and depersonalizing. Each of these techniques serves to help the worker cope with the job, although some may result in hurting the client. For instance, using depersonalization can provoke condescension and blaming may cause poor quality service and further stigmas (Tracy & Scott, 2006). Leaders need to understand, cope, and educate their audience about these jobs.

After reviewing the literature describing community building, nonprofit leaders and their audiences, and organizational communication strategies, there are many questions concerning leaders and recipients left unaddressed. The three proposed questions would serve as means to understanding how various leaders describe and portray those who they serve.

RQ1: How do nonprofit organization leaders talk about their recipients?

RQ2: How do nonprofit leaders seek to present the needs of their recipients to the general public?

RQ3: How do nonprofit leaders who offer goods and services to economically disadvantaged people talk about stigmas surrounding their recipients?

Methodology

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, I used a purposive theoretical construct sample (Tracy, 2013) to recruit participants. I searched online for emails of nonprofit organization (NPO) leaders. “Leaders” included directors, coordinators, board members, and staff members. Participants varied in age and generation. Five full or part time staff of different NPOs participated in semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews. Organizations recruited did not function in the same region, and interviewees took place in either the organization’s office or in the participant’s personal office. Participant demographics varied, and the majority were women with one man interviewed. All organization and participant names are replaced with pseudonyms to ensure participant confidentiality.

Procedures

Each semi-structured interview followed a protocol (See Appendix A) that focused on discussing workplace experiences of nonprofit leaders. Interviews were scheduled as approximately one hour long and were conducted in the participant's office. After receiving participant interest, multiple emails established a meeting time and an introduction to the interview procedures. I removed identifiable information to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Interviews lasted between 36 to 72 minutes with the average lasting 56 minutes. With permission, I downloaded digitally recorded interviews on a password protected mobile device and transcribed verbatim immediately following the interview.

Analysis of Data

After transcribing the interview data and field notes, I read the data several times to familiarize myself with all five transcripts. Second, I used iterative analysis to understand emerging themes through the data as well as reflect on past literature (Tracy, 2013). Through

Microsoft Word, I highlighted and created first level codes on the side of the transcript. The first level coding consisted of *in vivo* language and focused on participant linguistics (Tracy, 2013). For example, first level coding included “Volunteering in the organization” and “Focusing on expanding literacy in the region.” These codes intentionally focused on the participant’s use of language and communication strategies.

Constant comparison helped decipher whether to add new data to a code or to create a new code (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2013). Second level coding categorized first level codes. Larger patterns emerged, helping to explain and synthesize the data (Tracy, 2013). Analytical asides allowed me to reflect on themes and meanings within the data (Tracy, 2013), for example, “bringing people together,” “comfort zone,” and “what does ‘charity cases’ mean?” After a refreshing break, I shifted codes, meshed similar codes, and if they were different, I split them to clarify categories. Once the codes were solidified, I considered each theme according to the research questions. I processed and examined the data several times, then identified the themes within the language and strategies of the nonprofit leaders.

Interpretations and Findings

After analyzing the interviews, the data shows that participants varied in vocabulary about their clients, how they understood and engaged volunteers, and how they addressed their role in the organization and the community.

Talking about clients

Participants described specific but confidential stories about individuals in their population. “Storytelling” threaded throughout each leader’s portrayal of those they serve. Some participants shared specific stories while others gave broad applications, but both described a clear desire to break stigmas surrounding their population and understand “barriers” that they

face. Individual attitudes within the population also repeated throughout the interviews, as participants gauged their understandings and faced challenges based on client attitudes. Participants also described conversations with volunteers about clients and how such conversations depended somewhat on the volunteer's background knowledge of poverty, which will be addressed in the next section.

“Storytelling.” A common theme that participants shared involved using “real stories” to create a fair picture of their population. This type of narration included both positive and negative stories about individuals. Leslie described her time as a volunteer before this leadership position and how “hearing their, like, crazy stories” created some of her favorite moments while serving and helped her to connect with individuals.

