You've been reframed

How ought beneficiaries be represented in fundraising materials?

PAPER 2

What does research tells about whether positive or negative framing raises more money?

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ROGARE
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About the 'you've been reframed' project and this paper

This is the first output from the Rogare project to explore not just how beneficiaries are portrayed – or 'framed' – in fundraising and marketing materials, but how they *ought* to be framed, which itself is a part of our review of fundraising's professional ethics. This beneficiary framing project therefore tackles both descriptive (what's happening/what works and what doesn't) and normative (what ought we do) issues. In order to make normative judgements, we must be in possession of the most robust and reliable evidence. Before we can decide whether fundraisers ought to use 'negative' frames in their fundraising, we need to know whether negative frames are more effective than more positive frames, and even if they are, whether their use has any unintended or unforeseen deleterious consequences. Only then can a fully-informed normative judgement be made. Hence the reasoning behind this green (discussion) paper.

This is a discussion paper and, in line with Rogare's Theory of Change, which encourages fundraisers to be more critical of their current professional knowledge, it is designed to provoke debate and to get fundraisers to dig out more information and ask better questions so that we can improve our professional knowledge and thus the decisions that we make based on that knowledge. This is not an academic literature review and it does not try to be. It is thus probably not comprehensive (though we believe we have covered off the main papers to have explored these issues). But it doesn't aim to be comprehensive and we would encourage fundraisers to refer to the original papers explored in this document to discover their own insights about ideas that are not described here.

The main objective of the *You've Been Reframed* project is to close the gap (which is possibly an ideological gap) between fundraisers, who wish to use the images and messages that they believe raise most money, which often use 'traditional' negative frames; and other charity staff, who believe more positive frames should be used.

As part of this we are planning to publish six green papers.

1. Review of the 'philosophy' behind approaches to this topic to establish the philosophical/ ideological nature of the debate and hypothesise as to the degree of polarization in the discussion

2. Efficacy of positive vs. negative frames (this paper)

3. How beneficiaries view their portrayal in fundraising

4. Routes to communicate with beneficiaries

5. Commonalities and differences in relevant existing codes of practice

6. A final report presenting a normative argument about how beneficiaries ought to be framed in fundraising.

Although papers 1 and 6 bookend this project, there is no requirement that each paper is published in order (except paper 6) and we shall publish each paper as and when it is completed.

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About Rogare

Rogare (Latin for 'to ask') is the independent think tank for the global fundraising profession.
We are the engine that translates academic ideas into professional practice, and we aim to bring about a paradigm shift in the way fundraisers use theory and evidence to solve their professional challenges.

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Executive summary

Framing refers to the way that information is presented. There are different ways to conceive of 'framing' – it is not simply a matter of 'positive' and 'negative'. Frames can be based on risk, attributes, or goals, framed positively or negatively within each. For example, an attribute framing of beef could describe it as 25 per cent fat (negative) or 75 per cent lean (positive).

Goal framing promotes a desirable activity, with the framing geared towards persuasion. This mode of framing seems most applicable to fundraising:

- Positive framing – the positive impact your donation will have (e.g. 10,000 people can be saved from starvation)

- Negative framing – what will happen if you don't donate (e.g. 10,000 people will die of starvation).

There is however little research that has looked at framing specifically in the context of fundraising and charity advertising.

What there is lends tentative support to the commonly-held practitioner belief that negative framing, especially sad imagery, elicits more donations through engaging people's sympathy – and negativity bias means people pay more attention to negative information.

Research also mostly supports the idea that negative imagery (sad faces) tends to elicit more donations when there is little other information (or limited time to process this).

But the evidence is not overwhelming.

This might be because people respond differently to different frames according to whether they have an 'avoidant' or 'approach' motivation: negative messages trigger a stronger response for avoidant people, while positive messages work best with approach motivated people. How "susceptible" people are to being influenced by a negative message frame can also change the way they respond to it.

And there is some evidence that negatively framed images may put some people off donating.

It may be that:

- Negative framing may work best for donor acquisition, where new donors must be 'attracted' to the cause through an emotional punch.

- Positive framing may work better in donor retention, where fundraisers are trying to build lasting relationships with donors who are already engaged with their causes.

One study revealed that negatively framed messages of 'traditional' charity adverts generate donations based on negative emotions such as guilt and anger; whereas a more positively framed message generated donations through hope. However, there was no significant difference in the decision to donate or intended donation amount between traditional and 'alternative' (positively framed) appeals.

'Positive' framing isn't necessarily better for beneficiaries: 'positive' framing can make problems seem simpler to solve than they are, just as 'negative' framing can make it seem hopeless.

Foreword

Ruth Smyth

Since joining the charity sector 12 years ago I've been curious about what motivates people to support charities and keen to further our understanding of these motivations to increase the amount of money that can be raised. However, that is only part of the equation in fundraising. The stories that we share and techniques that we use to drive support can also impact on how the beneficiaries of our fundraising efforts are perceived.

How does the way in which we frame beneficiaries in our fundraising messages influence donations? Are we unwittingly using messages that make some of the goals of our charity harder to achieve? How do beneficiaries themselves feel about their portrayal?

Trying to find the answers to some of these thorny questions is why I was keen to be involved in the team at Rogare exploring this topic.

Working on this paper has been fascinating and thought-provoking. Although the research available currently on this topic isn't extensive (and there are almost certainly other examples we haven't included here) there are some really useful insights available on which to start building our knowledge. I hope this paper helps to further the debate around how beneficiaries are portrayed, and that this paper will provide a useful starting point for further discussion, collaboration and research. I'm very excited to see how the journey unfolds.

