

# A circular process for understanding humanity: The interdependency of group narratives and individual narratives

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify the process of understanding humanity as circular. In a society that depends heavily on labels and categories when regarding people, we must look beyond groups and recognize people as individuals. This can be done by listening to their personal narratives. Narratives are powerful for provoking empathy and understanding. The process becomes circular when the practice of understanding the individual turns to the task of acknowledging how one's social group affiliation impacts one's lifestyle. *Humans of New York* is a photoblog that works to humanize people in society. The blog's focus on a few specific series illustrates the need of groups for individuals and individuals for groups in the process of understanding their purpose and existence. One relies on the other, and as the audience is drawn toward understanding, a growth of empathy arises for others in society.

*Keywords:* identity, stereotypes, art, empathy

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It is dangerous to wear a head-covering today in the United States. Personal experience or knowledge of current events has frightened many Americans into a distrust of another group of people, whether that group is acknowledged as Muslims, refugees, or Middle Easterners. The image below is of a young Syrian woman who is now living in North Carolina. There is no doubt that throughout her life in America she will be scrutinized for what she wears, how she speaks, or the way she lives, whether such judgements are made vocal or not. The first impression of her identity is to see her as "that Muslim," "that refugee," or "that Middle Easterner." But, she is more than the group with which she identifies. What if people knew that she received a master's degree at a German University and graduated at the top of



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her class? Or that she has a beautiful young daughter that she is raising on her own? What if people knew that she has experienced heartache as a young widow after her husband was killed in an automobile accident? This woman is a refugee, but she is also a human being; she is an individual. She has a story to tell that distinguishes her from her culture

and religion. However, her affiliation with a group is also a component of her identity and affects her lifestyle. To understand her as a Syrian refugee in America, we need to look at who she is as a person; yet to see her as an individual calls for an acknowledgement of the culture group that influences her identity.

The claim I am making in this article is that understanding humanity is a circular process; to understand an individual we must recognize the group with which they identify or are perceived to be associated with. However, to understand a group we must acknowledge the individuality of those who comprise it. To support my claim, I will be exploring the photographic journalism series *Humans of New York*. The founder and photographer of the project, Brandon Stanton, emphasizes the humanity of groups and individuals through the combination of text and visual imagery. The various series he has conducted include "Invisible Wounds" (veterans of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan), "Pediatric Cancer," "Inmate Stories," "Syrian Americans," "Refugee Stories," and most recently, the neighbors of "Macomb County" (a blue collar suburb). The aforementioned example is from the "Syrian Americans" project. The woman's narrative was featured on *Humans of New York* in December of 2015.

The idea of circular reasoning as a method for understanding humanity is important to research, especially given current political and social dynamics, because people interact with each other every day. Interactions are governed by presiding social rules and perceptions that alter how individuals view each other and proceed with

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engagement. The simultaneous intertwining and separation of a categorized group and an individual should be studied in order to begin the process of understanding beyond social prejudice and labels. *Humans of New York* is at the forefront of this movement.

What makes the method presented in this piece different from other methods is that two separate points of interest (the individual and the collective) are being examined in conjunction and codependence, needing each other for complete understanding, which creates a circular process for understanding humanity.

This essay will begin with an overview of the case study that I believe to be at the center of this process, *Humans of New York*. I will continue by defining the term “understanding” for the purposes of this piece, in order to provide clarity and specificity. Next I will stress the significance of narration to explore how people express their individuality, and follow this with a look at the relationship between text and image as the method used by Stanton to share narratives and introduce understanding.

## Humans of New York

This study was inspired by the popular photoblog *Humans of New York*, a project begun by photographer Brandon Stanton in 2010. The modus operandi of the project is to photograph the residents of and visitors to New York with the intention of sharing their stories online via the *Humans of New York* website and social media accounts (i.e. Instagram and Facebook). *Humans of New York* has amassed a huge following of people from all over the country and all around the world. As of November 2016, *Humans of New York* has 6.1 million followers on Instagram and 18 million likes on Facebook; these figures were observed on the *Humans of New York* social media account profiles.

