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*Issues in Professional Development*

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**Manifestation of Stress and Its Impact  
on the Humanitarian Work of the ICRC Delegate**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Beyond the public's occasional glimpse of the work carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) lies an untold story of human vulnerability that is largely unresearched. The informed public generally admires ICRC's 125-year history of caring for the war wounded, of protecting the lives of prisoners of war, and of providing relief to civilian populations affected by armed conflicts. The even-better-informed may know of the Geneva Conventions that provide the ICRC with its legal framework. Some will also have read the poignant accounts of the ICRC's founder, the Geneva banker Henri Dunant, who gave up a successful business career to launch the ICRC, only to die alone and embittered.

Confidentiality is at the root of ICRC's work. One can readily understand that no governments would let an ICRC delegate into its prisons if ICRC could not be trusted to keep a lid on what it sees there. But the understandably introspective nature of the organization is also the reason why ICRC's doors have to date been closed to social scientists, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

Over the years, much has been written about the ICRC's institutional and political successes and shortcomings by Ben-Tov (1988), Lichtenstein (1988), Favez (1988), and Vichniac (1988). The politics of humanitarian work have been documented and analyzed by, for instance, Rufin (1986) and Shawcross (1984) covering the political pitfalls of humanitarian relief operations; by Haug (1986) analyzing the sociology of political persecution; and by Watson (1980) shedding light onto the military uses and abuses of psychology.

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But next to nothing exists on life within the organization, what it means in practical, human terms to be an ICRC delegate-the organization's field officer and representative at the battlefield both metaphorically and literally. What are the consequences of living with the knowledge that one has a particularly high chance of being taken hostage in the Middle East, as were three delegates in 1989 alone, two of whom are still in captivity? Why do some delegates need to be repatriated on account of chronic depression, serious psychosomatic ailments, or a high incidence of road accidents?

For 3 years (1984-1986), I was an active member of ICRC's training establishment. In that capacity I have conducted several missions under difficult conditions and closely witnessed the joys and many disappointments of ICRC staff members. I was particularly struck by the high burnout rate of the ICRC delegate, a subject that would deserve in due course full-blown research. My purpose here is primarily to draw attention to this issue within the as yet disregarded field that one might call the "psychology of the humanitarian worker." What follows are initial findings on stress behavior based on "before and after" interviews of ICRC delegates as well as my own direct experience.

Before going into the details of my findings and reflections, some basic figures about the ICRC itself might be useful for the reader's understanding of the organization. The International Committee of the Red Cross at present has about 240 delegates working in over 80 countries and is assisted in its mission by 380 expatriate staff and about 3800 local employees. Over the last 5 years, the ICRC has visited some 500,000 prisoners. Its annual budget is about 500 million Swiss francs (\$330 million) in any given year. Up to 15 planes fly relief operations to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and hundreds of trucks, ambulances, and other emergency-care equipment are used by ICRC during its numerous operational activities (Sommaruga, 1988).

On the average, the ICRC delegate is 29 years old, of Swiss nationality, has completed a graduate university degree, is single, Protestant or Catholic, and speaks at least two languages. Most delegates have graduated with degrees in law, literature, or social and political sciences; over half of the delegates are from German-speaking cantons of Switzerland. Most of them are children of middle- to upper-class Swiss families and about 65% of them are men.

The delegate is offered a 2-year contract during which time he normally serves between one to two missions in the field. At a later stage, based on mutual agreement between management and delegate, the initial 2-year contract can be changed to a 5-year contract, and later on to an unlimited open-ended employment contract. Over the last years, ICRC recruited about 80 new delegates per year, reflecting a high turnover rate. About 70% of

the delegates leave their jobs prematurely. Other organizational stress symptoms are a high number of traffic accidents, including an average of one to two fatal ones per year, and a steady increase in grievance cases.

