ABSTRACT

Helping or Hurting: Dismantling Poverty Stigma in Nonprofit Organizations' Strategic Messaging

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Charitable nonprofit organizations are often described by their supporters as noble, servant-hearted, caring, accommodating, and considerate, thanks in part to strategic messaging that underscores the organizations' emotional connection and practical assistance to individuals in need. However, when viewed through a different lens, the very messages intended to be helpful and dignifying to clientele may portray a different meaning to the public. The current study examines the challenges and implications of charitable organizations' strategic messaging about poverty. The following forms of qualitative data were collected from several Central Texas nonprofit organizations with poverty-centered missions. Interviews were conducted with nonprofit message crafters to understand the ways in which organizations strategically attempt to dismantle stigma surrounding poverty. Additionally, a content analysis of messages produced on organizational websites and social media was conducted. Findings of this study contribute to the scholarly literature on stigma communication and nonprofit legitimacy. *Keywords*: Nonprofit Organizations, Nonprofit Legitimacy, Strategic Communication, Stigma, Poverty

Helping or Hurting: Dismantling Poverty Stigma in Nonprofit Organizations' Strategic Messaging

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The stigmatization of individuals, groups, and cultures is nothing new to society and is of central interest for many scholars (e.g., Neuberg, Smith, & Asher, 2002; Smith 2007). Originated by the Greeks, the term stigma was used to refer to bodily symbols that were intended to expose something socially or morally wrong and unusual about that person (Goffman, 1990). The dehumanization of Jews in the Holocaust, the shame and torture of African American slaves in early America, and more recently, the genocide in Myanmar, are all historical examples of groups of people who were stigmatized, or targeted as bearing certain attributes that caused a negative impact on society. In addition to the widespread and deadly outcomes of stigmatization, other individual consequences of stigma include lowered self-esteem, anxiety, academic achievement, and declining physical health (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Markowitz, 1998).

In the eyes of many, the nonprofit sector is thought to be a champion for vulnerable and stigmatized groups in society. As described by the National Council of Nonprofits, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) provide "a way for people to work together for the common good, transforming shared beliefs and hopes into action… they foster civic engagement and leadership, drive economic growth, and strengthen the fabric of our communities" (2019, September 26). The National Center for Charitable Statistics (2018) estimates that 1.56 million nonprofits are registered with the IRS, and these nonprofits contributed an estimated $985.4 billion to the US economy in 2015. Nonprofit

organizations employ on average 14.4 million Americans and impact almost every demographic and generation (McKeever & Gaddy, 2016). Charitable 501(c)3 organizations in particular constitute the largest segment of the nonprofit sector in the United States, providing services such as essential healthcare, natural disaster aid, poverty and hunger relief, and animal and environmental advocacy. In short, the reach of charitable nonprofit organizations is vast and the mission of the sector writ large is, and should be, to "foster civic engagement" and "strengthen communities" (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019).

Perhaps nowhere is the role of nonprofits more important than in the lives of individuals facing poverty. In the United States alone, 38.1 million Americans live in poverty, many of whom turn to government or community assistance (US Census Bureau, 2019). Sadly, though, those who seek aid from charitable organizations potentially expose themselves to being further stereotyped, marginalized, and subjugated in an identity that places shame on their choices and lives. Nonprofits have the potential to play a crucial role in combatting the shame that surrounds their clientele; however, scholars in the communication field and beyond argue that NPO communication could be actually perpetuating the stigma (Alcoff, 1991; Dempsey, 2009; Lewis, 2005; Lewis et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2003; Murphy & Dixon, 2012).  As charitable organizations seek to alleviate poverty, they must tell moving stories to inspire widespread support for their missions, for as the nonprofit practitioner network *Ethical Storytelling* attests, "the story is currency" for many nonprofit organizations (Ethical Storytelling, 2020).  Additionally, NPOs must also communicate efficacy at combatting poverty in the communities they serve. Yet in the process of telling moving stories and attempting to legitimize their

existence, poverty-centered NPOs may unwittingly or inadvertently subjugate the very people they seek to elevate.

In addition to scholarly voices, nonprofit practitioners are increasingly acknowledging that the communities they claim to serve deserve more attention and consideration than the sector has typically afforded. For example, *Ethical Storytelling's* practitioner community promotes conscientious self-exploration of questions such as "Why is it that we [nonprofit organizations] continue to tell the stories of those we serve as if they're one dimensional? Why is it that we [nonprofit organizations] continue to consume one dimensional stories?" (Stories Matter section, para. 1). Practitioner voices such as these illuminate the reality that nonprofit messaging is damaging to communities when poorly crafted, and change is necessary.

In light of these practical concerns, the present study illuminates the communication dynamics linking charitable nonprofits and poverty stigma. Using in-depth interviews with five nonprofit marketing and communication professionals and qualitative content analysis of 11 nonprofit organizations' website and social media content, this study examines the ways in which charitable nonprofit professionals represent individuals experiencing poverty and the implications of this messaging for the ongoing stigmatization and shame of these groups. Additionally, this research explores the concerns and mindfulness of nonprofit actors responsible for crafting this content and underscores the multiple and, at times, conflicting interests that influence NPOs' strategic messaging.

Several streams of research provide the conceptual framing for this study. First, interdisciplinary poverty stigma research lays the foundation of the importance of

3

understanding the stereotypes and misconceptions of poverty. Images and preconceived notions of individuals in poverty have created a false reality of the impoverished community. Resenting impoverished individuals for their inability to contribute to society, blaming individuals' circumstances on a personal lack of effort and motivation, and over representing minority race in the media are areas of research that serve to shed light on the stigmatization of the impoverished community (Clawson, 2002; Gilens, 1995; Neuberg et al., 2000; Williamson, 1974). Second, communication research on Stigma Management Communication (SMC) provides a theoretical lens to understanding the ways in which individuals address and respond to stigma messages (Meisenbach, 2010). Further, nonprofit communication research on nonprofit legitimacy (Gill & Wells, 2014), the marketization of the nonprofit sector (Sanders, 2012), and agentic representation of aid-related messages (Hanchey, 2016) highlights the organizational complexities that nonprofit organizations must navigate to communicate ethically and effectively.

Intersecting these literatures has the potential to expand scholarly knowledge of why and to what ends nonprofits communicate publicly about their clientele. While SMC theory has been studied from the perspective of the individual stigma management processes, this study analyzes SMC at the organizational level. Viewing SMC from the perspective of organization-as-actor calls us to examine the transferability of these axioms to stigma management processes outside of the individual. Further, the intersection of marketization and stigma advances nonprofit communication studies by illuminating marketization's effects on stigma communication. Marketization has been recognized as a concerning nonprofit shift by communication scholars (e.g., Sanders,

4

2012). However, research has not directly examined the ways in which marketization may also contribute to the stigmatization of clients.

The following chapter provides an in-depth overview of the previously discussed literature and research. Chapters three and four provide insight into the methodology and findings of this study. The findings from this study offer three communication facets as central to NPOs ability to dismantle stigma: references to collective agency, favorable social comparisons, and client accountability. Furthermore, NPOs perpetuate stigma through two communicative facets: nonprofit agency, isolation and labeling. Nonprofit agency credits client change to the NPO and strips power from the client. Isolation through labeling appears when NPOs uses labels for clients such as "the poor" or "the homeless." These labels discursively remove clientele from the rest of society by targeting their identity as different. Additionally, the marketization of nonprofit organizations and their communicative efforts to demonstrate legitimacy were found to be both at odds and alignment with NPO messaging that dismantles client stigmatization. The final chapter addresses the scholarly and practical significance of the findings, provides recommendations for future NPO communication research, as well as addresses the limitations of the current study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to illuminate stigmatization as a byproduct of organizational tensions and communicative construction. Specifically, this chapter intersects theorizing of Stigma Management Communication (SMC) (Meisenbach, 2010) with scholarship on nonprofit representation (Hanchey, 2016), marketization (Sanders, 2012), and legitimacy (Gill & Wells, 2014). In order to meaningfully examine these concepts as they relate to poverty-centered nonprofits' strategic messaging, though, it is first necessary to review the major geneses of poverty stigma writ large.

*Societal Stigmatization of Poverty*

In the United States, poverty stigma is rooted in several origins. First, interconnected discourses that promulgate the American Dream and reciprocal exchange as well as link hardship with (lack of) motivation have fueled poverty stigmatization (Jennings, 1999; Mooney, 2009; Rank, 2004; Williamson, 1974). Second, media messaging that erroneously depicts poverty as limited to one racial group serves to further stigmatize (Clawson, 2002; Clawson & Kegler, 2000; Giles, 1995). These origins of poverty stigma are reviewed in turn.

*The "American Dream," Reciprocity, and (Lack of) Motivation*

In his book *Epic of America*, historian James Truslow Adams, quotes, "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and

fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (1931;

p. xvi). French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, states in his book *Democracy of America*

that the American Dream was "the charm of anticipated success" (2012, p. 75).

Professional success, financial prosperity, equal opportunity, and happiness are the

foundation of what this "dream" to live in the United States of America encompasses.

With this image engrained in the minds of American citizens, a target is placed on the

back of individuals that have not lived up to this opportunity. This discourse of the

American Dream positions impoverished people as falling short of the American standard

of life, having violated the expectation to contribute to the betterment of the nation.  For

impoverished Americans, society places a stigma of failure, inferiority, deviance,

unintelligence that encompasses the understanding of their identity (Lott, 2002).

Further imbedded in the discourse of the American Dream is the expectation of

reciprocity, yet another element that contributes to poverty stigma (Neuberg et al., 2000).

Reciprocity is the idea of exchanging goods or resources for mutual benefit. In society,

"fundamental benefits of group living derive from the sharing of individual efforts,

knowledge, and material resources" (Neuberg et al., 2000, p. 37). As Neuberg and

colleagues argue, stigmatization of impoverished individuals derives from the

fundamental understanding that they cannot reciprocate to what is being given by the

group [society], and therefore burden and hinder the effectiveness of the group [society].

