



UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

MASTER OF NONPROFIT ADMINISTRATION

# **MOVING TOWARDS DIGNITY:**

## **Using Inclusive and Equitable Fundraising Language to Dismantle Philanthropy's White Savior Narrative**

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NPA 622: Nonprofit Data Analysis - Capstone

Spring 2021

Instructor: Dr. Marco Tavanti

# THE WHITE SAVIOR NARRATIVE

 **Teju Cole** ✓  
@tejucole 

2- The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.

9:34 AM · Mar 8, 2012 

 671  19  Copy link to Tweet

 **Teju Cole** ✓  
@tejucole 

5- The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.

9:37 AM · Mar 8, 2012 

 1.4K  61  Copy link to Tweet

“...what ails philanthropy at its core is **colonialism**. Almost without exception, funders reinforce the colonial division of **Us vs. Them, Haves vs. Have Nots**, and mostly **white saviors and white experts vs. poor, needy, urban, disadvantaged, marginalized, at-risk people** (take your pick of euphemisms for people of color).”

- Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth*

# RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research is to better understand how using **inclusive**, **equitable** and **dignity-focused** fundraising language can ultimately contribute to dismantling philanthropy's **white savior narrative** and how frontline fundraisers can play a critical role in **shifting philanthropy's power dynamics**.

## Research Question 1

Can nonprofit fundraising teams thoughtfully abandon notions of white saviorism and fully embrace inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused language without compromising revenue or relationships?

## Research Question 2

How does fundraising language impact donors' affinity for programs and services and their understanding of their role in the giver/recipient relationship or partnership?

# METHODS AND APPROACHES

## *Qualitative Research Methods*



➤ **Literature Review**



➤ **Content Analysis**

➤ **Interviews**



# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Understanding White Saviorism

- **good intentions are not good enough**

## Examples of Saviorism

- NAACP - shifting priorities to accommodate donor interest

## Donor Motivations and Effective Fundraising

- Passion for the cause, personal connection, impactful content
- ***Relationships, relationships, relationships***

*“Imagine we’re in a boat that’s rapidly sinking. We need to work together to bail out the water, fix the leaks, and get everyone into life jackets. Now imagine there are passengers who want to help. They mean well; they’re just not used to handling buckets or duct tape or whatever. You go to one and he says, “Hi, I know you need someone on bucket duty, but that’s not what I’m passionate about. My passion is to send flare signals!” (Nevermind that flares have already been sent). Another says, “I don’t mind bailing out the water, but metal buckets make me feel warm and fuzzy because they remind me of my childhood growing up on a farm. You only have plastic ones; I’m going to sit this one out” - Vu Le, 2021*



# LITERATURE REVIEW Cont.

## Philanthropy's Power Dynamics

- *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*, Edgar H. Schein: help isn't always helping

## Defining Inclusive and Equitable Language

- **Words matter** - people centric (people facing homelessness vs. homeless people)
- Storytelling that avoids exploitation

## Centering the Community in Fundraising

- “Community-Centric Fundraising” movement
- Active listening



## The NDN Collective - Indigenous led, building Indigenous power

# DATA ANALYSIS: Content Analysis Key Findings

- 20 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations with missions related to equity, social justice or human rights
- 20 annual report leadership letters
- **Why annual report leadership letters?**
- 22 total questions in codebook
- 35 leadership individuals represented
- Some included a headshot, which gave an indication of **racial/ethnic identity** (made assumptions)
- **19** appear white, **7** appear non-white and racial identity is unavailable or unclear for **9**

**A LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND BOARD CHAIR**



Dear Friends,

As the two of us reflect on the roller coaster ride of the past year, we are so grateful for you—our supporters, community, and staff—who have kept Larkin Street moving forward through one of the most difficult times we have ever witnessed.

Through it all, our fight to end youth homelessness has not stopped. In fact, because of you, Larkin Street was able to respond rapidly to the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding our critical, life-saving services that young people need to come inside, get housed, and rebuild their lives.

The pandemic has further illuminated the profound gaps in access to social, economic, and health resources due to centuries of systemic discrimination. You don't have to look any further than who is accessing services at Larkin Street to know that inequity and injustice is a daily experience for people of color and people who identify as LGBTQ+. Fully 80% of the youth we serve are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and nearly half of young people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco identify as LGBTQ+.

Despite the obstacles in their path, youth continued to strive towards their goals:

- Graduated from high school or college and maintained employment.
- Actively advocated for public policy changes, including speaking to state officials in Sacramento or traveling to WA.
- Completed our integrated HOI and moved into stable housing.

