User views of fundraising

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A study of charitable beneficiaries' opinions
of their representation in appeals

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Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

This paper presents the findings of a study exploring the views of charitable beneficiaries on literature that is designed to appeal to donors. Ethical questions raised by using images of beneficiaries in fundraising materials have been a matter of debate for some time, but such debates normally only include the opinions of 'powerful' voices such as charity leaders, moral philosophers and media commentators. This research extends the parameters of the debate by canvassing the opinions of those depicted, to ask: what do users think of the images of themselves found in fundraising appeals?

The study is based on five focus groups attended by a total of 38 young people living in, or attending services at, homeless hostels in four English cities. Focus group participants were asked their opinion of an array of images of homelessness that had recently been used in fundraising campaigns run by major charities working in this field.

The findings demonstrate that this group of beneficiaries are visually literate, familiar with how marketing works and largely supportive of methods that maximize income. They understood why charity marketing often makes use of contrived and simplified images to depict homelessness, and showed appreciation for the skills of fundraisers in balancing the accurate depiction of social problems with the need to generate enough donations to – literally, in most cases – provide a roof over their heads.

However, participants also expressed a desire for fundraising imagery to 'tell stories' about how people find themselves in need of charitable assistance and how they can turn their lives around, so that potential donors can appreciate how others come to be in need of help. This preference for dynamic imagery and

storytelling was contrasted with 'sympathy snapshots': fundraising materials that simply show an image of beneficiaries at their lowest ebb. Our study participants preferred the use of images that elicit empathy in potential donors, rather than those that only attempt to arouse sympathy, as they hope people will decide to make a generous response as a result of a recognition of common humanity rather than through emotions such as guilt or pity.

The paper concludes by noting that the images used in fundraising materials play a key role both in defining social issues and in attracting a public response to those issues. Therefore the representations of need that are promoted by charities matter to beneficiaries, and it is important to include their voice in debates about the content of fundraising appeals.

Introduction

'Images adorn our inner life and carry great power there.'
William Shirley

The generation of voluntary income is clearly the main goal of fundraising campaigns. But the representations of need that are depicted by charities within their fundraising materials do more than simply prompt a financial response from donors; these images also provide an authoritative portrayal of those who will benefit from donations and help to define the public understanding of social issues.

The research presented and discussed in this paper offers a unique insight into how those on the receiving end of donations feel about the images of 'people like themselves' contained in fundraising appeals. It forms part of our wider research programme into questions of charity and social redistribution, which aims to increase our understanding of the visible and invisible relationships between donors and recipients.

The ethical questions raised by using images of beneficiaries in fundraising materials have been a matter of debate for some time. The nub of the debate concerns getting the balance right between selecting images that generate a large philanthropic response without being insensitive to those they depict, for example by undermining personal dignity or reinforcing stereotypes. Most commonly, this debate has focused on the rights and wrongs of using images of suffering children in countries affected by disasters such as famine and floods. Some images that were circulated in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake of 2010 were referred to as 'disaster porn' by Brendan Gormley, chief executive of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which coordinates fundraising for the main UK disaster relief charities. Reflecting on this concept, the journalist John Humphrys said:

> 'Disaster pornography. It's a powerful and disturbing phrase . . . You know exactly what he means – the pictures of victims that show in shocking detail what's happened to them, stripped of life and often stripped of dignity.'[1]

This ethical debate is also being vigorously discussed outside the mainstream media on social media channels such as blogs and Twitter. For example, the Aidthoughts blog (http://aidthoughts.org) published this definition of the problem:

> 'Poverty porn, also known as development porn or even famine porn, is any type of media, be it written, photographed or filmed, which exploits the poor's condition in order to generate the necessary sympathy for selling newspapers or increasing charitable donations or support for a given cause.'

The author of the blog, Matt Collin, illustrated the problem with this photograph and accompanying text:

Marco Dormini/AFP/Getty Images

> 'Let's see how many boxes this checks:
> Very cute, if impoverished, Haitian child? Check
> No shirt? Check
> Other cute, impoverished children, for context? Check

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[1] This quote is from the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme broadcast on 25 January 2010.

> Longing gazes upward (where you look down upon them and consider
> yourself gracious and merciful donor). Check
> Hands outstretched to receive help. Check'

As Collin concludes, addressing the person who selected this image:

> 'These are real children, ones that are obviously in need of help, but
> you do them a disservice when you exploit them in this way to make
> your arguments.'

However, despite the debate raised regarding the methods and images used to attract donors, the DEC's Haiti fundraising appeal raised over £100 million, which was the second highest sum in the fundraising organization's history.[2]

It is the tension between discomfort at the use of potentially exploitative images and the resulting fundraising success that lies at the heart of this debate. Donors expect charities to serve the needy by raising the funds required to meet their needs but they also expect charities to operate in a manner that is respectful and promotes, rather than harms, the dignity of those being helped.

While some academic research (discussed further below) extends this issue to review the imagery promoted by domestic disability charities, the public debate rarely extends outside international development charities – an omission this paper seeks to rectify. We aim to make a constructive contribution to the debate about the 'right' use of images in fundraising literature, being mindful of the dual purpose of raising large sums and being sensitive in the portrayal of beneficiaries. As this debate has thus far excluded the voice of beneficiaries and been the preserve of charity professionals, media commentators and moral philosophers, the purpose of the research presented in this paper is therefore twofold: to explore this issue in a domestic context and to expand the participants in the debate by inviting the beneficiaries of English homelessness charities to express their opinion on images that depict homeless beneficiaries in fundraising materials.

This paper begins with a review of existing research into the representations used in charity advertising. This review is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to provide the reader with the necessary background information to understand the social policy and voluntary sector issues and debates that this research seeks to inform and influence.

