


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The everyday emotional lives of aid workers: how humanitarian anxiety gets in the way of meaningful local participation

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## Abstract

Participatory approaches to humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development promise to listen to the voices of local aid beneficiaries. However, aid workers often listen to these voices through reductive narratives of aid beneficiaries, ventriloquizing their voice and inhibiting meaningful participation. Why do aid workers – despite humane intentions – continue to rely on reductive narratives? This paper inquires how the everyday emotional lives of aid workers make reductive narratives persist. Based on 65 semi-structured interviews in Singapore, Jakarta, and Aceh, and 40 aid worker books and blogs, I show how aid workers regularly experience emotional anxieties that question their complicity in the suffering of others and their powerlessness to do anything about it. Reductive narratives resonate and persist because they allow aid workers to cope with these anxieties. I illustrate the emotional resonance of three reductive narratives – civilizing; romanticized; and impersonal narratives – in three common practices of local participation in aid work: professionalized standards; visiting the field; and hiring locals. Given the emotional origins of reductive narratives, rational critique is insufficient for reforming or decolonizing aid work. Rather, change must also involve engaging the underlying emotions of aid workers.

**Key words:** Constructivism; emotions; global governance; humanitarianism; interpretivism; ontological insecurity

## Introduction

In 1992, the World Bank came under scrutiny for financing the Narmada dam in India. The dam promised safe drinking water, electricity, and irrigation. But, it also faced fierce resistance from civil society: the dam threatened to displace 140,000 people from flooding.<sup>1</sup> The Bank's role in making such displacement possible was not just a public relations fiasco. It also cut deeply within the organization, as one prominent World Banker recalled<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>1</sup>Wade 1997.

<sup>2</sup>Baird 2010, 18, 29–30.

It just isn't working. We just aren't giving these people what we promised, which was an equivalent or better standard of living. ... It was the most depressing situation. ... [we] were lost. ... I had a real sense of dread that the Bank was no longer a relevant, respected institution.

The diagnosis of the Bank's failure was 'if planners listened to the people, they would design better projects, and that was *participation*'.<sup>3</sup> 'Participation' still dominates discussion in the world of humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development today. At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations) debated how to enact a 'participation revolution', by which they meant: 'includ[ing] the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective and efficient'.<sup>4</sup>

Although involving the participation of the very people they claim to help is an important move away from the colonialism and paternalism underpinning humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development,<sup>5</sup> the way local participation is elicited is often far from meaningful. Who are considered 'deserving' recipients,<sup>6</sup> or what aid they can ask for has to fit within the aid agencies' logical frameworks ('logframes' in aidspeak),<sup>7</sup> focus group discussion questionnaires,<sup>8</sup> or categories of data – such as mortality or nutrition rates –<sup>9</sup> contorting aid beneficiaries' expressed needs and often leading to counter-productive outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

Consider the recent Rohingya crisis. In 2015, an estimated 50,000 Rohingya refugees were left stranded on rickety boats in the Andaman Sea, unable to land, while hundreds perished. Although Rohingya refugees have been fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh since 2012,<sup>11</sup> what changed in 2015 was the discovery of the human traffickers' landing site in Southern Thailand and a campaign by human rights activists that featured refugee accounts on the cruelty they experienced.<sup>12</sup> The subsequent crack down on human trafficking made it even harder for Rohingya refugees to escape. As one refugee protested to me: human trafficking is what happens when migration is made illegal, only more dangerous. Meanwhile, after being stranded for 7 months at sea, approximately 1000 Rohingya refugees eventually landed in Aceh, Indonesia, thanks to the Acehnese fishermen who blatantly defied national directives to prevent refugees from disembarking.<sup>13</sup> In the refugee camps,

<sup>3</sup>According to the Bank's first hired anthropologist, Davis 2004a, 9.

<sup>4</sup>The Grand Bargain Participation Revolution 2017.

<sup>5</sup>Kapoor, 2008; Barnett 2011, 218–19; Shilliam 2014; *The Guardian*, 'Secret Aid Worker: Who Will Save the White Saviours from Themselves?' 19 April 2016.

<sup>6</sup>Barnett 2011, 36–37, 233–36.

<sup>7</sup>Mosse 2005, 38; Krause 2014, 70–90; Li 2007, 228.

<sup>8</sup>Mosse 2005, 92.

<sup>9</sup>Redfield 2013; Bulley 2014.

<sup>10</sup>Harrell-Bond 2002; Malkki 2013.

<sup>11</sup>BBC, 'Why Are so Many Rohingya Migrants Stranded at Sea?' 18 May 2015; UNHCR 'South-East Asia: Mixed Maritime Movements', 2015.

<sup>12</sup>BBC, 'Thai Mayor Banjong Pongphon Held over People Smuggling'. 8 May 2015; *Reuters*, 'Special Report: Inside Thailand's Trafficking Crackdown', 9 July 2015; *Reuters*, 'Special Report: Flaws Found in Thailand's Human-Trafficking Crackdown', 10 April 2014; *Human Rights Watch*, 'Thailand: Migrants' Deaths Spotlight Exploitation', 11 April 2008.

<sup>13</sup>BBC, 'Asia Boat Migrants: UN Despair over Lack of Rescues'. 8 May 2015; *Serambi News* 'Yayasan Geutanyo: Penyelamatan Rohingya Di Laut Oleh Nelayan Aceh Perbuatan Kemanusiaan Yang Nyata', 26 June 2020.

aid agencies conducted numerous focus group discussions centered on what kind of 'livelihood programs' they could provide. These programs usually fit a certain mold, such as sewing handicrafts that showcased 'traditional' or 'local' designs with a story that was crafted to pull at the heartstrings of would-be-donors. However, many of these refugees instead asked for cash or employment opportunities outside of the camp. This was because many of the refugees had escaped Myanmar by incurring debts to human traffickers, who in turn, held their families hostage as 'collateral'. Yet, the request for cash or employment did not fit the narrative of what 'refugees' *should* want – asylum, shelter, food, and livelihood programs that would leverage on their story as 'refugees'. As such, many refugees sold the aid given to them by the various humanitarian NGOs to the local villagers to pay their debts. By 2016, catching many international aid agencies by surprise, 75% of the refugees escaped the camps to Malaysia on the same perilous human trafficking boats. Although both the journey and undocumented work in Malaysia was undoubtedly precarious, it provided hope that they would be able to keep their families safe.<sup>14</sup>

Unintended consequences such as these were supposed to be averted by participatory approaches. Yet, as scores of scholars have shown<sup>15</sup>: despite often sincere attempts to be more 'participatory' or more 'local', the other remains *other*.<sup>16</sup> Local voices are only heard insofar as they conform to *reductive narratives* in humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development: *as victims* that need saving or civilizing, or *as exotic peoples* that need empowering, or *as a statistic* in spreadsheets to be 'solved'.<sup>17</sup> This paper contributes to this literature by asking: *why* do such reductive narratives of local aid beneficiaries *persist* despite the turn to 'participation' and 'localization'?

I argue that paying attention to the everyday emotional life of aid practitioners reveals an *emotional logic* behind the persistence of reductive narratives in humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development. Drawing on social-psychoanalytic theory, I suggest that survivor's guilt – the anxiety of being complicit or powerless to alleviate the suffering of others – is a constitutive aspect of the lived experience of being an aid worker. As such, reductive narratives *resonate* because they offer a coping mechanism for the felt anxieties faced in one's work.

This has important implications for the 'participation revolution': if the reason why aid workers do not listen to local voices has an emotional logic, criticism of aid workers' reductive narratives may only lead to its replacement with other reductive narratives. Instead, reforming or decolonizing aid work requires engaging with the emotions of aid workers themselves.

This paper is organized as follows. In the second section, I give an overview of existing approaches in the literature for why reductive narratives persist in aid. The literature's shortcomings point to the need to pay attention to the everyday emotional lives of aid workers. In the third section, I introduce my theoretical framework on what emotions are and how to study it, namely, as the back-and-forth between (i) anxieties and (ii) using reductive narratives to cope with anxieties. Sections four, five, and six empirically illustrate how aid workers used reductive

<sup>14</sup>Yayasan Geutanyoe 2016; Missbach 2017.

<sup>15</sup>Cook and Kothari 2001; Kapoor 2020, 147–69.

<sup>16</sup>Li 2007, 48, 132.

