

2017-2018

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Recommended APA Citation

Koth, S. N. (2018). “Expanding that story”: How nonprofit leaders portray the populations they serve. *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal*, 5(1), 42-52. Retrieved from <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/jmurj/vol5/iss1/6>

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"EXPANDING THAT STORY"

*How Nonprofit Leaders Portray the
Populations They Serve*

Sarah Koth

This paper examines how nonprofit leaders talk about the populations they serve, specifically financially disadvantaged populations in food pantries and homeless shelters. 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 36 to 72 minutes. Questions inquired about their average workweek, their contact with clients and volunteers, and how they break stigmas about their clientele. Findings suggest that nonprofit leaders consider their clients as individual cases, and their primary strategy includes storytelling when talking about clients, retaining volunteers, and constructing their role in the organization as well as the community.

Origins of the nonprofit sector date back over ten thousand years (Grobman, 2015). This sector answers unmet societal demands that the government and private sectors overlook or are unable to address with satisfactory resources (Grobman, 2015). According to Zhuang, Saxton, and Wu (2014), “citizens everyday [sic] 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).

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) market their services, in part, 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 it has on public opinion. Further, narratives floating around service organizations may attempt to evoke emotional response because they draw attention and empathy. Dempsey (2009) noted that creating narratives for vulnerable populations may be dangerous, as those in need did not choose how their needs were articulated. However, Barker and Gower (2010) observed the importance of emotional storytelling in organizations, as it allows individuals to connect to the mission.

This qualitative study will focus on the nonprofit sector within the United States and organizations that serve financially disadvantaged populations. Research on nonprofits has left a void concerning descriptions and language regarding these populations. This paper aims to explore how nonprofit leaders talk about their recipients, how nonprofit leaders seek to present the needs of their recipients to the public, and how nonprofit leaders talk about stigmatized populations. Exploring this gap in the research will provide insight about the nonprofit sector’s leaders, their attentiveness to how they present their population, and what strategies leaders in direct-service nonprofits may use to help create a complete narrative of those they serve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

NONPROFITS AND NONPROFIT LEADERS

Fundamentally, NPOs work to serve those in need rather than to gain profit (Grobman, 2015). How the organization portrays those it serves may shape the community’s attitude as well as individuals’ attitudes toward the population, which may affect the funding, community partnerships, and volunteer loyalty.

Studies on how the leaders perceive the needs and wants of their recipients are relatively scarce, yet researchers agree that effective communication between organizations and their audience creates opportunities for positive change. Information

about client characteristics can help organizations concretize their ideas about population members, which may help the organization to create more beneficial programs (Guo, 2012). 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). Failing to have input from clientele would not only affect the quality of services, but also how the leaders understand the population. If these misperceptions continue, the organization might create a false or incomplete picture of those in need.

When leaders’ vocabulary offers a consistent, mindful message to further the mission, they can implement empowering strategies on each level of their organization.

Impactful leaders use professional language when speaking with volunteers, particularly about organizational matters that involve clients (Grobman, 2015). They also consider the perspectives of members and donors to create effective communication strategies (Fong, Wright, & Wimer, 2016). Rather than planning for short-term direct service, leaders make a more sustainable impact by communicating longer-term developmental strategies (Lupton, 2011). Leaders who supported “learning and innovation” develop higher quality services (Latting et al., 2008). This method raises workplace strategic problem-solving skills, and gives a clear message to the community (Shaefer, 2015). When leaders’ vocabulary offers a consistent, mindful message to further their mission, they can implement empowering strategies on each level of their organization. Leaders set the standard for volunteers and staff in how they communicate with and about their clientele.

DIRECT SERVICE (FOOD PANTRY FOCUS)

The nonprofit sector consists of a wide array of services, but this study will focus on direct service organizations, specifically on food pantries and homeless shelters. Leaders in these organizations engage in unique power relations. Allen (2004) observed that there is power in language and “everyday talk” within organizational communication (p. 34). These means of communication may reinforce dominant ideologies, including ones that further stigmas and oppressive structures. Outside forces such as media, government, and religion influence these power dynamics, but the leaders continuously “control language systems” of the organization (p. 34). Leaders can choose how they speak about the people who are in need—even if those people do not agree with the vocabulary.

