

# Critical Incidents in emergency relief work

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## Introduction

Emergency relief work is now routinely undertaken by many local and international NGOs, national governments, and UN agencies. In the economically less developed countries of the ‘Third World’, such work is often set in motion by wealthier Northern countries, which send specialist personnel to assist with the disaster response. Where human life is at risk, nurses and doctors are commonly among those who are dispatched. Such *technical assistance* (as it is referred to) understandably emphasises the importance of professional and technical qualifications. However, it is hard to imagine what could prepare one for the altogether overwhelming experience of, for instance, being a Charge Nurse in a well-resourced rural Scandinavian hospital on a Monday, and then by Wednesday being responsible for the provision of scant basic health services to thousands of malnourished, possibly traumatised, and certainly distressed, people in a dust-bowl of a refugee camp, miles from any form of back-up or respite.

Resource-poor environments, such as desolate refugee camps, seem to cry out for *technical assistance*—food, medicine, shelter, machinery, sanitation, and so on, and the expertise to provide them. However, those who provide such assistance are often seen simply as the conduits of international aid. The development literature, in general, has been relatively silent about the people who deliver international aid, even though there is considerable evidence to suggest that *individuals*, rather than simply the materials with which they are associated, determine the success of an aid project (Cassen 1994; Kealey 1990; Carr et al. 1998).

Parallel with this emphasis on material, rather than human, resources, is a focus on *outcome* rather than *process* (MacLachlan 1996). Again, this is entirely understandable, as international aid aims to return distressed, impoverished, and/or unhealthy people to a state of

well-being. However, the danger is that by looking towards that goal we look past the processes necessary to achieve it. By focusing on the 'hardware' of technical assistance in relief and/or development work, we do not recognise the importance of 'people skills' in facilitating interventions. A quarter of a century ago Schnapper (1973) stated that 'The history of international development is strewn with the wreckage of many development projects. One of the major conclusions that emerges from this history is the lack, not of technical skills, but of interpersonal and intercultural adaptation skills' (quoted in Kealey 1990:2). This conclusion is as apt today as it was then: O'Dwyer states that one of the main reasons why aid projects fail is '... poor design, including the failure to take full account of the human and social environment' (1994:436).

It is well known that working in another culture can be a stressful experience (MacLachlan 1997). Furnham (1990) describes seven factors which are related to the degree of stress experienced by expatriates: distance from home, how similar the new country of residence is to home, how similar the new job is to the previous one, the quantity and quality of social support in the new environment, how secure the person's job is at home, and to what extent individuals have moved on a voluntary basis. Clearly the context of one's placement, in personal, social, and geographical terms, is very important for coping with cross-cultural transitions. In a study of more than 1,000 Swedish business expatriates, men (rather than women), the better educated, those who socialised more with host nationals, those who had a special interest in the host country, and those whose spouse was more satisfied with their move, found that adjustment was easier. Again, both the way in which individuals interacted with their new environment, and their social and personal relationships, were key factors in their adjustment. Perhaps surprisingly, previous overseas experience was not associated with better adjustment, a finding that has been confirmed for international aid workers in developing countries (Gow 1991; Kealey 1989).

While working cross-culturally may present personnel with significant challenges, such challenges are surely augmented by the materially impoverished contexts that characterise many developing countries, which are major recipients of international aid. Bennett (1986) suggests that disconfirmed expectations, role ambiguity, social isolation, confrontation with one's own prejudices, and general anxiety may be experienced. Also, the lack of material resources and

professional support to which they are accustomed can undermine the confidence of health professionals.

When individuals are dispatched to emergency relief operations, the speed of response may be crucial, leaving these people inadequately prepared psychologically, socially, domestically, and simply in terms of the pragmatics of arranging for leave from their regular job and organising their departure. Given that the environment into which emergency relief workers are deployed is often so very different from that in which they received their training or currently practise, it is important to identify the sorts of skill which are instrumental in attempting to achieve their goals.

