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Humanitarian Interventions and Psychosocial Training Programs
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Abstract

Humanitarian intervention are international endeavours often responding to a human induced crisis. Literature exists on the ethics, legalities and history of humanitarian intervention. Although, there are a great deal of publications on humanitarian intervention including guidelines and best practice, and evidence-based research and practice in the field, there is a paucity of work examining teaching and training of humanitarian professionals. The article discusses the need for specialist training aimed at developing humanitarian professionals and more specifically psychosocial practitioners in the field. A discussion of the role and the importance of decolonisation within the sector and training programs is also presented. The paper then introduces a distance learning training delivered at the University of East London, informed by psychological theory and practice, aimed at supporting students with the development of multidisciplinary skills and competencies for working in the sector. The paper also examines various key components of the program,

Introduction to Humanitarian Intervention Training Programs

Humanitarian intervention or assistance is seen as an endeavour concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of others (Merriam-Webster, 2021.). Whilst this action has existed throughout history, our modern-day understanding of this can be located within the Western, particularly the European encounter with war and natural disasters (Davey, Borton & Foley, 2013). In its early European conceptions, humanitarian interventions took place in response to a human-induced crisis (e.g. conflict) where one state acted against another, “explicitly declaring its objective to intercede in how another state is operating, usually to prevent breaches of human rights” (Alhakim, Berdondini & Marshall, 2021, p.542). Since then, the scope and complexity of humanitarian activities has developed to include a diverse range of actions spanning the globe (e.g. Ager & Loughry, 2004; Davey, Borton & Foley, 2013). These activities can include, “responding to needs in situations of conflict or natural disasters, supporting displaced populations in acute and protracted crises, risk reduction and preparedness, early recovery, livelihoods support, conflict resolution and peace-building” (Davey, Borton & Foley, 2013, p. 1).

As time progressed the sector saw the development of more complex and exceedingly politicised post disaster contexts, requiring today’s humanitarian professionals to work under more challenging conditions and for longer periods of time. This triggered a need for workers in the sector, to acquire a range of multidisciplinary, specialist skills and capabilities. Thereafter, necessitating the need for mapping specific competencies for those who want to work in the sector and dedicated training that aids in the development of these skills (Walker, Hein, Russ, et al., 2010; Walker & Russ, 2010; Burkle, Walls, Heck et al. 2013). By 2010, 118 training programs were recorded in the sector (Walker & Russ, 2010). While this made it more possible to train and enter the field of humanitarian work, Walker and Russ (2010), noted that these programs were inconsistent and lacked standardisation, contributing to the ongoing gaps in training professionals in the field. In addition, issues of neo-colonialism and power and privilege are becoming increasingly recognised and so the need

to decolonise mental health and rethink ways of working. As such devising a training program that incorporates new ways of working is important.

Decolonisation of Humanitarian Aid and Training Programs

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the ‘western gaze’ across disciplines (Pailey, 2019). This concept indicated a process where societies and communities were looked at, and interpreted through a western-centred lens, where whiteness and western culture were, and continue to be, designated as the frame of reference for progress and development. Movements such as Black Lives Matters (Lebron, 2017) and the recent global racial uprising set off by the murder of George Floyd during his arrest by Minneapolis police officers on May 25 2020, continue to raise attention to concepts like ‘white saviourism’, ‘white supremacy’ and colonisation of thought (Fanon, 1970; Bhambra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu, 2018; Cooney-Petro, 2019). While a process of change, in terms of decolonizing interventions, was already starting to become part of an international discourse in several sectors, including psychology (Dupuis-Rossi, & Reynolds, 2018), the most recent global uprising has particularly forced many into “a racial reckoning” and began to rapidly expand this process into international policies, research and education in many other areas, including humanitarian aid (Peace Direct, 2021).

Alongside the aforementioned movements, the need to address power dynamics inherently existing in international humanitarian aid and development, continue to be strengthened by both failures and ethical oversights that have occurred during major international disasters (Burkle, Walls, Heck et al. 2013). Of late, several activists and organisations have been asking for ‘localisation’ of efforts in the sector as a solution to problems brought about by these existing power dynamics in the field. However, despite several attempts to “shift the power towards local actors”, Peacedirect (2021, p. 8) noted the failure of such efforts to address “deep-rooted, systemic issues that exist”. They continue to suggest that, “the incongruence of the aid sector’s commitments to localisation without engaging substantively with race or the sector’s colonial legacy is [...] untenable.” Therefore, it is pivotal to support a process of decolonising aid.