Reciprocity, meaning giving the same that was received, is a very important dynamic in

any relationship (Burgoon, Le Poire, & Rosenthal, 1995). When impoverished

individuals fail to have the ability to reciprocate means and services to society, for

whatever reason, stigmatization becomes the response from groups who see

impoverished people as threatening the ability to gain societal benefits (Neuberg et al. 2000). When individuals have interactions and relationships with one another, there are limits to the amount of uncertainty that can be withstood. In the context of reciprocity, the uncertainty of an impoverished person's ability to contribute or reciprocate actions in society causes discomfort. Once someone has violated the threshold of uncertainty they no longer feel comfortable interacting (Gudykunst, 2005). When society is uncertain of a group's [impoverished people] ability to contribute to society, to ostracize or eliminate their ineffectiveness is implicated through assumptions, stereotyping, and blame. Brewer (1979) states that "individuals will gain advantage if they selectively avoid, reject, or eliminate other individuals whose behaviors are disruptive to group organization" (p. 57). Stated previously, Americans experiencing poverty have violated the expectation to contribute to the country's betterment, and as predicted by expectancy violations theory, deviance from expectations can create negative cognitive arousal for those who witness this divergence (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Another discourse tied to the American Dream and reciprocity is the linking of success with motivation, or, inversely, failure with lack of effort and hard work. The "public ideology" of the American citizen depicts a "man that works hard ought to get ahead, does get ahead, and in getting ahead proves he's worked hard" (Rytina, Form, & Pease, 1970, p. 703). Thus, this "public ideology" continues to reiterate that poor people are not working hard enough to get ahead. Sociologist, John Williamson (1974) argues in his writings on the motivations of the poor that such beliefs are accepted more readily by higher socioeconomic classes and rebuffed by the individuals actually enduring this impoverished reality. In short, these contrived beliefs by higher classes indicate that

"failure to escape poverty is in large measure due to lack of sufficient effort and motivation" (p. 635). Sociologist, Gerry Mooney (2009), echoes Williamson's (1974) claim by stating that there "is a thinly disguised culture of poverty argument that people experiencing poverty are lacking in the capacity to escape poverty, gripped by fatalism and apathy" (p. 447). This practice of *blaming the victim* contends that impoverished communities are "held responsible for their poverty and their psychological make-up or deficiencies in their personality are seen to be the major blocks in bringing about improvement in their material condition" (Singh, 1980, p. 43; see also, Jennings, 1999; Rank, 2004).

Looking at poverty through an economic lens furthers the discussion on society's identification and discourse surrounding poverty. In America, society revolves itself around consumption (Hamilton et. al., 2014). Individuals deemed "good consumers" are citizens that "work hard," are "respected," and contribute largely to the contemporary consumer society (Bauman, 2000). By accepting this notion "poverty becomes a lack of 'consumer adequacy', defined as 'the continuous availability of a bundle of goods and services that are necessary for survival as well as the attainment of basic human dignity and self-determination'" (Hill, 2002a, p. 20). In connection with Williamson (1974), Hill (2002a) acknowledges that society blames impoverished individual's circumstances on their lack of human dignity and self-determination. Apathetic, lazy, unmotivated, and worthless have gained foothold as the characteristics of impoverished individuals in the minds of our society. Alongside these characteristics, society and the media have essentialized poverty and race.

*Media's Racial Stereotype of Poverty*

Mass media plays a larger role in the shaping of identity and culture than many might realize (Jansson, 2002; Kendall, 2005). Sources of media have "become the primary educational force in regulating meanings, values, and tastes that legitimate particular subject positions" (Giroux & Pollock, 2002, p.2). With increased technology and a larger consumption of visual media, societal perceptions can often times be skewed by the desires of media producers. In the realm of poverty there is stigma that comes with being an impoverished individual. The media has outlined an image and the character of a stereotypical "poor person." Pop culture media elicits representations of poverty on the correct way that these individuals are to live (Clawson & Trice, 2000), which are "often out of context, with no consideration of the underlying social and economic factors that work to generate and reproduce poverty over time" (Mooney, 2011, p. 7).

Race is a central aspect of media focus for impoverished populations in the United States. In the late twentieth century, scholar Martin Gilens (1995) conducted research that illuminated the inequality of race portrayal in the media concerning poverty. Gilens (1995) found that impoverished individuals were most often represented as African American when in reality they accounted for 29% of the impoverished population. In 1995, Gilens states that "national surveys show that the public substantially overestimates the percentage of blacks among the poor" (p. 516), a misconception that is very much alive today. In 2002, Rosalee Clawson published her research on the overrepresentation of African Americans in economic textbooks portrayals of poverty. Clawson states that the reality is, "blacks make up less than one third of the poor; yet, these textbooks would lead students to believe that 50% of the poor

10

are African American. In contrast, only 23% of the textbook poor were White, when the true proportion is twice that number" (p.353). Clawson and Kegler (2000) address this misrepresentation as "race coding." In this case, textbooks blatantly represented poor America as a black problem when statistics did not support this representation. The Opportunity Agenda (2011) created an illustration to represent research by Clawson et al. (2007) that claimed the idle black male on the street corner is not the "true face" of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in media portrayal (p. 24). It is clear that the media is susceptible to misrepresenting poverty as dominated by the African American population.

As sociologist, historians, and other scholars have demonstrated, social discourse and media depictions of impoverished individuals and communities has set the tone for how many Americans view and react to poverty. Communication scholars have furthered our understandings of how poverty is stigmatized by providing theoretical frameworks of stigma messaging and management.

*Stigma as a Communicative Construct*

Stigmatization is not a process that appears generationally or situationally, but is a challenge that must be managed daily (Falk, 2001). It is also a complex process that includes more than just one agent. Stigmatization is developed by stigmatizers, the stigmatized, bystanders, the process of stigma, and the social context in which stigma occurs (Bresnahan & Zhuang, 2016). In recent years, organizational and interpersonal communication scholars have begun to examine stigmatization as a communicative process (Meisenbach, 2010; Smith, 2007). These scholars have discovered ways in which organizations and individuals might perpetuate stigmatization through the ways they

11

communicate with the public and other individuals. Rachael Smith's (2007) early work on stigma identifies four attributes of stigmatic messaging. Smith explains that stigma provides content cues to "distinguish people," "to categorize these distinguished people as a separate social entity," "to link this distinguished group to physical and social peril" and "to imply a responsibility or blame on the part of the stigmatized for their membership in the stigmatized group and their linked peril" (p. 463).

Following Smith's work, Rebecca Meisenbach developed the theoretical framework of Stigma Management Communication or SMC (Meisenbach, 2010) which provides increasing knowledge and understanding on stigma management strategies and reasons for stigmatization of impoverished individuals. Meisenbach's work details the role of the stigmatized in attempting to discursively manage stigma. Before SMC, previous research typically evaluated stigma solely through the lens of the "nonstigmatizer." However, Meisenbach (2010) suggests with SMC that, "stigmas are discursively constructed based on perceptions of both nonstigmatized and stigmatized individuals" (p. 271). This theoretical development illuminated the reality that stigma is developed by more than just the stigmatizer. Goldberg and Smith (2011) reiterate the notion of multiple forces of stigma in their research on homosexual stigma and its effects on same-sex adoption. This study identified that external (i.e. public disapproval) and internal (i.e. internalized homophobia) stigmas contributed to mental health issues for homosexuals looking to adopt children. Similarly, Meisenbach (2010) explains that "individuals' perceptions of themselves as stigmatized are important to identity formation and stigma management theorizing, whether publics share that stigma perception or not" (p. 271).

Further, SMC highlights the notion that stigma is not developed solely by discourse. Meisenbach (2010) suggests that stigma is created through social discourse *and* material conditions. Understanding that stigma is bred through subjective discourse and objective materials emphasizes the complexity of stigmatization. Through SMC, "stigma is a social construction of human perception of differences; differences may be material and permanent, but perceptions of them as meaningful and as causes for SMC are not" (p. 272). To illustrate this axiom, Meisenbach uses King's (2006) study on breast cancer stigma as an example. King's (2006) book discussed the politics of philanthropy surrounding breast cancer. Meisenbach (2010) states that "societal discourses surrounding cancer have shifted as society's material ability to treat cancer has shifted," which demonstrates the duality of stigma contraction (p. 272). In their study on burn victims and stigma management, Notensmeyer and Meisenbach (2016) acknowledge that "the model [SMC] recognized that individuals have choices about how they could respond to a stigma message and that these choices needed to reflect both internal and external perceptions of whether a person is stigmatized" (p. 1381). Lastly, echoing Kreiner et al. (2006), SMC acknowledges that "stigmas vary by degree in breadth and depth" (Meisenbach, 2010, p. 272). Understanding the breadth and depth of certain stigmas provides additional information and data when choosing management strategies. An important foundation for understanding SMC is reviewing Meisenbach's (2010) theoretical model of stigma. The following section elaborates on this work.

Meisenbach (2010) not only addresses axioms of SMC, but further outlines and illustrates a theoretical model of stigma. Meisenbach (2010) proposes that in the initial phase of SMC individuals will assess the public stigma's applicability to their situation

and evaluate whether their own perceptions of stigma align with the publics. Once individuals acknowledge and accept that the stigma has affected them, individuals begin implementing SMC strategies. SMC strategies include "passively accepting, displaying, apologizing, using humor, blaming stigma, isolating, and bonding" (p. 280). Further, individuals who deny that stigma is applicable to them engage in SMC strategies such as "hiding stigma attributes, avoiding stigma situations, stopping stigma behavior, distancing self, and making favorable social comparisons" (p. 282). The SMC model ends with the notion that the strategies individuals choose will have either positive or negative outcomes on their health, self-esteem, and job turnover.

In a study by Noltensmeyer and Meisenbach (2016), the authors researched SMC strategies chosen by burn survivors and their partners. Through their research, Noltensmeyer and Meisenbach (2016) discover that the original SMC model "does not appear to be nuanced enough to capture all of the factors at play in a survivor's stigma management strategy choice" (p. 1392). The authors suggest that the incorporating interpersonal relations into the SMC model would strengthen the model. Stigma communication scholar, Rachel Smith (2014) further suggests the need to understand the role of interpersonal relationships in stigma communication. While SMC is foundational in stigma and stigma management research, there is still research that needs to be conducted to fully understand the ways in which organizational actors (mis)manage stigma through the selection of management strategies and representational agency.

*Agentic Representation and Nonprofit Stigma Management*

Examining how NPOs represent and construct agency around the people they serve is key to understanding their role in stigma management. Communication scholar

Jenna Hanchey has drawn attention to subaltern theory and agency representation to illuminate the creation of stigmatic messages and representations of clients. The definition of subaltern designates a group of people that are of a lower status and are in all aspects outcasts of a powerful hierarchy. Agency representation indicates who is the object that has the ability to control and change circumstances (i.e., Whoever attains agency has control). Subaltern agency and representation has a role in the stigmatization of individuals (Hanchey, 2016). Through the assessment of three humanitarian aid video campaigns to Africa, Hanchey (2016) discovers the overwhelming incorporation of rhetorical imperialistic ideologies. Hanchey (2016) claims that these widely popular campaign videos "reinforce Western assumptions about Africa and entrench imperialistic power relations by portraying African agency in Western-centric ways" (p. 12). In a video campaign designed to eliminate children's slavery in Uganda, Hanchey argued that agency is given to the Western culture. The video campaign portrays an image of Ugandan children helpless and abandoned, waiting on the Western world for help. Videos like this "create the groundwork for the agent–victim dichotomy" (p. 19). Hanchey argues further that Africans represented as agency-less have resulted in the African people appearing they are incapable of helping themselves. Similarly, it stands to reason that individualistic agency for American NPOs reiterates stigmatic images of helplessness, failure, and rejection for clientele.

Further, owning agency fulfills a level of control (Hanchey, 2019). In a study on American medical students on a mission trip to Tanzania, Hanchey reveals that "medical students' efforts to maintain control often involved disavowing Tanzanian skill or agency" (p. 48). Removing agentic control from subaltern groups illustrates a picture of

their subordination to the heroes (NPOs and campaigns). For nonprofit and other humanitarian aid organizations, the representation of agency is critical for eliminating stigmatic and stereotypical beliefs. As seen in Hanchey's (2016) study, individual agency given to NPOs and other organizations results in falsifying and imperialistic messages that fuel stigmatization in the minds of the public. With individualistic agency for Westerners "African agency in aid campaign videos result in problematic assumptions among Western audiences about Africans, who they are, and of what they are capable" (p. 25). While Hanchey (2016) focuses on African aid campaigns, I argue that individualistic agency of NPOs portray a false reality of impoverished communities in America.

