

Book Review

The Aid triangle: Recognizing the human dynamics of dominance, justice and identity

By M. MacLachlan, S.G. Carr, & E. McAuliffe. (2010)

(London: Zed Books.)

Reviewed by Tony Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington

This remarkable book presents the insight of three committed academics with more than 20 years of experience in the chaotic and unfulfilling field of monitoring international aid. Like many other such publications, it gives example after example of the failure of governments and voluntary agencies in the so-called 'developed' world to help their 'undeveloped' neighbours deal effectively with catastrophe of many different kinds.

Their answer, illustrated appropriately by the corners of an Escher triangle reproduced on the cover of the book, conceptualises the inextricable drives of dominance, justice and identity on the part of donors that inevitably influence the allocation and distribution of the international aid they offer. For the authors, **dominance** means that the interests of donors should not prevail over those of recipients; **justice** that disaster agencies should not discriminate between recipients in the distribution of goods and services to those in need; and **identity** that the distribution of aid should be devoid of destructive cross-cultural baggage. (Personally, to present all three drives in the same positive form, I would have thought it better had the authors used the word equity instead of dominance). More than that, the authors point out that the notion of any outside authority presuming to impose solutions on a beleaguered community is itself a recipe for disaster.

The sheer size of the humanitarian problems created by chronic poverty, food shortage, endemic disease, exploitation of natural resources, recurrent natural disasters, and interminable outbreaks of hostility commands attention. This slim, well written, provocative, and compelling book, will encourage the brave-hearted not to despair. The advice it offers will make sense to every practitioner and researcher in applied psychology - whether for the interpersonal, community, or cross-cultural level of appraisal. May more psychologists become committed to working with locals to create and monitor solutions for people in desperate need of the basic essentials for their very existence. Those looking for inspirational small-scale models need not look far beyond the fieldwork of a few absolute grass-roots organisations such as NZ Volunteer Service Abroad. (cf. <http://www.vsa.org.nz/about-vsa/new-publicationholder/vista/>) May 2010.

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