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# Cultural Theory and Acceptance-Based Security Strategies for Humanitarian Aid Workers

## Author Biography

Adam K. Childs has an MSc. in Risk, Crisis and Disaster Management from the University of Leicester, U.K. He has ten years of field experience in delivering humanitarian assistance in insecure and conflict zones, primarily with Médecins Sans Frontières. His research interests revolve around the safety and security of aid workers, especially in terms of organisational culture and individual psychometrics. He currently resides in New Zealand and can be reached at [adamkc@ymail.com](mailto:adamkc@ymail.com).

## Abstract

Humanitarian aid agencies have relied primarily on acceptance as their primary risk, or security, management strategy for well over a decade. Evidence suggests, however, that this strategy has become ineffective, as the number of targeted attacks against humanitarian aid workers has been steadily increasing over the past two decades. Despite the urgency of the situation, aid agencies have struggled to effectively implement new strategies and still rely primarily on acceptance as a mitigating strategy. This article examines the limitations of acceptance as practiced by humanitarian aid agencies as a strategy against targeted attacks and the challenges in adopting new strategies. The article uses Cultural Theory to explain these limitations and challenges and concludes with recommendations based on that theory for a new approach to security strategies that takes into account the social milieu of both aid workers and their potential attackers.

## Introduction

Acceptance, in the sense of a risk management strategy, is the reduction of the likelihood of targeted attacks by reducing or removing the motivation to attack.<sup>1</sup> Aid agencies have depended upon an appreciation for their work – the delivery of assistance within the framework of international humanitarian law – to gain that acceptance. Colloquially, “if we do good work, then everyone will like us”.<sup>2</sup> This article terms this the ‘passive model of acceptance’: agencies engage in few (if any) activities specifically designed to boost acceptance directly and trust that the acceptance earned as a by-product of other activities will suffice.<sup>3</sup>

That passive acceptance may not be sufficient is seen in the increasing number of targeted attacks against humanitarian aid workers. By 2008, the fatality rate for international aid workers was greater than that for UN peacekeepers.<sup>4</sup> The rate of non-fatal incidents increased similarly; there were 113 kidnap victims of kidnap in the four years ending in 2004 rising to 429 for the four years ending in 2011.<sup>5</sup> The increase in attack rates was highest for international staff of humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs); aid agencies.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the rate of targeted attacks upon aid workers of all types (i.e. NGOs, UN agencies and the ICRC) increased from 4 per 10,000 in 1997 to 9 per 10,000 in 2008 (the latest year for which rates are available).<sup>7</sup> As aid agencies became aware of these statistics, they began to consider alternative or additional operational tactics such as increased cooperation between aid agencies, deterrence and avoidance. Although the rate of attacks is still too high, the rate of increase of attacks has slowed in the past three years and has now more or less stabilized. Preliminary analysis suggests that this is primarily due to the strategy of avoidance (described later), a sub-optimal solution as there is a consequent decrease in the amount of aid delivered.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Koenraad Van Brabant, “Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies,” *Good Practice Review* 8 (2000). Targeted attacks are deliberate and motivated by the identity of the intended victim. Thus being hit by crossfire or attacked by a lion is considered untargeted. Similarly, a random mugging on the street is probably untargeted but an ambush wherein the attackers waited until ‘the right car’ came along would be targeted. In the context of this article, attacks are considered ‘targeted’ when motivated, at least in part, due to the identification of the intended victim as an aid agency or aid worker.

<sup>2</sup> International aid and assistance encompasses a variety of actors and actions. Although there will be significant overlap with and relevance to other aid agencies (e.g. development), the focus of this paper is *humanitarian* aid work and workers thus reference to ‘aid workers’, ‘aid agencies’, *et al* should be taken as referring specifically to humanitarian assistance wherein immediate, life-saving assistance is provided in times of conflict and disaster as defined by international humanitarian law, primarily the Geneva Conventions and associated protocols. This will be familiar in military circles as a ‘hearts and minds’ strategy.

<sup>3</sup> The provision of aid is a major generator of acceptance but other activities – employing staff, local purchases of goods and services for example – also generate acceptance.