In an attempt to improve social movements, organizing, and change work, Hanchey (2016) suggests that organizations alternatively adopt collective representations of agency in their messaging. Hanchey outlines three concepts to help move away from Western-centrism ideals in aid campaigns which include: "moving away from representing agents solely as individuals, offering alternatives to configuring aid interventions as hero/villain epics; and by presenting alternatives to the agonistic configurations of agents engaged in war and division" (p. 12). While Hanchey (2016) suggests these conceptual shifts in the context of African aid campaigns, I argue that these conceptual shifts should be incorporated in the context of all nonprofit aid messaging. Dutta and Pal (2010) deem collective agency as an essential aspect to the success of social change and fundamental for increasing ethical relationships with marginalized groups. The incorporation of collective agency representation has the ability to shed new perspectives on ways that aid campaign practitioners represent subaltern

groups (Hanchey, 2016). Collective agency is a strategy to give agentic control to both the NPO and client. It removes the notion that NPOs are the saviors and acknowledges the client as a critical agent in change. I argue that using collective agency representation in aid messaging serves as a way to dismantle stigma within these messages. In the context of nonprofits and poverty, moving messages from an individual agentic perspective where the NPO is the hero, saving helpless individuals from poverty, to collective agency where defeating poverty is a collective effort of the NPO and individual, dismantles the stigma that impoverished individuals are unmotivated to help themselves. Collective agency has the potential to recreate the way that nonprofit aid messaging effects its clientele.

In addition to agency representation, Social Representation Theory (SRT) adds additional theoretical understanding of how and why certain perceptions of society are formed. Similar to sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), social representations allow individuals to make sense of society and its relationships (Hamilton et al., 2005; Jodelet, 1991; Joffe, 1998). Social representations become an ingrained and routinized daily (Hamilton et al., 2005). Through SRT, stigmatizing attributes and stereotypes of groups can be formed and reiterated in society which could further lead to social and psychological damages for these groups (Howarth, Foster, & Dorrer, 2004; Jodelet, 1991; Moscovici, 1988).

I argue that agency representation plays a large role in SRT's ability to reiterate stigmatization and stereotypes. Attaining agency by NPOs and other aid organizations allows for these entities to remain in control of the depictions of the impoverished. However, in an effort to establish legitimacy and manage competing values, nonprofit

17

organizations may take agentic control and further exploit and stigmatize the very people they intend to serve. The next section explores, nonprofit organizations' responsibility in perpetuating stigmatizing messages as an unintended byproduct of moves toward marketization and efforts to pursue legitimacy (Alcoff, 1991; Dempsey, 2009; Lewis et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2003; Lewis, 2005).

<p align="center">*Competing Nonprofit Messaging Concerns*</p>

In addition to managing client stigma, nonprofit organizations have a challenging task of integrating and surviving in a highly competitive and overwhelming market economy (Sanders, 2012). Tensions of establishing credibility, balancing the market economy, and upholding the organizational mission pose competing demands that can comprise other messaging interests such as ethical representation. With an abundance of NPOs, each organization has the responsibility of displaying that it is performing and serving as it claims to do (Gill & Wells, 2014). NPOs also have the responsibility to represent their clientele in an honorable and respectful way. These organizational pressures and tensions become even more complicated for nonprofits because of their multiple stakeholders. The overwhelming demands of a NPO to appear legitimate, function successfully in a market-based economy, respectfully represent clientele, and accommodate multiple groups of stakeholders, creates difficulty in avoiding stigmatization of clientele.

*Marketization of Nonprofits*

With a rapidly growing global economy and changes in government operations, the tension of marketization of nonprofit organizations has become widespread

(Eikenberry, 2004; Sanders, 2012). Marketization is the "adoption of market discourse and practice in nonbusiness organizations" and "reveals the simultaneous pull between the financial imperatives of operating within a market economy and pursuing a social mission" (Sanders, 2012, pp. 180-181). Marketization forces for-profit elements of business into the NPO model of business. Sanders and Dempsey (2010) expend the term "Social Entrepreneurship" to further illustrate capitalist entrepreneurial ideals invading the nonprofit sector.

Understanding the existence of these competing demands sheds light on the complicated nature of making decisions in a nonprofit organization. Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) claim marketization of nonprofit organizations can cause "potential deterioration of the distinctive contributions that nonprofit organizations make to [create] and [maintain] a strong civil society" (p. 138). Marketization's ability to disrupt NPOs mission of creating a "strong civil society," indicates that marketization could have detrimental effects on the way that clientele are prioritized. That is, scholars have argued that marketization of nonprofits diminishes and invalidates the ideals of justice and fairness (Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004). The elimination of justice and fairness essentially removes the mission from the motivation of many nonprofits. The pressure by NPOs to abide by economic values or traditional nonprofit values is articulated in Sanders' (2012) statement

> As nonprofit organizations operate within a market economy, values such as commitment beyond self, individual worth and dignity, responsibility, tolerance, freedom, and responsibilities of citizens that underlie nonprofit work (O'Connell, 1988) can be overshadowed by economic and competition-centered values that seek to secure competitive advantage in the pursuit of producing individual-level goods and services for those who can afford them (Brainard & Siplon, 2004). (p. 180)

Nonprofits have the inevitable task of continuously constructing their work and messages around these two competing goals. Decisions about mission, priorities, activities, and the allocation of resources must be approached carefully (Brainard & Siplon, 2004). Due to the reality that NPOs cannot fully function outside of the market economy, these organizations are plagued with creating solutions to this tension (Sanders, 2012).

Sanders, Harper, and Richardson (2015) reveal after interviewing 12 nonprofit leaders at a local and national level that "participants readily acknowledged the expectation to be business-like and easily described their organizations as businesses" (p. 3). In this same study, the authors found that to balance the tension of business and mission, NPO leaders "selected only those aspects that were relevant to their work" (p. 4). Being professional and being financially responsible were the two aspects of business that NPO leaders felt most related to their line of work. NPO leaders deemed being professional was important in establishing credibility and legitimacy with external stakeholders. The implications of this study suggest that business values and social mission values blend together by communicative construction in nonprofits. The need for nonprofits to appear legitimate and the ways in which legitimacy is constructed are tied to the issue of nonprofit marketization and may also intersect with whether and how NPOs may further stigmatize the people through their messaging

*Nonprofit Legitimacy*

Nonprofit legitimacy refers to an organization's behaviors aligning with its actions (Gill & Wells, 2014). Achieving this legitimacy perpetuates tensions in communication due to the many audiences that NPOs communicate with (clientele,

volunteers, donors, management, political parties, etc.). Not all NPO leaders share the same cultural background as their clientele, therefore, NPOs engage in *communicative labor* by representing and speaking on behalf of groups that they themselves do not belong and further, have not been elected by these groups to represent their identities and interests (Dempsey, 2009). Zwick and Dholakia (2004) discover that in the digital marketing business, "consumer identity is authored by the owners of database technologies, not be the consumer him/herself" (Hamilton et al., 2004, p.1837). Similarly, identity of impoverished individuals is authored by NPOs not the individuals themselves.

Ganesh (2003) coins the phrase "organizational narcissism" to explain the tendency of NPOs to value their own legitimacy over the larger good of clientele and other stakeholders they represent. While NPOs' messages "are trying to materially improve the situation of some lesser-privileged group, the effects of discourse reinforce racist, imperialist conceptions and perhaps also to further silence the lesser-privileged group's own ability to speak and be heard" (Alcoff, 1991, p.26). It can be difficult for organizations to identify who is the most relevant stakeholder to consider when making decisions (Dempsey, 2007). Further studies (Lewis et al., 2001; Lewis et al., 2003) have concluded that NPO leaders direct organizational communication to the stakeholders that can offer the most funds and perpetuate resources within the organization (Lewis, 2005). To grow, "NPOs must carefully craft identity messages that generate buy-in and increase the resources available to them" (Gill & Wells, 2014, p. 30). For NPOs, the identity of resource providers becomes more important than protecting the identity of clientele. It would be naïve to believe that NPOs could completely eliminate communication to donors and other stakeholders. In an attempt to appear legitimate to donors, volunteers,

clientele, and society, the purpose and mission of the organization can become hazy. For example, organizations can be so consumed with making sure marketing is perfect for each stakeholders, flourishing financially, and courting donors and volunteers adequately, that they can begin to lose sight of the original mission. This inability to be grounded in the organization's mission leaves NPO messaging vulnerable to stigmatization of clientele.

Due to the nature of nonprofit organizations, the public expects that these organizations will act selflessly and "honor a set of widely accepted moral and humanitarian values" (Jeavons, 2016, p.191). In a case study by Murphy and Dixon (2012), the authors discover that not all NPOs have their clientele's best interest at heart. An administrator for Ugandan Alliance (UA), an orphanage in Uganda, admitted that "to her, UA was not so much about helping the orphans and widows of the villages but it was a place in which young people like her [author] could come and find themselves as they lived and worked in Uganda" (p.168). This testimony reveals that NPOs are capable of manipulation in their messaging and communication, which can cause exploitation and stigmatization of groups. An explanation for the apathetic attitudes of NPOs towards clientele exploitation, is that "images of people and their needs attract and repel funding and make political interventions more or less likely" (Dempsey, 2009, p. 328). The exploitation and stigmatization of individuals becomes a tool to raise funds and make statements to the community. Dempsey (2009) demonstrates that NPOs fundraising efforts focus on a "good story," rather than protecting the community they are trying to serve. Dempsey (2009) recounts that members of a researched NPO "showed steady concern for the need for persuasive stories demonstrating the ways in which grassroots

22

groups spontaneously organized for transformative change within their communities" (p. 339).

*Research Questions*

Navigating tensions is a fundamental reality and task of organizational communication (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004), and for nonprofit organizations, the tensions of managing representation and agency along with marketization and legitimacy are ever-present (Gill & Wells, 2014; Sanders, 2012). As poverty-centered nonprofit organizations produce strategic messages, they confront the pressures to produce a "good story" that conveys the power and impact of their work alongside the ethical need to preserve the dignity of the people they serve (Dempsey, 2009). These tensions prompt two guiding questions to frame this study:

RQ1: In what ways do NPOs focused on poverty confront, dismantle, and/or perpetuate stigma in their messages?

RQ2: In what ways to NPO marketers confront concerns of stigmatization when crafting messages, and how do other nonprofit values influence these messages?