In its early stages, *Humans of New York* was simply a collection of photographs depicting faces, fashion, friendships, family, and the joy (or sorrow) of everyday living. As it has progressed, *Humans of New York* evolved from a simple photo project into a massively popular photo blog that reaches millions of people. As it has risen in popularity, Stanton has allowed his platform to introduce a more purposeful theme; he still walks the streets at random, but he also has begun to incorporate isolated series of subprojects into his feed. His website writes that these concentrated stories “focus on specific populations, examining their experiences and the challenges that they face.” Stanton has partnered with other established projects and institutions to bring awareness to the issues delineated through his photo series, as well as make known the foundations who are striving to provide support to the subjects involved. The organizations he partners with benefit from his public endorsement of their efforts, which

enables them to continue the work they had begun with more support from the American people. Many of the specified groups shared on *Humans of New York* are based in America, although he has included a group of people from his time abroad in Europe as an additional focal point of his series.

Stanton has been inclined to capture the intrigue and humanity of his subjects not only in visuals, but in words as well. He initiates conversations with the people he photographs and asks them questions, the answers to which he presents as a caption underneath their portrait. The captions that Stanton places under his photographs vary in degree of self-disclosure and span a range of emotions. Each is told in narrative form. The purpose of publicizing these stories is to incite a reaction from the audience, drawing them toward empathy for and understanding of others.

## Understanding others

In this article, I would like to define the “understanding” of others as the acknowledgement of personal ignorance and recognition that other people can only be fully understood by themselves. Others can choose to share what they are thinking, but we are unable to know with accuracy unless they do in fact tell us; even then we may not wholly comprehend the depth of their internal thoughts. However, by allowing others to speak for themselves, it is easier to dismiss the stereotypes promoted by society that hinder our understanding of others; the process of understanding begins within the self. We must alter our views of others rather than expect them to align with our misconstrued perceptions of them. Spencer (2015) stated that the first steps for remedying our errors in perception begin with “opening ourselves up to new worldviews, perspectives, and experiences. It means being self-aware enough to notice when we are failing to understand someone and then taking steps to expand our perspectives” (p. 689). The responsibility of embarking on a journey of understanding is one that falls on us; change cannot happen until we first allow ourselves the act of internal transformation.

Groups of people are often stereotyped in society. It is not unusual for the actions of a few who are vocal about their affiliation to affect a group’s image and reputation. *Humans of New York* attempts to change the negativity attributed to groups by breaking them down to showcase individual members. The audience is introduced to personal anecdotes – an inside look at the people who make up the group in question. By viewing people one-on-one, it is easier to recognize them as humans and their group as a label. *Humans of New York*, by focusing on individual people one at a time, also establishes the important impact of groups on an individual’s story. The influence of a group, whether it be racial, religious, gendered, etc. contributes to one’s lifestyle and decisions. The group must be

understood as a pervasive force on the character of a person, but it also must be remembered that that person is merely a representative of their group who has an individual story to tell.

### The significance of narration

It is important to look at the method in which the subjects of *Humans of New York* relate their life experiences to Stanton; their choice is to dictate a narrative rather than simply outline the happenings of life. I would argue that narration is the most effective way of producing empathy and understanding in others. In “Narrative Theory and Criticism: An Overview Toward Clusters and Empathy,” the authors write that they want “researchers to explore, interpret and assess narrative and narrative clusters by way of extended empathy, a goal for expanding horizons toward understanding self and others” (Clair, et al, 2014, p. 1). Narration is inherent in human beings and resonates strongly when passed between individuals.

Taking a moment to address the influence of the everyday life on narration is beneficial for recognizing the contribution simple moments and actions have on the greater and personal narratives at hand. The everyday life is “a dimension of human experience rather than an abstract category” with “indeterminacy as the everyday’s defining characteristic” (Sheringham, 2006, p. 16). Despite the presence of routines, habits, and expectations, what happens on a daily basis is undetermined and constantly changing. One could assume the tediousness of repetition, and resign oneself to the fact that one’s life is not as remarkable as that of another; however, in the unassuming variety of daily life, the remarkable can be observed when desired.

