'Are we becoming bullies?' A case study of stress, communication, and Gestalt interventions among humanitarian workers

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Abstract: There is an increasing focus on humanitarian workers and stress. At a workshop in June 2015, the author facilitated self-care, group debrief and communication sessions for senior gender advisers deployed by the Norwegian Refugee Council. This paper presents and discusses survey responses relating to the advisers' experiences of stress, communication, and Gestalt interventions. In certain situations, such as humanitarian crises, people – including humanitarian workers themselves – can easily become stressed and their communication violent, which in turn may contribute to more stress and violence around them. However, this cycle can be broken with sufficient support and awareness.

Key words: stress, communication, resistance, group debriefing, humanitarian workers, gender.

Introduction

There is increasing interest and research on humanitarian workers, stress, and staff care. With a Gestalt therapist as staff care adviser, the Expert Deployment/NORCAP Department of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides Gestalt-based self-care training and debriefing. In addition, they have provided Gestalt-based communication training.

The Expert Deployment/NORCAP Department administers various rosters for humanitarian action worldwide. One of these is concerned with gender equality programming and gender-based violence. Senior-level advisers can be deployed to support the UN, NGOs and governments. These advisers met for a workshop outside Bangkok in June 2015. I was asked to facilitate.

Since NRC was interested in knowing how stress and communication, as well as Gestalt interventions, are experienced by the advisers, and I wanted to contribute to research on this topic, I decided also to carry out a study.

Research questions and methods

Since 2007, I have had various contracts with NRC as a human rights lawyer and social scientist. In parallel, I have trained to become a Gestalt therapist at the Norwegian Gestalt Institute. This is part of my background, the background for the request from NRC, and a background that influenced my facilitation of the workshop and this study.

This study has two interlinked research questions: what are the important stress and communication issues experienced by a group of humanitarian workers? To what extent – and how – can Gestalt-based workshop sessions address stress and communication issues experienced by humanitarian workers?

To answer these I have carried out a mixed-methods case study. The main data source is the twenty-one advisers participating in the workshop. They are seventeen women and four men, of various ages and nationalities, and with varied humanitarian experience. Everyone gave informed consent to the study. I took notes before – as part of my preparations, I spoke with NRC and a few of the advisers – and during the workshop. In line with Gestalt and qualitative research principles, the notes were based on my awareness of myself, the advisers and the situation as a whole (Brown, 1996). Often clients and participants report something other than what therapists or trainers themselves think is important (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005; McLeod, 2010). In this paper, I take the survey responses of the advisers themselves as a starting point while drawing on my notes, existing theory and research in the discussion of these.

Immediately at the end of the workshop NRC gathered responses from advisers through Survey Monkey (first survey). Advisers were asked to rank the sessions. There was also the option of adding comments. Nineteen out of twenty-one participants completed the whole or parts of the survey. The survey with results is on file with NRC.

In addition, I designed a survey that NRC sent out to the advisers three months later (second survey). This was also done through Survey Monkey. It was more open and unstructured. Advisers were asked to identify and rank what they, in their work and personal life, experience as the three most important stress factors, ways of coping, factors disturbing/limiting effective communication, and factors facilitating effective communication. They were also asked how – if at all – they experience connections between communication, self-care, and stress. With regards to the workshop itself, they were asked what experience(s) in retrospect stood out as particularly important from the workshop as a whole and then from the specific session on communication; to what extent and how the experience(s) from the workshop had been helpful in their work and personal life since the workshop; and what – if any – synergies they experienced between the communication session, the self-care sessions and the group debriefing.

