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Title: Small Stories in Charity Fundraising Letters and the Ethics of Interwoven Individualism

Author: Andrea Macrae

Abstract:

The explicit imperative to "tell a story" recently dominating UK and USA fundraising sector discourse refers specifically to the central compelling 'story' of the representative victim/beneficiary, and yet there are multiple stories at work in charity fundraising letters, with interdependent narrative trajectories. This article draws on small stories research (Georgakopoulou 2015), and on scholarship on storytelling and ethics (Meretoja 2018a; Shuman 2005), to explore the relative narrativity of the stories within charity fundraising letters and their marked contingence upon lack of resolution. This article also disentangles and investigates the interactions among the stories of the representative beneficiary, the addressee as potential donor, and the charitable organization. It discusses the affirmation and exploitation of Western neoliberal individualism in the selective spotlighting of an individual beneficiary, and in the individualized appeal to the addressee. It discusses the tensions between the charitable organization and the addressee as competing contenders for the archetypal role of the 'hero' in the narrative of the victim/beneficiary, and reflects on the ways in which the complex narratives of supra-individual social processes involved both in the causes of suffering and need and in their alleviation are downplayed in the service of more impactful individualistic narratives.

Author bio: Andrea Macrae is a Principal Lecturer at Oxford Brookes University. She is the author of Discourse Deixis in Metafiction: The Language of Metanarration, Metalepsis and Disnarration (Routledge, 2019)

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1. The narrativity of charity fundraising letters: small stories and ethics

The instruction to 'tell a story', as a central constituent of an effective direct mail fundraising appeal, has become increasingly prevalent in the UK and USA charity sectors. The value of good storytelling is the focus of several popular sector trade books (e.g., Brooks 2014, Burnett 2014, Lockshin 2016), guides for practitioners which are more explicitly informed by academic research (e.g., Sargeant and Shang 2017), formal sector training (e.g., Chartered Institute of Fundraising 2021; Management Centre 2021; Association of Fundraising Professionals 2021) and online sector guides (e.g., Boulton 2014; Community Funded 2021; Ibrisevic 2018; Keating 2019). The 'story' referred to in much of this discourse is ostensibly the brief personal story of a

representative 'victim', or 'beneficiary'.[1] This story is an illustrative narration of an ongoing crisis, or of a risk of a future crisis, which serves to establish the need for the appeal. However, discussions of storytelling in fundraising guidance and research tend to swiftly shift their focus from the story of the beneficiary to the engagement of the recipient of the letter (usually referred to within the sector as 'the donor') with that story, and their potential role in the beneficiary - usually as an agent who 'helps' or 'saves', through their act of donating. Thus, the story of the beneficiary becomes subsumed within the story of the donor. Charities often use the number and size of donations a campaign receives as an indirect measure of the emotional impact upon the donor of their engagement with the beneficiary's story, while academic researchers sometimes use study participants' self-reported hypothetical 'intention to donate' to measure this (e.g., Merchant et al. 2010). Beyond these particular measures, though, there has been little attention to the relative narrative nature of, and relationship between, the stories of the donor and of the beneficiary. The narrative of the charitable organization within fundraising letters, usually presented via a more or less individualized representative speaker who may also function as a 'witness', in practice often contains a further distinct story involving the organization as an agent. The narrative nature of this third story, and its relationship to the other two, tends to receive even less attention in both academic philanthropic research and in practical sector guidance.

Though the call within fundraising guidance to 'tell a story' has been prominent for some time, research within the sector has only recently begun to engage with theories of narrative. This engagement with narratology is usually specifically in relation to donors' emotional responses (and the link to intention to donate), and it is often indirect, via research in marketing and consumer psychology, where in turn some narratological understanding comes from film and television theory (see Merchant et al. 2010 for an example of this path of influence). There has been limited direct engagement with the extant body of narratological research across various fields, and in particular literary narrative research, the main exception being reference in some publications to ideas grounded in Campbell's work on archetypal hero myths (e.g., Ascough 2018; Community Funded 2021). Though much of the attention to storytelling in the philanthropic sector has centered around its ability to arouse the emotions of the potential donor, the bridge has yet to be built between sector research and practice and leading scholarship on narrative, emotion and empathy in literary and cognitive studies (e.g., Bortolussi and Dixon 2003; Green and Fitzgerald 2017; Keen 2007; Mar 2011; Nünning 2014). As Fernandes states, the twenty-first century prevalence of this instrumentalized form of storytelling has tended to involve "constructing a genealogy of an essentialized, universal formula" (2017: 4). Within current storytelling formulae in fundraising research and practice, the three forms in which narratological concepts do seem to have been adopted are: an understanding of one or other version of the basic narrative arc; a conceptualization of the

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[1] Many charities work on issues in which impact upon humans is not the primary concern. This article focusses only on charity fundraising appeal letters which focus on the impact on humans.

story of the beneficiary as constituting an emotive 'inciting action' in the story of the donor; and the depiction of the donor in the prototypical narrative role of either 'helper' or 'hero'.[2]