To identify such skills it is necessary first to know what goals individuals are working to achieve. While such goals may seem obvious, in emergency relief work there are often many competing needs which can call for fieldworkers' attention. This is an important issue, as clarity of objectives and of work roles has been shown to correlate with job satisfaction, emotional reactions, tension, personal adjustment, job commitment, and *job performance* (Jackson and Schuler 1985; Ilgen and Hollenbeck 1991; Netermeyer et al. 1990).

While there has been voluminous academic discussion and theorising on what technical assistance *should* be about, and what sorts of skill *should* be taught, insufficient attention has been given to fieldworkers' experiences of what actually happens *in situ*. In the present study we used the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to investigate emergency relief workers' goals and the skills that they themselves found most useful in trying to achieve them.

## Method

### *Subjects*

The participants were 15 nurses (all women), with a mean age of 39 years (range 29–50 years), all of whom had been engaged in emergency relief work within the past three months to five years. This study was undertaken with the co-operation of Comhlamh (an umbrella organisation for returned development workers in Ireland), which forwarded a letter to the addresses (stored on its database) of a randomised quota sample of 100 people living in or around Dublin, who had returned from international aid assignments within the time period specified. This sample received a letter inviting them to take part in a project 'looking at the experiences of Irish development workers during their period of work overseas'. The letter indicated that informal

interviews would take approximately one hour and be held in Trinity College, Dublin. The letter emphasised that '[i]t will *not* be an evaluation of you or your organisation. ... The long-term aim of the project is to improve training programmes for international aid workers. It is therefore important for us to learn about your personal and first hand experiences in the field.' Invitees were asked to complete a form indicating their willingness to participate in the project, and return it in a stamped addressed envelope. They were also given a number to telephone in case they wanted any more information about the research project before committing to it. Participants were offered no payment or any other form of inducement to take part in the research.

Replies were received from half of the sample, although many of these were on behalf of the person we had written to, informing us that they were not presently in the country. Twenty-two people agreed to participate in the study and were interviewed within two months of receiving the invitation. Seven of these people were engaged in long-term development assignments, and their data constitute part of another project. The present study reports on the interview data derived from 15 nurses who had been engaged in emergency relief assignments.

## **Critical Incident Technique (CIT)**

Since the CIT is a methodology which is not widely used in research on health or international development, we briefly describe its origins, rationale, and procedure.

Flanagan (1954) developed the CIT and described it as '... a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. The Critical Incident Technique outlines procedures for collecting observed incidents having special significance and meeting systematically defined criteria' (p. 327).

The CIT is a technique for collecting incidents which the respondent feels have been critical to his or her experience of the job. The incidents are recorded, and discussion of these incidents helps to elucidate a composite picture of job behaviour. The particular form of eliciting Critical Incidents was the same as that used by MacLachlan and McAuliffe (1993) and Kanyangale and MacLachlan (1995).

After a brief introduction, participants were told that 'in this interview we are going to ask you to identify some incidents which have

occurred during your emergency relief assignment. These incidents should be “critical incidents”. They should be events which have made a strong impact on you. A Critical Incident has a beginning and an end, and its outcome is relatively important to the objectives of your assignment.’

### ***Statements of objectives***

‘The first stage of identifying Critical Incidents is to define what the objects of your work are, as you understand them. We do not want to know how other people have described what the aims of your work were, we want to know your opinions based on your experience of the work. You are the “expert” on the job you were doing. You are therefore in the best position to define its objectives, as you have experienced them.’ The interviewees were asked to try and name four to six objectives ‘which are specific, not general or ambiguous’.

### ***Recording of Critical Incidents***

Following the identification of objectives, which were read out by each interviewee, they were then asked to try and relate one incident which had had a positive impact on them and one which they regarded as negative. They were given Incident Sheets, which were vertically divided into two columns. One column was headed ‘Incident Details’ and the other ‘Abilities/Characteristics’. The interviewees were asked to write brief notes, under the ‘Incident Detail’ column, on each of the two sheets.