<sup>4</sup> Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico, “Providing aid in insecure environments: 2009 Update Trends in violence against aid workers and the operational response,” *HPG Policy Brief* 34 (2009), available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/3250.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> “Humanitarian Outcomes,” *Aid Worker Security Database* (2012): available at: <https://aidworkersecurity.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Other humanitarian agencies include the ICRC and UN agencies such as UNICEF.

<sup>7</sup> Serious incident numbers are generally well known however rates are much harder to ascertain. Most aid agencies do not know how many staff they have in the field at any one time to make these calculations in a timely manner. Researchers (especially Abby Stoddard and Adele Harmer) spend significant time analysing proxy indicators in order to report incident *rates* as opposed to absolute numbers of incidents.

<sup>8</sup> A decrease in the presence of international aid workers due to avoidance strategies is not directly proportional with the decrease in aid delivered as new delivery mechanisms are introduced but a decrease in aid to some degree is unavoidable.

## Humanitarian Security Strategies

For over a decade aid agencies have used a 'Security Triangle' to guide their risk management strategies.<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier, aid agencies use acceptance as their primary risk management strategy. This acceptance strategy is one of the corners of the 'Security Triangle' with deterrence (threatening to harm those who harm us) and protection (making it difficult to harm through physical barriers) being the other two points.

Deterrence – the reduction of risk likelihood through the threat of retaliatory harm – is rare as a strategy for humanitarian NGOs. The more obvious manifestations of this strategy (armed guards, electric fences, guard dogs) are seen as anathema to humanitarian principles but are used in extreme circumstances.<sup>10</sup> Less obvious manifestations are more common – these include reporting malefactors to police or international criminal courts, loss of employment (i.e. firing) and withdrawal of assistance from the population (wherein deterrence evolves into avoidance). Deterrence tends to be a strategy of last resort for humanitarian agencies – harming people directly (e.g. shooting them) or indirectly (e.g. withdrawing life-saving assistance) is clearly contrary to the principles and objectives of aid organizations.

Protection is a focus on practical, technical solutions preventing untargeted, non-deliberate hazards (i.e. accidents) as well as reducing the likelihood of targeted risks by reducing opportunity. Examples include the mandatory use of seat belts, training staff in the identification and avoidance of unexploded ordnance (UXOs), the provision of sharps boxes and pits, walls around compounds and passwords on computers. Some protection activities also reduce post-incident impact (e.g. first aid kits in cars, fire extinguishers). Protection is a common strategy for aid agencies but only in moderation – protection activities can often countermand acceptance. For example, a three metre concrete wall, topped with razor wire and well lit at night provides protection but is also a literal barrier to establishing and maintaining cordial relations (the lowest useful level of acceptance) with the surrounding communities.

A fourth strategy, 'avoidance', is recognized and but is usually seen as a tactic within one of the three main strategies (e.g. *avoidance* of crossfire is managed through the *protection* of sandbags). Avoiding exposure to risk by, for example, not providing aid in highly insecure contexts, presents a moral dilemma for humanitarian agencies that see the provision of aid to those in need as their *raison d'être* and a moral imperative that should not be ignored. Hence avoidance may be used by aid agencies at a micro level (e.g. avoiding dangerous roads) but is rare at a macro level (e.g. avoiding Afghanistan).

## Acceptance as a Strategy against Targeted Attacks

For aid organizations, the greatest advantage of acceptance is in reducing the likelihood of targeted attacks by reducing others' desire to harm them.<sup>11</sup> Aid agencies rely predominantly on their good work to gain acceptance from communities; it is a truism that doing nice things for others will generate goodwill. However, acceptance can vary from mere tolerance to warm appreciation; what level of acceptance is generated is dependent upon three factors – the quantity and quality of the aid provided (and secondary benefits such as employment or business), the degree to which a potential attacker values aid and the social distance between the potential attacker and the person(s) benefiting from the aid. Of these three factors only one – the quantity and quality of the aid – is controllable by the aid agency (the 'provider'). The other two are dependent upon the 'receiver' and in certain cases – discussed in more detail below – these two factors can lower acceptance levels to the point where the risk of targeted attack becomes unacceptable.

