

# The Value of Support for Aid Workers in Complex Emergencies: A Phenomenological Study

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**Background:** More disasters worldwide are now classified as complex emergencies, thereby increasing the threat to life and limb and potentially increasing the psychosocial impact of the experience for aid workers.

**Objective:** This study examines the concept of support as perceived by aid workers who had recent experience in complex emergencies.

**Method:** Using a phenomenological approach, 6 professional aid workers were interviewed about their experience.

**Results:** Aid workers who work in complex emergencies do not feel supported at the pre-deployment, during deployment, and after deployment phases. Failure to provide this support may cause disappointment, reduced self-worth, anger with the organization, and feeling of lack of achievement regarding self and the mission.

**Conclusion:** While the study may be limited by the volunteer sample and potential bias in data collection, the findings reiterate a proverbial but important issue in relation to aid relief staff in complex emergencies.

Many of the world's disasters are now complex humanitarian emergencies because they include a multiplicity of problems such as war, ethnic conflict, famine, endemic diseases, and political unrest.<sup>1</sup> Aid work in such situations is challenging and dangerous, requiring a heightened set of skills in order to live and work in such a threatening environment.<sup>2</sup> In the past, recruitment of disaster relief aid workers has not been an issue;<sup>3</sup> however, recent indicators show that the overall available workforce for international aid relief may be diminishing.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of a growing number of complex emergencies, it is becoming difficult to recruit aid relief workers.<sup>5</sup> Alongside a growing concern about attrition rates from nongovernment organizations<sup>6</sup> (NGOs) and continuing concerns about training and support of aid workers,<sup>7,8</sup> this does not bode well for the future of aid relief work, especially in complex emergencies. NGOs and government agencies involved in disaster relief must ensure that those deciding to work in this field are well supported and relate positive experiences that will stimulate recruitment and retention.

## Review of Literature

Since 1999, a number of studies have highlighted the need to consider psychological support for aid relief workers (see Table 1). Set in the context of United States military studies that examine stress response in soldiers and their significant others, the studies related to aid relief workers display similarities. While such comparison is valuable, especially because the military studies have such large samples, it is limited because most military studies use a medical approach, aiming to identify those in whom posttraumatic stress disorder and/or other mental health pathologies have developed. There also is limited information about how best to assist in coping with and prevention of such problems. The context of the soldier vis-à-vis the aid relief worker is different because soldiers normally are required to prepare for complex situations that involve threat to life and limb. There is no indication that aid relief workers are introduced to such training. While there is evidence suggesting the need for the U.S. military to put more emphasis on psychological support and mental health needs of soldiers, the evidence cannot be transposed to the aid

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**Table 1. Previous research on stress and psychological support among aid workers set in the context of military studies**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Findings</b>
1999	Salama and McCall <sup>8</sup>	Relief Organisation Neglect Moral Support for Workers	Qualitative —interview	12 leading NGOs	Most admitted that psychological support is underdeveloped for the staff; complex humanitarian disasters are more difficult for the staff to deal with than natural disasters
1999	Centre for Humanitarian Psychology <sup>20</sup>	Psychological support to humanitarian workers in European Humanitarian organisations	Quantitative —questionnaire	84	25 were particularly aware of the need for psychological support, 18 were not concerned, 21 were not interested
1999	Dlugosz et al <sup>21</sup>	Risk Factors for Mental Disorder Hospitalization after the Persian Gulf War	Cox proportional hazards modelling	30,539	War service was associated with greater risk for acute reactions to stress and lower risk for personality disorders and adjustment reactions among men; personnel (men and women) who served on the ground war support occupations were at greater risk for post war drug-related disorders; men who served in ground war combat occupations were at higher risk for alcohol-related disorders; the authors called for more longitudinal studies to assess overall impact on health
2002	Pflanz and Sonnek <sup>22</sup>	Work stress in the military: prevalence, causes and relationship to emotional health	Quantitative —questionnaire	472	Military personnel were more significantly more likely to report suffering from job stress than civilian workers ( $P < .001$ ); 26% reported suffering from significant work stress, 15% reported that work stress caused significant emotional distress, and 8% reported experiencing work stress that was severe enough to be damaging their emotional health; work stress is a significant occupational health hazard in the U.S. military

*(continued)*

Table 1 (continued)

