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# **MAKING SENSE OF ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN AID WORK**

Narrative Approach to Humanitarians' Ways of Coping with  
Everyday Ethical Dilemmas

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# ABSTRACT

Selja Holopainen: Making Sense of Ethical Challenges in Aid Work: Narrative Approach to Humanitarians' Ways of Coping with Everyday Ethical Dilemmas  
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This thesis sets out to study ethical challenges in humanitarian aid from the perspective of field workers. The aim of the study is to move the focus from structural factors to micro-level by elaborating the practical ethical dilemmas that humanitarians working on the field are confronted with and study how humanitarians make sense of and deal with them. This is done by examining the ways in which humanitarians describe their experiences of ethically challenging situations and focusing on what kind of concrete and abstract ways they use to solve and cope with them.

To conduct the study this thesis applies the narrative research approach, which focuses on understanding the narrators' perspective and reality through their story. The data of the study was collected by conducting individual interviews with four humanitarian aid workers working for three different humanitarian organizations. The idea of the interviews was to focus on interviewees' descriptions of how they cope with ethically challenging situations. The interviews were done by utilizing the narrative interview technique and the data was analyzed by using thematic, structural and performative elements of narrative analysis. The analysis focused on observing the social positioning of characters and the power dynamics within each story as well as the main arguments used when the interviewees described their actions when facing ethical conflicts.

Based on the results, humanitarians used five key narratives, which each describe a different way of constructing, solving and coping with ethical conflicts. These were 1. dealing with challenges by not intervening or ignoring the dilemma, 2. solving challenges by considering what is best for the local context, 3. solving challenges in cooperation and interaction with others, 4. solving challenges by acting according to personal values and 5. dealing with challenges by positioning them as a part of life course. Some of the narratives brought up very practical and concrete ways of solving challenges in the situation, while others focused more on ideological justifications and ways of coping with the inner dilemma. Humanitarians described that their way of solving challenges depended on several factors, such as their own understanding of ethics, their values and personality, the nature and context of the conflict and humanitarian's own role and power dynamics in the situation.

The results of this study show how diverse and common ethical challenges in aid work are and bring up new aspects to the study of ethics in aid work by discovering ways in which humanitarians can overcome challenges in their daily work. The similarities within each interviewee's stories demonstrate that even though reflecting on ethical questions was seen to be in the responsibility of the individual, collective sharing of experiences could help humanitarians to make sense of complex situations and reflect on their own ethical views. In addition, this study highlights the importance of gathering more information on practical ethical questions in aid work to help humanitarians when solving challenges and coping with the difficult feelings that facing ethical challenges might cause.

Keywords: humanitarian aid, aid work, humanitarian, ethical challenges, ethics, narrative research, narrative analysis

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

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## 1. Introduction

In October 2023, the situation between Israel and Gaza Strip escalated into a serious armed conflict, leading millions of people in need of humanitarian assistance, such as health care services, medical supplies, water and food (IFRC, 2023). However, due to the difficult circumstances and complex political questions regarding the conflict area, humanitarian organizations faced multiple issues when trying to access the crisis areas, which hampered the delivery of needed supplies to ensure safe treatment of wounded patients. This increased the ongoing shortage of vital products, such as fuel and drugs, and raised serious concerns about securing healthcare services in already overcrowded hospital conditions. (Hadero, 2023) In addition, many aid organizations reported difficulties with communication and coordination, which resulted from the inability to reach out to their employees in crisis areas (Lapintie, 2023). Although the conditions in this conflict are extremely severe, this case example describes the typical challenges that appear in the context where humanitarian action takes place.

Humanitarian action refers to material or logistical help that occurs after conflicts or natural disasters with the purpose to save lives, relieve suffering and protect human dignity. It is guided by international humanitarian law and the four core principles of independence, neutrality, impartiality, and humanity. The distinction between development aid and humanitarian aid is not always apparent, but mostly humanitarian aid is based on immediate short-term relief, whereas development aid aims for more long-term sustainable development by addressing underlying socioeconomic factors leading to crisis or emergency. Currently, the humanitarian system undergoes a lot of pressure due to the increasing number of humanitarian crises generated by population growth, climate change, environmental deterioration, economic inequality and conflicts which means that also the number of actors involved in humanitarian action is growing, both in national and international fields. (Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2015)

Humanitarian assistance requires actors to move away from their familiar environment where explicit guidelines construct their work to one where various actors, cultural context and policy interact. When humanitarian organizations cross borders to foreign countries and act in transnational fields, they are responsible to various actors with conflicting ideals and expectations, such as sending and receiving governments, donors, international and local organizations and beneficiaries. (Sezgin & Dijkzeul, 2015) The practical work is often implemented by multiple individuals with different professional

and cultural backgrounds, who represent the norms of their sending organization. This increases the variety of cultural backgrounds and guidelines (e.g., organizational frameworks, professional principles and institutional requirements) according to which humanitarians act and make decisions while working on field missions.

Although the implementation of humanitarian aid is guided by principles in universal, organizational and professional level, these might sometimes pose contradictory requirements for individuals and furthermore, there is a difference in how individuals interpret, understand and apply these principles in practice. The differing perceptions of the situation at hand and the variety of principles can lead to discrepancy in aid implementation, such as coordination challenges or sending aid that does not align with the local culture or needs. This unique context of humanitarian aid makes humanitarians especially prone to face ethically challenging situations. Even though the elements behind ethical challenges in humanitarian aid are well recognized by literature, the existing research tends to concentrate more on explaining how these elements operate and overlooks the ethical demands, moral stress and the inner struggles that individuals experience. This indicates that personal ethics and moral feelings of humanitarians often remain unacknowledged even though their importance for aid workers is commonly recognized (Slim, 2015).

Moreover, the question of how humanitarians themselves deal with ethical challenges remains unanswered, which shows that more research on the micro-level about field workers' perceptions is needed to understand their view as one of the key actors in the aid chain. This study aims to move the perspective closer to the micro-level by exploring humanitarians' ways of coping with ethical challenges. In this study, I follow the definition offered by Perry (2014), in which ethical challenges refer to situations where differing duties or principles create conflicting requirements for individuals by calling for different actions which forces individuals to consider what they ought to do and who they ought to be. To focus on humanitarians' perspective, this thesis applies the narrative research method, which is used to study how the storytellers make sense of the world and their subjective experiences in it. The narrative research approach was chosen since narratives and storytelling offer individuals an opportunity to reflect on moral dilemmas and difficult situations while constructing who they are and how they ought to act. (Riessman, 2007) The data consisted of four individual interviews with aid workers working for three different humanitarian organizations. The narrative research approach was used throughout the data collection and data analysis.

This thesis is organized into 5 chapters. Following the introduction in Chapter 1, where an overview of the current context of humanitarian aid and the research problem are introduced, Chapter 2 offers

an overview of the existing research on humanitarian aid. The Sub-Chapter 2.1 introduces three relevant concepts that help to outline the humanitarian field. Next, the following Sub-Chapters 2.2 and 2.3 introduce how different external factors (culture and principles) and internal factors (identity and paradigms) enable and limit humanitarian action and influence the emergence of ethical challenges. This is followed by Sub-Chapter 2.4, which provides an outlook of the previous studies concerning humanitarians' experiences of ethical challenges. Later, the next Sub-Chapter 2.5 introduces the limitations of previous studies as well as the aim of this study and research question, which is followed by presenting how the data was analysed and the introduction of the narrative analysis method in Chapter 3. Last, Chapter 4 introduces the results of the analysis, followed by an overall summary of the thesis and suggestions for further research in Chapter 5.

## 2. Existing Research on Humanitarian Aid and its Limitations

The focus of this following chapter is to offer an overview of the literature related to humanitarian aid and introduce the key concepts that are beneficial when studying ethical challenges in humanitarian aid. The chapter introduces the main approaches and concepts that are used to approach the aid field, the factors behind aid practices and, the emergence of ethical challenges. The attention is on these elements because they offer an overview of how the context of humanitarian aid and ethical challenges are discussed in existing literature. Moreover, this is followed by outlining the limitations of the existing studies as well as the aim of this study and research question.

### 2.1 Approaches to Aid Research

Although humanitarian aid has been a prominent topic in academia and among humanitarian organizations, most of the research concerning aid work is still done on a structural level, focusing on humanitarian politics and policies while disregarding the actual implementation process, interaction with the local actors and humanitarians' experiences (Dijkzeul & Wakenge, 2010). As a response, scholars such as Krause, Hilhorst and van Voorst, have turned their attention towards the humanitarian actors and the social context of aid to allow analysis closer to the micro-level. The next sub-chapters will explore how aid literature approaches the concept of the humanitarian field and discusses the role of humanitarian organizations and other humanitarian actors by introducing three

relevant approaches: the practical logic of the field, the Aidland and the humanitarian arena. Last, these three approaches are compared and evaluated based on how they can be used to understand the context where field workers operate and ethical challenges emerge.

### 2.1.1 The Practical Logic of the Field

The literature concerning humanitarian aid defines the humanitarian context as a shared space where humanitarian actors, including organizations and individuals, operate and take each other into account (Krause, 2014 & Hilhorst, 2018). Krause (2014) observes humanitarian aid by focusing on the role of the aid organizations and the practical logic of the field of practice. This approach has emerged as a response to the theoretical debate on global civil society and the role of humanitarian organizations that has been dominated by two distinct approaches focusing on either organizations' stated values or their hidden interests. These approaches portray humanitarian organizations' motivation to be based on either ideas and moral values or the political interests of their donor governments. However, Krause states that neither interests nor values alone can determine decision-making in humanitarian aid and therefore, the debate should move closer to practice and focus more on how ideas and interests get translated into everyday practices. This doesn't mean that culture, values, or hidden interests would not matter, but that these are situated in contexts that should be explored closer to the ground. (Krause, 2014)

According to Krause, the needs and problems on the ground are subject to various interpretations and responses that become embodied in everyday practices of humanitarian organizations. This means that values and interests can be seen to become real only through organizational routines and actual practices of humanitarian organizations, which also determine what should be done and how. Therefore, when thinking about approaches to humanitarian aid we should look beyond values and the critique on ideologies and observe the institutional dynamics that mediate between humanitarian aid workers and the beneficiaries. To observe this topic closer to the ground, Krause observes humanitarian aid through the concept of field of practice, which she defines as a space, mediating between different factors such as, humanitarian values, needs of beneficiaries, and outside interests of the humanitarian organization or donating government, which all guide the implementation process of aid. According to this view, humanitarian organizations can be seen as the inhabitants of the humanitarian field which creates shared assumptions among different aid actors and influences on what is offered and how. (Krause, 2014)

Krause states that analysing humanitarian aid as a field organized around ideals, can help to observe the social space where these shared beliefs are constructed. Thus, Krause focuses on the ideas and practicalities that are shared on the level of humanitarian organizations, which she calls as the practical logic of the field. According to Krause, the organizations within the field follow the practical logic that is based on shared ideas of ‘how things are done’ which influences the distribution of resources and the designs of aid projects. Furthermore, this practical logic forms a part of a professional’s practical knowledge, which is combined with technical competence and ethical orientation. This logic exists between donors, aid organizations, and beneficiaries and it mediates between factors on three levels. First, the external factors, such as problems in the world, recipients' needs, and outside interests. Second, the internal factors, such as the values and principles that different actors possess, and last, what is actually implemented on the ground. (Krause, 2014) Even though Krause’s concept of the field is used to study the logic of humanitarian organizations, it can also offer some insights that help to understand the context where individual humanitarians act and make decisions when working on the field.