Creating a mutually beneficial relationship with the community requires the organization to know the local culture, including its needs and biases. Many organizations in the sector work for social justice, and leaders tend to use such a position to advocate for their population (Grobman, 2015). As Beltramini (1981) suggested, service organizations that are unaware of client needs may hinder the organization's ability to meet such needs. By creating an open environment, which requires trust and understanding, organizations can better serve their population. This focus on service can be obstructed when the organization focuses too much on the volunteer rather than those being served.

Boehm and Staples (2006) stated that NPO leaders tend to align their priorities with the organization's mission and vision rather than its shortcomings. Individuals differ in their needs, and organizations who address these unique differences are more likely to give effective aid. Viewing the services they provide through the lens of their population could alter their understanding and agenda (Fong et al., 2016). Doing so creates an empathetic environment and promotes understanding between the service providers and the recipients.

FRAMING NPO RECIPIENTS THROUGH LANGUAGE

Vulnerable populations, such as children and marginalized groups, may not have the platform to voice their needs. Communication scholars have recognized that language can create and shape reality; therefore, language choice is a powerful tool. Okamoto (2016) noted that organizations play a role in creating "alternative discourse communities—groups that discursively challenge prevailing knowledge-power relationships" (p. 3).

While Dempsey (2009) noted the difference between NPOs and grassroots efforts, both participate in "communicative labor." This practice affects the articulation of problems, the potential solutions, and how the public sees the population receiving material aid. Communicative labor can be harmful if the narrative misrepresents the population. Leaders help decide the narrative through specific vocabulary choices and how the organization communicates those needs to potential donors. Dempsey observed that many advocacy NPOs are not usually "elected" by "the groups for whom they speak" (p. 330). She also suggested that NPOs may hinder the group from speaking themselves and, instead, further an incomplete narrative.

COMMUNICATIVE LABOR

NPOs depend heavily on discourse to convey their mission, connect with the public, and serve their population well. When talking about its 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 the stigma (Gelb, 2012). 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 describing 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). Those who work with stigmatized groups face challenges that can become harder if the stigmas are left unaddressed. As shown in Harro's (2013) cycle of socialization model, the biases will become reinforced rather than questioned and reframed.

Past research has shown the importance of using mindfulness and considering connotations when talking about populations without a voice (Gelb, 2008). Leaders who reflect on their work may cultivate a more honest and complete picture of those who they serve. Shaefer (2015) found that shared leadership creates a balance of power in NPOs that allows leadership to create trust and accountability. Successful NPO leaders generally have a system that cultivates these characteristics (Shaefer, 2015). 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). If the leadership body is cohesive, the narrative may be more consistent and increase the effectiveness of the NPO.

NPOs focused on social causes hold unique power in their language (Mitra, 2013). Leaders influence power dynamics through their vocabulary. Labeling programs, procedures, and groups may bring out injustice or misrepresented power dynamics (Mitra, 2013). For instance, in one study, volunteers who assisted with refugee resettlement described how overemphasizing the concept of "helping . . . puts people on unequal footing" (McAllum, 2013, p. 95). These power dynamics within the organization could allude to power imbalances in the community.

Tracy and Scott (2006) found that people in stigmatized groups would benefit from leaders' use of reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing. Reframing involves neutralizing or altering the meaning attached with a stigmatization. For instance, rather than using the phrase "homeless person," the term "people dealing with homelessness" creates a more neutral, less stigmatizing meaning. Recalibrating involves adjusting implicit standards that evaluate the group's place in and contribution to the community. If an NPO serves meals, it may encourage people dealing with food insecurity to volunteer to help serve before sitting down for a meal. Refocusing means to actively shift the attention from stigmatized traits to the non-stigmatized traits. To

lessen the “dirtiness” of stigmatized groups, researchers found that the groups used the techniques above as well as “depersonalizing” in order to cope with their status. This could increase mental and emotional distance between the populations in need, which may help in cases such as home health care workers. However, depersonalization can provoke condescension and blaming, which may cause poor quality service and reinforce stigmas (Tracy & Scott, 2006). Leaders could use these techniques to help clarify the needs of the population as well as refocus the public’s perception.