I closed the second survey six months after the workshop. Ten advisers had responded. Low response rates are among the most common and difficult problems in survey research (Trochim, 2006). Possible reasons for the relatively low response rate in this case may include the time that had passed since the workshop, advisers feeling it was no longer so relevant, advisers travelling or not on assignment, the questions in this second survey being more open-ended and thus requiring more of the respondents, and respondents lacking the will to participate in the research that was first expressed at this point. Due to confidentiality dictating that few personal data were asked for, it is difficult and unethical to determine who completed the survey and how representative they are. The results and discussion must be read with this in mind. However, considered in combination with the first survey results and my own notes, they are still useful in shedding light on our topic. I have the full survey with results on file.

In the analysis and presentation, I have given priority to what advisers reported as important, and/or responses that were repeated by several advisers. It should be noted that over 90% of respondents in the first survey rated the daily mindfulness sessions as excellent or good. In the following, however, I will focus on the communication and debriefing sessions. I have attempted to make sense of the survey results based on existing research and theory as well as my own notes. The advisers and NRC have in turn had a chance to comment on a draft paper. Thus, I hope that the research process itself has been in line with the dialogic approach of contemporary Gestalt practice.

Stress and communication – a starting point

Stress, according to the Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary (2016), can be defined as 'a state of mental tension and worry caused by problems in your life, work, etc.', 'something that causes strong feelings of worry or anxiety' or 'physical force or pressure'. The word is used to describe a cause (the last alternatives) and a reaction (the first alternative). The biologist Hans Selye (1936; 1956) has been central in developing our current understanding. All animals have certain physiological reactions when faced with something overwhelming and threatening. Fight and flight – with *inter alia* increased heart rate and stress hormones – have been necessary for our survival. However, some people experience certain phenomena as so challenging that they become chronically stressed and develop health issues, including depression and heart diseases (Cohen and Miller, 2007; Kroese, 2010).

Recent studies show the effectiveness of Gestalt interventions with stressed populations, ranging from teachers in South Africa (Horn, 2009), to tsunami-survivors on Sri Lanka (Perera-Diltz, Laux and Toman, 2012) and veterans with PTSD in Iran (Nazari, Mohammadi and Nazeri, 2014). There is a paucity of Gestalt research specifically on humanitarian workers and stress, however. Other studies have shown that this is a group of people with particular challenges and coping strategies (Antares Foundation, 2012; Welton-Mitchell, 2013). Humanitarian organisations are increasingly concerned about the impact of stress on their staff as well as on the people they work with and the wider environment (ibid.).

Communication, according to the Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary (2016), is 'the act or process of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information or to express your ideas, thoughts, feelings, etc., to someone else'. This definition largely reflects the transmission model or standard view of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). According to this, communication involves a sender, information or content, noise that may interfere, and a receiver.

A field theoretical stance is one of the fundamentals in contemporary Gestalt (Parlett, 2005; Yontef, 2009; Wollants, 2012). This involves looking at the total situation, which consists of mutually influencing forces and relationships, and understanding that any

change in the situation – focused on a person or an environmental factor – affects the whole. Person and environment are intimately and dynamically linked. Moreover, the environment is not any objective outside world, but rather a phenomenal world, the world as experienced by a particular person. Stress depends not merely on the inherent characteristics of a person, nor on some environmental factor, but on the relationship between what is perceived and the perceiver. Stress occurs when an environmental factor is perceived as overwhelming and threatening by the person in a concrete situation here and now. Similarly, communication, when appreciated as a field phenomenon, cannot simply be seen as a one-way information process initiated by a sender and with another person as a more or less passive receiver, but is mutually influenced and co-created by both people and their environments.

In the following, existing research as well as various Gestalt concepts – including field, contact, dialogue, awareness, and experimentation – will be drawn upon in the discussion of the survey results. With regards to Gestalt theory, I assume some prior basic knowledge. As will become clear from the references, I particularly draw on contemporary, relational Gestaltists.

Survey findings: a relational dimension of stress and communication

It should be noted that the second survey was carried out some time after the workshop and answers are probably – hopefully, even – different from what they would have been had the survey been carried out prior to the workshop. Advisers may, for example, have become more aware of certain stress factors in their lives and see other connections.