Multiple participants volunteered in some capacity before their current position in the nonprofit field, so they had experienced how hearing personal stories humanizes stigmatized groups. Emily talked about the importance of finding “real stories of the types of people who come in,” and making these individuals relatable to the public. Tammy described how she doesn't get to hear many stories during her time managing the evening pantry, as clients move quickly and volunteers don't extensively interact. Still, she said, “I don't want people to think of the clients as numbers, that they're people who have stories.” Finding and sharing recipient stories proved important when talking about the population they serve.

Vocabulary. Participants mentioned specific words that they use to address or describe their population. As Emily described it, “A lot of what shapes how we approach people is our vocabulary toward them.” Emily's organization considers their client population as “guests” and “friends,” and the use of these depend “on how well we know somebody.” She spoke about the “disingenuous” idea behind using only the word “friends,” since new guests were still

“strangers.” Tammy considered vocabulary important as well, although discrepancies appeared between her consistent use of the word “client” and her desire to use other words.

I try to refer—I actually am never sure how I refer to our clients. I don’t like referring to them as ‘clients,’ I try to refer to them as ‘neighbors,’ or as ‘households,’ or as ‘families.’...When I’m speaking about a population, I like to use ‘our neighbors,’ I don’t know why...

While Tammy primarily used the word “client” during our interview, she occasionally used “neighbors” and “friends,” particularly when describing an individual who had repeatedly come for supplies. By making a conscious decision to use certain vocabulary, organizations can establish an equal standing between volunteers and those in need. As Emily described, it avoids the idea of “superiority” within the person serving.

“Breaking stigmas.” Participants described the importance of “breaking stigmas” that created an unfair or unjust view of individuals within the population. Rather than telling stories themselves, participants encouraged volunteers and the public to interact directly with individuals served. Leslie recognized volunteers who “wanted to feel busy and useful. Whereas, the most useful thing that the volunteers could do would just be to sit down with another human and talk to them.” When participants spoke about clients, they tended to include how speaking to them would benefit the volunteers. During one of her first exposures to serving the homeless population, Annalise said, “I remember thinking like ‘this guy’s homeless, like he’s cold, like it’s cold outside, but he’s so happy...I think that was my first idea of like ‘wait, these humans are capable of love and happiness and joy if they’re given the space to experience those things.’” Because of her surprise at the man’s attitude, Annalise realized that she had assumed things

about the homeless population; after interacting with an individual, she aimed to help others empathize, too.

Andy addressed certain stigmas such as drug addictions, alcoholism, and mental health issues. Rather than speaking to the general homeless population, he focused on those who his organization served. “This isn’t your stereotypical homeless population...there are people who’ve really just hit a rough patch.” He went on to describe how the majority did not struggle with drug addictions or alcoholism, but “there might be some kind of underlying mental health issue, often is.” While participants addressed stereotypes, they recognized certain aspects of them were present in the population, though not to the extent that the general public assumed.

“Barriers.” Challenges that the population faces are often referred to as “barriers” and may be “higher barriers” than other individuals within the population face. While stigmas exist as a common barrier among the individuals in the population, participants described that direct engagement can often help clear those misunderstandings. As Andy described, “we don’t work with the highest barrier homeless population.” Because such his organization focuses on homeless families with dependent children, he explained “that an individual homeless person” may have different priorities. These barriers don’t necessarily mean that individuals are in more danger or inferior to those with lower barriers.

Aside from priorities, clients face different barriers that led them to need material assistance. Leslie described a hypothetical conversation with a donor:

When they actually see I give food to this food bank and my next door neighbor who’s elderly can’t afford that, is that their fault? No, they’re old, they can’t work. They’re relying on X, Y, Z, and that’s not enough.

Participants described multiple stories, hypothetical and confidential which displayed what types of barriers caused the need for assistance. Emily described a story that has become apparent in her area, how elderly individuals trying to find jobs after becoming sick but no one will hire them. While those in need face barriers to receive material assistance, their need for such stemmed from a series of challenges in their past.

Attitudes. Individuals within the population range from gracious to entitled and may include a trust built with leaders in the organization. Negative or entitled attitudes can become a barrier in itself, as it may hinder the ability and willingness for organizations to help. Andy said that he had worked with a range of attitudes.

Some who's gracious and thankful is probably gonna be gracious and thankful when they get here. Um, other people are a little more dismissive and little bit more um, un [pauses] you know, this is, I deserve this you owe me this type of attitude. And it's a lot harder to work with these people.

