Defining the Developing World: Narrative Criticism Exploring Global Nonprofit Portrayals of Third World Poverty

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Defining the Developing World:
Narrative Criticism Exploring Global Nonprofit Portrayals of Third World Poverty

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Abstract

“Poverty is like heat: You cannot see it, you can only feel it; so to know poverty, you have to go through it” (Narayan, 2000, p. xvii). This quote from a poor Ghanaian man epitomizes the view of standpoint theory, the belief that dominant society should stop speaking and start listening to underprivileged voices, to recognize that these people hold knowledge and views of which the dominant world simply cannot conceive. Global nonprofit organizations World Vision and Compassion International tell stories to illustrate and share their work, but in these stories, they fail to let the poor speak for themselves. This narrative criticism of the organizations’ promotional stories will reveal the ways in which such silencing can impact the world’s perception of the poor. Further, it will tie these findings to our discipline’s understanding of Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, engaging his theory’s lack of focus on marginalized stories.
Defining the Developing World

“Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death” (UNICEF, 2011). They are the three billion who live on less than two dollars a day, the two billion who suffer malnourishment, the one billion who lack clean drinking water. They are the 30,000 who die each day due to their lack of basic resources (McCormick, p. 40). They are the epitome of silent sufferers. They are the third world.

To cure the assumedly helpless state of impoverished people in these countries, global nonprofit organizations all over the world, from Invisible Children to Food for the Hungry, speak for these silent sufferers and marshal donations to provide the food, clothing, education, and other resources they need. Such organizations use a variety of methods to raise awareness of and money for those suffering in the third world, trying to stand out from the 1.5 million other nonprofit organizations based in the United State alone (Foundation Center, 2011). Some hold fundraising events like 5K races and extravagant galas, others utilize phone solicitations and door-to-door marketing, still others approach wealthy individuals, beseeching support. Undergirding most, if not all, of these efforts, however, resides one persuasive technique – the use of story. Almost every nonprofit organization utilizes story in some manner due to narrative’s persuasive nature.

Perhaps narrative is persuasive because, as Alasdair MacIntyre’s has noted, “man in his actions and practice, as well as his functions, is essentially a story-telling animal” (Foss, p.). Stories give order to human life, helping explain its happenings and deciding what certain experiences truly mean (Foss, p.). Walter Fisher, creator of the narrative paradigm concept, claims that life itself is a series of stories and that narrative can actually create reality (Griffin, p. 302). Perhaps this ability to create and interpret reality, as well as humanity’s deep-seated
attachment to story-telling, explains nonprofit organizations’ frequent use of story in their efforts to persuade.

This ability to create reality also explains why scholars should understand and critique global nonprofits’ use of persuasive narrative. While these stories could present truth and bring awareness to many publics, they could, for example, also promote stereotypes and encourage apathy in their audiences. Narrative criticism can discover the hidden aspects of these stories, explore their methods of persuasion, determine the likelihood of the stories’ success, and analyze the sponsoring organization’s worldview and work. Narrative criticism examines all aspects of a narrative, from its content to its structure to its vocabulary (Foss, p.).

Global nonprofit organizations’ stories generally reach large audiences, consequently influencing many people’s views of third world happenings. As a result, this study seeks to discover the ways in which such organizations portray poverty in the developing world. World Vision and Compassion International seem to unwittingly promote a number of stereotypes and generalizations, as evidenced by their common themes. First, they portray poverty as an easily conquerable phenomenon, then they paint the poor as helpless but motivated individuals. Finally, the organizations portray themselves as “knights in shining armor” who save the day for these impoverished people. The findings of this study suggest global nonprofits’ need to seek and emphasize marginalized voices in order to reveal a comprehensive account of global poverty. This study seeks to re-evaluate Fisher’s narrative paradigm and further our discipline’s understanding of the significance of utilizing standpoint theory in promotional materials.