1
Introduction

How beneficiaries are portrayed in fundraising materials is an important and current debate within the charity sector – for example the Commission on the Donor Experience (2017) explores this as part of a major strand under the title *The Use and Misuse of Emotion* (see particularly Dexter 2017). The debate is often characterized as different views within a charity between the fundraising department, who want to use materials that raise the most money, and those working directly with beneficiaries, who are keen to ensure the people they work to support are portrayed respectfully (MacQuillin 2016a, 2016b).

In their extensive review of research into why people give, Dutch philanthropy academics Rene Bekkers and Pamala Wiepking (2011) found that around 85 per cent of donations are due to people being asked by the charity to donate. Therefore, it is not surprising that finding the best ways to ask is the topic of much research (Bekkers and Wiepking reviewed more than 500 articles) as well as some of the best-known books used by fundraisers, such as George Smith's *Asking Properly*. However, how beneficiaries are portrayed is much less well explored, both in trying to understand the effect of this on fundraising, and any negative consequences for the beneficiaries themselves. This paper covers the research that has been conducted on how different 'frames' have been used in fundraising and marketing, and attempts to summarise what we know so far and how this might be applied further in fundraising.

The paper starts by clarifying what we mean by the terms often used in this debate, specifically looking at framing in fundraising communications, and our current knowledge of framing effects. It then goes on to look at what we know about the impact of fundraising communications on beneficiaries. Throughout, the paper aims to draw some conclusions around what we know already and the gaps that further research could address.

Overall, the literature reviewed in this paper helps to suggest the answers to some questions, but also raises others – for example one paper explores the theory that different people respond better to different approaches (Jeong et al 2011), which suggests there is not one best way to frame fundraising. The research covered also clarifies and widens our understanding by highlighting that positive and negative framing comes in different forms and that it is not just a choice between these two approaches: there are other ways to frame fundraising communications successfully. There are also nuances lost in the overarching debate that have practical implications – some media work best with one type of framing for example.

2
Effectiveness of positive vs. Negative framing

One of the first thorny areas to address when considering positive and negative framing is what exactly we mean by those terms. The concept of framing has been applied in diverse areas within academia, including social psychology (for example, see Brewer and Kramer 1986; Rothman and Salovey 1998), behavioural economics (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), communications (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007; Keren 2011) and linguistics (Saya 2009; Keren 2011), and is used to refer to all sorts of different messaging techniques within marketing and fundraising. This section describes some of the different types of framing that are used within fundraising and gives a flavour of the ways these have been researched and understood. There are bound to be more than can be covered: the role of this paper is not to be comprehensive, but to provide a starting point for further exploration of this topic.

One of the biggest areas of confusion when discussing framing stems from the difference between how most of the academic literature looks at framing compared to how we often use the terms in fundraising. In fundraising, the terms are probably most associated with positive and negative imagery: in particular the idea that showing people in the distressing circumstances the charity is trying to alleviate (negative framing) will elicit more sympathy and therefore more donations, than showing the impact once they have been helped (positive framing).

In psychology and behavioural economics, the term tends to mean that the same information (typically in written form) is presented in either a positive (gains) or negative (losses) way. This gains and losses framing is focused on decision-making based on information, and received professional wisdom might suggest that written information plays a smaller role in many fundraising communications than the emotional impact of imagery. However, the research suggests otherwise, and that the information included can have an impact on the effectiveness of imagery, making how they both work together important. We'll return to this later. But first let's start with the research that stems from psychology and behavioural economics and a brief history of how that has developed.

> *"By presenting the identical information as either positively framed (people will be saved) or negatively framed (people will die), Tversky and Kahneman showed that people were more likely to pick the risky option when the problem was negatively framed, a result they described as loss aversion."*

Tversky and Kahneman's 'risky choice' framing

One of the most well-researched areas of framing stems from the work of Amos Tversky, a cognitive psychologist with an interest in people's understanding of statistics and how they judge risk, which he developed in collaboration with Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, author of the popular psychology book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). Together they are often credited as the founding fathers of behavioural economics. Tversky and Kahneman's concept is that people make different (therefore irrational) decisions based on the way information is presented about a serious problem (Levin et al 1998). Their support for this comes from research using the 'Asian Disease Problem'. In this experiment, participants are given one of two different choices about how they would respond to a deadly new disease entering the country: will they choose a

certain outcome or prefer a risk? By presenting the identical information as either positively framed (people will be saved) or negatively framed (people will die), Tversky and Kahneman showed that people were more likely to pick the risky option when the problem was negatively framed, a result they described as *loss aversion* (ibid, pp152-157). Tversky and Kahneman use this, along with many other experiments, to show that people make decisions under the influence of all sorts of cognitive biases, another relevant and related one being that people pay far more attention to negative information (negativity bias).

Three types of 'positive' and 'negative' message framing

Kahneman and Tversky's theories have been very well researched. However, up until the late 90s, the results were very mixed, with experiments that varied even a little from the original design giving different results. Irwin Levin, who has been a professor of psychology at Iowa University since 1965, unpicked this puzzle by suggesting that in fact there were three different types of negative and positive framing being researched and inadvertently people were comparing different things. Levin's three types of framing included (see Fig 1 for a fuller description):

- Tversky's 'risky choice' framing (Levin et al 1998, p.152-158)
- 'attribute framing' – e.g. beef could be 25 per cent fat (negative) or 75 per cent lean (positive) (ibid, p.158-167)
- 'goal framing (ibid, p.167-178) – so named because it is about promoting an activity that is desirable, with the framing geared towards persuasion.