Humanitarian workers may directly experience, witness or regularly hear about events such as bombing, earthquakes or other disasters. Existing research identifies such experiences and a lack of security as common stress factors (Antares Foundation, 2012; Welton-Mitchell, 2013). However, it is also clear from this research that much of the commonly felt stress has to do with a social/relational dimension, including team conflict, poor leadership, and being away from family and friends.

This social/relational dimension stands out in the survey as well. On the one hand, advisers report 'loneliness' and 'being far away from my family' as stress factors. On the other hand, there are difficult relationships in their current environment such as 'bad relation with supervisor/staff' and 'having to deal with people who do not support our field of work'.

An anecdote from the workshop can further illustrate this. One of the advisers told me she had been in this line of work for many years and would be fine even when her office trembled due to bombs nearby. In violent contexts, however, colleagues often also become violent in their communication. Now she was dealing with a verbally abusive boss, who shouted and publicly humiliated people in the office. The adviser described her as 'a tsunami' and herself as 'a little mouse'. She started having stomach ache and difficulties sleeping, and finally had to take sick leave.

Historically, the bulk of staff care has focused on interventions after acute events, such as a bombing or natural hazard-related disaster, but in recent years it has become clear that chronic, relational stress can be just as debilitating and tends to be more pervasive (Welton-Mitchell, 2013).

A social/relational dimension also stands out in advisers' coping strategies. Five out of ten mention talking, or otherwise spending time, with family and/or friends. Others include more general phrases that may also relate to this dimension such as 'networking' and 'communicating'. Again, this is in line with existing research, with 91% in one major study reporting that they rely on social activities (Curling and Simmons, 2010, in Welton-Mitchell, 2013, p. 29). Longitudinal research with humanitarians indicates that social support is associated with lower levels of distress and greater life satisfaction (Cardozo et al., 2012, in Welton-Mitchell, 2013, p. 30).

Factors that most disturb or limit effective advising/communication include 'poor leadership', 'insensitive colleagues', 'intra-agency politics', 'aggressive verbal and non-verbal communication', 'incoherent verbal and non-verbal communication', 'lies' and 'dishonest people'. Several mention that their role or work is not well understood or appreciated. A few also report their own personal contributions as important. For example, one mentions 'my own defences'. Another, clearly appreciating the need for good relationships and their own role, writes, 'I tend to also not meet people if I don't have a very specific thing I want to discuss. This is a weakness as network and social time could reinforce relationships and make things easier when I do have something I would like to influence.'

Asked what facilitates effective advising/communication, many include factors such as 'good leadership' and 'strong network of support to try out ideas'. Some also highlight the process or relationship with those they are trying to influence. One person lists 'my personal qualities' as the most important factor: 'benevolent, soft, non-confrontational, open and non-judging, good listener'.

Asked explicitly how – if at all – they experience connections between communication, self-care, and stress, most of the advisers seem to experience some connections.

In sum, the advisers find a social/relational dimension to be crucial in the creation as well as reduction of stress and for effective communication. This fits well with the appreciation of relationships and social support in contemporary Gestalt (Hycner, 1985; Jacobs, 1989; Wheeler, 1991; Yontef, 1993; Parlett, 2005; Jacobs and Hycner, 2009; Wollants, 2012). While relational Gestaltists recognise the importance of the environment, an emphasis also remains on personal responsibility and response-ability (Yontef, 1993 and 2009; see also Perls, 1969). It is noteworthy that only some advisers seem to recognise their own contribution to stress and communication through their personal qualities and approaches. I will return to this point below.

Survey findings: 'There is a huge resistance to change'

On the first day, a Monday, I facilitated a 4.5-hour communication session. This was the session with the most varied ratings and responses. In the first survey, 16% rated the session as excellent, 66% as good, 5% as average, 5% as poor, and 5% as unacceptable.

