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Between cause and control

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MISSION IMPOSSIBLE? THE IMPACT OF HUMANITARIAN AID CONTEXT AND INDIVIDUAL FEATURES ON AID WORKER RETENTION¹²

Abstract

High rates of employee turnover are problematic for many organizations, but particularly critical for the humanitarian sector. This study explains how the unique features of the context of humanitarian work (e.g., location, security) and individual characteristics of aid workers (e.g., gender, occupation) impact job retention within the humanitarian organization *Médecins Sans Frontières*. This paper extends existing research by providing new theoretical explanations of employment opportunities and constraints and engaging in the first large-scale empirical quantitative analysis of aid worker retention. Using a personnel database of field aid workers (N=1,955), we engage in a logistic regression of the likelihood to reenlist after a first mission. Findings demonstrate that only 40% of workers enlist for a second mission. Cultural and geographic proximity of the workplace, security setting, location of workplace, age and gender have no significant effect on turnover. Individuals are more likely not to reenlist for a second mission if they returned early from the first mission for a personal reason, are in a relationship, are medical doctors and come from countries with high levels of human development. We conclude with a reflection of our findings and policy implications.

¹² This chapter is co-authored with Nicoletta Balbo, Melinda Mills, Liesbet Heyse, and Rafael Wittek and is currently under review. Data was collected at MSF Holland in collaboration with Liesbet Heyse and prepared for analysis by Marleen Damman and Melinda Mills. Sincere thanks to the organization for enabling and supporting the research and granting access to its personnel database.

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4.1 Introduction: Turnover and Retention in Humanitarian Organizations

Employee turnover has detrimental effects on organizational performance and continuity, making the retention of skilled and experienced staff a key challenge for most organizations (Hilltrop, 1999; Staw, 1980; Ton & Huckman, 2008). In recent years, the humanitarian sector and other nonprofit and philanthropic enterprises have started to focus on the necessity to retain qualified and experienced staff (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Kunreuther, 2003). Recent evaluations of humanitarian operations following the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami, emphasized the crucial relevance of qualified personnel for the efficient and effective provision of humanitarian assistance and emergency relief operations to populations in need (Telford & Cosgrave, 2006; Harvey, Stoddard, Harmer, & Taylor, 2010). This is coupled with the heightened realization that retaining experienced personnel within international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is highly contentious (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). With demanding working conditions in disaster and conflict zones, long separation from family and friends, limited career prospects and employment security in the sector, many aid workers treat humanitarian employment as a one-time activity, resulting in high turnover rates within humanitarian INGOs (Henry, 2004). In an effort to address these excessive and potentially damaging turnover rates, humanitarian INGOs are keen to identify factors influencing aid workers' job exits as a basis to develop potential retention strategies (Emmens & Parry, 2006).

Whether an employee opts to leave an organization is dependent upon the desirability of movement (employee's perception of attractiveness of job) and the ease of movement (employment alternatives) (March & Simon 1958), applicable to employees across all organizations (Steel & Lounsbury, 2009). There is, however, considerable heterogeneity both between types of organizations, the context in which they operate and among employees (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The context of humanitarian INGOs also differs substantially from most profit-driven and public organizations, which have been the primary focus of turnover research. First, they often operate based on altruistic values which guide both individual and organizational behavior (Hopgood, 2005; Vaux, 2001). Second, the need to react rapidly to sudden crises demands a high degree of flexibility from organizations and employees (Loquercio et al., 2006). Finally, operations tend to take place in exceptional and often even dangerous locations (Heyse, 2007; Stoddard, Harmer, & Haver, 2006). Since the generalizability of findings from for profit to nonprofit and humanitarian organizations has been called into question (DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990; Lewis, 2003), it is essential to consider the distinct context of the humanitarian sector when examining employee retention.

The aim of this study is to explain how the unique features characterizing the context of humanitarian work (e.g., location, security) and the individual characteristics of aid workers (e.g., gender, occupation) impact job retention within one humanitarian organization. We use the comprehensive personnel database of the Dutch section of one of the most renowned humanitarian INGOs – *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) – to trace the potential causes and antecedents of job retention.

The current study builds upon and extends existing knowledge on this topic in three central ways. First, studies on turnover and retention in the humanitarian sector have been predominately explorative, relying on self-reported material, and based on qualitative interviews and relatively small samples (e.g. Emmens & Parry, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006). To our knowledge, this will be the first study that adopts a more rigorous empirical approach using a large-scale quantitative analysis of individual employees in this sector. We created a unique employee database, containing all staff records of field workers, including personal characteristics and information about missions over the time period from 2003 to 2008. Such comprehensive and objective data is rare in turnover research generally, but exceptional within the humanitarian context. The approach permits a more objective picture of employee retention.

A second contribution is our theoretical and empirical focus on the importance of both individual characteristics and the context of employment. This permits isolating which turnover antecedents are universal or specific to different contexts, organizations or types of individuals (see e.g. Cohen, 1999; Saporta & Farjoun, 2003). The third and final contribution relates to the broader generalizability of this study. Insights about aid workers' retention will be applicable to a broad range of other occupations and sectors, particularly those featuring high altruistic values like social workers or nonprofit employees (Mesch, Tschirhart, Perry, & Lee, 1998; Tziner & Vardi, 1984), or those that involve deployments to foreign and potentially insecure environments as is the case for expatriates (Grazonik, Brockner, & Siegel, 2000) or the military (Steel, 1996).