Goal framing has been applied and researched most thoroughly in medical contexts (ibid, p.169-171): for example, in encouraging people to undertake a breast self-examination, where you can easily see the impact of framing the message differently (people told about the dire consequences of not examining are more likely to do so compared to people told about the benefits of doing it). Goal framing seems that it could be the most applicable to a fundraising context.

Figure 1: Levin's three types of positive and negative framing (Levin et al, p 151)

Frame type	What is framed?	What is affected?	How is affect measured?
Risky choice	Set of options with different risk levels	Risk preference	Comparison of choices or risky options
Attribute	Object/event attributes or characteristics	Item evaluation	Comparison of attractiveness ratings for the single item
Goal	Consequence or implied goal of a behaviour	Impact of persuasion	Comparison of rate of adoption of the behaviour

Applying goal framing to donating

There have been several papers looking at this type of framing in a fundraising context, and these provide a fascinating, if mixed, set of insights into framing.

In 2008 academics Peter Kerhof and Enny Das, and masters student Joyce Kuiper, based at the Department of Communication Science at Vrei Universiteit in Amsterdam, published a study looking at three aspects of communication, including framing, and whether these might increase fundraising effectiveness. They defined positive and negative framing as (Kerhof et al 2008, p163):

- Positive framing – the positive impact your donation will have (e.g. 10,000 people can be saved from starvation)
- Negative framing – what will happen if you don't donate (e.g. 10,000 people will die of starvation).

One of the interesting findings is that this study suggests it could be more complex than either loss or gain being most effective in fundraising. Kerhof et al found that there was an interaction between the type of framing and whether the accompanying message was factual or anecdotal, with facts/negative frame and anecdotes/positive frame combinations performing best at creating strong views on an issue (ibid, p169). They struggled to find much impact on donations as a result of this, however.

Perhaps the best tips for fundraisers from this paper are that messages suggesting that the donation would have an impact and that other people were also donating had the greatest impact on whether people were likely to donate (ibid, p173).

Two papers that take a slightly different approach to goal framing come from Chun-Tuan Chang and Yu-Kang Lee from the National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan. Chang and Lee come from marketing and political economics perspectives.

In the first of their papers, published in 2009, they considered the effects of:

- Message framing – positive gains ('with your help a child will live') or negative losses ('without your help a child will die')
- Image valence – presenting a "vivid" picture positively or negatively in a framed message, hypothesizing that congruency between image and message (positive picture in a positive frame/negative picture in a negative frame) would work better than incongruent photos and message frames (positive photo in a negative frame/negative photo in a positive frame)
- Temporal framing – whether the effects of donating are presented over a short or longer timeframe…

…on the likelihood of:

- Participating in voluntary action
- Making a donation
- Recommending someone else make a donation.

They tested this using adaptations of the Barnardo's infamous silver spoon/cockroach advertisement (see Figs 2 and 3), which was banned by the UK's Advertising Standards Authority in 2003.

The results are shown in Figs 4 and 5. Fig 4 shows the effect of image valence and temporal framing within a positive message frame; while Fig 5 shows the effect of image valence and temporal framing in a negative message framing. Behavioural intention on the y-axis is a combination of all three things the authors set out to test: volunteering, donating and recommending a donation. As is very clear, the combination that leads to the greatest advertising effectiveness is negative photo in a negative frame. Shock advertising, it seems, works.

But it's also important to note that the congruency of image valence and message frame is important, and a positive photo in a negative frame is a bit more effective than a negative photo in a positive frame. And note also that the timeframe in which the information is presented has an effect. As the

> *"Messages suggesting that the donation would have an impact and that other people were also donating had the greatest impact on whether people were likely to donate."*

authors note, advertising effectiveness depends on complicated inter-relationships among message framing, image valence and temporal framing (Chang and Lee 2009, p2927).

Chang and Lee further explored the issues of goal framing applied to donations in a second paper a year later, which includes a good discussion on how loss aversion and negativity bias both suggest a negative frame may be both more salient and therefore effective (Chang and Lee 2010, p198). Chang and Lee investigated positively and negatively framed messages in eliciting donations for a child welfare charity (e.g. 'With your donation their life could become hopeful' vs. 'Without your donation, their life would be hopeless'), testing these alongside 'vividness' (by including a personal anecdotal story which was also positively or negatively framed) and statistics framed as either small numerator (1 of every 3) or large numerator (700 million out of 2.1 billion) (ibid, pp205-207).

For a second time, Chang and Lee found support for negative framing, with, people more likely to say they would donate to charity when (ibid, p209-211):

- A negatively-framed message was enhanced by…
- A negative anecdote (vividness), which used…
- Small numerators (to lesser extent).