From the survey responses on stress and communication in their lives generally, we already see that many advisers view others/the environment as significant challenges. From my own observations during the workshop as well, it seems that the perception for some is that they are primarily experts, and the challenge is how to convey their knowledge and change to others to become more in line with their vision, based on this knowledge. These others are seen as resistant to change, and difficult, and the challenge becomes how to break down the resistance. For this purpose, concrete tools and answers – from another expert –are needed, and this was an expectation from some advisers during the communication session. Their understanding of their own role, communication and change seems to be closer to the older sender–receiver paradigm in communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949) – in Gestalt terms also perhaps reflecting an I-It attitude rather than appreciation of I-Thou dialogue (Buber, 1937).

It is worth mentioning that the session had initially been described as 'communicating with impact and breaking down resistance' in the programme (possibly also contributing to frustrated expectations). After a conversation with me, NRC changed 'breaking down' to 'working with'. This is, of course, no minor change, but reflects a paradigm shift. Much of *Gestalt Therapy* (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951) concerns so-called contact 'resistances', 'disturbances' and 'interruptions'. According to more recent relational conceptualisations (Wheeler, 1991; Jørstad, 2002;

Wollants, 2012), a living person is always in contact with something or someone; rather than disturbances and interruptions in contact we have different ways of being in contact, various contact styles, including resistance; none of the styles is absolutely good or bad in itself ; and they can be understood as polarities, confluence being a possible counterpole to resistance, for example.

We can easily imagine stress and its effects resulting in various contact styles. For example, the physiological fight reaction can result in resistance; the physiological flight reaction can result in withdrawal; and scapegoating, which often increases with stress, is linked to projection. While a contact style always emerges here and now in a concrete relationship and situation, we each have our histories and are more familiar with certain styles than others. When faced with what is perceived as an overwhelming challenge, people become stressed and typically revert to their most familiar and basic styles.

Role play, exaggeration and reversal are typical Gestalt experiments (Korb, Gorrell and Van de Riet, 1989). A major part of the workshop session involved advisers experimenting in triads of adviser/oneself, difficult other and reflective observer. Everyone had a chance to play each role more than once. Some highlight these role plays in the second survey, writing that they gained perspective from seeing what other advisers did, as well as learnt by trying out something new, such as the reversal of what they normally would do. Asked in the second survey to what extent and how the workshop as a whole had been helpful in their work and personal life since the workshop, one person mentions that being aware of what is their 'natural style of communicating' and also trying other styles 'is not always successful … but has become part of my conscious toolbox'. This seems close to the goal of our experiments and Gestalt generally, namely increasing awareness (Yontef, 1993).

At one point while sharing experiences and reflections so far, we also talked explicitly about resistance. I mentioned that a metaphor that many of us live by is conversation as war, evident in language such as 'breaking down' another's 'resistance', 'defending' one's 'position' and 'winning' an argument (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). I encouraged the advisers to be aware of this and their own contribution to 'war'. With a relational view of resistance, we can appreciate that it may be that one person is pushing too much or too soon while another person is resisting – resistance being a possible stress response. Parlett writes, 'A provocative idea for therapists follows from the notion of reciprocal influence, namely that change in the client may be achieved by the therapist changing her or himself' (2005, p. 53). Something similar may apply

to the advisers as far as they are facilitators of change. I encouraged the advisers to try also experimenting with approaching the conversation in the role plays in a more dialogic way, more as dance than war metaphorically speaking, and to see what happens. In the second survey – as already mentioned – one adviser lists as a most important factor in communication, 'my personal qualities: benevolent, soft, non-confrontational, open and non-judging, good listener'. This seems to be closer to the metaphor of dancing and the Gestalt concept of dialogue – which can be considered a special form of contact (Jacobs, 1989; Yontef, 1998) – as involving inclusion and confirmation, presence, and a willingness to surrender to what emerges between the participants and letting oneself be changed in the process (ibid.). Yontef (2009) also highlights similar attitudes as important in a relational Gestaltist, including being respectful, humble, and compassionate.