These types of attitudes may shift or they may continue to challenge leaders as they try to serve.

Participants recognized when individuals' attitudes shifted they usually became more positive. Annalise recalled an interaction with a man who began to work in the organization to help serve food. Since then "he's like totally transformed. [His partner will] get upset and you know pissed off about things and he'll be like 'Hon, you gotta calm down.'" She explained that he and his partner shared a short temper and gossiped before he began this organization's work program, where he became more "intentional" and "engaged" in the community. Other participants also noticed shifts in their population's attitudes when they began to help the

organization as well as benefit from its services. Further, this scenario had impact on the volunteer's attitude toward those they served.

Talking about volunteers

Participants answered questions about their experiences and challenges when leading volunteers. Several themes repeated through each transcript, including volunteer motivation and attitude, getting volunteers "out of their comfort zone," encouraging empathy, and telling the general public how not to view those being served.

Motivation and attitude. Participants described the different motivations and attitudes with which individuals come into the volunteer position. These factors may change as volunteer works in direct contact with the population, or it may stay the same as when they entered the position. Motivations include "being a good person," learning, and "helping." Participants had varying opinions on which motivations were commendable and which needed more empathy and connection. Tammy said, "I think that our volunteers are mostly there because they want to help." The central idea to help others threaded throughout conversations when talking about volunteers, although Emily described the danger in this thinking.

I think I was completely in the mindset of 'I'm gonna help people.' I was totally on that side of the equation of I am a good person because I do this, I—I mean it's hard to even say it, but it establishes in us that superiority... That doesn't necessarily mean that you think the other person is inferior, but I certainly had that...in the beginning.

While volunteers may not see this idea of helping as showing their higher status, their attitudes hint at their understanding of the population, or lack thereof. Andy described how his organization takes on volunteers from the local university, many of

whom set out to learn about the social work industry and become curious about individual cases. Leslie, however, explained that volunteers may or may not come into the position without “a complex understanding” of the challenges that the individual in need faced. When asked about whether or not she has conversations with volunteers about those challenges, she said, “Most often than not I think really we don’t do a lot to push people to that next level of comprehension, that’s up to them.” Motivations to serve those in need, as well as their attitudes, toward them vary among volunteers, although participants saw that both affected the process. An efficient service seemed to stem from motivation to help while interpersonal connection strengthened with the motivation to learn.

Getting volunteers “out of their comfort zone.” Several participants described that one of the most challenging aspects of their jobs included getting volunteers to speak directly with individuals being served. Participants explained how they used encouraging language and similar experiences when convincing volunteers to participate in an uncomfortable interpersonal activity. During one night at her organization’s central location, Annalise noticed a group of young women from a nearby university that had come to help serve food to the homeless. She encouraged the girls to split off and talk to others.

[Tommy] saw one of the girls and was like, ‘oh, come sit with me, like, let’s chat’ or whatever, and the one girl sat, and then all the other girls sat with her and I’m like...So I...go up and I’m like ‘guys, I know this feels comfortable, but it’s super helpful if you just like just branch out, I know it’s weird and it can be intimidating, but even if you just start a conversation, at least make that attempt.

After this moment, Annalise smiled as she described two girls having “legitimate conversation[s]” with other “community members,” as those they serve are called.

Participants recognized multiple instances when volunteers seem shy or nervous about speaking directly with an individual in the population. Additionally, Tammy mentioned that one reason she took this position involved wanting to serve others instead of “sitting at home not doing anything.” Leslie addressed how volunteers needed a push to “see where the need is—visibly with your eyes—move to suit it.” While not all participants mentioned the idea of “comfort zones” and getting volunteers out of them, the concept of doing something uncomfortable or needing to step up repeated itself.

Empathy. Participants described the challenges and importance of encouraging volunteer empathy toward individuals being served and the general population. One factor involved the volunteer’s background knowledge. Leslie said that she had recently learned more about the aging population in the community from attending a discussion panel, which helped her to understand the challenges they face. She said, “Some people need that overarching view of the panel, some people need to be hands-in, and some people, unfortunately, have learned from being there.” Participants described that volunteers may gain a sense of empathy through education, experience with those in need, from being in need themselves, or a mix of these factors.

