



# CONFERENCE REPORT

MARCH 2014

## "HUMANITARIAN WORKERS: PERSONAL ETHICS, PSYCHOLOGY AND LIFESTYLE"

Held on 17 December 2013 at the University of Oxford

Convened by Dr Hugo Slim and Anaïs Ressayguier

REPORT BY:

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As part of ELAC's ongoing research on humanitarian ethics, Hugo Slim<sup>1</sup> and Anaïs Ressayguier organised a conference on 17 December 2013 at the University of Oxford entitled "Humanitarian Workers: Personal Ethics, Psychology, and Lifestyle". The aim of the conference was to come to a better understanding of the human face of humanitarian action. While individual actors play a significant role in shaping the practice of humanitarian aid, their experience has been generally disregarded by recent academic literature which has mainly focused on macro-level analyses of the political and operational challenges that this practice faces in armed conflicts and disasters. The primary objective of the conference was to start a discussion on the lived experience of individual humanitarians through three disciplinary angles: ethics, psychology and anthropology. The dialogue took place at the interface of theory and practice, inviting around the table European researchers and humanitarian professionals. This paper gives a summary of the presentations and discussions that took place over the day.

**Personal discussions:** Wishing to bring a more personal and intimate tone to the discussion, Hugo Slim opened the conference by telling the story of his own "humanitarian vocation". He recounted particular moments from his childhood to becoming a parent that have shaped, both in "functional and dysfunctional" ways, his commitment to humanitarian aid. The participants were then asked to reflect in pair on the particular path that brought them to engage in a career related to a helping profession (practically or intellectually), primarily humanitarian aid. Main points made in the discussions in pair were then shared with the group.

## **1<sup>ST</sup> SESSION: THE ORGANISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **Jonathan Potter: "How the Organisation and Individual Work Together"**

Jonathan Potter opened the first session by providing important statistical information on the state of the aid world today. A particularly noteworthy statistics is that of the number of national or local aid workers as opposed to international staff which amount to approximately 95% of all aid workers. Jonathan then addressed the main reasons why professionals join the aid sector. The fact that the sector is value-based is important, while people prefer organisations that "make a difference" and have a good reputation. After exploring these motivational elements, Jonathan gave an account of aid workers' relationship with their organisations and the different levels of loyalty to the organisation that there can be, evolving from the strict contractual "terms and conditions" to loyalty to the organisation's identity. Poor leadership is evoked as the main reason for leaving the organisation for 40% of all leavers. In a third part of his talk, Jonathan listed several ways the organisation can affect aid workers' relationship with beneficiaries, including recruiting the right competences, training, briefing, motivations, support, and Codes of conducts. His presentation concluded with a few points on future developments in the aid world: that there will likely be an increasing emphasis on values and behaviours as opposed to skills and knowledge; that a growing number of people will be attracted to the field in that it is a career rather than because they

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<sup>1</sup> A list of participants along with their affiliation is provided at the end of this document.

believe in the cause; and finally, that the question of ensuring that organisations are accountable to their staff, in areas such as gender development, capacity-strengthening or security, as they are to their beneficiaries, will become increasingly pressing.