Date	Author(s)	Title	Method	Sample	Findings
2003	Hourani et al <sup>23</sup>	Psychological and health correlates of types of traumatic event exposures among U.S. military personnel	Quantitative —questionnaire	15,000	The life-time exposure to one or more traumatic events was 65%; the most prevalent trauma for men was witnessing a major accident and for woman witnessing a natural disaster; those who experienced any traumatic event were at risk of having 2 or more physical and mental health problems than nonexposed controls
2003	Kaspersen et al <sup>24</sup>	Social network as a moderator in relation to trauma exposure and trauma reaction: a survey among UN soldiers and relief workers	Quantitative —questionnaire	302 relief workers; 144 responded; 97 soldiers; 72 responded	Four Network moderators (scales of social network support, trauma exposure, impact of event, posttraumatic stress) had relationship between trauma exposure and posttrauma reaction for aid workers; the soldiers were more trauma exposed yet displayed less signs of posttrauma reaction
2004	Ehrenreich and Elliot <sup>13</sup>	Managing Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Survey of Humanitarian Aid Agencies' Psychosocial Training and Support of Staff	Quantitative —questionnaire	100 agencies contacted; 17 responded	Few reported basic screening of potential staff with respect to risk factors for adverse responses to stress; little hands-on training with respect to stress management was provided; awareness of the role of organizational actions in reducing stress was limited; concrete preparation of staff for returning home was all but absent
2007	Antares Foundation and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <sup>25</sup>	Longitudinal Research on Stress in Humanitarian Aid Workers	Quantitative —3 questionnaires per candidate and saliva samples	430 participants from 19 international NGOs	To be published in 2007; <a href="http://www.idealists.org/psychosocial/resources/docs/staffstressStudy.pdf">http://www.idealists.org/psychosocial/resources/docs/staffstressStudy.pdf</a>

NGOs, Nongovernmental organizations.

relief worker. Moreover, the studies that are specific to aid relief workers do not focus on complex emergencies. In addition, they identify the aid agency perception of aid workers' needs, not the aid worker perceptions of need. Some literature that cannot be qualified as research provides informed thinking in the area. Conference papers and book chapters such as those by

Erikson et al,<sup>9</sup> Lopes-Cardozo and Salma,<sup>10</sup> and the Antares Foundation<sup>11</sup> suggest that patterns in relation to psychological reaction of aid relief workers are emerging, with a clear "dose response" relationship between experience of trauma events and anxiety symptoms of clinical significance.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that vulnerability is greatest for those aid workers either on the first

assignment or those with a long history of serial deployments.<sup>12</sup> In saying this, research remains scant. While the longitudinal study on the subject by the Antares Foundation is eagerly awaited, the work of Ehrenreich and Elliot<sup>13</sup> (see Table 1) stands as the landmark evidence in the field. Again, however, this work focuses on managing stress and does not clarify the nature of support as perceived by workers in the field, especially those in complex emergencies, which affirms the need to describe the phenomena of support from the perspective of these who have lived the experience.

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## Methodology

Phenomenology is the identification of phenomena as perceived by the individual who lives the experience. The basis of phenomenology is associated with the meaning as expressed by those who experience a particular social context and provides a holistic perspective on the subject under study.<sup>14,15</sup> This study uses an interpretative or hermeneutic approach, which is an adaptation of phenomenology that differs in the belief that the researchers go beyond an understanding and analyze and present ideas in a more structured fashion.<sup>16</sup>

## Sample

Interviews were conducted of a volunteer sample of 6 aid relief workers (3 men and 3 women aged 28

to 56 years) employed by different European-based international NGOs. All were professionals who had worked in recent complex emergencies between 2004 and 2005. One respondent had worked in 2 complex emergencies, and all the others had worked in at least 4 complex emergencies. All held different roles throughout their careers in aid relief in complex emergencies and were able to compare experiences across different missions in either Africa or Southeast Asia.