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[2] The Haiti appeal is second to the appeal run in late 2004/early 2005 in which the DEC raised £390 million for those affected by the tsunami that hit many parts of Asia on Boxing Day 2004. www.bbc.co.uk/news/10571665

Review of representations in the charitable literature

With around 180,000[3] registered charities in the UK, between 20,000 and 30,000 professional fundraising staff,[4] millions of voluntary fundraisers for charitable causes,[5] and the growth of fundraising using digital media and other types of innovative campaigns,[6] the quality and impact of charitable fundraising materials is of ever-growing importance. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the beneficiaries of charities – those who are assisted by the services provided by charities – are involved in the creation of the literature that seeks to represent them and canvass support for their needs.

Most studies explore the donor-beneficiary relationship, including the impact of images in fundraising appeals, from the donor's perspective.[7] One reason for the focus on the impact images have on donors and the negligible interest in their effect on beneficiaries is that theories of philanthropy tend to be exclusively concerned with the philanthropist, leaving the recipient 'absent' from the formulation (Ostrander, 1989: 229). Tackling the power imbalance inherent in philanthropic transactions requires greater input from recipients (Ostrander and Schervish, 1990) taking an active part in defining how they are portrayed and how their need is represented in charity appeals (Doddington et al, 1994). Yet it is widely understood that philanthropy is a supply-driven market, in which donors respond to the claims and promotions of charities working for those in need (Schervish, 1992: 328). If publicity is the 'lifeblood' of charities (Deacon, 1999: 51), and crucial for fundraising success, then one conclusion is that the public must be given what they appear to want: images of charitable beneficiaries that fit comfortably with widely held stereotypes about 'victims' and which prompt the largest amount of donations. Additional information that encourages potential donors to deliberate and consider more deeply the issues involved in an issue (such as the reasons that people become homeless, as opposed to the simple fact of their lacking a place to sleep) has been shown

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[3] According to the Charity Commission website, viewed on 2 February 2012, there are 161,893 'main charities' and a further 17,554 'subsidiary and constituent charities' on the Register of Charities, making a total of 179,447 registered charities.

[4] According to unpublished research by NCVO.

[5] The 2007 Cabinet Office report *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving* found that 65% of the nation's volunteers were involved in 'raising or handling money' (p28).

[6] See, for example, CAF, 2008; nfpSynergy, 2010; or Missionfish, 2011.

[7] For example Eayrs and Ellis, 1990; Adler et al, 1991; Miller, Jones, Ellis, 1993; Doddington, Jones, Miller, 1994; Schlegelmilch et al, 1997; Barnett and Hammond, 1999; Diamond and Gooding-Williams, 2002; Hibbert et al, 2007; O'Dell, 2007; Small and Verrochi, 2009; Hung and Wyer Jr, 2009. The one exception is Miller et al (1993), which explores group responses to charity appeals featuring children with Down's syndrome. One of the five groups researched consists of parents of children with Down's syndrome, who are asked their response to a poster, and provide insightful comment.

to lessen the impact and sympathy generated by appeals (Small and Verrochi, 2009: 785–6).

According to a newspaper report in 2001, a major UK-based overseas aid charity attempted to offer donors something different and produced a 'good news' television broadcast, highlighting their successes and asking for donations so that the charity could continue its work. The report claimed that the charity considered the campaign a 'failure', as it resulted in negligible new donations (Ramrayka, 2001). This outcome appeared to confirm the unfortunate conclusion reached by the author of a paper on the role of children in fundraising adverts, that:

> '[a] poor starving Black child is so central to the idiom of charity appeals
> that aid campaigns depart from this convention only at the risk of
> prejudicing their income' (Burman, 1994: 29).

Appeals run by international charities tackling poverty in the developing world were the subject of sustained controversy in the 1980s and 1990s. Most notably this centred on the 1984 Live Aid concerts, which were an undisputed success in terms of raising money and awareness. However, they gave rise to widespread concern that such initiatives 'cashed in' on images of disaster,[8] showing deeply distressing images of starving children, which succeeded in eliciting significant donations but provided no context about the causes of the famine (Clark, 2004) nor respect for the dignity of those depicted. As a result, the UN developed a code of conduct for images and messages for relief organizations. This code states that public communications strategies must be based on respect for the dignity of the people concerned; a belief in the equality of all people; and acceptance of the need to promote fairness, solidarity and justice (Dóchas, 2006).

Despite this development, research confirms that the public are more likely to respond to advertisements that demean sufferers than those in which charitable beneficiaries are shown in a more positive light, with the same rights and capabilities as everyone else (Eayrs and Ellis, 1990). And a decade after the first Live Aid concert, Burman (1994) concludes that producing more hopeful and emancipatory advertising featuring more positive images of beneficiaries carries the risk of jeopardizing revenue.

However, renewed efforts have been made in more recent years to tackle the 'poverty porn' model. For example an online campaign called 'Stop the Pity,

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[8] See, for example, Gaag and Nash,1988.

Unlock the Potential' was launched in 2011 by the San Francisco-based charity Mama Hope.[9] The campaign argues that we need to 'stop the pity' because:

> 'Too many non-profits ask for your pity by depicting poor, helpless Africans. But like any stereotype, this portrayal has more exceptions than truth . . . [I]t is time to re-humanize Africa and look to the positive change that is happening . . . It's time for us to change the way we see people across the world and start to see other communities for the people they are instead of the stereotypes we've been trained to expect. It is time to stop the pity and unlock the potential!'

A recurring criticism of charity advertising is that the images used involve gross simplifications of complex issues. As the Mama Hope campaign notes, a dominant – and unhelpful – image of the entire continent of Africa is 'the vision of a small child with a swollen belly, surrounded by flies'.

Charity advertisements do not have the space or scope to build up a full picture of all the services provided to beneficiaries, nor to depict fully the situations that have prompted people to make use of those services. Therefore, the prior knowledge and attitudes held by potential donors regarding both the 'typical' charitable beneficiary and the 'typical' charitable organization become an important element in the giving decision. The constraints involved in creating simplified images and messages mean that charity marketing materials often focus on the broad outlines of an issue and its most recognizable 'face' rather than offering detailed explanation of beneficiaries' circumstances or every facet of the charities' activities (Hibbert et al, 2007). This 'face' is likely to reflect notions of 'deserving' beneficiaries (Rosenthal, 2000), most notably children, whose presence provides an emotional pull in both commercial and charitable marketing (Payton, 1989; Burman, 1994; Holland, 1992: 157; O'Dell, 2007).

