

Viewpoint

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Stigmatizing the Disabled Through Fund-Raising Appeals

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The public is exposed to a barrage of advertisements designed to solicit funds for services for the disabled. Although fund-raising campaigns often fulfill this primary purpose, these appeals have been criticized for the manner in which they portray people with disabilities. Using the coping/succumbing framework developed by Wright (1960)**, this article will: 1) examine the manner in which many fund-raising advertisements stigmatize disabled persons; and 2) identify some fund-raising appeals which portray disabled persons in a positive non-stigmatizing manner.

The Coping/Succumbing Framework

The public's perception of the disabled can be affected by the manner in which a person with a disability is seen to cope with, or succumb to, difficulties. When people with disabilities are seen to be making the most of what they have by arranging their lives in accordance with their abilities, they are often respected and even admired. This positive orientation—making the most of one's ability, despite a disability—is referred to as a "coping framework". In contrast, people with disabilities who are seen to be preoccupied with the loss and debilitating aspects of their disabilities are often devalued and pitied. This negative orientation—a preoccupation with the loss brought about by a disability—is referred to as a "succumbing framework" (Wright, 1960). In fund-raising appeals both coping and succumbing frameworks are used in the portrayal of people with disabilities.

The Succumbing Framework

When a succumbing framework is used in the portrayal of people with disabilities, the emphasis is placed on what they cannot do. The focus is on the difficulties that exist for those with disabilities. The disability is the central

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** References are found on p. 47.

focus in the description of the person. The areas of life in which the person can participate are ignored (Wright 1960, 1974).

a) Association for Mentally Retarded Citizens (1984)

Consider the following 1984 fund-raising appeal of the Association for Mentally Retarded Citizens:

Half of the 100,000 babies born mentally retarded last year could have been born normal. Mental retardation can be prevented. When you give help you give hope.

This appeal informs potential donors about the need for funds but it also communicates many negative images. While it does illustrate the importance of prenatal care and research into the causes of mental retardation, this example also communicates to the parents of a mentally retarded child that they may be responsible for their child's disability by implying that some parental action prevented the birth of a normal child. The phrase "could have been normal" reinforces the attitude that the mentally retarded are abnormal. What does the statement "mental retardation can be prevented" say about the value of mentally retarded people to society? Research funds could be solicited in a more positive manner (coping framework) by highlighting the direction of current research. The importance of prenatal care could be stressed without emphasizing the negative aspects of mental retardation.

b) Variety Club (1984)

In an advertisement for a Variety Club of Ontario (1984) Telethon the following statement is made: "The holiday season is a tough time if you're unemployed, but what about if you're handicapped?" The intent of this appeal appears to be to establish a connection between the Christmas season and the people with disabilities for whom the charity raises funds. Yet the viewer seems to be left with the impression that people with disabilities enjoy the holiday season less than those who are unemployed. Why can't a disabled person enjoy Christmas just as much as someone without a disability? The Variety Club of Ontario funds a number of programs for children with disabilities year round. An alternative non-succumbing strategy might be to show a number of children with disabilities participating in a variety of programs the charitable organization sponsors accompanied by a statement such as "look what is possible when you give". With this approach the prospective donor is given the impression of children with disabilities as active participants in programs that require financial assistance rather than as unhappy passive recipients of charity.

c) Variety Club (1985)

"Ride a bike for a kid that can't" is an advertisement for a Variety Club of Ontario (1985) Bike-A-Thon which was held to raise money for children with disabilities. This statement not only focuses on a limitation of children with severe disabilities, but it also excludes them from participating in this fund-raising event. A non-succumbing alternative might be to have a Wheel-A-Thon

so that children in wheelchairs could be included. A promotion such as: “Bring your chair, bring your bike; everyone can take part in the Wheel-A-Thon” is preferable to “ride a bike for a kid that can’t”.

d) Ontario March of Dimes (1985)

A final fund-raising example that uses a succumbing framework to portray people with disabilities focuses exclusively on the dire consequences of a spinal injury:

Imagine not being able to move, for the rest of your life. Now how much would you give to lift an arm, move a leg, take a step. How much would you give for the simple dignity of going to the washroom, alone . . . Give as generously as you’re able.