At another point, I also introduced the idea that some styles – for example, resistance – may be 'shadows' or 'blind spots' (Zinker, 1977). We discussed what positive qualities resistance might have, including the importance of being able to say no and be clear about boundaries. I then encouraged them to also experiment with resistance in the role plays with awareness and perhaps even to exaggerate slightly. Later, when asked in the second survey about connections between communication, self-care and stress, one adviser writes, 'When I feel confident in saying no and setting boundaries, I feel less stressed'. This view of resistance as one among many contact styles that may be appropriate in certain situations, is in line with contemporary Gestalt. The survey response can also be appreciated in light of polarity theory and increased flexibility: when able to say no, one can also truly say yes; when able to resist, one can also truly accept (Zinker, 1977). With this increased awareness and flexibility, including the possibility of saying no, one may feel less overwhelmed and stressed in various situations. Also, when acted out with awareness of oneself and the environment, saying no does not necessarily increase stress in others/the environment. It may even have the opposite effect: it may be clarifying to others that one is clear about one's actual needs; it may also invite others to be clear about their own needs. Such authenticity is an important quality of dialogue (Jacobs, 1989; Yontef, 1998).

I encouraged the advisers to continue aware experimentation with communication after the session and throughout the workshop. Later, mid-week, I facilitated a conversation between the advisers and the Steering Committee. There were tensions, but my impression was that overall it became a true dialogue. In the second survey, advisers mention this as an important, positive experience. On the other hand, several advisers raise issues relating to communication between the advisers themselves, including 'a confrontative style of communication' and 'entrenched, non-progressive positions' of colleagues. One person writes, 'I find there is a huge resistance to change, people find it very difficult to appreciate anything new. I guess this could be related to the same experience we face when we try to negotiate working on gender. My only concern is, are we becoming bullies?' Clearly, it is important to work on communication internally among the advisers. Good communication among colleagues and others is important for stress relief, as suggested in the section above. It could also have transferable value in terms of communication in the various humanitarian settings to which they are deployed.

While writing this section, I have myself felt some resistance. I have procrastinated, worked on other things, not wanted to go into this. One way I have dealt with it is to not force myself but take time and also talk to others about the topic. Also interesting – and in accordance with the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970) – is the fact that once I became more aware of the phenomenon, I felt less resistance and could finish the section. Admittedly, it has been tempting for me to dismiss some advisers as difficult and resistant – at least partly projection from my side – and want to defend myself and Gestalt. If I take field theory seriously, it is necessary to explore my role and contribution and the overall situation (Yontef, 2009). Considering that relational Gestalt belongs to a radically new paradigm for many, it is not surprising that there was some resistance among advisers. Resistance may occur because a situation is not ripe for change, for example because there is not enough support for change (Parlett, 2005). I may have pushed too much and too soon for some. Moreover, the communication session was rather short and on the first day of the workshop. This could mean that there was still insufficient support in the form of trust and willingness to experiment. Such factors could be taken into account in a later workshop.

Survey findings: 'Verify with the other person if you understood correctly'

Asked in the second survey about the most important experience from the communication session, one person writes, 'It is always best to verify with the other person if you understood correctly.' Before the role plays in triads referred to in the section above, I guided the advisers in experiments based on the 'meaning exercises' of Satir (1988, p. 71): one person says a true statement (e.g. 'it is hot here') and the other asks questions in order to clarify the meaning (e.g. 'do you mean you are uncomfortable?', 'do you mean

that you want me to get you some water?', etc.), with the first person only being allowed to respond 'yes' or 'no'. Participants swapped roles and partners, but kept the same true statement. It was meant to increase awareness of our own assumptions and how easily we misunderstand others based on these, how many different assumptions different people might have, and also how attempting to understand – including by checking out our assumptions and interpretations – can build trust and improve communication. As such, this was an exercise focused on two contact styles, namely projection and the checking out of assumptions, a possible counterpole. Seeking to understand the other, and respecting the other's answer, also made it an exercise in dialogue.