Despite a charity's reputation being an important factor in affecting the likelihood of an individual donating (Kelman, 1961; Hibbert et al, 2007; Cheung and Chan, 2000), perceptions of a cause are just as important to donors as the efficacy of the charitable organization (Bendapudi et al, 1996); hence the reductive nature of much charitable advertising, where the 'short sharp shock' has a greater impact on donors than the carefully constructed message (Small and Verrochi, 2009). However, some evidence suggests this may be more relevant for new, rather than existing, donors, as response to appeals has been found to have greater salience for newly recruited supporters (Diamond and Gooding-Williams, 2002).

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[9] www.mamahope.org/unlock-potential

Representations of people with disabilities in charitable literature

While our study focuses on the opinions of the users of homelessness charities, there is a body of research and comment that focuses on the materials used by charities aimed at assisting people with disabilities. In the early 1980s, the Liberation Network for People with Disabilities (LNPD) was established as a pressure group to campaign against the alleged paternalistic and patronizing attitudes found in charity advertising and fundraising materials which they believed 'reinforced stereotypes' of beneficiaries. Jill Nicholls (1983), writing in *Voluntary Action*, interviewed the group, who expressed the view that charities were reinforcing unhelpful images of disabled people:

> 'The network is particularly opposed to negative images of people with disabilities and feel the charities often reinforce these. As Allan [one member] puts it, "they present victims with begging bowls to tug at the heart strings and raise money".'

Ann Pointon, who wrote about the techniques used by the mental health and disability charities Mencap and Scope to raise donations, confirmed this was very much the case until relatively recently:

> 'The imagery of disability used in their advertising to win donations represented disabled people as pathetic and dependent individuals. These images were dominant at a time when disabled people were less visible in the media than they are today, and they have improved following trenchant criticisms from disabled people' (Pointon, 1999).

Pointon notes that both charities altered their public image significantly in the mid-1990s as a response to criticism and demands for more rounded images of disabled people. Mencap changed its logo from the emotive image of tearful 'little Stephen', and Scope was renamed and rebranded, having formerly been called The Spastics Society.

Images in homelessness appeals

Representations of homelessness predominantly occur through images of 'rooflessness': the archetypal image of a homeless person is that of someone alone, on the street, sleeping among cardboard boxes (Swain, 2011). However, the issues involved in homelessness are clearly far more wide-ranging, and involve a more complicated set of problems that are harder to define (Liddiard and Hutson, 1994). The term 'homeless' is used to include those people who are sleeping in temporary accommodation, those in shelters, and those sleeping on the floors of friends. But charitable advertising and the media are unlikely

to represent these more nuanced and heterogeneous details (Kemp, 1997) because, as an employee of a homeless charity notes:

> 'It's when they become roofless . . . that they become an image that can be understood by most people, because the image of a young person living in a squalid bedsit would be difficult to film . . . but with these young people [the street homeless], you just send the cameras down' (quoted in Liddiard and Hutson, 1994: 61).

As the 'roofless' person is the most accessible public representation of homelessness, it is not surprising this image is frequently utilized in marketing materials produced by homeless charities, because it is most central in the minds of potential donors. To rephrase Burman: the dishevelled man in a duffle coat on the street is so central to the idiom of charity appeals that homelessness campaigns depart from this convention only at the risk of prejudicing their income.

The research presented in this paper attempts to rise to the challenges inherent in the existing literature. We can find no academic research that examines the opinions of beneficiaries on how they are represented. The study presented in this paper attempts to fill this important gap by asking the service users of homelessness charities what they think of the imagery, language and presentation of beneficiaries used in appeals to solicit donations.

Methodology

'A number of images put together a certain way become
something quite above and beyond what any of them
are individually.'
Francis Ford Coppola

Five focus groups were held in homeless hostels in Sheffield, Tonbridge, Canterbury and London.[10] Participants were recruited through posters displayed within the hostels, and through conversations with their key workers and other hostel staff. In line with good ethical practice, it was emphasized at all stages that participation was entirely voluntary and that no one was compelled to either attend or participate in the discussion. Those who chose to take part were each given a £10 voucher for a local shop, chosen by hostel staff, as a token of thanks for giving up their time. A total of 38 people participated in the research, which took place between August 2010 and September 2011 and comprised an equal gender split[11] and a bias towards younger[12] residents.[13]

The focus groups began with the distribution of a set of images of homelessness used in fundraising campaigns run by major charities working in this field. The images were collated from direct mail leaflets, newspaper adverts, billboard posters and internet campaigns produced by most of the UK's main homelessness charities. Direct mail leaflets were collected by the researchers for three months over the winter period 2009–10. Alongside these, a thorough internet search identified a number of additional images used in appeals in the

[10] Two focus groups were held a week apart in the London hostel, due to the large number of participants willing to take part.

[11] 19 men and 19 women took part across the five focus groups.

[12] While we did not ask participants to reveal any personal details, including their age, most looked between 16 and 30, and this was indeed the target age range of the charities that helped us to host the focus groups.

[13] All participants in Sheffield, Tonbridge and Canterbury were resident in the hostels; some participants in the London hostel made use of 'drop-in' services.

UK and abroad, and images used on web pages where potential donors could click to donate money. The internet was also monitored for new media and interactive technologies being used in the UK and abroad to raise money for homelessness, and some of these were also shown in the focus groups.

Participants were given time to look through the pack of images on their own before the researchers facilitated a group discussion, which was recorded on digital voice recorders. In the discussion of findings, all participants' comments have been anonymized.[14]

After the data collection period, the recordings of the focus groups were transcribed and analysed. In addition to the researchers' efforts to identify the main themes and ideas in the data, these were also cross-checked with a third researcher. Finally, we shared our findings and preliminary analysis with several professionals in the fields of charity marketing and homelessness to elicit their opinions and insights into the findings. Their input is presented and discussed in the 'Implications for policy and research' section (p35).