That the social distance between potential attacker and beneficiary is largely uncontrollable by aid agencies is a consequence of humanitarian principles. Aid, by definition, is delivered impartially on the basis of need; delivering aid specifically to gain acceptance and thereby reduce risk is not an option. Furthermore, it is often the case that potential attackers are male, in good health and with sufficient power to ensure relative prosperity – they are less likely to need assistance than others in

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<sup>9</sup> "Operational Security Management in Violent Environments," *Good Practice Review* 8.

<sup>10</sup> Stoddard, et al., "Providing aid in insecure environments," 8; 22 percent of agencies have used armed escorts in at least one situation.

<sup>11</sup> Although acceptance can reduce post-incident impact, aid organisations are usually better positioned for recovery and response than local communities.

the community. Thus acceptance from these individuals on the basis of receiving assistance is secondary and stems from assistance provided to other people that would-be attackers value (for example, family or tribal members). The first limitation of passive acceptance, as a strategy against a targeted attack, is that it cannot be used to counter specific threats.

Another aspect of social distance relates to the fact that aid is restricted to geographically bounded areas. The size and location of these areas is based on a variety of factors. These factors include the degree of need, the availability of resources, and logistical or financial constraints. But aid workers aren't always in the immediate vicinity of where aid is being delivered. For example, where infrastructure has been severely damaged due to the crisis, aid workers live well away from the assisted areas. Similarly, threats are not restricted to the crisis area. Security challenges to aid agencies are increasingly a result of global perceptions (e.g. targeted attacks by Islamic fundamentalists' perception of aid agencies as tools of the West).<sup>12</sup> The second limitation of passive acceptance is limited geographical range, that cannot reduce the risk of a targeted attack from global threats nor can it protect aid workers when they are away from the location where assistance is being provided.

A third limitation of passive acceptance is that it is dependent upon the value placed upon the aid by the potential threat source. For instance, the degree of acceptance earned by treating someone's nephew depends on how that person values his or her nephew. Furthermore, this action has little to do with the value the aid agency places upon that assistance. Social distance, more importantly, is not the same in all cases.

The fourth limitation of using aid as an acceptance-gaining strategy is that it doesn't create acceptance uniformly and in some cases can decrease acceptance. Examples of where the activities of aid organisations can create antagonism by creating anger, resentment, jealousy, include: Disciplinary action against staff; provision of aid to a rival clan and; buying goods and services from a business competitor.

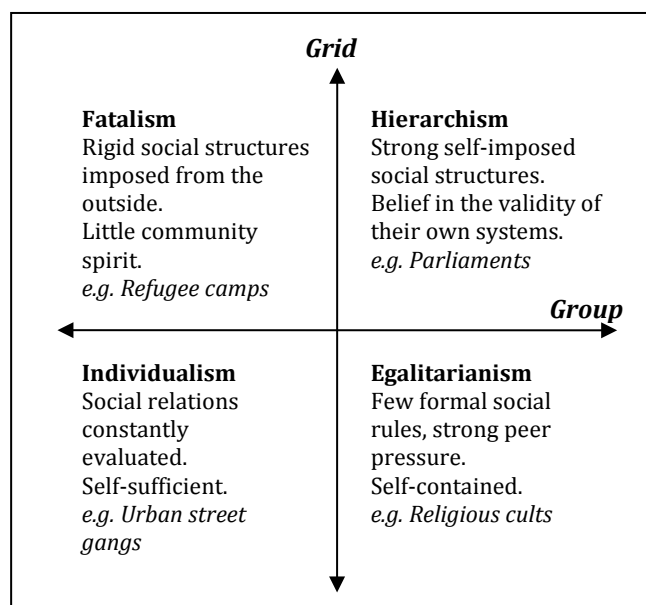
Crucially, very few aid agencies attempt to assess their level of acceptance either from the general population or from specific risk sources. In addition, aid agencies rarely, if ever, engage in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of their risk mitigation activities. The next section briefly describes Cultural Theory and how it can be used to postulate relative values for social distance, the amount of acceptance earned from potential attackers by providing aid to other community members and thus the decrease in the risk of targeted attack. For example, it will be seen that the provision of aid in so-called 'high group' societies will generate more acceptance than in 'low group' societies: if all other factors are equal, the risk of targeted attack is inversely proportional to 'group strength'. Such knowledge can be used by aid agencies to more accurately assess the likelihood of targeted attacks and formulate appropriate mitigation strategies accordingly.