<sup>17</sup>Spivak 1988; Krause 2010; Cornwall and Fujita 2012; Fassin 2012, 206, 254.

narratives to cope with anxiety. These stories were gathered from autobiographical accounts by aid workers – some published, some online, and 65 of whom I interviewed in Singapore, Jakarta, and Aceh (Indonesia). Section four illustrates (i) how aid workers regularly experience anxieties that question their impact as an aid worker; whereas Sections five and six illustrate (ii) how different reductive narratives are used by aid workers as coping mechanisms against these potential anxieties. Section five provides a typology of two kinds of reductive narratives – us–them narratives and impersonal narratives. Section six then shows how both types of reductive narratives help aid workers cope with survivor’s guilt in three practices that are supposed to engender the participation of local aid beneficiaries: professionalized standards; visiting the field; and hiring locals. I conclude in Section seven by offering a primer of how we may learn to unlearn reductive narratives.<sup>18</sup>

### Contribution to the literature on why reductive narratives persist

This section outlines how my argument contributes to the literature in humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and development studies. Although these are sometimes distinguished as separate fields of practice where humanitarianism and peacebuilding are short-term and focused on emergency relief whereas development is long-term and focused on solving structural root problems,<sup>19</sup> for my purposes, I treat these as part of a continuum of attempts to alleviating the suffering of distant strangers couched in altruistic and moralistic principles (and, thus, use these terms interchangeably for this paper).<sup>20</sup> In each of these fields, the turn to ‘participation’ and ‘localization’ are understood as important aspects of reform.

The existing literature provides three important but insufficient structural explanations for why aid agencies may pay tribute to ‘participation’ and yet still do not let aid beneficiaries meaningfully participate in aid, namely, participatory practices are overruled by: material politics; techno-politics; or discursive politics. Each of these accounts emphasizes how local voices go unheard, except through the material interests, bureaucratic filters, or the discourse of humanitarianism itself, respectively. Contrary to these literatures, however, aid workers often exercise agency in defiance of these structural politics. I briefly outline the limitations of each approach and how a turn to the everyday emotional lives of aid workers can complement them to explain why reductive narratives persist in humanitarianism.

The first approach, material politics, draws from rationalist traditions. In this account, reductive narratives persist when they offer legitimacy to the organization or its stakeholders, especially donors.<sup>21</sup> However, although funding imposes real constraints on aid work, almost all the aid workers I interviewed described how donors could be managed ‘creatively’. For example, to leverage donors, aid agencies would band together or play donors off each other. Many also suggested to me that once trust is established between the aid worker and donors, donors do not (and are unable to) monitor practices on the ground.<sup>22</sup> One respondent also told me

<sup>18</sup>There are lessons that can be transferred to other domains of global governance (see Fassin 2012; Barnett 2013).

<sup>19</sup>Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Fassin 2012, 154.

<sup>20</sup>Barnett 2011, 10; Barnett 2018; Krause 2014, 1–5. Rafanelli 2021.

<sup>21</sup>Edwards and Hulme 1996.

<sup>22</sup>I.e. a principal-agent problem. See Nielson et al. 2006.

that she saw it as their duty as professional aid workers to educate donors on how to do aid work. In other words, there is considerable autonomy as aid workers: although donors did have some say on the agenda of the projects they wanted to fund, it was not a one-way conversation. Therefore, to understand why reductive narratives persist, one cannot simply 'follow the money'.

This leads to a second approach. Techno-politics (or 'antipolitics') emphasizes how expertise silences local voices. In this approach, reductive narratives persist because of the professionalization of humanitarianism and the dominance of experts, especially economists.<sup>23</sup> However even before economists' ascendancy at the World Bank, the Bank privileged engineers as 'the experts',<sup>24</sup> and today subverting the expertise of economists, anthropologists and sociologists have managed to assert that they are 'experts in local participation'.<sup>25</sup> Yet, local voices are still ventriloquized through different experts' reductive narratives – while aid beneficiaries appear to 'participate' in aid, 'participation experts' still decide whose and which voices get heard, and how.<sup>26</sup> In general, aid workers across rank and file have shown that they are adept at contesting expertise, while posing as 'the expert' in their field. This approach then still begs the question: why do aid workers persistently need to turn to experts in the first place?

The third approach does not locate power in any actor, but in the reductive narrative itself. Discursive politics emphasizes how narratives, such as the 'development discourse', positions aid workers as 'developed' with paternalistic obligations toward the 'undeveloped'.<sup>27</sup> However, far from totalizing, I found that many aid workers would explicitly disparage the development discourse.<sup>28</sup> Instead, many aid workers articulated their own counter-discourse, albeit one that was still reductively colonial: a romanticized (even exoticized) characterization of aid beneficiaries.<sup>29</sup> Why then do aid workers need to rely on one narrative or other that continually do not treat the voices of local aid beneficiaries on their own terms?

To recap: aid workers can and do assert their agency against material politics, techno-politics, and discursive politics,<sup>30</sup> but end up reproducing reductive narratives in newer forms. This paper asks why then do reductive narratives persist in humanitarianism? Rather than looking at how reductive narratives are determined by material interests, expertise, or dominant discourses, there is a growing body of scholarship that suggests focusing on the very practitioners who reproduce these reductive narrative.<sup>31</sup> As Fechter and Hindman argue,<sup>32</sup> aid workers are not merely conduits in aid work. They are the interlocutors who inevitably bring their own interpretations of how to do humanitarian in practice.<sup>33</sup> My own account builds on this approach. Curiously, although emotions naturally constitute an inherent part of the everyday lives of aid workers,<sup>34</sup> existing studies of aid workers tend to only make passing glances at the emotional dynamics that underlie everyday

<sup>23</sup>Haas 1992; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Mosse 2005, 93–96.

<sup>24</sup>Weaver 2008.

<sup>25</sup>Davis 2004b.

<sup>26</sup>Mosse 2005; Cornwall and Fujita 2012; Ticktin 2014, 81.

<sup>27</sup>Escobar 1995; also see Sending and Neumann 2006; Williams 2004.

<sup>28</sup>As did Fechter and Hindman 2011.

<sup>29</sup>This is closer to Fassin's 'humanitarian reason' (2012).

<sup>30</sup>Scott 1985; Eyben 2010.

<sup>31</sup>Avant et al. 2010.

<sup>32</sup>2011.

<sup>33</sup>Mosse 2011; Harrison 2013; Autesserre 2014; Grynaviski 2014.

<sup>34</sup>Similarly, the emotions turn in IR has yet to pay attention to the everyday lived experiences of practitioners. See Bially Mattern 2011.

experience.<sup>35</sup> This project, thus, provides a systematic study of a key dimension of being an aid worker that has been rendered invisible in analyses – the lived everyday *emotional* experience of aid workers – and how it affects the persistence of reductive narratives in humanitarianism, peacekeeping, and international development.

### How should we study emotions?

In this section, I briefly lay out: what are emotions; how to study it; and what ‘data’ look like.

#### ***Social-psychoanalysis as theoretical lens for observing emotions***

To begin with, emotions are not ‘things’ – they are not reducible to neurons or behavior.<sup>36</sup> Neither do emotions refer to ephemeral feelings. Whether we ‘feel’ them or not, emotions bubble beneath the surface. How then are emotions knowable? Philosophy of science suggests that emotions, like all objects of scientific inquiry, are interpreted through theoretical lenses.<sup>37</sup> In this paper, I draw on social-psychoanalysis to provide a framework for interpreting emotions in aid workers.

Social-psychoanalysis is a theoretical framework that treats emotions as both individual and social.<sup>38</sup> At the individual level, emotions entail a back-and-forth between (i) anxiety and (ii) coping mechanisms.<sup>39</sup> First, anxiety is conceptualized as the fear of failure before the gaze of one’s conscience.<sup>40</sup> However, one’s conscience is not entirely in an individual’s head. Rather, we learn what is right and wrong from the social fields we inhabit. In this study, the field in question is the aid world – humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development.<sup>41</sup> As I demonstrate later, the aid world constitutes certain ideals that aid workers imagine they are expected to live up to: to not be complicit in the suffering of others. These humanitarian ideals are so internalized in the aid worker’s conscience that failing to meet these standards leads to crippling experiences of anxiety.<sup>42</sup> Second, the principal way in which individuals cope with anxiety is through (socially-available) reductive narratives that ameliorate oneself of guilt in one’s psyche. As Brown eloquently puts, ‘Storytelling helps us impose order on ... emotional chaos. When we’re in pain, we create a narrative to help us make sense of it’.<sup>43</sup> This need not be conscious. As I demonstrate later, aid worker narratives also reduce others to character-roles – such as ‘the victim’ – so that one can become the

<sup>35</sup>For exceptions, see Nouvet and Jakimow 2016, Malkki 2015; Galazzi 2018.

<sup>36</sup>Hutchison and Bleiker 2014.

<sup>37</sup>Kuhn 1970; Waltz 1979.

<sup>38</sup>Clarke 2003. Social-psychoanalysis departs from the more individualistic and biological-deterministic psychoanalysis of Freud. For a good overview of the move from a more biological and individualistic psychoanalysis of Freud to a more socially situated psychoanalysis of Lacan, see Kapoor 2020, 3–22.

<sup>39</sup>For good overviews, see Meltzer 1990; Fink 1995. The psychoanalytic jargon for ‘anxiety’ and ‘coping mechanisms’ would be ‘trauma’ and its ‘defense mechanisms’ respectively. See Anna Freud 1937.

