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BOOK REVIEW

● Beristain, Carlos Martin (2006) *Humanitarian Aid Work: A Critical Approach* (English trans.). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, xiii + 195 pp.[1]

This book serves as a practical guide for humanitarian aid workers in considering psychological and social factors existing in populations faced with natural and man-made disasters. As humanitarian crises, that is, war, refugee migrations and natural disasters are ever increasing, it becomes imperative for humanitarian aid workers who provide assistance to better understand their role and their impact, to understand how the particular populations best cope in such a crisis, and how the workers manage their own mental health. For the humanitarian aid worker or anyone working in unfamiliar environments with traumatized local populations, the text will serve as an important guide for effective personal interactions in the most complex and unstable environments. The layout of the book is organized into three general areas of concern. First, the author looks at how disaster and crisis impact local populations. Second, the author looks at personal interactions in providing assistance and how the humanitarian aid worker can be most effective in such circumstances, and problems in cross-cultural interactions. Third, the final chapter considers broader social intervention strategies and the area of human rights and social justice; in the latter the author explains how traumatized populations collectively heal. The chapters include many headings and subheadings of specific interest and insight, complete with capsules of information that the reader can use for quick reference.

The introduction of the book describes Beristain's approach and what he sets out to achieve. Imperative to a psychosocial approach to humanitarian work, the introduction notes the importance of understanding victims in context to their culture and the importance of respecting their dignity. Chapter 1 gives an overview of key psychosocial problems that face a society in a situation of disaster. The book explains the divide between North and South (or Western and non-Western) life experiences and explains how the collective thinking process of the South differs from Northern (or Western)

mentalities. This chapter explains how to understand many areas of concern during war: the dehumanization of war, including intentional dehumanization and torture; issues regarding loss of dignity (vital to understanding war's consequences on societies); the social impact of war on individuals and groups; loss and changes of group identity in war through aggression and terror campaigns; and the psychosocial problems of forced migration. In Beristain's phrase the 'rupture of the social fabric', he brings an understanding of key concerns in working with victims during the process of reconstruction. The text provides examples of the impact of war and violence on humans and the incredible challenges faced by the individual and the society. Chapter 2 describes the stages of disaster and how victims cope through these stages. The chapter delineates different ways of coping. In looking at the context of the emergency, the text explains the importance of time and preparation during the crisis, reactions differing with different types of aggressions (natural or man-made), or whether it is a first response, second response or at a reconstruction phase. In considering these factors, Beristain provides action plans for support teams to the victims. Chapter 3 describes collective and individual emotional responses to war and the critical areas of perception and reaction based on one's cultural framework. The author describes panic levels, and how these reactions undermine or support the group's ability to function. Beristain addresses the important issue of negative rumours and how communication systems break down in crisis, thereby affecting the flow of information and thus the individual's perceptions and reactions. In Chapter 4, concepts and approaches to evaluating a survivor's mental health are considered. The text looks at the experience of trauma, the guilt emotion and how it manifests. The author makes quick mention (though this deserves further thought) of the state's psychological manipulation in post-conflict situations, such as the government's use of group collective guilt as a means to escape responsibility for actions and as an 'instrument of social control'. The chapter addresses stress and post-traumatic stress disorder, and very insightfully delineates mental health approaches to stress within North and South cultural divides. The chapter explains important rituals in the grieving process and ways to help. Useful examples are provided, such as how non-Western cultures may express emotional pain through body pain (as non-Western cultures often do not speak of or articulate their emotional/psychological problems). In Chapter 5 the book looks at experiences of populations affected by violence and catastrophes across the globe. The chapter offers analysis and context, including assessing available support mechanisms needed in evaluating coping strategies, and introduces social movements as a form of healing. Gender differences and gender-specific problems are also well addressed.

