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## What are 'unpopular causes' and how can they achieve fundraising success?

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### **Abstract**

*Recent efforts to grow and strengthen the culture of philanthropy in the UK have largely focused on two dimensions: the total amount of money donated and the effectiveness of philanthropic spending. This paper explores a third dimension: the destination and distribution of donations. A defining characteristic of charitable giving is that it is voluntary rather than coerced, and the resulting respect for donor autonomy makes people wary of promoting one cause above another or implying that any beneficiary group is more or less 'worthy' of support. However, the absence of much comment on, or significant research into, the destination of donations does not alter the fact that some groups succeed in attracting significant philanthropic funds whilst others struggle to secure many – or any – donations. This paper explores the concept of 'unpopularity' in the charity sector, especially in relation to its impact on fundraising. We unpack what this loaded phrase means, identify good practice by those seeking support and present case studies of charities that have overcome perceived unpopularity to achieve success in raising voluntary income. We suggest that by investing organisational resources and effort in fundraising, by framing the cause to maximise the arousal of sympathy and minimise concerns about beneficiary culpability, and by avoiding the unintended negative consequences of self-labelling as 'unpopular' no charity need assume it is their destiny to languish at the bottom of the fundraising league tables.*

### **Introduction**

Feeling unpopular is not the preserve of the smallest and most niche charities. In 2012 the UK's Institute of Fundraising held a session during their national convention entitled 'Fundraising for Unpopular Causes'. Through the door came people working in a surprising array of organisations, including Shelter and NSPCC, which are both large and successful charities arguably leading their respective fields of homelessness and children's causes. Therefore popularity, or the lack of it, is to a large extent 'in the eye of the beholder'. It is a common complaint heard from many charities that their cause is 'neglected', 'a Cinderella cause' and particularly difficult to fundraise for. Given this widespread belief amongst charities that not enough people care about their beneficiaries or 'get' what they do, we suggest that it is useful to try to understand why some causes appear to more easily attract widespread support whilst others struggle to raise any significant donated income, in order to help all charities maximise their philanthropic reach.

To start, it is important to note that whilst Britain is a generous country, that generosity is not equally spread amongst all the tens of thousands of good causes seeking donated income<sup>1</sup>. Charitable giving varies widely between both causes and individual charities. For example, there is a disproportionate representation of cancer charities, which constitute nine of the top 100 most popular causes (Pharoah, 2011). And some causes do not feature at all in the top 100 - there is not a single charity supporting addiction issues, ex-offenders or refugees and asylum seekers. Whilst data on private financial support for different types of causes in the UK shows

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<sup>1</sup> As at March 2015, there are c.164,000 charities registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, c.23,500 registered with the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator and up to 12,000 charities in the process of being added to the new register in Northern Ireland.

that some cause areas dominate, further analysis shows that not every charity working in the same area achieves similar fundraising success. In March 2015 there were over 1,000 registered charities in England and Wales with the word 'cancer' in their name but only nine amongst the 100 most successful fundraising charities, indicating that 'cause area' is not the sole relevant variable for attracting voluntary support. The freedom to donate to whichever causes are deemed most worthy of support and which best meet personal preferences, is an important factor in encouraging giving amongst donors (Frumkin, 2006) and in the continuation of a liberal society (Titmuss, 1970). Yet normative conceptions of 'worthiness' and cultural factors aligning certain causes with elite preferences, creates an 'unequal playing field' for fund-seeking charities that fall – or believe themselves to fall – outside the charmed circle of causes that are popular with potential donors.

This paper explores the assumption that being viewed as 'unpopular' necessarily affects the philanthropic reach of charitable organisations and their concomitant ability to maximise fundraised income. Using fundraised income as a proxy for popularity of the cause, it begins by reviewing what is known about charitable decision-making and suggests three theoretical approaches that help unpack the reality and implications of the idea of popular/unpopular causes. We then present original research into understanding what the term 'unpopular' means in practice and discuss ten case studies that exemplify good practice in fundraising by charities working in cause areas that are perceived as particularly unattractive to private donors.