Participants used different methods of encouraging empathy in their volunteers. Tammy said that she and her service workers “try to hear well” when they interview individuals to find out their material needs. Leslie described how people should “expand that story” of those they serve, even if “some issues are never going to be translatable...but you can always...empathize.” Andy and Emily both explained that the average person wasn’t far from being in a similar

situation, and volunteers discovering the “real stories” of these individuals are the key way to develop empathy.

How to think about the population. Participants addressed the stigmas surrounding their population by using the anti-definition of collective traits. While they spoke about individual stories, they generally began to describe the population by addressing the “bad stereotypes” that proved untrue for the majority of the group. After a minute of quiet and asking to hear the question again, Annalise said, “I want [the general public] to not view the people we serve as charity cases.” Another common perception of those in material need includes bad decision-making and lack of will to work. Tammy addressed both of these ideas and said, “I would like people to view them as people who haven’t had as many opportunities...and as people who have something to give to the community, too...they’re not just siphoning off [the system].” Andy addressed these misconceptions by pointing to the organization’s focus on children and that not everyone struggles with addictions. These misconceptions and stigmas stem from assumptions about the mass population, and when participants spoke to volunteers about those they serve, they consistently addressed how not to view them.

Talking about themselves

Along with their clientele and volunteers, participants described their own limitations and boundaries when dealing with their populations as well as their overall roles. Their positions in the organization tended to change based on the season, but weekly meetings and administration aspects remained stable parts of their jobs.

Limitations. At one point, participants all described setting necessary limitations, whether personal or organization. Personal limitations included the amount of contact with clients, which affected emotional and relational boundaries they set for themselves.

Organizational limitations included what services the organization was able to provide and did not provide. Some participants addressed these service limits by referring individuals to other organizations, but they recognized their personal limits and adapted to them as they gained experience in the field.

Personal limits on individual monetary aid, emotional investment, and personal contact with population seemed apparent in this service industry. Annalise described the warning about individual donations that leaders give the volunteers: “If people come up to you and ask for money, it’s up to your own discretion, but we suggest not doing it, ‘cause a lot of people take advantage of not knowing them or not knowing their circumstances.” Other limitations included the concept leaving work at their office and “learning how to desensitize to a certain extent.” Andy also talked about the emotional toll that some cases had on him. As he spoke, he paused for a moment: “There are definitely times when I come home and I think about some things I’ve seen during the day, but you know, that’s just kind of what you have to deal with when you work here.” Participants explained the importance of setting personal boundaries between themselves, those they serve, and even volunteers.

As for organizational limitations, leaders mentioned the ability to referral individuals to other agencies and specific programs. Andy described working with partner agencies to best serve an individual in need. As Annalise said, “It’s just finding what our limits are and once we channel what we can do, we can figure out how to be the best at that and not exhaust ourselves trying to do these other things.” After establishing their limits, participants described that they had more focused and effective programs.

Role as a nonprofit leader. Participants described various roles in their organization and in their community, varying from coordinating volunteers to working with partner agencies to

promoting advocacy projects. They also talked about what their roles didn't entail.

Several participants defined their role through their actions. Tammy defined her position in relation to her previous role in the organization: "I just started volunteering regularly...it became more of a regular thing and then eventually led to more of a supervisory role." Tammy later mentioned that she enjoyed "interviewing" her clients but hadn't done so often. The majority of her job entailed managing operations and being present during the hours of pantry service. She described how the director position made her consider "how did they get into this situation and how do we ever get them out of this situation?" She clearly recognized her role as an advocate for those in need.

In contrast to Tammy's Director position, one participant worked as the Social Media and Design Coordinator. "A lot of my job is storytelling," Annalise explained, "Through pictures and blog posts and Instagram pictures...trying to find different ways to emphasize what we do and make it make sense for people". As she described her job role, she focused on the advocacy portion while explaining how she uses social media and graphic design to accomplish her goal.

At least one participant talked about what her position didn't entail. When considering how volunteers understand poverty and injustice, she said that they needed to take initiative to learn themselves, stating, "Sorry, but I'm not a teacher." Instead, she described her role in connecting volunteers to programs that may inform them or create a hands-on experience to learn. These participants understood their roles to help run engaging programs, to advocate locally, and to address both volunteers and clients as fellow community members.