We first provide a theoretical framework that outlines the central concepts and mechanisms of employee retention in the humanitarian sector. We then move to a more detailed discussion of the context of the humanitarian sector and the work related as well as individual characteristics that might influence individual aid workers' decision to stay or leave the organization. This is followed by a description of the data and the logistic regression model used in our analysis. After presenting our results, we will conclude with a discussion and reflection on the scientific and practical implications of our findings.

4.2 Theoretical Framework: Retaining Aid Workers

Humanitarian INGOs are nonprofit organizations that have the primary aim to save lives and reduce human suffering (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). The rationale of these organizations is normative instead of profit oriented, as reflected by their often precarious financial situation (Smillie & Minear, 2003) and the altruistic attitudes and identity of their employees (Hilhorst & Schmiemann, 2002). In the following, we elaborate why these features are relevant for developing a model to understand retention and isolate possible antecedents of turnover in the distinct context of the humanitarian sector.

4.2.1 Conceptualizing retention as reenlistment

Budgetary constraints arising from donor dependency and an ambiguous financial situation are the reality for most humanitarian INGOs (Simile & Minear, 2003). Short funding cycles

circumvent long-term planning, making it difficult for organizations to offer reliable career prospects. At the same time, humanitarian INGOs need to maintain a high degree of flexibility, which some argue is facilitated by the regular influx of new staff (Loquercio et al., 2006). As a consequence, humanitarian INGOs tend to issue short term contracts, usually between six months to two years and even shorter in situations of spontaneous, large scale emergencies (Brooke & McConnan, 1997). Though reluctant to offer permanent contracts, humanitarian INGOs are nevertheless aware of the crucial relevance of experienced staff for operational effectiveness and efficiency (Telford & Cosgrave, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006). To deal with these often opposing forces, they aspire to retain employees not only within one job, but for a succession of contracts within the same organization. Therefore, they operate in a similar manner to military deployment (Steel, 1996), flexible and subcontracted employment in the high-tech field (Carnoy, Castells, & Benner, 1997) and other forms of nonstandard work (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007). Due to this, for the purpose of this paper, we operationalize retention in the humanitarian field as the reenlistment for a second humanitarian mission.

4.2.2 Attitudinal models of turnover

The humanitarian sector presents a theoretical puzzle that challenges existing models and findings of job turnover, largely conducted within for profit organizations. Attitudinal models of turnover demonstrate that higher job retention is associated with factors such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and behavioral intentions (Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Jaros, 1997; Mobley, 1977). Studies commissioned by humanitarian INGOs and supporting agencies such as People in Aid, show that aid workers tend to be satisfied with their job and exhibit a strong affective attachment to their organization, with relatively few expressing exit intentions (Emmens & Parry, 2006). Yet, despite having strong commitment and exhibiting the intention to stay, many aid workers actually appear to leave the organization after one mission (Loquercio et al., 2006). While this seems contradictory at first, a study by Tziner & Vardi (1984) on the relation between social workers' job satisfaction and retention shows that this disparity is common in occupations characterized by high altruistic values. Similar observations have been made for military personnel, which, although driven rather by patriotic than altruistic values, also have a pronounced normative motivation (Mehay, 1990). Thus, it appears that attitudinal models of turnover, while highly successful in other sectors (Steel & Lounsbury, 2009) have limited predictive strength in explaining aid workers' reenlistments. A report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (in Loquercio et al., 2006) revealed that difficulties to balance private and professional life and lack of career opportunities are the primary factors determining aid workers' decision to quit. This indicates that instead of depending on aid workers' job attitudes, retention in the humanitarian sector is primarily influenced by the employment opportunities and constraints contingent on the particularities of aid work.

4.2.3 Opportunities and constraints of aid workers

Employment opportunities and constraints influence retention in the sense that employees evaluate their employment situation based on the extent to which it allows the realization of preferences (Rosenfeld, 1992). If there are substantial constraints to the realization of preferences, or if more attractive employment alternatives are available elsewhere, employees are unlikely to remain with an organization. The decision is thereby not necessarily based on the immediate available employment opportunities, such as alternative job offers, and objectively existing constraints. In fact, precise and reliable information on these dimensions is not always readily available. Under such conditions, general employment prospects as well as anticipation based on previous experiences play an important role in employees' retention decisions (March, 1994). Accordingly, prospective employment opportunities and experienced as well as anticipated constraints contingent on humanitarian work emerge as important factors influencing aid workers' decisions to engage in a second mission. A variety of factors shape the specific realization of an aid worker's employment opportunities and constraints, which can be subsumed under the two areas of individual characteristics and humanitarian context.

4.2.4 The context of humanitarian missions

Humanitarian organizations transport aid workers to disaster sites and scenes of violent conflict, which generally differ substantially from the employees' ordinary surroundings. Working in such emergency conditions entails challenges and stress factors not commonly considered in turnover research. The extensive literature on the psychological impact of working in emergencies (e.g. Cardozo, Holtz, Kaiser, Gotway, Ghitis, Toomey, & Salama; 2003; Eriksson, Van de Kemp, Gorsuch, Hoke, & Foy, 2001), however, indicates that stressful and traumatic experiences are a common occurrence in this field and can negatively impact aid workers' well-being. Security concerns and challenges of cultural adjustment are particularly important sources of stress and can constitute severe constraints for aid workers (Curling & Simmons, 2010; Danieli, 2002). These negative experiences in turn influence aid workers' reenlistment decisions, firstly, by reducing the motivation to do this type of work, and secondly, by shaping anticipations concerning constraints involved in future missions. In effect, the negative experience of severe constraints will likely affect aid workers' decision to reenlist for a subsequent assignment.