The aims of this article are to develop a richer account of the complex network of stories and plotlines, and narrative roles and relationships, within the common discourse conventions of UK and USA fundraising letters,[3] using ideas and approaches developed within work on storytelling and ethics (in particular Meretoja 2018a and Shuman 2005) and within 'small stories research' (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2015). Small stories research explicitly encompasses stories which diverge from the norms of singular, linear, totalizing and lengthy narratives in response to which much of traditional narratology has evolved. It recognizes that "in reality many of our stories are 'messy', developing without easily identifiable endpoints and in different environments and media" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 258). Small stories research aligns with the narratological approach of Herman (2009) and the sociolinguistic approach of Ochs and Capps (2001), both of which retain basic definitional criteria of narrative, but view these criteria as each presenting "a continuum of possibilities from more to less prototypical" or as dimensions which may be realized to a greater or lesser extent, in any narrative, and in a variety of different ways (Georgakopoulou 2015: 259). Georgakopoulou juxtaposes Herman's (2009) criteria of situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking/world disruption, and conveying an experience, with Ochs's and Capps's (2001) dimensions of tellability, tellership, embeddedness, linearity and moral stance. These two lists of narrative criteria overlap in different ways with each other and with Georgakopoulou's own proposed 'levels of analysis': sites, tellers, and 'ways of telling' – the last of this list including the "more or less conventionalized semiotic and … verbal choices" within a story, and the "iterativity" of "types of stories told as ways of (inter)acting, embedded in recurrent social practices" (2015: 258).

An underlying principle stressed in small stories research is that "any definitional criteria should be seen as context-specific" (2015: 259). In this light, small stories research includes stories in which some or most of the sequenced events may be "non- or multilinear," and may be "future or hypothetical events," "unfolding" as a sequence in potential "further narrative-making" (260). This inclusive approach to relative linearity, temporality, and closure is particularly pertinent to charity fundraising letters, the essential pragmatic function of which lies in outlining and using a prior, ongoing or pending potential crisis to influence what happens next, beyond the cessation of the letter's storylines. The effect of the storying in charities fundraising

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[2] Due to space and copyright constraints, whole letters or large extracts cannot be replicated within this article. A bank of illustrative examples of fundraising letters exhibiting the narrative features analyzed in this article is openly accessible online at the Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration (SOFII 2018).

[3] Though the extracts from letters used for illustrative discussion within this article are from the author's own UK-based private collection, the discourse conventions discussed are shared across UK and USA fundraising practices (and other Western English-speaking contexts), as are leading sources of philanthropic research and trends in sector guidance.

letters is contingent upon this lack of closure, so much so that readers are likely to accept these unfinished storylines as "a valid component of the text's signifying practice" (Herman et al. 2005: 359), in accordance with the conventions of the discourse genre. In a popular fundraising guidance trade book, Brooks goes so far as to present it as a form of (non-)ending in its own right, with its own term, arguing that every letter must have "a *fundraising ending*. That is, it's not quite finished" (2012: 40). The incomplete narrative structure plays upon the reader's desire for closure. The message of each letter conveys an implicit promise that the decision to act – to donate – will facilitate that resolution. Through this inherent lack of closure, the letters are also often "tellings [which] are fragmented," in which "more storying is added", and different kinds of tellability occur, "as more events unfold" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 263), beyond the textually inscribed narratives, determined by the choice that the reader then makes in response – specifically in their subsequent act of donating or otherwise.

Equally relevant to charity fundraising letters is the attention within small stories research not only to complicating world-disruption, via one or more extraordinary events, but also to world-making, which includes the "telling of mundane, ordinary, everyday events" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 260). The stories of representative beneficiaries tend to involve markedly radical world-disruption (significant change, caused by, for example, war, natural disasters, injury, etc.), and/or forms of unusually highly iterative and/or constrained world-making (unchanging, repeated, negative and/or very limited experiences, such as spending a large portion of every day walking to fetch water, or being routinely abused or neglected, etc.). These forms of extreme world-disruption and iterative and/or constrained world-making, and the relationships between them, are relatively uncommon in non-fictional narrative outside of this discourse genre. Equally uncommon is their doubled narrative function: the radical world disruption or iterative world-making in the story of the representative beneficiary primarily serves to create world disruption – a narrative complication or crisis – in the story of the potential donor.

Small stories research also acknowledges and addresses the implications of the "detachability and recontextualization" of stories – their scope for extraction and (re)deployment in different tellings and texts (Georgakopoulou 2015: 260). The story of the beneficiary within charity fundraising letters is always re(con)textualized: it is detached from the original instance and environment of telling, and then reframed as an embedded tale within the charity's narrative(s). It is often reformed and rephrased during that process. This recontextualization can be considered appropriation, and even commercialization, of an individual's story, in the service of the stories of others and of the broader cause. Here the events of the beneficiary's story are simultaneously events in larger socio-political narratives and also in the narratives of the charity as agent and donor as agent – an example of the "productive co-existence of narrative activities, big and small, in the same event" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 256).

In some charity fundraising letters, though, the representative beneficiary's story is not rephrased: the voice of the beneficiary-as-teller is retained, and their story is shared in their own words, sometimes dispersed throughout various sections of the letter. This is one way in

which the narratives within charity fundraising letters can be viewed as co-constructed, with multiple tellers contributing. A different kind of co-construction, however, of the "point, events and characters" of a story (or stories) within a charity fundraising letter, can be identified as occurring "between teller and audience" (Georgakopoulou 2015: 260) – between the charity and the potential donor(s).

