

# ‘Self-knowledge is the prerequisite of humanity’: personal development and self-awareness for aid workers

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## Introduction

The most demanding situations for aid workers can be those that require emotional rather than practical responses. However, emotional responses can be difficult and confusing, and it can seem easier to initiate action than to develop the increased self-awareness which would enable complex emotional responses to be managed more effectively. In his book *The Selfish Altruist* (2001), however, Tony Vaux argues, from his 20 years’ experience with Oxfam GB, that self-awareness and increased self-knowledge for those working for aid organisations are *essential* and should not be considered optional extras. His book powerfully highlights some of the damaging effects of lack of self-awareness, both at the individual level and within aid organisations, and shows how this lack of self-awareness can prevent aid workers and aid organisations from responding with impartiality to the person in need. Having identified the underlying principle of humanitarianism as ‘humanity’—which the author defines as the capacity to listen to the person in need in his/her full social, economic, and political context—Vaux’s detailed and emotionally honest analyses of aid scenarios in different parts of the world vividly illustrate many situations where lack of self-awareness was one of the most significant factors preventing the principle of humanity being carried out in practice.

Vaux hopes that his book will stimulate more self-awareness among aid workers, and there is no doubt that it *does* raise awareness about psychological and emotional issues within aid work which are mostly avoided or not acknowledged. However, *reading* as a means of increasing self-awareness has significant limitations. The reader’s response is most likely to move quite quickly from emotional reactions caused by the echoes from her or his own experience into a more ‘intellectual’ analysis. For more significant and substantial personal development and increased self-awareness to occur, there needs to be some active personal challenge at an individual emotional level within an interpersonal context. As Vaux’s accounts make clear, concern for others is fundamentally a personal, emotional response; increasing self-awareness therefore has to be addressed within that modality.

Vaux himself does not put forward any specific suggestions as to how the ‘inner voice which shouts so loudly that we cannot listen’ (p. 71) can be quietened, and whether the self-knowledge which he considers a ‘prerequisite for humanity’ can be enhanced and developed. His statement that ‘we need to obliterate our own self’ (p. 7) in order to achieve the goal of impartiality is not a feasible option. We are all flawed human beings and cannot step outside our own selves and

divorce ourselves from the lens through which we see the world. However, I feel it is possible to make some useful suggestions. Although bringing our own prejudices and perceptions into our concern for others is in some ways unavoidable, it *is* possible to know oneself in greater depth, and to develop ways of being able to subject one's self to internal scrutiny such that the self's power to distort our motives and actions can be diminished. Only then can our awareness and capacity to listen to 'the person in need in his/her full social, economic and political context' (p. 7) be enhanced and increased.

I wanted to take up the challenge of responding to Vaux's thought-provoking insights. This paper therefore brings together some of the threads in his book and combines them with my own psychological approaches to increasing self-awareness in order to put forward some specific suggestions as to how personal development and self-awareness could be enhanced for both managers of aid organisations and those who work on the front line.

## The role of experiential tasks in self-development

The word 'experiential' in its simplest form describes a process that is personally experienced at an emotional level, and it is commonly used to describe groups where emotional learning can take place. Developing greater awareness of the self is usually accomplished by the design and facilitation of experiential tasks that focus on particular aspects of the self. For such tasks to be effective for aid workers they would have to stimulate relevant psychological issues and their interaction with practical responses. Tasks given in a lecture or training format are very limited in their capacity to develop individual self-awareness because they do not necessarily challenge the aid worker's unique preconceptions, established structures of meaning, underlying assumptions, and values which are hidden from view. Vaux comments on very many aspects of the self and human nature, but how these attributes are experienced, which parts of the self cause a particular individual most difficulty and are perceived as most potentially threatening to the self will be unique, to some degree, for each person. Simply 'telling' someone either individually or within a group is of very limited value. Personal development and increased self-awareness have to be facilitated so that difficult aspects of the self can be faced, hidden parts of the self discovered, and then *felt* at an emotional level within each person.

The power of experiential learning, compared with other modes, is that difficult feelings inside each person can be *reflected upon openly* with honesty and courage in a safe environment. This cannot take place without the establishment of trust, both between the facilitator and participants, and among the participants themselves. Most often this trust is built up by designing tasks to be carried out initially in groups of three to four, and tasks are designed so that the emotions to be addressed gradually become more challenging. Group members can then begin to feel more comfortable about acknowledging difficult feelings. One of the most significant features of group experiential work from which people derive comfort is the knowledge that their own problematic emotional reactions, of which they may be ashamed, are also felt by others.