### 2.1.2 The Aidland

To bring the perspective closer to individual humanitarians, scholars have discussed the humanitarian context through two approaches which focus on the actors’ perspective and are based on the notion that humanitarian actors interpret their surroundings and experiences and use this knowledge to make sense and react to the events (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). The research about humanitarian actors' perspective in aid literature is mainly based on two actor-oriented approaches: ‘the Aidland’ and ‘the humanitarian arena’. The Aidland approach is more used to study the life of aid workers and it explores aid from an individual actor's perspective, whereas the humanitarian arena offers a way to understand the social context in a broader way by looking into how all the different actors with various mandates interact together.

The Aidland scholars view the humanitarian context as an imaginary country, ‘the Aidland’, which is inhabited by humanitarian organizations and the people working for them in the receiving countries, both professionally and voluntarily. This approach has emerged to offer a way to study the social lives, cultural practices and experiences of aid workers and the ways in which they shape development. The Aidland perspective focuses on humanitarian actors and demonstrates that aid

practices and policies are deeply related to the social environment where aid projects are implemented. (Verma, 2011)

However, a lot of the Aidland literature has been argued to be too narrowly focused on individual practices, failing to acknowledge the effects of existing structures in the aid field and overlooking the ways in which these limit aid workers' actions (Van Voorst, 2019). Moreover, the Aidland literature has been criticized for explaining ineffective aid by actors' actions, although it is also dependent on several other outside factors, such as politics, organizational culture and principles (Hilhorst, 2018). Although the Aidland literature offers some insights on humanitarians exceptional working conditions, it is more used to study how aid workers can develop their own reality due to the unique ways of living and working in places far away from home, which makes it more suitable when studying for instance challenges that humanitarians face when returning back home.

### 2.1.3 Humanitarian Aid as an Arena

Another actor-oriented and frequently used perspective in aid research that considers the various driving factors behind aid implementation views the humanitarian context as a social space, where different actors negotiate how the aid is implemented. The process of social negotiation can include various types of action, such as persuasion, violence, written declarations and formal as well as informal interactions. According to the arena perspective, aid is seen as the result of social interaction between various aid actors, such as sending governments, receiving governments, donors, international and local humanitarian organizations, field workers and the beneficiaries. According to the arena perspective, these various actors are trying to promote their ideas and interests further by negotiating and they shape the practices of aid together. (Hilhorst, 2018)

Furthermore, this approach highlights that the practices and decisions of different actors are taken in response to other actors based on different motives. One of the key features of the humanitarian arena is that there are always multiple realities and understandings of what is going on, what needs to be done and how. These multiple realities and understandings can exist even at the level of a single humanitarian project, and they influence the way in which aid is delivered. According to this approach, the various ways in which different humanitarian actors interpret crisis and action and understand the context, the need, their own role and each other affects the way of thinking and acting which influences on the outcome of aid projects. As a result, all actors involved in a certain crisis in

the same environment shape the everyday realities of aid within the process of project implementation. (Hilhorst, 2018)

All of these three approaches contribute to the discussion on humanitarian aid and help to outline and describe both: the social context where aid is implemented and the various actors in the aid field. Both Krause and Hilhorst manage to conceptualize the humanitarian context and offer useful insights, which help to understand the field where ethical challenges emerge and where humanitarian actors mediate. Krause's analysis of the humanitarian field helps to analyse the social space that mediates between the different actors and their interpretations, values, principles and interests, whereas Hilhorst builds on the understanding that every actor has their own interpretations and beliefs which guide their actions and affect the outcomes. In addition, the Aidland literature elaborates on humanitarians' exceptional working and living conditions, which might also create tensions for humanitarians when they are deployed on field missions. To follow the above-introduced perspectives closer to field workers, the next section will observe which other elements influence humanitarians' working environment, aid practices and humanitarians' interpretation of the situation.

## 2.2 Macro-level Elements Behind Aid Practices

To gain a better understanding of the context where humanitarians operate, this section will focus on how diverse social, political and cultural elements shape the practices of aid work and create discrepancies when implementing aid. This is done by outlining the rules and factors that shape the aid sector on the macro-level and elaborating how they affect the interpretations and decision-making process of field workers. These external factors include culture (national, local, organizational and professional) and principles (universal, organizational and professional).

### 2.2.1 Culture in Humanitarian Aid

Several scholars (i.e Hilhorst et al., 2012, Cook et al., 2015) have recognized that cultural factors affect the coordination and management of humanitarian projects. Culture influences aid implementation on many levels by shaping institutional dynamics and mediating between aid workers and beneficiaries. When considering how different cultures affect aid implementation and shape the practices of humanitarian projects, it is important to view culture especially on three levels: the organizational culture of the aid organization, the professional culture of aid workers and the culture in local communities. The definition and the way in which culture operates on different levels of the aid chain vary depending on the level of analysis. Generally speaking, culture can be defined as the factor that guides social behaviour, social norms, knowledge, beliefs and habits of the members belonging to a particular social group. In addition, professional and organizational culture include a particular way of thinking and perceiving in relation to problems as well as a shared set of values that shape the work practices and attitudes. (Rodon et al., 2011)

Rodon and colleagues (2011) have addressed the effects of culture in aid delivery further by exploring how interactions between aid organizations and local beneficiaries become mediated by culture. Their research illustrates that situations where cultural systems between actors in humanitarian aid differ from each other can lead to challenges when implementing aid. According to their study, discrepancies emerging from the contrast between the culture of the local community and the culture of the organization derive from the three following properties: conflicts with the system of meaning (e.g. differing understanding with words or context), conflicts with the norms of behaviour (local routines differing from the ways the organization is trying to implement aid distribution) and conflicts with the power relations (e.g. gender inequalities in families preventing women from participating in aid distribution). (Rodon et al., 2011)

The effects of culture can be explained mainly on two levels: first, the cultural assumptions of the humanitarian organization guide aid operations and practices and affect the ways in which aid is distributed, and second, beneficiaries draw on their own culture to interpret the aid that is offered (Rodon et al., 2011). In practice, the values and norms of international organizations might be in conflict with the local culture or the regulations of the receiving government (Resodihardjo, 2008). This can be seen in aid implementation for instance in cases where beneficiaries refuse to accept the aid because the way it is delivered does not align with their cultural habits or beliefs (Rodon et al., 2011). For instance, Jok's (1996) study on the interactions and relations between aid workers and local authorities in Sudan revealed that the images of 'loose' Western lifestyles and culture had a

negative impact on how local authorities engaged with Western aid workers. Since in the cultural context of Sudan it was considered inappropriate for elder male leaders to take orders from young women, the differing cultural perceptions hampered effective cooperation between actors and the way that local authorities engaged with the process. (Hilhorst et al., 2012)

In addition, the cultural conflicts have become visible for instance in cases where organizations have provided aid based on “what givers can offer” instead of considering what would be needed at the local level, overlooking the needs of beneficiaries and the role of local actors, such as national governments, civil-society and local communities (Fan, 2015). This contradiction between what is needed locally and what is offered by aid agencies during disaster response has become visible in various different contexts. For instance, in the case of the earthquake response in Gujarat, India in 2001, the media attention focusing on Western actors led to pressure on rapid spending and provision of aid based on Western perspectives. In practice, this led to agencies sending bottled water and international staff and ignoring the capacity of local responders and locally available water products. Also, criteria and standards to receive goods ignored the local situation: people were forced to stay in camps in order to register themselves and to be qualified to receive aid, even when they could have returned home. (Vaux, 2015)

Similar problems have also been identified in other contexts, such as after the earthquake in Nepal in 2015. The reports and interviews from local officers indicated that international agencies sent aid items that overlooked the local conditions; for instance, blankets when they were not needed due to hot temperature, medical supplies in a foreign language and food items which included beef despite the fact that most of the population does not eat beef for religious reasons (Cook et al., 2015). The Nepali government was also accused of placing political concerns over the basic humanitarian needs of the affected population after they denied access from three helicopters that were sent by the United Kingdom to assist in delivering relief items to victims in remote areas (Amnesty International, 2015).

These examples show that the effectiveness of humanitarian aid operations depends on how sensitive the actors are to the culture of the aid recipients and how well they manage to adapt their operations to align with the local cultural systems. This indicates that aid implementation can be observed as an interactive process which involves mutual adaptation and negotiation between beneficiaries and those delivering aid, mediated by their cultural backgrounds. (Rodon et al., 2011) This negotiation is performed by fieldworkers, who act as mediators between the local and international organizations and are expected to act according to the values and principles that are a part of their organizational culture, while simultaneously acknowledging the culture and conditions of the local actors.

## 2.2.2 Principles in Humanitarian Aid

Another important aspect that scholars have used when approaching practices in humanitarian aid is the effect of principles. Similar to culture, principles represent elements at macro-level, which influence the actual implementation process of aid as well as the attitudes and actions of field workers. The four universal core principles of independence, neutrality, impartiality and humanity provide a basis for all humanitarian action (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002). However, the application and importance of the core principles have been the subject of debate in academia and among organizations (Hunt, 2008) and the way that these principles are understood has undergone much change due to the changed nature of conflicts and the increased number of organizations in the humanitarian field. The challenges in the implementation of humanitarian principles and the changes within the humanitarian field have led organizations to adopt their own supplementary principles, such as human rights, development and peacebuilding, to support their diverse missions. (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002)

The way in which principles affect humanitarian action can be explained on two levels: first, principles shape practices, but second, they only become real when actors interpret and renegotiate them (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002). This means that the daily practices and interactions of humanitarians and their surrounding actors dictate whether principles gain or lose meaning (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2012). The actions of all team members and other relevant aid actors influence the process of translating principles into practices. This can be seen as a social process: individuals interpret principles and practices through interaction when patterns of organizational culture and routines are established. These evolving patterns are never stable, but they can be changed in response to situations in the field. (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002)

The variety of guiding principles at universal, organizational and professional levels might create competing demands or opportunities to endorse some principles over others. This negotiated nature of principles poses a range of options on the best course of action, which can lead to practical dilemmas on what to do. (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002) Hilhorst and Schiemann's (2002) study on the use of humanitarian principles among staff members of Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland (MSF-H) indicates that humanitarians construct their own way of understanding and prioritizing principles when responding to situations in the field. When making everyday decisions, humanitarians negotiate

between the reality on the ground and the requirements of organizational principles and universal humanitarian values (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002).