## Cultural Theory

As acceptance is found at a community level, it is necessary to consider the communities present. According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, social units, or communities, exhibit shared *worldviews* that can be characterised by two variables termed 'grid' and 'group'.<sup>13</sup> Douglas' Cultural Theory has become widely accepted, especially as a framework for understanding risk perception since she first proposed the theory in 1970. Although the theory has its detractors and has undergone various refinements and interpretations over the last forty years, the basic structure – that of a two dimensional matrix with 'grid' as one axis and 'group' as the other – has remained intact (see *figure one*).

<sup>12</sup> Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer and Abby Stoddard, "To Stay and Deliver: Good practice for humanitarians in complex security environments," *UNOCHA Policy and Studies Series* (2011), available at: [http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Stay\\_and\\_Deliver.pdf](http://ochanet.unocha.org/p/Documents/Stay_and_Deliver.pdf); Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, "Humanitarian space: trends and issues," *HPG Policy Brief 46* (2012), available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7644.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Douglas, "Four cultures: the evolution of a parsimonious model," *GeoJournal* 47 (1999): 411-415.

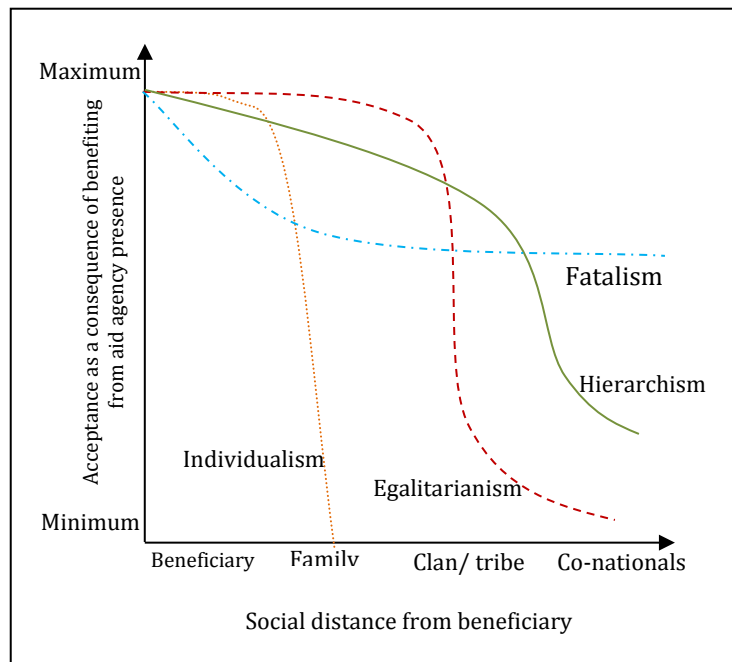
**Figure 1: Cultural Theory Worldviews**

Briefly, grid can be seen as a measurement of the external constraints put upon the members of a community when determining an individual's role, position and social standing. High grid societies have many rules based on explicit public social classifications like a person's heritage, race, gender, or club membership, etc. Low grid societies base their social interactions more on people's personal abilities; there is high social mobility and status is consistently being re-evaluated. Group can be seen as a measurement of internal constraints on members' behaviour. In high group situations, peer pressure is dominant in determining behaviour and social interaction whereas members of low group societies may not even know each other<sup>14</sup>. Taken together, the two factors create four worldviews: Individualism (low group, low grid – e.g. Wall Street traders); Fatalism (low group, high grid – e.g. ordinary North Korean citizens); Hierarchism (high group, high grid – e.g. militaries) and; Egalitarianism (high group, low grid – e.g. cults). By understanding the worldviews of the various actors it will be possible to answer some of the above questions. For example, a UN resolution is much more likely to have relevance to a member state (hierarchist worldview) than a loose group of anarchists (individualistic worldview).