Concomitantly, I could observe individual stress symptoms such as gastrointestinal problems (nonrelated to tropical diseases), heart attacks, skin rashes, alcoholism, and depression-related insomnia, anxiety, fatigue, sexual dysfunctions, and loss of appetite or overeating.

In trying to understand some of the observed and experienced stress, I will proceed by applying the conceptual frame developed by Cary Cooper and Marilyn Davidson (1987) with a view to offering a preliminary explanation of ICRC's stress symptoms, by which I mean that I would argue for a more thorough study in the near future. Cooper and Davidson's model of occupational stress identifies four categories of stressor variables, namely, those grouped under work arena, home arena, social arena, and individual arena. I will apply these four categories to the situation of the ICRC delegates working in the field.

## WORK ARENA

Within the area of work, four main factors contribute to the stress experienced by the delegate. They are job characteristics, role conflict, career impasse, and insufficient social support.

### Job Characteristics

The intrinsic characteristics of an ICRC delegate's job can in turn be grouped into three subcategories.

#### *Fight-Flight Impasse*

An ICRC delegate entering prisons and detention centers sees detainees or prisoners of war alone without the interference or the presence of prison

<sup>1</sup>Figure provided by Mr. Fuhrer, deputy chief of personnel of ICRC. This rather low turnover rate, however, does not include the great number of delegates who simply do not renew their 2-year contract for various reasons, stress being the major factor, as was mentioned to me during exit interviews. Taking into account the annual recruitment of 80 delegates and the average core of 240 delegates total, one might more realistically estimate a labor turnover rate of 30%.

guards. The so-called EST ("Entretien Sans Temoins"; in English, "Interview Without Witness") creates an intimate space between the delegate and the detainee. Based on this intimacy and the reputation of ICRC, the delegate hears of and, at times, sees the signs of human bestiality and cruelty.

Ill-treated and sometime tortured detainees and POW's disclose their pain and misgivings to the delegate who inadvertently empathizes with the detained person and feels some of the suffering which was inflicted on this fellow human being. The normal response would be to act on the information and on his own feelings and to neutralize or eliminate the stressor, in this particular case, the torturer-guardian or the jailer who violates fundamental ethical norms and values.

But the contract agreed upon between the ICRC and the detaining authorities severely limits the delegate's room for maneuver. He cannot openly challenge the situation without risking expulsion from the country. In fact, he can only use restrained approaches as a way of intervening, such as diplomacy, negotiation, and persuasion. Anything more drastic or more aggressive as, for instance, public denunciation (as practiced by Amnesty International) would break the agreed confidentiality.

Yet the delegate cannot opt for the flight response either. He has to provide protection for the victim. His role is to support the detainee or POW and to try to restrain the victimizing jailer. The ICRC delegate is caught in an impasse. Neither fight nor flight is possible. He therefore can easily experience a sense of powerlessness and anger. In some ways, he becomes a tertiary victim, especially when a prolonged sense of powerlessness leads to feelings of impotence and hopelessness.

#### *Unpredictability of Emergency Situations*

Manmade catastrophes, such as war and armed conflict, are unpredictable. They can be anticipated, but full-scale planning and control are not possible. Rarely is there time or the incentive for proactive planning as a way of anticipating measures needed to be undertaken during such calamities. As a result, the ICRC delegate is forced to cope with an uneven work flow. He is easily overstressed during times of emergencies and understressed during times of stand-by.

#### *Work Ambiguity*

The delegate is also faced with the conflict of having to choose between a therapeutic as opposed to an administrative-legal approach. The delegate's primary function is to safeguard the application of the Geneva Conventions. He acts, therefore, in an administrative and legal capacity.

While visiting the detainee or POW, the delegate has to check a list of prescribed items to make sure that the most important aspects of the Geneva Conventions are respected by the authorities. Yet, many times, he is the only outside person that the POW or the political detainee can talk to. His presence allows for some abreaction of feelings and offers hope which can be crucial for the detainee's general mental and emotional well-being. At the same time, it would be impossible for the delegate to start a therapeutic relationship. A continuity of the visits cannot be guaranteed, nor is there a sufficient sense of privacy and security. Neither crisis intervention nor short-term therapy is possible under such circumstances.

