

Introduction to the Special Issue: The Intersection of Psychology and Human Rights

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The discipline of psychology has a rich history of investigating how humans relate to and treat each other. These topics include—but are not limited to—the social construction of the mind (Vytgotsky, 1978), intergroup relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1981), the emergence of group structures and norms (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950) and power dynamics in interpersonal relations (Milgram, 1974). While these areas of inquiry are rooted in psychology's foundations as a scholarly field, much of the theory emerged and matured in the latter half of the 20th century. The development thus coincided with the emergence and proliferation of human rights as an international discourse following the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Nevertheless, psychology and human rights have developed mostly in isolation, and only recently have researchers begun to explicitly situate their work at this intersection (Twose & Cohrs, 2015).

Within the context of a burgeoning field of psychological research explicitly focused on human rights, recent revelations about human rights abuses by psychologists have cast a pall over these pursuits. In July 2015, an independent review report found that leaders within the American Psychological Association (APA) not only corroborated as advisors for extreme interrogation tactics undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency, but also altered ethics policies “based on [their] goals of helping DOD, managing [their] PR, and maximizing the growth of the profession” (Hoffman, 2015, p. 11). These troubling revelations have led to greater accountability for the APA and its leaders, while the public discourse has also more broadly framed psychology as undermining the goals and implementation of human rights.

Despite the lack of explicit historical connection and this recent negative attention, psychology is deeply and positively related to human rights. Even with the aforementioned acts of individual psychologists, the American Psychological Association's vision statement declares it to be “an effective champion of the application of psychology to promote human rights, health, well-being and dignity” (American Psychological Association, 2009). Beyond the United States, the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (1995) and other groups similarly affirm that they strive to uphold and support human rights. In terms of research, psychology supports understandings, constructions, and defense of human rights, particularly in the fields of cultural and social psychology.

The current special issue emerges from these roots by presenting an array of examples of how understandings of human experiences and interactions through psychological

frameworks can serve to further develop and support human rights. In this way, the papers build off of a legacy that is often overlooked.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are based in the universality of humanity and its social bases. This foundation has an integral connection to social psychological frameworks that situate humans as developing within social contexts that define their thinking, acting, and being (Gergen, 1985; Goffman, 1959; Vygotsky, 1978). The salience of group membership and socialization can drive individual identity and underlie interactions between and within collective organization.

As a first support of human rights, the psychology of these group interactions can bolster recognizing the mechanisms that lead to greater division and devising strategies to address the resulting issues. For example, over fifty years ago, Muzafer Sherif and colleagues (1961) developed a framework for how intergroup conflict emerges in the competition for resources. They found that previously harmonious coexistence of two fabricated social groups turned contentious and intense only once resource competition was introduced as a variable in the two groups' interactions. This finding is an important insight to understanding how scarcity can drive human rights violations. Similarly, more recent work draws direct connections to human rights through studies that specifically investigate how poverty and environmental depletion underlies particular contexts of violence and repression (Joop & De Jong, 2002; Mowforth, 2014).

Second, psychology can offer important methodological tools and empirical evidence to bolster abstract claims inherent to human rights. Forensic psychologists may be the most prominent examples as they help uncover human rights abuses and testify at trials (Ward, Gannon, & Vess, 2009). In other ways, social and cultural psychology also provides critical tools and insights. Judith Herman's book (1997) on trauma and recovery reorganized how victims and traumatic events are understood, bringing attention to cultural and structural elements to be recognized and considered in diagnoses. For transitional justice and post-conflict societies, this reconceptualization can prove critical to managing and addressing individual and collective trauma of past violence (Li & Lardner, 2015). Also recently, other scholars have begun to apply methodological tools from cultural psychology to the study of human rights, using thematic narrative analysis to study how conceptions of human rights are constructed by local groups of people (Grabe & Dutt, 2015). In both cases, psychology provides support and research possibilities that can develop the field of human rights.

As a third support, psychology can push conceptions of human rights that lead to clearer and more grounded definitions, as well as provide bases for stronger advocacy. Beyond the bounds of psychology in the United States, the liberation psychology movement promoted active involvement in upholding the rights of the oppressed and working to combat structural injustice. This branch of psychology first emerged in the 1970s in Latin America as the social psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baro argued that the discipline should use both

theory and action to address deeply-rooted inequality in many South American societies (Martin-Baro, 1994). More recently, psychologists have similarly pushed the theoretical understandings of human rights by questioning underlying legal and philosophical foundations. Some cultural psychologists have challenged what constitutes a human rights violation and how cultural practices are to be situated in reference to Universalist frameworks (Shweder, 2000; Woodhead, 1997). Others have similarly argued for more socially-constructed foundations for human rights, such as by reframing rights and duties as arising from social interactions and contexts (Moghaddam & Finkel, 2005).

Importantly, these three supports do not provide an exhaustive list of the possible links between psychology and human rights, but rather serve as a reminder of the organic connections between the two areas. From the theoretical to the empirical, social and cultural psychology have produced much research and theory that can inform the field of human rights. Recently, this intersection has become more explicit as scholars and journals directly draw the two together. Nevertheless, there are still many gaps in understanding the psychology of human rights and in applying psychological frameworks of social interaction (Keita, 2012; Moghaddam & Finkel, 2005).