### **Hannah Scott: “Who are our Humanitarian Aid Workers? Insight from inside an INGO”**

Hannah Scott addressed the human resources question with her perspective from with the humanitarian organisation Oxfam. She opened her talk by pointing to the deep shift currently taking place at Oxfam toward a one-programme approach aiming at developing longer-term relationships with a number of key countries. This implies a different approach to the way emergency response is delivered as well as different expectations, humanitarian skills and behavioural competencies. Another significant evolution of Oxfam humanitarian human resources that Hannah pointed out to is the nationalization agenda (international staff making up at the moment 14% of staff overseas). She noted that unfortunately, little data is available on national staff. With these organisational changes, the role of Oxfam humanitarian staff will significantly evolve, moving away from a culture of ‘humanitarian junkies’ (which is actually not an accurate image as Hannah noted). A difficulty that Oxfam faces with its humanitarian staff is the challenge of distance management. Hannah highlighted the fact that for most humanitarian personnel, Oxfam’s reputation is the main reason that drew them to work for this organisation. The first reason for leaving lies in the work/life balance for 61% of leavers. Another challenging area is the paradox at stake in humanitarian work in wanting to contribute positively, while being faced with constant challenges that make it difficult to achieve what was originally planned. Oxfam’s in-house counsellor dedicated much of his work to raise awareness on this aspect. Hannah mentioned a few examples of psycho-social mechanisms put in place to support their humanitarian personnel. A case that proved particularly successful was the feeling of true integration that national and international felt in Haiti by the fact of having to share the same tents over the first two weeks of the mission. Hannah concluded her talk by referring to an in-house study that showed that Oxfam people come across as both thoughtful and action-oriented innovators.

### **Discussion**

Among other things, the discussion that followed the two first presentations addressed current practices and attitudes in humanitarian organisations regarding debriefing and counselling. There was some disagreement as to whether this had or not become a norm in humanitarian organisations. Following up on several points made by the two speakers (the increasing reliance on remote management and the trend toward explicit careerism), participants questioned whether the humanitarian field is facing an “erosion of ethics”. Answers to this questions differed, but it was pointed out that a more precise definition of remote management and how can it be implemented is needed. A final important point that came up was the fact that, contrary to other sectors, the humanitarian field tends to undervalue the role of the organisation in leadership, the individual carrying all the responsibility of decisions made. The dangerous and probably unethical heroic model that such leadership culture generates was finally addressed.

## **2nd SESSION: THE PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **Anaïs Ressaygues: “Humanitarian Workers’ Personal Ethics. Conceptualisation”**

Anaïs Ressaygues opened the Philosophical session by pointing to the need to move away from a dominant approach to ethics that she defined as discursive, top-down, and ultimately disconnected from the reality of practices and experiences. According to Anaïs, such notion of ethics is manifest in today’s humanitarian sector, in particular in regulatory instruments, but also in staff support mechanisms and more broadly in a general culture that tends to emphasize notions of duty and moral obligations. She noted that it is also this notion of ethics which is at play in the analytical lens used to reflect upon humanitarian work externally (in the academia for example). To fill this gap in our approach of the ethics of humanitarian work, she suggested coming to a closer understanding of the lived experience of humanitarian actors, in particular their ethical aspirations, feelings of concern or outrage, and ethical intuitions. In a second part of her talk, she presented an aspect of her recent empirical work on the ethics of humanitarian workers through a study of humanitarian memoirs. The data she collected in these memoirs range from references to altruistic intentions and identity to feelings of distress in the humanitarian experience. This work led to the identification of sharp tensions in humanitarian work. She highlighted in particular the following paradoxes: the desire to help that becomes the desire for power; hope that develops in hopelessness and despair, and finally the desire to save lives that sometimes evolves in destructive behaviors (including self-destructive). She concluded her talk asking a paradoxical and slightly provocative question: *What is there in the way we engage in the helping relation, in our altruism, that may sometime lead to a desire to negate life?*

### **Eric Fiat: “From the love of one’s neighbour to the respect for the dignity of the person: reflections on the Good Samaritan”**

Eric Fiat centred his talk on the relation between love for one’s neighbour and humanitarian commitment around the Parable of the Good Samaritan. As he noted, the Ancient Greek tradition had three different notions of love: *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. Only (*caritas* in Latin) may give a basis to humanitarianism as it is the only form of love which does not choose, which does not discriminate between our enemy and our friend; it is the only form of love that can be universal. While for centuries the Christian world founded care on charity (the English translation of *caritas*), today’s secular Western societies have now replaced this notion with that of “respect for the human person’s dignity”, swapping the Crucifix above the bed of the patient with a Hospital Patient’s Charter. According to Eric, this is an evolution that shall be welcomed. Indeed, when other feelings of sympathy, love, *eros*, tenderness show weaknesses, respect - which does not rely on our sensitivity - remains alert and watch over the other’s dignity. It is easier to respect all men than to love them all. But is it enough asked Eric? While love is a celebration of the other person’s mere existence, respect simply legitimises, authorizes, the other’s existence. According to him, respect is good but something else must be added to it, a “*je ne sais quoi*”, a “little something, hardly anything” as Jankelevitch says, something that makes it possible to reach out to the singularity of the individual. Quoting the great violinist Yehudi Menuhin, on the lyricism of his youth, Eric noted that humanitarian