The term ‘decolonising’ involves a variety of meanings, interpretations, aims and strategies. Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu (2018) suggest that it has “two key referents”. First, “it is a way of thinking” whereby colonialism, empire and racism are seen as key drivers in determining the world today. Second, they propose, it “offer(s) an alternative way of thinking about the world and alternative forms of political praxis” (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu, 2018, p.8) . What this means and how it translates into practice is still contested within various settings (Bhambra, Gebrial & Nisancioglu, 2018; Peacedirect, 2021). While it is not within the scope of this article to speak about the many tasks falling under the umbrella term ‘decolonising/decolonisation’, we would like to affirm and acknowledge the importance of this endeavour.

The University of East London, alongside other Higher Education Institutes, have made a commitment to decolonising the curricula and engage to ensure that our practices are inclusive of all cultures and forms of knowledge, whilst also reflecting this in our teaching and in research procedures (Charles, 2019). We have begun doing so, firstly, by recognising the colonial history of psychology (Dupuis-Rossi, & Reynolds, 2018) and humanitarian aid (Peacedirect, 2021) and then by introducing and integrating literature written by Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, into our teaching material and content. As well as, offering

our students spaces to complete reflective and experiential tasks whilst considering their positionality (role as a practitioner and humanitarian worker), their worldview and the impact that this has on their work with others. Additionally, we have introduced lectures on ethical and cultural considerations in the sector and most recently, a module on Intercultural Counselling Practice was introduced. We acknowledge that this is the beginning of an ongoing process and therefore we have allocated space for monitoring and evaluating our work, to improve on and develop this undertaking further.

Education and Training in the Sector: WADEM recommendations

In 2003 the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine (WADEM), set up a working group to offer guidelines for education and training institutes within this field. In 2004, they published a paper, where they noted a range of concerns and recommendations regarding where the sector stands when it comes to the education of its workers. They suggested that it is unclear whether the current structures of education programs are meeting the needs of the sector. Thus, they argued that it is necessary to set up a platform for continuing and expanding the conversation relating to current programs that are viewed as “innovative” and seen as “exemplars” (WADEM, 2004, p.21). Additionally, the working group suggested that it would be beneficial to have the input of “kindred fields” who have developed standards and guidelines (such as medical, nurses and other health practitioners accredited courses) to serve as a model for programs within the sector.

The WADEM (2016) paper undoubtedly stressed the importance of expanding the ongoing conversation and research on training within the field. We have yet to see this conversation progress further since then, particularly when considering the status of training psychosocial workers in emergency contexts (Walker & Russ, 2010). With the intention of encouraging the progression of setting out guidelines and standards for training, we will introduce the master’s program in Humanitarian Intervention at the University of East London (UEL), which was set up in 2014. We hope that by writing about and evaluating this program, by way of example, we can begin to find the answers to some of the core issues regarding training of psychosocial humanitarian aid practitioners. We believe that Higher Education Institutes can play a vital role in meeting the current needs in the field and fostering this conversation (e.g. Walker & Russ, 2010).

The next part of the article will discuss the need for a distance learning training program specifically aimed at developing psychosocial practitioners’ knowledge and skills, which is informed by mental health theory and practice. The article will proceed to explore various key components of the program.

Training Informed by Psychological Theory and Practice

As well as offering aid and support, in the form of food and medicines, humanitarian interventions have also come to include psychological and psychosocial support. In 2007, with an inclusive process that benefitted from contributions from UN agencies, NGOs and Universities, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee,(IASC), Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Emergency Settings were developed. These Guidelines aim to plan, establish and coordinate a set of minimum multi-sectoral responses to protect, support and improve individual and communities’ mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in the midst of an emergency (IASC, 2007). Since the sector recognised the significance of mental health needs of communities’ post emergencies, it saw a rise in the

range of support offered under the umbrella of MHPSS. This included “the deployment of psychiatrists to emergencies, promotion of trauma counselling, establishment of supportive spaces for children, and longer-term community development and peace-building initiatives” (Rehberg, 2015, p.130).