Unfortunately for many others, it has interrupted these paths. ☹️

P.S. For the latest news a

*In Solidarity,*  
  
 Suzi Alexander

**Letter from Executive Director Jose Ramirez**



The upcoming year marks the 70th anniversary of St. Anthony's founding on October 4th, 1950.

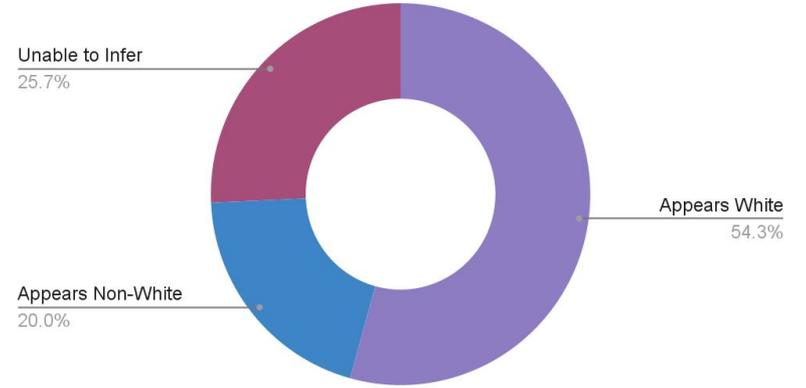
Our mission remains to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, addiction recovery services, access to technology, and other critical resources with respect for the dignity inherent in every person. It is made possible by the dedication and compassion of our partner organizations, financial supporters, volunteers, and staff. You, and our community, make our work a reality and I am grateful for your faithful generosity.

While we look back on the decades of volunteer and donor contributions that have enabled us to serve as the hands beneath the safety net for so many years, this is also a time to look ahead with clear vision and open hearts. Estimates of people experiencing homelessness on any given night have increased 30% in the last two years. There is much work to be done here in San Francisco, and we are positioned to adapt to the changing needs of the community. To that end, our Board of Directors is embarking on a Strategic Planning Initiative this summer, which will chart our path moving forward. This opens the possibility of expanding our programs, and finding new ways to provide much-needed services to our guests.

We enter our 70th year in solidarity with those we serve, committed to lifting the spirits of those in need, and creating a society in which all persons flourish.

 Jose Ramirez  
Executive Director

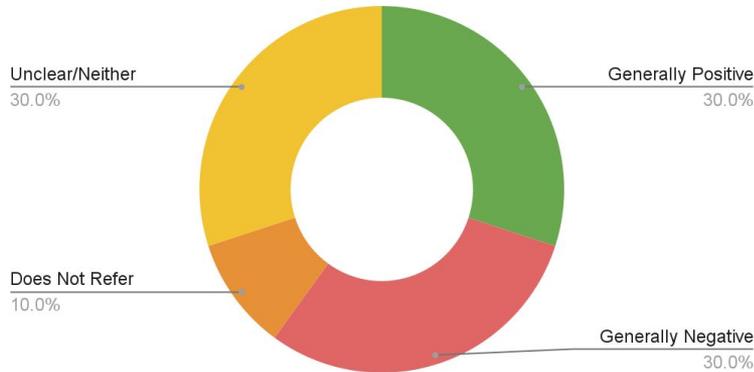
## Leadership Racial/Ethnic Identity



# DATA ANALYSIS:

## Content Analysis Key Findings Cont.

Description of Beneficiaries



### Description of Beneficiaries

- **6 letters describe program beneficiaries in a generally positive light**
- **7 letters describe program beneficiaries generally negatively often referencing **neediness****
- **2 did not have any description or reference to program beneficiaries or the community**
- **5 were either mixed, unclear or neither positive nor negative**

- **Overall positive tone, but letters largely portray program beneficiaries as needy**
- **Leadership individuals mostly depict their organization as the savior**

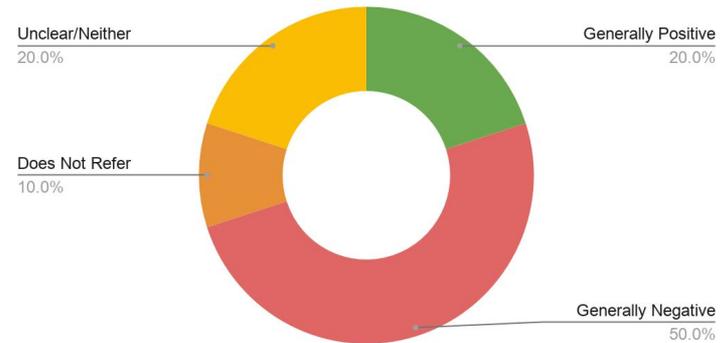
# DATA ANALYSIS:

## Content Analysis Key Findings Cont.

### Race/Ethnicity of Leadership Signer and Description of Beneficiaries

- **10** letters have a single white signer, multiple white signers or majority white signers
  - **2 describe beneficiaries positively**
  - **ONLY 1 letter mentions equity, references dignity *and* describes beneficiaries positively**
- **3** letters have a single non-white signer or multiple non-white signers
  - **3 describe beneficiaries generally positively**
  - ***Sample size is extremely small, but it is hard to ignore these results!***

White Signers - Description of Beneficiaries



Non-White Signers - Description of Beneficiaries - 100% Generally Positive



# DATA ANALYSIS:

## Interview Themes & Conclusions

### 7 semi-structured interview conversations:

3 frontline fundraisers

2 nonprofit leaders with expertise in DEI

2 board members/donors

- Savior imagery / savior narrative **does not inspire** donors to support and does not equate to sustainable change or philanthropy
- Savior narrative, disparaging language can **turn off** donors
- Fundraisers **have power** in donor relationships and **can influence donor perception**
- Nonprofit sector organizational leadership must set the tone **internally and externally**:
  - **Mission, values and language** that do not perpetuate saviorism
  - Empower fundraisers to **center the community** within donor relationships

# IMPLICATIONS

- ❑ We can honor our communities with the inherent dignity that they deserve without compromising revenue or relationships for our organizations.
- ❑ We can use inclusive and equitable fundraising language and still generate results.
- ❑ We can give a voice to the communities we represent and still provide a meaningful experience for our donors.
- ❑ We can do better fundraising and facilitate better philanthropy.

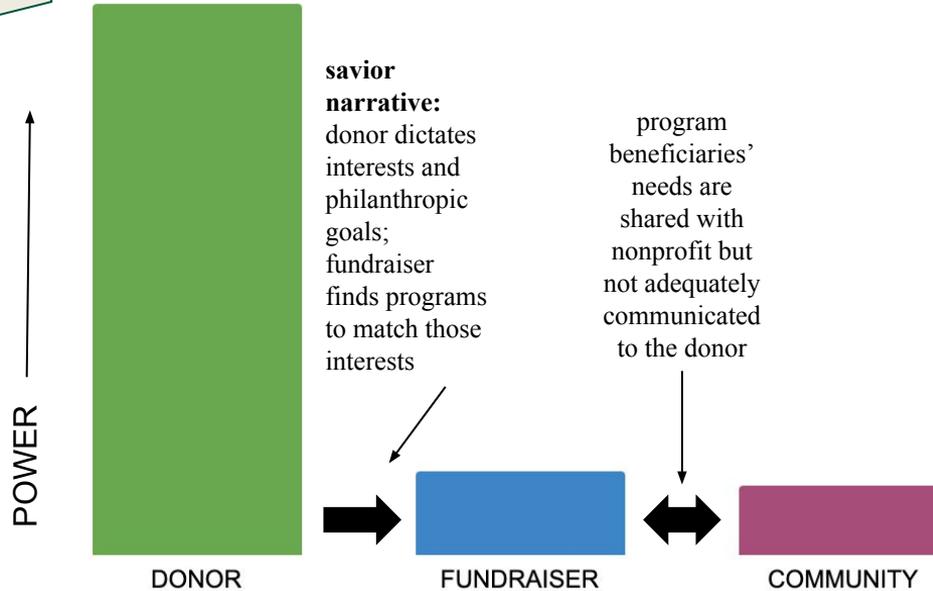


***“We need a fundraising model in which we respect donors and build strong relationships with them, but one that they are not the center of. The community we serve and benefit from must be centered.”***