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

*Sampling and Data Collection*

Typical instance sampling was used to define a sample of NPO organizations and

staff members (Tracy, 2013). Eleven organizations in the Central Texas area were

selected for study based on their large presence in the community and desire to eradicate

poverty (See Table 3.1). NPO communication/marketing staff members were selected as

prospective participants given their knowledge and role of NPO messaging. With

approval the Institutional Review Board at the author's university, participants were

recruited via email, and 5 individuals (4 organizations) ultimately agreed to a one-on-one

interview. Participants' privacy was ensured through printed confidentiality agreements

(See Appendix B) which participants were asked to sign indicating content prior to the

interview. Pseudonyms replaced real names, and pseudonyms were used for all

organizations, as well. All data was saved on a password protected computer.

Interview topics focused strategies used to combat stigma in their messaging,

tensions that surface when crafting NPO messages, and the degree to which NPOs

manage stigma in their messaging. Interviews included questions such as, "What are

strategies that the organization takes to appear legitimate (i.e. displaying that it is doing

what it says to be doing and is fulfilling the intended mission)?" and "Can you walk me

through your organization's process of creating messaging?" Questions were also

designed to explore communicators' sensemaking about how their messages shape

Table 3.1. Organizations and Descriptions

| Organization | Description |
| --- | --- |
| NPO A | Services include food pantry and empowerment/life training for impoverished individuals |
| NPO B | Services include thrift store, homeless shelter, empowerment/life training for impoverished individuals |
| NPO C | Services include mentorship and empowerment/life training for impoverished youth |
| NPO D | Services include a many aid programs for impoverished individuals |
| NPO E | Services include thrift store, homeless shelter, empowerment/life training |
| NPO F | Services include a many aid programs for impoverished individuals |
| NPO G | Services include education and empowerment programs for impoverished women |
| NPO H | Services include several initiatives for hunger relief |
| NPO I | Services include homebuilding and homeowner education for impoverished individuals |
| NPO J | Services include mobilizing resources to measurably improve lives of impoverished individuals |
| NPO K | Services include a residential program and empowerment/life training for youth |

societal understandings of people experiencing poverty. For the complete list of interview questions, see Appendix C. On average, interviews were 45-50 minutes in length, and subsequently transcribed, resulting in 52 single-spaced pages.

In addition to interviews, qualitative content analysis was conducted on the website and social media content of the 11 organizations to increase knowledge of the reality of NPO messaging and NPO current practices. Content analysis allowed for realistic view of the ways in which these NPOs communicate with its stakeholders and attempt to dismantle stigma. Specifically, the home landing and about/mission pages of websites were analyzed. The scope of analysis for NPO websites was chosen because the homepage is the first impression and communication that any visitor will experience. The *about/mission* page was selected because these pages give information on the

background, mission, values and services of the organization. These sections are important to analyze because it displays how the organization communicates the content that has the most potential to house stigmatizing messages. All content analysis was conducted prior to interviews to gather informative information that could be used to create additional probing questions.

Social media content was included for analyses based on the following criteria. One platform from each organization was selected for analysis based on which platform was most frequently used (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). With the exception of one organization, all messages posted between February–May 2020 were included for analysis, including texts and images[1]. February through May was chosen as the scope of the analysis for two reasons. One, due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, starting in February allowed for a look at conventional NPO messaging before messages focused on COVID-19. The time frame set in the middle of the pandemic was also chosen because it was the most recent messaging and many organizations communicated via web-based platforms more often. The second reason this scope of time was chosen was due to it being the late spring season right before the "summer slump" (TIAA Charitable, 2017). With the busyness of summer, often times donations and volunteers drop in numbers, therefore, it is necessary to recruit more intensely during this time. The early spring timeframe was selected for analysis given the typically high period of posting that occurs in response to waning donor engagement. The 2017 Blackbaud Charitable Institute Giving Report stated that February was the lowest percentage of giving by donors (5.9%). Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, May was also considered for analysis

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[1] One organization's messages were examined in February and May given the inordinate frequency and redundancy of messages posted (i.e., approximately 3-4 times per day).

because of the higher reliance on technological messaging. As previously discussed, May was chosen to be evaluated due to its time frame before the "summer slump," where there tends to be an increase in messaging to recruit donors and volunteers.

<center>*Data Analysis*</center>

*Interview Data*

Following data collection, I used software to transcribe interviews from each participant and saved the files on a password protected computer to ensure confidentiality. After the software completed transcription, transcriptions were edited for any mistakes to eliminate coding errors. I used thematic analysis to identify themes and concepts in the interviews (Owen, 1984). Owen's (1984) use of themes were "less a set of cognitive schema than a limited range of interpretations that are used to conceptualize and constitute relationships" (p. 1). Owen's (1984) thematic analysis analyzed the emergence of themes throughout his study. Similarly, during data collection, codes emerged and evolved throughout the coding process. Using foundational information from Sanders' (2012) marketization research and nonprofit legitimacy literature (Gill & Wells, 2014), I completed a primary-cycle thematic coding on the collected data to identify the tension of nonprofits need to conform to a for-profit style of business. Further, I analyzed the ways in which NPOs claimed they display legitimacy to the public and their stakeholders. The coding scheme for legitimacy and tensions developed as the coding progressed. While there were not specific codes developed beforehand, themes on legitimacy and tension emerged as interviews were evaluated. For example, codes such as "testimonials" and "statistics" emerged as NPO legitimacy methods under the theme of

nonprofit legitimacy. Additionally, "dealing with multiple stakeholders" emerged as a common tension under the theme of NPO tensions. Codes that were not developed until further in the coding process included relational accountability, labeling, and favorable social comparisons.

*Website and Social Media Content*

The unit of analysis for both the website and social media occurred at sentence and paragraph messages. Content and images were evaluated on what degree they addressed ideas such as race/body representation, lack of motivation or lack of client autonomy, and reciprocity. These specific aspects were evaluated to address if societal stigmatization features were perpetuated or dismantled in NPO messaging.

Using Hanchey's (2016) research on representational agency, a code was developed to identify the majority of NPOs' placement of agency in their messaging. Each organization was labeled with one of the following: *individual organizational agency, clientele agency,* or *collective agency.* Individual organizational agency represented that the majority of the messaging on these NPO platforms gave agentic control to the NPO. Clientele agency represented that the majority of the messaging on these NPO platforms gave agentic control to clients. Lastly, collective agency represented that the majority of the messaging on these NPO platforms gave collective agentic control to clients and NPOs. This category demonstrated NPOs and clientele having a joint effort in their aid.

The second stage of the content analysis coding was developing a coding scheme of ways that NPOs seemingly address, dismantle, or perpetuate stigma in their messaging. The coding scheme was developed as the analysis continued. As sentence and paragraph coding took place, repeating themes were entered into the codebook (i.e.

Labeling Clients). The coded themes were organized in an Excel document. Coding

pages were divided by organization and then further broken down into website themes,

social media themes, and interview themes (if applicable). Once coding was completed,

grouping of emergent codes where refined, categorized, and simplified to best explain the

findings. Due to the wide breadth of the study, certain themes could not be developed

before analysis, however, themes were grouped by *perpetuating stigma practices* and

*dismantling stigma practices.* The totality of analysis resulted in themes in each of these

categories. Table 2 displays all findings that emerged from this study.


Table 3.2. Master List of Findings

| Dismantling Stigma Strategies | Perpetuating Stigma Strategies | Tensions in NPOs |
|---|---|---|
| Collective Agency | NPO Agency | Stakeholder Tensions |
| Favorable Social Comparison | Isolating Through Labels | NPO Marketization |
| Relational Accountability | | NPO Legitimacy |


*Procedures to Ensure Validity*

To promote interpretive validity, a third-party moderator read the literature review

of the study and attested to whether or not the theoretical research aligns with the

research question and methods. Having this third-party "moderator" kept this study

accountable for potential biases and ethic encroachments. Further, I assessed the sample

to verify that the sample group satisfied the intended study demographic and the number

of responses reached saturation. Saturation was reached around the eighth organizational

analysis. This study was peer-reviewed prior to submission to the Baylor University

graduate school. The peer-reviewer challenged the evidence from the study, as well as

played "devil's advocate" to ensure accurate findings and interpretations. Having a peer-

reviewer for this study allowed for an increase in descriptive validity. Low inference

descriptors, such as verbatim quotations from participants, were used to increase

interpretive validity of the study (Johnson, 1997). Data triangulation, method

triangulation and theory triangulation (Johnson, 1997) were used to increase the validity

of this study. Data triangulation was satisfied through multiple data sources (social media

sites, organizational websites, and NPO practitioners) which allowed for a more well-

rounded understanding of discoveries. Similarly, method triangulation increased the

validity of the study through the implementation of two methodological approaches

(Content analysis and interviews). Lastly, theory triangulation incorporated multiple

theories and perspectives (SMC, Agency Representation, NPO Legitimacy,

Marketization, etc.) into the research to aid in the bolstering of theoretical validity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Emerging from detailed content analysis and interviews, findings revealed two overarching themes: *Methods of Dismantling and Perpetuating Stigma* and *Tensions in NPO Communication.* The first research question explored in what ways do NPOs focused on poverty confront, dismantle, and/or perpetuate stigma in their messages? The second research question addressed in what ways do NPO marketers confront concerns of stigmatization when crafting messages, and how do other nonprofit values influence these messages? The findings of this study have revealed that no NPO is immune to creating stigmatic messages. All 11 NPOs analyzed demonstrated the capability to dismantle as well as perpetuate stigma in their messaging. Content analysis and interviews identified there to be three facets of messaging that NPOs incorporate to dismantle and combat stigma. Similarly, the findings show that there are two facets of messaging that further perpetuates poverty stigma. The ways in which organizations were positioned as the agent (collective versus sole) interacted with stigma management strategies (e.g., favorable social comparisons) to help dismantle or further perpetuate clientele stigma. Much of the explanations for the perpetuation of stigma were produced by the ever-present tensions found in NPOs. Additionally, contrary to previous research, NPO legitimacy was discovered to both perpetuate and dismantle stigma.

*Methods of Dismantling Stigma*

All of the organizations analyzed in the present study put forth at least some messages that functioned to uplift and encourage their clients. Through the analysis of web content and interviews, I identified three specific facets of messaging that, together, help to dismantle poverty stigma: Collective agency (Hanchey, 2016), making favorable social comparisons (Meisenbach, 2010), and client accountability.