### **Research Context**

Philanthropic activity and charitable decision-making has received increasing attention over recent years. With a majority of the UK population regularly donating to charity (NCVO & CAF, 2012) there is a substantial amount of research exploring why donors give, including altruism, religious belief, various forms of self-interest, beliefs about social justice and conformity to social norms (as summarised in Sargeant & Jay 2014:70-75). However, within this broad picture of a nation of givers, there exists much internal variation. Demographic factors affect both propensity to give and the size of donations such that, for example, older people, especially older women, are more likely to give (Carpenter et al, 2008), and to give larger amounts (Smith, 2012). The multiple drivers of donors' decisions are usefully explored by Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) in their meta-review of over 500 studies of philanthropic activity, which identifies eight core mechanisms; awareness of need, being asked, the costs and benefits of giving, altruism, personal reputation, psychological benefits, personal values and efficacy. Mohan and Bulloch (2011) reveal a 'geography of giving' related to social and economic variations; their study found that whilst only 15% of the population engage in no philanthropic activity, the contribution of the other 85% is unevenly distributed with around a third of the population providing over 80% of donations and an even smaller 'civic core' representing the 9% of the population who are the most philanthropically active, accounting for 40% of charitable giving. These individuals tend to be highly educated, likely to be actively practicing religion, in professional and managerial roles, middle aged, living in the least deprived parts of the country and well settled in a neighbourhood (ibid). Other studies show that the type of donors is of less salience than 'being asked' which is described as the 'iron law' behind giving (Andreoni 2006). The emphasis on demand over supply is, confirmed by Wiepking and Maas' study (2009) that being asked more often, rather than having certain personal characteristics, is the leading reason behind certain individuals donating more. Feelings of financial security have also been found to outweigh actual spending power as a

driver of giving (Wiepking and Breeze, 2012). The recent proliferation of research into why people give has helped strengthen our collective understanding of participation in philanthropic behaviour but has left relatively untouched the question of how donors choose what causes to support.

The few studies that attend to the question of philanthropic distribution conclude that giving decisions are highly reliant on donor taste and preferences. Breeze (2013) identifies four non-needs based factors: donor tastes, personal experiences, perceptions of charities competence and desire for personal impact. This accords with Payton and Moody's (2008) proposal that donors draw on their 'philanthropic autobiographies' to give to causes they feel some connection to, or affinity with, as a result of experiences and incidents that occur in their personal and professional lives.

A further factor behind giving decisions is the desire for donations to make an identifiable impact that is not 'drowned out' by support from other sources (Duncan, 2004). Donors are particularly keen to avoid their donations becoming a substitute for government spending (Breeze 2012b). Concerns about 'additionality' are especially relevant in the areas of spending on human welfare, as studies show that very high proportions of the public believe that meeting social need is primarily the job of government rather than philanthropy (Taylor-Gooby, 1993).

The research context establishes that philanthropic behaviour is complex and motivated by a multiplicity of factors, and that donors choose causes that resonate with their personal experiences and values. Research also confirms that asking for donations is a critical factor in fundraising. However there is a surprising lack of confidence amongst charities about asking people for donations (Thelkelsen, 2011). Charities often rely on their work to 'speak for itself' rather than directly 'making the ask'. As a large proportion of charitable giving is limited to the rather narrow social demographic of people comprising the 'civic core', charities that resonate most strongly with those people are most likely to benefit from donations. Charities dealing with causes outside of the social experiences of these groups may therefore find it harder to attract funds.

### **Three theoretical approaches to understanding 'popularity' of causes**

To date the idea of 'popular' and 'unpopular' causes has attracted little academic interest. However there is a larger body of work exploring the organisational behaviours of charities and their relationships with donors. This section draws on that literature to present three theoretical approaches which may be helpful in making sense of the meaning of popular and unpopular causes: crowding out theory; the social construction of sympathy; and labelling theory.

#### *Crowding out theory*

According to Payne (1998) 'crowding out' occurs when new income from one source leads to a reduction in income from another source. Andreoni and Payne suggests that another version of crowding out occurs within organisations when charities reduce their own fundraising efforts as a result of new income success (2011); this presents a plausible hypothesis for why some causes may be more 'popular' (as measured by success in fundraising) than others. It is possible that efforts to generate income from other sources such as different parts of the state (whether local, central or European government) 'crowds out' efforts *within* the charity to

fundraise from private individuals and institutions. Certain causes receive more statutory support than others, for example charities providing services for the rehabilitation of ex-offenders receive more tax-funded support than do charities rehoming dogs. Therefore charities representing ex-offenders may focus their efforts on state funding opportunities rather than on fundraising from private individuals and institutions. Meanwhile charities rehoming dogs, being entirely reliant on voluntary income from private donors, focus a great deal of efforts on donor fundraising activities. There are other possibilities to explain the internal 'crowding out effect' including Wiesbrod's (1988) suggestion that charities do not set out to maximise their income, but rather aim to raise enough money to meet identified needs or to address a particular issue; once this target has been met they do not continue fundraising efforts even if it were possible to raise more money from other sources. The result in this scenario is also a reduction in fundraising efforts as a result of securing 'sufficient' funds elsewhere. As the popularity of a cause is related to the amount of voluntary income it attracts, the 'crowding out effect' can create circumstances within which a seemingly successful cause in terms of delivery and income is perceived as unpopular with donors.