### ***Probing of Critical Incidents***

Once the incidents had been recorded, the interviewer then concentrated on each one in turn. The first part of the interview involved probing the interviewee for more information about the incident: ‘What led up to the incident?’, ‘Why did the incident occur?’, ‘Who was involved?’, ‘What were you thinking/feeling?’, ‘How did you attempt to deal with it ...?’, and ‘If the incident occurred again, how would you deal with it?’ The function of these probes was to make the incident as vivid as possible, and in doing so heighten the interviewee’s recall of the learning experience.

### ***Specifying job-related attributes***

Once a full description of the incident had been obtained, interviewees were asked the following question: ‘Taking this incident as an example of the sort of work your job requires, what would you say are the main abilities or characteristics that somebody should have, in order to

perform well in the job?’ The interviewer then noted the attributes that were described by the interviewee, and continued the discussion to probe further and clarify some of the ideas put forward by the interviewee.

Once the discussion of a particular incident seemed to be drawing to a close, the interviewer read through the list of attributes which had been identified as relevant to dealing with the job-related Critical Incident described. This process was completed for each Critical Incident; the whole procedure took between two and three hours for each participant.

## Results

### *Identification of work objectives*

Table 1 presents a thematic content analysis of the work objectives identified by the 15 participants. Only those themes mentioned by two or more individuals are included. In total, 61 different work objectives were mentioned, with 15 of these being mentioned by only one person. On average, participants identified four work objectives each. By far the most frequently mentioned theme (by 12 participants) was the provision of basic medical and/or food aid. The second most frequently mentioned objective (by seven participants), was the desire to fulfil a personal ambition to help ‘Third World’ or developing countries, and thirdly, to train indigenous workers to provide the service that the expatriate was currently providing (mentioned by six participants). However, it is noteworthy that fewer than half of the sample mentioned the second and third most common objectives, reflecting the variety of objectives held by the participants during their emergency relief work. In some instances this may have been due to the very specific nature of the project (e.g. ‘to assess needs of prisoners of war’, ‘to encourage those with TB to remain in the area for the full term of the TB programme’, ‘to trace families of unaccompanied children’; each mentioned by one person), or due to specific motivations (e.g. ‘to enhance managerial skills as the co-ordinator of a programme’, ‘to educate myself regarding the political situation of the country’, ‘to set a good example to indigenous workers’; each mentioned by one person). It is clear from Table 1 that in our sample the 15 nurses were not focused on the same few objectives, but sought to achieve a diverse range of objectives.

**Table 1: Objective of the work of emergency aid assignees**

Statement of objectives	Frequency
Provide adults/children with basic medical/food aid	12
Fulfil personal ambition to help 'Third World'/developing countries	7
Train indigenous workers to enable them to run/staff the project	6
Improve and help conditions in the 'Third World'/developing countries	5
Use experience and skills to assist where most needed	4
Accept and integrate into the host nation's culture	3
Increase own knowledge of 'Third World'/developing countries	3
Undertake a new challenge	2
Keep good written records to ensure continuity of care	2
Encourage local people to foster orphaned refugee children	2

### *Identification of job-related skills*

To illustrate how the job-related skills were identified, and something of the character of the incidents described, we present summaries of four Critical Incidents (two positive and two negative): Each of these relates the experiences of nurses working in refugee camps. The first incident cited here was rated as *negative* by the interviewee. She was engaged in assessing the feeding and basic medical requirements of refugees, and prioritising for assistance to those most in need, according to the standards set by the aid agency. Approximately 3,000 people per week would pass through the feeding centre. A six-month-old infant had been identified as being in urgent need of nutritional assistance and to this end was provided with a gastro-nasal feeding tube. The mother subsequently removed the feeding tube and the infant died. It emerged that the mother had decided that available resources would best be given to her other children who had in her opinion a more realistic chance of surviving. The interviewee was shocked and distressed at first, but eventually came to terms, as best she could, with what turned out to be a not infrequent occurrence.