Still, something has to be offered to the detainee or POW. Checking a list of questions and sharing a cigarette is too little; offering psychotherapy or counseling is too much. To find the right mix between administrative and quasi-therapeutic approaches can be extremely stressful, especially if the delegate is young and inexperienced.

#### Role Conflict

The ICRC delegate has a multitude of official and unofficial roles to play. To the jailer and government official he should act as a diplomat and semi-government official; to the detainee, he should be the protector, helper, healer, and friend; to headquarters management, he should be the willing, loyal, and compliant subordinate; to the local staff, he is asked to act in the role of a boss who often, as head of delegation, might be responsible for 20 people and a budget of up to half a million Swiss francs; to the community of the Red Cross organizations, to often aggressive journalists, and to the concerned world at large he should be able to represent ICRC and the victims at the same time.

In order to be effective, the ICRC delegate has to master all these roles and has to be skillful enough to be able to switch roles according to the demands of the situation. How many people are prepared and able to fulfill such a job description?

#### Career Impasse

Most of the young delegates are recruited right after they've completed a university degree. In 50% of the cases, ICRC is the first employer to initiate the recruits into the world of work.

However, it is also the policy of ICRC not to offer job security to its employees. Only a small group achieves a permanent employment status. The delegate, in general, cannot expect lifetime employment from ICRC. The longer he works for the organization, the greater is the danger that he

might find himself in a professional no-man's-land with an ever-decreasing chance of finding an equivalent job outside the organization.

### **Insufficient Social Support Within the Delegation**

Because of the above-mentioned job insecurities, delegates can easily consider themselves as competitors and enemies rather than as colleagues or friends. Instead of giving each other needed emotional support, they can end up withholding it, either because they are afraid of intruding into another person's personal sphere, or because they are more interested in Machiavellian powerplays. The result is insufficient social and emotional support.

### **HOME AREA**

Being sent abroad, mostly to a developing country in the midst of armed conflict and civil war, the young and in general unmarried Swiss delegate finds himself thrown into a group whose members he does not know. The haphazardness of putting people together often leads to a mismatch of characters and in turn to personality conflicts which weaken the cohesion of the total delegation.

The head of the delegation, being a bit more experienced and older in general, is asked to act as a substitute parent. Not all heads of delegations are interested in or comfortable with this additional role. Some take up such a parental role with great ease and success; others resist it, and by resisting it, they increase the likelihood of alienation of all members of the delegation.

### **SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND ENVIRONMENTAL ARENA**

ICRC delegates, like diplomats, are expected to keep some distance from the local community in order to avoid slippage of confidential information. If such a slippage happens, this could not only discredit the organization itself but also, in the final count, harm the victims whom ICRC is mandated to protect.

On the other hand, the delegates are expected to find ways to integrate themselves into the new community of the host country in order to establish an effective working relationship with various counterparts, be they government officials, representatives of the local Red Cross societies, or local employees.

To find the right mix between security needs and cultural integration is not easy. As a result, ICRC delegates might either over-identify with the

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local community or remain aloof and isolated. Both extremes are unacceptable, but to stay on middle ground can be very stressful.

### **INDIVIDUAL ARENA**

ICRC delegates often face multiple stressors concurrently. While learning a new job, which is the protection of victims of war or armed conflict, the delegate is also learning to live, for instance, in a tropical climate and a collectivist society which rejects Western lifestyle habits. As a result, the delegate can experience a strong sense of isolation and cultural disorientation.

While he is coping with cultural disorientation, he is also witnessing the horrors of war and the human suffering so prevalent in detention centers. Seeing all kinds of violence committed in the name of all kinds of -isms, he is forced to reexamine the very foundations of his own belief system and, as a consequence, can easily feel more disoriented and even threatened in his own self-esteem and self-confidence.