Description of Artifacts
While countless nonprofit organizations utilize the art of story to validate their work and solicit funding, I chose to perform narrative criticism of the promotional stories published by two of the largest and most successful global nonprofit organizations – World Vision and Compassion International. The Forbes 2009 list of the top 200 largest U.S. charities includes both of these organizations, rating them by total revenue, fundraising efficiency, charitable commitment, donor dependency, and private support (Forbes, 2009). Further, Charity Navigator, the nation’s largest charity evaluator, gives both World Vision and Compassion International its highest rating of four stars (Charity Navigator, 2011). World Vision serves nearly 100 million people in 100 countries with a total annual revenue of more than one billion dollars (World Vision, 2011), and Compassion works for 1.2 million people in 26 countries with a revenue of 507 million dollars (Compassion International, 2011). Clearly, each organization influences many people in both the first and third worlds every day, aiding the suffering and involving the world’s wealthy in their work.

Further, I chose to study World Vision and Compassion because both organizations thrive on the use of storytelling and feature many stories on their websites for audience consumption. The narratives vary in length and topic, so for my study, I selected only stories of 500 words or more. I therefore examined 11 World Vision stories focusing on the organization’s work in Haiti and its effort to overcome hunger in Africa. I also studied 14 Compassion International stories labeled as “featured,” which vary in topic from hunger to education. While the World Vision stories are not dated, the Compassion stories were all written after the year 2005.

As a whole, these 25 narratives are stories of transformation often written with a dramatic flair. They come from various countries but all point to the fruit of the organizations’ work in
those countries. The stories contain many themes, from the conquering of poverty to the poor’s work ethic; through these themes, World Vision and Compassion International shape the world-views of their large publics.

**Methods**

In order to conduct narrative criticism of these promotional stories, I began by determining my research questions. First, how do these organizations portray third world poverty through their stories? Second, how do they present themselves and their work to aid those suffering people? Both of these questions have important implications because millions of dollars flow through these organizations each year as they touch millions of lives, both in the U.S. and abroad. Not only do these organizations receive money and give aid, they help form society’s assumptions about poverty and its potential solutions. Further, their portrayals of the third and first worlds influence society’s views of these entities. World Vision’s and Compassion’s influence are therefore substantial and should be examined.

After establishing my research questions and their significance, I began to examine the stories, searching for common themes, as well as deviants from those themes. I also looked for common structures and methods of presenting information. I then sought to determine the meanings behind these commonalities, pulling from them representations of the organizations’ views. Finally, I pondered the possible consequences of the views presented in these stories. In the next section, I will present my analysis of World Vision’s and Compassion International’s promotional stories, in addition to my interpretation of their implications both in the U.S. and abroad.
Portrayals of Poverty

Poverty is Conquerable

Through my analysis of their promotional stories, I found a number of themes that indicate World Vision’s and Compassion’s views of poverty, perspectives that influence the organizations’ work and the ways in which they portray such work. In their stories, the global nonprofits clearly and frequently display poverty as an entirely conquerable phenomenon. This concept permeates every aspect of World Vision and Compassion, from the work they accomplish to the images they paint of themselves to the ways in which they solicit donor assistance. They both function under and perpetuate the idea that all poverty is conquerable, furthering this view through the consistent success documented in their promotional stories. All 14 Compassion International stories and 8 of the 11 World Vision stories end positively. The three World Vision stories that do not contain successful transformations differ simply to strike a chord and make the point that the poor need the organization’s help and that the organization itself depends upon donor assistance. Two of these stories even include an explicit call for donor participation to fix the situation recounted. Further, the 25 narratives do not include organizational failures or struggles; the only failures displayed occur due to family mistakes or lack of organizational resources.

Instead, the narratives usually contain a three-part structure that makes the poor’s difficulties appear easily fixed. They begin with the problem, present the solution, and rejoice in the resulting happiness and hope. These stories do not contain the intricacies of the transformations because, on average, they contain only 600 words. They therefore give the gist of the situation, covering only the problem, the antidote, and the result, an anecdote that could
contribute to the perception of poverty as a clean-cut and easily solved issue. For instance, World Vision tells the story of a Haitian girl named Angela whose family was bitterly poor, most likely earning less than $1.25 each day. When the infamous earthquake struck in 2009, Angela’s family lived for two weeks in the rubble of their home, sheltered under branches and bringing in no income. Soon, though, World Vision provided the family transitional shelter, necessary food basics, and a cash-for-work program. As a result, Angela now derives much joy from attending school (“Back to School,” n.d.).