The ownership of stories, and the ethics of storytelling, within charity fundraising letters are highly complex. Small stories research foregrounds the epistemological aspects of stories, in that it explicitly identifies storytelling, and cultural circulation of stories, as ways of knowing, in the Foucauldian sense – as ways of discursively constructing and fixing categories and positions, iterating socio-cultural roles and hierarchies, and affirming dynamics of power, agency and ownership (Foucault 1990). This highlighting of the epistemological aspects of stories is in line with arguments made within Shuman's (2005) and Meretoja's (2018a, 2018b) ethics of storytelling, and coalesces at points with Phelan's rhetorical approach to the "ethics of the told" and "the ethics of the telling" (2007: 203; see also Phelan 2005). In an analysis of stories circulated on social media, Georgakopoulou discusses the ways in which stories may be "embedded into a variety of … environments with different semiotic modes (e.g., verbal, visual), and may be sanctioned and recontextualized in unforeseeable ways and by networked audiences" (2015: 267). Relatedly, there is usually no public transparency about the level of informed consent given by a representative beneficiary for the form in which their story is embedded (e.g., with what introduction and further framing comment), presented (e.g., with what images) and circulated (e.g., using what media, in what contexts) by the charity, and subsequently consumed and implicitly sanctioned by potential donors, and recontextualized within donors' own stories as helpers or heroes. In later work, Georgakopoulou stresses the need to consider "the trajectory of texts", noting that "all discourse shifts across contexts" and arguing that "any act of re-entextualization [sic] both produces new meanings and depends on who has access to which contextual space, who selects what to carry forward and how, what the conditions of say-ability are in the first place, and what the potential may be for subsequent circulation" (2017: 272). Georgakopoulou draws upon the work of Briggs who calls for the interrogation of the ways in which discourse can "structure means of systematically producing marginalization and subordination", and writes that "we need to ponder not just the content of messages but how the ideological construction of their production, circulation, and reception shapes identities and social 'groups' and orders them hierarchically" (Briggs 2005: 275). Cultural and social narrative studies have increasingly foregrounded the fact that narratives are "entangled with relations of power" and, as such, tend to "marginalize experiences which do not fit white, male, heterosexual and anthropomorphic normativity" (Meretoja and Davis 2018: 5). Though online sector guides profess the value of "leveraging personal stories in the change-making process, and learning techniques to tell a story that transcends the status quo" (Ibrisevic 2018), Fernandes draws attention to the potential for "curated personal stories" to "shift the focus away from structurally defined axes of oppression" and to "inhibit social change" at a deeper level (2017: 3).

These points are particularly pertinent with regards to the trajectory of the story of the representative beneficiary, and also with regards to what experiences and narratives are inevitably occluded in the process of the selection, reformulating and foregrounding of that individual story. Contemporary media and marketing practitioners recognize the emotive value of representing experiences on a "human scale", often reduced to ideologically imbued crisis-resolution narrative arcs (Fernandes 2017: 4). By contrast, complex socio-political and environmental issues which have evolved due to many causes over a long period of time are "unnarratable at heart" and "not amenable to emplotment" (Mäkelä 2018: 180). Mäkelä warns of the risk that the dominance of marketization and consumption of human scale, individualized stories may enable dominant cultural groups to ignore, oversimplify, defer or efface larger, more complex narratives of structural injustice, and reaffirm biased norms and values (2018: 182).

If the attention, within Georgakopoulou's small stories research (2017, 2015), to the context-dependency of narrativity and to context-specific variations, is combined with critical view of the motivated construction of "genealogies of storytelling, story prototypes and voice" (Fernandes 2017: 5), and applied to storytelling practices within charity fundraising letters, several questions arise: What prototypes of stories are being created and curated within charity fundraising letters? What voices are bestowed telling rights? What kinds of experiences are considered tellable? What kinds of narrative arcs are privileged? What kinds of roles and actions are inscribed? And what cultural webs of narratives, and social structures of power distribution, are transformed or perpetuated, shaped or questioned, in that storytelling (Meretoja 2018a)? The rest of this article brings together these lines of narratological and ethical questioning to examine the workings, interweavings, interdependencies and contradictions of the stories of the beneficiary (section 2), the donor (section 3) and the charity (section 4) within charity fundraising letters. Section 5 of the article presents conclusions and reflections on implications for theory and practice.

2. The representative experiencer's story

Drawing on evidence-based studies, philanthropic researchers Sargeant and Shang argue that "real victims generate the strongest emotional response, the most positive attitude toward the communication, and the highest proclivity to donate" and add that "in many cases, a single identifiable victim generates more support than thousands of unidentified victims in aggregate" (2017: 81). This corroborates the 'identifiable victim effect' was originally put forward by Schelling (1968; see also Small et al. 2007). To offer just one example of how this is transferred into sector trade books, Brooks writes that "so many fundraisers think the size or intractability of a problem is what makes it compelling. What they're missing is that donors don't want to solve a problem because it's big. They want to solve it because it's solvable" (2012: 38). Brooks continues, "the fundraising that works is always about a sick baby. Or a father who couldn't grow enough food for his family" (38). These are examples of individual stories of problems which have solutions, each "an account of *one person*" (39, italics in the original). Shuman

proposes that the use of a personal narrative testifies to the reality of the need, creates the impression of a singular, authoritative, first-hand and thereby reliable *interpretation* of the need, and lends legitimacy to charity's appeal, whilst backgrounding the paternalistic context (2005: 130-2).