We now outline the constraints related to the conditions in a humanitarian mission, particularly in terms of how security and cultural adjustment can impact on aid workers' reenlistment decisions. Humanitarian operations are concentrated in the less developed regions of the world in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, where local capacity to respond to disaster is low. Working in such circumstances entails challenges, particularly for foreign employees, so called "expatriates" (Birdseye & Hill, 1995). Considerable cultural differences between the home and the host country can be stressors that negatively affect expatriates' satisfaction with their postings and general well-being (Lanier, 1979; Torbiron, 1982). Curling and Simmons (2010) observe that humanitarian expatriate staff tends to

experience the political, economic and social situation of their work location as more stressful than their national counterparts. The separation from friends and family to confide in further enhances such emotional strain.

Not all aid workers, however, find themselves in a foreign environment. Humanitarian INGOs also recruit locally, employing persons from regions where the organization is active.¹³ Stressors related to cultural discrepancies and separation from supportive contacts is presumably less pronounced for those aid workers who are employed in settings culturally and geographically close to their home country. First of all, the culture shock upon entering the work location is less pronounced or even absent when an employee is familiar with basic cultural expectations and not immediately distinguishable from the local population (Oberg, 1960). Such similarity between home and host country, in turn is generally assumed to positively affect expatriates' retention (Gregersen & Black, 1990). Speaking the local language is also advantageous, since it facilitates social integration, both in the workplace and privately (Naumann, 1992). Particularly in regions where certain languages are widely spoken, such as Spanish in Latin America or French in Africa, fluency in the local language is likely for aid workers from the region. Finally, the proximity to the home country facilitates more frequent contact with family and friends such as during holidays. Taken together, aid workers employed in a location close to their home country will have less culture shock, have higher likelihood to fit in with the local population, speak the language and due to closer proximity, be able to maintain personal and family ties. In relation to a reenlistment decision, we pose our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Cultural and geographical proximity): Compared to aid workers employed in a foreign setting, aid workers who work in their home continent have a higher probability to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Beyond the challenge of cultural adjustment, the security situation in humanitarian projects often constitutes a major stressor for employees (Danieli, 2002). In 2008, 260 aid workers were killed, abducted or seriously injured in the field (Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico, 2009). Main threats to the safety of aid workers relate to politically-motivated violence, crime and unsafe physical conditions in terms of hygiene, medical facilities, transportation and land mines. Substantial differences exist between locations: the vast majority of incidents occurred in Afghanistan, Somalia and Darfur, where aid workers increasingly found themselves as the deliberately chosen targets of violent attacks (Stoddard & Harmer, 2010). Other high risk settings include Sri Lanka, Chad, Iraq and Pakistan. Together, these seven countries account for three quarters of all attacks on aid workers between 2006 and 2008, indicating that numerous other settings are considerably less dangerous (Stoddard et al., 2009). If the security of aid workers cannot be guaranteed, many INGOs require employees to remain within the confines of the project compound, diminishing personal freedom and opportunities to socialize (Curling & Simmons, 2010). In effect, working in a high-risk

¹³ This study only examines professional staff (e.g., medics and administrators) who can be deployed to other projects worldwide and not locally recruited support staff (e.g., drivers, cooks, guards, and cleaners), who are specifically hired for a local project.

setting involves substantial constraints in terms of physical safety and mental well-being as well as the realization of personal preferences such as leisure time activities or interactions with the local population. We anticipate that these security constraints will impact reenlistment decisions, and propose the following hypothesis in this respect:

Hypothesis 2 (Security): Relative to aid workers deployed to a high risk setting, aid workers who are dispatched to a low or medium risk environment will have a higher likelihood to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Aid workers do not always remain on a humanitarian mission until the scheduled end of contract. Sometimes organizational policies exogenous to the employees, like downscaling, evacuation or project closure result in the premature termination of a humanitarian assignment. Yet, organizational restructuring is not the only reason for premature conclusion. Occasionally, stressors resulting from difficulties with cultural adjustment, separation from family or a constant sense of threat can cumulate to the extent that continuation of the mission becomes difficult (Blanchetière, 2006; Curling & Simons, 2010). In some of these cases, the return to the home country prior to the scheduled end of contract is a sensible or even necessary option. A premature departure for personal reasons, rather than organizational restructuring, can therefore be interpreted as indicative of an aid worker experiencing severe constraints in their work. Learning from such negative experiences, an aid worker will likely develop apprehension concerning future missions. Hence, we expect:

Hypothesis 3 (Early Return): Compared to aid workers who stayed for the full length of their contract or left early due to organizational reasons, aid workers who ended their first humanitarian assignment prematurely for personal reasons have a lower likelihood to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Finally, even though humanitarian missions can be all over the world, there is little reason to assume that working in any one particular geographic location is more or less conducive to reenlistment. We therefore control for the mission location by continent, but do not formulate respective hypotheses.

4.2.5 Individual characteristics of aid workers

Individual characteristics of aid workers are also likely to influence employment opportunities and constraints, hence affecting reenlistment decisions. Turnover research has demonstrated that factors like age, gender, marital status, and access to different labor markets depending on occupation and nationality are important antecedents of job exit (Koenigsberg, Garet & Rosenbaum, 1994; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Moynihan & Landuyt, 2008; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Rosin & Korabik, 1995).