World Vision offers numerous other stories written in this fashion, as does Compassion International. Appendix A outlines the three-part structure contained in a number of these stories.

In addition to writing their stories in a simplistic fashion, World Vision and Compassion also emphasize, either at the beginning or the end, the happiness their work brings. They show this joy in a variety of ways, but they often set scenes and use actions to show it. For instance, a Compassion author discusses a little girl named Violet from an abusive home peacefully enjoying her lunch under a tree (Irungu, 2011), and a World Vision author shows the happiness of a boy named Mygal by detailing the music he makes with plastic carton drums (“Life is Changing,” n.d.). World Vision and Compassion also like to show their work’s effects by highlighting the children’s newly promising futures. For example, Compassion explicitly mentions Violet’s desire to work as a lawyer in order to fight for the rights of children like her (Irungu, 2011), and World Vision emphasizes Angela’s desire to become a nurse (“Back to School,” n.d.).
This recurring hope points to the idea that all poverty is conquerable as long as an outside entity can step in to provide the necessary resources. Further, the three-part structure portrays poverty as a simple problem to fix, one that requires little time or ingenuity. This somewhat simplistic picture of poverty can lead to stereotyping and misrepresentation, as this paper will later explore. It can also prompt, however, motivation in donors, showing them how their money can benefit a child but not burdening them with all the process details. Ideally, such simplicity encourages potential donors to support World Vision and Compassion by showing them that these organizations can overcome poverty.

**Poverty is Motivation Enough**

While portraying poverty as conquerable, World Vision and Compassion also paint the poor as helpless but motivated individuals who need only education and resources to break free from their dire circumstances. The narratives generally begin by detailing the poor’s desperate and feeble attempts to free themselves and follow that account with the organization’s solution of education or resources.

In order to describe the poor’s feeble state, these narratives utilize many emotionally charged words and phrases. Phrases like “desperate to feed her children,” “vulnerable,” “alone,” “harsh reality,” and “obstacles of poverty” all implicate the helplessness of the poor (C. Rayburn, 2005; S. Irungu, 2011). Other stories explicitly describe the people as “defenseless” and “powerless” (Campbell, 2009).

Next, the stories nearly always detail the poor’s failed attempts to change their situation. They take a variety of measures to survive, from abandoning children to fleeing violence to relocating to find jobs. In a story entitled “The Toll of Poverty on Motherhood,” Compassion
International describes one mother’s efforts in the following way: “[Glenda] had one chance only and she took it without hesitating… Glenda’s tenacity and perseverance were amazing. Despite her pregnancy and its challenges, she did not weaken; but instead, she fought to support her family” (Yepez, 2011, para. 5 &6). These references to Glenda exhibit Compassion’s purported view that the poor never lack motivation, but instead they strive toward independence and freedom from struggle.

According to the narratives, however, the poor often cannot achieve this freedom on their own, regardless of how hard they try. Inevitably, in 24 of this study’s 25 stories, the global nonprofit organization steps in and solves the problem with its education and resources. A World Vision nurse states the organization’s perception of the situation: “A lack of knowledge, combined with poverty, means that many children are all too familiar with hunger” (Kaumba, 2010, para. 11). More specifically, the narratives name local myths and simple ignorance as sources of faulty knowledge and a lack of steady employment as a reason for poverty. Compassion International’s mission, referenced in the story entitled “Compassion Registers One Millionth Child,” plainly shows the organization’s commitment to providing the essential tools of education and resources: supplying “the health care, educational opportunities, and spiritual guidance [children] need to be released from poverty in Jesus’ name” (Campbell, 2009, para. 2). In order to provide these tools, the organizations offer resources like nutrition and cooking programs, health clinics, shelters, Mothers’ Clubs, and so on.

The stories’ documented success of such programming supports the idea that poverty alone serves as sufficient motivation for the poor to strive forward. In none of the narratives do constituents of World Vision or Compassion require encouragement to take steps to change their lives. These impoverished people consistently desire to better themselves, working toward such
goals even before the organizations assist them. Throughout the narratives, these universally motivated people require help only through resources and education.