## Using Cultural Theory to Understand Risk Levels

The first question that Cultural Theory can help answer concerns social distance. For instance, if two individuals receive the same benefit (food, medical care, employment, etc.), how effective is that benefit in reducing the risk of attack from other members of the community? This can be answered by considering the worldview of the community (see *figure two*). In individualistic societies, acceptance drops off rapidly; acceptance will be high from the individual benefiting from the presence of the aid agency and that person's immediate family but not much further. A similar situation occurs in egalitarian societies with very high acceptance from the members of the social group to which the beneficiary belongs but little acceptance outside that group although in this case the size of the social group is much larger (e.g. clan as opposed to family). In hierarchical societies, acceptance drops off at a more constant rate, as acceptance from close relatives is less than in the first two worldviews considered but does not drop precipitously once a social boundary is reached. Fatalistic societies believe that the world does not care about them one way or another. Their ambivalent position believes that the assistance was provided for reasons known to the NGOs and not because of any real concern for the fatalist society. Hence those who directly benefit from the aid agencies will be grateful but any consequent acceptance drops off rapidly due to indifference.

<sup>14</sup> Gross, Jonathan L. and Steve Rayner, *Measuring Culture: A Paradigm for the Analysis of Social Organization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).  
Thompson, M., Eillis, R. and Aaron Wildavsky, *Cultural Theory*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

**Figure 2: Effectiveness of Acceptance based on Worldviews**

Thus an understanding of the effectiveness of acceptance as a security strategy requires an understanding of the worldviews of the potential attacker's communities. This understanding can also provide a preliminary macro-level risk assessment ahead of a more detailed assessment in the field. Cultural Theory suggests that the nature of targeted attacks will vary from worldview to worldview (see Table 1). As an example, egalitarians – with a higher commitment to their social group than individualists – are more likely to use an attack method that exposes the attacker to significant personal risk than the latter who value their personal survival higher than that of the group: Suicide bombers are found in high group societies, not in low group ones. Conversely, providing aid to the wider community will earn greater acceptance from potential attackers in egalitarian societies than in individualist ones. In risk terms, the theory predicts that likelihood is lower but impact higher in egalitarian societies (e.g. Somalia) compared with individualist societies (e.g. Haiti). Similarly, Cultural Theory predicts that individuals are more likely to be targeted in an individualist society (e.g. mugging) whereas egalitarians are more likely to target the agency as a whole – its assets, reputation or programmes – than individual workers. Further research is required to test these hypotheses.

Incorporating this theory into aid agency security policies will be a challenge especially concerning standard operating procedures (SOPs). As an example, aid agencies identify their assets (e.g. cars, offices, personnel) as SOP. This works well to reduce risks in areas of high acceptance and is based on empirical evidence from decades of working in high group societies. However, as populations move from rural (commonly egalitarian) to urban environments (often individualist), this SOP may no longer be valid and may even increase risk. Cultural Theory can guide risk managers both in identifying the societies with which they are dealing and in designing appropriate what strategies for those societies.

Individualist societies are characterised by a low sense of community. There may be many competing factions (often armed) and competition for status, employment and resources is high. Local politics will be very volatile with rapid shifts in alliances. It will be difficult for aid agencies to ascertain who is in charge or who can provide access, security guarantees, and an unbiased picture of what the needs are for. The rule of law will be minimal and the social context can appear chaotic, even anarchic. These societies can be found in urban environments, especially those with high inward migration and/or in failed states. Furthermore, the coming together of disparate groups (tribal, religious, ideological) can create individualistic environments. Attacks are often spontaneous or opportunistic, targeting vulnerable individuals or small groups and may be more violent than necessary (e.g. beating a victim even after they have handed over their valuables). Attacks are usually motivated for personal gain as seen in criminal activity.