The individuals whose stories are leveraged within fundraising letters as a central emotive device are commonly referred to within the sector as "victims" (e.g., Sargeant and Shang 2017; Small 2011) or "beneficiaries" (e.g., Breeze and Dean 2012; Hibbert 2016; Merchant et al. 2010). Crombie (2020: 8) critically reflects on the passive, one-way interaction and disempowered receivership inscribed by the term 'beneficiary', and advocates for the use of the alternative term "contributor" (i.e., a partner in the work of the charity). The story of this individual, meanwhile, is sometimes referred to within the sector as a "case story" (e.g., Chang and Lee 2010) or "case study" (e.g., NCVO 2020), which foregrounds the representative or allegorical function of these stories, and elides the original teller, their individual identity and personal experience. This article instead uses the terms 'representative experiencer'[4] and 'representative experiencer's story'. These terms reflect the spotlighting, within this article, of the individual's first-hand experience, and of their discursive role in letters as an experiencer (i.e., as someone who has experienced, or is experiencing, something which has given rise to a need), and also draw attention to the function of the story as representative of others'/collective experiences. They also avoid the (occasionally assumed) implication that the individual whose story is told is necessarily a direct 'beneficiary' of any donation made in response to reading that story, do not position the individual as a 'victim', and create space for querying how routinely such individuals have informed and empowered agency over how their stories are selectively narrativized, presented and circulated.

As Mäkelä (2018) points out, an embodied individual experience, and the mediation of this experience, seem to be at the crux of most definitions of narrative. The mediation of an individual representative experiencer's story can be located on three continua. The first continuum is a scale from positive (e.g., happy, healthy, strong) to negative (e.g., intensely pitiable) framing of the representative experiencer.[5] The second continuum is a scale from first-person presentation to third-person presentation. The third continuum relates to the overall proportion of letter that is dedicated to presentation of this single representative experiencer's story, i.e. the extent to which the individual experiencer story is foregrounded (and other stories backgrounded). In addition to the three continua, there are arguably three different narrative trajectories. The first narrative trajectory presents a crisis which has been resolved, but now there is the risk of a new crisis (e.g., a flood has been survived, but there is risk of future flooding, of starvation due to crop damage, etc.). The second narrative trajectory presents a crisis which has been resolved for some people but not for others (e.g., a health

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[4] This term is not unproblematic, in that, for example, it backgrounds the individual's identity and agency.
[5] The first continuum is less directly relevant to this article, but for valuable critical discussions see Breeze and Dean (2012), Bünzli (2021), Chang and Lee (2010) Crombie (2020), and New Venture Fund (2016).

condition for which some have received medical care, but others are still in need). The third narrative trajectory simply presents an ongoing crisis (e.g., long term famine or civil war). The choices made with respect to these continua and trajectories, combined with the choice of using one individual's story as representative of others, entail ethical implications.

The first continuum, relating to the narrative voice used to present the representative experiencer's story, has a bearing on claims to authenticity, ownership, immediacy and empathy. Shuman raises the problem of entitlement in storytelling, asking "who has the right to tell a story, who is entitled to it?" (2005: 3). Representative experiencer stories which are presented in the first-person voice arguably carry a greater sense of embodied immediacy, evoking the reader's empathy with the individual concerned (Keen 2007). Use of stories in the first person also implies that the original speaker has bestowed the charity telling rights, with permission to recontextualize and convey their words, rendering charities less open to allegations of misappropriation or misrepresentation.

A first-person story will nonetheless be edited and textually framed. Shuman suggests that in the context of charity fundraising letters there is the possibility that "quotation erases rather than makes present the quoted person" (2005: 125). Selective quotation can be read as representing the quoted person - as standing in for, summarising and epitomizing - thereby presenting a reductive portrayal of the individual's experiences, roles and identities in ways which risk reaffirming stereotypes. Moreover, Georgakopoulou describes some of the editorial practices and "entextualization choices" that quoted and inscribed small stories can be subjected to, such as "erasing hesitations, uncertain looks toward the interviewer, false starts [and] long pauses." Georgakopoulou argues that "entextualization encompasses a host of choices of form from layout to … transcription … with a host of implications for what may be foregrounded or overlooked" (2017: 273). Further to the potential problems of quotation and entextualization, any editing, translation or reformulation of the original first-person storytelling involves a subtle form of erasure of that individual's voice. A rendering of the representative experiencer's story in the third person assumes the authority to interpret, paraphrase, summarize and 'speak for', entailing a greater erasure of the original voice.

The portrayal of experiencer's story as representative also carries ethical implications. Shuman highlights how, despite their basis in individual experience, these stories "stray beyond the personal," by being presented as allegorical – functioning "to represent not just individual, but collective, experience" (2005: 4). Representative experiencer stories, positioned as bearing a metonymic relation to the voices and experiences of others, are vulnerable to ethical queries regarding the entitlement of that story to represent (and thereby arguably silence) those others (121).