Older employees show stronger attachment to their employer and generally exhibit lower rates of job mobility (Ng & Feldman, 2009). The limited availability of better employment alternatives and the reduced focus on career advancement are potential reasons. Younger employees are not only more driven to pursue a career, but also face more attractive

employment opportunities (Krecker, 1994). This situation is particularly pronounced in the humanitarian sector. Among younger aid workers, many enter the field to gain experience that is advantageous for a later career outside the sector, for example with the United Nations or as an expert in public health (Hudson & Inkson, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006). In contrast, older employees often take up humanitarian work after having successfully pursued a career in another field, for example as a medical doctor, thus being less intent on career advancement and more stable workers. Due to the difference in career stage and motivation of workers of different ages, we expect:

Hypothesis 4 (Age): Compared to younger aid workers, those who are older will have a higher propensity to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Another key predictor for job turnover is gender, with women shown to be more prone to exit jobs than men (Royalty, 1998). Researchers such as Hakim (1991; 2002) argue that women and men have different lifestyle preferences, which in turn result in the divergent labor market patterns that we observe between the sexes. Crompton and Harris (1997), conversely, maintain that structural constraints in employment opportunities for women are the main cause of gender differences in employment patterns. In line with this reasoning, Stroh, Brett, & Reilly (1996) identify limited career advancement opportunities within the employing organization as the main reason for female managers' voluntary job exit. In comparison to for profit organizations, gender wage differences are lower in the nonprofit sector and female involvement overall is relatively high (Leete, 2006), although a "glass-ceiling" nevertheless remains. Gibelman (2000) observes that women's overrepresentation in direct service provision is contrasted by a striking underrepresentation in management positions, indicating that even in the relatively egalitarian nonprofit sector women face fewer advancement opportunities than men. Humanitarian INGOs are no exception. Leadership positions are predominantly held by men and gender awareness pertains mainly to the operational, rather than the organizational domain (Lewis, 2003; Wallace, 1998). Facing limited advancement opportunities within the employing organizations, female aid workers may have fewer incentives to remain.

Beyond limited career opportunities, additional mechanisms explaining gender-specific job exit are women's family obligations, the higher likelihood of women to withdraw from the labor market due to parenthood, and the extreme work-family reconciliation difficulties of humanitarian aid work. Previous research has identified various characteristics of "good" jobs, that allow paid employment to become more compatible with family responsibilities, such as flexibility in timing and organization of work and a higher degree of autonomy (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Begall & Mills, 2011; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000). Although work in humanitarian organizations often offers relatively high autonomy and flexibility, the distant location of the workplace and high security concerns likely influence women's decisions to reenlist, particularly if they are considering starting a family. Although young fathers or males who are considering children may also be influenced, previous research has demonstrated that women are often the primary caregivers of children and are more likely to withdraw

from the labor force for family-related reasons in comparison to men (Adema & Whiteford, 2007; Allen et al. 2000; Blossfeld & Hakim, 2007; Mennino & Brayfield, 2002). We therefore propose that:

Hypothesis 5 (Gender): Relative to male aid workers, female aid workers will have a lower likelihood to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Being in a permanent relationship has been found to positively affect retention (Huang, Lin, & Chuang, 2006). Previous research has demonstrated that individuals who are married or in a stable cohabitating union are more likely to remain employed and avoid unemployment, which is particularly the case for men (Mills & Blossfeld, 2006). This is often attributed to their need to support a partner or family and the higher likelihood of home ownership, which in turn fosters stability (Mulder & Wagner, 2001). We anticipate, however, that this standard relationship might be challenged in the context of humanitarian work. Aid workers' deployments constitute extended sojourns abroad and only very few (often higher) positions allow individuals to bring a partner or children. Such extended separation from partner and family is perceived as a high constraint by many aid workers and listed among the primary reasons for job exit (Emmens & Parry, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006). Aid workers who are single would be less likely to face such constraint, which we anticipate would affect their reenlistment. Hence, we assume:

Hypothesis 6 (Partnership): In comparison to aid workers who are single or separated, those in a permanent relationship will have a lower propensity to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Humanitarian INGOs employ a diversity of occupations, making the term "aid worker" a broad concept that can be applied to medical doctors, technicians, administrative personnel and humanitarian affairs officers (Brooke & McConnan, 1997). Since MSF, the organization we study, focuses on the provision of medical aid, it is useful to make a distinction according to occupations that might be more or less likely to reenlist for a second mission. In MSF it is logical to distinguish between: medical employees (doctors and surgeons), paramedical personnel (nurses, laboratory technicians and mid-wives), non-medical staff (logisticians and administrators), and coordinators (project coordinators and head of missions).

The occupational labor markets, employment opportunities and professional requirements differ between these occupations (Lorence, 1987; McBrier, 2003; Smith, 1983). In most countries, medical doctors need to obtain a formal verification of their qualification that officially allows them to practice medicine. This accreditation is usually temporary, with revalidation requiring proof of continuous practice for example in the form of a minimum number of hours a medical doctor needs to have spent doing professional work. Humanitarian work – even in a medical position – does not in all circumstances fit the eligibility for accreditation. For this reason, many medical employees may fear the possibility of losing their practitioners' license as a consequence of extended aid work (Crawford, 2009). Such fundamental constraints in combining humanitarian work with a career in their home country's national health system may deter medical employees from reenlisting for a second

humanitarian mission. Since other occupational groups do not face such severe constraints when employed in humanitarian organizations, we pose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7 (Occupation): Compared to their colleagues in nonmedical, paramedical and coordinating positions, medical aid workers will have the lowest likelihood to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