However, some of the conditions didn't have particularly big differences in overall results. For

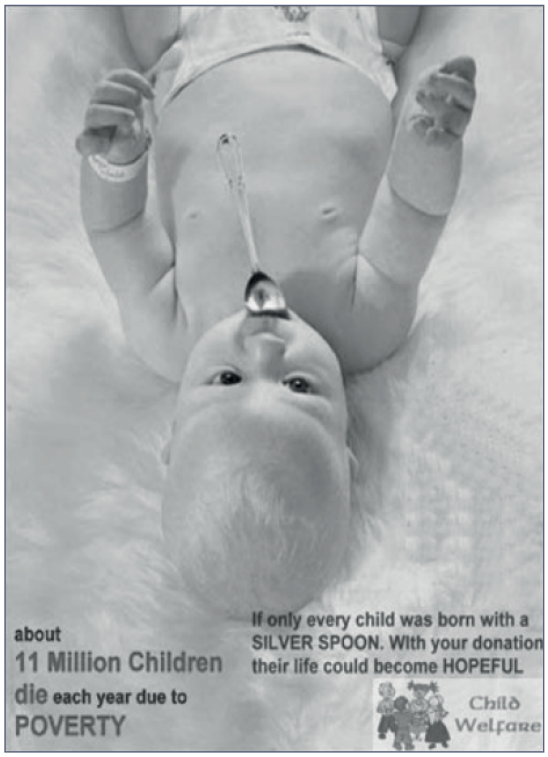

Fig 2 Positively (gains) framed message with a positive photo (congruent) and long time frame (Chang and Lee 2009).

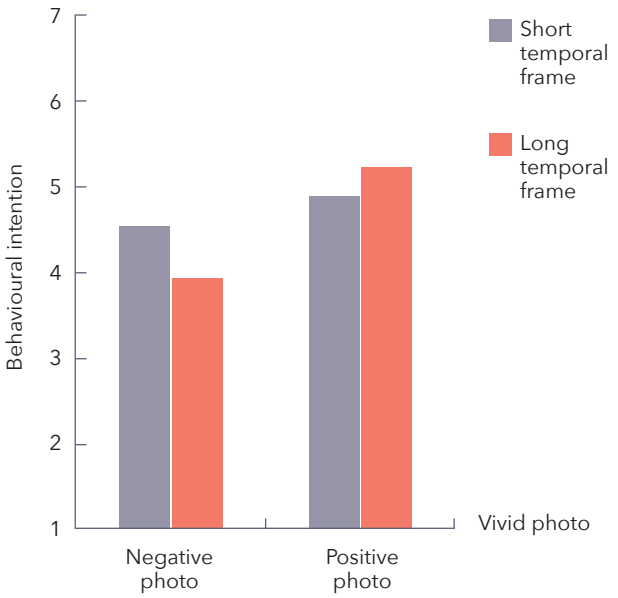

Fig 3 Negatively (losses) framed image with a negative photo (congruent) and short time frame (Chang and Lee 2009).

Fig 4 Effect of image valence and temporal framing in a positive (gains) message frame (Change and Lee 2009, p2926)

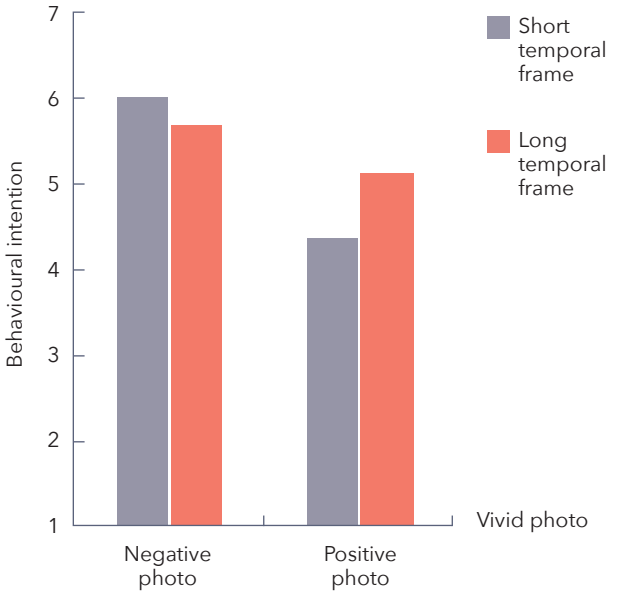

Fig 5 Effect of image valence and temporal framing in a negative (losses) message frame (Change and Lee 2009, p2927)

example, the positive story with positive framing and a large numerator performed almost as well as a negative story with negative framing and a large numerator (ibid, p210). A bigger difference between conditions is clear for messaging which is incongruent, with the least successful condition being a negative anecdote with a positive message.

Chang and Lee conducted a very thorough and well-designed set of experiments, which suggests some support for negative framing being more effective, with consistent messaging being an important aspect of that. But it does also seem that the results aren't strong enough to settle the debate.

A fourth piece of research in this area by a team at the University of California may shed some light by adding into the mix the idea that different types of messaging may be effective for different types of people. Esther Jeong and her team (2010) looked at positive and negatively framed messages for school funding (e.g. 'with funding the library will stay open' vs. 'without funding we'll have to charge more for food in the cafeteria') and analysed the results by splitting it into people who were measured as having 'approach' or 'avoidant' motivation.

People with a strong approach motivation tend to be inspired by incentives and rewards, whereas avoidant motivation describes people who will be more motivated by signs of threat (ibid p16). As predicted by the research team, negative messages triggered a stronger response for avoidant people, and positive messages worked best with approach motivated people (ibid, p19).