commitment often starts with a lyrical form of action which eventually leads to bitterness and disenchantment once it comes to face with reality. In the humanitarian ‘coming of age’, humanitarian action evolves from the imaginary to the real, the absolute to the relative, simplicity to complexity, and finally, from the lyrical to the critical. As Eric concludes, this is ultimately where politics come in. Not everything is political, but not everything is ethical either.

### **Respondent: Paul Bouvier**

On the basis of his experience with the ICRC, Paul Bouvier responded to the two philosophical presentations. According to him, the starting point of humanitarian action is a cry of indignation, an attempt to respond to the despair represented by Goya in a series of paintings on war, one of them powerfully expressing the cry “There is no one to help.” However, as he made clear, this response is a positive one, one that precedes and goes beyond the “Do no harm” principle. Paul then came back to the initial question asked to Jesus of Nazareth in the Good Samaritan Parable, “who is my neighbour?”. A trap would be to graduate a duty to help according to whatever criteria of proximity. The response reverses the question, asking which passer-by actually behaves as the neighbour of the wounded man. In that sense, no one is not my neighbour, and the humanitarian imperative has no limit. In International humanitarian law the duty to provide care to a wounded enemy is as strong as the duty to a comrade. Paul concluded his remarks observing that the “Human response” is made of two components, according to Jonathan Glover: (1) respect for the dignity of the person and (2) sympathy for the person. Respect is not enough, sympathy neither; we need a combination of the two.

### **Discussion**

The discussion that followed engaged with the philosophical matter that was just presented. In particular, the complexity of both motivations and experiences to engage in humanitarian work was addressed. Participants also acknowledged the need to go beyond a lyrical humanitarian aid, but also beyond a disenchanted one. Eric noted the spiritual dimension of the acts of giving and helping, touching here something that goes beyond human strictly material need. However, the discussion mainly attempted to challenge what could be a biased perspective on the ethics of humanitarian aid, in particular as framed under the key narrative of the “Good Samaritan”. The partiality of the perspective was highlighted through a gender and economic lens but also by questioning the very structure of the humanitarian system as a sector essentially shaped by the Western culture. Several points were made in attempting to bring in an ethical perspective that would be more aware of its biases and make space to different perspectives, challenging as such the core, dominant humanitarian narrative.

### **3rd SESSION: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

#### **Kaz de Jong: “Moral distress and difficult choices in humanitarian action”**

Kaz de Jong began his talk reminding the group of a point that was made several times over the morning session: the fact that the morality that was at stake in the discussion was that of the individual in the field faced with a specific context as opposed to a theoretical notion of what is good and what is bad. On that practical basis, Kaz highlighted a number of difficult choices that MSF staff faces on a daily basis in its work and the moral uncertainty, doubts and dilemmas that they generate. He mentioned the issue of having too many patients, the lack of resources, challenges around staff management, evacuation rules, and finally the fact that sets of guidance may themselves become sources of difficult choices as well. Inevitably, these challenges lead to moral distress, which Kaz made very clear is a normal reaction to these difficult choices, not a pathological one. He described the impact that humanitarian work can have on personnel: anger, feelings of guilt, frustration, self-judgment, disgust and stress, but also lack of enthusiasm, absenteeism or early return. Kaz noted that the greatest source of stress in humanitarian work comes from bad management. In terms of support system, he mentioned the following: peer support, speaking out, evaluations, creating a culture in which it is acceptable to bring these issues of distress, etc. Finally, Kaz referred to some ways the organisation addresses at a more structural level these difficult choices the staff has to make and the impact these may have, such as by implementing staff care system, trainings and active thinking among others.