The British Red Cross Nepal earthquake appeal letter (2015) offers one example of the privileging of an individual's experience. A report of the radical world disrupting event of the earthquake is followed by iterative world-building, in the descriptions of the daily lived

experiences of consequent poverty, homelessness, and fear of recurrence. The letter presents the story of a named individual, Bijay, whose experiences are partly conveyed through direct quotation, for example "'As I was running down the stairs with my boys, my elderly parents were clinging to each other in the bedroom,' Bijay said. 'My dad is 79 and paralysed – my mum would not leave his side.'" The last segment of Bijay's story, though, is narrated in the third-person: the charity selectively describes his and his family's feelings of relief over their survival and despair over the devastation. The next sentence portrays the story of Bijay and his family as metonymically representative of the experiences of many: "They now face weeks of uncertainty ahead of them, as so many other families do." Bijay's story lacks closure: the story is presented as ongoing, awaiting an intervention.

Discussing the advantages and disadvantages of recontextualization and circulation of others' stories, Shuman notes that "storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences", but also argues that in some contexts "the appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding" (2005: 5). What is being occluded by this privileging of the individual are the larger and more complex narratives of how the representative experience came about. Fernandes argues that "disconnecting … personal experiences" from the "broader geopolitical contexts" in which they occur can reinforce stereotypical narratives about the causes of the situations which have led to those experiences (2017: 13). Mäkelä probes the social-political consequences of twenty-first century transmedial "radical storification – the focusing on individual experience instead of macro-level or complex phenomena" (2018: 175). Mäkelä finds "tear-jerking fundraising stories" to be a more "harmful or misleading" form of "instrumentalised story[ing] of personalised experiences (178), partly because, as Fernandes writes, they foreground the individual and the immediate, and background the bigger picture: they prioritize the satisfaction provided by "practical problem solving over confronting power and class conflict" (2017: 29).[6]

A further example illustrates this issue.[7] Roughly 25% of a letter by Action Aid (n.d.a.) is dedicated to telling the story of Nikita. The letter begins, "Born and raised in the slums of Mumbai, Nikita lives in a tiny hut made of metal sheets and plastic with her parents and her younger sister." Notably, she is introduced via a locative prepositional phrase that situates her

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[6] See Moore et al. (2021) for one example of an empirical study which found that including information about systemic issues which have created to the situation of need increased the likelihood of inspiring belief in the need for broader systemic social change, without deleterious effects on reader engagement, empathy and willingness to act. The study warrants replication in varied charity contexts, but suggests that the complex social and structural narratives which representative experiencer stories tend to occlude could potentially be incorporated into fundraising letters without reducing revenue generation.

[7] This article's re-entextualization and recirculation of the individuals' stories in the illustrative letters is arguably more ethically problematic than the charities' use of these stories, in that the individuals have no awareness of, and thus have not permitted, the author's use of their stories in this context. Additionally, it should be noted that the two examples have been selected based on their illustrative potential, with no intended critique of the practices of the two charities involved, both of which are widely respected within the sector.

using the word 'slum', which tends to be used by more powerful and privileged people to marginalize and misrepresent more impoverished communities (Mayne 2017). The charity's presentation of Nikita's story deploys iterative world-making – the portrayal of unchanging limited or negative experiences: "There's no electricity and oil is so expensive her parents have to ration the use of their only lantern. Nikita's father earns a few rupees selling garlic, but it's never enough and Nikita often goes hungry." Nikita's story is presented in the third person, with no indication that Nikita's own words have been used or even paraphrased. Her voice is thereby elided from the story (as are the voices, and names, of her parents and siblings). Nikita's experience becomes metonymic: the next sentences of the letter are "Thousands of children in Mumbai and other deprived communities around the world are growing up in poverty …. Children like Nikita can't depend on hope or luck …". The storytelling thereby moves on to portray Nikita's story as illustrative of the experiences of "thousands of children in Mumbai", children "like Nikita" who are represented only through her. The letter invites the reader to become a child sponsor, or make a donation, with the promise of this act "making a difference." The causes of this poverty – the wider, longer term, more complex and less directly remedied issues – are elided by the selective, micro-narrative focus of the storytelling.

Meretoja (2018a, see also 2018b) distinguishes between subsumptive and non-subsumptive narrative practices. Subsumptive narrative practices "function appropriatively and reinforce cultural stereotypes by subsuming singular experiences under culturally dominant narrative scripts." They also "reinforce problematic stereotypical sense-making practices", those which "tend to hinder our ability to encounter other people in their uniqueness and perpetuate the tendency to see individuals as representatives of … groups" (2018b: 107). They present an authoritative, naturalizing interpretation of the events and experiences they depict. Subsumptive narratives reduce and appropriate the individual, and, as per the view of Levinas, subsume "singular experiences, events or persons … into a coherent system of representation: narrative represents them as 'fixed, assembled in a tale'", within a sequence of events presented as inevitable (Levinas 1991: 42, cited in Meretoja 2018b: 105). While subsumptive narrative practices present storyworld events as "self-evident and inevitable", non-subsumptive narrative practices instead present counter-narratives, and challenge oversimplifying stereotypes and categorizations, and have the potential to expand our 'sense of the possible', to change perspectives and modes of thinking and perspective-taking, (Meretoja 2018a: 90). Some presentations of the representative experiencer's story in charity fundraising letters risk reaffirming stereotypes, such as positioning the less privileged as 'other' (Hall 1997) and as "the oppressed" (Shuman 2005: 148), and reducing complex narratives to naturalized crisis-resolution dynamics on a human scale. In Meretoja's terms, the nature of the appropriation and mediation of experiencers' narratives within charity fundraising letters, and the use of them as representative, arguably tends towards subsumptive narrative practices. The same could be said of the presentation of the potential donor's story.

