The Challenges and Costs of Humanitarian Aid: Working With the Displaced in Ethiopia

A review of

In the Lion’s Mouth: Hope and Heartbreak in Humanitarian Assistance
by Lewis Aptekar

Reviewed by
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In 1996 Lewis Aptekar settled with his wife, six-year-old daughter, and infant son in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. In a project sponsored by an unnamed European government and the Department of Psychiatry at Addis Ababa University, Aptekar was charged with assessing the mental health of displaced persons in the Kaliti camp for internally displaced persons and training a core group of peer professionals with respect to mental health. Those goals were successfully achieved, revealing, for example, a relatively low level of posttraumatic stress disorder along with higher prevalence of disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified, which Aptekar attributed, in part, to the stress of living in the camp, including malnutrition, fear of starvation, and untreated AIDS.

In The Lion’s Mouth: Hope and Heartbreak in Humanitarian Assistance might best be categorized as an ethnographic study, but it also has elements of a sojourner’s memoir and a
critique of humanitarian aid programs. A preliminary report of this study can be found in a chapter published earlier (Aptekar & Giel, 2002).

A compelling argument made by Aptekar is that mental health services must be an essential component of humanitarian assistance. Most readers of *PsycCRITIQUES* will endorse the argument that improved mental health will lead to improved physical health and well-being (see, e.g., Schauer & Schauer, 2010).

The central moral quandary that Aptekar faced was whether to give, or how much to give, to needy camp residents. Immediately upon arrival in the camp, he had become a rich and powerful person. This experience of relative wealth resonates with many Peace Corps narratives; for example, one Peace Corps blog is titled “Rich and Famous on $6 a Day” (Starace, n.d.). Narratives by less perceptive travelers often bemoan their annoyance at being approached by beggars in low-resource countries.

But Aptekar vividly describes how destitute poverty and the lack of options necessitated that residents in the camp beg. A camp resident, Tsehaynich, needed medical care that she could not afford. Her options were limited to (a) asking family and friends, (b) borrowing against future food rations, or (c) asking the author. Because her family and friends were in the same situation, the first option was not feasible; the second would lead to a dimmer future for herself and her son; and the third seemed like the only possibility.

Flouting the official rules, Aptekar gave Tsehaynich money to see a doctor and arranged for her admission to a hospital, where she died shortly thereafter.

The official policy of the European sponsor of the program was that the Kaliti community would receive only the salary for one teacher and access to a medical clinic staffed by a nurse in return for the community’s participation in the program. However, Aptekar and his local staff found it impossible not to give money to prevent starvation and stave off death.

However, even efforts to give were problematic. Clothes donated by parents at a local private school were stolen before they could be distributed. And when a U.S. group gave a $200 donation for the author to use as he saw fit, he established an informal grant committee to allocate the money to a long queue of supplicants. But there was much greater need than available resources, leading to anger and disappointment among those who didn’t receive money; moreover, the weakest in the camp (those who were badly debilitated by ill health or hunger) never made it into the line. A recent study of international aid and rescue workers revealed that the main source of moral stress among workers is insufficiency: the inability to provide needed resources and services (Nilsson, Sjöberg, Kallenberg, & Larsson, 2011).

Based on his experiences in the Kaliti camp, Aptekar rebuts some of the axioms of humanitarian assistance. Although based in substantial research and well-established findings that children’s well-being is best ensured by promoting educational and vocational opportunities for women (see, for example, Simister & Zaky, 2009), the “women and children first” policies of many humanitarian aid organizations may have deleterious side effects. In the case of Kaliti, young men were marginalized (women were considered the
“heads of families” and eligible for aid). The disaffected young men in the camp spent their days playing cards and making cynical remarks.

A second policy of most humanitarian aid organizations is that the organization should hire the services of locals to the greatest extent possible. This can lead to conflict in societies with ethnic strife and language differences. In addition, Aptekar points out that the policy can put the local employees in uncomfortable positions. In many nonindustrialized societies, family is foremost in terms of cultural values. An aid worker who does not place family members first in line for scarce resources would be violating cultural and ethical norms. Yet many organizations would consider favoritism toward family members to be corruption (e.g., CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2011).

Another issue that Aptekar takes on is that of aid dependency: the notion that providing aid creates dependency on that aid and stifles agency. Instead, he argues that it is the unreliability of the aid in the Food-for-Work program (more work, less food), inconsistent delivery of food and supplies, and the breaking of promises that create dependency and lethargy. He applies the learned helplessness model (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1995) to the situation of residents in Kaliti camp (but incorrectly attributes helplessness to unpredictability of reinforcers rather than to a lack of contingency between behavior and outcomes). Paradoxically, Aptekar observes that those who become most aid dependent are the local employees of the NGOs because their livelihood is directly dependent on the organization.

Probably the most important myth that Aptekar debunks is that organizations can effectively provide humanitarian aid without giving material assistance. Aptekar argues that cash gifts would allow for recipients to decide how best to meet their own needs. In fact, some major humanitarian organizations, such as Save the Children, have moved to providing cash transfers as part of disaster relief.

In sum, this is a book worth reading. The author bases experiences related here in his many years of work with children living in difficult circumstances. He provides insights into the myriad difficulties (ranging from frustrating paperwork to moral dilemmas) inherent in providing aid. This book lends a personal face to other recent critiques of international aid, such as those by MacLachlan, Carr, and McAuliffe (2010), Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin (2007), and Moyo (2009).

In the Lion’s Mouth is a self-published book and, as such, lacks good copy editing. It is rife with typographical and grammatical errors, the most egregious being the misspelling throughout of the name of James Garbarino, an expert in international child welfare. Despite this limitation, Aptekar provides a valuable resource to those who wish to promote the well-being of the many people of the world suffering from poverty, hunger, and displacement.
References


