



Beyond the Glass Barriers: Empathy and Humanitarian Action

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Picture this: You are charged with protecting your soldiers on foreign soil. Your job is to keep them safe as they do their job of keeping everyone else safe. Suddenly, you see something moving: a child and his mother. You are not sure if they are a threat. Your finger is on the trigger, ready to pull it. You are agonizing over whether or not you should shoot. But then you see the mother giving the child something: a hand grenade he is ready to throw at your charge. What do you do? The mother and the child are civilians, but what becomes of them when they are holding a grenade? Are they still civilians? When you are not sure what category the person targeting you fits into, what do you do?

That was the scene I was haunted by as I read the article by Mansour (2008). It is a scene from the movie *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014) where the lead character, a sniper protecting US troops in Iraq in 2003 against Iraqi bullets, is agonizing over whether or not to shoot a child and his mother who are carrying a hand grenade and are about to throw it at the American soldiers. So, he shoots and kills the child then the mother as she picks up the grenade from her dead son's hand, but then comes the shame. He refuses to celebrate saving his charge. He feels guilty, and over the next months, the guilt is only exacerbated and develops into PTSD. Such are the dilemmas aid workers have to struggle with on a daily basis: How do you distance yourself from the scene? How do you make sure you do not break down and become a burden to those you should be helping? And how do you make sure you do not distance yourself too much from the scene that you lose your human touch and the beneficiaries become objects that you can even

exploit and make money off of? Such are the questions Mansour (2008) addresses in his article. He wrote it after the bombing of a UN building in Baghdad in 2003 and the death of over 20 of his colleagues. The building was not the only thing that came down that day, however, he explained. The wall he had put up to shield himself from the tragedies he bore witness to as an aid worker came tumbling down too. He started feeling again and had to take some time off work.

He explained how aid workers who are confronted with such scenes on a daily basis usually either turn into complete robots who have no feelings in order to be able to carry on their work or they become vulnerable but are even more motivated to make a difference, and then there are those who are both and that is what he endorses. He believes that aid workers should strike a balance between empathizing with and distancing themselves from the beneficiaries so that they neither break down and become a burden nor turn into profiteers taking advantage of the situation. I have to agree with Mansour that it is empathy that makes us human; should we lose it, we turn into another version of those who started those conflicts, and that we need to strike that balance. We need to channel that frustration into change and ways to help, but I also believe the world needs both kinds of workers. We need the aid workers who will empathize; they will work with passion and help the cause. As long as they feel, they will be dedicated.

Then again, we need those humanitarian aid workers who will do their job but not get bogged down with their feelings. They will be able to carry on when their fellow workers get emotional and break down. They will still bring something different to the table; they will take those pictures of dead children and not be too emotional to publish them. Those will be the pictures that tell the rest of the world what is going on in that forsaken part of it. I understand how there will always be that fear that the workers might exploit the beneficiaries, but I am beginning to think that the beneficiaries have nothing that can be exploited if they have nothing.

I noticed that Mansour (2008) emphasized how the disasters were man-made, but would it have made a difference as to how the aid workers felt toward the beneficiaries? Do we feel more frustrated when the disaster is man-made? Do we feel partially responsible or guilty for belonging to the same species as the culprit and/or not being able to prevent or fix the situation? This is reminiscent of what actress Alyssa Milano once confided. She said that after being a national spokesperson for UNICEF's "Trick or Treat" campaign and visiting disaster-stricken regions, she came back depressed. She felt guilty that she could not help everyone and that she got to go back to her luxurious life and leave the beneficiaries suffering.

I understood that it was more the feeling of guilt, of not being able to help, of not changing the outcome, that hurt her the most. It is that feeling that might traumatize aid workers: the fact that there are so many people left unassisted. I have never been that close to human suffering, but if I ever were, I would try to go in with the mindset that what is happening is not my fault. I would remind myself that it is not in my power to change the causes of the conflict, but that helping one person is better than not helping at all; it will make a difference. I would focus on what is done, rather than what still needs to be done.

References

- Eastwood, C. (Director). (2014). *American Sniper* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.
- Mansour, K. (2008). Beyond the Glass Barriers: Empathy and Humanitarian Action. *Al-Insani ICRC*.