The principal skills identified here were the ability to respect the dignity, customs, and traditions of others (specifically the tendency of the mothers to reject the weakest child in order to maximise the survival chances of the sturdier children); to recognise the limits of the job—especially in regard to handing out advice which has little relevance in a war-torn situation (evidenced by the mother's response to aid workers' intervention to save the child). The remaining skills identified

were related to how best to cope on a personal level with a survival ethos which is generally uncalled for in a stable Western environment. These include being able to express one's emotions; good interpersonal relationships with colleagues; being able to nourish oneself after a day's work without feeling guilty.

The second Critical Incident describes the experience of a nurse who managed a feeding centre for refugees. This incident was also rated as a *negative* one. On taking up the post, she realised that it was more appropriate to a nutritionist than a nurse. She felt swamped and unable to cope. She decided to find as many books as possible on the subject. She sought advice from medical colleagues and the organisation's field director. She established a rapport with local employees whom she found to be a valuable source of information. After about three weeks, she felt competent to set out to achieve her objectives.

The job skills identified from this incident were being able to identify the requirements of the job (from the recognition that the job was more appropriate to a nutritionist); making full use of available resources (by asking for help and advice from colleagues and getting hold of the appropriate textbooks); and openness to learning from local workers (by entering into the team spirit).

The third Critical Incident, which was rated as *positive*, concerns the relationship between personnel within a refugee agency. A satellite telephone dish was stolen from outside the residence of the donor organisation. An investigation was carried out by the local (indigenous) assistant co-ordinator of the project, who attributed blame to the 'opposing' tribe. The organisation's co-ordinator directed that the wages of the indigenous workers (belonging to the 'opposing' tribe) would be cut by 25 per cent to pay for the cost of the new dish. The interviewee felt very strongly that this was an unjust course of action; but she found that other expatriates who agreed with her were disinclined to challenge this unilateral decision of the group leader. The indigenous workers organised a protest, and the decision to cut the wages was rescinded. Instead, a reward was offered for the return of the dish. The dish was returned a week later and, it seems, had not been stolen by the accused tribe. A considerable amount of damage was done to the relationship between the indigenous and expatriate workers by the way in which the matter was handled.

The characteristics identified from this incident included the employment of fair practices in dealing with co-workers (because of the failure to do so in this case); assertiveness (because of the reluctance



of some expatriate workers to challenge their manager); showing sensitivity to the feelings of others (because of failure to do so); and the ability to resolve conflict (following the protest by indigenous workers).

The fourth Critical Incident, also rated as *positive*, concerned the selection and training of an indigenous worker to assess who, of his own people, were most in need of being admitted to a refugee-feeding programme. The interviewee selected a young man who she considered to have the necessary ability to undertake the job. The young man had great difficulty at first in turning away his own people who did not meet the required criteria for acceptance to the feeding centre. However, after a week's training she (the interviewee) felt confident that the trainee would be capable of carrying out the job with only intermittent supervision and she was happy to hand it over to him.

The characteristics identified from this example were ability to assess suitable workers (the trainee turned out to be an able worker, despite his initial misgivings); willingness to hand over the job to indigenous workers (which is what subsequently happened); ability to pass on skills; having trust and belief in indigenous co-workers (in allowing the trainee to work unsupervised).

Table 2 summarises the job-related skills identified through analysis of the 34 Critical Incidents reported by participants. This table presents only those skills mentioned by two or more individuals. In total, 139 job-related skills were derived; these were collapsed into 54 distinct skills. Thirty-one of these skills, or characteristics, are described in Table 2, the basis for their inclusion being that they were derived from two or more Critical Incidents. As an aid to further analysis, we have presented these under five broad themes, although some items could easily be classified under more than one of these themes. The number of times a particular skill was mentioned is given, along with the number of times it arose in a positive or negative Critical Incident. Sub-totals for each of the five themes are also presented.