Humanitarian INGOs are also international organizations with a highly diverse workforce often consisting of multiple nationalities (Brooke & McConnan, 1997). In relation to employment opportunities and constraints, nationality often defines access to different labor markets, which vary substantially in terms of structure of employment, labor market participation, unemployment rates, general working conditions, and pay levels (Betcherman, 2002). Such differences affect the “decency of work” in a given country (i.e., the extent to which productive, secure and dignified employment opportunities are available) (ILO, 1999; Osberg & Sharpe, 2004). The working conditions and employment opportunities in an individual’s home country will in turn influence an employee’s perception of the attractiveness of the current job. In general, employment opportunities, conditions and protection legislation tend to be more favorable and attractive in developed countries, compared to countries with medium or low levels of development (Bescond, Châtaignier, & Mehran, 2003; Gregory, 1980). Such “decency of working conditions” is often closely associated with human development, more so than with economic development as measured by the GDP (Ahmed, 2003). Taken together, for aid workers from countries with a low human development level, the working conditions offered by humanitarian INGOs, which tend to be held accountable to relatively strict Western employment regulations, are presumably more attractive than the employment alternatives available elsewhere in their national labor market. The opposite can be expected for nationals from highly developed countries. For these individuals, there are often more attractive employment opportunities available in their home country, making the option to remain employed by MSF less appealing. Accordingly, we expect:

Hypothesis 8 (Nationality): Compared to aid workers from highly developed countries, aid workers whose home countries have a medium or low human development level have a higher likelihood to reenlist for a second humanitarian mission.

4.3 Data and Method

4.3.1 Data

Data was taken from the personnel database of the Dutch section of the distinguished international humanitarian organization *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF). MSF Holland focuses on the provision of medical aid and currently operates in 24 countries worldwide (see Heyse, 2007). The personnel database is used for administrative purposes and first required extensive restructuring and matching to enable statistical data analysis. After restructuring, however, it is highly amenable to this type of analysis due to the fact that it contains basic

demographic information about the employee, but also detailed labor market history information, including detailed information about each mission. Since the personnel data includes information on each mission an employee engaged in, including start and end date, it was possible to determine the number and sequence of missions.

The personnel database contains the employment histories of 2,985 field workers employed by the organization from January 2003 until December 2009. We reduced this sample for the purposes of our analysis for several reasons. First, we omitted all employees who started to work for the organization prior to the establishment of the digital database in 2003 due to the fact that there was no detailed information available on their early missions (reduction of $N=701$). Second, we excluded individuals who ended their first mission in 2009, but might not have been able to start a second mission within our observation period (which ended in December of 2009). MSF encourages aid workers to have a break of several months between missions, which implies that employees' completing their first mission in 2009 may still return for a second mission but are right-censored by our observation window. To allow for a realistic buffer, December 2008 was chosen as the cut-off date for first mission completion (reduction of $N=163$). Third, a small number of experts or advisors were excluded from the sample since these individuals are hired for their specific knowledge, often on a one-time basis, and therefore have a different function to regular employees (reduction of $N=14$). Finally, we excluded cases with missing values for the variables that we examined (reduction of $N=152$ cases), resulting in a final sample of 1,955 aid workers for our analysis.

Measurement of variables

Reenlistment for a second mission. The dependent variable has a dichotomous outcome indicating whether an employee reenlisted for a second mission after his/her first humanitarian assignment with the same organization (MSF).¹⁴

Cultural and geographic proximity. This variable measured proximity by matching an employee's nationality to the location of his/her first mission. This resulted in a dichotomous variable, indicating whether an employee worked in their home continent (e.g., African in Africa) or in a foreign context (e.g., African in Asia, reference category). Given the computation based on nationality and workplace location, the variable constitutes essentially an interaction term.

¹⁴ An alternative measure of retention, length of stay with the organization, was initially considered and tested, yet turned out to be problematic in the context of aid work. Two computations of length of stay as either, the entire period between the commencement of the first and the end date of the last mission or as the accumulated duration of each attended mission produced different outcomes, thus posing the challenge to ascertain which one would be more meaningful. Consultations with the personnel department of MSF revealed two reasons for this. First, employees are encouraged to take several months breaks between missions, and second, missions can vary in length between a few months to several years, depending on an employee's function and the type of mission. During these consultations, MSF's retention goal was also specified as retaining each employee for a minimum of two missions, irrespective of the duration of these missions. Based on this information, the decision was made to operationalize retention as reenlistment for a second mission. The organization affirmed this decision.

Security. This variable is measured by recording the number of deliberate violent incidents (killing, injury or abduction) involving aid workers, for a country, in the timeframe 2003 to 2008 (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2011). As such it specifically reflects the security situation of aid workers rather than general risks as faced by the local population, which may be substantially higher. Specifically, we computed a categorical variable that identifies: i) low risk settings, with less than 10 violent incidents (reference category), ii) a medium risk setting with 10 to 50 violent incidents; and, iii) a high risk setting with more than 50 violent incidents.

Early return. This variable measures whether an employee left the first assignment prior to the anticipated end of contract. We differentiate between employees who returned at the regular end of contract (reference category), those who ended their contract prematurely due to organizational decisions such as downscaling, evacuation or project closure, and finally, employees who returned for personal reasons.

Age is a continuous variable measuring the age of employee at the moment of entering the organization for their first mission. For the *gender* variable, men are the reference group.

Partnership status measures the relationship status of an employee at the time when the respondent first entered the organization, categorized as: single (reference group), in a partnership (cohabitation, legal marriage, registered partnership, or long-term committed non-residential union), and a third category of separated (divorced, legally separated or widowed). Unfortunately, the data only contained partnership status at the start of the first mission, not enabling us to examine any changes in relationship status. We tried different specifications and separate groups (e.g., separating cohabiters from the legally married), but they were not statistically different.