There's a similar paper by Xiaoxia Cao – an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin's College of Letters and Science – that looks at how people with a 'promotion' focus (respond to favourable outcomes) or 'prevention' focus (respond to unfavourable outcomes) respond differently to messages that are framed in terms of positive and negative gains (Cao 2016, p5). People's "susceptibility" to these frames can temporarily change their promotion or prevention focus: for example, when people are told they are at high risk of contacting a disease, they become temporarily more amenable to loss-framed messaging (ibid). In other words, people's own perceptions of how a gain or loss might impact on them (or their loved ones) influences what type of frame they respond to. Cao's study tested this in a charitable context and found that a negative-gains (loss) frame increases donation intention among people who are more susceptible to the negative consequences of not making a donation (ibid, p9). But due to the small sample size, not enough people scored as promotion focused to be able to test the other part of the hypothesis: that positive-gains framing would lead to higher donation intention among people who were not so susceptible to being influenced by how the message was framed.

> *"Negativity bias means we pay much more attention to negative news and may mean in the crowded world of advertising that a negatively framed message may grab enough attention needed to result in more donations."*

Cao suggests that causes that affect the lives of many would benefit from using loss-framed messages (since many people would be susceptible to a perception of the negative effect on them or their loved ones if they did not donate), or where donors might share an identity with the beneficiary, such as disabled veterans (ibid, pp10-11).

As intriguing and potentially useful as both these sets of results are, both studies were conducted on very small numbers (in Joeng et al's study, 34 overall, with only 11 in the avoidant motivation group; and 159 in Cao's study) and both used a student-only sample.

However, they indicate a strong theoretical basis that there may be differences in response to positive and negative framing due to the type of person and what motivates them. This is an area where further research and application would be very helpful.

Summary of Section 2

The five pieces of research reviewed in this section suggest that there is a lot more to learn about how positive and negative message framing works, both to understand its impact overall and because it appears to interact with other factors.

There is tentative support from Chang and Lee's papers (2009/2010) that negatively framed messages would elicit more support and this is to some extent supported by Kerhof et al (2008). That these papers don't provide totally overwhelming evidence could be explained by Jeong et al's (2010) suggestion that differing types of motivation play a role, while Cao's (2016) paper, which suggests how "susceptible" people are to their own perception of message framing, is similarly relevant.

Perhaps part of the reason that the findings so far are inconclusive is that the difference becomes much more apparent in a more realistic context. Negativity bias means we pay much more attention to negative news and may mean in the crowded world of advertising that a negatively framed message may grab enough attention needed to result in more donations (Chang and Lee 2010, p198).

But by and large, it seems that negative message framing may be more effective than positive framing, or may be more effective for certain types of people.

3
Using positive and negative images to elicit emotions

A nice real-world study kicks off this section. In 1992 Evelyne Dyck and Gary Coldevin from Concordia University in Montreal worked with World Vision Canada to look at the effects of including different photos in a direct mail pack (Dyck and Coldevin 1992). Previous donors to the charity were sent an appeal pack with a photograph of either a smiling child, a sad looking child (picked based on ratings from a group of 21 people from the university and World Vision) or no photograph (ibid, p574-575). This went out to just under 45,000 previous donors with an overall response rate of 7.2 per cent (ibid, p576). The results were a bit surprising, with the 'no photo' condition getting the highest response rate and the highest average donation coming from the positive photo group (ibid). However, the differences in results between groups were very small in practical terms, suggesting that the photographs were less impactful within the pack than the researchers and fundraisers involved had expected, and furthermore, the authors did no significance testing on the results, which makes drawing reliable inferences that much harder.

Sad faces and 'emotional contagion'

Dyck and Coldevin's findings that photographs are less impactful than they expected are perhaps explained by the findings from a later study by Deborah Small – a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, who studies charitable giving and prosocial behaviour – and her doctoral student Nicole Verrochi (2009). They also looked at photographs of happy and sad faces used alongside charity appeals, but added further theoretical underpinnings to their research by suggesting that images used in this way create 'emotional contagion', which is defined as (ibid, p778):

"A primitive, automatic form of empathy [that is] distinguish[ed] from more deliberative empathy that involves taking another person's perspective."

This can lead to a person "catching" another person's feelings by responding to their facial expressions automatically and outside of awareness (ibid).

Because emotional contagion is an automatic process, Small and Verrochi predicted that its impact could be reduced when deliberative thought processes were triggered. They also predicted that sad images would elicit more sympathy and therefore be more likely to encourage donations (ibid).

Small and Verrochi undertook a series of studies and found support for both hypotheses, neatly demonstrating the path to people donating based on an emotional response to a 'sad face' that created sympathy and resulted in increased donations. They demonstrated that this process can be interrupted by encouraging more deliberation, through adding more information, and also that this effect can be reduced when the "cognitive load" is increased – e.g. people are given another task to do simultaneously (ibid, pp780-785). This could explain why in a direct mail pack full of other information – as was the case with Dyck and Coldevin's experiment – the inclusion of photographs makes little material difference to donation behaviour. It also means that in an applied sense that adverts where attention is short or interrupted are more likely to work using these automatic processes. For example, an ad on a train with a 'sad face' will most likely outperform a 'happy face', but in a direct mail appeal this effect will be less certain and the other information may make a bigger difference.

Volume two of Rogare's four-volume review of relationship fundraising described theories from social psychology that could form the theoretical

foundation for relationship fundraising (Sargeant, MacQuillin, and Shang 2016). This argued that – just as in interpersonal relationships – potential donors need to feel some kind of attraction to the charity or the cause and that they need to feel "aroused" to act, illustrating this with a case study of a PlanUK advert on London Underground trains (ibid, p12) – see Fig 6. The concept of emotional contagion could add another layer of explanatory power as to why potential donors would feel attracted to and aroused by such advertisements.