Lazarus (1985) has pointed out that stress:

. . . lies not in the environmental input but in the person's appraisal of the relationship between that input and its demands and the person's agendas (e.g., beliefs, commitments, goals) and capabilities to meet, mitigate or alter these demands in the interests of well-being.

Some of these external demands can be met through the delegate's own capabilities or be mitigated through effective in-service training programs in areas such as language skills, interpersonal skills, basic understanding of the Geneva Conventions, cross-cultural orientation, and negotiation capabilities.

The difficulty over time lies in the loosening of the delegate's own belief and value system, which acts as an appraising and mitigating filter through which the perceived horrors of war and detention can be rationalized and brought under cognitive control.

Prolonged exposure to the human race's seemingly infinite love affair with cruelty and destruction can lead to an erosion of the delegate's intellectual armor and to a decomposition of his own preferred '-ism' and belief system. This in turn can bring about a cognitive dissonance leading over time to confusion, aggression, depression, existential despair, cynicism, and nihilism; all of which I have personally felt and observed in fellow delegates. The extent to which this prolonged stress can lead to lasting impairment or creative adjustment needs to be established by a future in-depth research project.

As Festinger (1957) defined it, cognitive dissonance means ". . . that two or more concepts are logically opposed to one another. . . [and] anxiety is the anticipation of possible dissonance."

Cruelty and atrocities occur almost everywhere. The justification for cruelty is, of course, "packaged" in various ideological, religious, and idiosyncratic rationalizations. Once the delegate has seen through these justifications, there comes the dangerous moment where the protective armor of his own personal belief system becomes vulnerable. Metaphorically speaking, he might feel as if he were in a house whose roof has been removed by a tornado, leaving him exposed to empty open space.

Facile explanations of why the Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Moslems, communists, capitalists, or what have you are inferior, evil, ignorant, or barbarian do not hold up anymore against the evidence of observed cruelty in all parts of today's world. In response to this levelling of belief systems, the delegate might strengthen his defense mechanism, become rigid, righteous, and inflexible, or use an escape mechanism of blunting his feelings and indulging his senses in the ancient art of forgetting and pleasure-seeking.

Both approaches might work for a while until further exposure to cruelty and destruction evades these defensive maneuvers as well. It is at this stage, as far as I could observe, that many delegates drop out and leave the organization in order to revert to a previously held mental equilibrium, thus confirming in this sense Festinger's rules which govern prolonged cognitive dissonance.

Other delegates burn out completely and become emotional wrecks in need of urgent rescue, be this through relocation to a headquarters post in Geneva, or, if need be, through assignment to an outplacement program.

In the past, ICRC delegates were recruited from well-to-do Calvinist families in Geneva. Working for the ICRC was like an initiation rite taking place after the completion of general education and prior to assuming full career and family responsibilities. But this old world is gone and so is the old ICRC. It is therefore no great surprise to hear Cornelio Sommaruga (1988), the first Catholic and Swiss-Italian president of ICRC state:

The Red Cross is not a philosophy or an ideology, nor is it an intellectual notion of the exercise of charity. It is first and foremost a practical action, carried out by a delegate in the field or in Geneva, an action that generally combines common sense, thought, experience and mature judgment.

The transition from a charity-type organization to a more professional humanitarian organization probably requires a different type of delegate, namely, one who can let go of the old protective belief system while at the same time be able to cope with the cognitive dissonances and multiple stress factors inherent in ICRC's humanitarian actions in the field.

What follows from the above is that it would be in the interest of the organization to obtain more empirical data on the delegates' present stress levels, their cause-effect linkages, and the delegates' adaptive capabilities. A thorough study followed by corresponding remedial action could help

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decrease the delegates' current stress levels, increase their job satisfaction and job performance, and consequently further improve the protection they can offer to POWs, to political detainees, and to civilian populations suffering under situations of armed conflict.

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