### ***Coping skills***

A sense of humour, ability to relax and detach when off duty, and knowing one's own limitations were identified as coping skills. These skills were mentioned twice as often in the context of negative Critical Incidents as in the context of positive ones, suggesting that it was often the lack of these skills that produced negative outcomes for the participants. Other coping skills, each mentioned by only one person, included accepting failure, knowing how to express emotions appropriately, and knowing how to deal with homesickness.

**Table 2: Job-related skills identified from Critical Incident analysis**

	Positive incident	Negative incident	Total
<b>Coping skills</b>			
Sense of humour	3	4	7
Ability to detach and relax off duty	1	4	5
Knowing one's own limitations	1	2	3
Sub-totals	5	10	15
<b>Relationship skills</b>			
Sensitivity to values of other cultures	5	2	7
Patience (adapt to local pace)	4	3	7
Being able to ask advice from colleagues	3	2	5
Openness to learning from local people	3	1	4
Willingness to hand over to local workers	3	1	4
Sensitivity to feelings of indigenous population	1	1	2
Sub-totals	19	10	29
<b>Communication skills</b>			
Diplomacy/tact	3	4	7
Good social skills	4	2	6
Negotiating skills	1	3	4
Good relations with expatriate colleagues	0	3	3
Ability to establish rapport	1	1	2
Use of touch with seriously ill people	1	1	2
Sub-totals	10	14	24
<b>Analytical skills</b>			
Good interviewing skills for recruiting locals	3	0	3
Ability to achieve closure	0	3	3
Ability to predict project sustainability	1	2	3
Use of democratic practices with all workers	2	1	3
Not being impulsive	2	1	3
Good programme evaluation skills	1	1	2
Regular evaluation of programme	2	0	2
Motivating locals to accept responsibility	1	1	2
Sub-totals	12	9	21
<b>Internal motivations</b>			
Assertiveness	2	2	4
Adaptability	1	3	4
Flexibility	4	0	4
Initiative	2	0	2
Decisiveness	2	0	2
Tolerance	0	2	2
Resourcefulness	2	0	2
Stubbornness	1	1	2
Sub-totals	14	8	22
<b>Grand totals</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>111</b>

### ***Relationship skills***

Relationship skills were the most frequently mentioned sort of skill, being mentioned almost twice as frequently in the context of positive incidents as in negative incidents. Sensitivity to the values of other cultures and a willingness to adapt to the (slower) pace of life were each noted by seven participants. Some of the relationship skills mentioned by only one individual included entering into a team spirit with local workers, and having a genuine interest in the people whom one is helping.

### ***Communication skills***

Being diplomatic/tactful, having good social skills, and being willing to negotiate were the most frequently cited communication skills. The importance of establishing good relationships with expatriate colleagues was also noted in three different negative Critical Incidents. Communication skills, including non-verbal communication such as touching; using simple straightforward language, and having the ability to probe, were each mentioned by one person.

### ***Analytical skills***

No particular analytical skills dominated this category; all the skills derived through analysing Critical Incidents were found for either one, two, or three individuals. The pragmatics of selecting local colleagues to work with showed interviewing skills to be important, and such skills were cited in three positive incidents. On the other hand, the ability (or inability) to bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion and achieve a sense of closure was cited in three negative incidents. Skills cited in only one instance included responding to the needs of the local community rather than those dictated by the fieldworker's role, the ability to pass on skills, and recognising one's mistakes and apologising when necessary.