According to the study, humanitarians negotiated unsuitable principles and policies in two ways. The first way of circumventing them was by referring to the practicalities of the situation: “we knew we didn’t have a mandate for that... but how else could we have done our job?” (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002, p. 498). Another way for humanitarians to mediate principles was by referring to higher or parallel principles. In some situations, humanitarians prioritized organizational principles over universal humanitarian values, while in others, humanitarians disregarded organizational principles and policies, justifying their actions with humanitarian values. For example, in one of the cases, the interviewee had circumvented the organization's hands-off policy on circumcision, justifying it with her medical ethics. In another case, a team of humanitarians extended the aid to cover the local population contrary to their organization's policy, which stated that the aid should only be given to refugees. This was justified by considering the policy as being against the higher universal principle of neutrality. Although principles are used for decision-making, the study shows that humanitarians still prioritize the need to get the job done over formal policies. (Hilhorst & Schiemann, 2002)

### 2.3 Micro-level Elements Influencing Aid Implementation

In addition to culture and principles, the ways in which practices of aid become constructed and how actors in the humanitarian field make sense of reality and respond to situations can be explained further with external factors, such as paradigms, values and humanitarian identity. These micro-level factors influence the implementation process of aid by shaping humanitarians’ way of interpreting the situation and making decisions when interacting with their environment and facing challenging situations. The next section will elaborate further how the effect of paradigms, values and humanitarian identity is discussed in previous studies.

### 2.3.1 Paradigms

Paradigms represent a particular way of understanding and framing the situation which influences the actions of humanitarian organizations and field workers (van Voorst, 2019). According to Hilhorst (2018), paradigms affect humanitarian aid by creating frameworks that guide humanitarians' actions and decision-making. Paradigms can exist both on an organizational level within policies and practices and on an individual level within different ways of perceiving the situation. Paradigms guide aid implementation by offering a particular way of understanding reality through dominant discourses and stories of the situation. However, the way in which paradigms influence practice is always dependent on actors' interpretation of paradigms. (Hilhorst, 2018)

Since there are always diverse ways to act and perceive situations, the way in which crises are responded to, depends on the language in which actors discuss the crisis and the practices which are used when reacting to it. The crisis attains its meaning for instance by answering questions such as: How exceptional is the crisis? How did it emerge? Who is to blame? These questions guide the way in which actors interpret the crisis and its causes which furthermore affects the way in which they respond to it. For instance, it makes a difference for the disaster response if a socio-natural disaster is seen to emerge due to the actions of God, as the influence of climate change or other natural phenomena, or as the outcome of an unstable political situation. (Hilhorst, 2018)

The differences in the way of understanding crises often translate to distinct paradigms and practices between different aid actors (van Voorst, 2019). In her research about aid workers' paradigms, van Voorst (2019) studied the paradigms and practices between expatriate and national humanitarian workers and elaborated on how paradigms guided their way of solving challenges. According to the results, there was a clear distinction in how international and national aid workers perceived challenges and responded to problems in their everyday work. This shows that several differing perspectives exist within aid actors, which implies that instead of one unified humanitarian field, it is essential to discuss the existence of multiple diverse fields within a wider humanitarian sector. Furthermore, understanding how actors frame and explain their actions can help to understand why they do things and uncover the underlying motivations and beliefs that guide their actions when reacting to situations. (van Voorst, 2019)

### 2.3.2 Humanitarian Identity

In addition to paradigms, the way in which humanitarians respond to situations and interpret the social reality around them is influenced by their professional identity. In fact, both humanitarian principles and professional culture become embodied through humanitarians' professional identity, which provides a certain way of performing a role and furthermore, a certain kind of way of looking at the world and acting throughout events. (Dube & Broekhuis, 2008) In general, the professional standards attached to a professional identity guide individuals' way of making decisions while acting as the representatives of that particular profession. These professional standards represent the ideals that an individual or a certain group possesses with regard to how the work should be carried out in their professional field. (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2012) As humanitarians, field workers follow certain norms, beliefs and values that guide the provision of aid, such as moral and ethical conduct and guidance on 'providing unhindered assistance, without discrimination, to whoever needs it' (Dube & Broekhuis, 2008, p.151).

Although all humanitarians share the same professional identity in theory, different individuals even among the same organization might interpret it differently. Unlike other professional groups where members start to resemble each other in their practices, norms and values, humanitarian identity is more complex, since humanitarian professionals are also members of other occupational groups, such as engineer, accountant or health care professional. This makes humanitarians especially prone to face situations where they have to balance between these identities with differing principles which impose contradictory requirements for individuals. When being confronted with differences between their social identities, humanitarians are required to reconcile the competing requirements and redefine their social self. (Dube & Broekhuis, 2018) In challenging situations where humanitarians feel as if they are not able to act according to the values attached to their identity, the contradictions that they experience might affect their sense of themselves as professionals and as people (Schwartz et al., 2010).

In their study about humanitarian logisticians' identities, Dube and Broekhuis (2018) explore how humanitarian logisticians negotiate their professional and humanitarian identities in response to local regulations in situations where logisticians have to mediate between their humanitarian identity, logistician identity and host government regulations. According to their results, individuals make sense of the tensions between their social identities and government policies by adopting different types of identity profiles. The adopted identity profile affects the ways in which individuals make sense and respond to issues. According to the results, the respondents were either engaging or

disengaging with their environment and the host government regulations, depending on how open they were in gaining support and resources from the environment, or on the other hand, wanted to protect their own expertise, values, position and principles. (Dube & Broekhuis, 2018)

The results show that despite common principles and shared professional identity, everyone has their individual ways of engaging with the environment and responding to challenging situations because of individuals' subjective hierarchy of roles and the values and requirements attached to them. This means that the way in which humanitarians experience their identity influences their individual ways of acting in situations and resolving issues. On the other hand, values attached to identity or contradictions between multiple sub-identities can also lead to contradictions where humanitarians need to balance between different identities and prioritize some values over others. The authors note that the complexity of the humanitarian field requires adaptability when responding to situations, which cannot be achieved through standardized guidelines. This creates a paradox for the individuals to obtain a fixed professional identity with universal values, norms and practices, while still holding on to their subjective differences that can support innovation and adaptability in complex settings. (Dube & Broekhuis, 2018)

## 2.4 Ethical Challenges in Aid Work

As discussed above, humanitarian aid is implemented in a unique context with a greater extent of scarcity and need as well as insecure political and social situations where various actors, cultures and policy interact (Hunt, 2008, Lee, 2010). The different frameworks, guidelines and practices of aid organizations as well as different cultural norms and social structures construct the reality for humanitarian actors where they have to navigate their work. This makes humanitarians especially prone to face ethically challenging situations where differing duties or principles are in conflict with each other and call for differing actions. Since field workers are often working in unsettled environments and acting in less defined roles without their usual resources and support, they are often required to act beyond their knowledge and skills. Due to the exceptional circumstances of the humanitarian context, the way in which ethical conflicts emerge and are solved differs substantially from other contexts. (Schwartz et al., 2010)

The literature on aid workers' experiences about ethical challenges is mostly focused on healthcare professionals in humanitarian work. According to Hunt (2008), field workers in the health care sector face new forms of ethical dilemmas during humanitarian missions as a result of distinct cultural values

and differing understandings of healthcare practices. In his study on healthcare professionals' experiences about ethics in humanitarian assistance, Hunt (2008) compiles five main themes in which their ethical values are challenged. These are: contradictions between respecting the local environment and imposing values, difficulties to provide sufficient care, differences in the ways of perceiving health and illness, conflicts in healthcare workers' professional identity and trust issues between local and international actors.

According to Hunts' results, field workers struggle to balance between respecting local culture and beliefs without compromising their own values in situations where local values conflict with their moral ideals. Furthermore, field workers also reported situations where they felt forced to resist local policies because these conflicted with their own principles. In one of the cases, these government policies limited the ability to provide medication for patients, which led the health care workers to smuggle the medication to their patients, because they felt it was morally justified in order for them to provide care according to their own standards. (Hunt, 2008.)

Following previous research, the study on healthcare professionals' ethical challenges in humanitarian and development aid missions by Schwartz et al. (2010) produced similar findings to Hunt. According to Schwartz et al. (2010), ethical challenges appear due to four following factors: 1. lack of resources, 2. historical, political, social and economic structures, 3. guidelines of the aid organizations and 4. norms related to healthcare professionals' roles and their way of interacting. For instance, the respondents described cases where social structures related to gender norms would guide the way in which patients' needs were prioritized. This led to situations where male patients' medical needs were prioritized over female patient's needs, even above clinical standards. The disagreements on patient care between international and local healthcare professionals raised broader concerns about cultural and ethical relativism and questions of how far one should respect the existing social structures, cultural norms or situational constraints and whether disregarding them would only be a reflection of past colonialism and lead to inappropriately imposing individuals' own beliefs. In other words, how much an individual should accept or reject the local culture. (Schwartz et al., 2010.)

Continuing with the perspective of humanitarians' Katz et al. (2012) studied how humanitarians try to overcome the challenge of sustaining personal balance while still remaining efficient in the humanitarian context. Their study indicated that humanitarian workers are required to balance between their ideals about humanitarianism, doing what is right and the actual reality on a field mission. Even though organizational frameworks create general standards for humanitarian actions, these were sometimes seen to be too distant from the reality on the ground and from crisis situations.

According to the interviewees, they had to sometimes bend the guidelines to act according to what was seen as the most reasonable thing to do considering the situation on the ground. The contradiction between the reality and organizational rules created division among the humanitarians: while some felt that it was not possible to find a morally ideal approach, others said that one should never compromise on personal principles. According to the results, the interviewees stated that humanitarians should consider when the situation challenges personal principles too much and when it can be solved by ‘swallowing some pride and compromising’. (Katz et al., 2012, p. 252)

## 2.5 The Aim of This Study and Research Question

Based on previous literature, the complexity of the humanitarian field with diverse cultures, principles, values and paradigms on the situation creates diverse challenges for humanitarian field workers. Even though the literature does not explicitly discuss these challenges as ethical challenges or present these studies as studies concerning ethical challenges, these elements can be seen to lead to ethically challenging situations where humanitarians need to balance between conflicting requirements or expectations. In fact, some of the studies even present cases that can be considered as ethical challenges, without explicitly addressing them as such, which indicates that humanitarians might be confronting these situations frequently in their work. Furthermore, this lack of discussion on ethics in previous studies illustrates the fragmentation of the literature regarding ethical challenges and practical ethics in humanitarian aid and reveals the complexity of recognizing and addressing ethically challenging situations.