Psychosocial implications for humanitarian aid workers are taken up in Chapter 6. Beristain describes the dangers in taking on humanitarian aid work from a psychosocial perspective and what abilities and skills are needed to be successful in the field. Importantly, the chapter identifies

certain personality qualities as essential to the sensitive nature of working with victims of violence. The chapter does well in identifying stress issues for workers and psychosocial risks. Here the book misses an opportunity to elaborate further on the problem of organizations' role in care for proper personnel placements in the field, as well as issues of cross-mandates and uncoordinated efforts between organizations, all of which can and do negatively affect the groups they are trying to help, particularly in the sensitive areas of humanitarian and human rights work. Though this is a complicated organizational problem, the humanitarian aid worker, as part of delivering the outputs for the organization, might do well to have concrete examples of how this disorganization manifests and how best to avoid these problems in the field. In Chapter 7, Beristain describes problems in stereotyping and discrimination. He looks at conflicting cultural frameworks, with examples of different interpretation of space and time and cultural differences in displaying emotions. He offers easy to understand communication models and concrete examples. The text describes many cross-cultural problems faced in working relationships and examples of social miscommunication. Specific analysis is given to the dynamic of communicating with translators and the benefits of integrating local staff in organizations with supervisors from the North. The chapter also takes on the problems of culture shock for refugees and reverse culture shock for humanitarian aid workers returning home. Chapter 8 may be particularly useful to humanitarian aid workers and human rights officers working in post-conflict reconstruction environments. The book does very well in providing guidance on explicit types of mental health preventions, such as community approaches to mental health, delineating appropriate steps to take. Beristain introduces the multiplying effect in working with other local actors, and the pros and cons of multiplication work. This allows the reader not yet familiar with humanitarian aid work to visualize the complexities of working in a dynamic environment.

As a physician who has a wealth of experience in the reconstruction of the collective memory of people affected by torture and genocide, the author offers insight into therapeutic approaches with victims of war, and specific ways in which groups collectively approach trauma and painful memory. As cross-cultural communication and behaviours weave through the book's critical concerns of psychosocial approaches to humanitarian aid work, the author considers cross-cultural approaches to healing with applicable examples, but also stresses the importance of considering the individual in approaching the healing process. In doing so, he gives us situations with examples, such as considering if and when voice or recognition of a traumatic experience is useful for the individual in overcoming pain from loss and violence. The chapter offers insight into local and traditional approaches to healing, as opposed to Western therapeutic concepts and processes. The chapter also offers models for interventions concerned with cultural appropriateness, with attention to bicultural workers and community

participation. One area the author does not adequately address is the aid worker's political relationship to the host population. How does the aid agency define itself in the process of assisting and delivering aid? This issue has important consequences for the humanitarian aid worker understanding his/her identity and interactions with others. How is the local population viewing the humanitarian aid worker's role? How do the local authorities view the humanitarian aid worker? What is the political positioning of the humanitarian aid worker, and what are the expectations from these varied viewpoints?

Humanitarian Aid Work: A Critical Approach is a book which describes what often takes years of experience in the field to understand. It will serve as a very useful introductory guide to the humanitarian aid worker or as a well received reminder to those with field experience, in understanding the 'logic in repairing the social fabric' (p. 164). The text is clearly written and offers very appropriate examples of the many aspects of concern to the humanitarian aid worker. This is truly a book about sustainability without using the overused term. For the humanitarian aid worker who can hold respect and consider the dignity of the victims they provide assistance to, much of the models in this book will make sense. In an understanding of incorporating or yielding to local, collective thinking, sensitive psychosocial interactions may find much longer-term benefit. Although this book attempts to reach the humanitarian aid worker, many of the concerns addressed and advocated, if put into practice, will have a lasting impact on the populations the humanitarian aid worker seeks to help. Beristain's approach promotes a necessary accountability to beneficiaries of aid, that is, including in interventions a better understanding and respect for the population or individual to which assistance is provided.

Note

1. This is an updated version of a book originally published in Spanish: C.M. Beristain (1999) *Reconstruit el tejido social: un enfogue citrico de la ayuda humanitarian*. Barcelona: Icacia Editorial.

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