### ***Self skills***

While all of the above skills relate in some way to how the relief worker treats herself, the skills grouped under the theme of 'Self skills' especially emphasise this ability. Assertiveness, adaptability, and flexibility were the most frequently cited skills. We use the term 'adaptability' to refer to the ability to move on to another area of work when required to do so, rather than seeing oneself as having competence in only a specific narrow area. By 'flexibility' we mean flexibility in matters such as the interpretation of rules. Less frequently

mentioned skills included perseverance, autonomy, and maintaining optimism (each mentioned by only one person).

## Discussion

### *Work objectives*

The degree to which people share work objectives can be taken to reflect their 'cohesion of purpose'. Clearly, however, we would not expect people responding to different emergency situations in different parts of the world, and under different local living conditions, to specify the same objectives. Indeed, although 12 of our 15 participants reported the provision of basic medical or food aid as one of their objectives, more than 60 different work objectives were derived through the CIT, with a quarter of these being given by only one person. In the evaluation of any project it is, therefore, important to realise that not everybody is motivated to achieve the same objectives, and that an individual's objectives may differ from those of the sending agency, or of the recipient community.

The objectives reported in Table 1 reflect three broad themes: *helping* (e.g. 'To improve and help conditions in the Third World'), *benefiting* (e.g. 'To undertake a new challenge') and *being task-focused* (e.g. 'To keep good written records to ensure continuity of care'), with many objectives reflecting more than one of these themes (e.g. 'To fulfil personal ambition to help the Third World'). The 'helping' or altruistic motives reported by Irish workers in this study coincide with previous surveys in Ireland which have noted strong support for helping developing countries (ACDC 1990). While aid motivated by personal, humanitarian, or charitable concerns may have its value, it should also be informed by awareness of the larger structural causes of poverty, and in Ireland this has not necessarily been the case (*ibid.*). While it is certainly desirable for aid workers to be motivated by altruism, this is never going to be sufficient, and more emphasis should be placed on educating them on the social, economic, and political context in which relief and development operations occur.

The second theme of 'benefiting', or personal fulfilment, is an aspect of international development and/or relief work which is becoming increasingly recognised. In their study of Irish development workers, O'Dwyer and Woodhouse (1996) note that development workers, in common with volunteers in general, have self-interested motivations such as career development and the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills. It is entirely reasonable that such 'pay-offs'

be explicitly acknowledged, and indeed promoted, for the purposes of recruitment.

Being 'task-focused', the third theme to emerge from the objectives reported, reflects objectives which are rather specific to the context of intervention. However, it may also reflect a concern with the achievement of specific goals—a focus on outcomes, rather than on a more abstract 'reason for being there'—and perhaps a concern for *how* progress is made.

### ***Skills***

We grouped the themes concerning job-related skills under five headings: 'Coping', 'Relationships', 'Communication skills', 'Analytical skills', and 'Internal motivations'. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the skills that emerged from the analysis of Critical Incidents is that they are, by and large, concerned with *how things get done*, rather than with *what* is done. That is to say, they reflect a concern with *process skills* rather than with *technical skills*. Only the category 'Analytical skills' (which had less than one fifth of the skills elicited) explicitly incorporates a concern with outcomes (by, for instance, having an 'ability to achieve closure' or 'ability to predict project sustainability'). However, even when a lack of technical skills is seen as a problem, for instance in the second Critical Incident described, where a nurse felt that the skills of a nutritionist would be more appropriate, the ability to do something about this was derived from openness to learning from indigenous workers, making full use of available resources, and the ability to recognise the requirements of the job.

The four specific skills that achieved the highest endorsement (by seven different people) were sense of humour, sensitivity to the values of other cultures, patience, and diplomacy/tact. If these are indeed among the most important skills for aid workers to possess, few professional training or pre-departure courses can claim to provide a grounding in them. The first three categories of skill are essentially concerned with how individuals operate in their work environment, be it in relation to others (relationship and communication skills) or in relation to themselves (coping skills). While such skills may be related to personality characteristics, the fifth category of Internal Motivations is more explicitly concerned with this. Although Kealey (1994) suggests that most donors appreciate the value of adaptability, communication skills, motivation, flexibility, cross-cultural sensitivity, initiative, realism, and patience, MacLachlan and Carr (1998) argue that there is often no systematic way of assessing such requirements, or of

measuring how effective such skills are in the field. Recruitment policy, we argue, should be empirically, not theoretically, driven (MacLachlan and Carr 1998).