Although some of the existing studies also recognize that field workers face several ethical challenges in their work, they are discussed at a very general level, disregarding humanitarians' personal struggles and ways of coping with the situation. Furthermore, the existing literature is mostly focused on healthcare workers and very little research is found from other professionals that are engaged in humanitarian work. Yet, the professional scope of humanitarian workers is broad and considering the context where humanitarians work it is worthwhile to investigate if other humanitarian workers confront similar ethical challenges as healthcare workers. To shed more light on what exactly ethical challenges in humanitarian aid are, who experiences them and how are they discussed by humanitarians themselves, this study aims to answer the question of *how humanitarians make sense of and deal with ethical challenges in their narratives*.

By elaborating on humanitarians' ways of coping with ethically challenging situations, this study can provide practical knowledge for all the actors involved in humanitarian work. The knowledge of how ethical challenges can be solved in practice will help humanitarians to reflect on ethical questions, prepare themselves for their future deployment and maintain their professional abilities when working on the field. Furthermore, aid organizations can utilize the results of this study for instance in their trainings or in the production of practical material about ethical challenges. In addition, the results can provide some insights on what kind of ethical considerations should be taken into account in political decision-making when planning for more sustainable aid projects. Overall, gathering more knowledge on ethical dilemmas in aid work could help to observe the frequently appearing challenges as a part of a bigger framework of ethics, instead of focusing on them as separate questions of culture or principles. This change of mindset could help to uncover the underlying ethical questions behind challenging situations and produce new insights on how these challenges can be framed in academia and discussed within aid organizations.

### 3. Research Data and Methodology

The next chapter will offer an overview of how this study applies the narrative research method from conducting the interviews to data analysis. This chapter elaborates how ethical challenges can be studied by utilizing the concepts of narrative and storytelling. Furthermore, it will offer a detailed description of how the data was analysed in practice and which concepts of narrative analysis method were used when conducting the analysis. In addition, the research data, ethical considerations, and the data collection process are elaborated.

#### 3.1 Narrative Approach to Ethical Challenges

To observe how humanitarians make sense of ethical challenges, this study applies the narrative research approach, which is a form of qualitative and case-centred research with the focus of understanding the narrator's reality and perspective through their story. Depending on the discipline, methodological assumptions and method of analysis, the way of defining what is a narrative might range from a short description of events to an entire life story. The narrative approach is based on the notion that by selecting, organizing, connecting and evaluating events in the form of a story, the

storytellers make sense of the world and their subjective experiences in it. The stories can appear in diverse kinds of written, spoken or visual material that is seen to present a reflection of reality by forming a story with a beginning, middle and an end. The stories can be anything from dominant narratives of the history of nations and governments to stories about the experiences of ethnic groups, organizations, scientists and individuals. (Riessman, 2007)

When studying individuals' narratives, narrative research aims to understand the narrator's perspective by focusing on how they make sense of events, their own actions and social situations by creating themes, plot and stories. The plot of a narrative is constructed by a series of events that are acted by different characters in the story. By studying the plot of the narrative and the characters within the story, narrative research can answer questions such as, in what kind of story the narrator places themselves, how do they position themselves and other characters in relation to each other and how do the narrators relate to an identity. This approach can provide a wider understanding of life experiences as it offers possibilities to explore people's way of experiencing the world by taking into account the narrator and the social context of the events when asking why the story was told in that way. Personal narratives and their storylines can also tell broader stories about the social context of the events by reflecting its social processes, contemporary beliefs, discourse and power relations. (Riessman, 2007)

Narratives can also offer a possibility to observe the ways in which individuals construct their approach to ethical challenges. In ethical theories, ethical conflicts are frequently considered as problems or contradictions that need to be solved. However, Perry (2014) suggests that rather than trying to overcome these contradictions, we should focus on observing them as challenges that individuals are bound to face throughout their lives and explore how individuals learn to navigate through them. One way to do this, is to approach ethical challenges through the concept of identity, which is constituted by various roles and norms that might be in contradiction with each other. (Perry, 2014) The roles that constitute and shape individuals' identity can be for instance professional, cultural, social or political and they contain various attitudes and beliefs as well as expectations to behave in a certain way (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2012). If the different roles attached to our identity impose conflicting norms and ideals on individuals it can lead to ethical challenges and to an inner conflict of how one should act and who one is. Furthermore, in order to take concrete actions in the situation and navigate through the dilemma, individuals are required to find a balance between the conflicting roles by making choices about their identity and what sort of a person they hope to be. (Perry, 2014)

When considering ethical dilemmas as conflicts that derive from our identity, it becomes necessary to elaborate the ways in which individuals can construct their identity, explore their moral world and reflect on their actions in ethically challenging situations. One method that enables individuals to reflect on moral dilemmas and difficult situations while constructing their identity of who they are and how they want to be known is through narratives and storytelling. Moreover, personal narratives can provide individuals a way to construct past events and actions, tell about difficult life experiences and shape their identities. Telling stories about difficult experiences can help individuals to navigate through conflicting moral rules by offering them a way to revisit their experiences and provide narrative accounts for their actions. The process of constructing a personal narrative can be understood as a way of presenting the narrator as a moral actor and building a moral philosophy of how they ought to act. (Riessman, 2007)

The stories that provide individuals a way to explore past experiences can be for instance related to situations where there has been a contradiction between the ideal and real course of events. Constructing narratives about the situation can help individuals to deal with this external conflict and the internal experience of not being able to act according to their own ideals. (Riessman, 2007) Through storytelling, the narrator can shift between their own moral ideals, their perception of institutional and other public views on morality and the ethical views they apply in practice and find a way to construct their own ethical ideals (Zigon, 2012). Telling stories about challenging situations can offer a way to find meaning from difficult experiences since it helps to structure the events and understand the underlying emotions related to those situations. This doesn't mean that the narrative is required to solve the contradictions and challenges it is presenting, but it can help to make the plot understandable and bearable by providing explanations about how the situation has progressed. Thus, the narrative is not making assumptions about what is "right" or "a good resolution", but it can offer tools to understand and deal with difficult contradictions that may challenge an individual's identity. (Riessman, 2008) Since narratives provide a way to explain what the narrator morally believes and values, they offer individuals a possibility to explore their ethical work and way of making decisions which gives them the means to understand who they are as moral actors when facing contradictions (Zigon, 2012).

## 3.2 Data Collection

To examine how humanitarian aid workers accounted for ethical challenges within their narratives, I conducted four individual interviews with four aid workers from three different aid organizations. The interviews were conducted by utilizing the narrative interview approach, which is a qualitative research technique focusing on a smaller number of research participants with the aim to explore their subjective experiences and perspectives of a certain idea or situation (Riessman, 2007). The starting point of the interviews was to ask the participants to describe a specific situation where they had faced an ethical challenge and to explore that example deeper by asking further questions about the case and how the situation progressed. The aim of the interviews was to approach the case situation from the individual's perspective in order to analyse their concrete actions and choices in the situation as well as their way of constructing the ethical conflict.

Following the narrative interview approach, the interviewees were given the space to express themselves without restrictions and describe the events by their own words without the interviewer leading the conversation too much. Thus, instead of asking everyone a similar set of questions, the idea was to allow each interviewee to freely describe their case by actively listening and asking further questions about the details of the story when needed. To give some kind of structure to the interviews, I had prepared a set of guiding questions that could help the interviewee to reach essential themes, such as who else was there, what happened next and what was your role in the situation. However, the interview situations always progressed at the pace of the interview participant, depending on their unique case and the themes that were relevant to that specific example.

The interviewees were found through three different aid organizations that are actively working in the humanitarian sector. All of the organizations share the same mission of helping the most vulnerable people by sending aid workers to work on projects that provide either emergency or development aid in the receiving countries. All of the four interviewees came from different backgrounds, represented various nationalities and had a different amount of work experience from various kinds of missions, both emergency aid and development aid. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, the names of the organizations will not be mentioned, and the background details of the interviewees will not be introduced any further. When recruiting the interviewees, requirements to fulfil any specific criteria or having a specific sending organization was not seen as a relevant factor since the aim was to study individuals' experiences and not to compare them based on any variables. The only fixed requirement for the interviewees was to have fieldwork experience in the humanitarian sector and to be willing to discuss their experiences of ethical challenges. The aid organizations were

chosen based on my personal networks, their general familiarity, their expertise with the topic and the volume of their humanitarian reserve. Since the focus was not to evaluate any particular aid organization or their practices regarding ethical questions, all of the interviewees were participating in the research as individuals and not as the representatives of their organization. The organizations were only seen as intermediary parties, which enabled me to reach a network of humanitarian aid workers and find suitable interviewees.

The first contact with the research participants was through two of the aid organizations which circulated an open call for the interviews in their networks and mailing list. The letter included basic information on the research process, data processing and the research topic and aim. The possible participants were informed that the focus of the research is gathering more knowledge on humanitarian aid workers' realities and subjective experiences to understand how humanitarians make sense of and deal with ethical challenges in their everyday work. In addition, the letter contained information that taking part in the study is voluntary and the recipients were encouraged to ask for further questions or details about the research, in case they wish to know more detailed descriptions of the process before deciding if they want to take part in it. Moreover, the interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any point. To guarantee the transparency of the research process, also my supervisor's contact details were shared. On the basis of the open call, all interested were asked to contact me directly to schedule an interview time. Although the open call most likely reached many potential candidates, it turned out to be challenging to get enough interviewees and to find a suitable time for the interview as some of the candidates were currently employed on the field and had busy schedules. Therefore, in addition to the open call, I also had to utilize my personal networks and reach out to individuals from a third organization to get enough interviewees.

The interviews were conducted as individual interviews online via Zoom and the length of the interviews was between 40-80 minutes, depending on the interviewee. The estimated length of 35-45 minutes per interview was informed to the participants beforehand, but most of them used longer time to discuss their case and thoughts during the interview. The interviews were recorded by using the recording possibility in Zoom. A formal consent to take part in the study was asked on tape from each one of the interviewees before starting the actual interview. Considering the sensitivity of the topic, I paid particular attention in creating a safe atmosphere for the interview situation by informing the participants about how the interview situation will proceed as well as giving them enough time and space to express their thoughts and feelings during the interview. Even though face-to-face interviews would have also been a suitable option considering the topic of my research and the narrative

interview technique, all of the interviews were done online, due to the active corona situation and the fact that some of the interviewees were deployed abroad at the time. Zoom was chosen since it was recommended as the most secure server by the experts from Tampere University.