## Examples of experiential work to increase self-awareness

In addressing how concern for the person in need could be responded to with greater impartiality and minimal personal motives and feelings, it is possible to design experiential tasks to highlight and focus on the further development of the parts of the self that Vaux so clearly describes. However, within the limitations of this paper, I would like to focus on what I consider the two most essential fundamental capacities of the self which could form the foundation of personal development for aid workers and their managers. As with Vaux's

concept of humanity, these two capacities at first glance appear to be simple, but in practice are extremely demanding and personally challenging:

- the capacity to listen accurately and actively to another person; and
- the capacity for internal reflection on one's own feelings without fear.

These capacities are 'interwoven' with each other. To actively listen to another person, the internal self of the listener has to be quiet, and for the listener to distinguish between her or his own internal emotional reactions, motives, and vulnerabilities, and those of the person to whom they are listening, the listener has to be able to reflect on her or his own internal processes with clarity and honesty. This capacity for internal reflection requires the identification and specific development of a part of the self which can take on the role of the 'internal observer'. This 'internal observer' must be capable of being sufficiently detached to be able to weigh up conflicting and difficult emotional reactions stemming from other parts of the self. If this capacity is sufficiently developed, judgements when responding to the person in need can be far more considered, and less emotionally reactive.

## Listening

Some may consider listening to another person to be a fairly passive process. In fact accurate listening is active, tiring, and demanding. *Listening for a Change* (Slim and Thompson 1993) focuses on oral testimony collection. The authors' description of listening encompasses what is challenging about active listening and begins to illustrate why listening to another person can feel potentially threatening:

*Speaking up is a sign of confidence; being listened to increases that confidence. But listening is also an art, based on certain principles which are also at the heart of any notion of just and cooperative development. . . . It needs the human skills of patience, humility, willingness to learn from others and to respect views and values that you may not share. (p. 3)*

*A central part of any attempt at listening is a commitment to accept the idiom of the people who are talking. This automatically contributes to a more equal relationship. Too often the poor and powerless are further disadvantaged by having to conform to the language and communication methods of those who hold power. Ideally it should take place in the speaker's mother tongue. In this way the collection of oral testimony shifts the burden of translation and understanding back to the listener, and begins to balance the scales in the communication process. (p. 9)*

*The process of listening reverses the roles of expert and pupil. . . . [T]he interviewer sits at the feet of the people who are obviously experts on their own life and experience. (p. 10)*

Facilitated experiential tasks which involve participants attempting to actively listen in the ways described above will automatically bring out many of the psychological issues that Vaux describes as being potentially the cause of 'doing harm as well as good' (p. 204). In attempting to actively listen with patience and respect to someone of a different cultural background, and who holds different values and assumptions about the world, profound and complex issues relating to power and its inequality will be activated—issues including, among other things, culture, language, knowledge, status, vulnerability, helplessness, and control. The reality of accurately listening to someone who not only holds different values and assumptions about the world, but who also may have very different priorities from those of the aid worker, and who may want of the aid worker something very different from what the aid worker assumes s/he is there to give, can be deeply challenging.

Appropriate *experiential* tasks focusing specifically on the implications of actively listening to the person in need will bring out many difficult, uncomfortable, and conflicting feelings. Automatically one's own judgemental feelings about others, one's own value system, issues of cultural relativity, and many other disturbing feelings can be engendered by such exercises. Many questions arise. Are we prepared to address our own vulnerability and fears when we become the pupil rather than the teacher? Do we actually *want* the person to whom we are listening to become more confident and to assume more power? Negatively judging and blaming the other person can sometimes seem an easier option than to acknowledge ignorance and fear within one's self. It can feel much 'safer' to hold on tightly to our image of ourselves as being the person who 'knows'. Can we care enough to empower the other person, if that means letting go of our own power?

Facing up to the difficult and painful parts of the self is the essence of increasing self-awareness. However, this will not occur if the issues are approached using an 'intellectual' or teaching format. An emotionally safe, non-threatening atmosphere that is conducive to the examination of potentially shameful feelings has to be facilitated. It is also crucial that the process of extending the capacity for self-reflection is facilitated gradually so that the participants do not 'shut down' their emotional responses.

## Developing the 'internal observer'

Individuals vary in terms of their own natural capacity for self-reflection. Most often it is those who are most comfortable 'doing' and being active who are more fearful of internal exploration of the self, and therefore find the challenge of self-reflection more unsettling. Through supporting each individual to face up with increasing honesty and courage to their own complex and multi-layered reactions, and encouraging someone to reflect on those reactions with greater detachment, an 'internal observer' part of the self, separate from emotional response, can be developed.