### *The social construction of sympathy*

A second theoretical approach that is useful in understanding the topic in question draws on Clark's (1997) notion of the construction of sympathy, or the 'socioemotional economy'. This concept understands sympathy as something the donor subjectively and socially constructs based upon their own experiences and the social world they live in, thereby suggesting that the popularity of any cause is governed by the level of sympathy it can attract at any given time. Although sympathy may be considered a natural, reflexive reaction, people are not born knowing how and when to distribute it appropriately. Individuals use external guides to modify their thoughts and behaviours by learning elaborate rules for the expression of sympathy that are considered appropriate to the time and social context. Donations to charity can therefore be understood in terms of distribution of sympathy through economic resources, though how the perception of 'neediness' is translated by donors into giving decisions is not a simple process (Flores, 2013). The social construction of sympathy suggests that individuals and social groups will, for the most part, only readily give sympathy under certain conditions which can be governed by external factors such as the time, context and social situation within which the 'need' arises. In past centuries, popular objects of sympathy and charity in the UK included helping poor maids to marry, institutionalising 'fallen women', rescuing captives from pirates and paying off the debts of imprisoned debtors, none of which attract significant support from 21<sup>st</sup> century donors. Understanding the changing and socially constructed nature of sympathy is useful in explaining how donor choice relates to social norms regarding 'deserving' and 'underserving' beneficiaries in any particular time and place. For example the recent rise in negative media attention concerning asylum seekers and immigrants (Thomas, 2012) may make it more challenging for charities seeking donations for this cause to fundraise. This leads us to question whether the concept of popular and unpopular causes really exists beyond that of the individual donors' sympathetic preferences and the context at any given time.

### *Labelling theory*

A third useful theoretical approach highlights the consequences of charities describing their own organisation or cause area as 'unpopular'. Labelling theory, first explicated by Becker

(1963), argues that labels are the creation of observers rather than a reflection of innate characteristics. The social force of being labelled (whether negatively or positively) affects the self-identity and behaviour of individuals and groups, which is reinforced by the ongoing 'labelling language' used by other people. Charities that often refer to their cause as 'unpopular', 'neglected' or 'challenging', rather than using more positive terminology, may unintentionally deter donors who accept and then act on the negative label being attached to that cause. Negative labelling of a charity can impact on fundraising success in at least two ways: Firstly by labelling itself as unpopular and likely to be overlooked by donors the charity may alter its own behaviour by not making substantive efforts to seek support and therefore hamper the likelihood of receiving voluntary income. With similar logic to the crowding out effect, if a charity decides the cause it represents is too unpopular to receive donated income and does not ask, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Secondly, the opportunity to take advantage of donors' networks may be adversely affected by a negative label. Giving behaviour is influenced by donors' social networks and peers, such that social ties are better predictors of charitable giving than personal values and attitudes (Sokolowski, 1996), and the rising power of social media has underscored the importance of the 'personal ask' (Payne et al., 2014). Labelling a cause as 'unpopular' may decrease the number and quality of fundraising requests that come from within personal networks as people may prefer to signpost to charities they perceive as more popular.

### **Research Question**

The process of reviewing the literature and relevant theoretical approaches generated three questions:

- (1) how can we define what is meant by 'unpopular' causes?;
- (2) are there examples of 'good practice' by charities that have overcome perceived unpopularity to achieve fundraising success?;
- (3) what steps can charities that perceive themselves as unpopular take in order to maximise their philanthropic reach?

### **Methodology: defining 'unpopular causes' and identifying case studies**

Despite widespread usage of the concept of 'unpopular' charitable causes in both mass media and academic literature, no agreed definition underpins this concept. Though used relatively frequently to refer to certain groups of charities the phrase relies on a widespread - but unelaborated - acknowledgement of what it means. In the absence of any shared definition, we have used the media as a proxy for public opinion and viewed popularity or lack thereof through the lens of the public press. Furedi notes that, "most people gain their information through the media, rather than through direct experience" (1997:52), and Couldry argues that the media can be considered an adequate proxy for public opinion:

"It is generally taken for granted that the media... have a particular authority to speak on behalf of society as a whole. The media have the power to speak 'for us all' - indeed to define the social 'reality' that we all share" (2000:273).