*Collective Agency*

As previously discussed in chapter two, collective agency in NPO communication effectively avoids the tendency to cast clientele as helpless, failures, and worthless (see Hanchey, 2016). Rather, collective agency representation creates the understanding that NPOs and clients are working alongside each other to enact change. Previous research illuminated lack of motivation and effort to better themselves and the community as a stigmatic attribute of impoverished individuals (Mooney, 2009; Rytina, Form, & Pease, 1970; Williamson, 1974). The incorporation of collective agency avoids casting the NPO as the savior and reiterates that clients are capable and strong enough to enact their own change. Collective agency was reflected in many of the messages that dismantled stigma. For example, one NPO website stated that "We help them get started so they can begin helping their communities" (NPO A). Further, NPO G states on their website "[NPO G] fosters spiritual, personal, and professional growth enabling women to transform families and communities." These messages are crafted to dismantle stigma by showcasing that clients have autonomy and are capable of contributing back to their communities. These messages also directly dismantle stigma surrounding the poor and their inability to reciprocate (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Mooney, 2009; Rytina, Form, & Pease, 1970;

32

Williamson, 1974). Collective discourse such as "we" and "enabling women" indicate that the betterment of clientele is not being produced solely by the NPO or the individual, but through a combined, collective effort. Messages such as "Together, we can do this," (NPO B) "Clients develop a plan of action and [NPO D] helps them achieve their goals," (NPO D) and "They have overcome incredible obstacles to continue their education through [NPO G]!" (NPO G) reveal that collective actions enact change. Notice that these messages place agency on both the NPO and client. Framing services as a collective effort by the NPO and client acknowledges the strength and capabilities of clients. Incorporating collective agency into NPO messaging highlights the clientele's ability to conquer challenges themselves, work as a team, give back to the community, and develop/accomplish goals. As previously mentioned, these messages by NPOs dismantle lack of motivation and reciprocity poverty stigma. The findings are evident that collective agency plays a large role in the elimination of stigma. Similarly, Meisenbach's (2010) favorable social comparison SMC axiom appeared to play a part in NPOs ability to dismantle stigma. The following findings highlight the instances and benefits of incorporating favorable social comparisons into organizational messaging.

*Favorable Social Comparisons*

Meisenbach's (2010) research on stigma management communication provides several axioms that indicate different methods individuals implement to combat stigma, one of which is the SMC strategy of making favorable social comparisons. Favorable social comparisons are used to display favorable commonalities between stigmatized individuals and the rest of society. Findings from content analysis and interviews reveled that organizations also make favorable social comparisons in attempt to combat the

33

poverty stigma. While the original indication of making favorable social comparisons is in context of the stigmatized individual, organizations also compared or linked their clients with favorable activities, values, and norms which helped to dismantle client stigma. Through content analysis, findings highlighted that organizational use of favorable social comparisons also worked in concert with efforts to encourage clients to seek services.

An object that is rife with (de)stigmatizing potential is food. The notion of hunger and food scarceness are commonly in tangent with ideals about poverty. For example, NPO B used the hashtag "#foodie" in one of their social media posts promoting free food that would be offered for clientele. The word "foodie" can often be found in conjunction with gourmet food and popular bloggers who enjoy exotic cuisine. In a Washington Post article, Philipino restaurateur, Elbert Cuenca, stated the word "foodie" was "a modern-day casual substitute for 'gourmet'" (Ferdman, 2016). Additionally, Reid Nichols (2012), a writer for an online food blog, stated,

> Foodies go to new restaurants, shun large chain establishments and are eager to give their opinions and recommendations. Foodies know something about the chefs, cooking styles or methods of these restaurants. They also know about the quality and origin of the food they consume. Foodies are keen to fads, education and culinary tourism.

NPO B's implementation of this hashtag into the post was an attempt to make a free food handout seem special, extravagant, and expensive. Using this hashtag helps to link sophisticated cuisine to those who cannot conventionally partake of it. This favorable social comparison of free food to gourmet food dismantled stigma by categorizing this free food handout as top of the line. Similarly, NPO F's website stated, "we've got everything from grass-fed beef to the best price in town for Blue Bell ice cream."

Crafting messages to include the adjectives "grass-fed" beef and "Blue Bell" ice cream help to dispel the idea that impoverished individuals cannot partake of premium or top-of-the-line food.

The use of physical space and its activities played a key role in favorable social comparison's ability to discursively (de)stigmatizing poverty. In an interview, a NPO practitioner stated, "people used to come in and shop the way the pantry is laid out is kind of like an H-E-B store." The strategy to design the organizational space like that of a popular grocery store allows customers to feel they are getting the same grocery shopping experience as the rest of society. Moreover, NPO C used favorable social comparison to dismantle stigma by displaying a video on their website of children smiling and playing soccer. Depicting clientele engaging in a common sport and displaying joy and laughter on their faces combats the stigmatic image of an impoverished child sitting on the curb sad, dirty, and alone. NPO C uses favorable social comparison through the use of children playing soccer on a soccer field to present to the public that their impoverished clientele are no different than non-impoverished children.

Findings displayed that a popular favorable social comparison used by NPOs was comparing thrift store prices and quality to expensive boutiques. NPO E used a social media post to show pictures of expensive looking clothing with the added caption of "GREAT FINDS." By framing the organization's store merchandise as fashionable, new, and expensive, they dismantle the stigma that impoverished individuals only get hand-me-downs and tattered clothes. Similarly, NPO D suggests seeking services from their organization due to "Great deals." NPOs use of "Great Finds" and "Good Deals" could be argued as a strategy to dismantle stigma. Framing messages with this language creates

35

the opportunity for the public to not view clientele as needing a cheap handout, but taking advantage of a great deal. A CNBC article revealed that even millionaires love to take advantage of a good sale (Elkins, 2017). Elkins' article shares a Tweet from famous pop star, Lady Gaga, stating "why do people look at me like I'm crazy when I use coupons at the grocery or try bargaining at retail, IM FROM NEW YORK WHERE IS THE SALE RACK." This article highlights the idea that everyone, even wealthy pop stars, enjoy taking advantage of a sale. NPOs use of this language shifts the focus from clientele needing cheap items to clientele shopping smart and taking an advantage of a good deal. The favorable comparison between having to shop at a thrift store and leisure shopping at a boutique is clearly displayed as a stigma dismantling strategy.

*Relational Accountability*

       The differentiation of holding clients accountable for services versus framing services as a free handout is the third facet of dismantling stigma in NPO messaging. More specifically, accountability is most effective within the contract of collective effort and interpersonal bonds. Statements made through web content and interviews suggested that several NPOs attempt to convey the understanding that clients are not entitled to services but must showcase a need and desire to better themselves through the organization. In an interview, an NPO communication practitioner stated that "I don't take responsibility for their situation. They have got to be responsible for their life. I can help them. But if I just respond to them every time they need me, that is not helping them" (NPO A). A social media post from another NPO states "[NPO B] looks to give a hand-up, not a handout." Additionally, NPO I states on their organizational website that "[NPO I] is not a giveaway program. In addition to the monthly mortgage payments,

homeowners invest at least 300 hours of their own labor–sweat equity–into building their

house and the houses of others as well as completing New Homeowners College." These

statements create an understanding that individuals who seek the services of these

organizations are not lazy and simply taking free handouts as stereotypical discourses of

poverty suggest. These messages dismantle the stigma that impoverished individuals

have a lack of motivation to improve their lives (Jennings, 1999; Mooney, 2009; Rank,

2004; Williamson, 1974), but rather illuminates the reality that seeking services with

these organizations is a foundational step in improving their lives. When discussing the

role of the organization with an NPO practitioner the following statement was made:

> We have to remind our mentors that they're there to encourage them not to
> fix anything. And they're not there to, to rescue anybody. We don't allow
> them to, you know, be a chauffeur or have people spend the night or
> anything like that. That's not your job. You're not on a rescue mission
> when you come in here to mentor, right. You're here to partner and to
> encourage.

This statement provides an explicit example of an organization that strategically

operates to avoid giving handouts to clients. Further, a NPO practitioner stated when

providing services to clients "There will be obligations. You don't just show up here and

we hand you a blank check, you know, not at all." Similarly, another staff member stated,

"we're not a place that's going to have like a lot of giveaway things where you just come

pick something up and leave... most everything else is, is more relationship based." These

statements directly attempt to dismantle the poverty stigma that impoverished individuals

lack the ability to do anything for themselves. The findings of these interviews suggest

that many NPOs desire to avoid simply providing handouts, but rather hold clients

accountable and give them autonomy to be successful.

It is important to stress that implementing the language accountability must be used in concert with collective agency representations or else it perpetuates the cultural discourse that people in poverty must be forced to work because they lack intrinsic motivation. Accountability dismantles stigma because it allows clientele to feel as if they earned something from organizations. Further, it demonstrates to the public that impoverished individuals can exhibit hard work to help themselves. Additionally, accountability demonstrates these ideals due to the incorporation of collective agency. Without the use of collective agency in accountability discourse, there is more room to misinterpret the NPO message and intentions. If an NPO communicates "If you do this, we will give you this," there is potential for the perpetuation of stigma. Messages such as this highlight that NPOs represent agentic control and strip power from the clientele. However, highlighting the collective nature of accountability as a "hand-up not a handout" and reminding mentors to "partner and empower" not "rescue" clientele strategically dismantles stigma. NPO F states on their organizational website that their mission is to provide "empowerment through relationship-based, holistic programs." The emphasis of empowerment and relationship-based programs showcases the importance of relational and collective accountability.

Connected with collective agency, the notion of relationships is vital to understanding accountability as a dismantling strategy. Throughout interviews with NPO practitioners the idea of relationships and accountability was key to helping dismantle stigma. Building relationships with clientele allows NPOs to more easily encourage accountability, rather than simply requiring action in exchange for services. One practitioner stated, "the relationships that we have with our clients are important because

those are the ones that we can make a difference for them." Offering accountability induces additional collectivity the more that services are centered on relationships. Through relationships, it is easier for NPOs to communicate collective agency because there is a larger understanding of the client. The relationship aspect removes the need to simply require action for services, but seeks to find ways to partner and empower the individual. NPO F states on their organizational website that the origin of the organization was founded by wanting to "help bring 'good news' through relationships and empowerment opportunities." Relationships were foundational for effectively and collectively empowering clientele. Additionally, when discussing intern responsibilities NPO C states that "they [interns] are that vital first relationship, assessing current life/home situations and immediate/long-term needs of the students we seek to walk alongside." This statement highlights that relationships are a necessary element when collectively walking alongside clientele. Accountability is a more understood and effective strategy for dismantling stigma when in conjunction with relationships and collective agency representation.

When analyzing collective agency, favorable social comparison, and accountability, all thread together to dismantle stigma in NPO messaging. The connectedness of collective agency and favorable social comparisons can be seen by evaluating the ways in which favorable social comparisons bring collective understandings to the surface of messages. For example, discourse stating "great finds" and "great deals" reiterates the notion that as an NPO and client together there is the opportunity to capitalize on a great sale. In this example, favorable social comparison plays out through the idea that clients are capitalizing on a great deal rather than having

to shop at a thrift store. Simultaneously, collective agency is highlighted by giving a degree of autonomy and power to the client to capitalize on the great deals. Further, connectedness between collective agency and accountability was discussed earlier in this section. While it is apparent that NPOs implement strategies to dismantle client poverty stigma, there were found to be areas of growth. The following section illuminates two major facets of stigmatic messaging that NPOs often employ.

*Methods of Perpetuating Stigma*

As previously stated, no NPO is immune to creating stigmatic messages. The findings of the following section highlight nonprofit organization agency and isolation through labeling as two major facets of perpetuating stigma. NPO agency indicates that the organization has agentic control over clientele change. NPO agency perpetuates stigma by reiterating the idea that clientele are helpless and NPOs are saviors. Additionally, findings revealed isolating clients through labeling is a facet of communication that perpetuates clientele stigma. Labeling clientele as "the poor" or "the homeless" discursively isolates them from the rest of society. Labels that target identity have the ability to perpetuate poverty stigma. The following sections provide a detailed look at the findings on NPO agency and isolation through labeling.