Nationality. Nationality provides information on an employee's access to national labor markets, which differ in terms of attractiveness, particularly between highly developed and under-developed countries. Accordingly, nationalities are grouped by the Human Development Index (HDI) categorization of the home country (UNDP, 2011). The HDI is a composite index which measures a country's development level based on a combination of indicators concerning life expectancy, educational attainment and income. The final index classifies countries by level of development, resulting in a categorical variable containing three categories: highly developed home country (reference category), medium developed home country, and low development level of home country.

Occupation assesses potential professional constraints and opportunities related to a specific career path and is measured by a categorical variable, with four categories: i) Non-medical (logistics, finances, water-sanitation, humanitarian affairs, administration), ii) Paramedical (nurses, midwives, laboratory technicians), iii) Medical (medical doctors, surgeons, psychiatrists (reference category)); and, iv) Coordination (higher and lower coordinating positions such as project coordinators and country managers).

Location of mission. Mission location is included as a control and is measured by a categorical variable that groups different geographical areas, including: Eastern Europe and Russia, Africa (reference category), Asia, South America, and Middle East.

4.3.2 Analytical method

Since the variable has a dichotomous outcome, we estimate a logistic regression analysis, which allows us to examine which factors affect an aid worker's probability to go on a second mission. Our model includes two sets of variables: firstly, factors relating to the specific context of humanitarian missions (cultural and geographic proximity, security, early return, plus mission location as a control), and secondly, individual characteristics of the employee (age, gender, partnership status, occupation and nationality). To test model fit, we first applied a log-likelihood ratio test to ensure that the model we developed was a significant improvement to the null model. Second, we classified the model by checking predicted values in relation to actual values, thus identifying model specificity and sensitivity. Moreover, in preliminary analyses, we adopted a stepwise approach inserting each variable separately to test whether it significantly improved model fit. As a consequence some variables were left out. For example, we checked for a possible curvilinear effect of age, by squaring the age variable and including it in preliminary analyses. Since we could not find any effect, we then excluded the age squared term from our model. Our final selection of variables is the result of both theoretical and empirical reasoning. Indeed, we include in our analysis every variable that, according to our theory, might affect aid workers' reenlistment for a second humanitarian mission. On the other hand, the preliminary stepwise procedure we engaged in helped us to identify a parsimonious and efficient model.

4.4 Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.1, which shows that turnover rates are indeed high with only 40 per cent of aid workers returning after their first mission with MSF. This indicates that for the majority of employees, humanitarian engagement is a one-time activity. The results of the logistic regression are shown in Table 4.2. Table 4.3 presents the truth table for the analysis.

With regard to the specific context of the humanitarian mission, the following observations were made. No support was found for Hypotheses 1 and 2: aid workers who work in their own home continent or are posted to low/medium risk settings are not more likely to reenlist for a second mission. Hypothesis 3 in turn is supported: aid workers who left prematurely for personal reasons are less likely to return for a second mission.

In terms of individual features, no support was found for Hypotheses 4 and 5: neither are older workers more likely to reenlist for a second mission than younger ones, nor are men more likely to reenlist than women. We also tested for categorical interpretations and higher-order polynomials of age in additional analyses, which were also insignificant. Hypothesis 6 in contrast found support: compared to their single and separated colleagues, aid workers in a relationship have the lowest propensity to reenlist. In support of Hypothesis 7, we find that medical doctors have a significantly lower likelihood to return for a second mission than all other occupational groups. Furthermore, we observe that non-medical employees have the highest propensity to reenlist, exceeding that of coordinators and paramedical staff. Finally, the analysis supports Hypothesis 8. Our findings reveal that

nationals of highly developed countries are least likely to reenlist, whereas nationals of countries with a low level of human development have by far the highest chance of reenlisting for a subsequent humanitarian mission.

Table 4.1 Aid Worker Reenlistment: Descriptive Statistics used in the Analysis

<i>N</i> = 1995	N	Percentage		
Retention (Dependent variable)				
Reenlisted for a second mission	785	40.2		
Exit after first mission	1,170	59.8		
Cultural & geographic proximity				
Foreign setting	1,801	92.1		
Familiar setting	154	7.9		
Security				
Low risk setting	1,015	51.9		
Medium risk setting	613	31.4		
High risk setting	327	16.7		
Early return?				
Regular end of contract	1,607	82.2		
Early return – individual reasons	268	13.7		
Early return – organizational reasons	80	4.1		
Location				
Africa	1,437	73.5		
Eastern Europe and Russia	23	1.2		
Asia	428	21.9		
South America	62	3.2		
Middle East	5	0.3		
Gender				
Women	847	56.7		
Men	1,108	43.3		
Partnership Status				
Single	1,462	74.8		
In relationship	388	19.9		
Separated	105	5.4		
Occupation				
Non-medical	577	29.5		
Para-medical	670	34.3		
Medical	523	26.8		
Coordination	185	9.5		
Nationality by home country's HDI				
High development level	1,763	90.2		
Medium development level	135	6.9		
Low development level	57	2.9		
Age	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	36.37	8.94	21.79	76.66

The interaction effects (not reported) of gender with age, partnership status with security situation, gender with position, nationality with familiarity of workplace turned out to be not significant.