<sup>40</sup>What I’ve called ‘conscience’ is what Sigmund Freud called the ‘superego’. Even in Freud, the superego was not entirely subjective, but intersubjective. See Freud 1963.

<sup>41</sup>See Hilhorst and Jansen 2010.

<sup>42</sup>See Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006.

<sup>43</sup>Brown 2015.

hero of one's own story. However, when reductive narratives can no longer make sense of one's anxieties, the emotional chaos returns, prompting aid workers to double-down on or create new reductive narratives that can more effectively keep anxiety at bay.

Social-psychoanalysis thus complements Bourdieu-inspired analyses, one of the most generative approaches to studying the everyday lives of aid workers. This approach argues that humanitarianism constitutes a 'field' that provide the social rules for how aid workers 'play the game'.<sup>44</sup> In this field, the closer one approximates humanitarian ideals, the more aid workers' position in the field can be wielded as 'symbolic capital'.<sup>45</sup> However, whereas Bourdieu-inspired analyses tend to emphasize how humanitarian ideals act as 'capital', social-psychoanalysis emphasizes how humanitarian ideals gets internalized as the emotional dispositions (or the habitus) of aid workers. Understood as such, aid workers do what they do not merely to improve their position in the field<sup>46</sup> but because they are trying to cope with the impossibility of being truly 'good aid workers'.

Before illustrating what this looks like in the next section, I first explain where I located aid worker accounts.

### **Locating aid worker emotions**

I located aid worker narratives through two types of empirical sources: autobiographies and fieldwork. First, autobiographies consisted of 14 books and 26 blogs written by aid workers which narrate their personal stories in humanitarianism. This gave me an insider's glimpse of the everyday emotional lives of aid workers – what is important to them, how they interpret the *meaning* of their work,<sup>47</sup> what emotional challenges they face, and how they deal with them.<sup>48</sup> For example, Jessica Alexander's *Chasing Chaos: My Decade In and Out of Humanitarian Aid* was well received by aid workers for reflecting many of their common experiences and described as 'refreshing[ly] honest'.<sup>49</sup>

Second, fieldwork was conducted between December 2015 and April 2016 (with follow-up in June 2018) and involved 65 interviews with aid workers in Singapore, Jakarta, and Aceh (Indonesia) – all of whom are given pseudonyms. I adopted a biographical-interpretive method to guide my interviews – I asked aid workers to tell me about their life-stories, the emotional rewards and challenges they faced, and how they handled them.<sup>50</sup> One important advantage of fieldwork is that it avoids the possible selection bias of written autobiographies. Not only were all the autobiographies written by English-speaking aid workers with citizenship in the global north, but I was also concerned that they may consist of a particularly vocal clique. Contrary to popular representations, most of the people doing aid work are from the global south.<sup>51</sup> By contrast, 63 out of 65 of my respondents

<sup>44</sup>Bourdieu 1990.

<sup>45</sup>See Ebrahim 2003; Krause 2014; Goetze 2017.

<sup>46</sup>Krause 2014, 112–18.

<sup>47</sup>See Scollon 2001; Feldman 2011; Fountain 2014.

<sup>48</sup>On methodology, see Hor 2019.

<sup>49</sup>WhyDev. "Book Review, Reflection: Heart of Darkness: The Psychology of an AidWorker." WhyDev: Committed to Getting Development Right. 2013. <https://www.whydev.org/heart-of-darkness-the-psychology-of-an-aid-worker/>.

<sup>50</sup>Hollway and Jefferson 2000.

<sup>51</sup>Only that they may be called 'national staff' whereas the term 'aid workers' or 'expatriates' are reserved for those who come from the global north. See Barnett forthcoming; Fassin 2012, 238; Redfield 2012;

were Southeast Asian and were working with communities in Southeast Asia. Only 20% of the respondents were native English speakers. More than half of the interviews were conducted in Indonesian (which I translated), and most others were conducted in a mix of English and Indonesian.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, I chose to interview a mixture of aid workers that were working in 'Headquarter' ('HQ') management roles (offices based in Singapore and Jakarta), as well as those who were working directly with aid recipients 'in the field' (Aceh),<sup>53</sup> as well as a good mix of aid workers who were working in or had experience working in international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>54</sup>

### ***Narrating aid worker emotions***

I will rely on these aid worker stories for the remainder of the paper. As the stories that I share are inherently emotional, I will present them in a more ethnographic style. Rather than speak on their behalf, I think quoting them at length is the most respectful way to retell the stories of anxiety that aid workers kindly shared with me. Moreover, my hope is that by bringing the reader through the lived experience narrated in these stories, the salience of emotions is not only more apparent, but more relatable, persuasive, and intuitive.

### **Aid worker anxiety**

Recall that there are two sides to emotions: anxiety and coping mechanisms. This section focuses on the former (Section five focuses on the latter). Specifically, I demonstrate that in the case of aid workers, anxiety typically takes the specific form of survivor's guilt: the fear of being complicit in the suffering of others.

### ***Survivor's guilt as humanitarian anxiety***

Although aid workers' emotions are multifaceted, I suggest that a constitutive emotion of being an aid worker is the *anxieties* that question one's *complicity* in the suffering of others, or one's *powerlessness* to change the fate of suffering in impossibly complex situations.<sup>55</sup> Nicola Rieger's account captures this sentiment<sup>56</sup>:

The guilt that we can just walk away to a safe home or on rest and recuperation (R&R) while they remain faced with the same realities – sometimes for their entire lives – is as much part of the job as the empathy you feel, the powerlessness at not being able to do more for them. The pain of an evacuation, of

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Arcaro, Thomas. 'Addressing the Binary Illusion of 'Expat vs Local' Aid Workers.' Aid Worker Voices. 11 June 2017. <https://blogs.elon.edu/aidworkervoices/?p=852>.

<sup>52</sup>A second advantage of conducting interviews was that I could talk to my respondents about my provisional analyses. This allowed them to disagree and provide their own interpretation of their emotions.

<sup>53</sup>By 'HQ' I am referring to aidspeak for any location that doesn't involve direct interactions with aid beneficiaries and thus tends to involve relative administrative managerial or support work.

<sup>54</sup>On interviewing local aid workers, see Jakimow and Yumasdaleni 2016; Babül 2017.

<sup>55</sup>Walkup 1997; Feldman 2007; Napier-Moore 2011; Krause 2014, 138; Kapoor 2020, 13.

<sup>56</sup>Nicola Rieger. 'The Pain of Leaving Communities You Love Burns a Hole in Your Heart.' The Guardian. 24 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/24/the-pain-of-leaving-communities-you-have-come-to-love-burns-a-hole-in-your-heart>.



leaving behind local colleagues, projects and communities you have come to know and love, burns a hole in your heart.

Here, Nicola expresses ‘guilt’ for evacuating or for going on R&R – framed as an abandonment of local colleagues or aid beneficiaries in a conflict zone; she also feels ‘powerlessness’ for not being able to help them more.<sup>57</sup> This sentiment is widely shared in humanitarianism. Humanitarian doctors often are so overwhelmed with patients that they might equate their inability to pull another all-nighter with their complicity with the suffering of others.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, aid workers frequently juxtapose their privilege to those they are trying to help, including enjoying a modicum of comfort (e.g. beer) in the middle of a war zone<sup>59</sup>; wage differences between ‘expat aid workers’ and ‘local aid workers’<sup>60</sup>; recognizing how their language, behavior, or lifestyle may be implicitly colonial or racist<sup>61</sup>; or like Nicola, just having the choice of leaving a refugee camp while the refugees do not.

For Jessica Alexander, another aid worker, this guilt stems from the recognition that ‘I make my living off of the suffering of strangers’<sup>62</sup> and that ‘Nothing you [do] will solve this problem’.<sup>63</sup> This anxiety is characteristic of ‘survivor’s guilt’. Survivor’s guilt is a psychoanalytic concept developed in the study of post-holocaust trauma. It refers to the feeling of ‘guilt’ for having survived because one believes that their survival was at the expense of others, and hence, their survival itself makes them complicit and responsible for the suffering of others.<sup>64</sup> Far from merely describing the psyche of Auschwitz survivors,<sup>65</sup> one aid worker admits ‘I felt guilty about joy *because* there were others who lacked it’ with ‘the firm conviction that I was responsible for the world’s unhappiness’.<sup>66</sup>

### ***The omniscient gaze of the humanitarian conscience***

Survivor’s guilt is not the *only* anxiety that aid workers face. Nevertheless, experiencing survivor’s guilt is *a* constitutive part of the lived experience of being an aid worker.<sup>67</sup> This is in part because those who are most anxious about their complicity in the suffering of others are also more likely to pursue a career in humanitarianism.<sup>68</sup> But, it is also partly because one gets socialized into becoming

<sup>57</sup>Also see J. 2014, 101.