[14] This study was carried out under the ethical guidelines set out by the British Sociological Association, available online at www.brit-soc.co.uk

Findings

'Different people get different things out of the images. It doesn't matter what it's about, all that matters is how it makes you feel.'
Adam Jones

The findings of this study are divided into the three main themes that emerge from the data:

1 beneficiaries' belief that fundraising appeals should prioritize maximization of income over other considerations;
2 beneficiaries' desire for dynamic representations that explain rather than simply depict homelessness;
3 beneficiaries' preference for images that elicit empathy rather than merely arouse sympathy.

Finding 1: Income maximization is the priority

One of the main questions we wanted our focus group participants to address was the issue of whether homelessness charities should select images that will maximize donations or whether the charities should select images on the basis of other criteria, such as authenticity. These choices, while not diametrically opposed, are potentially pursued at the detriment of the other.

Participants clearly expressed a preference for both accurate imagery and successful fundraising, but on the whole felt that if charities are placed in a position of choosing between these goals, then maximizing donations has to be the priority. A young man called Amjal summarized this realist position:

> 'Yeah, well, when you're in the situation and you ain't got no money of your
> own, you ain't got time to be judgemental, so if the organizations haven't
> got their money in the first place to help you then the whole system breaks
> down, really and truly. Just get the money, hook or crook, y'know?'

A number of participants expressed a belief that if you are getting help from
a charity, then the level of moral outrage you can have about the issue of
representation is reduced. It was this pragmatism, when asked about the
balance between accuracy and effectiveness, that became the dominant
theme of all our focus groups. Ideally participants agreed they would be morally
against adverts prompting inaccurate stereotypes of homeless people, but their
current situation resulted in making the tough choice to prioritize the receipt of
assistance above experiencing some moral discomfort, as this comment from
Patrick illustrates:

> 'I think the money's the main thing, y'know what I mean, you can't have
> morals when you're homeless.'

As service users they were aware of their weak bargaining position and did
not feel they had the power or the right to demand accurate representation. As
Dean noted:

> 'If the money's not there, if the organization's not there to give you a
> hand, or give you directions or support you, then you can't afford to
> be moralistic.'

Participants understood that accurate images representing the reality of being
homeless and educating donors on its causes would not necessarily encourage
donors to give as much as they would if they saw more powerful images
that prompted what they termed 'sympathy payments'. There was a general
consensus that 'tugging on the heartstrings' of potential donors is an unfortunate
necessity because 'the images need to make as much money as possible'.

David expressed more caution concerning the problems that a strategy
aimed solely at 'maximizing money' could create:

> 'I suppose if they're making the money they're making the money, y'know,
> that's the important thing. [But] It's not actually dealing with the problem,
> just keeping people with their judgemental views.'

The idea that the public hold preconceived 'judgemental views' about homeless
people was central to the narrative of how respondents tackled the issue of
representation. It was clear that it had been a problem for many of them, and that

they themselves had been guilty of misunderstanding the problem in the past, as the following three quotes show:

> 'I always thought that people were homeless because they wanted to be homeless, until I was homeless myself' (Laura).

> 'I think that people who have never been in that situation find it hard to understand why people can be homeless . . . I always thought that it's because people couldn't be bothered to get a job. I don't think that now, but that's maybe my mom and dad's view' (Erin).

> 'Yeah, before I'd have said, "yeah, that looks like a homeless person", but once you experience these things you find out it's not like that. There's a lot of people who come from the middle class or the upper class, and don't really know the ins and outs of it, know what I mean? So that would be their judge of what you look like' (Amjal).

There was clear frustration that charitable imagery could reinforce existing stereotypes. The concept of homelessness is one that attracts many preconceived ideas in the public's mind about the causes of the problem, of which the images used by charities have played some part (Platt, 1999). Causes of homelessness include structural factors, such as fluctuations in the jobs market and the housing market, and personal tragedies such as bereavement and experiencing physical or emotional abuse. These types of causes prompt donors to respond to the beneficiary as an 'unwilling victim' who is 'deserving' of assistance. Structural and tragic causes are contrasted with factors that are felt to be within the control of the individual, such as alcohol, drug abuse or criminality, where people are generally thought to be homeless through their own choice or irresponsibility and are therefore classed as 'undeserving' (Rosenthal, 2000). Participants were aware that potential donors weigh up such factors before making a decision to give, and were wary of being judged in this way. As John said:

> 'You can't judge somebody by the way they seem. Unless you talk to them and you get to know who they are, their faults and their experiences, that's what I reckon.'

This concept of the deserving versus the undeserving is at the heart of much charity advertising, albeit implicitly. Our focus groups felt that stories explaining how people become homeless are the best way to rebut the 'undeserving' label (see Finding 2, below). While children are the archetypical 'deserving' category, being innocent and not responsible for the situations they are born into, there was some debate around the use of images of young children in

Image 1: Reproduced with kind permission of the Salvation Army

homelessness campaigns. Young people and children featured in several of the images discussed in our focus groups, for example the photograph in the top right-hand corner of image 1. Simeon and John, both aged under 18 themselves, believed that depictions of homeless children would be the most effective way of maximizing donations.

> 'Well she's young, and that affects people, because they see a kid, and the opportunity for them to make their life has been taken away. And so that will hold a person's attention, and they will be more happy to help in any way that they can' (John).

> '[She's a] proper little kid. It makes you feel bad, don't it? Because she looks about ten or something, so it makes you feel bad. Yeah, that's the one I feel would be like the best, that's the one that stuck out for me . . . That's not what homelessness looks like. I don't know, 'cos it's a little kid, people with kids and other things are thinking "oh shit", y'know what I mean?' (Simeon)

Graham gave a more practical and less emotional reason why potential donors may respond more generously to an image of a homeless child:

> 'For example, I'd say that little kid . . . she's underage, she's probably ten years old, so she's gonna manage a future because someone could adopt her or something, but the situation as an adult you don't have anywhere to go.'

