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**STRESS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN LOCAL
HUMANITARIAN WORKERS IN COLOMBIA WORKING
FOR A LOCAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Psychology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2008

Abstract

This study examined the differences in stress and psychological wellbeing in 75 local humanitarian personnel (70 females and 5 males, median age = 30.7) from “Fundacion CC”, local non-governmental organisation from Medellin, Colombia, who worked either in the field, with the communities they help, or in an administrative facility, doing managerial and planning types of work. Participants answered the Stress Profile questionnaire in order to assess the impact of background variables such as place of work and age, and variables theoretically associated to the processes of stress such as social support, cognitive hardiness and coping styles, on their current levels of stress and psychological wellbeing.

Despite increasing worldwide evidence showing the significant impacts of humanitarian work in the field on stress and mental health of humanitarian staff, all participants consistently showed low levels of stress and high levels of psychological wellbeing regardless of place of work and any other differences among them. Additionally, this study showed that variables theorized in the literature as relevant to stress were instead more significant to assess psychological wellbeing in the sample of participants. Results and implications were discussed within the guidelines of transactional models of stress.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express grateful appreciation to the following people and authorities:

The Human Ethics Committee for granting approval and permission for conducting this research.

“Fundacion CC” for kindly allowing me to recruit some of its staff members as participants for this research.

The participants who took part in this research. Without their cooperation this research would not have been possible.

Dr. D. Gardner for her guidance and assistance through the whole process of developing a structured, coherent and meaningful piece of investigative work.

Docente Asociada Isabel Puerta (Associate Professor Isabel Puerta), from San Buenaventura University Psychology Department, Medellin, Colombia, for her support and help in accessing K. Nowack’s Stress Profile, psychometric instrument essential for this investigation.

To my wife, children, my family and close friends for the support they gave me during this study.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

1.1 Introduction

The Colombian violent internal conflict has reached its fifth decade and many people, at least 2.9 million until 2003 (Castles, 2006) and 3.7 million until 2005 (Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (CODHES), 2005), have been forced to leave their homes and lands to go to live in remote country villages or city shantytowns where they often lack resources and conditions basic for their survival. CODHES, the main national NGO working to help these communities, estimated that in 2006 alone at least 288,000 people were forcibly displaced (The United Nations Refugee Agency, 2006). Many of the victims of this artificial migration throughout the country are suffering from poverty, disease, violence, different sorts of traumas and mental disorders (Doctors Without Borders, 2006).

The magnitude of the Colombian humanitarian emergency has prompted a much needed relief response from high profile aid organizations such as the International Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other important international and local non-governmental aid agencies. However, the violent environment and logistical difficulties in accessing communities at risk have put under stressful circumstances those willing to provide help and support in the field. Aid workers have to often deal with desperately affected families who have to wait long periods of time before they are provided, by the sometimes slow official agencies, with a document that certifies that they are real victims of forced displacement and then the goods and services to

alleviate their situation will often take longer still to be delivered (Human Rights Watch, 2005). In the same way, international and local staff members from aid agencies, such as the Peace Brigades International, sometimes need to be protected when on duty by international human rights observers so that they are not targeted by any of the factions in conflict (Eguren, 2002). However, some aid providers, such as doctors, nurses and other health relief personnel, have already faced personal threats against their wellbeing and life such as kidnappings and robbery (Doctors Without Borders, 2006; de Currea-Lugo, 2001). As a consequence, high levels of stress, mental disorders and emotional exhaustion have been documented on aid workers exposed to either direct or indirect harassment by the groups in conflict in this country (Camilo, 2002).

Due to the nature of their work humanitarian staff in Colombia is constantly exposed to daily cumulative and likely traumatic stress. However, these events are not exclusively happening in this country. These are constant issues in many regions of the world where relief personnel work in complex environments facing civil conflicts, disasters and poverty (McFarlane, 2004). This state of affairs has encouraged academics and researchers to increasingly acknowledge the need to understand the negative stress-related effects of humanitarian work. A body of literature has been built over the last few decades and, even if this field of enquiry is still in its early stages of development, researchers have been finding common patterns and concepts that guide in the improvement of preventive procedures and treatments to protect the psychological wellbeing of field humanitarian aid workers. However, most of the research in this area has been carried out on Western expatriate relief workers that usually go to countries other than their own to comply with their humanitarian assignments (McFarlane, 2004). Despite that the majority of relief

personnel (all over the world) are locals working for Western and local aid agencies (McFarlane, 2003b; Ahmad, 2002) available scientific information addressing mental health issues they go through due to work related stress is very limited. This is a big gap in the literature that international researchers certainly need to address.

Available scientific literature in this area from Colombian academic sources is also scarce. While most of the existing information comes from qualitative studies centred on the victims of the conflict, and from theoretical perspectives more reflective of social work or the political sciences, outcomes from scientific-quantitative studies addressing the psychological wellbeing of aid workers are, if they exist, very hard to find. This therefore is where the main purpose of the present study lies.

1.2. Purposes of the Present Study

- To contribute to the development of scientific literature on stress in national aid workers in Colombia and its implications for mental health
- To assess the relationship between the stress national aid workers experience, not only at work but as part of their life routines and habits, and psychological wellbeing using a psychometric instrument, the Stress Profile (Nowack, 2002), which has been already culturally validated and translated into their own language.
- To identify stress related risk and protective factors that might make participants either more vulnerable to psychological and physical illness or more resilient to the challenges of daily life and work.

The advantage of using a culturally validated instrument, as the Stress Profile (Nowack, 2002), is relevant to this study. In this way findings are subsequently analysed considering the socio-cultural background of the participants. Elsass (2001) stated in his investigative work with Colombian and Peruvian communities that diagnoses of psychological illness, and further ways to treat them, are closely related to culture and different from one social group to another. This finding obviously has implications for local aid staff who might find themselves working alongside foreigners helping people from their same country but not necessarily the same socio-cultural background. From the culturally sensitive perspective of this research, a more culture-aware investigation can be developed and the psychosocial difficulties of national staff can be better represented. Finally, this study is of special interest to the author as he was born and raised in Colombia before moving to New Zealand.

An overview of the following chapters of this study will give an idea of the structure this research effort is trying to use for its intended purposes. After this introductory chapter, an overview of stress in aid organisations will follow. The scope of the problem, the unique characteristics of aid-work and impacts of stress in the relationship between aid workers and those helped will be discussed. In the last part of this chapter, a general look at the specific characteristics of the communities aid agencies work with in Colombia, and some of the issues they face in carrying out their duties, will also be undertaken. Further, a review on some of the existing theoretical approaches and previous research on stress will lay the academic foundations for the purposes of this investigation. Following chapters will single out the specific characteristics of the present study and how data will be collected and results obtained and analysed. Finally, the discussion of the obtained outcomes and

conclusions that can be drawn from them, in light of previous findings from other researchers on the general concept of stress and considerations when it affects humanitarian workers, will complete the present investigation.