When this capacity for detached internal reflection has been recognised, established, and can be felt within the individual, the function of the 'internal observer' part of the self can then gradually become similar to the chairperson of a committee. The members of the 'committee' are the different parts of the self which can have very many different perspectives, views, and feelings. In one's own self there are so many 'voices'—emotional reactions, motives, drives, pride, emotional wounds from the past, terrors, vulnerabilities—and some parts of the self or 'voices' are much louder than others.

When sufficiently developed, the function of the 'internal observer' is first to find sufficient courage to listen to the different parts of the self without fear, especially those feelings which make us uncomfortable, frightened, and ashamed, and which are most difficult to acknowledge in ourselves. In addition, some parts of the self will be 'louder' than others so the 'internal observer' also has to quieten the demanding parts in order to try to hear what different, more hidden, parts of the self may be feeling. If the 'internal observer' or chairperson of the committee of selves is sufficiently developed and separated within the self, the different parts can then be heard, and fears and conflicting feelings acknowledged with greater detachment. Weighing up, prioritising, and organising the different parts of the self, rather than unthinkingly reacting, can then take place. Having listened to and heard the 'noise' of the self (selves) as clearly and honestly as possible, one's self can then be quietened and it then becomes more possible to listen and attend to the person in need as a unique individual in his/her particular social and cultural context.

## Self-reflection as the basis for action

Vaux comments that there has been too little capacity for self-reflection within aid organisations in the last 20 years and that 'self knowledge as a prerequisite for humanity' has not

been encouraged. One of the aims of his analysis of humanitarian crises is to highlight the way in which personal motive interacts with practical response. In my own view, the capacity for self-reflection on one's own complex emotional responses represents the best, but always less than perfect, basis for action.

Developing a capacity to listen as pupil rather than teacher and to be able to contemplate one's own 'bundle of vain strivings' which make up the self demands a particular kind of courage—the courage to accept uncertainty and self-doubt. There are always parts of the self which, when looked at clearly, are in conflict with each other; different parts of the self respond in different ways, and it is not possible, no matter how developed the 'internal observer', to know one's self fully. Throughout his book, Vaux regularly asks rhetorical questions which appear to suggest that one of two suggested alternative motivations is somehow the right or more accurate answer. For example, in discussing the basis of humanitarian concern he asks 'is it an expression of selfishness as in removing the feeling of guilt or is it altruistic concern for another person?' (p. 163). My response to this and many other of his fixed-choice questions is that *both* apparently contradictory motives will most often be present simultaneously!

It is this capacity to hold and face up to conflicting motives and feelings that is most challenging in the process of internal reflection. If these internal conflicts can be reflected upon honestly by the 'internal observer' of the self, and then negotiated, it is possible to arrive at a clearer sense of order in terms of what matters most, to go against some motivations of the self if necessary, and decide on a course of action. A decision made in this way is most likely to feel like the 'least worst' compromise among all the parts of the self, but the potential for harm will be reduced. Decisions have to be made, even when total self-knowledge is not possible. Vaux comments that 'in analysing the context in which a person lives, I have to choose from innumerable possibilities' (p. 202). That will always be the case, but one of the unique attributes of being human is the capacity to choose. It is my view that the more an aid worker or manager has the courage to develop the capacity for internal reflection, to confront his/her own fears, and be aware of the often contradictory and emotionally painful parts of the self, the greater likelihood that those decisions can be based on the principle of humanity.

## Concluding comments

This paper was written as a response to some of the profound and challenging emotional issues for aid workers described in *The Selfish Altruist*. I have briefly described two approaches to experiential learning which could enable emotional and psychological issues for aid workers to be addressed in constructive ways. The paradox of those providing aid for those in need needing to be 'emotional enough to feel concern while not being so emotional that their concern is limited unfairly' (p. 71) requires a capacity for both attachment and detachment. The development within the self of an 'internal observer' and the resulting greater capacity for self-reflection such that complex emotional responses can be acknowledged and monitored more dispassionately seem to me to be the best way of achieving this balance.

Understandably, some people are apprehensive about engaging in any process which increases self-awareness and self-reflection, as it can be painful. Often it may seem easier to run away from the self by engaging in endless activity and overwork, rather than taking the time for internal reflection which could allow decisions regarding action to be more thoughtful. However, commitment from aid agencies to equip their staff with greater capacity for self-knowledge would not only provide aid workers with their greatest personal strength in whatever circumstances they find themselves but also minimise the risk of doing harm in an increasingly complex world.

## References

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