The diversity of these initiatives, falling under the umbrella of MHPSS, brought into question their usefulness within the field. Wessells (2008), for example, noted that the need for ‘instant counsellors’ to deliver these programs gave rise to the presence of poorly trained psychosocial workers in some countries, post disasters. This, he noted, brought with it a host of concerns regarding the support offered to these communities, primarily, whether the workers are competent to provide this type of assistance. Following this critique, Wessells (2008) stated that, “inadequate training of counsellors in emergency-affected countries remains a common problem” (p.849) and organisations within the field continue to facilitate “short term training” while providing “little to no supervision and ongoing follow up support” (p.849). Tribe (2007) discussed how the concepts and methods of western counselling, psychology and psychiatry may not always be appropriate to radically different cultures and contexts, noting “Post-conflict and post-disaster psychosocial rehabilitation may depend in complex ways on local specifics and interact or not with biomedical notions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis and individual therapy. The relationship between a culture and its healing rituals is a complex one. Cultural, socio-political, existential and personal meanings, expressions and responses to civil war or traumatic events and their aftermath are likely to be mediated by each individual and the context in which they occur” (p.21). Thus psychosocial practitioners in humanitarian settings face a complex set of issues in addition to those of how power is positioned.

Other critiques of MHPSS programming highlights the varying tensions within the field. There are debates concerning the discourses informing these programs, whether information gained from one context could be applied elsewhere, whether the programmes pathologise human experience, lack a focus on the structural and wider issues faced by people in protracted emergencies and whether indigenous healing strategies should be prioritised (Wessells, 2008; Tribe, 2013; Rehberg, 2015;).

The critique and tensions mentioned, underline the intricacies of working as a professional offering mental health and psychosocial support within a humanitarian context. Additionally, they emphasise the need for practitioners with a unique set of skills; often bringing together, mental health practitioner and humanitarian field specific expertise. The American Psychological Association, APA (2021) set out several criteria for mental health professionals who would like to work in disaster affected regions. They stressed the need for practitioners to have previously worked outside their own sociocultural setting, have basic competence in some of the interventions covered within IASC guidelines, have an understanding of either community psychology or public health principles, have a good understanding of and ability to consult with local communities and mental health leaders, and with the affected population itself. The above, calls for longer-term and more sophisticated training for practitioners, that takes into account the various concerns and debates and blends mental health practice with humanitarian field specific skills (Wessells, 2008; Wessells, & van Ommeren, 2009).

As mentioned previously, the distance learning MSc Humanitarian Intervention course at UEL, was first introduced and validated in 2014, initially with the title International Humanitarian Psychosocial Interventions. This program brought together the expertise of a

range of clinicians who had previously worked as practitioners in their own fields and in humanitarian contexts. These professionals also had academic expertise, which meant they were involved in the development and delivery of varying programs at the university. Together this group of individuals, established this unique Post Graduate Academic course with a specific focus on psychosocial aspects of interventions for both beneficiaries and humanitarian workers alike. The course was and continues to be, informed by psychological theory, knowledge, research and practice.

The course intends to inform the practice of workers in the sector in several ways, for example – how emergencies can affect mental health and alter family, community and political systems, how best we can support international and national staff’s wellbeing during and post emergencies, how best to work with Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees and how to improve intergroup relations. In order to support future psychosocial practitioners further, the program team worked to implement the introduction of two new optional modules which began running in January 2022. These modules offer a foundation in counselling skills and mental health (with a specific view on how these can be applied within the humanitarian sector) and an understanding and working knowledge of intercultural counselling practices and processes including diverse idioms of distress, explanatory health models and help-seeking behaviours. The modules are informed by up to date theories, research findings and practices within the field of counselling and mental health and intend to support practitioners with developing an ability to apply these skills in one-to-one and group psychosocial programs.

The course was designed for a range of students, including – “Humanitarian aid workers who want to expand and deepen their knowledge into the psychosocial area of interventions (sometimes as a form of Continuing Professional Development); students who come from different backgrounds (including but not isolated to: psychological, legal and social disciplines) and want to start a new career in the humanitarian sector with a specific interest in the psychosocial dimension of humanitarian interventions” (Alhakim, Berdondini & Marshall, 2021, p.549).

Curriculum Design and Training Delivery of MSc Humanitarian Intervention

The MSc in Humanitarian Intervention at UEL was updated in 2019. The title of the course was reviewed and changed together with other modifications. In Spring 2021, there were further developments of the curriculum that will be described in more detail below.