*Nonprofit Organization Agency*

Returning back to Hanchey's (2016) research on agentic representation, she discusses the common tendency for nonprofits and other humanitarian aid organizations to fall victim to perpetuating western-centric ideals and values in their messaging. Many of these organizational messages reiterate a savior complex and create false realities of

the people they are serving through assigning agentic control to the organization. As

discussed previously in her research, Hanchey (2016) illustrates in an African aid

campaign that Africans were represented as agency-less and resulted in the African

people appearing incapable of helping themselves. Likewise, several of the NPOs in the

present study further stigmatized their clients through representations of agentic control.

For example, the website landing page of NPO A depicts a small Hispanic child, sad,

alone, and holding a sign stating, "Please help." These types of images perpetuate stigma

by creating an understanding that clients are hopeless, desperate, and searching for

someone to save them. Images such as this not only highlight the NPO as the savior, but

further strip clients of any power or dignity. Similar messages such as "Be a Hunger

Hero," (NPO A) and "Our program turns people into successes" (NPO A) perpetuates the

western-centric idea that people with money and resources are the heroes and clients are

failures. These messages give agentic representation to the nonprofit which depicts the

NPO as the agent for change, not clientele. Again, not only do these messages give power

and control to NPOs, but further removes any dignity or autonomy from the client.

Similarly, in a social media post one organization posted "We feed the hungry, house the

homeless, clothe those in need, rehabilitate the addicted…" (NPO B). While intention

behind this behind the message is innocent, it depicts the NPO as the savior. This

message further perpetuates stigma by highlighting all the stereotypical poverty

characteristics (i.e. hungry, homeless, the need for clothes, addiction).

Additionally, NPOs control agentic representation by explicitly labeling and

exploiting the circumstances of their clientele. The discursive isolation of impoverished

individuals can be found through explicit distinctions between "the homeless" and the

rest of society. The following section reveals instances of isolation and labeling in NPO communication.

*Isolation Through Labeling*

Research on stigma management communication argues when an individual acknowledges that stigma has affected them, isolating themselves from others is used as a management strategy (Meisenbach, 2010). The findings of this study suggest nonprofit organizations also contribute to the idea of isolation. Often times this was found in labeling clientele. One nonprofit website states, "Mobilize middle-class Americans to become more compassionately involved among the poor" (NPO F). This statement isolates "the poor" from the rest of middle-class America. Sequestering "the poor" into a separate category perpetuates poverty stigma by highlighting differences and their need for help. Stated in previous discussions, messages such as "Thank you for your sacrifice and compassion for the poor and marginalized," (NPO F) and "Done with that school backpack? For a homeless person, a backpack carries their home" (NPO B) explicitly places stigmatizing labels and characterizations on clientele. These isolating labels create the stigmatic idea in the minds of others that clientele are different, less-dignified, and helpless. I argue that implementing isolating labels in organizational messaging further validates their acceptability. "The poor and marginalized," "low-income neighbors," and "homeless" are labels that dehumanize and isolate impoverished individuals from the rest of society. The use of discursive labels causes isolation by ingraining in the minds of society that impoverished individuals are different and outcasts of the normal public. The negative connotation with which these labels are created reiterate to the impoverished

42

community that they are not a part of the normal public. This discursive isolation perpetuates the notion that impoverished individuals are on the fringe of society.

Additionally, the use of isolation and labels perpetuates stigma by highlighting identity rather than circumstance. Discourse that distinctively labels individuals as homeless and poor casts that individual's identity as being homeless and poor. However, discourse stating that a person has become homeless due to circumstances, highlights a situation rather than the person's identity. An example of this was found in a social media post which stated, "We have had the honor of serving and walking alongside those struggling with homelessness in our city through the COVID-19 crisis" (NPO F). This post highlights the notion that these individuals are facing homelessness, without casting homelessness as their identity. Communicating this labeling distinction within NPO messaging creates a difference between dismantling or perpetuating stigma.

The findings of this study suggested several explanations as to why NPOs might use these labels and language in their messaging. The following sections reveal organizational tensions that inhibit NPOs to clearly process the implications of their messages.

<center>*Tensions in Nonprofit Communication*</center>

Nonprofit organizations are replete with organizational tensions (e.g. Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Gill & Wells, 2014; Hanchey, 2016; Sanders, 2012), and this reality was palpable among the organizations that participated in this study. Through discussions with NPO practitioners it was apparent that nonprofit organizations wrestle with many competing demands. Many practitioners described the overwhelming nature of having to be attentive to several different stakeholder groups. One practitioner stated, "I don't know

of any other place where you have to spin all the plates at once and make life happen the way nonprofit people do." Being attentive to all stakeholders can produce challenges for NPO communication/marketing staff members. When discussing the challenges that arise with communicating to multiple stakeholders, a practitioner stated that "sometimes with your volunteers, you know, you have volunteer luncheons and volunteer this and that. And, and you can kind of get driven away from what your real mission is. If you're not careful." This statement illustrates the ease with which practitioners can begin to focus too heavily on one stakeholder at the expense of mission and people served. Stakeholder tensions provide a degree of explanation for the tendency for NPO agentic representation. When focusing too heavily on one stakeholder, NPOs can have a tendency to shift their language to fit the audience. While tailoring messages to a specific audience is not a negative strategy, there is temptation to lose sight of the mission and begin to illustrate the organization as having agentic control.

Coinciding with multiple stakeholders is the tension of providing multiple services. Several NPO practitioners highlighted the fact that providing multiple services comes with a challenge. One practitioner described the responsibility of running a shelter, afterschool children's program, low-income housing complex, social services center, medical clinic, legal clinic, laundromat, and grocery store. Similarly, a practitioner explained the desire to provide education, spirituality, and wellness. The necessity to designate attention to many different services causes tension by requiring practitioners to select which service and group (employees, donors, clients, volunteers) require the most attention. It is seemingly impossible to dedicate equal amounts of time and attention to every service and every group simultaneously. The overwhelming pressure for NPO

practitioners to eloquently communicate to every stakeholder about every service becomes a daunting and unmanageable task.

Other organizational tensions include marketization and legitimacy. Sanders (2012) discusses the pressure that nonprofit organizations face to conform to market economy styles of business. This study reveals that marketization poses challenges in the crafting of messages for NPOs. The following section displays NPOs' navigation of marketization and how this potentially contributes to the exploitation of clients.

*Nonprofit Marketization*

The pressure to conform to a market-economy style of business was a common theme amongst NPO practitioners. Much of the findings reflected NPO practitioners' aspirations to be marketable and relevant. These tensions of conforming to a competitive and self-interest driven economy produced messages that perpetuated stigma, but also produced messages that dismantled stigma. Discussions with NPO practitioners and web content analysis revealed the complicated task of marketing a nonprofit organization. Multiple NPO practitioners expressed the necessity to conform to certain aspects of the market economy to continue growing as an organization. The consequences of overlooking the organizational mission results in clientele being misrepresented or completely eliminated from representation. NPO practitioners expressed, as NPO A said, that they "have to function that way [like a for profit business] …our mentality is a for profit business." When discussing the marketing of the organization's thrift store, a NPO practitioner expressed the importance to "make it salesy… make the imaging appealing… and make it as sexy as any, any other shop." It is evident that the desire to appear desirable and relevant remains an important aspect of NPO marketing that has the

potential to draw focus away from the mission of the organization. One NPO practitioner stated,

> We have to study the trends and we have to decide what marketing trends we're going to follow and you have to decide if we're going to merchandise ourselves…if you're not careful, you can get very involved with courting people and making people happy instead of really focusing in on the mission.

The necessity to be a marketable organization can often cloud message crafters' responsibility to showcase the organization's mission, which results in the potential stigmatization of clientele. A byproduct of organizations' making marketization a priority is the stigmatization of clientele. The tendency for organizations to become hyper focused on selling the organization could leave them vulnerable to forgetting about the needs and identities of their clientele. For example, one organization's website was tailored directly for volunteers and donors. A NPO practitioner for this organization stated, "I don't know that our website is necessarily geared towards someone who is wanting help…volunteers go to the website, donors go to the website" (NPO F). While not intentionally, in an effort to market the organization to volunteers and donors, clientele are isolated from using the organizational website as a source for help. The absence of client resources on an organizational website has the potential to reiterate the message that clients are not as important as other stakeholders. These messages have the ability to stigmatize clients and further perpetuate the notion of client subordination. This example illustrates a circumstance where marketization of the organization to volunteers and donors has overshadowed clientele on a particular platform.

However, while marketization messaging can result in stigmatization of clients and loss of mission, it can also be used to dismantle poverty stigma. Most notably, favorable social comparisons often aligned with marketization elements which helped to

46

dismantle stigma. Findings from content analysis revealed marketization had the ability to remove the stigma that impoverished individuals seek services due to a lack of financial resources. For example, one NPO posted weekly promotional advertising messages: "Motivation Monday Sales," "Thankful Tuesday Sales," and "Frugal Friday Sales." Using sales and deals to attract customers (clients) rather than exposing the cheapness and quality of the items allows customers to justify taking advantage of a sale rather than admitting they cannot afford to purchase items from higher-end boutiques. Similarly, messages framed through "sales" and "deals" provide justification to the public of why many people would shop there. It removes the stigma that the only people who shop at the organization are impoverished, but rather individuals looking to take advantage of a great deal. The use of "sales" and "deals" created a favorable social comparison between shopping at a thrift store for deals and shopping at a more expensive store.

Shifting from marketization to nonprofit legitimacy, findings reveal several common legitimacy strategies amongst NPOs. The following section discusses the findings on legitimacy and its relationship to the stigmatization of clients.

*Nonprofit Legitimacy*

Much previous research on nonprofit legitimacy reveals the tendency to exploit clientele in the process of displaying the sincerity of the organization (e.g. Gill & Wells, 2014). However, the findings of this study revealed that messages aimed at demonstrating nonprofit legitimacy do not always perpetuate stigma. Take, for example, the use of statistics and credentials to advance NPO legitimacy. In the current study, several NPO websites and social media platforms used statistics and credentials to this effect. The

mission page of NPO C displays the statistic that, "In the 2017-18 academic year, [NPO C] had 1,436 student visits in the 138 days of operation, which is up from 440 visits over 118 days in the 2016-17 academic year." Similarly, NPO J posted a series of "Did You Know?" posts that provided statistics and messages about current organization plans and initiatives. An example of one social media post by NPO J states "Did you know…The community can keep track of contributions received and distributions made through the Community Response Fund at [two NPO organizations] websites?" Highlighting that the community has the ability to keep the organization financially accountable displays legitimacy without stigmatizing clientele. Centering the message on the public power of accountability shifts the focus away from stigmatizing clientele. Additionally, NPO J posted, "Did you know… In an effort to determine the best use of the initial dollars, we surveyed our area nonprofits on the needs they currently saw in the community?" This message attempts to display legitimacy by transparently showcasing that decisions were made collectively within the community. This message also avoids the stigmatization of clients by focusing on the NPOs financial actions rather than their actions towards clients. In the process of legitimizing the organization, the organization does not specifically stigmatically label and exploit the clientele they serve. One NPO practitioner described displaying nonprofit legitimacy through making sure credentials are updated and available for public viewing (NPO G). To display legitimacy, one practitioner stated that "we're [NPO B] ranked very high on charity navigator and those kinds of national programs." The use of statistics and credentials has become a popular way for NPOs to display legitimacy with minimal exploitation of clientele.