This section has explored the way in which the crisis within charity fundraising letters is located within a story of an individual representative experience. One of the contradictions inherent

within the use of a representative experiencer's story is the way in which the letter conventionally moves away, towards the end, from any implication that the potential donor can directly aid that individual with whom a personal empathic connection has been facilitated, and draws the potential donor towards the idea that 'you could help someone *like* [the named individual]', e.g., "Please make a difference to a child like Nikita today" (Action Aid n.d.a.). The representative experiencer is no longer the sole occupant of the role of the Object, within Greimas's actantial model (1983): that position becomes, usually latterly and briefly, occupied by multiple, anonymous people 'like' that named individual.

This shift in attention from the one to the many arguably addresses one particular critique of individualized representations of need in charity fundraising letters and elsewhere: that evoking empathy towards an individual creates only a very limited form of empathy, and obstructs people from forming a more "universal compassion" which is likely to be a more powerful force for positive social change (Bloom 2016). However, the marked extent to which most fundraising letters foreground the individual representative experiencer's story suggests that this critique is valid in this context.

Shuman calls for a different but connected critique of empathy in the context of charity fundraising letters, arguing that a letter's primary provision of an opportunity for the potential donor to feel a prosocial emotional response to the named individual reaffirms "the privileged position of empathizer" (2005: 5). Relatedly, Meretoja (2018a) asks whose agency is enabled through the representative experiencers' stories. The story of the potential donor, as the key agent in the letter's multiple narratives, is the focus of section 3.

3. The potential donor's story

The term 'supporter' is often used within the fundraising sector, rather than 'donor': 'supporter' encompasses other kinds of giving to the cause (e.g., volunteering), and backgrounds the monetary exchange. Interestingly Merchant et al. (2010) use the term 'consumer', which is arguably more fitting in some ways, not least in view of the 'consumption' of an other's story. In this article, the term 'potential donor' has been adopted, because the focus of this section is upon the narrative path that hinges precisely upon that potentiality; the reader's agency, opportunity and privilege, to choose to donate financially (i.e., to become a 'donor'), or choose not to.

The three different narrative trajectories through which the representative experiencer's story can be presented (i.e., a crisis survived but with risk of recurrence or subsequent crisis; a crisis resolved for some but not others; an ongoing crisis - see section 2) offer the potential donor different points of intervention in the story, and different kinds of agency and levels of impact. Multiple roles also exist for the potential donor: from 'hero' to 'helper' – or, in Greimas's terms (1983), from Subject (as hero-protagonist, providing aid to the experiencer as Object), to Helper (as an agent who supports the charitable organization as Subject).

The representative experiencer's story often begins on the front of the envelope of the charity fundraising letter, as does the positioning of the potential donor, with text such as "Will you save *x* from a harsh winter on the streets?" or "Please help us save *x*", for example. On the envelope, and within the letter, the verb choices, and the inclusion (or otherwise) of the charitable organization as an agent with a more or less direct relationship to the representative experiencer, can either position the potential donor in a direct relationship with the representative experiencer and/or the group they are representing, as the principally empowered agent and protagonist (e.g., "Will you *be there to help* families on the edge of survival?" (Oxfam n.d.) and "Will you *protect* children like Omar from the bitter cold?" (UN Refugee Agency 2016)), or can situate the potential donor primarily in relation to the charitable organization and in a secondary agentive role (e.g., "Please *help us save* women like Maria from this evil in our midst" (The Salvation Army 2019)). This latter position also notably presents the remedial action as collaborative (see section 4).

The more individualistic narrativizations which position the potential donor as a hero and saviour are expressed through invitations to "perform a miracle" (Sightsavers 2014), to "save a child the world forgot" (Action Aid n.d.b.), and to "giv[e] the gift of childhood" (Action Aid 2016), and assertions that "you can transform a life", "your gift … could save lives" (Action Aid 2021), and "your generosity will change lives," (Christian Aid 2016), etc. In these examples, the second-person pronoun (or a noun phrase using the second-person possessive pronoun) is the grammatical subject – the sole agent. This is combined with verb phrase and object pairings implying high impact (e.g., "could save lives", "will change lives"). The potential donor, and/or their actions (i.e., their "gift" or "generosity"), are presented as significantly, and solely, empowered. Brooks advocates this approach in their sector guidebook:

> The best story of all is the story where the donor is the hero. … You never go too many sentences without shining the spotlight back on the donor. You make it clear she has the power, the will, and the compassion to make the world a better place by giving. … Make it clear the donor is the hero.
>
> (Brooks 2012: 41, 42)

Positioning the donor as a hero, "as an agent capable of changing the world" (Shuman 2005: 148), however, diametrically positions the representative experiencer, and the group(s) they represent, as needing to be saved - as lacking the agency to change their own circumstances without dependency upon others. This reiterates and re-enforces disempowering narrative power structures, and undermines attempts to present the representative experiencer, and the group(s) they represent, with dignity.