Self-Portraits

Knight in Shining Armor

As World Vision and Compassion paint portraits of the poor, they also paint self-portraits. While they describe those suffering in third world countries as motivated yet helpless, they portray themselves as knights in shining armor, ready to swoop in and save the day. If poverty is indeed conquerable, as explored earlier, World Vision and Compassion International are the conquerors. In the 25 narratives examined, Compassion “comes to the rescue” in every one of its stories and World Vision enters the scene in all but one of its pieces.

In order to look like the saviors, the organizations utilize rescue language that maximizes the effect of their work. For instance, World Vision says, “Hope dawned when [Bellanda’s family] moved into a camp for internally displaced persons” (“Looking to the Future,” n.d., para. 3), and Compassion explicitly claims that its Child Survival Program “rescues” a family (Rayburn, 2005, para. 6). Further, Compassion aided a child named Riohnel by ensuring “an action plan went into effect immediately” (Estioko, 2011, para. 15).

Beyond this rescue language, however, the organizations’ knight in shining armor persona is perpetuated through causal relations. Causal relations permeate the 25 narratives examined because the majority of these stories focus on transformations. For example, a Compassion story called “The True Joy of Christmas” states, “Tania’s life changed, however, when she was accepted into the Compassion project in her neighborhood” (emphasis added,
Campbell, 2006, para. 6). In another Compassion story, entitled “A Reason to Live,” the main character says, “I am here today because of the Child Survival Program, and my baby is alive because of them” (Campbell, n.d., para. 41). These examples are two of many throughout the narratives; each action highlighted in the stories leads to another event, which eventually leads to the suffering’s salvation. In the stories, however, these chains of events always begin with World Vision or Compassion International, further solidifying the organizations’ place as knights in shining armor.

Help Wanted

World Vision and Compassion International may be knights in shining armor, but they remain clear about their inability to work without help from their donors. They therefore strive to involve the donors through these promotional narratives. Compassion seeks reader participation in eight of its stories, including a link for readers to leave feedback of what they liked about the story. In this way, Compassion aims to personally involve its readers and encourage them to engage more by clicking further into the website and leaving feedback. Also, in this way, Compassion can gain knowledge about which aspects of their work audiences and donors most enjoy.

World Vision approaches reader participation in a different and more explicit way than Compassion, asking directly for audience involvement. To close seven of its 11 narratives, World Vision asks its readers to help the organization in some way – through prayer, a one-time gift, a monthly donation, a child sponsorship, and so on. World Vision always includes in these requests links to pages that contain more information about helping. Further, the organization
continually strives to specifically connect the request to the story, as evidenced by the following examples:

“Hungry children are counting on the generosity of donors like you to help them survive this food crisis” (“Horn of Africa,” n.d., para. 10).

“Please pray for the ongoing recovery of Swangirai, and remember the countless other children like him who continue to suffer from hunger and malnutrition at the hands of the global food crisis” (Kaumba, 2010, para. 15).

“Make a one-time gift to our Horn of Africa Food Crisis Fund” (Murunga, 2011, para. 16).

Specific connections like these enable donors to more easily discern the fruits of their efforts, while emphasizing the organizations’ reliance on their benefactors. Such an emphasis fosters pride in donors, encouraging them to continue their benevolence, through monetary donations, prayer, and so on.

**Leaving God Behind**

World Vision’s stories may request prayer, but otherwise the stories rarely reference God or the organization’s spiritual imperatives. Throughout their mission statements and distinctives, both of these organizations emphasize Christianity and their desire to serve others for Jesus Christ. Compassion mentions God more often in its narratives than does World Vision, but it still focuses on spiritual transformation surprisingly little considering the organization’s mission statement:
In response to the Great Commission, Compassion International exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their *spiritual*, economic, social and physical *poverty* and enable them to *become* responsible and fulfilled *Christian* adults (emphasis added, “Compassion International,” 2011).

World Vision has a similar mission statement:

World Vision is an international partnership of *Christians* whose mission is to *follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice, and bear *witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God* (emphasis added, “World Vision,” 2011).