> *"Due to 'emotional contagion' an ad on a train with a 'sad face' will most likely outperform a 'happy face', but in a direct mail appeal this effect will be less certain and the other information may make a bigger difference."*

Small and Verrochi's (2009) findings strengthen the evidence from an earlier study, this time from New Zealand, which showed that negative emotions are more strongly elicited and therefore make people more likely to give. Christopher Burt and Ken Strongman (2005), both professors of psychology at Canterbury University, used existing charity ads, which they tested for emotion generated (positive vs. negative on a seven-point scale). They then carried out a series of studies to test the donation level (money, items, or time) in response to varying levels and types of emotion (ibid, pp572-578).

Burt and Strongman (2005, p578) found that negative emotions resulted in more money given, and to a lesser extent more items/time. They also found that images that generated more emotion (both positive and negative) were more effective at increasing donations than those generating less emotion (ibid). This suggests an order of effectiveness, where strong negative emotions might generate the most income, strong positive emotions generate a little less, and the least impactful are those that trigger a lower emotional response (positive or negative). Along with Small and Verrochi's (2009) findings, the research suggests that 'sad face' images may well generate more income, especially when used in settings where the decision to give is a quick and automatic one.

However, a further study suggests this might not be quite so clear cut, questioning whether different types of people may respond differently.

Fig 6 PlanUK advert on London tube trains. Do the people who respond to this advert 'catch' the sadness in Aneni's face through emotional contagion?

Fig 7. A 'traditional' charity appeal – aimed at provoking pity and guilt – as tested by Hudson et al (2016)

Fig 8. An 'alternative' charity appeal – aimed at generating empathy – as tested by Hudson et al (2016)

Negative consequences of negative framing

David Hudson, Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson, Niheer Dasandi and Susan Gaines, all professors and lecturers in international politics working at UK universities, published a highly relevant paper in 2016. Looking at donations to development charities, they were keen to understand both the fundraising effectiveness of negative vs. positive imagery and its impact on people's longer-term views of the need to support the cause, including its impact on how people perceive beneficiaries (Hudson et al, 2016).

Hudson et al (2016) tested two versions of a development charity appeal (ibid, p14):

- A 'traditional' version that included both negative imagery (a malnourished child) and statements that framed the beneficiaries as helpless without the donation, which aimed to prick emotions such as pity, anger and guilt (Fig 7)

- An 'alternative' version where more agency was given to the beneficiary as well as positive emotion (they were holding up a sign with 'future doctor' written on it and smiling) and the

text sought to increase a sense of empathy by suggesting that beneficiaries were similar to the donors (Fig 8).

These two versions bring in new aspects of framing beyond those explored in the research covered so far, in particular those that relate to how the beneficiary is perceived as either helpless or having agency, and as different vs. similar. In doing this they have created a much more realistic appeal advert, but perhaps risk a difficult task when trying to unpick the effects of the different aspects of it. They showed both treatments to focus groups before using them in experimental conditions and this confirmed that the 'traditional' version was what most people associated with charity appeals (ibid, p15).

> *"'Traditional' charity adverts lower people's sense of agency and efficacy in addressing problems, and they also put some people off because they are 'repulsed' by the adverts."*

Hudson et al (2016) measured people's emotional response to the ads, including a 'baseline' ad which had no framed messaging/imagery, along with their donation intentions, and used a fairly complex statistical modeling technique called mediation analysis to look at their results (ibid, pp17-21). This technique allowed them to examine the factors causing people to donate or not donate to the different adverts. The model showed that the 'traditional' version elicited donations through making people feel anger and guilt, whereas the 'alternative' version triggered donations through 'hope' (ibid, p19, p23). However, there was no significant difference in the decision to donate or intended donation amount between traditional and alternative appeals (ibid, p23).

These results are perhaps not particularly surprising. However, perhaps more challenging for fundraisers is the finding that the 'traditional' version lowers people's sense of agency and efficacy in addressing problems (ibid). And it also put some people off: some participants reported that they were less likely to donate to the 'traditional' version than the baseline because they were "repulsed" by the advert (ibid, p19). In fact, when looking at the overall mediation effects from both versions, 'hope' seemed to work as strongly for the 'alternative' version as 'guilt' and 'anger' did for the 'traditional' version, but the alternative version didn't put anyone off, suggesting that overall the 'alternative' version would perform better.

Overall the model appears to cast some doubt over the findings from both Burt and Strongman's (2005) and Small and Verrochi's (2009) research. But this bears further analysis and research conducted by Save the Children in the UK in 2010 does challenge these findings. Contained in the charity's unpublished *Depicting Injustice* report, this research suggest that the British public made up its own mind about whether someone was "in need" and only "surprisingly small" indications of "resilience" in how beneficiaries were depicted could lead them to report they would not give (Warrington and Crombie 2017, p5). This research contained comments such as (ibid):

"They look quite well fed. They're not starving enough."

"I'd give more to a baby or child I see suffering than to a child with a pencil in his hand."

One noteworthy finding of the Hudson et al research (2016, p18) is that the traditional appeal generates stronger emotions in general than the alternative appeal. It is also notable that the effect of emotions on the donation decision is weaker than the effect of the different creatives on generating emotion. In other words, although both appeals generate emotions – the traditional appeal in particular – the effect that these emotions have on the donation decision isn't as large. Perhaps this leads us back to Small and Verrochi's (2009) findings: both versions of the appeal included quite a bit of text, and in the experiment, donors would have had time to overcome their initial, automatic emotional response. It may also relate to the variety of different frames being used in these adverts, as well as something that was clear from their focus group findings, that donors are used to seeing appeals that "pull at [their] heartstrings" (Hudson et al 2016, p15) and therefore may have become less responsive to them (the idea of donor fatigue).