## The Interview

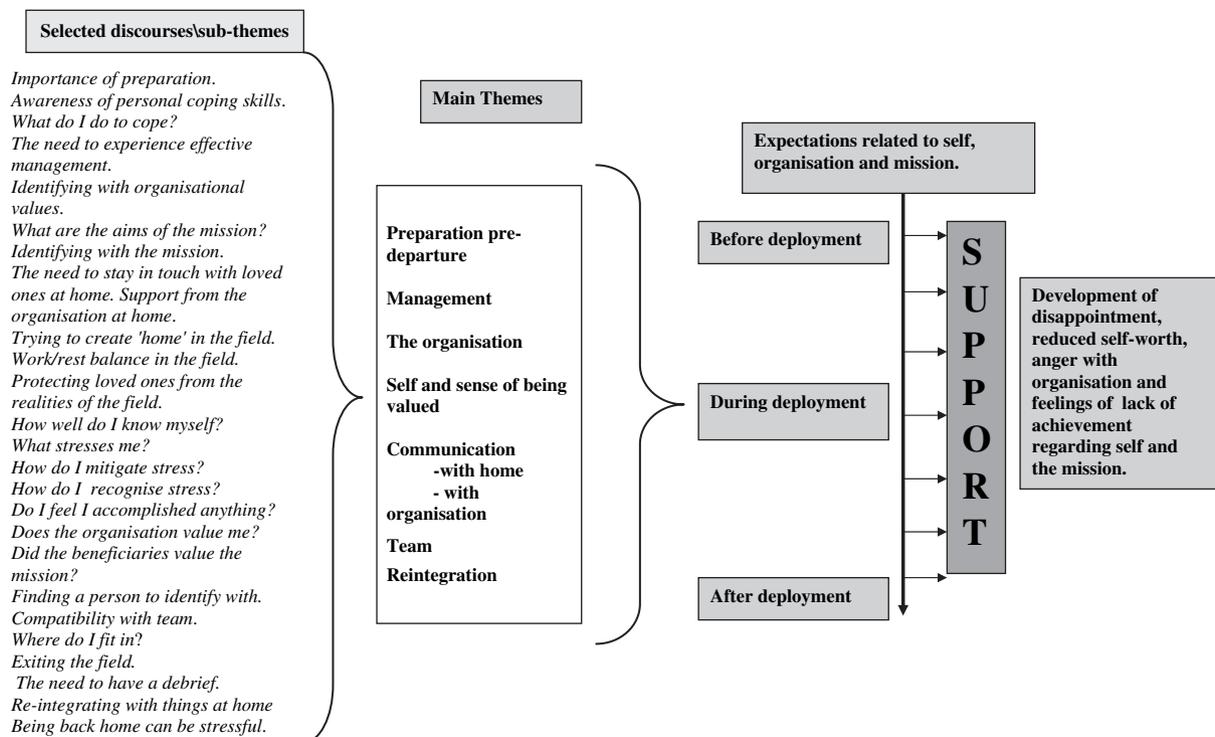
An open-ended conversational style interview was used, the duration of which was dictated by the respondent and normally lasted 1 hour. The questions posed were open-ended, allowing the individual to talk freely; for example, "Tell me about your experience of support while you worked in this emergency." Each interview was recorded and transcribed. As agreed by the participants, all tapes and transcripts were destroyed 1 month after completion of the project.

## Reducing Bias in Phenomenology

The fact that the primary researcher (AH) had field experience similar to the respondents was seen as a potential bias. To address this issue, it was proposed that "reflexivity" would be emphasised throughout.<sup>17</sup> Reflexivity is an initiative to identify and acknowledge one's own prejudices and bias about the issue being researched.<sup>18</sup> Prior to data collection, AH was interviewed by a work colleague who was not associated with the project, who was not an aid relief worker, and who had not been in a complex emergency. This approach was used to identify AH's existing perceptions about support in complex emergencies prior to commencing the interviews and analyzing the data.

**Table 2. Themes identified by external reader**

Theme	Topics
Communication	A need for hi-tech resources Facility to be able to connect family and friends Importance of keeping touch with "own culture" Need to know that contact with home office is possible and one is listened to Communication is a two-way process
Leadership	Need to understand the difference between managing, leading, and leadership Encourage leadership as a teamwork process The leader can alter depending on what the situation is
Management competence	A significant criticism of management competence at Home, Regional, and Country level—why? Criticisms leveled at skill and attitude
Task issues	A significant lack of management competence in people skills is obvious The balance between people and tasks is inappropriate An analysis of the job acuity is necessary
Predeparture briefing	Needs to be enhanced considerably
Predeparture training	Needs to be enhanced considerably
Post-role debriefing	Stress and re-entry program needs to be put in place
Facilities in the field	Need for better resources and facilities Need for an understanding that "the little things do count"



**Figure 1:** A diagrammatic representation of the phenomenology of support as perceived by aid relief workers in complex emergencies.