<sup>58</sup>Claire, Arjun. ‘Leaving Patients behind is the Hardest Thing’: When Fighting Reached an MSF Hospital in South Sudan. *The Guardian*. 16 March 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/mar/16/leaving-patients-behind-is-the-hardest-thing-when-fighting-reached-an-msf-hospital-in-south-sudan>.

<sup>59</sup>*The Guardian*, ‘Secret Aid Worker: It’s Unrealistic to Expect Us to Live like Monks’, 5 January 2016; *The Guardian* ‘Secret Aid Worker: Sorry to Disappoint You, but We Can’t All Be Mother Theresa’, 1 November 2016.

<sup>60</sup>*The Guardian*, ‘Secret Aid Worker: It’s One Standard for Local Staff and Another for Expats’, 16 June 2015; *The Guardian*, ‘Secret Aid Worker: Why Do We Still Value Expats More than Local Staff?’ 25 July 2017. <sup>61</sup>Redfield 2012, 364. <sup>62</sup>2013, 255. <sup>63</sup>2103, 216 <sup>64</sup>Levi 1986; Leys 2007.

<sup>65</sup>The survivor’s guilt of the average aid worker is unlikely to run as deep as that of a holocaust survivor. Nevertheless, the same guilt of being privileged at the expense of others is still pervasive, even if at a lower register. <sup>66</sup>Burkhalter 2013, 58, 125.

<sup>67</sup>Barnett 2011, 14–15, 238; Krause 2014, 144; Kapoor 2020.

<sup>68</sup>Arcaro 2016, 41–45.

a 'real aid worker'<sup>69</sup> by entering the social field of humanitarianism: not just learning its lingo, but also its ideals, its sensibilities, and its dispositions.

This is evident when we ask who exactly is accusing aid workers of complicity? Social-psychoanalytic theory tells us that the accuser lies within: anxiety is experienced as the feeling of failure *before the accusing gaze of an idealized version of one-self*<sup>70</sup> in this case, the idealized humanitarian self.<sup>71</sup> Consider J.'s account as an aid worker<sup>72</sup>:

You do this job long enough and you begin to accrue an account of stains on your soul. ... your dark moments come to be haunted by the faces of beneficiaries you've had to turn away ... by images of those you've had to injure in some way, perhaps in the name of the greater aid good.

Similar to many aid workers, J. expresses his experience of anxiety *as if* it came, 'haunt[ingly]', from the local aid beneficiary's gaze. However, as J. goes on, it does not seem to matter if the beneficiaries actually accused J. or not<sup>73</sup>:

We can feel this pressure from our neighbours whose eyes well up as they affirm what we do; we feel it from the journalists and bloggers who accuse us of being blind or calloused to the needs of the poor, and cite the facts that we live in team houses or ride in white SUVs as the evidence. We feel it in our nagging guilt when we do things which contradict our notions of 'good'.

In other words, aid workers get socialized into aspiring toward humanitarian ideals not just from interactions with local beneficiaries, but also from the social expectations in everyday discourses of what it means to be a 'humanitarian',<sup>74</sup> including representations of Henry Dunant, Mother Theresa, Florence Nightingale, Mahatma Gandhi, or even MSF's departure from the Red Cross in the name of a more heroic and purer humanitarianism.<sup>75</sup> These idealized notions of what it means to be an aid worker constitute the shared humanitarian conscience. As J. puts it, the reason why the 'accus[at]ions' made by 'our neighbors ... journalists and bloggers' sting so much because they are not entirely 'imposed' by external actors<sup>76</sup>:

There is often tremendous unspoken pressure on humanitarians, both imposed on us, and also, perversely, self-imposed. The pressure I'm talking about is the pressure to be good people, because we do supposedly good things.

Since this gaze comes from one's conscience, the gaze is not merely cast on *actions* we commit, but on our *intentions* behind both the actions we commit and actions we merely intended to commit. Thus, when Jessica confessed that, after 7 months of

<sup>69</sup>Alexander 2013, 360.

<sup>70</sup>Ahmed 2004. See Kapoor 2020, Ch. 7 on how the use of 'the gaze' differs from 'the gaze' in the Foucauldian sense.

<sup>72</sup>J. 2014, 104–05. 'J.' is a self-given pseudonym.

<sup>71</sup>Fassin 2012, 9; Krause 2014, 113.

<sup>73</sup>J. 2014, 105.

<sup>74</sup>*The Guardian*, 'Secret Aid Worker: What I Wish I Could Say to the People Back Home', 11 April 2017.

<sup>75</sup>Krause 2014, 99–106.

<sup>76</sup>J. 2014, 105. Also see Ticktin 2014, 113.

‘the unrelenting feeling of futility’ in Darfur and having imagined herself to take-out her pent-up frustration by throwing rocks at local kids for calling her ‘Khawaja’ or white person, it turns out that<sup>77</sup>:

I hadn’t actually thrown rocks at children ... but that seemed like a trivial distinction: just wanting to was bad enough.

Intent, rather than action, is what Jessica felt judged for. As Freud puts it, ‘the distinction ... between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely, since nothing can be hidden from [one’s conscience], not even thoughts’.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, one’s privilege, not just one’s actions, is something that cannot escape the conscience’s gaze: survivor’s guilt is experienced as though my conscience has judged me guilty for experiencing privilege while others suffer. Because of this, aid workers would express the feeling that ‘If you’re over thirty years old and have relative health, regular food, and secure shelter, how can you not feel some survivor’s guilt in this world?’<sup>79</sup>

### Reductive narratives in humanitarianism

Reductive narratives offer aid workers a way to cope with this anxiety of survivor’s guilt. Reductive narratives do so by placing *emotional distance* between the aid worker and the imagined aid beneficiary in the aid worker’s conscience. In this section, I typologize two types of reductive narratives (Figure 1): (1) us–them narratives that split the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’, reducing others into ‘good-people’ and ‘bad-people’; and (2) impersonal narratives that reduce others into ‘things’.

Each of these narratives reduce the local aid beneficiary to some (colonial) object: when the aid beneficiary is part of ‘them’, *us–them narratives* may reduce him/her to the victim that needs saving/civilizing; when the aid beneficiary is part of ‘us’, *us–them narratives* may also reduce the local aid beneficiary to a set of romantic qualities; while *impersonal narratives* reduces him/her to a technical object that can be manipulated. Although the literature has demonstrated how objectifying ‘the local’ inhibits local voices from being heard on their own terms, my focus is on showing that reductive narratives persist in one or more of these three forms because they each offer a way to cope with the anxiety of survivor’s guilt.

The first reductive narrative, *us–them narratives*, works by demonizing some people for the anxiety of survivor’s guilt. It does this by projecting the gaze of one’s conscience onto others.<sup>80</sup> The other becomes reduced to a ‘villain’ or ‘bad person’ – where it is ‘*you, not me*’ who is complicit in the suffering of others. In so doing, the aid worker also places ‘civilizational distance’ between him/herself and the ‘villain’, inscribing a superior ‘us’ and an inferior ‘them’, one which needs saving, developing, or civilizing. When local aid beneficiaries are demonized for their own suffering, participatory practices are paternalistic at best.

Crucially, us–them narratives also tell a story of good-people just as much as bad-people, heroes as much as villains. Often overlooked, however, is that even when the aid worker identifies with the local aid beneficiary as part of ‘us’, there

<sup>77</sup>Alexander 2013, 5–8, 203.

<sup>78</sup>Freud 1963, 72.

<sup>79</sup>Annan 2011, 63.

<sup>80</sup>Klein 1921; Fassin 2012, 222

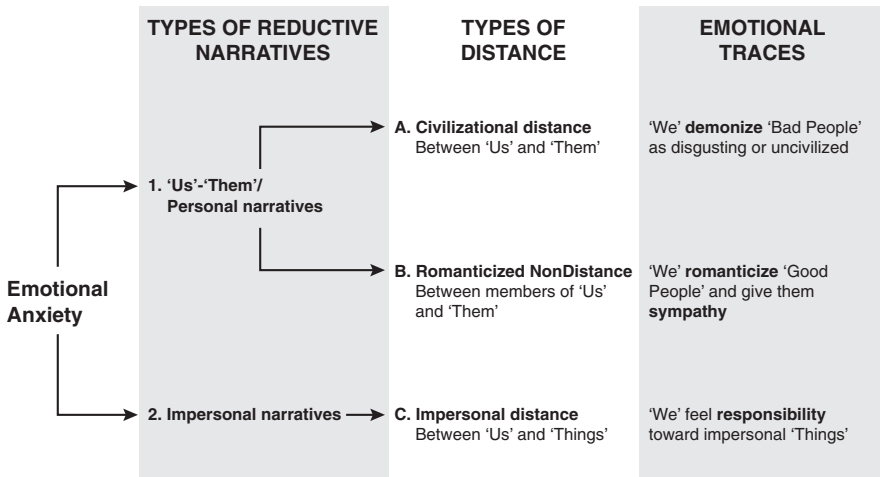


Fig. 1. Reductive narratives and their corresponding distances and emotional traces.

remains a concealed distance between aid worker and aid recipient when the aid worker believes him/herself to be able to speak on behalf of the distant other, in virtue of an imagined ‘us-ness’ or an imagined solidarity with the marginalized.<sup>81</sup> Turning Freud’s ‘identification with the aggressor’ on its head, aid workers instead ‘identify with the victim’.<sup>82</sup> I call this second distance ‘romanticized solidarity’ or ‘romanticized non-distance’ to indicate the residual distance between aid workers and aid beneficiaries despite a romanticized notion of intimacy. After all, to romanticize someone is also to reduce someone to a set of fetishized characteristics.