Afterwards we sat in a circle with the group as a whole to share experiences and reflect. One person said that she didn't feel the need to ask clarifying and follow-up questions to someone when, for example, they say that they are feeling well. Or more precisely: this was what I heard her say. As she continued talking, I felt my heart beat increase, I got warmer and tenser, and I noticed that I was not hearing her well due to my own loud thoughts such as 'she didn't like the experiment; I'm not a good facilitator', etc. Rather than get caught up in a stress reaction, I then tried to model aware and authentic/congruent communication, self-disclosed, and asked to check out an assumption with her, namely whether she meant that she found the experiment unhelpful. She seemed genuinely surprised and said that was not what she meant. A few others had had the same interpretation as me, and the exchange served as a good here-and-now illustration of how checking out assumptions can improve communication. With the permission of this person, I later referred to the incident as a learning experience for everyone. When we are in an uncomfortable and stressful situation – such as I was feeling with this adviser before checking out my assumption – our awareness often narrows and we start seeing the other person as difficult. With awareness and checking out, we may end up elsewhere. Again, rather than having to 'break down' resistance or ourselves becoming resistant, we may sometimes get further when conversation is not understood as a war against a difficult other but rather a dance or dialogue.

A similar point was made when another person seated in the circle said something along the lines of 'I often hear people say "gender is not important"; what use is there in trying to further understand or clarify that?' I asked her to take on the role of one of these difficult others here and now, to try to sit and be like this person, and invited other advisers to check out possible assumptions they might have. Someone asked, 'Do you mean that you personally don't think gender is important?' Eventually, we did get more information,

including that the difficult other – as understood and acted out in this group – personally did think gender was important. This was contrary to the assumptions that some had prior to checking them out, including the adviser who had raised the issue in the first place and was now acting out this difficult other. The latter point is also in line with research indicating that there can be increased understanding and empathy for a difficult other when acting out their role in, for example, Chairwork (Kellogg, 2015). This contrasts with typical stress responses such as decreased empathy (Martin et al., 2015), scapegoating, and other critical projections. While there may still be power differences, resistance, and other challenges, we see that awareness, checking out assumptions, experimentation, and empathy may be helpful in dealing with stress and improving communication.

Survey findings: 'Sharing helps repair the despair'

On Wednesday, I facilitated three voluntary 1.5-hour group debriefing sessions. In the first survey, 50% of respondents rated these as excellent, 37% as good, and 12% as poor.

Due to the short time available for each session, they had to be relatively structured. I opened by asking for consent to confidentiality, which may have helped build trust. Then I explained that each participant had the opportunity to talk about something unfinished, difficult, or something else that they had learnt from and was important for them here and now. Each person had around seven minutes to tell their story, focusing on what happened/is happening, how they felt/feel and how they dealt/deal with the situation. I encouraged everyone else to listen actively and especially be aware of areas of recognition. Then I opened for feedback. In line with relational Gestalt principles, the group as a whole worked as the debriefer rather than me taking an overly active role and individualistic approach (Zinker, 1977; Feder and Frew, 2008; Jacobs and Hycner, 2009).

In the comments box in the first survey, one person writes, 'I didn't think I would like this but I found it to be the highlight of the workshop as we shared a common frustration and fear in our work and I bonded with those I thought I had nothing in common with'. Another writes, 'This was an excellent session as it provided an opportunity to not just share the problems but also build trust amongst the members of the group. It was clear that problems faced are often the same and sharing helps repair the despair.' In the second survey there are similar responses.