Additionally, testimonies were a communication strategy implemented to produce NPO legitimacy. The implementation of testimonies had the ability to dismantle, but also perpetuate stigma. A few of the NPO websites revealed testimonies from clientele to display that the organization's actions are in line with its mission. A practitioner revealed the importance of testimony by stating, "I can't imagine that anybody would ever look at us and say, Oh, they're not legitimate because half of what we do is built on testimony," (NPO G). Similarly, when discussing how the organization proves legitimacy a practitioner stated, "You constantly invite people to come and give testimonies," (NPO A). NPO C incorporates testimonies on to the home screen of their organizational website. The use of testimonies is a strategic way for NPOs to showcase that the organization is making an impact without speaking on behalf of the clientele. Testimony brings a sense of credibility to the organization. However, the use of testimony is not without fault. There were occurrences where the use of testimony was deemed stigmatizing to clientele. More specifically, testimonies had the ability cast the NPO as a savior. There seemed to be a tension between allowing clientele to speak on their own behalf and testimony further perpetuating client stigma. The use of testimony to gain agentic control perpetuates the stigma that clientele need saving and are helpless. NPO C exhibits a testimonial statement on the organization's website that casts the NPO as the savior, yet also exhibits collective agency. The beginning of one testimonial states: "The emotional support we had, that was the biggest thing we needed… 'You can do it' goes a long way for someone going through hard things." The notion that the NPO supported and encouraged the client through a difficult situation illuminates the collective nature of service. This testimony dismantles stigma by reflecting that the client fought their own

battle, they were strong, brave, and the NPO was there to support and encourage them. However, the ending of the testimony articulates the opposite idea. The last statement made by the client reveals "Without [NPO C], I don't think I would've graduated." Even though the testimony is probably sincere in its meaning, these incorporation of this statement shifts agentic control back to the NPO. This statement creates the understanding that without the organization this client was helpless. Broadly, this statement reiterates stigma that NPOs are saviors and control agentic representation.

Throughout interviews with NPO practitioners, all stated the same desire to be transparent with the public about their organization. To achieve this transparency was the incorporation of testimony and statistics. The challenging navigation of legitimacy, alongside marketization and stakeholder tensions provides one explanation for NPOs ability to stigmatize clientele. The following section will provide scholarly and practical implications for the findings of this study, as well as limitations and future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

*Scholarly Implications*

The findings of this study contribute to the discussion of marketization tensions in nonprofits and further extends this literature to illustrate its role in perpetuating clientele stigma. Literature on nonprofit legitimacy is extended through these findings by suggesting shifts in approaches to achieving legitimacy that mitigate stigmatization. Further, the findings of this study speak to stigma management strategies and tensions from an organizational perspective and showcase the critical nature of collective agency in dismantling client stigma.

*Nonprofit Marketization*

Much of the previous literature on nonprofit marketization has centered on the tensions that arise from injecting a market economy style business the traditional nonprofit structure (Brainard & Siplon, 2004; Eikenberry, 2004; Eikenberry & Kulver, 2004; Sanders & Dempsey, 2010; Sanders, Harper, & Richardson, 2015). Sanders' (2012) research on marketization highlights the existence of competing tensions bred from the complicated nature of making decisions in a nonprofit organization (Brainard & Siplon, 2004). Research on marketization has focused on the tendency for nonprofit organizations to cater more to the business demands of the organization rather than the mission and clients. While the findings of this study echo marketization tensions discussed by Sanders (2012) and Eikenberry and Kulver (2004), the findings further

51

extend the conversation to include marketization's ability to stigmatize clientele. The reiteration of stigmatic messages through marketization was demonstrated by messages that prioritized other stakeholders over clients. Marketization can reiterate the message that clientele priority is not as important which breeds stigmatization. While NPOs are likely not intentionally trying to display stigmatization, these messages could reiterate to the public that clients are less important than other stakeholders to the organization and society. It is critical that marketization research expand on its responsibility in the stigmatization of clientele. Future research should continue to acknowledge the organizational tensions developed from nonprofit marketization and further address stigmatization as a harmful byproduct.

However, the findings of this study further extend the research on marketization by exhibiting several positive effects marketization has on client stigmatization. The interconnectedness of Sanders' (2012) marketization and Meisenbach's (2010) favorable social comparison stigma management strategy must be added to the conversation regarding marketization outcomes. Favorable social comparison was found to be a communication strategy that dismantled client stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). Many of the positive marketization techniques used by NPO practitioners incorporated favorable social comparisons strategies. Messages such as "Motivation Monday Sales," "Thankful Tuesday Sales," and "Frugal Friday Sales" strategically attracts customers without exposing the cheapness and quality of the items. Blending previous research on marketization (Sanders, 2012; Sanders & Dempsey, 2010; Sanders, Harper, & Richardson, 2015) with Meisenbach's (2010) stigma management communication theory extends the scholarly conversation on the positive effects marketization has on nonprofit

52

organizations. Incorporating favorable social comparison into the marketization strategy allows customers to justify taking advantage of a sale, rather than admitting they cannot afford to purchase items from higher-end boutiques. The interconnectedness of the SMC strategy and marketization is worth further study. Future research ought to expand the connections that marketization has with SMC strategies.

*Nonprofit Legitimacy*

Scholarly conversations on nonprofit legitimacy have greatly demonstrated the negative aspects that legitimacy creates for an organization. The findings of this study add two elements to the discussion of nonprofit legitimacy. Contrary to previous scholarly research on legitimacy and stigmatization (Dempsey, 2009; Ganesh, 2003; Murphy & Dixon, 2012; Zwick & Dholakia, 2004), the first implication produced from the findings extends the nonprofit legitimacy conversation to reveal that not all legitimacy strategies produce negative consequences. Much of the research surrounding NPO legitimacy sheds light on the ability for NPOs to stigmatize and isolate clients (Dempsey, 2009; Ganesh, 2003; Gill &Wells, 2014). However, in this study findings revealed that shifting legitimacy strategies to toward statistics and testimonies alleviated much of the tendency to stigmatize clientele. Dempsey (2009) discusses the tendency for stigmatic consequences when NPOs speak on behalf of their clientele. Expanding on Dempsey's (2009) research, the findings of this study show that the use of testimonies were found to be a strategic way for NPOs to showcase that the organization is making an impact without speaking on behalf of the clientele. Similarly, strategically implementing testimonies allowed clientele to use their experiences to testify to the legitimacy of the organization.

However, there is a critical communication element that must be addressed in the conversation of statistics and testimonies. The incorporation of Hanchey's (2016, 2019) collective agentic control in message discourse is vital to eliminating stigmatization of clientele. Previous research does not speak largely to the connectedness of legitimacy and agency in relation to stigmatization (Dutta & Pal, 2010; Hanchey, 2016; Hanchey 2019). The use of collective agency in legitimacy messages is critical for the message's ability to dismantle versus perpetuate stigma. Displaying collective agency representation through testimonies demonstrates legitimacy without casting organizations as saviors and heroes. Ganesh (2003) coins the phrase "organizational narcissism" to explain the tendency of NPOs to value their own legitimacy over the larger good of clientele and other stakeholders they represent. Without collective agency implemented into legitimacy messaging, organizations have a greater tendency to become "organizationally narcissistic." The incorporation of collective agency avoids perpetuating stigma while allowing organizations to display legitimacy. It is critical for scholarly research to acknowledge the positive impacts legitimacy, combined with collective agency, can have on mitigating stigmatization. While nonprofit legitimacy does have the ability to produce stigmatizing messages, collective agentic representation can be used to alleviate much of the harm produced from NPO legitimacy. Further research should expand knowledge of additional legitimacy strategies that have a positive effect on stigmatization. Future research ought to address the role that collective agency plays in a nonprofit's legitimacy strategy.

*Stigma Management Communication*

The final scholarly implication that ought to be addressed is the notion of shifting the perspective of SMC from an individual lens to an organizational lens. The original context of Meisenbach's (2010) stigma management communication theory was developed to address how an individual who is being stigmatized manages the acceptance or denial of stigma. In the context of this study, stigma management strategies were evaluated from the perspective of the stigmatizer through an organizational lens. Expanding on Goldberg and Smith's (2011) notion of multiple forces contributing to stigma, this study adds the perspective of organizations to SMC research. As Meisenbach (2010) states, "stigma is a social construction of human perception of differences; differences may be material and permanent, but perceptions of them as meaningful and as causes for SMC are not" (p. 272). Like King's (2006) study on the breast cancer, social discourses on cancer stigma have shifted as cancer treatment has shifted (Meisenbach, 2010). Similarly, the incorporation of an organizational perspective into SMC illuminates understandings of stigma management. One interesting connection between individual and organizational perspectives of SMC strategies was the way in which favorable social comparisons were implemented. Meisenbach's (2010) favorable social comparison axiom was described as a management strategy for individuals who denied that a particular stigma affected them. Individuals who deny that stigma affects them, use favorable social comparison as a management strategy to mitigate harm through highlighting similarities between themselves and the stigmatizer. Similarly, it is worth discussing that organizations also implement favorable social comparison to deny stigma of its clients. This was demonstrated through the use of "#foodie" and "great deals." It is interesting

55

that the organization implements favorable social comparison when they are not the subject under stigmatization. When evaluating the shift in SMC perspective from individual to organizational, it is important to understand that in this instance both perspectives implement SMC strategies the same way. This finding allows for the expansion of SMC research to provide stigma management strategies for organizations. The integration of stigma management communication into organizational communication offers several areas for future research. While this study focuses heavily on favorable social comparison, future research ought to evaluate other SMC strategies from an organizational perspective.

However, it is important to note differences in the use of SMC strategies by individuals and organizations. Isolation is suggested in Meisenbach's (2010) original study as a strategy individuals practice when accepting that stigma applies to them. From an organizational perspective, the implementation of isolation comes through the form of labeling and exploitation. While isolation from the individual perspective can be defined as distancing themselves from others, organizations practice isolation through the labeling and exploitation of clients. There is a difference between individual isolation and isolation due to organizational discourse. Organizations that practice isolation through labeling strategies are aware of the stigma effecting clientele and further perpetuate stigma through this strategy. Further research should be conducted to assess other SMC strategies (i.e. using humor, blaming stigma, or hiding stigma attributes) that might have the opposite effect when shifted to an organizational perspective. Meisenbach's isolation axiom was originally a strategy to avoid stigma, however, from the organizational perspective isolation is synonymous with exploitation.

Along with the importance of scholarly research comes the practical actions that nonprofit organizations can take to begin avoiding the stigmatization of clients. The findings of this study have revealed three practical actions that nonprofit organizations can implement to more ethically serve clientele.