The charitable organization instrumentalizes the story of the representative experiencer for financial gain to alleviate the central need. Concurrently, storytelling within charity fundraising letters serves a self-oriented need in the potential donor (e.g., of empowered altruism), while simultaneously and relatedly backgrounding more complex narrative situations and the potential donor's relationship to those narrative situations (e.g., of complicity). Shuman

discusses the ways in which "appropriation can use one person's tragedy to serve as another person's inspiration and preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations" (2005: 5). The relationship between the representative experiencer's story and the potential donor's narrative trajectory provides an illustrative example of uses of storytelling to marshal reactive "moral energy", and appeal to emotions, values and self-identity, rather than to issues-based analysis (Fernandes 2017: 33). Presser proposes that, among different readers, "different stories provoke emotional reactions of varying force and engagement … depending on how much preferred experiences and identities are under threat" (2018: 21). Though such short narratives have limited potential to achieve reader-immersion, the dramatic intensity of the story of the representative experiencer, and the positioning of the reader as someone who either is or is not the kind of person who would choose to help, is impactful through the arousal of the reader's emotion and their desire to perform an act, completing a narrative which reaffirms their preferred self-identity. As Presser states, the attraction of the "resolution" of the story is the illusion of agency and control, and of "a recognizably stable self" (2018: 20).

As mentioned in the previous section, a tension arises towards the end of many charity fundraising letters in the shift away from the individualized empathetic relationship that has been implicitly established between the potential donor and the representative experiencer. While much of the letter may offer the opportunity to 'save x', the last lines are more likely to imply the potential donor could 'save people like x' (as per the close of the Action Aid letter in section 2). The prior implicit avenue for achieving narrative closure, by resolving the problems faced by x, is latterly negated and frustrated. Despite this, many recipients take the next step in the narrative journey, and donate. This suggests that while the one-to-one individualized relationship may be important in evoking engagement, the potential donor does not need, or can readily see beyond, that individualized depiction of need, once they are engaged.

Unusually, this juncture of the potential donor's completion of their narrative lies beyond the auspices of the textually inscribed discourse. Many charities send thank you letters, or make thank you phone calls, etc., which carefully convey some kind of impact alongside gratitude, thereby providing some textual or verbal narrative resolution.[8] The deferral (at best) of that final step, however, beyond the cessation of the narratives within original letter, as well as the possibility that the charity may not be able to report precisely the impact originally implied in the letter, risks achieving only a weak narrative satisfaction in that closure.

The penultimate section of this article devotes some attention to the most backgrounded of the three narrative strands within charity fundraising letters: the story of the charitable organization.

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[8] As with fundraising letters, there are many templates and guides for thank you letters online (e.g., Donorbox 2021; Sargent 2011). The discourse conventions of impact updates and thank you letters, and their relation to storytelling continuation and/or closure, warrant further research.

4. The charitable organization's story

The charitable organization conventionally functions as the primary narrator - the dominant voice in the letter through which all entextualized storylines are framed and mediated. As the main and framing teller, the charitable organization is in control of the presentation of other two stories. Unlike the other stories, the story of the charitable organization is not usually presented as the story of an individual, though but rather of a depersonalized collective. A caveat is required though, in that, as will be discussed, this story is often attributed to an individual, at least at the point of the letter's close.

Again, a continuum may be useful, in appreciating the affordances of the story of the charitable organization: a continuum of different degrees of presence or absence of reference to the work of the charity. As mentioned in section 3, in narrative configurations in which the potential donor is presented as the hero, the story of the charitable organization tends to be backgrounded: here their role is that of the Sender, in Greimas's terms, and references to the work of the charitable organization will be few. In narratives which present the charitable organization as Subject, reference to the work of the charitable organization is likely to occupy a larger proportion of the text. Relatedly, the charitable organization is more likely to be depicted in the syntactic role of active agent in verbal processes. Consider, for example, the ask "Will you be there to help families on the edge of survival?" (Oxfam n.d.) which positions the potential donor as the directly impactful agent and elides the charity. Compare the ask "Could you give £5 to ensure we can respond when we are needed?" (British Red Cross 2010). Here the potential donor ("you") is the actor in the main clause, but the charity ("we", implicitly excluding the potential donor) is the agent which responds and which is needed.

A further continuum may be relevant, one in which the voice of this teller narrates as an individual predominantly using first-person singular reference (e.g., "I have seen …"), or first-person plural reference (e.g., "We have built … ") or using referring to the charity by name (e.g., "[name of the charity] has developed …"). There is different rhetorical value in presenting the charity as a legitimate organization comprised of a collective body of people, and presenting the charity via a single, seemingly authentic, relatable individual. Charities tend to, at minimum, present the letter as signed by a named individual, creating a personal touch, signalling the legitimacy of the letter, and suggesting its author has a position of responsibility and/or is a reliable source. For example, within a Christmas Appeal letter from Crisis (2020), while the letter makes occasional first-person plural reference to "us" and "our" work, the first-person singular pronoun "I" is used only in the final line, latterly developing the impression of a personal message from an individual, identifiable, authoritative author: "From all of us at Crisis, I wish you a very happy Christmas" is followed by a signature, the signatory's name and role - "Head of Crisis Christmas Team".

When first-person reference is more prominent, is it usually to voice a form of witness testimony, for example with phrases such as "I've seen a great deal of cruelty and suffering" (The Salvation Army 2016), "I'll never forget my first winter in Jordan" (UN Refugee Agency

2016), and "I saw for myself the unprecedented scale of the flooding" (British Red Cross, London, 2010), testifying to both the reality of the need and the authority of the teller. Such individual testimony, as per the representative experiencer story, provides a first-person perspective with which the potential donor can empathetically connect. This voice has different empathy-inducing affordances, however, in that the teller may be more likely to be (perceived as) a member of the 'in-group' of the potential donor, and they model an emotive response to the experience of witnessing – a response thereby presented as appropriate - which can guide the potential donor towards feeling and acting in the desired way.