We initially reviewed high profile newspaper articles discussing 'unpopular causes' to gain a sense of terms that were used to describe this concept. We identified four terms that were commonly used; 'unpopular', 'unworthy', 'challenging' and 'Cinderella'. Using the Google internet search engine and Nexis, a searchable online database of UK newspapers, the four

terms were all inserted, each alternating with the terms ‘charity’ and then ‘cause’. The first hundred responses from the Google search engine were reviewed for appropriate references. Due to the large quantity of results, the Nexis analysis was confined to pairing the four terms with ‘charity’. The search was limited to UK based sources and within the last 20 years (1994-2014). Successful results were defined as those that mentioned unpopular charities (or any of the aforementioned appropriate derivatives) and gave named examples of types of causes or specific charities. Whilst 152 sources referred to unpopular charitable causes, less than one fifth of these gave examples, underscoring the view that it is a self-evident concept. A total of 27 successful results were identified, generating 56 references to particular causes or charities considered to be ‘unpopular’. These references were listed by themes and ranked in order of frequency; this resulted in the top ten ‘unpopular’ causes, as shown in table 1.

This list was then used to identify ten case studies of charities to highlight and analyse good practice in fundraising for unpopular causes. The criteria for selection was three-fold: (1) to be working in one of the cause areas identified as ‘unpopular’ in the first stage of the research; (2) to have demonstrated success in attracting private philanthropic income either by achieving a substantial percentage of their income from philanthropic sources or by showing a marked increase in their philanthropic reach; and (3) to have sufficient information about the charity and examples of their fundraising communications in the public domain. Whilst the ten case studies represent each of the ten ‘unpopular’ causes areas, they constitute a purposive rather than a representative sample as they are chosen for their suitability in illustrating strategies to overcome barriers to fundraising that may be faced by all types of causes. Once selected, each case study was examined utilising charity commission data and publically available information, including their online presence and media reports.

## Findings

We identified the ten cause areas listed in table 1 as those most often defined in practice as ‘unpopular’, the ranking refers to the frequency with which the cause attracted this label, with ‘1’ being ‘most often’. Column 3 of table 1 lists the specific charity chosen as a case study within each cause area.

Rank	Cause	Case study of this cause area
1	Mental health (including suicide and eating disorders)	MIND
2	Refugees and Asylum Seekers	Refugee Support Network
3	Offenders/ Ex-Offenders	Storybook Dads
4	Children with behavioural problems (inc young offenders)	YoungMinds
5	Travellers/ Gypsies	Ormiston Families
6	AIDS/ HIV	Terrence Higgins Trust
7	Domestic Violence and Child Abuse	Lucy Faithful Foundation
8	Prostitution	Beyond the Streets

9	Homosexuality	Stonewall
10	Drug and Alcohol Addiction	Addaction

Table 1 – ‘Unpopular’ causes as defined in UK media coverage

Table 2 summarises the key features of the ten case studies, noting their relative size and a summary of why they were chosen as an example of good practice, which is expanded on in the ‘discussion’ section below.

Case study	Size of charity <sup>2</sup>	Summary of good practice <sup>3</sup>
MIND  ‘for better mental health’	Major	Voluntary income has doubled since 2009 as a result of placing fundraising at the heart of the communications strategy, working with all staff and supporters, telling compelling stories of individuals who have been helped, and building substantial celebrity support. The charity has, through collaboration with partners, been behind some major national campaigns including Time to Change, launched in 2007, to challenge stigma and discrimination.
Refugee Support Network  ‘Education for a hopeful future’	Medium	The annual fundraised sum has more than doubled from £40,000 in the first year of operation (2010). The charity’s website makes good use of film and personal testimony from both volunteers and beneficiaries to explain what it does, to share stories of individuals helped and promote awareness of the cause.
Storybook Dads	Medium	Fundraised income from individuals has tripled from 2008 - 2013 as result of raising awareness of the need to keep children connected to in-prison parents, imaginative campaigns such as inviting people to tweet comical RSVPs to a non-event, and a strong programme for thanking supporters. Celebrity supporters, including the Chair Terry Waite and ‘national treasure’ Joanna Lumley, help raise the profile.
YoungMinds ‘The voice for young people’s mental health and	Large	Donations increased by 25% from 2013 to 2014. Fundraising is strongly promoted online, with a range of examples of what can be achieved with different size donations. The charity’s impact is clearly communicated with over 50 online case studies to illustrate the work and help connect donors to beneficiaries.

<sup>2</sup> Size categorisation based upon NCVO definitions from turnover p/a (figures based on latest accounts as of April 2015); Micro < £10,000, Small £10,001 - £100,000, Medium £100,001 - £1m, Large £1m - £10m, Major >£10m.