Summary of Section 3

The research on emotions seems to mostly support the idea that negative imagery (sad faces) tends to elicit more donations when there is little other information (or limited time to process this). This suggests in certain media (e.g. train ads, social media feeds) these will be more effective. In these media, negative images are probably carrying out a dual role of also being more attention grabbing due to negativity bias.

The research is less clear cut when looking at how the donation ask is framed. However it does suggest that framing the message incongruently can be detrimental, so it may be important for these ads to also have donation asks which are 'negative' in terms of 'losses' e.g. without your donation we can't do 'x'. However none of the papers covered here tests this directly.

Another important suggestion has been that whether positive or negative frames are effective may depend on the type of person receiving them: that those who respond more to threat rather than reward will respond best to negative framing. Finally, as Hudson et al (2016) point out, 'negative' framing in an appeal can put some people off donating, so perhaps even though it is often more effective, there are also some risks.

4
Impact of different frames on beneficiaries

Part of the stimulus for this review has been the sense that the debate around positive and negative framing is a bit stuck, with seemingly irresolvable differences on both sides of the argument (MacQuillin 2016a, 2016b). These 'sides' are often characterized as fundraisers keen to raise money using 'negative' framing pitted against those working in delivery who want to represent the people that are benefiting from these funds as accurately and fairly as possible. Also in the mix are staff responsible for influencing policy who are often trying to gain traction around issues and want these to be communicated accurately in the charity's messaging. Interestingly and usefully, much of the research and academic work in this area challenges the simplistic view that it is a 'positive' vs. 'negative' debate, and points towards ways we can 'un-stick' the topic, by better understanding the different factors at play. The first of these challenges the idea that positive framing is better for beneficiaries.

Positive framing isn't necessarily better for beneficiaries

Professor Lilie Chouliaraki from the London School of Economics specialises in researching how the media shape our perception of 'distant others', and has written a fascinating paper on how this applies to charity communications in the development sector (Chouliaraki 2010). In this she looks at what she describes as 'shock value' campaigns, with negative framing (ibid, p5), and positively-framed communications (ibid, pp7-8), and has found that as well as differences there are also some similarities.

Both types of communication tend to simplify the issues and make it seem as if the problems can be solved by donations alone, without addressing wider issues (ibid, p10). It is easy to see why this happens in charity communications, since one of the aims is to encourage people to donate to something they feel will be successful.

However it is useful to see that this still occurs when 'positive' framing is used. In fact, positive framing may make problems seem even easier to solve than negative framing, which may underplay the issues facing beneficiaries (ibid, p10). Chouliaraki (ibid, p10) also notes that people can doubt the validity of photographs in charity communications, thinking that they may seem staged, which can also affect the impact these have on donations.

Have we already started to move beyond positive and negative framing?

In her paper, Chouliaraki (2010, pp11-13) looks in depth at how cultural changes have impacted charity communications and suggests that more recent communications have moved beyond the use of photographs that report on issues to a much more stylized presentation, which is heavily branded, action- oriented, and makes donating a low-effort action by removing the sense of pity. As examples of this she uses three campaigns by Amnesty International that use irony (the 'No Food diet' of an African family contrasted with the Atkins diet), animation (an execution being stopped by petitions used as a shield) and juxtaposition (images of war torn streets with transparent backgrounds placed on bus shelters) (ibid, pp11-13). These campaigns all focus much more on the actions of the donor/ potential donor and differ significantly from the 'traditional' appeal tested by Hudson et al (2016). They don't quite fit into the 'positive' versus 'negative' choice and highlight how creative approaches can move beyond this.

> *"Both positive and negative frames tend to simplify the issues and make it seem as if the problems can be solved by donations alone, without addressing wider issues."*

Fig 9. A screengrab from Amnesty International's Bullet – The Execution video, analysed by Chouliaraki (2010) as an example of an advert that fits neither a positive nor negative frame

What do beneficiaries themselves think?

While the debate about how beneficiaries ought to be framed in charity fundraising continues at charities and within academia and the media, not many people have thought to ask what the central and perhaps most relevant stakeholder in this issue thinks about it – the beneficiaries themselves.

This will form the topic of a separate discussion paper as part of this series, so this section only aims at a topline summary on two pieces of research.

The first was a major initiative conducted by Save The Children in the UK by the charity's global director of creative content, Jess Crombie, and Siobhan Warrington of Oral Testimony Works (Warrington and Crombie 2017). This research comprised interviews and focus groups with 202 beneficiaries across four countries: UK, Jordan (Syrian refugees), Niger and Bangladesh, exploring their motivations in contributing to fundraising materials, what they thought of the image-making process, and their attitudes to how they and their communities were portrayed.

By and large, Save The Children's beneficiaries were satisfied with how the charity used their images (ibid, p62) – as they also were with the image-making process (ibid, p ix) – albeit with some concerns and caveats, such as what might happen to relatives back in Syria if a refugee were recognised (ibid, p x). But they expressed a preference for balance in showing solutions as well as problems (ibid, p82) and resilience as well as suffering (ibid, p53), and preferred content where they were able to speak for themselves.