To ensure good research ethics through all phases of the study, from approaching the interviewees to data collection and writing the final results, I followed the ethical principles for research with human participants set by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity as well as the guidance on the procedures concerning research participants personal data introduced by the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (TENK, 2019, FSD, n.d). In addition, I consulted an expert on ethical matters at Tampere University with regard to data collection and storage. To protect the interviewees' professional status and anonymity, I paid particular attention to concealing all the details that could lead to the identification of the interviewees or their sending organizations, such as nationality, gender, background and other personal information. Moreover, all further information about the case examples, such as location, timing, name of the organizations and other possible details that might lead to identification of the cases are deleted from the final results. The interview recordings and all personal information of the interviewees were treated confidentially, and they were not shared with any other party. The data was used only for this master's thesis and will be deleted after completing the thesis. The participation for this study did not pose any risk for research participants or their families and the well-being of research participants was considered at all stages of the study. Since this study did not contain any of the elements that require the researcher to apply for an ethical review statement from the human sciences ethics committee, applying for a formal statement was not considered necessary.

### 3.3 Models of Narrative Analysis

To analyse the data, I utilized the narrative analysis technique, which is a form of qualitative analysis method. When using narrative analysis, the first phase of the data analysis is to decide which elements and parts of the interview to analyse considering the data and research questions. In order to determine which parts of the interview to focus on, Lieblich and colleagues (1998) present two ways of defining the unit of analysis either as categorical analysis or holistic analysis. The first option, categorical analysis, aims to analyse all references to the phenomena in one interview or across several interviews while holistic analysis observes how a part of a text is related to a life story of the interviewee narrated during one interview or several interviews with the same individual. Categorical analysis is typically

chosen when the study focuses on an experience shared by a group of people, whereas holistic analysis is more suitable when the research is about the impact and change in the context of one individual's life. (Earthy & Cronin, 2008)

After establishing the unit of analysis, the next aspect to narrative analysis is defining the focus of the analysis, or in other words, deciding what element of the narrative is being explored. To decide the focus of analysis, Riessman (2005) introduces four different approaches called thematic, structural, interactional and performative analysis, which each emphasize a different layer of the narrative and help to define where to focus when reading the interviews. The first approach, thematic analysis, focuses on exploring the content of the narrative and what is being said in the interview. This approach is especially suitable for finding common themes across the interviews and from the stories that are being told in the interview. The second approach, structural analysis, is more focused on analysing why the story was told in a specific way and the persuasive nature of the story. This method is used to analyse the way in which the narrative is structured, including the plot as well as different parts of the plot, such as turning points and resolutions of the story. In the third, interactional approach, the emphasis is on the dialogue and the interactional process between the narrator and the audience. In this approach, the focus shifts from the content of the story to the process of storytelling, where the story is seen to emerge in cooperation between the narrator and the listener who create the meaning of the story collaboratively. (Riessman, 2005)

The fourth approach, performative analysis, focuses on the performative nature of the narrative and explores the circumstances where the story takes place as well as the actors and their social positioning in stories. Social positioning in stories refers to the way in which the narrator positions themselves and other actors in relation to each other, what kind of roles and agency they give to themselves and other actors and how they relate to an identity. This approach also looks into the power dynamics of the stories by observing if the narrator positions themselves as the victim of the circumstances or another character, or alternatively, as the actors possessing power and control over events, being able to initiate or cause action. This positioning is done by using particular language to construct the narrators' identity and actions, for example using verbs that refer to their actions as voluntary or compulsory. This approach is seen to go beyond the spoken word, extending the analysis from the content and storyline to symbolic meanings, identity construction and positioning of the narrator. Although each approach focuses on a different aspect of the narrative, these different approaches can also be combined and used simultaneously since they are partly overlapping and not mutually exclusive. (Riessman, 2005, Riessman, 2007)

In addition to choosing the suitable approach, one essential part of the narrative analysis is to define which parts of the interview are included as a part of the story that is being analysed. Since there are many different ways of applying the narrative method and interpreting what is a story, deciding the starting and ending points of the stories is often a complex task of interpretation which requires the researcher to reflect on the research questions. Ultimately, the choices between different approaches and definitions as well as which parts to include in the analysis depend on the research questions, the data and the underlying methodological assumptions, which all influence the researchers' perspective. Even though it can be difficult to find clear guidelines due to the interpretive perspective of narrative analysis, adapting the method to match with the data and research questions offers an insightful and a unique viewpoint when analysing the data. Due to the versatility of the narrative approach, applying the method successfully requires strong reflection and justification from the researcher in order to match the analysis with the research questions. (Riessman, 2011)

To conduct the analysis, I have applied the above-mentioned approaches of thematic, structural and performative analysis to provide an overall framework through which the data is observed. I utilized especially the concept of social positioning in stories, since it provided applicable tools to observe the ways in which humanitarians portray their own role and possibilities when addressing ethical challenges. These different approaches of narrative analysis have been chosen based on my data and research questions and they are applied as complementary methods that provide different dimensions to the analysis. The analysis consisted of reading the data and paying particular attention to how the interviewees discuss ethical challenges, construct their own position in the situation and what kind of practical or abstract strategies the interviewees use to navigate through ethical contradictions.

To follow the narrative analysing technique, each case example was considered as a small story, which consisted of the beginning (recognizing and describing the type of ethical conflict), middle (deciding what to do with the conflict, concrete actions) and an end (what happens after the situation, compensating actions after the conflict, finding strategies to reason and accept the conflict, moving on from the conflict). Locating the core and different parts of the story helped to structure the analysis and discover where and how to find the concrete and abstract ways that were used to resolve the ethical contradiction. Although the initial idea was to discuss only one situation per interview, some of the interviews described more than one example, in which case all of the examples of ethical conflicts were taken into account when analysing the results.

After identifying and highlighting all the parts where the interviewee was discussing their case example of an ethical challenge, I read through the examples to see what happened after recognizing

the conflict and started looking for strategies that the interviewees had used when trying to deal with the situation. The strategies were found by reading through the data and focusing on the interviewees' ways of acting and making decisions in the situation as well as their ways of coping with the conflict after the situation. These strategies could be anything from concrete practical actions in the situation, such as asking advice from the local people to more abstract ideological justifications, such as "I did what I believed was right", or ways of reasoning and dealing with the inner contradiction later on after returning home. To uncover the interviewees' ways of dealing with ethical conflicts, I posed the following series of questions to the data: What does the interviewee do when facing an ethical challenge? What kind of concrete or abstract ways does the interviewee use to solve the situation? Why does the interviewee decide to act in that way? How does the interviewee reason and justify their actions?

After gathering all the different ways of dealing with ethical conflicts, I organized them according to similarities and underlying themes to see which main arguments would arise from the data. For instance, several interviewees mentioned that they made decisions by consulting the local actors, thinking what is best for the local people and considering the local culture. All of these three strategies were seen to be a part of the same underlying theme: resolving ethical conflicts by considering the local context. To reveal the main arguments and underlying themes of all case examples and strategies, they were all organized by following the same logic. However, organizing the case examples according to similarities was not always straightforward since there were also some overlapping themes and times when the interviewee used multiple different strategies for solving the same situation. A good example of this was one participant, who described solving the ethical conflict by letting the locals decide what to do in the situation since it was according to the interviewee's values to respect the local perception and not to intervene too much in the situation. In this case, the interviewee was using two different strategies: considering the local context and acting according to their own values. All similar examples where the interviewee was referring to multiple different strategies were considered as a part of each strategy that was used when describing the solution. This ambiguity of ethical challenges and different themes caused some overlapping between different narratives in the results.

After organizing the data according to main strategies and themes, I could establish five main narratives, which each represented a different way of constructing, solving and coping with ethical conflicts. Next, I focused on exploring the main characteristics, similarities and differences of each narrative to define what kind of parts and arguments each narrative consists of. This was done by extending the analysis to cover the interviewees' description of the circumstances, social positioning

of characters in the stories as well as the interviewees' underlying assumptions that influenced their actions in the situation. Observing how humanitarians constructed the conflict, other actors in the scene and their own role in the situation helped to explain their strategies for solving the challenge. To gather more insights on each narrative, I used the following questions to guide me when reading through the data: How does the interviewee construct the aid system and ethical conflicts? How does the interviewee position themselves in relation to other actors, the conflict and the aid system? How does the interviewee locate themselves and the other actors in the scenes? How are the hierarchy and power structures between different actors in the scenes? Which actor or entity is constructed as powerful in the narrative? What roles are given to humanitarians in the narrative? In addition, I read through all the stories to see what kind of words were used to describe the events and if something relevant was left outside of the story.

#### 4. Results

After analysing the interview data, I could identify five narratives which described how humanitarians construct and deal with ethically challenging situations. These narratives are 1. *dealing with ethical challenges by not intervening or ignoring the dilemma*, 2. *solving challenges by considering what is best for the local context*, 3. *solving challenges in cooperation and interaction with others*, 4. *solving challenges by acting according to personal values* and 5. *dealing with challenges by relating them as a part of life course*. Each narrative introduces a different perspective to ethical challenges which helps to further elaborate and understand how these challenges are constructed in humanitarians' stories and what kind of solutions or coping ways humanitarians use to resolve and manage with these situations. Although there were some similarities and overlapping themes in the narratives, they are still introduced separately from each other because of their dissimilarities. Each narrative and their main themes and differences are introduced shortly in the following table, which is followed by a more thorough description of the narratives and their storylines.

<b>Name of the Narrative</b>	<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Hierarchy and Agency</b>	<b>Special about this Narrative</b>
Dealing with challenges by not intervening or ignoring the dilemma	-Humanitarians lack of power and agency  -Not being able to find solutions	-High hierarchy and strong power relations -Power with people and institutions possessing money -Passive actors	-Strong memories and difficult feelings attached to the experiences of not being able to make a difference
Solving challenges by considering what is best for the local context	-Respect towards the local culture and people  -Humanitarians' contradictory role and influence in the local context	-Low hierarchy -Power with people and institutions with local knowledge and networks -Passive/ active actors	-Emphasis on the local culture, values and perspective
Solving challenges in cooperation and interaction with others	-The nature and quality of social interaction -Building a shared understanding of what is right	-Low hierarchy -Power was built and shared through interaction and networks -Active actors	-Actors' different backgrounds and ethical views are seen as a benefit
Solving challenges by acting according to personal values	-Humanitarians' own background, perspective and values	-No clear hierarchy -Active actors with main responsibility when addressing challenges	-Humanitarians define and follow their own approach to ethical challenges
Dealing with challenges by positioning them as a part of life course	-Ethical reflection after the experience -Finding meaning in difficult experiences	-No clear hierarchy -Narrative is centred around individual humanitarians' life course	-Constructing own moral view to ethical challenges by reflecting them afterward in the light of own life course and values

Table 1. Key narratives and their central features used by humanitarian aid workers as invoked in the interviews.