<sup>3</sup> Further detail on the case studies are available in the full report – ‘*Rising to the Challenge: A study of philanthropic support for ‘unpopular’ causes*’ available at <http://www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/philanthropy/publications/index.html?tab=working-papers>



wellbeing'		
Ormiston Families 'Young Lives Matter'	Large	A significant investment in fundraising in 2014 led to a 28% increase in donated income. Strong emotive language is used, as well as films and first-person accounts that enable beneficiaries to communicate directly with donors.
Terrence Higgins Trust 'Together we stop HIV in its tracks'	Major	The charity's 30 <sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012 was used to focus efforts on fundraising, leading to a rise in donated income of c.20% in 2013. Use of positive imagery about living with AIDs is blended with emotive language underlining the extent of need. The website is interactive and can be personalised to the visitor's gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation which generates tailored fundraising messages. High profile celebrity support from pop star Elton John, TV presenter Graham Norton and businessman Richard Branson helps attract major donors.
Lucy Faithful Foundation 'Working to protect children'	Large	Donations tripled from £11,000 in 2012 to £37,000 in 2013 as a result of an increased focus on fundraising by all staff, better communication with supporters, an improved website, willingness to participate in TV and radio interviews and good use of social media. Being featured in a New Philanthropy capital report in 2010 helped demonstrate the charity's effectiveness in protecting children by working with paedophiles.
Beyond the Streets 'Say no to exploitation'	Small	Fundraised income doubled from 2009 to 2014. A change of name in 2008 from 'National Christian Alliance on Prostitution' to 'Beyond the Streets' shifted the focus from the organisation to its work and beneficiaries. In 2009 an investment in fundraising helped the charity survive the economic downturn.
Stonewall 'Some People and Gay. Get over it'	Large	The charity experienced a 22% rise in donations between 2012/13 and 2013/14, mainly through securing additional legacy and corporate donations. The media has been identified as a key way to communicate their work, with a focus on both attracting corporate support and increasing their profile through social media. In March 2014 the charity launched a successful social media anti-bullying campaign #NoBystander with 13,800 pledging to support by April 2015.
Addaction	Major	The charity launched a campaign to (in their words) " <i>target head-on the perception of drug and alcohol treatment as an unfashionable and unpopular cause to support</i> ". Fundraised income rose from £75,000 in 2009 to £225,000 in 2014. Communications focus on 'recovery' rather than 'addiction'

		and use personal stories with images of happy, healthy people to illustrate the impact of the charity's work.
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Table 2: Case study summaries

## Discussion

Drawing on the literature review, theoretical approaches and case studies we suggest five types of 'good practice in asking' that are relevant to all types of charities, wherever they perceive themselves to be on the 'popularity spectrum'. Good practice in asking has an impact at three different levels of the fundraising process: (1) the organisational level of the charity; (2) the interaction between the donor and the cause; and (3) wider societal norms and values.

### I. Good practice at the organisational level

#### *Establishing a Culture of Philanthropy*

Each of the case studies had taken steps to ensure fundraising and philanthropy was understood and encouraged at all levels of their organisation, this was achieved by a number of strategies including staff training in fundraising skills, raising awareness of the role and impact of fundraising, including the fundraising function in strategic planning and integrating fundraising in the charity's core values. Embedding a commitment to fundraising throughout organisations creates a 'culture of philanthropy' that has a proven connection to successful fundraising (Belle & Cornelius, 2013). A charity is said to have a 'culture of philanthropy' when, 'Most people in the organisation (across positions) act as ambassadors and engage in relationship-building. Everyone promotes philanthropy and can articulate a case for giving. Fundraising is viewed and valued as a mission-aligned programme of the organisation. Organisational systems are established to support donors. The chief executive/director is committed and personally involved in fundraising.' (Belle & Cornelius, 2013:3)

For example, Beyond the Streets, a charity working with people affected by prostitution invested in fundraising training for the whole charity when faced with the economic downturn in 2009. This resulted in new fundraising materials and a strategic fundraising plan that placed increased focus on fundraising from charitable trusts and foundations as well as engagement of individual donors. As a result, by 2014, the charity more than doubled its fundraising income. As a second example, the mental health charity MIND purposefully placed fundraising at the heart of the charity's communications strategy and has worked with all staff and supporters to ensure fundraising is understood as a key strategic priority.

#### *Cultivating Cheerleaders*

The case studies varied in their focus on engaging and utilising supporters to help fundraise, however those that were particularly successful in securing donor income actively promoted wider networks of supporters, both through celebrity and non-celebrity supporters as well as beneficiaries of the charity. When celebrities can make a credible claim to being a beneficiary then they serve as especially effective cheerleaders as they can speak from experience to a large following (Wilson, 2013).