BASIS FOR SPECIAL ISSUE

The current issue of *Psychology & Society* began with the intention to both acknowledge the work that has been done, while also creating further space for development. The issue extends from a recent special issue of *Peace and Conflict: the Journal of Peace Psychology* to propel “more human rights research within the discipline of psychology” (Twose & Cohrs, 2015, p. 4). The current issue of *Psychology & Society* continues toward this goal by highlighting an array of work on human rights as related to psychology. These six papers involve studies of individuals in relation to social contexts, while directly invoking and engaging with human rights discourse and concerns. As a whole, the issue asks how human rights can be understood as based in relationships between an individual and the groups that they belong to, as well as how individual and structural level variables shape psychological construction of human rights (Grabe & Dutt, 2015).

OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES

With this underlying framework, the current special issue encompasses diverse topics and data sources. These varied approaches demonstrate the richness of this psychological approach and its value as both generative for theory about human rights and as an aid to framing the experience of human rights. The theoretical frames and empirical methodologies differ from paper to paper, but all six focus on qualitative inquiry beyond the laboratory. This type of study—much like these paper’s topics and approaches—does not exclusively inform the intersection of human rights and psychology, but offers an effective research methodology to generate new frameworks and describe lived experience.

As generative research, two of the papers explore the social construction of important aspects of human rights. Erin McFee (2016) demonstrates how social constructions of peace and promise interact with the realities of human rights abuses. She posits that the Colombian state offers a promise of future well-being and security that may be contested by citizens themselves. The state uses discourse around the peace process to co-opt the support of its citizens, and in turn, different groups challenge and resist these processes.

Through a different approach, Lucas Mazur (2016) demonstrates that semantic representations of geography shape assessments of collective responsibility for mass atrocities. Drawing on two studies employing maps and other visuals, Mazur begins to build a framework for how social construction can inform collective understandings of human rights abuses by deconstructing the discourse of location.

The other four papers in this issue demonstrate the potential to frame experience by detailing how human rights emerge from the lived realities of different social actors. The topics span agency, gender identity, trauma, and the psychological construction of the child, but converge by employing psychological methods and theory to understand experience. In her paper on youth in Argentina, Bertrand (2016) utilizes narrative analysis to explore meaning making as these youth interact with institutional models and frameworks for cultural rights. The paper raises important questions about the divide between implementing human rights and the experiences of those whose rights are in question.

The next paper in the issue also describes experience, but centers on detailing a particular space in which human rights are critically linked to psychology. Ana Karina Canguçu Campinho and colleagues (2016) detail the process of incorporating human rights within the field of applied psychology by describing the development of an information booklet for families with intersex children. The authors demonstrate that these children and their families experience invisibility, silence, and trauma; all of which necessitate an appreciation of human rights in developing materials for practitioners.

Focusing on the experience of trauma, Yvonne Rafferty (2016) argues for a human-rights based approach to mental health supports for children who have been victims of sex trafficking. Her work moves from human rights to psychology to frame how programs focused on recovery and (re)integration of this population should understand their experiences. Human rights are translated into actual practice and inform the social contexts and experiences as psychologists work with these children.

Finally, Gabriel Velez (2016) also addresses the rights of the child, but applies textual analysis to the construction of the category of the child. His paper draws out assumptions on the psychological positioning of the child from the general comments on the Convention of the Rights of the Child. In particular, these documents conceive of child development as a universal and ideal trajectory. Velez then utilizes positioning theory and Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of the Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) to critique these documents. He argues that a conceptualization of the child based in social psychological

frameworks would serve human rights discourse by offering a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of children's experiences and development.

LIMITATIONS

The array of work here is defined by its focus on qualitative inquiry based in social and cultural psychology. Other approaches also provide unique insights about human rights that complement and go further than the research in this issue. For example, large, international surveys have been used to demonstrate that gender differences exist in attitudes toward human rights and that government orientations toward human rights can shape the average attitudes and beliefs of youth within those countries (Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008). These broader, quantitative approaches can work in dialogue with micro, individual-focused levels of analysis like that of Bertrand (2016), or provide another perspective to McFee (2016) on the relationship between national discourse and local-level construction of human rights. Therefore, the current journal issue not only speaks to those working on similar research, but also puts forth this work as part of a broader dialogue.

This special issue offers a small segment of the current field of research. It is neither comprehensive nor random, and thus does not fully capture the diversity of topics or methodologies at this intersection. Nevertheless, the six papers demonstrate that psychology can inform how individuals interact with human rights. By highlighting this work, we hope to engage deeper understandings of this intersection and spark further development.

CONCLUSIONS

Though focused on a particular subset of research, the papers in this issue contribute to human rights understandings and frameworks while offering insights for possible future work. They are methodologically and theoretically based in the social construction of individuals and groups. In distinct ways, they each address the underlying rationale for this special issue: a shared belief that such work should translate to affecting discourse, programs, policies, and individuals who operate within the human rights discourse. By publishing this research for a wide audience through *Psychology & Society*, the editors of this issue highlight that the two fields can work together toward positive, constructive ends. This focus does not ignore the complicity of specific psychologists and organizations in human rights abuses, but rather begins to move forward from these troubling revelations and further advance the relationship that is based in a rich, if underdeveloped, history.

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