This appeal offers little hope to a person who has suffered a severe spinal cord injury. The emphasis is on the loss associated with a disability. A non-succumbing appeal might focus on the role that charitably funded rehabilitation plays in the re-establishment of lives after a serious accident. Rather than focusing on what disabled individuals can’t do, it could point out that, thanks to the generosity of the public, people are returning to the workforce after serious accidents.

These appeals all set out to inform the public of the need for funds to support a variety of praiseworthy efforts aimed at assisting people with disabilities. Unfortunately they also present a number of negative images. The focus is on what people with disabilities cannot do. The disabled are portrayed as a segment of the population that does not contribute to society. The areas of life in which disabled persons can participate are ignored. The disabled persons in these appeals are portrayed as helpless individuals deserving of, and desiring, the public’s pity. By portraying disabled persons as significantly different from the rest of the population, these organizations are stigmatizing the very people they are trying to serve.

The Coping Framework

When a coping framework is used in the portrayal of people with disabilities the emphasis is placed on what the person can do. Despite their disabilities, people are perceived as playing an active role in molding their lives in accordance with their abilities. The difficulties that exist are portrayed as manageable. The focus is on ability, not disability (Wright 1974).

a) Canadian Rehabilitation Council for the Disabled (1985)

Consider the following fund-raising appeal that uses a coping framework in the portrayal of people with disabilities:

STRUCK BY LIGHTNING—The fiery flash was merciless. It snapped away branches, changing the tree forever. Weakened but surviving, it compensated for its loss and thrived. The tree lived a long and full life contributing to the forest and the

well-being of the other creatures. **MORAL:** Though some is missing much remains . . . The costs of helping are enormous. Thanks to many thousands of contributors, the Ability Fund helps Canadians take steps to achieve independence and build pride in their accomplishments.

In this appeal the person with a disability is shown to be someone who can continue to live a meaningful life by compensating for his/her losses. Those with a disability are portrayed as contributors rather than burdens to society. The focus is not on the disability, but rather on the ability that remains after an accident. Portraying a person with a disability in this manner makes the public aware of the need for funds without an emphasis on the differences between the disabled and the non-disabled.

b) National Easter Seal Society (1983)

The Society's poster entitled, "The Future is Where We Spend the Rest of Our Lives", also illustrates a coping orientation in a fund-raising appeal. Once again the focus is on the positive; what the person can do despite a disability.

FUTURE 1—Jack is a ten year old. Although he has been paralyzed from the waist down since birth, his bright conversation and his fascination with wheelchair basketball tells you a lot about the future he is fighting for. The future means that Jack is going to have to work to fight his disability and it's a fight he is going to win. Easter Seals help but we can only do it with your help. So please back a fighter . . .

Although, this appeal may overemphasize the confrontation between the child and the disability, it shows clearly that people with disabilities need not be passive recipients of charity and that children with disabilities can be, and are, active participants in the shaping of their lives.

c) Easter Seal Society of Ontario (1984)

Another advertising strategy using the coping framework focuses on the services provided by charitable organizations rather than focusing on the people with disabilities. Difficulties associated with a disability can be presented with solutions such as medical procedures and the use of prostheses and other aids, as well as environmental accommodations. Consider the following example:

Easter Seals are still hard at work in November. When you give to Easter Seals, you are speaking up for children with communication handicaps. Blissymbolics is a graphic communication system capable of conveying most aspects of human experience. Easter Seals help make this program possible . . . Back a fighter year round.

In this appeal the reader's attention is not drawn to the person with a disability, but to the effect of a graphic communication system—funded by Easter Seals—on a disabled person's life.

d) United Cerebral Palsy Inc. (1976)

An advertisement using a coping orientation need not simply focus on the services provided by an organization, but might also focus on the advocacy role played by the charitable organization. The following is an example of a fund-raising advertisement that focuses on the advocacy role played by the charitable organization as well as the coping orientation of the person portrayed:

Joe Elko has Cerebral Palsy. But that does not disturb Joe or the State Department of Motor Vehicles or the College he attends. But it does disturb some people. Those who don't understand. Both Joe and United Cerebral Palsy are working towards the day when everyone understands.

The focus of this advertisement is on the shared responsibility of Joe Elko and United Cerebral Palsy for the education of the public about cerebral palsy. The widespread idea that all people with cerebral palsy have impaired intellectual functioning and are confined to wheelchairs is also challenged in this appeal which points out that Joe is capable of driving a car and attending college even though he has cerebral palsy. This fund-raising appeal both informs the public of the work of United Cerebral Palsy and educates the public as to the nature of cerebral palsy.