Table 4.2 Logistic Regression Estimates of Aid Workers' Reenlistments

Variable	B Coef.	S.E.	O.R.
Cultural & geographic proximity (Foreign setting)	0.14	0.27	1.15
Security (Low risk setting)			
Medium risk setting	-0.07	0.11	0.93
High risk setting	-0.00	0.14	1.00
Early return (Regular end of contract)			
Early return – individual reasons	-1.34***	0.17	0.26
Early return – organizational reasons	-0.30	0.24	0.74
Location (Africa)			
Eastern Europe and Russia	-0.21	0.51	0.81
Asia	-0.07	0.12	0.93
South America	-0.20	0.28	0.82
Middle East	0.12	0.93	1.12
Age	0.00	0.01	1.00
Gender (Men)	-0.07	0.11	0.93
Partnership Status (Single)			
In relationship	-0.36**	0.14	0.70
Separated	-0.06	0.23	0.94
Occupation (Medical)			
Non-medical	0.93***	0.14	2.54
Para-medical	0.53***	0.13	1.70
Coordination	0.73***	0.19	2.07
Nationality by home country's HDI (Highly developed)			
Medium development level	0.63**	0.24	1.88
Low development level	1.28***	0.37	3.59
N		1955	
Log likelihood		-1236.40***	
Log likelihood null model		-1316.94	

Notes: Reference group in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ / O.R.: Odds Ratios

Despite the absence of interaction effects, our model appears suitably classified as the truth table indicates (Table 4.3). However, it becomes obvious that it is better suited to predict job exit (specificity), than correctly anticipating retention (sensitivity). Nevertheless, the analysis clearly identified several factors influencing aid workers' reenlistment for a second humanitarian mission: early return, partnership status, occupation, and nationality.

Table 4.3 Truth Table for Logistic Regression of Aid Workers' Reenlistments

Classified	2 nd mission - actual	No 2 nd mission - actual	Total
2 nd mission - predicted	301	210	511
No 2 nd mission - predicted	484	960	1444
Total	785	1170	1955
Sensitivity	38.34%	Specificity	82.05%

Classified 2nd mission-predicted if predicted probability (2nd mission-actual) $\geq .5$

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion – The Role of Employment Opportunities and Constraints

The aim of this study was to explain and understand how the unique features of the context of humanitarian work and individual characteristics of aid workers impact on job retention within one humanitarian organization. Using a comprehensive personnel database of one of the most renowned humanitarian INGOs – *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), we explored the potential causes and antecedents of job retention.

Our theoretical explanations for job retention were centered on two primary factors. Firstly, we demonstrated that the humanitarian sector constitutes an exceptional organizational context and consists of features (proximity of work, security) that are unique and pivotal for understanding job reenlistment. Secondly, we departed from the standard body of research that focuses on job attitudes as predictors of turnover, largely within profit organizations, in favor of an approach emphasizing the role of employment opportunities and constraints. In addition to including individual level factors associated with employment opportunities and constraints, we focused on specific constraints emerging from conditions in humanitarian missions. Engaging in a quantitative analysis of personnel records, we then estimated a logistic regression to measure which factors predicted the likelihood of returning to a second mission.

A first general conclusion is that employment opportunities and constraints that aid workers face play a substantial role in influencing their decision to return. Especially the extent to which attractive employment alternatives are available appears to be of importance. Differences thereby manifest primarily in terms of nationality. For employees from countries which score low in level of human development, the working conditions in a humanitarian INGO are in fact relatively attractive compared to the employment opportunities available in their national labor markets. Accordingly, they are considerably more likely to remain with the employing organization than aid workers whose home countries' labor markets provide attractive employment alternatives.

Besides attractive employment opportunities, constraints in labor market access also appear to be relevant. Differences particularly manifest themselves along occupational lines. For medical doctors, a prolonged stay in the humanitarian field reduces their chances for employment elsewhere due to the need for regular accreditation. In contrast, coordinators and non-medical employees who do not face such risks have a considerably higher likelihood to reenlist. In summary, both constraints related to a professional career path as well as the relative attractiveness of employment within the humanitarian field influence aid workers' reenlistment. Constraints also relate to aid workers' personal situation and the extent to which it is compatible with working in aid provision. Aid workers in a permanent relationship have a lower propensity to reenlist than those who are single, indicating that the extended separation from a partner is a major obstacle for retention in the humanitarian field. Although there is no direct gender effect and we are unable to directly test whether having children or work-family conflict influences individuals decision, the presence of a partner might provide some indication of these frictions.

Yet, to what extent is reenlistment shaped by an aid worker's experience of constraints during a first humanitarian mission? Our analysis of mission characteristics as potential turnover antecedents indicates that the most common stressors in humanitarian aid, namely cultural adjustment and security threats, are less influential than anticipated. In fact, it appears that only in extreme circumstances when a premature termination of the mission is required, is the negative experience severe enough to affect reenlistment. However, neither being in a foreign environment, nor the experience of working in a high risk setting reduces aid workers' chances to return for another mission. Possibly, aid workers anticipate the risks and challenges involved in the work and do not perceive them as particularly negative and constraining. This is in line with Fawcett's (2003, p. 6) observation that "aid workers have a pretty shrewd idea of what they are getting into when they enter this career, and dirty clothes, gunshots at night and lack of electricity do not surprise them". While such realistic expectations might be an explanation, the limited extent to which the distinctive features of humanitarian missions shape aid workers' retention nevertheless remains striking. Given the extraordinary conditions of aid work, one would expect to find these factors more potently reflected in aid workers' retention. The more unexpected finding is that apparently, aid workers are actually quite similar to employees in other, less extreme fields, at least in terms of retention. Rather than being influenced by constraints experienced during a mission, aid workers primarily evaluate their job relative to available employment alternatives, then choose the most favorable option. Particularly for those aid workers who have access to attractive occupational and national labor markets, this option often appears to be outside of the employing humanitarian INGO, thus inducing job exit.