If the little girl in image 1 elicited sympathy, there was one deeply contrasting image which it was felt would not produce the requisite appeal to donors. This image – used by a charity operating outside the UK – showed an old man, wearing a black hat and black overcoat, with a long, straggly beard. The caption beside the image reads: *'Help. So that no one has to come here for food'*, and the advert had been placed on the underside of dustbin lids. It was felt by most participants that this approach to fundraising went too far. Laura said:

> 'That is so sad. This gentleman's obviously an older gentleman; he's obviously had a life, and the fact that that is where the image came from makes me want to cry.'

David also spoke out forcefully against the advert, but focused on the damage it could do to the image of homeless people in the public's consciousness:

> 'Cos having been homeless, I wouldn't want people to think "there's me, rummaging through dustbins every day", and you don't want to keep being judged.'

For David and others who held similar views, the main problem with this piece of fundraising was not the image itself but where it was placed and the messages about homeless people that sent out to the public. The image is not dissimilar to many others discussed in the focus groups, but it turned into something more shocking because of its positioning on the underside of a bin lid. Participants also questioned whether such a powerful and distasteful advert would 'maximize money' or merely alienate homeless people from potential donors. It was a clear example of a boundary being drawn between what 'powerful' donors and charity advertisers create and what 'powerless' homeless people would accept. Patrick's statement that 'you can't have morals when you're homeless' clearly has some limits.

In summary, our first finding is that participants generally agreed that raising money has to be foremost in charities' minds above ethical considerations, and ultimately viewed maximizing donations as the main goal of the images under discussion. However, focus group participants felt that at least one image crossed a line, failing to tell us anything more about why this man has been forced to look for food in bins, and risked damaging the reputation of all homeless people. This leads us onto our next findings, which explain what – in an ideal world – the homeless service users hope to see in charitable advertising.

Finding 2: The desire for dynamic representations and the importance of telling stories

Despite the dominance of the pragmatic 'maximize-the-money' approach, participants overwhelmingly felt that the literature they were shown was too simplistic and utilized overly pitiful images of vulnerable homeless people, many of which looked 'fake' or 'staged'. They also felt that most images were too generic, and failed to contribute any understanding of the issues surrounding homelessness to potential donors. Participants were insistent that the public need to understand that homelessness is a much more complicated and diverse problem than is suggested by the iconic image of a bearded older man sitting on cardboard (see, for example, the main picture within image 1).

While being alert to the fact that the complex story of every homeless person cannot be contained in a single image, they were keen to see more contextual and textured portrayals so that the public could understand them and how they got into their current situation. Telling the stories behind 'sympathy snapshots' was widely viewed as the best way to improve the representation of homelessness. This would manifest itself in images with text to explain the transition from a 'normal man on the street' to becoming homeless. It was felt

such stories provide an opportunity for the public to relate to the experience of those portrayed, as Hussein summarized:

> 'Show [donors] that one day you can be sat in some nice gaff [house] in Kensington, all the tea in China and something can happen. Maybe your loved ones die and you lose the plot and in a short space of time you can be homeless just like anybody else. And it's right across the board no matter who you are or what you're doing, anything can happen to you to change your life. [Clicks fingers] Like that.'

Dynamic storytelling techniques were valued by participants who felt the general public do not grasp that homelessness can happen to anyone. They also felt such an approach would avoid reinforcing the view of 'the homeless' as a homogeneous group. Abigail spoke for many participants when she said:

> 'Adverts are better when you see someone's story and you see where they've come from and you can relate to them with a picture.'

It was clear that most of the service users did not expect to be where they were. Some were quite strident in their insistence that becoming homeless can happen quickly and without warning, and felt that if a campaign could be created which highlighted this issue, and continued to raise significant funds, charities would have a moral duty to follow this strategy. Martin stressed this point and noted how existing stereotypes can help people to disassociate from the issue:

> 'I think that focusing on how it happens will make everyone think "Oh god, it could happen to me", instead of "It's alright, I haven't got a beard and I don't drink that much".'

It was also felt that telling stories could counteract the problem of simplification caused by a narrow focus in advertising and a lack of public education. This was related to a view that some images, such as stereotypes of 'roofless' people, are long past their sell-by date. As Angela noted:

> 'We've seen images like that millions of times before and it desensitizes us . . . Even though that's really horrible to say, it does stop affecting you.'

One advert that won extensive praise included text explaining why an older man called Steve had become homeless (see image 2). This was popular among many of the participants, as exemplified by Laura's comment: 'we understand, we're learning why he's homeless.' Anita also said this style of advertising appealed to her the most:

Everyone deserves another chance in life

The weather was freezing when we met Steve on one of our meal runs. He was huddled on a bench wrapped in an old blanket. He gratefully took the stew and tea we served him, and started to tell us his story.

Steve once had a good career, but the pressure of work became too great, and he had a nervous breakdown. Everything unravelled from there – he lost his job and then his home.

Steve had lost so much, but he hadn't quite lost all hope. He eagerly accepted a bed for a night at one of our centres, and the offer of a bath and a clean set of clothes. It made all the difference to his morale.

At the centre, we talked to Steve about his future, and helped him to find a job and a bedsit to live in. With our help he's getting his life back together. **'You've given me another chance,'** he told us, **'and this time I'm determined not to let it go.'**

'You've given me another chance.'

Image 2: Reproduced with kind permission of the Salvation Army

'I would definitely go for this one, because it's given a story, like I would
give anyone else my story, not just a picture of me that's gross.'

Other favoured adverts included those describing or portraying the positive
change that interaction with the charity had brought about. Telling the 'happy
ending' of the story was viewed as crucial, because:

'It gives people a more positive look towards us. Cos if I was in the street
and I said "yeah I'm homeless, I'm in a hostel", basically people look down
on me . . . To me these faces are saying to me, "she's gone through a
hostel and turned herself around and now look at her, she's got a smile on
her face"' (Ian).