#### **Alessandra Pigni: “Organizations on the Edge of Chaos: Exploring Culture, Burnout, and Resilience in the Humanitarian Sector”**

It is by telling some elements of her own story as a psychologist in a humanitarian organisation that Alessandra Pigni started her presentation. This experience showed her the extent to which the organisational culture in aid agencies can be dysfunctional and averse to change. Indeed, as she argues, most distress aid workers experience in the field does not come from the actual work with communities or because of the particular context they work in, but rather from the 'defensive' and 'sacrifice' culture of these organisations. Alessandra made it clear that burnout is not simply overwork or the accumulation of stress. Referring to the work done by Professor Maslach and Professor Leiter, she listed six potential sources of burn out: overwork, lack of control over the work, lack of reward, community problems, lack of fairness, and finally mismatch between personal and organisational values. According to Alessandra, the question of power lies behind this organisational culture that leads to burnout. While organisations need to change and adapt to be resilient, it appears that a settled power structure in humanitarian organisations make them averse to evolve. Alessandra concluded her talk by noting that the fact that today's organisations are “on the edge of chaos” (as described by Ben Ramalingam in his recent book *Aid on the Edge*) offers the great potential for bringing about transformation and “new ways of living and working together” (Peter Senge, *The Necessary Revolution*).

## **Olga Klimecki: “Overcoming Empathic Distress”**

In her talk, Olga Klimecki showed that most issues of distress and burn out that had been discussed in the two previous talks are actually widespread in helping professions in general. Olga’s presentation focused on a distinction that emerged from studies made in neurosciences between two ways that we may respond empathically to the suffering of others. On the one hand, we can enter in empathic distress which Olga described as a self-related emotion involving negative feelings and the wish to withdraw in order to get away from this negative emotion. On the other hand, empathy may also lead to compassion, also called empathic concern or sympathy, which is associated with positive feelings, pro-social motivations and other-related emotions. Olga presented some elements of her research in which she demonstrated that this social brain that we are equipped with can actually be changed, even as an adult. She conducted studies in which half participants were trained in compassion (following ancient Buddhist techniques) and the other half, the control group, in memory. These studies showed that compassion training increases positive emotions (warmth and connectedness to others among others) but do not function by down-regulating the negative as negative feelings remained the same after the training. This is also reflected in the different zones activated in the brain. Another study she conducted showed that compassion training also increases pro-social behaviour. There are limits to these studies, in particular the fact that they are done with normal population and not with people working in the field. However, as Olga concluded, these studies have shown that empathic distress is not an unavoidable reaction when confronted with the suffering of others. The practice of compassion can actually contribute to pro-social behaviour and to generating feelings of connectedness, warmth and benevolence, rather than distress.

### **Respondent: Ayesha Ahmad**

Ayesha Ahmad responded to the three talks on the psychological perspective by bringing a cultural lens to the topic of moral distress, psychological suffering and support. She highlighted the fact that when we address these questions, we tend to take an individual perspective, disregarding as such the broader cultural context and relationships which shape the individual and his or her perception and response to suffering. Ayesha stressed the fact that we shall be acutely aware of the risks of applying to the humanitarian context a reductive scientific model that medicalises suffering. This approach in itself constitutes a normative judgement that can sometime increase the trauma and prevent the individual to find healing through his or her traditional support mechanisms. Ayesha concluded her intervention by noting that the fact that religious coping had not been mentioned in the presentations was in itself significant of this tendency to neutralise humanitarian actors.