## 4.1 Dealing with Challenges by Not Intervening or Ignoring the Dilemma

The narrative of *not intervening or ignoring the ethical dilemma* appeared in all of the interviews and it was the first narrative which humanitarians presented when being asked about their experiences concerning ethical challenges. The narrative of not intervening focuses on scenes where humanitarians witnessed an ethically challenging situation but did not have the power or agency to address it due to limited resources or their own role in the situation. The main themes emerging in the narrative were humanitarians' lack of agency, high hierarchy and strong power relations between different actors in the scene. In comparison to the other narratives, this narrative was the only one where humanitarians did not react or find solutions when facing ethically challenging situations.

One of the most central elements in the narratives was the perception of the aid system as a hierarchical structure with strong external influences that restrained humanitarians' own control over the situation. Even though ethical challenges became visible in everyday situations in the field, they were seen as the product of the aid system, emerging due to macro-level factors such as the distribution of resources, the market economy and ideological and cultural factors. Furthermore, these factors were seen to guide the aid institutions and their decision-making process, which again influenced the everyday work practices and resources in aid projects. Following this hierarchical view of the aid system, the actors holding power and having the most agency in the scenes were the people and institutions possessing money and decision-making power over project resources and practicalities. Such actors included for instance high level management, directors, donors and organizations, who used their agency by defining frameworks and guidelines for projects and project funding. This was described as a way to use power and influence what kind of projects get implemented and how, and what kind of products are offered in aid distribution:

*There are all these nice things like gender equality and all this. But it's just like, then how much can you really do it? When an organization has to run like three of those big projects who have the budget for the next three years? And you're just running it through? (...) So, I think that's a bit like a problem then again, in itself and yeah, unethical. With regards to, can we decide, like we as Westerners, how fast somebody has to learn or what somebody has to do? Because we give the money? So, from the perspective of me being in there, like I have to play that game. Because if I wouldn't play that game, I wouldn't do my job, and we wouldn't get money. (Interview 2)*

Similar to the extract above, in many of the scenes macro-level decisions about project practicalities and resources created ethical conflicts for humanitarians' by influencing day-to-day work in the field. In practice, this produced ethical dilemmas, such as trying to achieve change with too few resources, having projects or aid packages that don't match the local context or being compelled to follow or implement ready-made frameworks. Following this, the interviewees positioned themselves low in the social hierarchy: being victims of the circumstances and not having the power or resources to change them. The local actors and beneficiaries were also positioned low in the aid hierarchy, being victims of the system and not having a voice of their own or power over aid practices.

When facing injustice, all of the interviewees made a clear distinction between what was happening and their own moral sense and highlighted how inappropriate the situation felt for them. However, the respondents described how the limitations of their role restricted them from intervening, and thus, personal struggles over unethical practices were resolved by adjusting to the requirements of external frameworks and ignoring the personal dilemma. This made humanitarians passive observers in the scene, witnessing, or at times even enacting something they found unethical or unsuitable to ensure the continuity or funding of the project:

*It's again the question if I give the power into the hands of the local organization and say, like, it's your decision, what do you want to do? Bring in my concerns and say, like, I'm not sure if I want to do this. But you know, it's like, okay, here is money. Do you want to get the money from here or not? That's a bit your decision. Although I'm, at the same time, aware that if there is money, we will probably go for it because we definitely need money (...) It's just pretending that you're blind, that you don't see the consequences. Or the dilemma, because I can always say like, okay, at this moment, it left my desk and it's with you. (Interview 2)*

*So, at some point, you really sell your soul every time you write an application. Because how much is it in the end still you and how much is it getting in line with the one with the money? (Interview 2)*

The aspiration to do good but seeing that what is done is not working caused a lot of frustration among the interviewees. When describing these events, some of the humanitarians used strong language to express their disappointment over the situation. Many of the respondents expressed feelings of anger, disgust or shame which occurred when being compelled to do something they considered as unsustainable or witnessing a situation they considered as unethical:

*And I thought this is so not worth my time (...) Like this is shameful and I'm ashamed of working here. I'm ashamed of this bullshit (...) So that was a big blow you know. And also in the organization like a lot of high management, they think they are superheroes (...) They act like they are so untouchable and they are so rude. Like my line manager was the worst manager I have had in my life. And then it was like what makes you think you afford to do this (...) Like this is not right you know. And all my colleagues told me that you sometimes have to put your head down because these people come for four or five years and they leave. But we don't have better options here to work. So, we can't quit so we have to put our pride up our ass and say okay. (Interview 1)*

On a few occasions, the interviewees described how they had carried the memory of the situation with them ever since and considered it as being one of the most difficult things they have experienced throughout their career or their life, which indicated how significant the experience had been for them. Overall, it seems that being personally touched, frustrated or shocked by witnessing such injustice had had a long-term impact on the humanitarians as remembering these events still brought up strong memories and feelings in the interviewees.

Even though humanitarians were not able to find concrete ways to solve ethical contradictions in this narrative, they still provided other accounts that helped them to deal with the unresolved situation. These were divided into two following categories: concrete compensating actions and ethical reflection afterwards. The first category that helped humanitarians to cope with unresolved ethical conflicts was to act in a way that would allow them to promote their values in other situations with small actions. This included, for instance, promoting sustainability and environmentally friendly action in free time by making creative use of waste or keeping nature clean by collecting waste from the forest. Although these actions were not always directly related to the unresolved ethical conflict, they still provided humanitarians a way to compensate for the feeling of not doing enough. Another way that helped humanitarians to deal with the unresolved situation was to find meaning in difficult experiences by seeing them as a positive resource and relating them as a part of their life course. This was done by processing challenging experiences afterwards and is related to the narrative of *ethical challenges as a part of life course*, which will be introduced later in the results.

## 4.2 Solving Challenges by Considering What is Best for the Local Context

The narrative of *considering the local context* appeared in all of the interviews as one of the most central narratives and it discusses humanitarians' experiences of intervening in the local environment and facing ethical challenges when engaging with the local culture and actors. The local context narrative presents concrete ways to deal with ethical challenges, such as considering the local context, cooperating with the local actors, acknowledging the local perspective and reflecting on what is best for the local context in the long term. The main themes emerging in this narrative were humanitarians' influence on local context, humanitarians' contradictory role and respect towards the local culture and actors. Although this narrative contained similar themes with the narrative of cooperation and interaction, which also highlighted open dialogue and sensitivity, this narrative focused more on the overall way of resolving challenges by considering the local environment.

One of the main themes in the local context narratives was the perception of ethical challenges as an inevitable part of the working environment, emerging due to the dynamic between global and local and differing cultural ideals on what is right and desirable. Many of the interviewees described aid work as a process that aims to implement global ideals and external frameworks in the local context while still respecting the local culture and values. In practice, following this idea of aid work proved to be challenging in situations where global ideals contradict the local culture and values, for instance with regard to development norms or gender equality. At times, this led to a conflict between local and international actors' ideals on how things should be done and what is considered as good and desirable. The dynamic between global and local and the differing cultural perspectives on the situation became apparent when field workers engaged with the local environment and faced some ideological and practical dilemmas due to their position in between different organizations, actors and cultures:

*It's a very long process (...) To achieve this change of mindset (...) This is very challenging to me because I had to assist and our team had to assist and I was the only foreigner there..Because the local staff, it was a part of their culture and they didn't see it in the same way as I saw it or our organization saw it (...) Their culture was somehow so dark and the beliefs about what is right were embedded so deep. I saw it like a big mountain when thinking about how to start discussing this issue. It was such a big thing there and it was so normal to them that it is a part of their culture that if you are a woman and you are not circumcised you will not get married. (Interview 3)*

As a result, some of the interviewees expressed how intervening in the local culture to enforce change and development in the local mindset raised some concerns about the extent of Western influence in the aid system and neo-colonialism in aid projects. According to the interviewees, the discrepancy between external ideals and the local culture emerged frequently in aid projects and led to the dilemma on if it is right to intervene in the local context and in which ways. Following these concerns, humanitarians described being in a contradictory position where they had to consider how their own values and actions influence the local context and balance with respecting the local perspective, while still enforcing change in the local culture. Throughout the scenes, this contradiction became apparent in humanitarians' diverse ways of positioning themselves in relation to local context and local actors as the interviewees switched their role from identifying as a part of the local community to representing “the Western ways” of thinking and acting. Even though the respondents felt connected with the local actors, they still acknowledged their own position as an outsider and struggled with finding their role, not wanting to impose too much of their own cultural background, beliefs or attitudes on the local community and actors:

*When you consult somebody (...) the idea is that you know, better than they do (...) So it's already the question like, do I first of all really know better? Like, I have maybe methods, yes, in itself. But what it implies as well is that the European or Western ideas are better than what we have here. And so, the conflict I really have here every day is like: am I a person who can tell somebody else to do their job? (Interview 2)*

When facing ethical contradictions, the interviewees emphasized the importance of acting based on what is best for the local environment and changing practices through open dialogue and sensitivity. Despite the interviewees' own, sometimes contradicting values and beliefs, they highlighted resolving ethical challenges in cooperation with the local actors, not through power or authority. Throughout the scenes, humanitarians saw themselves in control of how they interact with the local environment and used their agency to create close ties with the local actors and consult them for advice before making decisions. In addition, some of the interviewees mentioned everyday capacity building as a way to strengthen the local organization and local colleagues' own voice. Mostly, the respondents made decisions by considering how they influence the local environment, local security situation and the future of the local people, who remain in the community after the project ends and humanitarians return back to their home countries:

*I got there, like, two or three years after everything happened (...) You had to deal with this sensitivity of these people that had been in a genocide, really. So you're dealing with this, all*

*my staff was from there (...) I was the foreigner, and then everybody else was from there (...) it was a situation where at some point, it got so tense and you had to be super careful. And you have to, you have to sort of respond to your organization, you have to respond to your colleagues. Because, you know, it's also your colleagues who are from that place, and they all know each other, if they were involved in a situation where they did something bad to someone. (Interview 1)*

Mostly, the interviewees saw themselves as mediators, balancing between different actors and cultures while trying to take into account the local perspective as well as the needs and requirements of their sending organizations and the donors. Even though the donors and sending organizations possessed power and authority over aid finances and project frameworks, they were often seen as distant and even disconnected from the local culture and reality on the ground. This was the opposite to humanitarians, who could not affect financial, ideological or cultural factors in the aid system, but had the power to influence the grass root level due to their physical presence in the receiving country. Mostly, the hierarchy between different actors in the scenes was low, but the actors having the most power and agency in the scenes were the people and institutions with local networks or knowledge of the local culture.

#### 4.3 Solving Challenges in Cooperation and Interaction with Others

The narrative of *cooperation and interaction* appeared in almost all of the interviewees and it focuses on humanitarians' descriptions of solving ethical challenges through cooperation and interaction with others. This narrative was not as central as the other narratives, but it was used when describing some concrete and ideal ways of solving ethical conflicts and acting in ethically challenging situations. The main themes emerging in the narrative of cooperation and interaction were humanitarians' role as a mediator, low hierarchy among the aid actors and the power of social interaction. Similar to the narrative of local context, this narrative also emphasized cooperation with the local people, but the focus was more on how to achieve a dialogue between actors' different perspectives and the way of interacting with others.