For example, The Lucy Faithful Foundation, a charity working with child abusers or those at risk of abusing, has received ongoing public criticism due to its client group. Despite attracting 'bad press' it has invested in facilitating supporters prepared to champion the cause in

television and radio interviews, and has made good use of social media, such as blogs, to promote the value of their work direct to the public

Further examples include the Terrence Higgins Trust which is promoted by two global names: pop-star Elton John and businessman Richard Branson, whose support helps raise the charity's profile and gain access to major donors in their networks. An example of a celebrity who is also a beneficiary, MIND's President is the well-regarded comedian Stephen Fry who has written and spoken about his own mental health issues.

## II. Good practice at the donor level

### *Arousing Donors Sympathies*

The framing of a cause to appeal most widely to donors' sympathies was a common feature amongst the case studies. Each charity deliberately and carefully framed their key message and reinforced that framing through all their communication activity, including carefully chosen images (still and videos), in order to engage the attention and sympathy of donors.

For example, the charity Ormiston Families works across a number of areas supporting children and families, including gypsy and traveller communities. The homepage of the website is centred on children, including a large image of happy children on a rolling screen with emotive captions such as, *'Worries soothed'*, *'Tears dried'* and *'We gave her back her smile'*. Such imagery and wording, which is continued throughout the website and marketing material, helps arouse sympathy and captures potential donors' attention. Once engaged and looking through the material the charity uses short films to highlight the needs of particular communities, for example one project *'Life Through a Lens – Our Voice'* gives young people from the Cambridgeshire Gypsy and Traveller communities the opportunity to show their culture through their eyes and voices.

A second case study example, Storybook Dads, which works with parents in prison to produce CDs and DVDs of themselves reading a book to their children, frames its beneficiaries as the innocent children with an in-prison parent. Their material leads with the statement: *"The stories bring comfort to the children and mean they can hear their parents' voice whenever they need to"*. The charity also recognises that assisting prisoners to undertake meaningful activity is a good fundraising message: *"Most of the work is done by trained prisoners who gain useful skills and experience of working in a busy, dynamic environment which can help with resettlement upon release"*. The imagery used to illustrate the message is primarily of happy children listening to their storybook or reconnecting with family. The website, social media and marketing material reflect a child-focused approach with a range of drawings and doodles, giving the impression that children have helped design the brand and are directly asking the donor for support.

The importance of efforts to arouse donor sympathies is summed up by Paul Farmer, Chief executive of another case study, MIND: *"Making people care about your cause means making them care about the people it affects, and helping them understand how your work makes a difference."* (2013)

### *Minimising perceptions of culpability*

Supporting Clark's (1997) notion of the 'socioemotional economy', the case studies demonstrate an understanding that donors prefer beneficiaries whose needs arise through

little or no fault of their own and hence are perceived to be free – or more free – of culpability (Fenton et al, 1993).

For example, YoungMinds, a charity working with children and young people with emotional and mental health needs, notes that the young people it supports are often '*demonised by society*' but suggests they should be viewed as victims first and foremost because, '*Many are likely to become victims of crime, grow up in dysfunctional families, or left to cope with illness, drugs and/or alcohol issues – not necessarily their own*'. YoungMinds also focuses on the specific issues affecting their clients that are most likely to solicit a positive response such as isolation, unhappiness, eating disorders and self-harm.

A second example, Refugee Support Network, a charity offering support to young refugees and asylum seekers, highlights the plights of their beneficiaries, framing their situation with statements such as '*They often experience isolation, loneliness, and difficulties communicating. Some have been brought into the UK by human traffickers and can experience on-going exploitation and abuse.*'

### **III. Good practice at a societal level.**

#### *Attracting positive media coverage*

Media discourses are widely understood to be directly reflexive of public opinion (Ewart 2000:2). Mass media acts as a gate-keeper at two levels: firstly deciding which social issues make it on to the public radar, and secondly shaping how they are presented which impacts on *how* people are encouraged to think about an issue rather than just *whether* the topic appears in the media (Hale 2007).

The recent rise of social media has dented the power of the mass media to some extent and greatly benefited charities (Waters et al, 2009) as communication messages can now be spread more democratically through diverse networks of individuals lacking traditional media power. The case studies demonstrate examples of gaining good media coverage in terms of both quantity and quality: hitting the public radar and being presented in a way that encourages a positive reaction from observers.