Assumedly, the organizations fulfill their goals of spreading the Gospel and working toward spiritual transformation among their constituents, but their narratives do not often indicate such a commitment. Only three of World Vision’s 11 stories reference God at all, and when they do, the references come in the form of a quote or request for prayer. The narratives never contain intimations of spiritual transformation. Further, only three of Compassion’s 14 stories discuss spiritual change in the people the organization serves. The other eight stories include spirituality only in quotations and in casual mentions like “Scripture verses written on the walls” and “real reason for the season” (Estioko, 2011; Campbell, 2006).

This lack of narrative spirituality seems to divert from the organizations’ clear focus on improving the spiritual lives of its constituents while providing for them physically and emotionally. In every self-description, World Vision labels itself a “*Christian* humanitarian organization” (emphasis added, “World Vision,” 2011), claiming to pursue the strengthening of
its constituents’ relationships with God through its life-saving work. Further, the organization uses its child sponsorship program to meet the “basic needs” of each child, needs that include spiritual nurturing in addition to healthy food, health care, and so on (“World Vision,” 2011).

Compassion International uses even more Christian language throughout its promotional materials and website than World Vision. It distinguishes itself from other nonprofits by emphasizing its “Christ-centered and church-based” nature that ensures each sponsored child hears about Jesus Christ’s saving grace (“Compassion International,” 2011). Compassion names the Great Commission – Jesus’s call to Christian evangelism – as its mission’s core, labeling as most important its work to help children develop relationships with God (“Compassion International,” 2011).

One might imagine that organizations with this stated mission would engage in some explicit spiritual focus alongside the provision of material aid, yet the organizations’ narrative accounts do not include such work. This lack of spiritual reference is puzzling given the organizations’ emphases on God, but one cannot deny the “God void” in these stories.

**Giving a Voice**

Regardless of the intricacies they overlook, these World Vision and Compassion International narratives paint beautiful and hope-inspiring pictures of the poverty situation around the globe. They give insight into the redeeming work conducted by these organizations, spotlighting hard working and worthy individuals around the world who simply need a helping hand. These narratives inspire their readers to act on behalf of others, to spread love, and to believe in the possibility of reconciliation. Every story also enables World Vision and
Compassion to help more people as they make known to the world the work they conduct, recruiting others to join in their efforts.

In order to make their work understandable and hope-inspiring, World Vision and Compassion write their stories in clear-cut ways that often simplify the matter of poverty. While such simplification results in emotionally charged and inspiring stories, it can also lead to potentially negative generalizations. One must therefore consider the narratives and discern what aspects they exclude.

Overall, the most significant aspect excluded is the voices of the poor. Muted group theory, developed by Cheris Kramarae, aptly describes this exclusion and reveals the reasoning behind it. According to muted group theory, voices of the dominant societal group often overshadow and distort the voices of the less privileged group (Orbe, 2009). In this case, the powerful and wealthy World Vision and Compassion International voices simply muffle the voices of the global poor. As a result, these organizations spread their world-views while excluding the life experiences of the developing world. World Vision and Compassion certainly aim to speak for the poor by using their narratives as a platform for such speaking. However, in the process, they inadvertently mute and distort their constituents’ voices. They simply cannot tell the stories of the poor as accurately or as vividly as the poor themselves due to limited language, lack of experiential knowledge, and so on.

To counteract this lack of understanding, in 1999, the World Bank conducted a survey to act as background information for the World Development Report 2000/01: Attacking Poverty. The first portion of this three-part study surveyed more than 40,000 poor people from more than 50 countries, seeking their ideas and opinions about poverty to aid in reforming strategies for
eradicating poverty. The books written from this research, entitled *Voices of the Poor*, seek to outline the poor’s feelings and experiences regarding poverty. The books contain summaries of what people said, including findings that counter commonly held beliefs about the impoverished. Through this study, the World Bank sought to give a voice to the voiceless and learn from what they had to say. The following quote from a poor man in Adaboya, Ghana, epitomizes why we must, as the first world, allow the third world to speak for itself: “Poverty is like heat: You cannot see it, you can only feel it; so to know poverty, you have to go through it” (Narayan, 2000, xvii).