*Humans of New York* focuses on the lives of individuals as they go about their day-to-day activities. Each subject has his or her own experiences to share, which are shaped by their own personal histories. Sheringham (2006) writes that “...the everyday is all around us, yet we cannot ‘arise and go’ there...it is where we already are, although we do not see it” (p. 21). I think that Stanton’s interactions with people during their day-to-day lives inspires them to focus on what they can see as remarkable in their own experiences.

de Certeau (1984) talks about how stories begin with footsteps (p. 97). Life must be walked to create one’s tale. In a sense, I feel as if stories themselves are footsteps of the larger narrative of life. They are singular pieces that are woven together to make a path headed toward deeper understanding of a place, whether that “place” is physical or conceptual.

Narrations that are acknowledged as contributors to something greater than the self are given to others as a referential tool for life and understanding. The audience of a narrative become a part of an individual’s narrative by

accepting it into the collective. The role of the audience is to engage with the text, whether or not this engagement occurs as the author had hoped. It is my opinion that the implied auditor(s) of *Humans of New York* are the individuals in the world who have already come to the realization that there is more to life and humanity than they know it; a mind must be at least partially open to new information before it can accept some of the revelations that *Humans of New York* presents. The engagement of the audience with the narratives of others helps to establish the narrative’s meaning, intentionally desired or not.

Stanton is not biased when it comes to which narrations he shares on his blog; he does make known his individual political preferences, but if a subject of his shares a story that conflicts with his own interests, he continues to share it *as is* with the public. The goal of *Humans of New York* is not to influence people to believe one way or another, but to acknowledge that people are different and believe in an assortment of various things; we are divided by individual worldviews and personal opinions, but everyone still possesses the ability to form these private attitudes on their own.

Audience’s possible responses to the narratives of others may be narrowed down to two basic reactions: agreement or disagreement. It could be argued that there is neutral ground, but if someone is not sure whether or not to agree with someone else, then it is a form of disagreement. Reactions to a narrative say just as much about the audience as it does of the narrator. The form of a narrative falls under the science of the subjective; narratives are the result of interpretation by the speaker and call for additional interpretation from the listener. The implied auditor will factor in his or her own beliefs and experiences before weighing the narrative, eventually reaching a conclusion of agreement or disagreement.

Fisher (1984) advocates examining stories by exploring their rationality, which can be held against two measurements: narrative probability and narrative fidelity (p. 305). Narrative probability questions the story’s coherence and consistency with itself, while narrative fidelity explores how it fits within the social domain in relation to reality and the audience. Evaluating a narrative by these standards ensures its relative accuracy to and impact on other narratives.

Regardless of the outcome of the audience’s appraisal of a story, narration is powerful in that it prompts people to listen, to think, and to be exposed to the opinions of others. It also encourages internal assessment when placing judgement on the narrations of others.

In his series *Inmate Stories*, Stanton interviewed inmates at multiple prison complexes in the East; he heard about various crimes committed that led to their incarceration. Many stemmed from drug abuse or dealing, others were the result of murder. The stories they narrated reflected their humanity because they dealt with so much more than the action(s) that landed them in prison. More

than one person talked about how they were arrested for illegally dealing drugs even though they had never taken them themselves. “It’s really tough to say ‘no’ when there are no other options for money. So I agreed.... My job was to maintain the vessel and help load the cargo. I’ve never done drugs in my life” (6/20). A couple people shared what their families were like and what their kids were doing. “My daughter had to raise herself.... She’s got every excuse to be bitter, but she doesn’t even talk about it. She’s got a 4.0 at the University of Virginia right now” (16/20). A popular theme was to talk about rehabilitation – the steps that were being taken to turn their life around. “He’s always correcting my Spanish and giving me quizzes. He used to be an engineer, so he’s been tutoring me in trigonometry. He’s been a blessing to me. He’s helped me to not be so angry” (4/20). One man did not reflect on his crime, but instead what it felt like to be caught in 9/11. “I tried walking down into a subway station.... An attendant was sitting in the booth, watching the television, and she said: ‘They’re gone.’ And that was when I finally felt fear. Until then, it had only been survival.” I think that the reflection of one of the inmates captured their group’s collective humanity in a beautiful manner: “‘We’ve got to find a way to win by losing.’ In the eyes of society, we’ve lost already. Everyone in here is a loser. We can either be angry about it, or we can keep trying to grow” (4/20). To be human is to feel pain, joy, sorrow, and emotion; but to be human is also to change, develop, and become a better person.