Through telling stories, focus group participants also felt there was an
opportunity to showcase the good work that charities do. Balinder said: 'You
should explain how you will use this money and how you will help the homeless',
and Laura added: 'People like to think that their money is being used wisely'.

However, commenting on the advert shown in image 2 that does 'tell the
story', Tom felt it lingered too long on the depressing tale before reaching the
all-important positive conclusion:

'You have to go through all that shit to get to the good bit, which is "you've
given me another chance". That should be at the top!'

In summary, participants felt that advertising for homeless charities could be
changed for the better by telling the stories behind homelessness rather than
simply showing 'sympathy snapshots'. This would manifest itself in a number of
images accompanied by text that explains how the one specific featured person
has made the transition from being a regular 'man on the street' to becoming
homeless in a number of stages. They felt that this type of representation through
storytelling would offer individualized accounts of homeless people rather
than treating them as a homogeneous group. Furthermore, this was important
to the charity users, because they knew – from their own experience – that
'homelessness can happen to anyone, any time', a fact that they felt the wider
general public do not grasp.

Finding 3: A preference for eliciting empathy rather than arousing sympathy

The young people participating in this study made many negative comments
about images they felt were aimed solely at 'making me feel sorry for them'
(Patrick). Participants expressed a strong preference for images that succeed

in eliciting empathy rather than simply arousing sympathy, and expressed frustration with the fact that, in James' words: 'Most charities, they just put up the sad picture'.

The degree of pathos present in many images was a cause of widespread irritation. As Hussein pointed out: 'If you filmed us on the street we'd all be laughing, having a joke with each other, but we're still homeless.' It was also felt that sympathy-arousing tactics do nothing to address the underlying structural factors involved in homelessness, or to educate the public about the causes and consequences of this social problem:

> 'For the majority of people, you show a young kid looking sad, you show an old man freezing to death, it's gonna play on people's heartstrings . . . but I don't think it's gonna do anything about the issues' (Anna).

It was also felt that some images intended to arouse sympathy might backfire. Comments on various images of homeless men included: 'He looks like a bit of a nonce' and 'he looks like a bit of a nutter, like he's there for a reason'. Reflecting on one distressing image of an older man who appears desperate for food, Laura said:

> '[That] is the image you will see every day in London, and maybe I don't want to see that. Because it evokes you to feel pity and shame, it's a bit like seeing the donkey that's beaten, and I really don't like that image. I don't want to see those photos . . . I want to turn away from it.'

Instead of using the most pitiful image, it was strongly felt that charities should use 'proper pictures of homeless people' that show 'every kind' of person because 'there's different ways to be homeless'. This is a continuation of the 'rooflessness' issue discussed by Liddiard and Hutson (1994). While many of our participants had suffered from rooflessness and had slept on the streets, most were now living in the hostels in which we conducted our research. They had lived the many different facets of homelessness, but did not see it represented in most of the adverts they were shown.

However, campaigns that sought to avoid stereotypes, such as those in image 3, also came in for some criticism, with participants equally unconvinced of their veracity, saying: 'They all look like they're in nice houses' and 'he looks like a doctor or something'.

Image 3: Reproduced with the kind permission of Centrepoint

The images of cheerful, well-presented young women drew particular scorn:

> 'I'm happy to believe that it can happen to anyone, but you're not gonna
> look like that, y'know. You're not gonna have your hair all done, with big
> smiles on your faces. It's not going to happen' (Erin).

The desire for more 'truthful' images was articulated by many participants, including John who commented: 'Looking at a lot of these, they look like they're actors to me, so I don't know what is real and what is not real.'

A number of campaigns use images of children (see for example the photograph at the top right of image 1), which led to some debate concerning the likelihood that a child would be in the care system rather than a homeless charity. Yet participants appreciated the rationale behind the picture selection. In response to the researcher asking: 'Why do you think they used this picture [of a child]?' Laura quickly replied: 'Because she's cuter than us!'

But generally participants expressed a preference for depictions of more 'normal people' that donors could empathize with. Such images were also thought to generate 'better' philanthropic motives than guilt-relieving sympathy payments, and could help convince donors that their investment would one day be repaid:

> 'People need to want to [give]. You should feel the need to want to do it
> to make it better, not feel guilty so you have to do it. "I'll look like a stingy
> bastard so I've got to do it" – it shouldn't be like that. It's more that your
> money's going to help me, so put your money in my pocket and I'll put it
> back as soon as I'm back on my feet' (James).

While participants felt it was important that images used in fundraising appeals should inspire empathy, it was acknowledged that no matter which type of person is used to represent homelessness, no one face can be expected to relate to every potential donor. Using any image of a specific person was therefore viewed as a strategy that risks both misrepresenting some types of homeless people and alienating some portion of the donor base. This widespread view led to general acclaim for one advert which contains no people but instead features simply a bed-length piece of cardboard lying on snowy ground with the text: 'Loving the snow? Try sleeping in it' plus the charity's website details (see image 4).

This campaign was extremely popular with almost all of the focus group participants because they felt it honestly evoked the sensation of being homeless and cleverly illustrated the conflicting values of fun and hardship associated with snow, as these two comments show:

> 'That really stands out. Because I love the snow, but it's quite poignant
> that I know that people are sleeping out in the snow, and through my own
> experience I was out in the winter . . . and it's not a nice experience being
> out in the snow' (Laura).

> 'Everyone who's been homeless has been through the same thing. I hated
> the snow under the bridge, know what I mean? Basically that is putting
> down true facts. I'm not being funny – snow is cold' (Patrick).

The following exchange between a group of young people discussing the 'snow advert' underlines their desire for honest imagery that elicits genuine interest and empathy:

> 'It makes a more clearer point. Because they are not playing the guilt trip
> having people looking depressed and feeling sorry for themself' (Dan).

> 'I like it because people will look at it and make a sarcastic comment but at
> least it proves they're fuckin' interested in us' (Ian).

> 'Whereas one of those where people look depressed, people change the
> channel straight over' (Mark).