Individuals and organizations that strive to speak for others can inadvertently create or perpetuate stereotypes and generalizations. For example, the 25 narratives’ portrayal of poverty shows it as a conquerable entity that these knight-like organizations can fix simply, given the right amount of funding. While such a perception of poverty can encourage people to get involved because it makes the goal of eradicating poverty appear attainable, the actual removal of poverty is far from simple. In his blog, Dennis Whittle, president of the Whittle Group and Global Giving, cites Ben Ramalingham’s perspective on the complexity of poverty. Ramalingham argues that solving poverty is not a simple, or even complicated, task; it is instead thoroughly complex due to its many facets. Society engages poverty like a puzzle, assuming aid fits perfectly into the holes. Ramalingham posits that this puzzle view misrepresents both the problem of poverty and the solution of outside aid (Whittle, 2011).

Further, in his work entitled “Well-being and the Complexity of Poverty: A Subjective Well-being Approach,” Mariano Rojas of United Nations University emphasizes the subjectivity inherent in the notion of a fulfilling life. One cannot, from the outside, deem another wealthy or
happy (Rojas, n.d.). *Voices of the Poor* echoes this sentiment, finding in its participants’ answers that freedom from poverty is not simply economic because poverty itself has multiple dimensions; they identify six. First, hunger and a lack of basic needs define poverty, followed by the psychological aspects like lacking power and a voice. The poor also desire access to infrastructures like roads and transportation, as well as opportunities for literacy and an education. Additionally, physical illness can bring poverty. Finally, as a whole, the poor constitute wealth as assets made up of varying components, physical to social (Narayan, 2000).

As evidenced by their narratives, World Vision and Compassion International seek to address many of these dimensions of poverty, focusing on more than just income through their redemptive work. However, the organizations’ simple problem-plus-aid-equals-success equation may mislead audiences, suggesting that poverty is a simple entity, solvable in only a few steps. Audiences need to instead realize the intense work that pulls people from the jaws of poverty and understand that simple donations of money do not heal the poor’s psychological disorders and help them establish relationships with others. Simplifying the issue of poverty can diminish the complexity of this global problem, while also encouraging audiences to laud global nonprofit organizations more than warranted.

Global nonprofits certainly impact millions of people around the world; World Vision and Compassion alone serve more than 101 million people, contributing to and even creating success stories in many developing countries. According to *Voices of the Poor*, however, global nonprofit organizations have a relatively limited presence in the developing world because they help few in relation to the massive number of poor people. At times, they even function as
sources of disempowerment as they do little to fix the countries’ social inequalities (Narayan, 2000).

Further, even in the lives they do touch, global nonprofits sometimes fail. World Vision and Compassion International certainly have less-than-successful stories. Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, wrote a reflection posted on the organization’s Facebook entitled “When a Child Dies.” In this article, he openly expresses his grief over the loss of a World Vision child to illustrate the fact that these children do sometimes die (Stearns, 2003). In the same vein, Compassion International published a blog post to give support and guidance to donors if their sponsored children die (Web Team, 2010). Clearly, these organizations do not always have success stories; they also suffer unavoidable hardship.

Overall, World Vision and Compassion definitely impact the developing world in large and beneficial ways, but they cannot always save the day and serve as the “knight in shining armor.” Their work contains flaws, failures, and fallacies, but audiences do not perceive such issues in the organizations’ narratives because these pieces contain only positive outcomes. One must therefore ask two questions: Do these stories promote an incorrect and potentially damaging view of third world poverty by simplifying its solutions? If so, what measures can these organizations take to counteract and prevent such damaging presentations?

To answer the first question, I offer that our discipline needs to conduct further research, perhaps performing an audience analysis to determine the meanings people make from narratives like those listed above. My study and the communication discipline in general believe that stories hold persuasive power over those who encounter them. We can therefore assume nonprofit narrative readers garner information from these stories; we simply do not yet know the
specific impressions these readers gain. Audience analysis research, through interviews, focus groups, surveys, and so on, would consequently inform the communication discipline and the nonprofit world of negative stereotypes promoted by these narratives. For example, through this research, we could discover whether or not people actually view global poverty as simple to solve. Discovering these potentially negative viewpoints could serve as support for the proposition that narratives must seek to portray the poor in an accurate and balanced manner.