As exemplified above, each of those inmates possesses a personal narrative that reflects their own life. The purpose of sharing these individual stories on *Humans of New York* was to break down the stigma associated with those who are incarcerated; the collection of the singular narratives composes the group. But, the group does not suddenly disappear. The labels of “prisoner,” “inmate,” and “criminal” are reevaluated, but all are still a part of the individuals’ narratives. People are made up of multiple groups as well, such as race and gender. Focusing on narratives in a series provides the audience with an outlook that generates empathy for groups that are often misjudged.

### The relationship between text and image

*Humans of New York* allows people to present themselves in the narrative form; this is their method of storytelling. However, the method employed by Stanton to share their narration is the combination of textual documentation and visual photography. Regarding text, Nathan Black Rupp (2016) writes that “words are not the meanings themselves, but rather point at meanings” (p. 427). Textual passages implicate meaning portrayed or established elsewhere, including other times such as in the past. Concerning photography, Blood and Caciatiore (2014) note that “Photographs invoke the viewer’s application of internal meaning to an external subject,

creating referents that expand the viewer’s vocabulary of personal symbolism” (p. 225). Images prompt internal memories and opinions that guide a person in the present. Despite the important meaning that each entity offers, the combination of both text and visual creates more meaning than one component on its own because it blends external meaning and internal meaning to establish a well-rounded interpretation that expands society and personal identity.

For example, one can view an image of a shadowed figure standing on a boat with their hand up; is it a him or a her? Is he/she coming or going? Is it a speed boat or a cruise ship? Is the person depicted happy or sad? The viewer can come to his own conclusions. On the other hand, a reader may digest this passage: “Marco solemnly stood at the railing of the ocean liner. This was his first solo journey, and he was nervous about being away from his family for a whole year. He lifted his hand to wave to his mother as the vessel set out from the harbor.” This short description does not give all the details of the event, but provides a more detailed interpretation to the reader than the viewer of the image received. But, the reader must first of all know the English language, as well as understand terms such as “solemnly” and “vessel” before the writing makes any sense to him. There is still room for interpretation, however, such as whether he is studying abroad. The ideal situation would be to reach a conclusive interpretation of the event at hand, and this would be more accurately done if the image and words were combined. When this arrangement is done, the consumer of the work will better know what was meant to be portrayed.

In *Humans of New York*, Brandon Stanton publishes a multitude of photographs depicting people in moments of their daily life, whether it be walking in the park, sitting on a bench, petting their dog, holding hands, etc. These images are sweet and well-portrayed, but the audience’s understanding is limited to their own knowledge and experiences. But, when Stanton adds a caption to his photographs (provided to him by his subjects), suddenly the images have more meaning and depth to them. The audience is able to understand backstories, emotion, and thoughts. The words themselves do not inspire this comprehension; if we saw only the written passages, we would still conjure up our own mental images based on our own experiences. The combination of both photographs and text create a space in which we can identify the significance of the work, and consequentially be impacted by it.

Once it has been recognized that meaning of a greater depth can be amassed by the union of the textual and visual elements, it is interesting to wonder which compliments the other, if one does at all. For the purposes of *Humans of New York*, one could analyze that due to its origin as a photo collection turned blog, the text (as a caption) emphasizes the image; conversely, the textual narratives could be perceived as being the dominating component of the project

because they are what evoke passionate responses from the audience.