The second reductive narrative, *impersonal narratives*, has no characters – good or bad. It renders the suffering of others – and the potential complicity aid workers might have in it – as a technical problem to be solved. The idea that aid workers can ‘solve’ suffering promises them of the possibility of redeeming the self from survivor’s guilt.<sup>83</sup> However, by impersonalizing the accusing gaze, it also places impersonal distance between the aid worker and the local aid beneficiary – the distance that results from reducing others to numbers on a spreadsheet or logical frameworks.

Each of these three distances – civilizational, romanticized, and impersonal – prevents the local aid beneficiary from being heard on their terms. In the next section, I illustrate how these distances persist because they also offer emotional distance to the anxiety of survivor’s guilt.

### Three cases of participatory practices

To illustrate how these reductive narratives persist because they offer coping mechanisms for the anxiety of survivor’s guilt, I focus on three practices that aid

<sup>81</sup>Zižek 1994; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Kapoor 2004; Fountain 2011; Fassin 2012, 199.

<sup>82</sup>Freud 1960; Nandy 1983, 74.

<sup>83</sup>Weber 1930.

**Table 1.** Reductive narratives in practices of participation

		PRACTICES OF PARTICIPATION		
		A. Professionalization	B. Visiting the Field	C. Hiring Locals
US-THEM PERSONAL NARRATIVES	'Them' Bad People	Voluntourists	Bureaucrats, Professionals	(White) Expats
	'Us' Good People	Professionals, Locals	Fieldworkers, Locals	Locals
IMPERSONAL NARRATIVES	Standards	Professional Qualifications	Time spent in the field	Number of locals hired

Diagrammatic annotations in the table: A circle with the number '1' is centered between the 'Them' and 'Us' rows in the 'A' and 'B' columns. A circle with the number '2' is centered between the 'Us' and 'Impersonal' rows in the 'A' and 'B' columns. A circle with the number '3' is centered between the 'Us' and 'Impersonal' rows in the 'C' column.

workers typically claim to be participatory or local (Table 1): professionalization<sup>84</sup>; visiting the field<sup>85</sup>; and hiring locals or localization.<sup>86</sup>

I first share aid worker stories that exemplify how us–them narratives make the first two practices of participation (the lightest shaded area) – ‘professionalization’ and ‘visiting the field’ – emotionally resonate. Second, I show how impersonal narratives do so with the same two practices – professionalization and visiting the field (the darkest shaded area). Third, I show how both us–them and impersonal narratives come together in the third participatory practice in humanitarianism: ‘hiring locals’ (the medium shaded area). Although I reference the scholarship that critiques how each of these practices does not meaningfully consult aid beneficiaries, my focus is on showing how they persist because they provide coping mechanisms for aid workers to salvage their survivor’s guilt.

**Us–them narratives**

*Us–them narratives in professionalization: demonizing voluntourists*

First, a common way of conceiving the participatory revolution is further professionalization of the aid sector.<sup>87</sup> However, as others have pointed out, to equate local participation with professionalization is to reduce the local beneficiary to

<sup>84</sup>The Grand Bargain Participation Revolution 2019.

<sup>85</sup>PHAP. ‘Participation in Practice: Examples of Inclusive Action for a ‘Participation Revolution’,’ 26 March 2020. <https://phap.org/common/Uploadedfiles/Webinardocuments/200326-SCHRGBWorkstream6-Report.pdf>.

<sup>86</sup>The Start Network 2017; The Grand Bargain Localization Agenda 2019.

<sup>87</sup>Some prominent professionalization reforms include ALNAP, Sphere, the Humanitarian Accountability Project, etc. See Krause 2014, 129.

an object that aid workers can claim to represent – through professional accreditation and methods – without necessarily consulting local beneficiaries on their own terms.<sup>88</sup> I show how the emphasis on professionalization persists at the expense of meaningful participation because it offers a coping mechanism for aid worker's anxiety of survivor's guilt.

Recall how Jessica Alexander had earlier expressed anxiety over 'making [her] living off of the sufferings of strangers'. Jessica copes with this by redirecting her anxiety about her own complicity toward how voluntourists could be 'giving out candy to kids ... – like handing out pellets to goats when you're at a petting zoo'.<sup>89</sup> She distinguishes<sup>90</sup>:

'Real' aid workers hated these folks. We called their trips 'hug vacations'. ... This trip is for them, not for Haitians! ... They're here to ... feel good about themselves.

Railing against voluntourists can be a bit of a hobbyhorse for professional aid workers. Yet, social-psychoanalytic theory tells us that 'To be disgusted [or triggered] is *to be affected by what one has rejected*'<sup>91</sup> – in this case, the anxiety of being complicit in the suffering of others. In fact, Jessica acknowledges that her disgust for voluntourists can be traced to how<sup>92</sup>:

*I knew I recognized myself in them.* Perhaps my motives for coming here weren't so different from theirs.

It is this uncanny recognition of the voluntourist in herself that urged Jessica to distance herself from voluntourists through a reductive narrative of 'good-people' (professionals like herself) and 'bad-people' (voluntourists). After all<sup>93</sup>:

To Claude [Jessica's local driver] and to the rest of the Haitians, I was probably just another white face among the thousands of do-gooders, no different from any of the other disaster tourists. ... Why should Claude have been able to distinguish me from [voluntourists], or from anyone else working there?

Yet, Claude's imagined voice is merely ventriloquized to personify the accusing gaze in Jessica's humanitarian conscience. Note, however, that by demonizing voluntourists as 'dilettantes', Jessica believed that she could legitimately represent Haitians – not on the basis of consulting them – but on the basis of being a professional (romanticized non-distance)<sup>94</sup>:

Whenever a dilettante screwed up or revealed his ignorance, it was once again confirmed that experience and master's degrees were the only ways to be legitimate.

Jessica does this not merely to score points (symbolic capital). Rather, hating on voluntourists is a defensive manoeuvre: by projecting her survivor's guilt onto

<sup>88</sup>Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002; Chandler 2013; J. 2014, 89, 29–30. <sup>89</sup>2013, 360. <sup>90</sup>2013, 360.

<sup>91</sup>Ahmed 2004, 86. <sup>92</sup>2013, 362. <sup>93</sup>2013, 362. <sup>94</sup>2013, 313–14; also see J. 2014, 62–64.

voluntourists, Jessica can imagine that it is voluntourists who '[profits] off of the suffering of others' and not professionals like her<sup>95</sup>:

The aid community resented amateurs, 'voluntourists' like James. But when they scorned people like James they were also reassuring themselves, justifying ... that what they did *was* a profession.

*Us-them narratives in visiting the field: demonizing bureaucrats*

Visiting the field is a second way that aid workers talk about soliciting the participation of aid beneficiaries.<sup>96</sup>

Similar to professionalization, reductive us-them narratives can also make visiting the field serve the emotions of aid workers, rather than meaningful participation. However, unlike professionalization, who is 'us' and 'them' in narratives of visiting the field is often reversed: professional aid workers are now the villains while the volunteer in the field is the hero instead.<sup>97</sup> This was the case for Hanif, an Indonesian aid worker I interviewed:

There is a negative correlation between the salary and the impact of humanitarian work ... A good humanitarian organization works for the community and the issues that they are concerned with. Bad organizations are busy with themselves, their internal conflicts, and their internal procedures. ... I admire those who work in local organizations. They are volunteers (*relawan*). They are activists. ... But the staff [of INGOs]? They are not volunteers, they don't bring their heart, they are not activists ... they are professional staff: ... [to them] 'it's nothing personal, it's only business'.

Just like how Jessica realized that she saw the voluntourist in herself, Hanif too, is frequently worried that he, like the very professional aid workers he demonizes, has questionable impact. To assure himself that he is not merely 'lost in a pile of reports' like professional aid workers, Hanif is driven to work like a 'volunteer': he is committed to visiting the field, 20 days a month, even as a manager based in Jakarta. The practice of visiting the field resonates with Hanif (and many others like him) because it assures himself that he is not complicit or powerless to help others by projecting that complicity and powerlessness onto professionals.

At the same time, by considering himself a volunteer and frequently visiting the field, Hanif can *claim* to have a better understanding of what the local beneficiary needs, even if he does not. Although 'visiting the field' is a pre-requisite to local participation, on its own however, it is common to visit the field without meaningfully listening to aid beneficiaries on their own terms. For example, Hanif confesses that a big part of going to the field, for him, is about discovering

<sup>95</sup>Alexander 2013, 313.