For example Stonewall, a charity working for equality and justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, promoted their *#NoBystander* film across a range of media networks. The 60 second clip, narrated by film star Ian McKellan, culminates with the statement '*if you hear it, stop it. Don't be a bystander*' and signposts viewers to support the campaign; it has been viewed on social media (Youtube and Facebook) over half a million times, as at April 2015.

A second case study example, Lucy Faithfull Foundation, also highlights the importance of shaping of media coverage. The charity has a clear focus on communications as a means to both raise organisational profile and achieve their mission to 'protect children from sexual harm'. Over the past five years they have featured in over 50 high profile, national media outlets mainly promoting their 'Stop it now!' campaign. The campaign has an identity of its own with its own Youtube channel and an associated Facebook page that has 20,000 followers as at April 2015.

### **Implications for Practice**

We now draw on the 'research context' section of this paper and the examples of good practice highlighted in the case studies above, to identify learning which can help ensure a maximum

philanthropic reach for charities. In doing so we identify five key areas that directly impact on successful fundraising.

### *Asking*

We conclude that asking donors to donate is the single biggest factor affecting giving. All of the charities featured in the case studies proactively embrace a culture of philanthropy and directly ask donors for support. We know that almost all donations occur in response to a solicitation (Bryant et al 2003). Asking for donations means investing in fundraising, not just in financial terms but also by strategically placing fundraising at the heart of the organisation. Such investment can pay dividends, regardless of the size of the charity. Both Beyond the Streets, a small charity, and Mind, a major charity, doubled their voluntary income in the 5 years 2009-2014 by adopting such an approach. However recent research focused on the north east of England suggests that not all charities embrace this concept and suggests the 'crowding out' effect is indeed a reality, where charities either perceive themselves as too 'unpopular' to ask or when new income from one source leads to a reduction in income from another source. Pharoah et al., (2014) found that a third of charities (33%) felt fundraising was not a strong priority within their business plan, and 85% thought their fundraising approach needed strengthening. This was coupled with 44% experiencing a decrease in fundraising resources and just under 50% feeling that staff had no dedicated time to fundraise and generate income.

### *Framing the Cause*

As the case studies demonstrate, framing the cause effectively to both capture donors' sympathies and appeal directly to donors' personal tastes is key to securing donations. Bachke et al., (2014) suggest that framing the cause in relation to an individual beneficiary, ideally a child, is far more effective than focusing on large numbers of potential beneficiaries. Personalising the message of the charity through story-telling and individual case studies is more likely to appeal to donors' sympathies. Both Addaction and Refugee Support Network offer good examples on their websites, highlighting personal and compelling stories of individuals that help donors emotionally connect to the cause and feel empathy with the beneficiaries. Such approaches allow donors to understand and visualise the impact of their gift, whilst simultaneously overcoming issues associated with the cause being labelled as unworthy or unpopular. This is exemplified in charities dealing with more complex causes when it may be beneficial to draw out particular elements of their work that are most likely to engage donor sympathies. For example Storybook Dads focus on children as victims rather than the imprisoned parents with whom the charity works. Similarly, the Lucy Faithfull Foundation's 'Stop it Now!' campaign, puts the focus on the emotive and empathy-arousing part of their work, i.e. protecting children, rather than on their work supporting the rehabilitation of abusers.

### *Illustrating the Cause*

Choosing the right images to illustrate a cause in printed, online and broadcast media, is essential to supporting the chosen framing of a cause. For example, Small et al (2007) find that focusing on individual beneficiaries rather than on larger groups of those helped, or on the general charitable purposes, can be more effective. A number of case studies, such as Ormiston Families Trust, Storybook Dads and YoungMinds, illustrate their work with images of an individual child. However there are a number of moral considerations to take into account when considering illustrations used to frame a cause. Breeze and Dean's (2012) exploration of homeless young people's perceptions of the imagery used to generate voluntary income found participants prioritised maximising donated income, even it meant they had to 'play along with

stereotypes' (p.40). However the research also highlighted beneficiaries' preference for images that elicit empathy rather than sympathy and that avoid arousing the 'shame effect' (Ash, 2005).

### *Empowering Supporters*

Successful fundraising charities make the most of all available resources including employees, volunteers, beneficiaries, donors and celebrity supporters who can use their networks and influence to reach and empower people who are unaware of the need and may be motivated to donate. In our case studies MIND, Addaction, Stonewall, Terrence Higgins and Storybook Dads all make good use of celebrities, who can be effective cheerleaders as some donors use well known supporters as a shorthand method of assessing a charity's calibre (Breeze 2013). Engaging such individuals can be difficult for smaller charities with fewer resources, but cheerleaders do not need to be famous as social media enables anyone who is connected to other people to promote the work of a charity (Payne et al, 2014). Empowering the people at the heart of 'unpopular causes' – beneficiaries, former beneficiaries, their parents and loved ones, as well as volunteers and staff - to ask their social networks to support the cause, is an efficient and effective way to secure donations (Yoruk, 2012).