In order to create such a portrayal, global nonprofits need to consider four simple words: let the poor speak. World Vision, Compassion International, and any other organizations that perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions through their work should learn from the Voices of the Poor approach by allowing those suffering around the world to give voice to their stories. Julia T. Wood’s standpoint theory, which began as a feminist theory, advocates for placing the power of voice into the hands of the poor. This theory encourages the dominant society to stop speaking and start listening to the underprivileged voices, to recognize that these people hold knowledge and views of which the dominant world simply cannot conceive. In fact, standpoint theory argues that the subordinate culture actually sees the world in a more objective manner because it must work to speak through the dominant culture in all situations and because it has no reason to defend the status quo (Orbe, 2009; Griffin, 2009).

Therefore, in order to best understand a situation, the culture on top must allow the subordinate culture to express its view of the circumstances and must dig into the everyday experiences of this subordinate culture, searching for the truth within small but meaningful experiences. Standpoint theory encourages dominant cultures to understand that many views of any given situation exist and to acknowledge that varying viewpoints will exist even within the
subordinate culture. Under the tenets of standpoint theory, people seek to understand the similarities and differences among cultural groups, while rejecting the tendency to generalize or essentialize the experiences of the underprivileged sector (Orbe, 2009; Griffin, 2009).

Adopting this equality-promoting perspective will also lead to a new approach to story, one that re-examines Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm. In his theory, Fisher proposes that a narrative is successful and good if it possesses the qualities of coherence and fidelity. The attribute of coherence requires internal consistency throughout the story and a level of believability. For coherence to exist, the characters and plot line must act in an understandable and believable manner. Further, in order to create fidelity, an author must write a story that “rings true” with an audience’s experiences and makes sense from the audience perspective (Griffin, 2009). Therefore, if a story makes sense and functions in a logical way, Fisher considers it good.

University of Washington’s Barbara Warnick questions this perspective by arguing that not all books containing coherence and fidelity are good. She provides the example of Adolf Hitler’s book entitled Mein Kampf, a work that appealed to Hitler’s audiences but contains much evil and immorality (Griffin, 2009). Therefore, based on this critique, can we truly deem stories beneficial if they simply make rational sense (coherence) and have emotional appeal (fidelity)? I argue that we cannot judge a story with the sole criteria of coherence and fidelity because, as supported by standpoint and muted group theories, stories written from the dominant perspective do not always portray an accurate picture of life. Because I exist as part of the dominant culture, however, I will most likely relate to such stories because I hold common dominant culture experiences and viewpoints. The same stories, written from the subordinate perspective, may not
appeal to me, though, because I do not come from the same background as those storytellers. Does that lack of appeal make the story any less true or good? Of course not. Wheaton College professor Em Griffin agrees with the tenets of the narrative paradigm, but for the above reasons, proposes an extension of the theory that acknowledges the subordinate perspective. Griffin advocates for the recognition of the status quo in the art of storytelling and the recognition that others have legitimate stories to tell (Griffin, 2009).

This recognition may manifest itself in a number of ways. First, I propose that writers seek out and strive to emphasize the marginalized stories. Nonprofit storytellers, specifically, should work toward creating a balance between persuasion and transparency, a balance important to any public relations endeavors. Further, readers and critics should look for the marginalized voices in stories, or the lack thereof. In order to conduct this search, they must simply ask questions like, “Who wrote the story? Is it the main character or an outsider? From what perspective is this author writing?” If readers remain cognizant of such story components and strive to be aware of marginalized voices, they will demand more objective and accurate narratives.

If World Vision and Compassion International ascribed to the ideas in standpoint theory, they would give the poor a chance to speak for themselves. In turn, they would promote a more accurate and potentially beneficial view of the developing world, teaching people in the first world how the “other” lives. According to a poor person in Egypt, “Nobody hears the poor. It is the rich who are being heard” (Narayan, 2000, p. 2). By letting the poor speak, World Vision and Compassion could provide a more truthful account of what transformation looks like in the third world, a portrayal that comes from those most deeply invested. Perhaps such genuineness
would attract more donors. Perhaps such transparency would reverse the negative and damaging stereotypes of the poor. Perhaps such openness would give a life-changing voice to the voiceless.
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