

ABSTRACT

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Ethical fundraising from the donor's viewpoint: An exploratory study

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Abstract:

Over the last few decades, ethical concerns about non-profit's fundraising practices have grown (e.g., the portrayal of needy people in fundraising messages (Bhati & Eikenberry, 2016). In answer to these concerns, several self-regulating institutions were set up in different countries regulating the ethics of fundraising and developing ethical codes (e.g., Sargeant, Hudson, & Wilson, 2012). These ethical codes for fundraising are usually developed by and for fundraisers, rarely considering the donor's perspective. The current study aimed to address this gap in professional and academic literature by investigating the donor's perspective of ethics in fundraising.

Methodology: Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted among a convenience sample of 18 Belgian donors (12 Flemish and 6 Walloon) that was heterogeneous with regard to gender, age, and type of non-profit organization.

Different fundraising themes were incorporated in the interviews (i.e., fundraising messages, the channels used, the management of donor information, the allocation of the funds, the payment of fundraisers, and transparency). The topic guide was tested by means of three focus groups including 5 to 6 Belgian donors.

The qualitative data were analyzed using a discovery-oriented, thematic analytic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results: No black-and-white conclusions can be drawn on what is ethically acceptable and what is not from the perspective of the donor. The results show that donors' ethical perception of fundraising activities is driven by six underlying dimensions: freedom of choice (own choice, no

force, respect for choice), dignity (no violation of the dignity of the organization, the donor or the needy people), authenticity (honesty, sincerity, and believability), long-term relationship (long-term, structural results, relationship), sense of purpose (the end justifies the means), and equilibrium (balance, control, certainty, trust). Based on these six key concepts, donors form their judgment about which fundraising activities are ethically acceptable and which are not. The six key dimensions can also strengthen or weaken each other. Some implications can be derived from the results for the development or adaptation of ethical codes.

Most important references:

- Bhati, A., & Eikenberry, A.M., (2016). Faces of the needy: the portrayal of destitute children in the fundraising campaigns of NGOs in India. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 21, 31-42.
- Braun, B.V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Sargeant, A., Hudson, J., & Wilson, S. (2012). Donor complaints about fundraising: what are they and why should we care? *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organisations*, 23, 791-807.