### *Raising profile through collaboration*

Opportunities to raise a charity's profile can be created through calculated marketing efforts, or they can be opportunistic. Accepting that the visibility of a cause is largely influenced by wider social factors means that a charity needs to remain vigilant for opportunities to discuss and promote the work of the charity at all opportunities. Many charities lack the funds, resources and networks to launch significant media campaigns, and their supporters and leadership may not endorse significant spending on non-frontline activities. Even when a media campaign is launched it is very difficult to ascertain the factors that lead to success. It may therefore be beneficial for charities to work together to raise the profile of specific 'unpopular' causes and use their combined resources and networks to secure sufficient media support for the effort to be fruitful. The Charities MIND and Rethink Mental Illness (working name of the National Schizophrenia Association) collaborated to launch the national campaign 'Time to Change' a programme to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination. Both charities have experienced significant growth in their voluntary income since 2010 and cite a 6% improvement in attitudes between 2011 and 2014 based on survey feedback<sup>4</sup>. As Paul Farmer, CEO of MIND, wrote, *'Cross-working with other organisations, both in policy, campaigning and fundraising, is beneficial to all the charities because it raises the issue clearly. Certainly, mental health charities have benefitted both from increased income and improved public attitudes as a result of this.'* (2013)

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to pin down the previously opaque notion of 'unpopular causes' and questioned the widespread assumption that certain causes are inevitably 'unpopular' and unlikely to attract significant voluntary support. In doing so we have sought to unpick how the term 'unpopular' is applied in practice, and illustrated how this assumption of unpopularity can be overcome by charities.

The identification of three levels of good practice - organisational, donor and societal - which are explained and exemplified in the case studies within the 'discussion', give weight to the

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Time to Change website at <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/about-us> (viewed 2/10/15)

three theoretical concepts described in the ‘research context’ section at the start of this article. We argue that good fundraising at an organisational level is primarily concerned with internal investment in, and advocacy of, fundraising. The case studies’ investment in fundraising is not tied to their success or otherwise in generating other types of income – the search for philanthropic support is viewed as a valid task that is owned and supported by the whole organisation and is not at risk of internal crowding out. Good practice at the donor level in the charity-donor relationship is exemplified by successfully arousing sympathy and minimising perceptions of culpability amongst the beneficiary group. Charities that invest in the ‘ask’ and frame their cause effectively position themselves more favourably with donors. Empowering cheerleaders and advocates can further enhance this relationship. And finally at the societal level, successful fundraising depends to some extent on successfully influencing media coverage of the beneficiary group as well as the work of the organisations working in that area. We note that the rise of social media is helping to redistribute some power into the hands of charities and their supporters, as demonstrated by some of our case studies, but they do remain reliant on favourable depiction of their work in the main news outlets.

Whilst this article offers an attempt at understanding what constitutes an ‘unpopular’ cause, it is a contemporaneous study and does not take account of changes in public perceptions over time, so it would be useful for future research to take a more historical perspective on this topic. Furthermore, our research is broadly focused on the outcomes of fundraising efforts, using data in the public domain, and it would be useful to conduct a study that was able to take greater account of the relationship between resources invested and outcomes.

In summary, we conclude that the UK is a generous country, but this generosity is not evenly distributed or allocated according to objective criteria of ‘worthiness’, so all charitable organisations need to work hard to attract voluntary support. The landscape of charitable activity is increasingly filled with well-framed, emotive causes competing for donors’ support. Whilst we know that an individual’s decision to donate is hugely influenced by subjective experience and personal taste, we also know that they are unlikely to seek out charitable causes beyond their normal frame of reference or experiences. This means charities, especially those that perceive themselves to be unpopular and/or working in cause areas beyond typical donors’ experiences, must create an organisational culture of philanthropy, consider carefully how they frame their cause and its beneficiaries and be pro-active in drawing attention to their work. As such we recognise that they sometimes need to work harder to ensure they make their cause as visible and compelling as possible for donors. However this is not an impossible task as demonstrated by the case studies. Whilst we recognise that some causes are undoubtedly a tougher ‘ask’ than others’, none should pre-emptively write themselves off as ‘unpopular’ and therefore unlikely to attract private support.

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