*Practical Implications*

Shifting from a scholarly perspective, there are significant implications found within this study that concern the actions of nonprofit organizations. Increased awareness and implementation of collective agency into messaging appears to be the most critical implication of this study. Additionally, acknowledging and becoming aware of marketization tensions and intentionally implementing strategies to avoid prioritizing one stakeholder over another proves to be a beneficial takeaway from the findings. Lastly, avoiding the use of labels that attack identity versus alluding to circumstances that create poverty has the potential to alleviate much of NPOs role in the stigmatization of clientele.

*Implementation of Collective Agency*

The incorporation of collective agency into NPO messages was a major factor in the dismantling of stigma. A practical implication derived from this study suggests that NPOs take a more strategic and thoughtful look at their communication and evaluate the agentic representation of all messages. Collective agency was a critical factor in dismantling stigma through SMC favorable social comparison, marketization, and shifting SMC to an organizational lens. The incorporation of collective agency diminishes societal stigma and could possibly encourage more clientele to seek services. For many NPOs, the mission and core values of the organization are rooted in collective

agency, but they have a difficult time showcasing this through messaging. While strategically implementing collective agency into messaging might appear difficult, in reality it is a simple shift in discourse. Using language and phrases such as "together," "partners," a collective (client and NPO) "we," and "alongside" demonstrate the notion that change is a combined effort from both the NPO and the client. For example, the findings revealed on an NPO website the phrase "Be a Hunger Hero." This phrase depicts an image of the NPO being the hero and the client have to be saved by the hero. Incorporating collective agency would be demonstrated by a message stating, "Together we can all eliminate hunger." The connotation of both messages reveals a desire and mission to eliminate hunger, however, the second statement inclusively invites everyone (even clients) to be a part of the solution. A simple shift in discourse to incorporate collective agency into messaging largely impacts the elimination of stigma. Through the implementation of collective agency, NPOs can better exemplify their mission and dismantle stigma simultaneously.

*Marketization and Favorable Social Comparison*

The findings of this study revealed nonprofit marketizations ability to perpetuate, yet also dismantle clientele stigma. While it seems the marketization of NPOs is an unavoidable tension, how marketization is implemented and monitored is critical to dismantling stigma in messaging. For many nonprofit organizations, there is a tendency to fall prey to the overwhelming tensions of marketization. These tensions often result in the over representation of volunteer and donor stakeholders in messaging. One NPO practitioner echoed the tendency for organizations to get caught up in courting and entertaining certain stakeholders and neglecting to fulfill the mission of the organization.

58

The findings of this study suggest incorporating favorable social comparisons into marketization strategies to avoid the perpetuation of stigma. Favorable social comparisons are a stigma management strategy that compares clientele's experiences to those of the rest of the population. Finding favorable comparisons between clientele's experiences and other's experiences dismantles stigma by eliminating the notion that clientele have different standards than the rest of society. The marketization of one organization implemented discourse such as "great deals" and "amazing sales" to draw clientele into the organization. Incorporating this marketization strategy eliminated the stigma that clientele have to purchase clothes from a consignment store. Strategically displaying "great deals" allowed clientele to feel that they were taking advantage of a great sale rather than having to shop at a thrift store. Further, to the public, this marketization strategy also dismantled stigma the stigma that impoverished individuals are forced to shop at a thrift store, but rather are partaking in a financially advantageous sale.

Organizations have the ability to shift their marketization strategies to eliminate stigma if monitored correctly. Intentionally recognizing and remembering the mission and the core values of the organization when crafting messages is critical for shifting marketization strategies. Implementing favorable social comparisons into organizational messaging is a key way for NPOs to eliminate the perpetuation of stigma. Ultimately the monitoring of marketization allows NPOs to focus on their organizational mission and clientele.

*Labeling and Accountability*

Lastly, a practical implication from this study is the suggestion for nonprofit organizations to shift client labels from identity to circumstance-based discourse. The findings of this study revealed that NPOs focusing on poverty often label their clients as "the homeless," "the poor," or, "the marginalized." Incorporating labels into organizational messaging that target the identity of an individual are one of the multiple ways in which NPOs perpetuate poverty stigma. The use of these labels reiterates the notion that homelessness and poverty are the identity of impoverished individuals. The use of these labels strips humanity from these individuals and assigns clientele an identity with negative connotations. The findings of this study suggest avoiding labels that attack or target identity and shift to addressing homelessness and poverty as a circumstance.

Instead of identifying clients as "the homeless", shifting labeling discourse to "individuals experiencing homelessness" or "neighbors experiencing poverty" dismantles stigma by diverting attention away from identity. Using circumstantial discourse alleviates NPOs tendency to isolate and categorize impoverished individuals into stigmatic characteristics. Further, the shift from identity to circumstantial discourse dismantles stigma by communicating that poverty and homelessness are not permanent identifiers of impoverished individuals. When NPOs identify clients as "the homeless" and "the poor" there is a connotation that these are permanent characteristics. Whereas framing homelessness through circumstance (i.e. "individuals experiencing poverty) implies client's capability to change. When crafting messages, it is critical for NPO practitioners to be aware of labeling clientele in such a way that taints target's identity.

Along with identity is the need for NPOs to articulate and showcase client accountability. A major stigma surrounding impoverished clientele is the notion that their circumstances are based on a lack of motivation and effort to change. NPOs have a responsibility to dismantle this stigma through their messaging. Many NPOs strive to hold their clients accountable and empower them to change their circumstances. However, not all NPOs display these intentions to public audiences. As an NPO it is important to share the notion that services are not free handouts. To avoid perpetuating the stigma that clientele simply take advantage of free NPO services, NPOs must display the ways in which they hold clients accountable for services. Demonstrating that clients are capable of working hard and creating their own change is a practical strategy for dismantling stigma that this study deems important for NPOs to recognize.

While the implications of this study add significance to scholarly and practical audiences, there are limitations to this research. The following section outlines several limitations encountered throughout this study.

*Limitations*

The findings and implications of this study are accompanied with limitations. The first being the scope of data collection. Due to time constraints, a limited number of NPO practitioners were able to schedule time for interviews. The lack of interviews resulted in a small data set that cannot be said to reflect all NPO organizations. Further, due to strict time constraints, confirmatory interviews with NPO practitioners were not conducted which would have ensured that the findings of the study resonated with practitioners. The scope of the organizations that were evaluated were all located in the Central Texas region and were small in number in comparison to national nonprofit organizations that

61

deliver aid globally. Lastly, the scope of this study revolved around nonprofit organizations dealing predominantly with poverty. Due to the narrow scope of this study, the findings cannot be applied to organizations focused on other needs. The findings of this study reflect the way that NPOs dismantle and perpetuate only poverty stigma. Future research is encouraged to expand the number of interviews collected to capture a more nuanced understanding of nonprofit messaging. Increasing the number of practitioner interviews would further increase validity. Additionally, expanding geographically to incorporate organizations nationally, and even globally, would expand knowledge on NPO messaging. Similarly, examining different types of nonprofit organizations would help address how NPOs manage other types of stigma (i.e., mental health stigma, special needs stigma, etc.). While limitations in this study are present, the research and implications of this research are intended to encourage NPOs to grow and become more aware of their role in the stigmatization of clientele. Further, this research looks to contribute to the conversation surrounding stigma and nonprofit communication.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

Hi! My name is Sidney Dietze and I am currently a graduate student in the

Communication Department at Baylor University. I am currently conducting my Thesis

for my graduate degree on the ways that nonprofit organizations dismantle poverty

stigma in their messaging. I was contacting you in hopes to sit down and talk with one of

your marketing or communications staff members to discuss your organization's

communication strategies to collect data for the project. All information will be kept

confidential and pseudonyms will replace the organization's name in the final project.

Please let me know if you are interested and have the time to meet with me in the near

future. I would greatly appreciate your help in conducting this study. I am happy to give

further details if needed. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Sidney Dietze

APPENDIX B

Consent Form


Baylor University

**Department of Communication**


<u>Consent Form for Research</u>



PROTOCOL TITLE:  Helping or Hurting: Dismantling Poverty Stigma in Nonprofit Organizations' Strategic Messaging

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Sidney Dietze
SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University


**Purpose of the research:** The purpose of this study is to explore the different methods that nonprofit organizations, pertaining to poverty and hunger, dismantle stigma. We are asking you to take part in this study because of your experience and knowledge in constructing and receiving nonprofit messaging.


**Study activities:** If you choose to be in the study, you will be interviewed about your strategic participation in the dismantling of poverty stigma in your organizations messaging. These interviews will be audio recorded.


**Risks and Benefits:**


You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the questions.  Tell the interviewer at any time if you want to take a break or stop the interview.

This organization, as well as others, may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by having the transcribed interviews on a password protected computer**.** We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. However, there are times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of your records.

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

By law, researchers must release certain information to the appropriate authorities if they have reasonable cause to believe any of the following:
Abuse or neglect of a child
Abuse, neglect, or exploitation of an elderly person or disabled adult
Risk of harming yourself or others
Alleged incidents of sexual harassment, sexual assault, dating violence, or stalking, committed by or against a person enrolled at or employed by Baylor University at the time of the incident

**Questions or concerns about this research study**
You can call me with any concerns or questions about the research. Our telephone numbers are listed below:

Sidney Dietze

903-439-5177

Sidney_Dietze@baylor.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-3708 or irb@baylor.edu.

Taking part in this study is your choice.  You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason.  No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled.  If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing consent.

NAME (Print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide


<u>Primary Interview Questions</u> **for NPO Employees**

**Let's talk about your relationship with this organization…**

1. Tell me, what made you begin to get involved working with this organization?
2. What history do you have working with other organizations?
3. What is the mission of this organization?
4. What is your personal relationship to the clientele that you serve?
5. Can you recall a time where you felt the mission and actions of the organization were in tension?
6. How does the organization maintain relationships with its donors?
7. Do your relationships with donors differ from person to person? How so?

**Let's talk about poverty…**

1. Would you say that there is stigma surrounding impoverished communities?
2. How do you perceive the Waco community to view the impoverished community?
3. In a busy month, about how many clients do you have?
4. How well do you feel this organization dismantles stigma?

**Let's now talk about communication within the organization…**

1. What are strategies that the organization takes to appear legitimate (i.e. displaying that it is doing what it says to be doing and is fulfilling the intended mission)?
2. Are there tensions that arise from running a nonprofit organization?
    a. If so, what are they?
3. If not, have you ever had difficulty crafting a message? Why?
4. Can you walk me through your organization's process of creating messaging?
5. What values/aspects do message crafters have to consider during this process?
6. What aspects of this organization are different from a for profit business?
    a. What are similarities?
7. Do you consider potential stigma when creating messages for your Organization?
8. What are strategies that you take to dismantle and avoid stigma?
9. When planning messages what factors do you consider?
10. What messaging techniques have you found the most receptive from clients?
11. Have you ever experienced a time when clientele was upset with a message you released?
    a. How was this situation handled?

12. Do you ever wonder how clients would feel if they read/watched/viewed the content you produce?
13. How do you sort that out in your mind when you're crafting messages?
14. Have you ever experiences a time when you felt uneasy crafting a message?
    a. Why?
    b. How did it make you feel?

**Closing and Wrap-up…**

1. Is there anything thing else about the organizations messaging strategies that we did not discuss

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