A Comparison of Coping/Succumbing Appeals

Both the succumbing and coping advertisements tell the public of the need for funds. Yet coping appeals note that people with disabilities are similar to their non-disabled counterparts, while succumbing appeals emphasize the difference between disabled and non-disabled persons. The coping advertisements quoted above point out that: people with handicaps *can* communicate most aspects of the human existence, attend college, drive cars, and participate in sports. The succumbing appeals noted point out that: people with disabilities *cannot* ride bikes, lift their arms, move their legs, take a step or enjoy Christmas as much as others (even in one case, the unemployed).

While coping appeals inform the public of the services available to people with disabilities and the advocacy role played by charitable organizations, the succumbing appeals focus on the dire consequences of a disability. Also, the public is not informed of the role played by charitable organizations or what funds are used for in any of the four succumbing examples reviewed.

The coping appeals highlight positive human qualities. The focus is placed on the contribution people with disabilities make to the wellbeing of others. The determination to deal with a disability is illustrated. The ability of the disabled to communicate most aspects of human existence and their interest in helping others develop an understanding of people with disabilities are also conveyed in the coping appeals. Differences and lack of abilities are highlighted in the succumbing appeals.

Succumbing appeals are often defended on the premise that if only the positive,

able and equal qualities of peoples with disabilities are portrayed, prospective donors will be hard-pressed to know why they should continue to support services for the disabled. Yet if appeals continue to stress negative qualities, rehabilitation and charitable agencies may find they have spread an attitude of hopelessness and may then find it necessary to spend even more money to counteract the detrimental effects of their own advertisements.

Arguments in favor of succumbing advertisements may be overstated. Canadian Gallup Poll Limited (1984) surveyed the donating behaviour and attitudes of Canadians toward non-profit organizations. When questioned about their motivation for donating to non-profit organizations (of which 37 per cent assist disabled persons) 34 per cent of the 1161 respondents said they gave money because they felt the organization was worthwhile or felt that money was required for curing a disabling disease. On the other hand only four per cent gave money to "help the needy". The remaining 62 per cent either did not know their reasons for donating or the reason was not related to organizations serving the disabled. It appears that fund-raising advertisements that highlight the organization's role or the directions of current research (strategies used in coping advertisements) would encourage more people to donate than a focus on "helping the needy" which is often evident in advertisements that portray people as succumbing to their disabilities.

The National Easter Seal Society (1983) surveyed 2162 people who donated funds to their annual Telethon so it could develop a donor profile. When asked why they pledge funds, 67 per cent of the respondents gave answers that indicated it was not because they felt sorry for disabled children and wanted to help. The reasons respondents gave for pledging included: felt that Easter Seals was a worthy organization, always give, know someone who is disabled or have been helped by the Easter Seal Society. Respondents who wished to help, or sympathized with, people with disabilities were categorized together, yet people can want to help without sympathizing with those they want to help. A person may empathize (the capacity of an observer to understand the point of view of another) and wish to help as well. Thus even the 33 per cent response rate for "sympathetic reasons" may be high. The evidence seems to indicate that the *majority* of respondents would give to Easter Seals whether the organization used succumbing appeals or not, although a *minority* would probably give as a result of seeing advertisements that show people succumbing to their disabilities. Is reaching a minority of potential donors worth the risk of stigmatizing the people the organization is assisting? Further research is necessary to investigate two areas of inquiry:

- 1) Does the public's donating behavior change in relation to the presentation of coping or succumbing appeals? and
- 2) Do coping or succumbing portrayals of people with disabilities affect the public's perception, either positively or negatively, of disabled persons in general?

Conclusion

Fund-raising for people with disabilities cannot be separated from the rehabilitation process. When a positive, able and equal view of people with disabilities is portrayed in fund-raising appeals, the rehabilitation process is furthered. The rehabilitation process is undermined when the differences, losses, negative stereotypes and negative perceptions of those with disabilities are stressed. The success of fund-raising appeals cannot be measured solely by the amount of money they raise. Agencies must be innovative in developing appeals that stress the positive attributes of people with disabilities as well as the need for funds. Can the amount of money raised justify the loss of dignity that may result when fund-raising appeals stigmatize the people they are trying to support?

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