4.5.1 Limitations and future research

Firstly, an alternative explanation for the lack of significant findings in relation to geographic and cultural proximity and security risk is that it is a measurement issue and thus a methodological artifact instead of a substantive finding. To correctly measure cultural proximity, it would be important to know if the individual actually speaks the language or is culturally connected to the location of that workplace in other ways. We should also note that although we were able to match the security level by year and country, this is likely highly variable by location. In future research it would therefore be important to pinpoint the security level more precisely. Certain locations may be secure, while other regions in the same country could be "no go" zones.

Secondly, the characteristics of the particular sample might also have affected findings. For example, age is relatively centered in the span between late twenties to early forties. Thus, the majority of aid workers in the sample are likely to have a similar timing of their humanitarian engagement, which in turn reduces potential effects of age. The absence of an age effect thus is likely related to the constitution of the sample, rather than of substantial theoretical implication.

Finally, although the included turnover antecedents accurately predict 82% of all job exits only 38% of all reenlistments are correctly anticipated (Table 4.3). A possible explanation

might lie in the omission of attitudinal factors such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, the desire to have children or other unmeasured personality characteristics. Even though our findings support previous, more qualitative studies (Emmens & Parry, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006) which indicate that attractive employment alternatives and constraints contingent on the job constitute important reasons for aid workers' job exits, high satisfaction and a strong affective bond to the organization possibly reduce the impact of these turnover-inducing factors. More specifically, aid workers who have strong positive attitudes toward the job and the organization are possibly more likely to accept constraints and forfeit attractive employment alternatives for the sake of remaining with MSF. Unfortunately, the personnel database used for analysis does not contain attitudinal measures; hence testing this assumption is not possible. Future research would benefit from extending the theoretical and methodological approach, by including both, antecedents relating to employment opportunities and constraints and attitudinal factors as determinants of aid workers' retention.¹⁵

4.5.2 Policy recommendations

The findings generated already allow for some practical considerations in terms of possible organizational retention strategies. More than any other stressor emerging from the working conditions in humanitarian aid, the separation from the partner is perceived as a substantial constraint by many aid workers. While allowing for the general accompaniment of partners is not a viable solution, humanitarian INGOs might explore to what extent it is possible to send couples on joint missions. A lot of romantic relationships are formed in the field, between aid workers (Bortolotti, 2004). For these persons, the possibility to go on a second mission together with their partner will likely enhance reenlistment chances. Currently, many INGOs maintain that sending out couples together holds the potential to negatively affect group dynamics in the project. In pursuit of higher retention rates reconsidering this in favor of a more accommodating partner policy might be feasible.

The fact that substantial differences exist in reenlistment chances between medical and non-medical staff is also interesting from a policy point of view. As the constraints faced by medical doctors, notably in terms of accreditation requirements, cannot be resolved by humanitarian INGOs, it might be sensible to accept higher turnover rates among medical personnel and focus retention strategies on non-medical staff. This could for example include favoring non-medical staff for promotion to coordination positions, thus improving their advancement opportunities within the organization.

Finally, our observations concerning the influence of staff nationality on retention tie into a relatively recent development in the humanitarian sector: the internationalization of the workforce (Walker, 2008). Traditionally, humanitarian aid has been dominated by staff

¹⁵ In the context of the research on professionalization and performance of humanitarian organizations at the University of Groningen, more recent data collection efforts involve the preparation of a general survey to be distributed among a large community of aid workers. This survey includes attitudinal measures, thus will open the possibility for successors of the author to extend on current findings.

from highly developed, Western countries. However, increasingly, this predominance has been called into question (e.g., Fowler, 1997; Musaka, 1999). Besides ethical concerns relating to issues of self-determination and principles of capacity building, costliness arising from high turnover rates is an important argument for the reconsideration of a Western focus in recruitment. Our results support this notion: employees from developing countries have substantially higher chances of reenlistment than their colleagues from highly developed nations. Based on this finding, it appears warranted to encourage diversification efforts of humanitarian INGOs. MSF for example, recently initiated a program intended to recruit highly qualified staff locally and eventually deploy them worldwide. Such initiatives that promote the increased involvement of staff from developing countries into humanitarian relief efforts are not only commendable from an ethical perspective, but may also facilitate the reduction of turnover rates.

Employee turnover is one of the most extensively studied topics in organizational research (Maertz & Campion, 2004). Studies have been conducted in diverse organizational settings as well as among various occupational groups (Hom, Caranikas-Walker, Prussia, & Griffeth, 1992). This study in the disparate context of the humanitarian sector challenged some theoretical presuppositions and demonstrated the importance of the context of the workplace in the retention of workers. This research facilitates a better understanding of the factors inducing aid workers' job exits and gives some indication for the development of retention strategies. These strategies could result in better qualified and consistent staff which could in turn foster more effective and efficient humanitarian assistance.

However, while the development of strategies to address and reduce turnover in the humanitarian field is a commendable and relevant undertaking, some skepticism concerning the substantial impact of such strategies remains warranted. A crucial aspect of humanitarian work is its fundamentally normative and voluntary nature and the idea to engage in this work for the sake of a career is in fact spurned by some in the sector (Hopgood, 2008). Thus, while policy changes geared toward making aid work a more attractive employment option might facilitate the retention of some aid workers; such approaches are likely to also draw resistance from substantial parts in the field. Thus, addressing the problem of staff turnover in the humanitarian sector is not only a matter of designing effective policies, but involves a careful balancing of different perspectives on the nature and purpose of humanitarian work.