

HumanKind: A Perspective Collection

Background

The dictionary definition of empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, but beyond that, empathy is also “the ability to grasp the many sides of today’s complex problems and the capacity to collaborate with others to solve them” (Ashoka, 2015). Researchers from the U-M Institute for Social Research found the ability of American college students to practice empathy has declined by 48% in the last 30 years (Konrath, O’Brien & Hsing, 2011), leading to an empathy deficit that gives rise to detrimental stereotypes. Humans stereotype because the human brain aims for efficiency; it organizes unique experiences into oversimplified schemas to quickly recognize patterns, learn, and grow (TED Radio Hour, 2014). For example, Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist, discovered that humans could only process about 150 meaningful relationships, known as Dunbar’s number (NPR, 2011), a small number considering the average Facebook user has 338 friends (Pew Research Center, 2014). Anyone who falls outside of a person’s 150 is more easily stereotyped and misunderstood by that person, or in other words, more likely to be approached with a lack of empathy.

There is a way around this biological limitation, however: storytelling. Storytelling is as old as the human race, and humans are biologically predisposed to value stories. When a person listens to a story, the parts of their brains that would be active while actually living the experience burst with activity (Paul, 2012). Uri Hasson, a Princeton researcher, “discovered that a great storyteller literally causes the neurons of an audience to closely sync with the storyteller’s brain” (Hasson, TED, 2016). Storytelling allows a person to live out someone else’s subjective experience, to share and understand the experience of another, the very definition of empathy, without taking up a spot in their 150.

Project Description

HumanKind is a creative nonfiction project that addresses the empathy deficit through storytelling. It is a collection of interview-based profiles of individuals, one of the key research methods used to advance differential psychological research (Revelle, Condon & Wilt, 2011). As the audience for this project, the UNO community, reads the profiles of other members of the UNO community, they will find similarities and contact points across their differences, taking a neurological walk in the other person’s shoes. My goal with this project and my proposal is to collect as many perspectives as possible using the HumanKind process to promote empathy on our college campus, equipping the UNO community with the skills to grasp today’s complex problems and collaborate in solving them.

Methodology

HumanKind preserves perspectives in two major forms: creative nonfiction profiles and a podcast. A creative nonfiction profile is a biographical sketch of a person that gives a sense of the subject’s life experience and worldview. The profiles in HumanKind are called perspectives, they are written in the first person point-of-view, and they capture the interviewee’s subjective experience and unique viewpoint through an extensive interview of over 100 questions about what it’s like to be them. Examples of interview questions include: What do you want most out of life? What social groups do you identify with? What sort of impact do you want to have on the world?

The interview is recorded and edited into a podcast released the same day as the interviewee's perspective on the website. Each perspective is written based off of a transcript of the interview. The interviewee's answers are analyzed for major themes, edited, and organized to most accurately represent their point-of-view in story form.

The interview is paired with a cover survey, the second piece of the perspective. The cover story asks objective questions about the interviewee, including sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, and class, all things people are commonly sorted and judged for. Cover surveys are included with the perspective so the reader can more easily sort and compare perspectives across obvious differences. The cover survey also includes a photograph of the interviewee taken the day of the interview, and anything else the interviewee would like to share with the rest of the Internet audience. This often includes additional pictures, hobbies, objects of sentimental value, etc. Quotes and picture are also posted to the HumanKind social media handles to be shared.

For this proposal, this project will be finished when 20 perspectives of people from the UNO community have been collected and preserved through the HumanKind process. This will allow me to shape the perspectives into a creative nonfiction book proposal to be sent to literary agents with the end goal of publication. Eventually, I envision an interactive eBook that includes the perspectives and podcast episodes, updates automatically as new perspectives are added, and lets the reader/researcher apply filters to more easily study and compare perspectives.

IRB

After conferring with Gaile Koutulak, I confirmed that this project is exempt from IRB approval per Policy #1.7, Section #6.5, Oral Histories.

Project Timeline

200 hours – 10 hours a week for 20 weeks – Each week will produce one perspective (20 total)

Each week, the following will be accomplished:

During interview (2 hours):

- Interviewee takes cover survey
- Interview is conducted and recorded
- Interviewee's picture is taken
- Social media post #1

After interview (8 hours):

- Interview is transcribed
- Social media posts leading up to perspective publication are scheduled
- Podcast is edited and submitted to iTunes
- Perspective piece is written and cover story is created
- The perspective is released on the website through a blog post

Student/Faculty Mentor Roles

I will be responsible for all of the above steps of the HumanKind process, repeated 20 times. My mentor, Jody Keisner, will be providing feedback on each perspective and supporting me, especially with the multimodal parts, which is one of her creative nonfiction areas of interest.

Budget Justification

I am requesting a \$2,000 stipend for compensation of my time. A wage of \$10 an hour for 10 hours per week for 20 weeks is requested.

I will be using UNO's free resources for supplies.

Stipend: \$2,000 Supplies: \$0 Travel: \$0

Total Requested: \$2,000

References

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8 December 2017

Dear FUSE Selection Committee:

I am writing in support of Madison Larimore's application. I am pleased to serve as her faculty mentor for her research project. Madison is an accomplished student and writer who is passionate about her work.

In her role as an undergraduate student Madison has excelled, as her 3.69 GPA attests. I am currently working with Madison in Form & Style in Creative Nonfiction, and not only is Madison's creative writing excellent—nuanced, sophisticated, innovative, and self-aware—but she is also an active class participant and adds to class discussions in meaningful and productive ways. She has already been the recipient of department and university-wide nominations and awards, including the 2017 Madden Fine Arts Scholarship, the 2015 Distinguished Scholarship Competition Award, and the 2015 Student of Integrity Award. This latter was awarded by the Better Business Bureau.

Further, Madison has extended her interest in writing beyond the classroom. For instance, Madison has taken on a leadership role with UNO's student-run magazine, *13th Floor Magazine* and is also currently interning at Metro and has an editorial role with *The Metropolitan*. She has publications appearing in the following literary journals: *13th Floor Magazine*, *Midnight Circus*, and *Journey*. This is no small feat for a graduate student, let alone an undergraduate.

I have no doubt that Madison has the determination, ambition, and capability to complete her research project. I have met with Madison and offered guidance when she required it, but this project is wholly her own. Should Madison be awarded a FUSE grant, I will meet with her periodically during the research and writing process to help her problem-solve research-related roadblocks; help her refine her thematic explorations of empathy, intersectionality, and storytelling; and help her to revise for discipline-specific concerns such as quality of multimodal components (audio, visual, etc.) clarity of text, and characterization of her perspectives. Madison is asking for a \$2000 stipend for compensation of her time—10 hours per week for 20 weeks total—which is a reasonable request, and an achievable timeline for the projected workload.

Please give Madison Larimore your very best consideration.

Sincerely,

Jody L. Keisner, Assistant Professor
Department of English