A full treatment of this important piece of research will be contained in the forthcoming discussion paper as part of this project. But the takeaway from this is that, even though Save The Children identified a number of recommendations to address their beneficiaries' concerns, those concerns were not so serious that the charity needed to radically overhaul and revise how it frames its beneficiaries, and Save the Children is a leading exponent of what Hudson et al (2016) would call the 'traditional', negatively-framed approach (see Fig 10).

Another piece of research to look at beneficiary attitudes to their own framing was undertaken by Beth Breeze, who is director of the Centre for Philanthropy at the University of Kent, and Jon Dean, a lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University (Breeze and Dean 2012). Together they ran a series of focus groups with young homeless people looking at materials from campaigns fundraising for homelessness charities.

There were several useful insights from Breeze and Dean's study, the first being that young homeless people felt that overall the most important role of the charity campaigns was to raise funds, and that fundraisers should use whatever are the most effective techniques to do that (ibid, p136). There

Fig 10. A still from a Save the Children No Child Born To Die DRTV ad. Research conducted by the charity (Warrington and Crombie 2017) found that its beneficiaries were generally comfortable with this approach. Note the similarity to Hudson et al's (2016) 'traditional' charity appeal (see p16).

was recognition from the groups that fundraising campaigns were a form of advertising and so would be subject to the limitations of this, such as using stereotypes and simplified imagery to communicate needs (ibid, p136). As with Warrington and Crombie's research (2017), on the whole, the participants were comfortable about 'negative' framing as long as it was the most effective way to raise money.

However, the participants also expressed a wish that campaigns could portray a more nuanced view if this was still effective at raising money: in particular they wanted the messaging and imagery to reflect their experiences of how homelessness could affect anyone, and for them to build empathy with the donor, not just sympathy (or pity) (ibid, p138). To illustrate how a campaign might do this, Breeze and Dean use the example of a campaign by Crisis with an image of a piece of cardboard in the snow bearing the hand-written legend 'Loving the snow? Try sleeping in it' (ibid, p140). The image doesn't feature the beneficiary but instead invites the donor to empathise with them. Here the type of impact fundraising communications have on beneficiaries could be seen as building wider understanding and empathy.

Breeze and Dean's (2012) study highlights how one of the worst impacts on beneficiaries would be to reduce the fundraising income, so that they were no longer able to access the services provided by the charity. Above that, if charity communications can also engage supporters with the context and experience of beneficiaries and encourage empathy, this will add to their helpfulness.

Can 'negative' framing ever harm income?

This leads us back to an earlier point made by Hudson et al (2016 – can 'negative' framing harm fundraised income? Some clues to this can be found in a later piece of research by Beth Breeze and Alison Body, a research assistant also based at the University of Kent. Breeze and Body (2016) looked at 'unpopular causes' to try and understand how some causes raise significantly more funds than others, despite having similar needs, and how within these less popular causes of some charities still succeed. Breeze and Body (2016) suggested that after 'asking', the number one determinant for people giving to charities was eliciting their sympathy, and that there were several factors that impacted on this. One of these is that sympathy can be reduced where people feel the beneficiaries are to some extent responsible for their situation (ibid, pp10- 11). With some causes, this isn't usually an issue – for example children's charities, where people tend to see children as innocent and vulnerable. However, for homelessness charities, this can be a problem, so imagery that reinforces any stereotypes (e.g. a homeless person who looks like they may be suffering from addiction) could – only could – be detrimental to raising funds.

5 Conclusion

Although the terms 'positive' and 'negative' framing are commonly used within fundraising and marketing, the academic literature breaks these down into sub-categories, so any discussion around these needs to establish which type is being debated. In fundraising this is typically 'happy' and 'sad' images, but can also be the ways in which the donation ask is phrased (goal framing) or any other aspect of the communication.

There is not a huge amount of academic research that explores framing in charitable contexts and what there is inconclusive and sometimes contradictory, though to a certain extent backs up the commonly-held practitioner belief that negative framing, especially sad imagery, elicits more donations through engaging people's sympathy. However, it also shows that this type of framing works best where time and information are limited. There is also some evidence that it can generate negative emotions that may put some people off donating.

- Negative framing may work best for donor acquisition, where new donors must be 'attracted' to the cause through an emotional punch.

- Positive framing may work better in donor retention, where fundraisers are trying to build lasting relationships with donors who are already engaged with their causes.

On the other side of the debate there is relatively little concrete evidence that beneficiaries are directly harmed by the ways in which they are portrayed. However, there are hints that the choices made in how beneficiaries are portrayed do impact more widely, on both how they are perceived and on fundraised income. Here it is not a simple 'positive is better' argument: as Chouliaraki (2010) points out, 'positive' framing can make problems seem simpler to solve than they are, just as 'negative' framing can make them seem hopeless.

Perhaps the most compelling case for more work on framing comes from the beneficiaries who were the subject of the studies conducted by Warrington and Crombie (2017) and Breeze and Dean (2012). They were happy to accept that marketing techniques may not be perfect at portraying their circumstances, but want fundraisers to use methods that raise the most funds. Nonetheless, they would also like us to elicit empathy for them, not just sympathy, and show solutions as well as problems.

"There is not a huge amount of academic research that explores framing in charitable contexts and what there is inconclusive and sometimes contradictory, though to a certain extent backs up the commonly-held practitioner belief that negative framing, especially sad imagery, elicits more donations through engaging people's sympathy."

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