<sup>96</sup>For example, see J. 'The Field.' Aidspeak. 27 July 2013. <https://aidspeak.wordpress.com/2013/07/27/the-field/>. J. "'The Myth of the 'Field.' WhyDev: Committed to Getting Development Right, 7 January 2014. <http://www.whydev.org/the-myth-of-the-field/>. Allison Rabe. 'Send Them to the Field!' WhyDev: Committed to Getting Development Right. 25 July 2013. <http://www.whydev.org/send-them-to-the-field/>.

<sup>97</sup>By 'volunteer' (*relawan*), Hanif is not exactly referring to 'voluntourists'. Rather, he is thinking of aid workers who have sacrificed a stable career for altruism.

the change *he* can make as an aid worker, as well as to gain approval from the local aid beneficiary:

By going to the field, doing and observing directly, you can find the reason why you chose to be an aid worker ... we want to make a difference ... [B]y going to the field ... we get direct feedback from the community: their thanks, acceptance, and the sparkle in their eyes. These are priceless. Everyday work in Jakarta is dominated by abstract concepts and paperwork which often makes us think 'what exactly is the relevance of all this jargon to children in the community?'

In this quote, Hanif reveals that what he means by 'feedback' (*umpan balik*) is not just consulting the views of the local community, but to get their approving gaze – 'their thanks (*terima kasih*), acceptance (*penerimaan*), and sparkle in their eyes (*pandangan mata berbinar*)'. Visiting the field 20 days a month might be less about local participation *per se*, and more about assuring oneself of his/her potency to 'make a difference', as Hanif puts it.

#### *Demonizing other aid workers as romanticized solidarity*

What both Jessica and Hanif's reductive us–them narrative had in common was that their demonization of other aid workers (be they 'voluntourists' or 'professionals') allowed them to imagine a romanticized solidarity with the local beneficiary.

This use of us–them narratives to speak on behalf of local beneficiaries was very common in my interviews. For example, Yusuf, an aid worker from Banda Aceh (Aceh's capital) claimed that he knew what the local community in Aceh wanted because unlike expatriates, 'We *are* the people! We *are* from here! We know what the problems are'. Although local elites will likely have more nuanced understandings of local context than expatriates who are helicoptered in, my fieldwork suggests that many people from Banda Aceh also have paternalistic and civilizing attitudes toward the rest of Aceh, especially the more rural areas. Moreover, upon my asking, Yusuf could not tell me what steps he took to verify that his claims corresponded to what 'the people' wanted except that he was one of them. Similarly, in response to an expatriate who exuded a 'condescending white savior complex', Felicia, an Indonesian Chinese aid worker based in the Philippines, would frequently claim to know what Filipinos wanted because of her 'Asian connection' with them. Here, Felicia reimagines her identity – not just as Indonesian Chinese or as an expat aid worker – but as 'Asian', as a way of including the local aid beneficiary as part of 'us' while excluding those with 'white savior complexes' as part of 'them' – the villains. Yet, even though the white savior complex is decidedly problematic, Filipinos often do not think that Straits Chinese have sufficient shared experiences to speak on their behalf (especially, since Straits Chinese are commonly seen to profit at the expense of the local Indonesian and Filipino populations).<sup>98</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Anderson 2001.



*The emotional resonance of us–them narratives*

So, why do aid workers – often good, likeable, and well-intentioned people – persistently rely on such reductive us–them narratives that silence the voices of aid beneficiaries? Contrary to structural constructivist/discursive accounts (discussed in Section two), what these stories suggest is that reductive us–them narratives become common-sensical not just through discursive politics,<sup>99</sup> socialization,<sup>100</sup> norm entrepreneurship,<sup>101</sup> buzzwords,<sup>102</sup> or governmentality.<sup>103</sup> These may supply aid workers with plausible reductive narratives that aid workers can tell themselves. But, whether these reductive narratives emotionally *resonate* with aid workers depends on whether they can address the anxiety of survivor's guilt.

Inability to recognize the underlying emotional dynamics underneath us–them narratives can cause us to underestimate how and why reductive narratives persist.<sup>104</sup> For example, consider the supposedly dominant narrative guiding humanitarianism and international development – the development discourse – one where the aid worker is presumed to be more developed and thus has a paternalistic responsibility to develop/civilize the underdeveloped aid beneficiary.<sup>105</sup> In my interviews with aid workers, I rarely came across an explicit use of 'the development discourse' or 'white man's burden'. Curiously, when I did encounter civilizing narratives like the development discourse, it was most explicit among local aid workers based in the field – as if they were deploying it to differentiate themselves from the local community they were working with and often associated with.<sup>106</sup> Take Gus' case, an Acehnese who survived the 2004 tsunami and preceding 30-year civil war, and then became an aid worker. Although collecting data in the field for a needs-assessment, Gus narrated how he had been traumatized by the threats he received from other Acehnese aid beneficiaries. Because Acehneseness represented rejection for Gus, he resented working with the Acehnese community (the 'bad-people' in his story). In turn, he regarded them as 'backward', 'closed-minded', 'uneducated', and even 'remote'. Instead, Gus embraced another culture that he could identify with – *bule* or white foreigners (the 'good-people' in his story).

By contrast, most expat aid workers would actively condemn the development discourse (in other aid workers). However, in its absence, civilizing narratives seem to have merely been replaced with reductive narratives like Jessica's or Hanif's, us–them narratives that imagined a romanticized us-ness with aid beneficiaries.<sup>107</sup> This suggests that it is not simply enough to critique the development discourse, the white man's burden, or romanticized narratives *as reductive narratives*. Rather, these reductive narratives may simply reappear in other forms because reductive narratives are needed to shield the aid worker from their everyday anxieties of survivor's guilt.

<sup>99</sup>Escobar 1995; Fassin 2012.

<sup>101</sup>Mosse 2006; Goddard 2009.

<sup>103</sup>Hyndman 2000; Sending and Neumann 2006.

<sup>105</sup>There is related to the discourse on the white man's burden. See Shilliam 2014.

<sup>106</sup>Kapoor 2004.

<sup>100</sup>Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Hopf 2010.

<sup>102</sup>Cornwall and Brock 2005.

<sup>104</sup>Hopf 2017.

<sup>107</sup>This corresponds with Fassin's humanitarian reason (2011).

### Impersonal narratives

Both professionalization and visiting the field do not only reduce local aid beneficiaries to 'us' or 'them', but also to statistics or measurements. Similar to us–them narratives, impersonal narratives of local aid beneficiaries persist because they help aid workers cope with the anxiety of survivor's guilt. Unlike us–them narratives, impersonal narratives do not work by projecting the survivor's guilt onto others, but by rendering suffering as a problem to be solved.

#### *Impersonal narratives in professionalization: impersonal tangibles*

Impersonal narratives are ubiquitous in the drive to professionalize humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development. Aid workers typically talk about humanitarianism as 'problems' to be 'solved', projects to be accomplished, targets to be achieved, and using the language of 'fixing' or 'lessons learnt', etc. Aid workers do not do this because they love solving problems for its own sake. Instead, conceiving one's potential complicity in the suffering of others as a solvable problem enables aid workers to feel like they are not powerless to redeem themselves.<sup>108</sup> Jessica expresses this sentiment when she realizes that 'Nothing you are doing will solve this problem', and yet<sup>109</sup>:

'But I want to feel like I've finished something. *Anything?* ... I'd come to learn that this feeling of powerlessness, this recognition of the insignificance of your own work beneath the overwhelming, endless avalanche of problems is what aid workers face every day.

As such, many aid workers expressed to me the satisfaction they felt from seeing some tangible and material outcome of their efforts in person – be it relief supplies or a school building.

Impersonal narratives of professionalization, thus, help aid workers cope with survivor's guilt by using standards and indicators to render human suffering as a legible problem to solve.<sup>110</sup> This may seem harmless, even necessary. However, impersonal narratives also pigeonhole the voices of local aid beneficiaries to fit within the standards and indicators aid workers use to feel in control. Although looking into the face of the hungry may induce the anxiety of complicity or powerlessness, to redefine hunger as a 'failure to reach a minimum nutritional standard'<sup>111</sup> not only allows the aid worker to imagine being able to redeem him/herself by crafting programs toward meeting the nutritional standards, it also allows the aid worker to avert the (imagined) gaze of the hungry.<sup>112</sup> As one senior World Vision director put it<sup>113</sup>:

In a way, it is easier to cope with the suffering of a whole nation or of a needy world from a distance than to come face-to-face with the suffering of one person, one family.

<sup>108</sup>See Edkins 2000; Beardsworth 2004.

<sup>110</sup>Winichakul 1994; Scott 1998; Li 2007.

<sup>112</sup>Cohn 1987; Krause 2014, 144.

<sup>109</sup>2013, 216–17. Also see Barnett 2011, 238.