These responses are in line with existing research. Normalisation of phenomena such as stress, fear and frustration is commonly highlighted as one of the

major benefits of group therapy (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). This may also involve an increased appreciation of the existential condition of imperfection and may decrease shame and increase connection. Rather than feeling alone and shameful, it is possible to realise that we all share this condition and that it in fact connects us. This can be healing (see also Wheeler, 1997), and in the second survey one adviser describes the session as having provided 'the space I needed to start a process of "healing" and "de-stressing"'. More generally, as mentioned previously, longitudinal research with humanitarians indicates that social support is associated with better health (Cardozo et al., 2012, in Welton-Mitchell, 2013, p. 30).

Another person writes in the second survey, 'Good to know what people have experienced and how we can better support ourselves and each other'. This is also in line with research and theory highlighting the sharing of information as a benefit of groups (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005). I encouraged each person while telling their story to say something about how they had coped with the situation, and others to listen and see whether they could find something good to take away from the story and mention. In this respect, I stretched the concept of feedback (Zinker, 1977; Skottun, 1998), allowing listeners to include something they explicitly liked about the other's way of coping. That way each person could find the inspiration they wanted from others' stories for themselves. This is a very different experience from being advised or advising others on the basis of one's own experience. The person telling their story may also have felt supported by others and felt new appreciation for how they had coped. Some had not initially seen their coping strategy as any good – and this may have been an additional source of shame and stress – and seemed genuinely happy when they got positive feedback. This was the case of 'the small mouse' encountering 'the tsunami' of a boss. When she got some recognition that being a mouse – being small and even withdrawing if need be – might be the right response in some stressful situations, she seemed to grow there and then in front of our eyes. As such, it was also an illustration of the paradoxical theory of change (Beisser, 1970).

Possible reasons for the difference in responses, ratings and comments to these debriefing sessions and the communication session may include those already mentioned, including timing and that the communication session challenged more entrenched notions of change and their roles as experts and advisers. In addition, while the communication session was compulsory and involved more experimentation, the debriefing was voluntary and more structured.

As already mentioned, social support stands out in advisers' reported coping strategies. This is in line with

other studies (Curling and Simmons, 2010, in Welton-Mitchell, 2013, p. 29). Not surprisingly, however, one study concludes that humanitarians only turn to a colleague when there is trust (Welton-Mitchell, 2013). The confidential and structured group debriefing may have helped in this respect, judging by the quotes above. This could also have an impact on internal communication more generally, and improved internal communication could in turn be stress-relieving and make advisers more open to turning to each other for social support. Again, stress and communication are intimately linked.

Final remarks and recommendations

In this paper I have addressed two research questions: what are the important stress and communication issues experienced by a group of humanitarian workers? To what extent – and how – can Gestalt-based workshop sessions address stress and communication issues experienced by humanitarian workers?

While the surveys reveal a variety of stress and communication factors in the work and lives of the advisers, a social/relational dimension stands out. Depending on the quality of the relationship, they experience this as crucial in the creation or relief of their own stress as well as in limiting or facilitating communication with others. Stress, self-care, and communication are experienced as intimately linked. These findings are in line with existing research as well as key concepts and approaches in relational Gestalt.

While the voluntary and structured debriefing in groups got mostly positive responses such as 'sharing helps repair the despair', the communication session got more varied ratings and responses. Resistance became a figural phenomenon in the latter. This may be related to expectations, role understandings, and views of change and communication among advisers, as well as other field conditions, including lacking trust and little time available for this more experimental session.

Some advisers primarily see themselves as experts and others/the environment as problems. In certain situations, such as humanitarian crises, people can easily become stressed and their communication more violent, which in turn can contribute to stress among more people and more violent communication. As one participant put it, 'My only concern is, are we becoming bullies?' This cycle can be broken, however, and we had some examples of this in the communication session, debriefing groups and elsewhere during the workshop. With sufficient support and awareness some advisers even experienced empathy, positive feelings and stress relief in situations with a person they initially thought they had nothing in common with or even saw as a difficult other. Relational Gestalt may hold great

promise for stress and communication on various scales, and ultimately help in creating a more peaceful and just world.

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