The literature describing community building, nonprofit leaders and their audiences, and organizational communication strategies leaves many questions unaddressed concerning NPO leaders and recipients left unaddressed. The three questions below guided my research regarding how leaders describe and portray the populations 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 (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 interviews 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) that focused on discussing the workplace experiences of nonprofit leaders. Interviews were scheduled to be 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. Identifiable

information was removed to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Interviews lasted between 36 to 72 minutes with the average lasting 56 minutes. With permission, digitally-recorded interviews were downloaded onto 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. Then, I used iterative analysis to understand emerging themes through the data as well as reflect on past literature. Using 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 participants’ use of language and communication strategies.

Constant comparison helped decipher whether to add new data to a code or to create a new code. Second-level coding categorized first-level codes. Larger patterns emerged, helping to explain and synthesize the data. Analysis of these patterns allowed me to reflect on themes and meanings within the data, for example, “bringing people together,” “comfort zone,” and “what does ‘charity cases’ mean?” Then, 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 recurring theme involved using “real stories” to create a realistic 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 explained 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; they're people who have stories.” Interviewees said that finding and sharing recipient stories were an important when talking about the population they serve.

“I don't want people to think of the clients as numbers; they're people who have stories.”

Vocabulary. Participants mentioned specific words that they use to address or describe their population. Emily said, “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 described 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 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 about 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:

Someone who's gracious and thankful is probably gonna be gracious and thankful when they get here. Other people are a little more dismissive and little bit more . . . you know, 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 that 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 volunteers' attitudes 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 volunteers work 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 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 who 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. 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 seemed 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-on, 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 . . . 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 is 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. These anti-definitions described the population in terms of what they were not. While they spoke about individual stories, they generally began to describe the population by addressing the “bad stereotypes” that rang 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.

“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.”

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 organizational. 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 her

warning to 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 of leaving their 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 refer individuals to other 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 talked about their recipients. Participants used different vocabulary to describe their population, such as consciously choosing the term “community member” or the more technical “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 about the recipients and the importance of direct contact with those in need.

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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 involved ways that participants presented these needs. Participants were conscious of the individual cases rather than the general population when they talked about clients. Through the talking about volunteers, they described how volunteers came into the position with different understandings. Participants explained the needs of the population based on the volunteer’s previous understanding. Finally, participants 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 have improved services as opposed to furthering stereotypes and fueling misconceptions about a population (Tracy & Scott, 2006).

The third research question asked how NPO leaders talked about the stigmas that followed populations in material need. Participants agreed that a part of their role was to encourage the general population to volunteer

and experience direct contact, hold conversations, and hear “real stories” behind the stigmatized individual. As Tammy described, engaging with the populations “puts a face” to those in need.

Nonprofit leaders in this study faced challenges with their populations, volunteers, and defining their role in the organization. While populations were inherently unique because of the individual characters within them, participants recognized that the public grouped these individuals under unfair stereotypes and sought to address those misconceptions through experience and direct contact. Participants acknowledged the need for their organization to integrate into the community so that the population served felt engaged in the mission as well as the overall community; doing so would indicate that the program would have long-term effectiveness (Burt, Resnick, & Novick, 1998). Organizations that provide 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 of interpersonal-centered service organizations and how they see the quality of organizations focused on handing out supplies efficiently.

Talking mindfully about underprivileged populations raises the quality of service and affects how the public views those in material need.

Limitations of this study included the limited regions investigated, leader demographics, and the number of interviews conducted. The organizations resided in a southern region of the United States, so the theoretical implications did not reach saturation due to the lack of diverse communities. Additionally, the study omitted demographic information, but questions of gender roles in the nonprofit sector lead to curiosity on how different genders portray clientele. While the five interviews produced similar content and repeating themes, investigating food pantries and shelter service NPOs with more diverse populations may produce different themes.

Several of the participants mentioned interactions with college-student volunteers; 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.

The nonprofit sector continues to contribute to the national and global economic and social working industries (Grobman, 2015). Talking mindfully about underprivileged populations raises the quality of service and affects how the public views those in material need. This study supports the idea that 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 can help future social workers, nonprofit leaders, and volunteers break stigmas and validate a marginalized human experience.

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APPENDIX: 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?