<sup>111</sup>Allan 2018, 167.

<sup>113</sup>Irvine 1996.

To see how the impersonal narrative of ‘solving problems’ keeps everyday emotional anxiety at bay, consider how Kristin, another Indonesian aid worker I interviewed, experiences an emotional breakdown precisely when her impersonal narrative began to crumble. Kristin characterizes her early career as a field-based aid worker, one where she was also extremely task-oriented, often at the expense of ‘seeing people as people’. In her own words:

When I was younger, I really looked at those projects as projects. ... if we have a target to achieve, [let’s say] a thousand people, [then] we have to achieve a thousand people, because that was our target. ... I see the numbers, but I didn’t really see the people behind those numbers.

Curiously, it was the arrival of her nephew that helped her ‘humanize’ the ‘people behind those numbers’:

I knew children were vulnerable, but I really didn’t know what it meant ... [But] after having [my nephew] in my life ... it was really hard to see pictures of children who died in a disaster and not picturing my nephew.

In other words, prior to this, by only seeing numbers and not people, the gaze of the victim was impersonalized, making Kristin well-defended against emotional anxiety (even when she was in the field). It was only after her nephew came into her life that Kristin narrates the emotional breakdown experienced during the disaster response to typhoon Haiyan, the mega-typhoon which hit the Philippines in 2013:

I didn’t go to the Philippines in the first two weeks [of Haiyan]. I was just here based [at HQ]. ... I was basically working 24/7 ... the first week I did not see any TV about Haiyan. ...

[One] night, I was sitting alone in my home, and I was watching [the news channel] on TV, and I think it was just an interview with a woman in a hospital who was holding her dead baby. ... it was the first time that I switched on my human side, because before that, I was just reading news. I think it was probably the first time I let myself cry.

Although Kristin is particularly honest about how the event was not registered as traumatic at first, when all you see are numbers, there is no reason to feel anxious in the first place.

*Impersonal narratives in visiting the field: impersonal ‘being there’*

Visiting the field can also be reductive through impersonal narratives. For example, although Hanif is not fond of bureaucracy, he still gives an impersonal measure of participation – he spent 20 days a month in the field despite having a managerial position. Yet, although aid workers are cognizant of the dangers of treating local beneficiaries as merely an indicator, many still cling onto this impersonal standard of time spent in the field. This is because it gives them the feeling that they are *doing something* and keeps the anxiety of survivor’s guilt at bay.

However, just like Kristin, the inability to meet these indicators may not only feel like one has failed to meet a technical standard, but also elicit a personal failing. For example, when visiting the field can no longer assure Hanif that he is making an impact, the impersonal narrative breaks down, the anxiety of powerlessness returns, and Hanif experiences an existential crisis, leaving a 'gaping void' (*ruang hampa menganga*):

Sometimes, I wonder whether what I've done has had an impact to the community in the time I worked for the psycho-social support project. ... Aid workers need the feeling of having made a difference. ... Many aid workers leave the field feeling devastated [*perasaan hancur*, literally a 'feeling of collapse'] ...

Answering the question of our impact is even harder in the field of psycho-social assistance. Build a home or school, and you will see the building. Distribute food and you will see people queue for it. If you are working in psycho-social assistance, it is sometimes difficult to get direct feedback that what we've done has helped. ... So I questioned my job, I questioned my effectiveness. I got burned out and frustrated. ... I arrived at a point where I was so stressed ... I got hospitalized.

This suggests that the impersonal standard of time spent in the field is a way for Hanif to cope with the emotional anxiety of not knowing his impact. In this process, standards of participation have the potential to be merely tokenistic, where visiting the field can reduce the local to visible outputs (like housing projects) at the expense of the intangible (like post-traumatic healing).

#### *The emotional resonance of impersonal narratives*

What these stories suggest is that reductive impersonal narratives persist because they help aid workers (pre-emptively) cope with potential emotional anxiety – the potential complicity with the suffering of others, and, one's powerlessness to do anything about it. They are (unconscious) attempts to defend against potential survivor's guilt through *control* and *standardization*. As a corollary, the techno-politics of statistics,<sup>114</sup> bureaucratization,<sup>115</sup> turning to experts,<sup>116</sup> professionalization,<sup>117</sup> seeing like a state,<sup>118</sup> depoliticization,<sup>119</sup> or habit<sup>120</sup> (discussed in Section two) are not merely caused by a tyranny of experts maximizing efficiency. Rather, technocrats are often merely trying to cope with the anxiety of powerlessness by focusing on things that can make one feel like they've accomplished something. Neither are professional standards merely attempts to legitimize failed aid projects to external stakeholders.<sup>121</sup> Aid workers also legitimize their work internally *to themselves*. Hence, even in the absence of formal indicators, people like Hanif still find a way to create new informal indicators as proof that they are 'doing something'.

<sup>114</sup>Merry 2011; Krause 2014, 134.

<sup>117</sup>Barnett 2011, 214.

<sup>120</sup>Hopf 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011.

<sup>115</sup>Weber 1958; Barnett 2002.

<sup>118</sup>Scott 1998.

<sup>121</sup>Ebrahim 2003; Mosse 2005; Weaver 2008.

<sup>116</sup>Mitchell 2002.

<sup>119</sup>Ferguson 1994.

At the same time, as Kristin's experience suggests, although impersonal numbers conceal the human aspect of humanitarian work and limit meaningful participation, it also protects the aid worker from registering the trauma of seeing a fellow human being in horrifying conditions, helping aid workers out of a state of impasse and enabling him/her to function and get things done. As one aid worker ascetically describes his/her dependency on impersonal distance<sup>122</sup>:

Passionate and well-meaning experts dissect violence for us. ... Hearing the concepts and the interventions and the services splayed so clinically, always by PowerPoint, I cannot help but feel disconnected from the pain. Perhaps that is the point – are we numbing ourselves? (We must – if not to go mad.) 'Screening, assessment, treatment, maintenance'. ... if only we were not speaking about refugee victims of rape, forced migration, and brutality. Sanitize we must.

### ***The emotional resonance of 'hiring local'***

Jessica's and Hanif's stories already show how both *us-them* and *impersonal narratives* persist in 'professionalization' and 'visiting the field' because they help aid workers emotionally cope with anxiety (Table 1). I now consider a third practice: 'hiring local'.<sup>123</sup> This too reduces participation to an impersonal standard – how many locals are hired. Yet, reductive notions of 'hiring local' resonate because it reassures expatriate aid workers that they are not complicit in deepening global inequalities.<sup>124</sup>

Local aid workers are indispensable for aid work. Yet, as scholars point out, 'hiring local' often glosses over the heterogeneity of who is 'the local'.<sup>125</sup> It tends to assume, for example, that all Indonesians can represent each other and that state boundaries are a good proxy of identities that are relevant to humanitarian actors.<sup>126</sup> Yet, one of my respondents suggested to me that as a Javanese Indonesian, he was seen as 'the enemy' in Aceh because of Aceh's long civil war with the Indonesian state. If one thinks that the solution is, in the case of Aceh, to simply hire more Acehnese rather than Indonesian aid workers, even 'Aceh' is not homogenous. For example, the Gayonese are a minority ethnic group mostly concentrated in the mountainous regions in Aceh. Not only are they disproportionately poorer, but also they were often described to me as more 'backward' and even considered as immigrant 'guests.' Among my Acehnese respondents, civilizational lines were drawn by ethnicity (sub-ethnicities of Acehnese, or the Gayonese minority), *agama* (state-recognized religion), where one originated or grew up from

<sup>122</sup>Anonymous Aid Worker. 'Convergences.' The Dream is the Truth. 18 June 2014. <https://thedreamisthetruth.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/convergences/>.

<sup>123</sup>Kapoor 2004.

<sup>124</sup>This can also shed light on the emotional logic of why stereotypes persist in global governance more generally. See Yanow 1997; Scott 1998; Seabrooke and Broome 2012.

<sup>125</sup>Mosse 2005, 84; Fassin 2012, 216; Louise Redvers. 'Local Aid Agencies: Still Waiting for a Bigger Share of the Funding Cake.' The New Humanitarian. 27 March 2017. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2017/03/27/local-aid-agencies-still-waiting-bigger-share-funding-cake>; Thomas Arcaro. 'Non-Local Local?' Aid Worker Voices. 28 June 2017. <https://blogs.elon.edu/aidworkervoices/?p=881>.

<sup>126</sup>Mohan and Stokke 2000, 75–86; Eyben 2010, 156.