### **Discussion**

The discussion that followed the Psychological Perspective session touched on potential feelings of guilt that one may experience when expressing suffering at the other’s suffering as well as the tendency to draw a wall between these painful experiences in humanitarian contexts and the life back home. The point was made that organisations should give a space to express this suffering. However, participants also noted the risk of focusing too much on

negative aspects of this work, downplaying as such the positive and meaningful experiences that there can be in humanitarian work. Several humanitarian professionals mentioned the importance of knowing that they are contributing to a work that is actually improving people's conditions. This in itself has been said to constitute a fundamental element in the humanitarian experience that helps preventing anxiety and depression. This discussion highlighted the fact it is not only trauma and suffering that is shared in the helping relationship, but also resources for resilience, "vicarious resilience". This point ultimately helps to shake the distinction between the 'helper' and the 'helped' by showing that in some ways both may be beneficiaries in this relationship brought about by the humanitarian situation.

#### **4th SESSION: THE SOCIAL SCIENCES PERSPECTIVE**

##### **Leïla Kherbiche: "Living (with) others' words"**

Leïla Kherbiche's talk gave a very concrete example of humanitarian work, that of humanitarian interpreters. She insisted on the importance of trust within the triangular relationship between the humanitarian, the person in need of assistance and the interpreter. The following concepts are keys in ensuring this relation of trust: neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality, integrity, respect and fidelity (accuracy). In order to maintain a strongly pragmatic approach to the interpreting practice, she pointed out the fact that the InZone (the Centre for Interpreting in Conflict Zones) made the choice not to develop a Code of ethics specific for humanitarian interpretation but rather extract the common principles out of existing codes of ethics for interpreters and frame them within the humanitarian principles. Leïla continued her presentation by sharing her experience and that of other interpreters to fulfil the requirement to come to own the story of the person in order to interpret it as neutrally and faithfully as possible. She pointed out the different ways that humanitarian interpreters negotiate this need to embody stories that may be particularly traumatic. She observed for example that while some interpreters had to change the pronoun from the first to the third person to make it more bearable for them to continue the translation, it was actually the opposite for other interpreters who felt that inserting this distance with the narrative would make it even more difficult to carry on.

##### **Jade Legrand: "Humanitarian Bodies: Aid Workers and Risks in Emergency Contexts"**

Jade Legrand explored how the notion of risks shapes humanitarian work and is mobilised within the mission by actors themselves. She argued that risks are central in the elaboration of told and untold principles that organise humanitarian work but not necessarily in the way these are commonly understood. She highlighted the different ways that risks can bring division within the humanitarian team by showing how staff members are differently allowed to take risks. For instance, she noted differences in relation to risks between "essential" and "non-essential" staff and between "national" and "international" staff. However, as Jade



demonstrated, this question of risks does not only divide but may also serve as a unifying instance for the humanitarian team. Risks enable the team to go beyond the heterogeneity that usually characterises it and bring about a united, coherent and structured body. As she argued, the legitimacy of the leader and the security paradigm is being contested in different ways: humanitarian staff challenging the security regulations that they may find exaggerated as well as the “risk aristocracy” model. Jade concluded her talk by noting that the “making of risks”, of interest for both social scientists and practitioners, is a complex apparatus of representations and practices shaping humanitarian work today while also being constantly negotiated.