Consider an image of a Syrian man; it possesses the



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Stanton attempts to address this erroneous assumption with his series *Syrian Americans*. He catches the eye of the audience with images of Syrian people; visually, they are racially different and trigger a reaction in the audience who consider past experiences to come to an invalid conclusion. Standing alone, the image itself has the power to evoke fear. When a caption is added alongside the image, however, the audience is exposed to a new experience with a Syrian man that could potentially change their initial calculations. “I was studying Literature and French Philosophy when the war came. I wanted to be an Arabic teacher. I didn’t want to be a soldier. I didn’t want to kill anyone.... [So] I ran” (1/10). The addition of this caption (when read by an open-minded individual) brings a new layer to the interpretation of the image. Suddenly, a foreign man is made human in our eyes.

Photography immortalizes moments that may have otherwise been forgotten; it acts as a classification system of information. What is marvelous about photography is that not only does it preserve moments, but it makes new knowledge and experiences available to more people than were present for the moment of capture. Susan Sontag (1977) wrote that “Through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information.... Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience...and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all” (p. 156). Experience through observation provides opportunity to acknowledge everyday living as a universal activity. Sheringham (2006) wrote: “The photographic practice I am seeking to characterize positions the everyday as a space of possibility: ...a space whose enigmatic character is revealed little by little, by our homing in on it, rather than delving behind it” (p. 94). The character of a subject is present within the image in which they are captured, but as the narrative paradigm explored, the story that belongs to them is best shared through narrative to implore empathy.

The relationship between text and visual applies to the idea of circular understanding because images provide an easy opportunity to group individuals together, even when the photographs capture a single person. The subject is almost immediately interpreted as a representative of a group or groups, whether it be a race, religion, gender or profession. The addition of text affirms or negates what has been assessed by the viewer. The understanding of who the subject is as an individual reminds us of his humanity, while also redefining our opinion of the group. However, we must recognize that his group is also part of his identity and allow him that membership in our analysis of who he is as a person.

## Conclusion

The discussion and analysis in this article was performed with the intent to claim that the process of understanding humanity is a circular one; the understanding of an individual asks that we understand the group they identify with or are perceived to be associated with, but to understand a group we must understand the individuals who comprise it. My use of the term “understand” suggested that we ought to look beyond social prejudices and empathize with others, seeking to know the motivations for their actions and beliefs while allowing them to retain their own stories.

*Humans of New York* is an exceptional project that aims to introduce people to others who many overlook or avoid because of group affiliation or association. I selected the project to illustrate my argument because it breaks down group stereotypes by highlighting individuals, but does not strip the influence of the group from the individual’s identity. The two elements are interwoven and are useful for interpreting each other.

It is my opinion that narratives are the best approach for promoting understanding and empathy; they are effective because they are inherently understandable. Part of the reason that narratives are so relatable is because they discuss things that others can recognize and relate to. Sometimes the lives of other people seem more interesting than our own, and yet they really are not that different at all. They are different enough to distinguish people as individuals, but similar enough to connect humanity on a closer level. Humanity, in a sense, is a group in and of itself.

Another focus of my article considered the relationship between photography and text as the method in which Stanton shared the stories he collected. Combined with the photographs, the textual narratives create an intense meaning that elaborates on the visual provisions. Eye-catching photography allows people to see a person that can be immediately categorized visually; maybe they are wearing prison garb or a hijab, or maybe their hair has fallen out from chemo. After being drawn to the image, the text underneath provides insight to how the subject is

feeling, or gives explanation to the “hows” and “whys” of their life experiences. Plainly and simply, the combination of text and visuals presents a fuller perspective that evokes greater meaning and understanding to the audience; others are presented as people and not just labels.

This particular focus on circular reasoning as a method for understanding humanity is important to research because people interact with each other every day. Interactions are governed by presiding social rules and perceptions that alter how individuals view each other and proceed with engagement. Too often, misunderstandings take place which limit the depth that a relationship could hold. The simultaneous intertwining and separation of the

collective and the individual should be studied in order to begin the process of understanding beyond social prejudice and labels. The exposure to new ideas and different points of view is beneficial for individual growth by the audience and subjects. Study in this area would contribute to the enlightening of members of society, creating a better environment for living. The importance of the method presented in this article is that two separate points of interest (the individual and the collective) are being examined in conjunction and codependence, needing each other for complete understanding, which creates a circular process for understanding humanity.

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