Image 4: Reproduced with the kind permission of Crisis

> 'When I look at that one I think "That used to be someone's bed". They've helped that person from sleeping in the snow, and they've gone from the snow. That's how I see that picture"' (Mary).

> 'It gets people thinking about it' (Balinder).

Many participants noted appreciatively the absence of any specific person in the 'snow image', which makes it more inclusive and less likely to foment stereotypes, as these two comments show:

> 'If it's an old person, it's "Oh it's sad to see an old person", but this covers everyone. It could be a kid, it could be an adult, you could be black, you could be white . . . It covers everyone' (Hussein).

> 'If there's someone in it you could make 'em play the victim kind of card, you can make a judgement if there's someone there. If you can't relate to that person . . . cos usually you just see big old men in duffle coats, I mean that's the initial thought of a homeless person. Whereas that [indicates the advert reproduced here in image 4], anybody could be sleeping on that' (James).

By eliminating images of people from the adverts, it was felt that charities would effectively eliminate doubt from potential donors' minds, because any image of a person – whether an archetypal depiction of homelessness or one which challenges stereotypes – would always alienate some potential donors, who either could not relate to or did not trust an image. Focus group participants again reiterated that this was a problem solved by image 4. Amjal said:

> 'Yeah [it] stuck out for me when I first saw it and it still does. It crosses all the stereotypes, there's no one there so you can use your own imagination and think "Wow, trying sleeping in it".'

Speaking from personal experience, it was clear that some respondents had often felt required to justify why they needed assistance from charities or from the public. The depersonalization of image 4 was felt to be a positive factor in this regard, in Abigail's view:

> 'Cos there's no people there and they are not trying to dignify why they are there or why they shouldn't be there, they are showing you what happens. I like it the most.'

Summing up the reasons why this image struck a chord with so many of our participants, David said:

'[That is] exactly what homelessness is. There's no people, it's just whoever is on that bit of cardboard in the snow, that's what being homeless is. Out of all of them I'd give money to that one. If I had money to give to charity that's the one I would do, because that's what being homeless is. It is just whenever you can sleep, wherever you can sleep, whoever's going to sleep there. It's not just a person, it's a homeless person.'

The expert view: implications for policy and practice

'The source and center of all man's creative power . . . is his power of making images, or the power of imagination.'
Robert Collier

To understand the implications of this study for practitioners, and to gain 'expert opinions' on the data, the findings were shared with a number of professionals working in the voluntary sector. These experts included chief executives of homelessness charities, heads of marketing and communications, and consultants working in the wider non-profit sector.

Some experts agreed that for many charities a decision had to be taken on balancing authentic and accurate messages with maximizing funds. As a head of marketing in a large national charity said, 'It would be lovely to be able to kill several birds with a fundraising stone', but noted the frequent incompatibility between available resources and expected results.

However, other experts disagreed that such tension is inevitable:

'The "continuing choice that may have to be made between accuracy and effectiveness" [a phrase used in the conclusion of this paper] is not one we recognize. Choices are made around, for example, visual impact and case study relevancy to target audiences, but our materials are always accurate in their reflection of the problems.'

There was also disagreement about the practicalities of involving beneficiaries in the process of designing and generating imagery. The head of marketing and fundraising at a homelessness charity claimed:

'We aim always to use photography that is authentic, or re-creates authentic situations, and wherever possible we use real people.'

Another expert concurred,

> 'We agree with participants' views that the "stories behind homelessness" should be told . . . [In our Christmas fundraising campaign] these are real clients, not models, and it is their real stories we are presenting.'

But another marketing director, in response to being asked how often, in her experience, charities involve beneficiaries in their marketing, responded:

> 'Rarely – normally the pressures of time, resources and actually achieving results mean that the service user is low on the involvement list.'

While agreeing it is an important aim, she felt the natural limits of resources in the voluntary sector mean that all concerns cannot be adequately addressed. She continued:

> 'If the goal is raising funds, the priority must be maximizing money. Naturally it would be perfect if both could be achieved. It is incredibly lucky if you can find a creative, or team of creatives, who can combine the two principles, especially as normally in the charity sector there are limited funds, timescales and staff.'

But experts agreed on the central thrust of the dilemma facing colleagues:

> 'It seems the problem we all face is how an image can communicate the entire story simply, powerfully and in a way that will evoke a reaction in the viewer to do something.'

This problem of the power imbalance between donors and beneficiaries was also understood as a central issue. One charity marketing consultant, reflecting on Patrick's poignant quote (cited on p20) that: 'you can't have morals when you're homeless', expanded on this point by saying:

> 'I think the research highlights a key area of conflict between what charities want and need and what beneficiaries want and need. On the whole I thought the homeless responses were cogent and insightful. My worry is that they were a little bit too supine in saying "but fundraising gets the priority". But this is all about their position of power. Because they see themselves as powerless they give in to something they see as a necessary evil.'

An expert response from within a large UK homelessness charity echoed the view that:

'We were unsurprised that participants in the focus groups felt that many
images of homeless people were simplifications of highly complex issues.
We also noted the pragmatism the focus group attendees seemed to
adopt in the face of this with regard to using images to generate funds.'

Finally, the experts agreed that the selection of images has a real impact on
public understanding of social issues:

'Fundraising literature is one channel through which the public can be
educated about the realities of homelessness, and our view is that doing
this is central to donor retention and long-term supporter relationships.'

It therefore seems appropriate that greater involvement of beneficiaries in
creating and developing fundraising campaigns should become the norm for
charitable organizations that wish to promote the interests of those who are
intended to benefit from their activities.

The study presented in this paper provides a starting point for a wider
discussion on what the role of charities should be in relation to the public image
of their beneficiaries. That discussion is obviously not limited to questions
regarding depictions of homeless people. Other disadvantaged groups, such
as the disabled, children at risk, or people living in poverty in the UK and the
developing world, are regularly featured in charity advertising, so this research
could be extended far beyond the parameters possible in the present study.
An expert opinion addressed this point, while also questioning whether the
dichotomy identified needs to be in place:

'The real challenge is for fundraisers to develop effective fundraising
materials which meet the needs both of beneficiaries and of raising funds.
It doesn't have to be an either/or. The question which kept coming up for
me is: how would disabled people react to the same process or people
with cancer or people overseas? I wonder if any of that [research] has
been done.'