(*berasal dari mana*), how urban or rural one's hometown/village was, education levels (*tingkat pendidikan*), gender, and others.<sup>127</sup> Therefore, to standardize localization as 'hiring local' runs the risk of privileging some locals over other locals – such as privileging Javanese over Acehnese, Acehnese over Gayonese, or those who speak English over those who cannot, etc.<sup>128</sup>

It can also be hard to reconcile 'hiring local' with Gus's internalized orientalism – even though he himself is Acehnese, he treated the Acehnese as the uncivilized 'bad person' and identified with *bule* (white foreigner) instead. The 'white saviour complex' is thus not limited only to white aid workers. Internalized racism and aspirations to whiteness, like Gus', is not uncommon among local aid workers from postcolonial societies who are 'qualified' enough to get hired by INGOs or their local partners.<sup>129</sup> (These days, Gus also frequently tweets his admiration for Donald Trump). If the coloniality embedded in humanitarianism involves a paternalistic and ventriloquistic disposition toward the marginalized, then decolonizing aid must involve more than simply swapping in 'expat' aid workers with 'national' aid workers with the same colonial mentalities.

With all its problems, why then do reductive narratives of 'hiring local' persist? Both us–them and impersonal narratives (Figure 1) are alluring because of what they do emotionally. Us–them narratives that demonize the white savior complex is often used to 'screw the outsider',<sup>130</sup> however construed, to distance oneself from *the anxiety of being an outsider oneself*. Conversely, reductive romanticizations of local aid workers allow the expat aid worker to imagine a solidarity with 'the local', allowing aid workers to *feel* that they are diversifying – even if diversity initiatives benefit local elites at the expense of less privileged 'locals'. Similarly, 'hiring local' also involves an impersonal narrative that reduces 'participation' to measurement, such as quotas to 'hire Indonesian nationals'. The appeal is that it allows aid workers to abdicate the burden of meaningful participation onto local experts, while still being able to feel that their efforts are 'local' enough<sup>131</sup> and that 'local aid workers' know what's going on despite the complex multi-layered identities of aid beneficiaries.

### Conclusion: the tragedy of fighting distancing narratives head-on

To be clear, professionalization, visiting the field, and hiring local are ultimately important (even necessary) – but ultimately insufficient – turns toward improving local participation in humanitarianism. The danger lies in simplistically equating participation to any one of these practices (or other reductive practices) as substitutions for meaningful participation.<sup>132</sup> This danger is real precisely because they provide ready and convenient reductive narratives that guard us from our emotional anxieties.

And yet, these reductive narratives can never fully keep the anxiety at bay. At best, they may allow us to temporarily forget the impossibility and endless needs of complex crises that aid workers are asked to solve, or slide over difficult

<sup>127</sup>Local 'culture' is also itself always contested. See Swidler 1986. On intersectionality, see Crenshaw 2017.

<sup>128</sup>Also see Li 2007, 61–95, 137, 169–75, 186.

<sup>129</sup>Fanon 1952; Freire 2005; Chen 2010.

<sup>130</sup>J. 2014, 37–40.

<sup>131</sup>Li 2007, 199–203.

<sup>132</sup>Also see Li 2007, 277; Mosse 2005; Krause 2014.

historically rooted structural inequalities that no one person can fix<sup>133</sup>: for instance, despite Jessica's disgust at voluntourists (civilizational distance), she acknowledges that she sees herself in them and in her abject disgust; despite going to the field 20 days a month (impersonal distance), Hanif experiences an existential crisis when he is still unable to verify what his impact is. Because these anxieties always lurk beneath the surface, aid workers have to continually re-work new or existing narratives to keep themselves sane.

Hence, fighting these reductive distances *head-on* will only lead to a substitution of one reductive narrative with another. If distance is what allows the aid worker to not get bogged down with paralyzing anxiety, then challenging the development discourse may merely lead the aid worker to resort to romanticized narratives of ever more distant suffering stranger, where, as one aid worker put it: 'in efforts to acknowledge and challenge inequalities, it is easy to adopt a discourse of villainy; to see oneself as a personification of privilege ... lead[ing] to a kind of "development martyrdom"'<sup>134</sup> and burnout.<sup>135</sup> Alternatively, to point out the flaws in the impersonal standards in humanitarianism may only drive aid workers to invent even more impersonal standards or getting new expertise that can render the flaws solvable and hence keep the aid worker sane at the expense of meaningful participation. This explains the allure of Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development (LRRD) – a policy agenda for reconceptualizing aid in a way that directly connects short-run humanitarian efforts with long-run development assistance. LRRD was a response to the anxiety that emergency relief is merely 'a drop in the bucket' in contrast to the vast prevalence of human suffering (and sometimes makes it worse). However, the assumption behind LRRD, that one can 'solve' root causes of human suffering, betrays a tragic hubris and technocratic faith in humankind's ability to resolve complex problems of global suffering and injustice. This has led humanitarianism deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole of finding impossible and depoliticized solutions, a downward spiral of more impersonal narratives and anxiety-inducing crises that challenge them.<sup>136</sup> This inward focus on 'what *I* can do' not only plagues aid workers with workaholism, but the figure of 'the local' only becomes more and more impersonal, distant, and strange.

I wish to conclude by contemplating the normative possibilities for meaningful participation in humanitarianism, peacebuilding, and international development. Meaningful participation is not simply listening without preconceived notions of the other as a tabula rasa or an open slate – that is impossible. Rather, since our emotions make us prone to mischaracterizing others in reductive narratives, meaningful participation must entail *unlearning* reductive narratives and *relearning* who the other is through *dialog* – not as an outcome, but an always ongoing, iterative, and perennially unfinished process.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>133</sup>Head 2020.

<sup>134</sup>Bevan, Marianne. "The Help' in Togo.' Eleven Hours Abroad. 3 July 2012. <https://elevenhoursabroad.wordpress.com/2012/07/03/the-help-in-togo/>.

<sup>136</sup>Li 2007, 47; Barnett 2011, 3, 10, 37–41, 195–222; Krause 2014, 129.

<sup>137</sup>See Arendt 1959; Noddings 1984, 33–40; Lo 2012.

<sup>135</sup>Weber 1930.

Consider how Fridah, an Acehese aid worker, retold an instance when several Acehese aid beneficiaries were upset (*marah*) at the unequal distribution of aid. Rather than to take their criticisms personally, she would sit down with the aid beneficiaries to listen (*mendengarkan*) – not just to their complaints, but also what made them angry. She explained that although she was initially offended, she had to learn to let go of her anger (*tidak terpancing marah*), relent (*mengalah untuk meredam*), and put aside her ego (*mengesampingkan ego kita*) in order to return to the good intention of sincerely helping others (*kembali kepada niat awal kita ... ikhlas membantu*). She explained that even though she too was a victim of the tsunami, putting aside her ego allowed her to better understand both similarities and differences in survivors' experiences (*pengalaman*) and feelings (*rasa*), as opposed to assuming that they must be the same.

How did Fridah do it? If the narratives that we tell ourselves have emotional origins (specifically, that they are defensive), then unlearning them cannot be a purely rational or logical exercise.<sup>138</sup> They cannot be disciplined through reason. Rather, they need to be worked through emotionally.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, resisting reductive narratives cannot simply entail antagonism. To do so is to re-enact demonizing us-them narratives *ourselves* – a defensive measure to assure ourselves that we are not complicit with voluntourists, bureaucrats, or others. Rather, resistance requires emotional engagement with others. But, it also requires emotional engagement with The Other *in ourselves* – that which we have rejected from ourselves in the gaze of our conscience. Similarly, emotional anxiety cannot simply be 'fixed' by equating emotional reflection with hiring more psychological support staff – another vital but ultimately insufficient response that merely medicalizes (and often responsibilizes) *our* own anxiety through impersonal standards. This is escapism too.

Hence, an important requisite to meaningful participatory practices is for us to not fight the distance, but to recognize that some distance is always necessary to defend ourselves from anxiety. The trick is, I suggest, to appropriate suitable kinds of distances – if not through reason, then perhaps through aesthetic or subliminal media,<sup>140</sup> such as in art, therapy, writing, friendship (*curhat*), or religious prayer (*Subhanallah, istighfar*, and others).<sup>141</sup> Although these are usually suspect in modernity, it is these subliminal media that affords us the 'aesthetic distance' to see the stranger in ourselves.<sup>142</sup> Through aestheticizing one's emotional anxieties, aid workers need not project them onto the figure of the distant stranger, nor domesticate them into impersonal objects, but allow for the possibility to be work with one's own anxieties and to empathize with others as speaking subjects.<sup>143</sup> As Fridah narrates her experience of how her faith helped her work through her emotions:

Everything here is ephemeral (*Nggak ada abadi di sini*). When we remember that everything we have or do is God temporarily entrusting (*titipkan*) us to take care of others (*ikhlas membantu*), even when others are angry at us, we pray for patience (*sabar*), we put aside our ego, and we learn to accept (*menirma*) others as they are.

<sup>138</sup>Contra Foucault 1994, 216.

<sup>139</sup>Hutchison 2016; Zevnik 2021.

<sup>140</sup>Bleiker 2009; Oh 2012.

<sup>141</sup>On tragedy as a therapeutic art form. See Nietzsche 2003.

<sup>142</sup>Kristeva 1991.

<sup>143</sup>Ufford and Giri 2003.



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