One of the main elements in this narrative was the perception of the aid system as a socially negotiated process where humanitarian and local actors negotiate the outcomes of aid projects together and resolve ethical challenges through cooperation and interaction. The nature of ethical challenges was not strictly defined, but they were seen to emerge in a complex environment with varying social

dynamics, tensions, politics and culture, and therefore, requiring a range of actors with different perspectives to solve them. In addition, ethics was seen as an element that is present in social interaction in the way actors behave, talk and refer to each other in daily situations. In practice, actors' rude, irresponsible or unethical behaviour, such as being disrespectful towards others, not following rules or safety regulations or abandoning team members in a critical situation caused ethical discrepancies.

The way in which people engaged in social interaction was seen as one of the key elements, either helping or restricting cooperation and dialogue between aid actors and their perspectives. Communication was seen to form the basis for all aid work and collaboration since the nature of humanitarian field work required humanitarians to build close relations with actors from different cultures and cooperate with many different kinds of personalities in volatile and extreme situations:

*When you are living in a place, respect where you're living and your colleagues, the local colleagues. It's not a minor thing. I mean, you're working, hand in hand with other people who are completely different. So, what I'm highlighting here is that it's easy to keep a good face when you meet someone once in a blue moon. Another thing is when you're constantly interacting, the way you talk and the way you refer to them or the way what you ask them to do this kind of things, managing stuff (...) I think it's not only my work but it's also the interactions that I encounter with my fellow colleagues. (Interview 1)*

When facing ethical challenges, the interviewees solved challenges in cooperation with their colleagues and the local community, who were seen as equal participants in the aid process. Instead of only relying on their own perspective, the interviewees figured out together what should be done by building a shared understanding of what is the best way to move forward in the situation. In practice, this meant engaging in a dialogue with the local community and other actors to understand their perspectives on the situation and acknowledge the diversity of ethical views. Recognizing and combining aid workers and local actors' different backgrounds and views were seen to bring more layers and diversity to the discussion about ethical challenges, increase team members' shared knowledge and help to find more flexible and adaptable solutions to multi-level ethical questions:

*I always believe in negotiation, and I believe in talking, no matter how difficult the situation is if people can face each other on a professional level and as human beings with mutual respect. No matter how difficult the situation is, whether it's about corruption or a political question or ethical question or some concrete technical question, I always believe in*

*cooperation, and I have seen that it works. That yes, this kind of open discussion should happen and with the help of that we will be able to move forward. (Interview 3)*

According to the interviewees, cooperating with different kinds of people who had diverse ways of approaching the situation demanded a lot of sensitivity and good interpersonal skills. This required humanitarians to focus on how they as individuals can influence the quality of social relations with their own ways of interacting by treating everyone as equal and talking to them in a respectful way. This was seen as a way to create a safe environment for open communication and strengthen the trust between people, which was defined as the basis for all negotiations regarding ethical challenges:

*This kind of bad behaviour, rude and disrespectful behaviour doesn't bring you forward. So sometimes you have to please for a very long time to get to the level of trust in the negotiations. That trust is all. If you don't achieve the trust of the other party then your effort will be empty because you need that trust to be able to discuss and after the trust is there, then you can hope that the discussion moves forward in the way that you achieve results. (Interview 3)*

The power to influence the aid process and resolve ethical challenges were seen as elements that are achieved only through cooperation and teamwork, not by individual means. Following this, the interviewees positioned themselves primarily as members of their team and the local community, not giving much emphasis on their individual identities or the agency of their sending organizations and donors. In most of the scenes, the hierarchy between aid actors was low and the interviewees saw their role as a mediator, creating meaningful connections and building a sense of community among all the actors. Even though humanitarians were only able to control their own behaviour, they saw the potential to solve challenges by focusing on their own ways of interacting, which made humanitarians active actors in the scenes.

#### 4.4 Solving Challenges by Acting According to Personal Values

The narrative of *personal values* appeared when discussing all kinds of ethical challenges and it emerged in all of the interviews as one of the most central narratives for resolving challenges. The way in which humanitarians solved challenges was seen to derive from their own personality, life experiences, background and values: what they consider as right and good. The main themes emerging in this narrative were the perception of ethical conflicts as something personal, humanitarians' individual responsibility and humanitarians' own values. In contrast to the previous

narratives which highlighted cooperation and networking, this narrative was more focused on individuals' subjective means of solving challenges by following their own perspective of the situation. Yet, this narrative was partly overlapping with the previous narratives since the interviewees also justified their decisions to respect the local perspective and cooperate with others by referring to their own values and what they thought was the right thing to do.

One of the main elements in this narrative was the perception of ethical challenges as a personal obstacle, emerging in situations that are against humanitarians' own view of how things should be done in practice. Ethical challenges were seen to arise from the contradiction between the actual reality on the ground and humanitarians' own moral sense and they appeared in all different levels of aid work from daily interactions and practical matters to the implementation of bigger ideological frameworks and projects. Moreover, the way of defining ethical challenges was described as a subjective experience as the interviewees described how their way of understanding ethics was constructed throughout their lives: arising from their identity, childhood, education, professional background and overall life experiences:

*I can just bring in the values which I have experienced. And based on this I assess. And what I would consider as good might be considered bad by someone else, or, like, unethical or so.*  
(Interview 2)

Thus, even though ethical challenges were a part of humanitarians' working environment, ethical reflection about the challenges was seen as a part of personal process that did not belong under professional discourse about operational practices and policies. As a result, instead of reflecting ethical questions in a dialogue with their organization, ethical challenges were seen as something the professional has to negotiate with themselves by forming their own perspective about the situation.

When addressing ethical challenges, the interviewees highlighted the meaning of their own identity and personality. In practice, humanitarians described making choices based on their personality and background as they justified their actions with the values they had internalized throughout their lives:

*And then on the other hand it belongs to my personality, and I work with my personality (...)  
And then it's all a matter of faith to me that I believe I'm doing the right thing despite everything.* (Interview 4)

*Because if I insist too much on my point, I would be in conflict with my first idea (...) Because the moment I insist too much, I'm, let's say the bossy European, which I don't want to be (...) I may be unfamiliar with my own ideas and values. (Interview 2)*

To highlight their personal responsibility when dealing with ethical challenges, some of the interviewees also mentioned relying on personal coping mechanisms, such as consultation with friends, having meaningful hobbies, being compassionate towards themselves and taking good care of themselves. Overall, humanitarians emphasized their personal ways of coping with ethical challenges over any organizational or professional guidelines:

*And then as an individual, of course you have a huge responsibility in how you start to deal with those things (...) It has a lot to do with your own behaviour, how you as an individual and professional can deal with that and handle that with the people who are involved in it. So, it has a lot to do with the skills of the individual and their way of handling things. Of course ethical questions are also very difficult so it depends on your maturity how these things can be addressed. (Interview 3)*

Although sending organizations offered some operational guidelines and distant support, they were often described to be too far from the actual reality on the ground. Following this, humanitarians constructed themselves as actors with power, being able to decide how they implement frameworks and choose if they take on active or passive roles. As a result, some of the interviewees were actively involved when solving challenges, whereas others decided to retreat into the background since they felt like it was not right to intervene or take over the local actors' agency in the situation. Mostly, humanitarians portrayed themselves in the role of a moral actor: being in a position where they can implement their own ideals and values through their actions and decisions at the micro-level.

#### 4.5 Dealing with Challenges by Positioning Them as a Part of Life Course

The narrative of *ethical challenges as a part of life course* appeared in all of the interviews as the underlying theme which emerged when considering the overall interview as a one unified story instead of focusing only on the individual case examples. Rather than showing any concrete ways to resolve challenges or act on the scene, this narrative presented ways that helped humanitarians to cope with ethical challenges afterwards by reflecting them in the light of their life course. This was a way of coping with all kinds of ethical dilemmas, but it was especially used when dealing with the

challenges that remained unresolved and the feeling of not being able to do enough. The main themes emerging in this narrative were humanitarians' life course and identity, ethical reflection afterwards, finding meaning in challenging experiences and turning difficult them into positive resources. Even though this narrative was partly overlapping with the narrative of personal values, which also highlighted humanitarians' own life course and values, this narrative was more focused on abstract ethical reflection after the events rather than any concrete actions in the situation.

One of the main elements in this narrative was the perspective of ethical conflicts as complex and time-consuming dilemmas that might require time and distance to the events in order to find resolutions or ways of accepting them. While ethical reflection was also an important part of the decision-making process when working on field missions, most of the humanitarians felt that many ethical issues still required more time to emerge and reflect. The complexity of dealing with ethical challenges was seen as an inevitable part of life and humanitarian work that might offer some inspiration or personal meaning later in life. Since reflecting on ethical questions was seen as a complicated and slow process, humanitarians felt that reflecting on them required more time than what they had on field missions, where the focus was more on practical and operative matters. As a result, some of the ethical questions concerning the project arrangements as well as humanitarians' own actions in the situation only emerged after returning home, when the interviewees had more time and distance to the events.