This interview was transcribed and used as the basis of supervision of the data analysis by the second author (PD). Using this process of self-analysis, particularly by AH, the researchers attempted to put pre-existing biases aside when performing the research process—bracketing their own feelings to exclude them from biasing the results. While it is known that true objectivity, especially in qualitative methods, is well-nigh impossible, it is advised to acknowledge the biases in advance.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the preliminary analysis and initial themes being shared and validated by some of the respondents (n = 3), the transcripts were also read by an external reader who had experience in the field of psychological support for aid relief workers (see Table 2).

### Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Filter Committee at the University of Ulster. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and upheld. Respondents received a research protocol and signed a consent form prior to interview. Extra precautions were used regarding the use of direct quotes in order to protect the identity of respondents. Permission was sought and quotes changed or omitted depending on the agreement from respondents.

### Data Analysis

A phenomenological descriptive approach with an inductive reasoning process<sup>16</sup> was chosen to analyze

the data. Each interview was transcribed and each question or issue mentioned by the respondents was highlighted. These were then linked and grouped under themes. Account was taken of the analysis by the external reader, and an overall pattern or phenomenology emerged (see Figure 1).

## Findings

The overall phenomenology that emerged from this study is that aid workers have expectations in relation to self, the organization, and the mission which, if not achieved, cause disappointment that can lead to deeper held negative feelings (see Figure 1). It is proposed that support at all stages of the process, that is, pre-deployment, during deployment, and after deployment, may prevent development of such negative feelings (see Figure 1). The main themes noted represent the most important areas of concern regarding support for international aid workers in complex emergencies. These include issues about predeparture preparation, management, the organization, self and sense of being valued, communication, team, and reintegration to home society. Some themes are illustrated by quotations when permitted by the respondent.

### Preparation Predeparture

Adequate training is vital when preparing for complex emergencies. Most respondents believed that the

training could have been better, especially in relation to personal preparation to deal more effectively with stress. Discussing and reflecting on how they might cope under stress would have been useful in the pre-departure training. Some respondents believed that they could have made more use of the resources that were available to them in advance of the deployment. Again, this added to feelings of guilt. The fault, as perceived by the respondents, was that both sides were to blame, the aid relief worker and the organization. The following quotes illustrate this point: “Many aid workers are recruited for a job that sets a certain level of expectations for the individual. If these expectations are not met, then the result varies from personal growth to a disappointment, which is bound to impact on their own self-worth.” “Rarely does the deploying organization know its staff well enough to forecast how they will cope once they are in a stressful situation. This needs to be taken on board in the preparation and training.”

### Management

Respondents believed that effective management of the entire employment phase should comprehensively address many of the gaps in support. There was heavy reliance on the personal skills of the aid worker, such as communication, reporting, and management, but this was not being reflected further up the organization. An example of this was the issue of management of “outside visitors” to the emergency that increased the workload and the stress. This, in turn, added to feelings of resentment, cumulative stress, and a sense of being undervalued. The following quotes illustrate this: “The leadership is on the ground, but they need the back up. It can only last for a while.” “There’s unreal expectation by HQ; we have too many extra role responsibilities.” “Do they know the impact of this massive staff turnover? There’s just too much ad hoc planning.” “There are too many outside visitors. This puts added pressure on us.” “There is no effective people planning, if you know what I mean.”

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### The Organization

The lack of resources in the field was a constant problem. It is clear that all respondents had an expectation for better resources, including better living conditions, and blamed the organization for this inadequacy. Despite this, all respondents stated that it was important to identify with the ethos of the organization. Most respondents stated that they had good loyalty to the organization and most continued to work for the same organization despite the perceived lack of support. Deep down, however, there is an

anger or unresolved conflict in relation to the organization, centered primarily around what the organizations say on paper and what they do in reality. The following quote illustrates this point: “It was a great programme in theory but the organization just didn’t have the contextual knowledge, and that caused problems.”