Given recognition of the importance of relationship and communication skills, it is surprising that language skills do not feature in Table 2. As long ago as 1961, the US Peace Corps introduced a requirement for each volunteer to be proficient in the local language of their assigned country or area, and this is generally looked upon as a landmark decision. The nature of the assignments investigated here, i.e. emergency relief work, probably militates against the practicalities of language training. Even so, we would have expected the lack of language skills to be a feature of some Critical Incidents, but this was not so. If language skills were not seen as critical to job performance as assessed through the Critical Incident methodology, then it is important to know why. Further research with emergency relief workers should probe this important area of communication between expatriate aid workers and the people they were assigned to work with.

In 1966, Byrnes described 'role shock' as an occupational hazard of technical assistants working abroad. It refers to the stresses and frustrations concomitant with discrepancies between expected, ideal, and experienced roles. Role conflict and role ambiguity have received considerable attention from occupational psychologists, and its psychosocial and health costs are well documented (see, for example, Winnubust 1984). Analysing the work practices of Irish development workers, O'Dwyer (1994) has noted 'considerable differences' between the perceptions of development workers and those of their 'supervisors' of the roles that development workers should be filling. It seems very likely that the same will apply to emergency relief work, where expectations may be relatively naïve, especially for 'first timers'.

Among the 'ways of working' identified by our methodology were patience, tact, openness to learning, being able to ask for advice, willingness to negotiate, adaptability, flexibility, initiative, tolerance, and resourcefulness. These all reflect a 'fluid' approach to working, as opposed to relying solely on more crystallised technical skills. Such 'fluid' skills are likely to promote tolerance of ambiguity. Given the confused, hectic, and unstructured nature of much relief work, tolerance in both social and work relationships may be very important for an individual's work performance and well-being.

## *Limitations*

It is important to recognise certain limitations to the present study. First, the participants were self-selected, and their willingness to take part in the research may reflect biases in terms of cultural values, personal experiences, self-perception, recall of events, age, sex (all females) and so on. While the aim of qualitative research is to develop a richer and deeper understanding of particular human experiences, it is difficult to assess the legitimacy of generalisation. However, while there were only 15 subjects in the present sample, this is a relatively large number, compared with other applications of the CIT (e.g. MacLachlan and McAuliffe 1993). It would clearly be desirable to evaluate the construct validity of the CIT by using other methods of job-skills analysis and comparing the outcome with that derived from the CIT. It would also be important for future research to investigate whether there are gender differences in the skills identified through the CIT.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present research represents the first attempt to assess job skills in emergency relief work; and it has furnished behaviours and attitudes which have proved critical to the achievement of the objectives towards which people worked. As such, these job-related skills reflect valuable empirical data which could be incorporated into preparatory training courses for emergency relief work. While Critical Incidents have provided the 'data' for the present research, these same incidents could be used as the content of experiential learning, where participants on training courses could work through, and perhaps role play, the protagonists in various Critical Incidents, subsequently providing their own analyses and interpretations of the skills required for particular types of work in particular situations. Such a perspective could also profitably be used at the recruitment stage, where applicants could be asked to role play and subsequently analyse Critical Incidents in order to identify the applicants who are sensitive to the importance of the sorts of skill described above. Thus, Critical Incident analysis can provide a mechanism for returned aid workers effectively to feed back their own experiences into the training of those who may be sent to replace them on the same or similar assignments. Such a cycle of learning from experience, especially contextualised experience, may be one way in which fluid process skills can be identified, specified in terms of clear behaviours and attitudes, and enacted.

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