Discussion and Future Directions

The first research question explored how NPO leaders talk about their recipients. Participants used different vocabulary to address their population, whether consciously chosen

such as “community member” or a technical definition such as “resident.” They tended to talk about the population and individuals in distinct terms as if wanting to reiterate the uniqueness of each case. Depending on the audience they addressed, participants talked the recipients alongside the importance of direct contact with those in need.

As for the second research question, participants sought to present the needs of their populations primarily through direct conversations. The three categories addressed in the Interpretations and Findings section each involved ways that participants presented these needs. In talking about clients, participants were conscious of the individual cases rather than the general population. Through the talking about volunteers, they described how volunteers came into the position with different understandings. How participants explained those needs to them depended on what kind of knowledge the volunteers held about these situations. Finally, in the subsection considering the participant’s roles, they sought to present the needs of their population to the general public through partnering with other agencies, creating affecting resource distribution, and “storytelling.” This act of storytelling and sharing relatable experiences may improve service as opposed to furthering stereotypes and fueling misconceptions about a population (Tracy & Scott, 2006). Such an idea promotes the need for more research in this field.

Finally, the third research question asked how NPO leaders talk about the stigmas that seemed to follow populations in material need. The general agreement among participants leaned toward encouraging the general population to volunteer and experience direct contact, hold conversations, and hearing “real stories” behind the stigmatized individual. As Tammy described, this “puts a face” to those in need.

Nonprofit leaders face challenges with their populations, volunteers, and how to define their role in the organization. While populations are inherently unique because of the individual characters within it, participants recognized that the public tends to group these individuals under unfair stereotypes and seeks to address those misconceptions through experience and direct contact with those in need. Participants acknowledged the need to integrate into the community so that the population served felt more engaged in the organization as well as the overall community, which indicates that the programs will have long-term effectiveness (Burt et al., 1998).

Organizations that serving material resources function differently based on how volunteers interact with recipients; the structure may center on building interpersonal connections or it may focus on handing out needed supplies. This would be an interesting direction to study in the nonprofit sector: how clients see the quality interpersonal-centered service organizations and how they see the quality of organizations focused on handing out supplies efficiently.

Limitations of this study include the limited regions investigated, leader demographics, and the number of interviews conducted. Organizations were located within a similar southern area, so the theoretical implications may not have reach saturation due to the lack of diverse communities. Additionally, the study omitted demographic information, but ideas of gender roles in the nonprofit sector may lead to interesting investigations on how different genders portray clientele. While five interviews produced similar content and repeating themes, reaching more food pantries and shelters in other areas with unique populations may produce different themes.

Several of the participants mentioned college-student volunteers, as they were located in a college town in the south. This might suggest another future direction to take this research:

how do nonprofit leaders engage volunteers specifically in college towns? Nonprofit leaders hold influence over their organization and those they serve. Future studies surrounding this sector would benefit from focusing on how to use such power dynamics for the benefit of the individuals in need, the community, and those working beside them.

Overall, the nonprofit sector proves vital to the national and global economic and social working industries (Grobman, 2015). Talking mindfully about underprivileged populations may raise the quality of service, and it may affect how the public views those in material need. Vocabulary has the power to change the direction of the entire organization and affect communities. Participants portrayed the importance of respectful language when helping others, which all future social workers, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, and those served, should recognize and use.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- How did you get started with this organization?
- What kinds of goods and services does your organization provide?
- Can you describe a typical day in the life of your job?
 - Types of projects?
 - Types of people you work with?
 - Can you describe a non-typical day when your organization has special events?
- How do leaders figure out the needs of those you serve?
- Can you tell me about how your organization engages volunteers?
 - What kinds of conversations do you have with volunteers about their task?
 - What kinds of conversations do you have with volunteers about the people they're serving?
- Describe a memorable experience you've had with someone you've served.
- Have you worked with other nonprofit organizations in the past?
 - What kinds of organizations/fields did you work/volunteer in?
- Your organization has a mission to serve this particular way. Where did your passion for this originate?
- How do you address the stigmas related to the population you serve?
 - How has this position influenced your perception of this population?
 - In the future, how would you like the general public to view those you serve?