**Table 1: Risk Environments based on Worldviews**

WORLDVIEW	EXAMPLES		
	LOCATIONS	ATTACKS	ATTACKERS
Individualism	Port-au-Prince; Port Moresby; Kivu; Somalia; Caucasus, Central Nigeria (e.g. Jos); Refugee camps; Pastoralist-agriculturalist	Car-jacking, armed robbery, rape, kidnap (for ransom)	Disgruntled ex-employees; embarrassed traditional healer; landlord who didn't rent out his house; simple criminals
Hierarchism	Sudan (Darfur); Sri Lanka; Russia; Iraq; Myanmar; Karzai's Afghanistan	Detention, threats, beatings, compound raids, deportation.	Political criminality-State actors (e.g. police), proxies (e.g. Janjaweed), or de facto powers (e.g. Tamil Tigers pre-2009)
Egalitarianism	Yemen; Somalia; Iraq; Colombia; Afghanistan; Pakistan; Mindanao	Suicide bombs, IEDs, compound raids, political abduction and theft of major assets	Religious or ideological groups-IRA; al-Qaeda; ETA; LRA, etc

Hierarchist societies are characterized by strong central authority with a high likelihood of strong nationalistic and/or religious-cultural beliefs. These are often found at a nation-state level but can also be regional. Hierarchical humanitarian agencies such as the UN will be able to work with these societies better than egalitarian NGOs. Hierarchist societies will challenge the impartiality and neutrality of aid organizations and try to co-opt them into the 'system'. Consequently, aid agencies may find it difficult to be present in order to access those in need. Attacks can target specific members of the organisation as a whole on the basis of their function within the organisation. They are often planned and calculated to influence agency activities through intimidation. In some cases, proxy groups may be used for more violent attacks.

Egalitarian societies are isolationist and self-contained with strong communal beliefs. They can be xenophobic and often feel threatened by outsiders. In rare cases, they can encompass entire nations, like North Korea, however most egalitarian communities are smaller than nations and are geographically independent. However some egalitarian societies (e.g. the Catholic Church) have very large memberships. Access to these societies – even just for communication purposes – can be difficult. In fact, their philosophies, mores and beliefs can seem alien to a newcomer. Egalitarian societies can include extremist and terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida, al Shabaab, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Taliban. Attacks can be deliberate and carefully planned but sometimes lacking in resources and contain elements of improvisation. However, attacks can also be the work of overzealous individuals. As such, the nature and likelihood of attacks arising from these groups can be hard to predict. Humanitarian NGOs are egalitarian in comparison to UN humanitarian agencies and commonalities between these NGOs and egalitarian groups can be found in a shared distrust of 'the establishment'. That this common ground exists is often denied by aid agencies, but does help explain why some NGOs have greater success in 'talking to terrorists' when others fail. If accepted by these groups aid organizations can expect a degree of protection from those groups whether that protection is desired or not.

Fatalist societies are change resistant both internally and externally. For instance, change could be for better or worse as the feeling is often to stick with the status quo. This sense of resignation can be seen in populations devastated by disaster. This is usually short term but for populations that have been subject to recurrent disasters or who have lost everything as depicted in refugee camp situations. A little kindness can go a long way, however, short-term humanitarian relief can have dramatic effects. Unfortunately, aid workers can become disillusioned and frustrated by a lack of progress in the long run. Change resistance is a factor in explaining why targeted attacks from fatalist societies are rare and why they are a result of an individual temporarily throwing off the fatalist worldview. Ironically, given the low threat level of fatalist societies, acceptance of aid agencies is highest from these societies. The danger is that aid agencies may feel that they have a high acceptance from a fatalistic society and subsequently assume that it means that they are safe from a targeted attack. Although rare, attacks

can arise from fatalist societies, however, risks are generally opportunistic and do not contain the premeditated, organized aspects of a *targeted* attack.