The course is offered both as full time and part time and recruits students in September and January. It is delivered by distance learning, a unique and strong point of the program, which often attracts international students who are already working for humanitarian organizations. These students are located all over the globe, connecting from refugee camps (e.g., Calais, or Greece) to countries in war and conflict (e.g., Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mozambique, just to name some examples). Recently, we had an increase in the number of students who chose the course in order to make a drastic change in their career as new professionals to the sector of humanitarian interventions. The marked diversity of participants in each cohort can promote the development of a very stimulating learning environment which could in turn foster publication of cutting-edge research studies.

In January 2020 the course was approved by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (2020), a global learning initiative working in collaboration with a wide range of partners across the

humanitarian sector that regularly examines, approves and hosts more than 150 online training courses for humanitarian professionals working in the sector. Moreover, in July 2020, the program formally established a collaboration with Save The Children International, offering the possibility for students to expand their professional connections, to receive lectures from guests working with the organization, to find potential placement opportunities (although this is not a requirement of the course) and an opportunity to participate in collaborative research projects.

The curriculum is delivered by video-recorded lectures, integrated with guided reading, knowledge-based activities with feedback and online discussions. Practical skills are developed through individual and group activities with feedback and research skills-based activities.

The aims of the MSc Humanitarian Intervention program is to give students the opportunity to:

1. Promote awareness of psychosocial aspects within any field of humanitarian work internationally.
2. Raise awareness of the different contexts that affect psychosocial well-being and access to appropriate services.
3. Introduce students to different types of interventions, while recognising that most of the services provided through humanitarian agencies are delivered in response to crises or emergencies, are time limited and rely on the engagement of local populations. Intervention skills include those of engagement, development of trust, facilitation, enabling and identification of a process by which information can be accessed, shared and evaluated.
4. Help build students' capacity to make successful, responsible and useful contributions in the humanitarian field or the third sector through greater awareness of the implications of different contexts and the use of psychosocial interventions.

As explained earlier, the program covers various aspects of psychosocial interventions related to different groups, these include beneficiaries, humanitarian workers, volunteers, staff, managers, partner organisations and stakeholders, all of whom require safety, security and good psychosocial support in order to facilitate the successful completion and evaluation of projects internationally.

The learning outcomes of the course have been designed on a competency-based and skills specific framework to equip students with a multidisciplinary and trans-discipline knowledge, measurable by correspondent assessments. The competencies, identified as core to the training, are based on recognised key skills within the field and following on from previous studies, such as the Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELHRA) report (Johnson et al., 2013).

Knowledge

- Demonstrate a systematic understanding and critical awareness of the key assumptions underlying differing approaches to international humanitarian work in disparate social, cultural and organisational contexts, and the problems within these.
- Demonstrate originality in the application of knowledge relating to how contextual factors influence people's access to and take up of a variety of resources and opportunities that influence their wellbeing; and problems related to these.

- Demonstrate a systematic understanding and critical awareness of the key assumptions underlying differing approaches to engaging with and delivering psychosocial Interventions.

Thinking skills

- Critically evaluate the significance of structural inequalities and the repetition and reinforcement of discrimination and disempowerment at individual, relational and organisational levels.
- Critically evaluate the way organisational and group factors influence organisational development and culture.

Subject-Based Practical skills

- Exhibit the ability to provide interventions within a system with complex issues.
- Demonstrate sound judgements in the absence of complete data within the intervention.
- Communicate their conclusions clearly to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Skills for life and work (general skills)

- Deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively involving different contexts in their work internationally.

The assessments for the course have been designed to offer a variety of ways to demonstrate the learning outcomes detailed above. Students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge through a critical understanding of the theories and different intervention models presented and discussed during the lectures through coursework assignments. Other learning outcomes, such as thinking and practical skills are assessed by project work where students are asked to design and present proposals for psychosocial intervention programs in different contexts. It is interesting to notice that currently 100% of our students who were working in humanitarian contexts, had their proposals accepted and put in practice by their employer at their workplace.

Students can also opt-in to take research specific modules, where they learn relevant and essential knowledge and skills related to designing, carrying out and writing up research studies undertaken in humanitarian contexts. As a part of the delivery of the course and the development of learning, students are also expected to engage with live reflective groups and experiential activities that foster self-awareness and the capacity to develop a critical voice.