Notably, the donor's act of donation will not complete the narrative trajectory of the charitable organization or the witness/teller/author: their work and story is generally implied to be unending, each appeal part of a continuous series. The need-generating situation that functions as radical world disruption or repetitive world-building in the story of the representative experiencer, and the donor's purportedly crisis-resolving, climactic act of donating, both constitute a different kind of mere world-building in charity's ongoing story.

There are inevitable tensions between positioning the potential donor as the protagonist and key agent of change, and positioning the charity as the protagonist – as the primary agent whose role the donor merely facilitates.[9] As has been illustrated throughout this article, this is but one example of the ways in which the positioning, and narrative trajectories, of the potential donor, charitable organization, and representative experiencer are interdependent, and but one manifestation of the challenges of mapping complex processes, involving multiple agents and stakeholder groups, onto individualistic cultural codes.

5. Conclusions and implications for theory and practice

While the immediate need presented in a charity fundraising letter is often intended to create a degree of world-disruption for the recipient, that world-disruption is framed in such a way as to suggest the act of donating as the recognizable and ready means by which that disruption can be resolved. The broader 'untellable' socio-political narratives which have led to the circumstances of need, and which have not only created the necessity for the charity fundraising appeal, but have also contributed to the normalization of the dynamics of power, privilege and agency inscribed in the web of relations within philanthropy, are not disrupted, and nor are the discourse conventions or the wider systems of communication through which philanthropic appeals make meaning (Meretoja 2018a). In one view, the individualistic, emotion-arousing, self-identity-affirming nature of conventional storytelling practices within charity fundraising letters tend to reduce or distort sequences of events into a crisis-resolution narrative arc and an individualistic, rather than collective or collaborative, model of experience, empowerment and agency, and to problematically perpetuate patriarchal and paracolonial

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[9] Some charities are increasingly presenting experiencers as agents, e.g., explicitly portraying local communities as initiating and driving change, with charities' collaborative support. This shift is sometimes as part of programmes to decolonise Western philanthropy.

relationships between those who have historically been among the privileged and empowered peoples of the world, and those who have not. In another view, the charity sector is both mindful of, and cannot escape, its difficult position with regards to the ethics of its storytelling practices.[10] Instrumentalizing stories of representative experiencers is highly effective in generating funding needed to facilitate charities' work. Just as those who design systems using artificial intelligence cannot control the inherent misogyny within the data on which those systems are based, the charity sector cannot control the broader culturally dominant patterns of consumerist engagement with individual, problem-resolution/trial-triumph narratives. While many charities also work hard to effect significant structural and social change in complex contexts, most are responding to urgent need with limited resources. Charities make choices about which stories to tell, and how, but they do so within a cultural context in which views on what kinds of stories are 'tellable', relatable and powerful are deeply entrenched. Fernandes (2017) and Presser (2018), as leading critics of instrumental storytelling and the ethics of narrative, foreground the role and responsibilities of charities, as agents given telling rights and/or asserting telling privileges, to examine the ethics of their storytelling practices and to engage critically with the discourse conventions and encoded power structures involved, but both critics extend this responsibility to readers too, as consumers of and actors within these stories and the cultural norms within which they operate.

It is important to note that the outline of narratives within charity fundraising letters in this article deliberately focusses on the prototypical. There is wide variation (not least spurred by the need for novelty to attract readerly attention). Some charities prefer to provide lengthy first-person letters from representative beneficiaries as separate enclosed (rather than embedded) texts, for example. Different causes have slightly different conventions, codes of practice, and affordances. Some organizations and campaigns are less individualistic (particularly religious charities), and appeal more to in-group identities. Different nations, and more so cultures, operate via slightly different discourse conventions, within different embedded, foregrounded and backgrounded power structures, and with different conceptualizations of tellability and the unnarratable. The ethics of representation of animal beneficiaries is, within current culturally dominant views, very different. It is hoped that the discussion of the more prototypical charity fundraising letters presented here may inform and support analyses of the narratives and ethics of wider varieties.

Finally, the three core strands of a charity letter, and the hypothetical future events they project, can be usefully recognized as stories in their own right, and, while a charity fundraising letter as a discrete textual unit is difficult to conceptualize as a coherent narrative, its strands do nonetheless closely fit aspects of the conventional definition of a multiplot narrative: they

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[10] For an exploration of the deeper ethical contradictions underlying conventional Western philanthropy, see Žižek's compelling animated lecture (RSA Animate, 2010), and Glennie (2011) as an example of an opposing position.

"frequently … include embedded narratives", and "new plot lines are initiated when intersecting destinies create new personal relationships, new goals, and new plans of action, which interact in various ways with the previously establish[ed] plot lines" (Herman et al. 2005: 368, 324). The application of ideas from small stories research to charity fundraising letters shows how taking an inclusive and context-sensitive approach to narrativity facilitates a deeper narratological appreciation of the multiple plot lines, protagonists, tellers and tales in this discourse genre, and enables a means by which to constructively accommodate and explore their often non-linear, fragmented and ongoing/unfinished form.

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