This expert felt strongly that the findings of this research study, and others in the
future conducted in the same vein, must be taken into account in the creation of
best practice guidelines for charity communication professionals.

Conclusions

'Pictures can and do make a difference. Strong images of
historical events do have an impact on society. They can help
with change.'
Charles Moore

Our original research question was: do charitable beneficiaries care about how
they are represented? The answer is a resounding 'yes'. They want their situation
to be understood, contextualized and portrayed without resorting to stereotypes,
clichés or prejudices. They also care about where and how the representations
take place. But more than anything they want a discussion about representations
to take place, and they want to be part of that discussion.

We began this study to generate some initial findings about a topic that
has received little attention, through the views of a section of society who also
receive little attention. Each of the five focus groups ended with the participants
being invited to suggest what images they would use if they were in charge
of running a fundraising campaign. Most responses reiterated the themes
highlighted in the findings discussed above: they would aim to raise a lot of
money, tell the stories of becoming and being homeless and how they turned
their lives around, avoid the use of stereotypes and avoid playing 'the sympathy
card'. As Amjal explained:

> 'It's easier to play on people's heartstrings, isn't it? [but] . . . you've gotta
> concentrate on the stories and what makes homelessness, you know and
> concentrate on pictures that show how you can get to that stage to give
> people a better understanding . . . That's what I would do myself.'

When asked what she would include in an advertisement, Anita explained how
providing more details of homelessness services and the impact that donations
would have on them would be a more positive way to encourage donations:

'So I want an image where it's like 50-50, how can you help yourself as
well? That would make people think "Y'know what, I'm giving money and it
won't go to no wasting thing, it's not going to booze or drugs, nothing like
that, but instead it's going to this".'

John backed this strategy up by saying:

'I guess to do good advertising, you need to know where your money goes,
and then please have an example of what did happen, and what is going
to happen [with the money]. If you give £10 a month then you want to
know what it's doing. It makes a big difference to the person who needs it,
even if you might not know who the person is.'

When a group of young people were asked if they themselves would be willing to
appear in a fundraising advert, the following exchange ensued:

Mike: No
Sam: No, we'd have to be all like, y'know, sad and dirty looking.
Mike: Maybe if we just rubbed some shit on our faces . . .
Sam: Grow a bit of stubble!
Nic: Don't use no deodorant or nothing . . . People need to realize the
truth about homelessness. Like the levels of homelessness, and that it's
not just people on the street. I talk to people at college and they are like:
'you're not homeless'. Well I am.

This exchange summarizes what the young people would do if they were put in
charge of selecting the imagery for a fundraising campaign to raise the funds
for the services that they use. They would strive for an honest depiction of their
predicament, but would be willing to play along with stereotypes in order to
maximize donated income.

Given the visual literacy of the participants in our study, opening up the
process of creating promotional materials to include beneficiaries may prove a
worthwhile risk. They are savvy about the mechanics of marketing, and can offer
insight into the realities faced by those seeking charitable assistance. While this
process would clearly require some time and resources, the pay-off for charities
would be an increased confidence that they are working in partnership with their
beneficiaries rather than simply for them on their behalf.

Our data illustrates the dilemmas experienced by those creating
fundraising literature, and the continuing choices that may have to be made
between accuracy and effectiveness. Charities are having to utilize more
innovative ways to secure donations. But the moral need to represent service

users accurately and fairly, and in a way that promotes their image among the public, should not be forgotten.

Fundraisers can take heart that the participants in our study appreciate their efforts and understand the constraints within which they work. But the data also highlights the responsibility held by those putting images of charitable beneficiaries into the public realm, and includes suggestions as to how their representation might be improved. In particular, and in so far as it does not affect the financial bottom line, beneficiaries would prefer the use of storytelling techniques that explain how recipients come to be in a position of need and how they can turn their lives around; they prefer the use of images that elicit feelings of empathy rather than merely arousing sympathy; and they hope for marketing that generates a generous response as a result of a recognition of common humanity rather than through emotions such as guilt or pity.

It is our hope that these findings will be helpful in reminding those responsible for the portrayal of charitable beneficiaries that their subjects are savvy about, and grateful for, their labours – but are also striving for dignity and understanding.

Appendix 1: Focus group schedule

Focus group discussions were based on the following questions and prompts:

Here are some examples of homelessness campaigns. What do you see? What do they make you feel or think of?

Please can you describe the images in the campaigns.

Do the images in these campaigns reflect what it is like to be homeless? Are they accurate?

Why do you think homelessness charities choose certain images?

Are you aware of any of the campaigns that [organization] are currently running?

Have you ever been asked to be involved in a charity advertising campaign? This could include being in pictures, or asked to provide quotes.

Are there certain images that you think would make people more likely to donate to a homelessness charity?

Regarding the people in the images, what do they make you think of?

Why do you think people give to homelessness charities?

Do you think there should be more education for the general public as to why people become homeless?

Do you think the general public understand homelessness? How could campaigns affect this?

If you were to make a homelessness appeal or campaign, what would it say? What images would it include?

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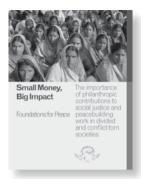
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The use of visually striking images in fundraising materials can raise large sums of money for charities, yet has also led to accusations of exploitative 'poverty porn'. This report explores the tension between discomfort at the use of images that could be seen as emotionally manipulative and the resulting success of fundraising appeals.

Based on focus groups with homeless young people, it is the first research to explore the opinions of those represented in charity campaigns.

Charitable beneficiaries are largely supportive of methods that maximize income, yet would prefer fundraising imagery that elicits empathy and 'tells stories' about how people find themselves in need of charitable assistance, rather than pictures that provoke pity and depict beneficiaries at their lowest ebb.

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