The course offers several core and optional modules such as *Psychological Aspects of Humanitarian Intervention; Assessing, Planning and Intervening During and After Disaster and Conflict; Individual Group and Organisational Support for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees*. In response to students' requests, two additional optional modules (mentioned above) have been added: 1) Foundation Counselling Skills and 2) Intercultural Counselling Practice and Processes. These offer the possibility to professionals within the field to be introduced to the world of mental health practice and foster their skills through clinical sessions with each other. The second module focusing on intercultural counselling is an important addition to the content of the course curriculum, as it allows students to engage with the exploration and the reflection of ethical issues and cultural sensitivity related to psychosocial counselling in different international contexts.

The course is constantly evaluated by students at the end of each term and through regular course committee meetings with representatives from each cohort and university members of staff. This process of regular consultation with students and evaluation of all aspects of the course is extremely important as it allows a constant process of improvement and advancement of content, materials, assessment and forms of delivery. In the academic year 2020-21, for example, all contents of the core and optional modules have been updated with relevant information and data related to the recent global pandemic of Covid-19. The two new optional modules added in 2021-22 are another example of this process of continuous growth and improvement of the program.

Thus far, the main challenge encountered with regards to the delivery of this course, has been to encourage and foster the engagement of students in live group discussions and forums. The development of a network of professionals and the exchange of experiences and reflections within the student body is very important, particularly as this is a distance learning course (Alhakim, Berdondini and Marshall, 2021; Bollettino & Bruderlein, 2008). The introduction of Microsoft Teams, in September 2019, improved students' participation in live events, group discussions and online forums, however, the engagement in this element of the course remains an aspect that needs further development. The possible factors that contribute to this challenge seem to mainly relate to the different geographical locations of students, their life commitments - the unpredictability of their deployment and movement due to their work context and often the extreme pressure and demands of this. The recent COVID-19 has also impacted the students in a number of ways, as a result making it difficult for many to be fully engaged and present in all aspects of the course.

Students' most recent feedback on the program

Below are some of the feedback students' representatives reported during the most recent course committee meetings (2021-22) which echo some of the points discussed in the previous section:

- *The course content is stimulating and useful. We have also found that we have been able to implement what we learn immediately.*
- *The flexibility of the course, being studied by Distance Learning, is a great benefit as we are working alongside our study*
- *The readings are helpful for both assessment but also for continuous study and application in the field*
- *Skills developed are helping us with our work in the field*
- *The course is rich in content, the video materials are a good preparation for assessment and the teaching is of high quality.*
- *Qualitative Research module – the progression between theory and practice made this course exciting and the teaching and support is excellent*
- *There is not much interaction in the forum between students and it would be useful to introduce more opportunities for students in the same cohort and across cohorts to interact and work together.*

Conclusion

This paper was intended to discuss the area of humanitarian interventions, and in particular psychosocial programming, with a specific focus on the aspects related to the training programs available for humanitarian workers. In exploring needs, challenges and areas of future development for this sector, it was important to mention the lack of standardisation

across the existing international programs and the recent emergence of a process of decolonization of the curricula. In order to give a practical example, we presented the distance learning MSc Humanitarian Intervention course offered by the School of Psychology at the University of East London. The commitment to continuously evaluate, update and develop content, materials and methods of delivery in accordance with the most recent research data and international policies in the sector is at the core of this innovative course. We discussed, amongst other examples, the introduction of two new modules that have the specific aim of offering students an insight into certain aspects of psychosocial and counselling interventions such as working one-on-one and with groups, cultural awareness, ethical dilemmas, and the importance of considering intercultural elements in the provision of therapeutic interventions.

There are still a lot to examine, assess and improve when devising training programs for humanitarian workers and as such, this is an exciting time for the institutions and the organizations that offer these programs. The field is complex, where interdisciplinary and intercultural dimensions might contribute to explain various aspects of humanitarian crisis and inform appropriate, effective and sustainable interventions. One step forward could be to enhance and coordinate more international collaborations among different institutions and agencies for the co-creation of humanitarian training models and their delivery. These collaborations should also engage in interdisciplinary research in order to maintain a critical and expansive view towards the assessment and evaluation of these models and towards the continuous development of innovative forms of training for humanitarian workers.

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