### Self and a Sense of Being Valued

This theme received attention from respondents. Most expressed low evaluation of self and regret regarding their tolerance of the lack of support, feeling bad about how this affected their performance, the overall program, and possibly the beneficiaries. With the benefit of hindsight, they noted that alternative courses of action had been open to them but they did not push for better. This increased their feelings of guilt, which remained with them well after they returned home. Although highly emotive for each, the interview process seemed to offer opportunity for a form of debriefing. All of the participants reported negative feelings associated with the mission, and most used the term “traumatic” to describe these feelings. Some cried openly while relating their stories. As real as the pain was, as troubled as some admitted to being, none took the opportunity to visit the critical incident counsellor when they returned home. Also, it was noteworthy that although the operational environment where the respondents worked was extremely dangerous, no mention was made of the security risks they lived with, the impact of watching suffering, or the enormity of the task they agreed to undertake. Most of the focus was on self and whether or not the organization made them feel valued. Most did not feel valued and blamed the absence of support for this.

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*... There is an anger or unresolved conflict in relation to the organization, centered primarily around what the organizations say on paper and what they do in reality.*

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### Communication

Issues related to communication fell into 2 main areas, contact with home and family and contact with the organization at home. Respondents believed that their communication with home could have been facilitated to a greater extent. Rest and relaxation time could have been used more effectively to accomplish this, especially communication with family at home. Even though most admitted that they wanted to protect their loved ones from the events they witnessed, they still valued communication with home. Communication with the organization at home was

problematic and compounded by a perception that those at home in the organization did not fully appreciate what was happening in the field. The following quote illustrates this perception: “There is a need for everyone in the organization to understand that the little things count, better people skills are needed.”

## Team

The team composition was mentioned many times in various ways, such as team spirit, cohesiveness, and the ability to identify with the others. Many respondents believed it was imperative to find a niche or clear role within the team, likening it to the family structure. Respondents reported that they were expected to be constantly flexible and dynamic, taking on tasks and responsibilities as well as additional roles when necessary. Added to this pressure was the lack of understanding from management in headquarters of the reality of the situation. For example, planning for replacement of departing staff seemed to be lacking. When staff left, their roles were not abandoned but were assigned as an additional task to another team member. This practice added to the workload and stress. Some who believed they were not being sufficiently supported in their original role could not cope with these new responsibilities. The resources did not match the workload required to achieve the outputs. This gap between intention and practice of the organization and the guilt that emerged in individuals within the team was a common complaint. When discussing team, one respondent said, “Working in this emergency was a gruelling experience for me and for the team I was part of. Although I felt part of the team, I allowed my own personal experience to isolate me. My inner dialogue while registering the unfairness also at times confirmed the justice of my treatment—‘you don’t deserve anything better.’”

## Re-integration Into Home Society

Some respondents expressed guilt about having to leave the field and had thoughts about their colleagues left behind. Most respondents stated that they found it difficult to talk about their experiences when they returned home, highlighting a need for a program that facilitates re-integration. All stated that they had mixed emotions, from guilt at having left to sheer joy in being able to shower daily.

## Conclusion

Perceptions of support affect how the aid worker views self in relation to aid work and working for a particular organization. There is an element of disappointment, either with self, the organization, or the mission, when the anticipated support is not provided. It is suggested that expectations regarding all 3

elements should be articulated by aid relief workers well in advance and discussed openly at the recruitment phase and the predeparture training. A focus on stress and coping strategies also may be valuable.

**Aid relief organizations must reflect on management styles and incorporate more people-friendly policies to prevent conflict emerging with workers in the field.**

As is the case in most social situations that cause stress and conflict, communication needs to be improved. This communication does not stop at the end of the mission but must continue afterward so that the aid relief worker feels supported in the reintegration back into home society. However, this is a two-way process that both aid relief workers and aid relief organizations need to consider if positive support in complex emergencies is to be fully realized.

## Limitations

This is a small phenomenological study that raises more questions than it answers. It is simply a description of the concept of support as perceived by a volunteer sample of aid relief workers who experienced complex emergencies. There are no comparisons with other types of disasters, so it is not possible to infer that these perceptions are only attributable to complex emergencies or even attributable only to aid workers. The data were collected by an individual (AH) who has had numerous experiences in complex emergencies. Despite the use of an external reader and adherence to good reflexivity throughout the supervision by the second author, this inherent bias still may have influenced the phenomenology.

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