Reflecting on ethical questions and finding ways to cope with them, was related to humanitarians' own reflection about their overall life course as the narrative shifted between the past, present and future. Some of the scenes were located to the time before the interviewees became humanitarians, describing their childhood or previous work environments while other scenes were describing events that happened to them after facing the ethically challenging situation, such as arriving back home or deciding about future work possibilities. Throughout the scenes, the interviewees described their identity on one hand as a stable continuum of their life history and values and on the other hand as flexible and changeable over time, adjusting to their experiences. By constructing a story of their life course and identity, humanitarians were able to describe the different layers and personal struggles related to ethical dilemmas but also find ways of coping with the challenges:

*When I was working at the bank (...) I decided then actively, okay, I want to do something which has more effect and use for people (...) And I definitely feel here that there are projects and there is work which is helping someone more than it would do when I would be back home for example right now (...) I feel at the end, I did something worth the effort I do here. And I*

*think also worth the troubles I have maybe with regards to the ethical conflict I have.*  
(Interview 2)

In addition, positioning the ethically challenging situation as a part of their life history helped the interviewees to observe their subjective abilities to intervene in the conflict when considering their professional or other life experiences at the time of the events:

*When I think of how ready I was to deal with those things I actually say that I also made some mistakes. If I would have been a more experienced employee in that foreign culture and in the new environment, I could have managed to deal with it easier and my own stress would have been smaller. It would have been easier if I would have had more experience about different cultures and working with authorities and with the village community leaders.* (Interview 3)

This helped humanitarians to cope with the feeling of not being able to do enough or intervene in the situation. Moreover, when describing different events throughout their lives, humanitarians constructed a story where ethically challenging situations found some personal meaning and illustrated how facing ethical challenges had influenced their lives or the way they see themselves. For instance, some of the humanitarians described how getting through ethically challenging situations had helped them to find their own abilities to get through difficult situations, which allowed them to find their own strengths and apply for more challenging positions:

*It has had a massive impact on my life in general if I think about humanitarian work (...) It has only reinforced that because I could handle so difficult things that I had to face there and I didn't have any people on the same level there that I could talk with (...) Yes it took a long time to deal with that. But I would think that it made me stronger. Well, I do think that if I managed that thing there, because it was such a big process and project, I can manage.*  
(Interview 3)

In some cases, the interviewees described how facing challenges had helped them to evaluate their ways of being involved in humanitarian work which led them to apply for different types of organizations where they could address some of the ethical questions that had remained unresolved:

*I started to make my list, like, you know, like potential employees for the future when I'm done here, and I think it's good for that. So I have organizations on the list, and I didn't strike out anybody yet, but more understand, like, whom I think I would not like to work to, for example, because I have the feeling like okay, yes, they do still work, which is necessary.* (Interview 2)

Although reflecting on past ethical dilemmas after the experience could not produce any actual solutions to old situations, it offered a way to construct “a new ending” to the story by finding meaning from difficult experiences and turning them into positive resources. In addition, by extending the story to what happened before or after the ethically challenging situation, humanitarians were able to provide some solutions to inner conflicts, such as choosing to work for a more ethical employer in the future or seeing the meaning of their work compared to other positions, they had worked in. This ethical reflection after the experience helped humanitarians to position difficult experiences as a part of their life course and construct their own moral view to ethical questions.

## 5. Conclusions

In previous studies, the field of aid work is described as a complex environment where different principles, cultures, paradigms, values and identities interact. All of these elements are described to constitute the exceptional environment where aid is implemented and where individual humanitarians operate and make decisions in ethically challenging situations. Even though the literature recognizes that humanitarians are especially prone to face ethical challenges due to their special working environment, most of the existing studies about ethics in aid work discuss macro-level themes about the ethics of national interventions, the reasons behind ethical challenges or the general types of ethical challenges, disregarding individuals' subjective ethical reflections and their ways of overcoming ethical challenges. The few existing studies addressing individuals' perspectives are mainly centred around healthcare workers', focusing on their professional ethics and professional role in the receiving community.

In this study, I set out to move the perspective closer to the ground and explore humanitarians' ways of navigating through ethically challenging situations. This was done by applying the narrative research approach, which focuses on understanding the narrators' perspective and reality through their story. The aim of the study was to extend the discussion from only recognizing different types of ethical challenges to observing the ways in which individuals cope with ethically challenging situations by answering the research question of *how humanitarians make sense of and deal with ethical challenges in their narratives*. The data of the study was collected by conducting individual interviews with four humanitarian aid workers from different professional backgrounds. The aim of the interviews was to ask the participants to describe a specific situation where they had faced an

ethical challenge and to explore that example deeper by asking further questions about the case and how the situation progressed.

The data was analysed by using thematic, structural and performative elements of narrative analysis. The aim was to elaborate on the interviewees' concrete actions and choices in the situation as well as their ways of constructing the ethical conflict. The analysis focused on observing the social positioning of characters and the power dynamics within each story as well as the main arguments used when the interviewees described their actions in ethically challenging situations. According to the results, ethical dilemmas arise in many everyday situations from daily practices to interactions with colleagues and beneficiaries in various contexts and levels of aid work. The results showed that ethical conflicts are often complicated and multi-layered challenges that require varying solutions. Based on the results, humanitarians used five main narratives to describe their ways of constructing, making sense of and solving ethical challenges. These were 1. dealing with challenges by not intervening or ignoring the conflict, 2. solving challenges by considering what is best for the local context, 3. solving challenges in cooperation and interaction with others, 4. solving challenges by acting according to personal values and 5. dealing with challenges by positioning them as a part of life course.

The first out of the five narratives, ignoring the ethical conflict, emerged in situations where humanitarians had no power to intervene in the conflicts they witnessed. In this narrative, challenges were dealt with by ignoring the conflict and remaining passive in the situation. The second narrative, considering the local context, described situations where humanitarians considered how much and in which ways they can intervene in the local context and dealt with the dilemma of how much they should respect the local culture and enforce Western values. In this narrative, humanitarians resolved conflicts by networking with the local actors and made decisions based on what would be the best for the local context and local people in the long term. This was partially overlapping with the third narrative, cooperation and interaction, which focused on situations where the interviewees solved contradictions in cooperation with others by taking into account different actors' ethical perspectives and building a shared understanding of what would be the best way to move forward in the situation. In this narrative, ethical challenges were resolved by negotiating the outcomes of ethical challenges together with other aid workers and the local community. In the third narrative, humanitarians highlighted the importance of respectful and equal interaction as the key element when resolving ethical conflicts in cooperation with others.

In contrast to the third narrative, the fourth narrative was centred around individual humanitarians, who resolved conflicts by making decisions based on their own values and moral views. In this narrative, humanitarians solved ethical challenges by relying on their own background, personality and values. This narrative was perhaps the most comprehensive of all because ultimately humanitarians justified all their choices with this narrative. Even when humanitarians made their decisions in favour of the locals or in cooperation with others, they described following their own vision of how things should be handled when choosing that approach in the situation. The last narrative, ethical challenges as a part of life course, was also centred around the individual, focusing on their identity and subjective life story. In this narrative, humanitarians dealt with ethical conflicts after the situation by relating them as a part of their life course which helped humanitarians to find personal meaning in the difficult experience and turn it into a positive resource. This narrative was used to deal with all kinds of ethical conflicts, but it appeared especially when discussing the conflicts that had remained unresolved.

As seen in the results, each narrative focused on a different level in which the ethical conflict was solved and contained a certain way of explaining the underlying idea behind one's choices in the situation. Depending on the narrative, the focus was either on individual-centred solutions, such as how the individual can resolve their own inner conflict which emerges as a response to the external ethical dilemma, or in interactive ways of solving the external conflict in cooperation with the environment and the other actors involved. Some of the narratives brought up very concrete ways to act and make choices in challenging situations, while others focused more on bigger theoretical ideologies of how one should approach ethical challenges in general and how to deal with the aftermath of the situation. The way of dealing with the ethical challenge depended on several external factors, such as the nature and context of the challenge, cultural factors, humanitarian's own role in the situation, actors' roles, and the power dynamics in the situation. In addition, humanitarians' solutions to ethical challenges were always subjective choices which were influenced by internal factors, such as humanitarians own understanding of ethics, humanitarians' own values and personality, humanitarians' subjective life history and previous life experiences.

One of the most central themes when dealing with the conflict was humanitarians' own role and agency, which defined their ability to influence the situation in practice. Humanitarians' agency was dependent on actors' hierarchy and power relations, which indicated who had the most control over the daily practices and the overall situation. Depending on the narrative, the concept of power was seen to be constituted through different things, such as money, high position, decision-making power, local knowledge, local networks, the quality of interactions and presence in the local community.

Humanitarians' ability to influence the conflict was dependent on the concept of power, which determined whose ethical perspective would become the dominant frame of reference, or in other words, who would get to decide what is right and acceptable and what kind of values should be followed when resolving ethical challenges in practice. Despite the fact that all of the interviewees' descriptions were subjective, the narratives showed that similar topics occurred in all of the interviews. This indicates that everyone's personal reflection followed similar, frequently appearing themes about power, culture and values, which can be seen to describe the core of the ethical questions that emerge in the humanitarian field.

## 5.6 Comparing to Previous Studies and Implications for Future Studies

In comparison to previous studies, this study was able to move the perspective closer to micro-level by addressing individual humanitarians' experiences about everyday ethical conflicts while also extending the scope from health care workers to other professions working in the humanitarian field. The main elements influencing humanitarians' decisions and actions in ethically challenging situations followed similar themes introduced in previous studies, such as culture, values, paradigms and identity. Similar to previous literature, my results confirm that humanitarians tend to prioritize their own view and practical solutions over any formal policies and guidelines. My findings on the root causes of ethical conflicts were in line with previous studies in which ethical conflicts have emerged for instance due to historical and political structures, lack of resources, differing ideologies, dilemmas between imposing external values and respecting the local culture as well as contradictions between what is needed and offered. In addition, this study found other types of ethical dilemmas that emerged between colleagues due to their unethical behaviour towards others. Overall, the results showed how common ethical challenges in aid work are and how long-lasting effects they might leave on the people involved.

Furthermore, the narrative approach brought up new aspects in the study of ethics in aid work by making humanitarians' ways of reasoning their choices visible and discovering different ways in which individuals can overcome ethical challenges. By elaborating on humanitarians' ways of constructing ethical challenges, the research approach was able to unravel the underlying ethical questions behind the challenges and show the factors that were either restricting or enabling humanitarians' ability to solve the conflict. In addition, the results revealed that ethical challenges are not only limited to the role of healthcare professionals, but aid workers in different positions with

different backgrounds face ethical challenges in their daily work. Although the type of the challenge and the way of approaching and solving them might vary depending on the individuals' position and profession, the results show that ethical challenges can appear in various roles in aid work. However, due to the experimental application of the research method and the small number of research participants, to increase the reliability of the results it would be good to repeat this study with a larger number of interviewees to see if the data would produce similar findings. Future research on the topic could gather a larger set of data, limited to a specific case, for instance on a certain project or a geographical location, to see if there would be any significant differences in how the participants construct the same situation. Alternatively, a similar research design could be repeated by focusing on just a few interviewees over a longer period of time to concentrate more on individuals' long-term approach to ethical challenges and the possible changes when facing them.

In general, wider research data about individuals' ways of solving challenges could produce tools for humanitarians' self-reflection, which could help them to deal with external and internal ethical conflicts and stay motivated in their job. Thus, another useful path when studying ethics in aid work would be looking into the role of humanitarian organizations in supporting their employees to deal with ethical challenges. The similarities within the interviewees' descriptions demonstrate that even though ethical reflection was mostly seen to be in the responsibility of the individual, an open discussion and collective sharing of experiences could help humanitarians to extend their understanding of the topic and deal with the difficult feelings that remain afterwards. Future research on the topic could look into how humanitarian organizations support their employees in dealing with ethical challenges and how openly they discuss the challenges and share information. Further research on the topic could help to instill the discussion about ethical conflicts as a part of the organizational culture and encourage organizations to raise the theme of ethics into a visible part of humanitarians' work and training. By sharing more information and initiating discussions about ethics, organizations would make complex ethical questions more understandable and easier to deal with. In addition, having access to more information on the topic would enable humanitarian actors to take ethics into account when designing and implementing aid projects and provide ethically more sustainable aid work in the future.

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