### **Anne-Meike Fechter: “Aid Work as Moral Labour”**

In her talk, Anne-Meike Fechter explored the specific paradoxes at stake in aid work on the basis of an ethnography conducted in Cambodia, the ‘Kingdom of NGOs’. As she highlighted, aid workers are confronted daily to violence, suffering, inequalities, and injustice. There is evidence that this reality, in turn, generates stress for aid workers. However, as Meike noted, while there is ample research and measures to mitigate the negative effects of stress on staff wellbeing and retention for care workers in the ‘Global North’, it is not the case yet for international aid workers. In her research she observed that they draw on private and informal coping strategies, among them ways of maintaining their health and well being. Nonetheless, she observed some unease regarding the efforts of aid workers to make themselves ‘comfortable’. To some extent, these are considered as inappropriate or of low priority by employers, aid workers, recipients or the general public both in aid workers’ country of origin and host countries. One possible explanation is that a certain amount of emotional or physical suffering is implicitly considered as part of the job of the aid worker. One might thus suggest that aid workers are expected to, or are performing a kind of ‘moral labour’. This would entail continuously facing conditions of injustice and poverty without ever being able to fully redress them. In their daily work, are aid workers thus also paid – by public or private donors – indirectly to engage in a form of witnessing in the place of citizens of the distant Global North? This analytical lens of aid work as moral labour might, among other issues, explain the apparent reluctance to recognise and address the evident emotional pressures that aid workers keep being confronted with.

### **Respondent: Cathy Fitzgibbon**

In her response to the three previous papers, Cathy Fitzgibbon highlighted the fact that aid workers would sometimes show mixed moralities. For instance, she mentioned that they would cherry-pick certain customs that would suit them and reject others that they would refuse to adhere to (for example, the fact of taking shoes off when entering a house or using local prostitution).

## CONCLUSION

**Closing Remarks by Tony Vaux:** After a brief recap of the main points addressed over the day, Tony Vaux concluded the day of discussion with some personal thoughts on the issues covered. Drawing on his own experience, he highlighted two main difficulties faced by humanitarian aid workers. On the one hand, the stress generated by the sense that one is unable to actually solve the problem. There is the tendency to think that humanitarian action can sort out many problems, but it is not the case, it is actually a form of action that is quite limited. It cannot stop the war. This feeling that one cannot fulfil one's role or one's intention is a challenging one. On the other hand, Tony highlighted the fact that limits upon what you can achieve do not only come from outside but may also find roots in the individual aid worker. In his book the *Selfish Altruist* Tony referred to these as the seven deadly sins which come on the way to our initial altruistic intentions. Tony ended his remarks by mentioning the powerful cathartic role of writing one's experience in that it introduces a distance with the past and eventually enables detachment to take place.

**Hugo's conclusion:** Hugo concluded the discussion by agreeing with Tony that humanitarian aid cannot indeed solve everything, but that there are reasons for hope. There is a way, with and through the disenchantment. When one considers the lives who are actually saved, there is reason to hope. Another encouraging thought lies in the value of the 'accompaniment' that humanitarian aid provides to people as they go through disasters and war.

*Following up on the interdisciplinary discussion that this Conference started, ELAC intends to pursue its research on the experience of humanitarian aid workers at the interface of ethics, anthropology and psychology and in close partnership with humanitarian organisations.*

## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS:

- **Karen Abbs** - Early Intervention Counsellor, Oxford County Council and former Humanitarian Psychologist, MSF and RedR
- **Ayesha Ahmad** - Medical Ethicist, University College London
- **Paul Bouvier** - Senior Medical Advisor and Help Course Coordinator, International Committee of the Red Cross
- **Emma Fanning** - Humanitarian & Conflict Policy Advisor, Oxfam GB
- **Anne-Meike Fechter** – Senior Lecturer in Anthropology, University of Sussex
- **Eric Fiat** - Lecturer in Philosophy and Director at the Institute Hannah Arendt, Paris Est University
- **Cathy Fitzgibbon** - Head of International Human Resources, British Red Cross
- **Maurice Herson** - Co-editor of Forced Migration Review magazine
- **Kaz de Jong** - Psychosocial & Mental Health Staff Care, MSF Holland
- **Leïla Kherbiche** - PhD candidate, Centre for interpreting in conflict zones, FTI-Geneva
- **Olga Klimecki** - Neuroscientist and Psychologist, University of Geneva
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- **Alessandra Pigni** - Clinical Psychologist, Founder of Mindfulnext
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- **Silke Roth** - Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Southampton
- **Hannah Scott** - Senior Human Resources Adviser, Oxfam GB
- **Hugo Slim** - Senior Research Fellow, ELAC
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