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Master's in International Humanitarian Action

Short descriptive title:

Manufacturing Empathy:
The Ethics of Rhetoric in Promoting Humanitarian Action

Outline of research topic:

Care and compassion are inextricably connected to humanitarianism; stemming from Henry Dunant and still carrying into present-day. These emotions create a drive, and the need for us to react, or to 'do something' (O'Hagan, 2013). This research will investigate a multitude of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (grassroots to multi-national) on a variety of different levels (campaigns, speeches, media). The purpose of this thesis is to discover the role of empathy in reaching out and promoting humanitarian aid campaigns.

The main research question that will be asked is: "How do humanitarian aid and advocacy organizations apply an empathy-based discourse to marking campaigns and in branding their organization?" Sub-questions that will be asked is, "what about the discourse of empathy is so captivating and alluring?" And, "how connected are the sentiments of empathy, care and compassion to humanitarian aid work in present day?" Broader questions that will be asked, are, "How is empathy connected to making people 'care' about humanitarian action" and "when the discourse of empathy is being pitched, what nuances, positions of power, and values are attached to it?"

The research aims to explore the two-way connection between how disasters in humanitarian action are conceptualized by NGOs to permeate empathy. And, in turn, how this empathy permeates a response from the 'moral community' (O'Hagan, 2013). From there, the purposes, outcomes, rhetorics and framing of empathy will be investigated in a cultural, social, historical and ethical context. Empathy will be explored in a humanitarian action context, as a product of the organizations that wish to promote it for gain. When empathy is being generated, a critical approach will be taken as to who is the narrator or subject, how it intersects with power and privilege.

Justification for selected research topic – academic and humanitarian relevance:

Provide a rationale for the research project; identify significant prior research: explain whether these questions have been asked before, related questions have been asked, and what answers have been obtained; be explicit about limitations of research project: "This research will not...."; explain why your proposed research is worthwhile and necessary.

There is a long tradition of Western rhetorics diminishing (and sometimes rejecting) the need to regard or analyse emotions, especially empathy, as it relates to humanitarian action.¹ In

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- ¹ "Today, the new cohort of researchers no longer endorses a single perspective on emotion. They prefer multi-layered approaches that conceptualize elaborated emotions as comprehensive packages of

many cases, emotions are abstract, unable to be quantified, and therefore often overlooked, skimmed upon, or regarded as unimportant. However, so much of the aid industry is reliant upon ‘people caring,’ hence, emotions, especially empathy, is paramount to examine.

Little research has been done which examines empathy (including compassion and care) in a humanitarian ethical context. The question, and effects of empathy in humanitarian aid has seldom been examined. It will be analytical in examining the role of empathy both in promotion and performance. How persons in a position of privilege can empathize, or are taught to empathize with those living without it is a phenomenon not widely examined. Empathy is one of the core moral values which lie at the foundation of the aid industry, and it is worthwhile to examine.

Acquiring a better understanding of the discourse of empathy has the real, added value of practically being able to understand the properties of this emotion in a humanitarian aid context. It is of practical use to be able to both detect and separate this emotion from humanitarian aid discourse (including advertising, marketing) as well as to understand how this emotion is able to convince, or reach out to people. Hence, the ‘abstractness’ of the discourse of empathy has the ‘real, concrete’ ability to convince and provoke, and thus results in real consequences, and being materialized.

meanings, behaviors, social practices, and norms that crystallize around primordial emotions” (Lindner, 2013).

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