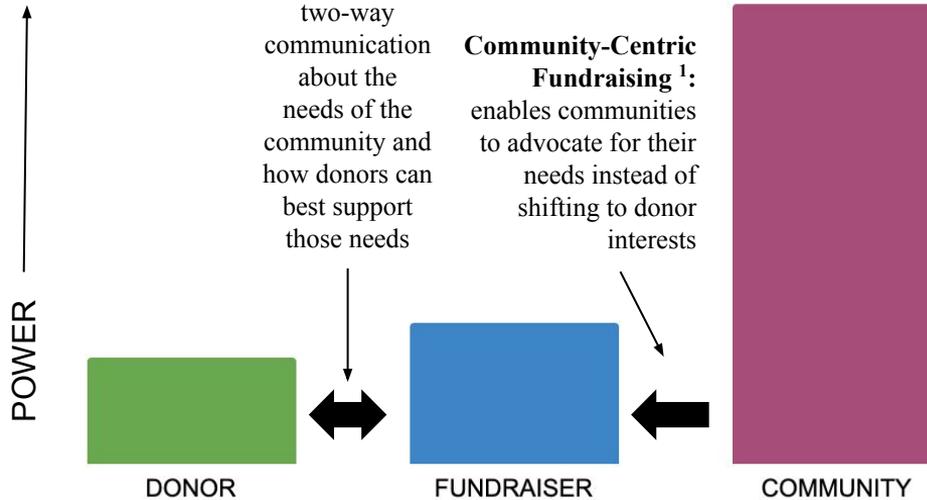
***- <https://communitycentricfundraising.org>***

**“Do whatever it takes  
to close the gift.”**

## DONOR-CENTRIC FUNDRAISING



## DIGNITY-FOCUSED FUNDRAISING



<sup>1</sup> <http://communitycentricfundraising.org>

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDRAISERS: Inclusive, Equitable, Dignity-Focused Fundraising

Be thoughtful with  
fundraising language

Prioritize unrestricted funding

Don't be afraid to talk to donors  
about programs such as cash  
transfers

Develop authentic donor  
partnerships that align with  
organizational values

# LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

*My opinions and experiences are from the perspective of a major gifts specialist and a white, cisgender, straight woman.*

- This research is extremely limited in scope compared to the vastness of this topic
- My focus is on language and communications through a major gifts fundraising lens
- There are many, many individuals talking about white saviorism in philanthropy

## **With more time & resources:**

1. Conduct a deeper analysis of relevant literature
2. More examples of organizations that are centering the community in fundraising - *there are many!*
3. Content Analysis is limited: ideally conduct a more comprehensive content analysis of significantly more organizations' mission, vision, website, collateral, fundraising materials, etc.
4. Interview more fundraising experts who are successfully centering the community
5. How does nonprofit organizations' internal DEI work impact external communications/partnerships?
6. Are there differences between individual donors, foundations, corporate donors, major donors, etc?

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## SUMMARY

The white savior narrative allows for donors to act out of emotional response and dictate programs and services based on their own interests. By shifting to a more inclusive and equitable approach and by centering the community in our fundraising strategies, we can generate results while honoring program beneficiaries with dignity and respect.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to better understand how using inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused fundraising language can ultimately contribute to dismantling philanthropy's white savior narrative and how frontline fundraisers can play a critical role in shifting philanthropy's power dynamics.

## RESEARCH

**RQ1:** Can nonprofit fundraising teams thoughtfully abandon notions of white saviorism and fully embrace inclusive, equitable and dignity-focused language without compromising revenue or relationships?

**RQ2:** How does fundraising language impact donors' affinity for programs and services and their understanding of their role in the giver/recipient relationship or partnership?

## METHODS

### Literature Review

**Content Analysis:** 20 annual report leadership letters

**Interviews:** 7 semi-structured conversations

## CONTENT ANALYSIS KEY FINDINGS

20 annual report leadership letters revealed:

- Majority of letters portray an overall positive tone, but do not mention equity, reference dignity/honor in relation to program beneficiaries and largely describe program beneficiaries as needy
- Leadership individuals mostly depict their organization as the savior

Mention of Equity



Description of Beneficiaries

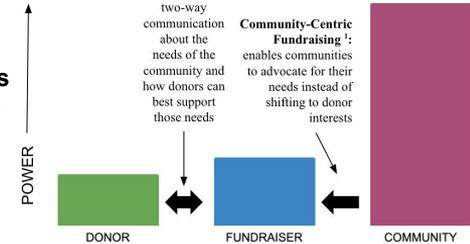


## RESULTS

> Donors do not need to hear savior narrative.

> Fundraisers can continue to generate results and center the community.

### DIGNITY-FOCUSED FUNDRAISING



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDRAISERS

### Inclusive, Equitable, Dignity-Focused Fundraising

1. Be thoughtful with fundraising language
2. Prioritize unrestricted funding
3. Don't be afraid to talk to donors about programs such as cash transfers
4. Develop authentic donor partnerships that align with organizational values

## REFERENCES

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