## Using Cultural Theory to Evaluate Strategic Effectiveness

It is now possible to re-visit the theoretical effectiveness of acceptance, and other available strategies for mitigating the risk of targeted attacks against aid agencies through the conceptual framework of Cultural Theory. Acceptance by itself, especially the passive form practiced by humanitarian NGOs, will not protect aid workers from all targeted attacks. Rather a lack of acceptance will almost guarantee such an attack. Table 2 provides an overview of the effectiveness of acceptance as a strategy for managing risks in the different worldviews. The relevance, however, of other strategies for managing risks in different contexts also needs to be examined.

**Table 2: The Utility of Acceptance as a Strategy Against Targeted Attacks in Different**

WORLDVIEW	ACCEPTANCE UTILITY
Individualism	Very limited: Useful only if the threat was from the individuals benefiting from the presence of the aid agency or their immediate family
Hierarchism	Wide acceptance throughout the region but at medium levels; rogue elements within the society may still be a threat
Egalitarianism	Very useful <i>if</i> the aid workers all live and work within the physical areas controlled by the society. Aid agencies should ensure that any support offices or bases are either within the 'jurisdiction' of the accepting society or well away (i.e. out of the country)
Fatalism	Limited and largely irrelevant. Fatalist societies are rarely a source of targeted attacks with or without acceptance

Acceptance is a poor risk management strategy for individualist societies; the members are mainly concerned for their own well-being and their empathy with other society members is limited. Individualists are likely to attack by themselves or in small numbers. As such, protection is a good strategy to use. Deterrence also works well to reduce risks from individualists but does not always fit within the worldview of the aid agency in question. Hierarchists are system-oriented and rules-based. Acceptance is essential as a foundational strategy. This can be strengthened through the use of deterrence – non-violent deterrents (threats to withdraw aid, appeals to international law) can be effective against threats from hierarchists and are more acceptable to egalitarian humanitarian NGOs. The resources and coordination available to hierarchists is often sufficient to overcome any amount of protection strategies that aid agencies can afford. Acceptance is the best strategy to use against threats from egalitarians. However, acceptance must be ensured in all locations where the aid agency is present; egalitarians are only loosely bound by geography. Extended acceptance activities are essential, in some cases being global in scope. Protection strategies are also necessary in order to mitigate rogue elements within the egalitarian society and because acceptance can rapidly decrease without notice (e.g. when cartoons deemed offensive to Islam were published). It should never be forgotten that 'acceptance' from closed egalitarian societies is actually tolerance and that the aid organizations are only safe from attack so long as they are providing a service to the community. Basic protection strategies are usually sufficient adjuncts to passive acceptance strategies to mitigate targeted attacks from fatalists.

## Using Cultural Theory to Understand Strategic Compatibility

The final lesson to be learned from Cultural Theory is self-reflection. As noted by this article, humanitarian agencies differ on the appropriateness of various risk strategies. Furthermore, the implementation of new strategies in these cases has not been always been straightforward or successful. The answers to these issues can be found in the worldviews of the humanitarian agencies themselves. Agencies with higher grid strengths are more likely to favour a rules-based approach that relies on adherence with accepting conventions and legalities. For instance, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emphasizes the rights and obligations found in International Humanitarian Law (IHL). As grid strength increases belief in the system becomes the overriding philosophy; anything sanctioned by the system becomes the paramount objective. UN agencies find it

easy to accept the use of deterrence and heavy protective measures in order to meet the obligations laid upon them. NGOs tend to be low grid and avoid systemic constraints; this allows them more flexibility in finding ways to meet their objectives. For high grid agencies, like the UN, a formal declaration of a crisis from a consensus of recognized authorities is the signal to intervene. Once the signal is sent, those agencies have no choice but to respond. For low grid agencies, like NGOs, a crisis is declared by the agency even if it contradicts the authorized position. These organizations are under no formal (i.e. systemic) obligation to respond to a crisis, as their obligation is solely self-defined.

With the exception of the ICRC, most humanitarian agencies can be classified as high group with some higher than others. The ICRC, with its emphasis on neutrality and global applicability exhibits somewhat lower group strength compared to the UN or NGOs. UN agencies have variable group strength but their high grid strengths often mask the differences. For NGOs, group strength is the dominant characteristic. Acceptance by the community becomes more important to its members as group strength increases along with the belief systems becoming more important. This has the consequence that the importance of using an acceptance strategy may be based more on ideological grounds rather than on the assessment of its utility in specific circumstances. Egalitarian societies can also struggle with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of risk management (security) activities. This activity is specifically designed, *inter alia*, to unearth sub-optimal performance areas for improvement. When faced with such areas, hierarchist societies blame the system and subsequently set to fix it. Egalitarians, on the other hand, are more likely to blame individuals. With very high group communities, a failure to perform at the highest level can be seen as a betrayal of the principles of the community with ostracism the consequence. By definition, group harmony is of utmost importance to high group societies as finding a group member at fault can jeopardise that harmony. The way around this is not to find the fault in the first place by minimizing M&E activities.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the lack of monitoring and evaluation or measuring of acceptance, aid agencies have become aware – mainly through continuingly high levels of security incidents – that their existing strategies are insufficient. In the past few years ~~have seen~~ aid organizations have tried new strategies, primarily by increasing deterrence and avoidance.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the rate of targeted attacks has stabilized in the past two years, despite it being too early to tell whether a causal relationship exists between these two observations. Many recommendations have been made over the past decade for increased data sharing, cooperation and integration within the humanitarian sector. These recommendations are generally well received by NGOs, ICRC and UN policy makers but have not fared so well when it comes to implementation, especially by NGOs. That egalitarian organizations struggle to implement system-based solutions is predicted by Cultural Theory: Egalitarian organizations are isolationist and have difficulty trusting and working with other groups.

## Conclusions

Acceptance is a valid strategy for reducing, but not eliminating, the risk of targeted attacks against humanitarian aid workers. The degree of effectiveness of acceptance as a strategy can be seen in terms of 'provider' and 'receiver' of acceptance gaining activities. The provider is the aid agency. They commonly rely on their work to generate acceptance and also have the option of doing other activities at different levels to increase the amount of acceptance provided. Although aid cannot be directed to gain acceptance, the aid that is being provided could be publicized through proactive dialogue and engagement with community members and leaders. Done discreetly, these activities could enhance the acceptance of organizations while reducing risks. Furthermore, acceptance activities beyond the provision of aid should be considered.

The worldview of attackers influences attack methods and the degree to which the utility of the agency to the community promotes acceptance by would be attackers and thus the consequent likelihood of attack. The worldview of the agencies delivering aid influences their risk management (security) policies and procedures. Understanding the worldviews of all actors in insecure contexts can lead to

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this reticence relates mainly to risk management/security activities. In their core businesses – water, shelter, health, etc. - M&E is an integral part of their activities. One possible explanation lies in the fact that humanitarian NGOs do not consider security as a separate department (unlike the UN) and thus do not have professional security managers or departments equivalent to their core activities.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. increased use of armed escorts, increased appeal and resort to international legal systems, remote management projects and outright

improved management, *inter alia*, of the risk of targeted attacks. For instance, acceptance based on the delivery of aid diminishes as group strength of the community being aided decreases: agencies operating in low group societies like urban centres should rely less on acceptance (thus reconsider their SOP of identifying assets) and more on protection and/or deterrence. Similarly, agencies operating in high group societies should ensure that they understand the boundaries of those societies and recognize that outside those boundaries, their acceptance will be minimal and avoidance and protection methodologies may be necessary. Organizations need to be aware of their own worldviews and the corresponding opportunities and constraints: Egalitarian organizations tend to overemphasise the protection that results from the assistance they provide – this can dangerously impact their risk assessments; hierarchist organizations can have a similar risk management blind spot in that they assume everyone follows the rules. Finally, many humanitarian NGOs are essentially egalitarian in nature. This can result in two serious weaknesses in risk management; sub-optimal monitoring and evaluation of risk management activities and a reluctance to explicitly define acceptable risk thresholds. These weaknesses need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Understanding of the worldviews of all the actors in contexts with the risk of targeted attack can make humanitarian organizations better positioned to keep aid workers as safe as is reasonably possible.