
Enhancing the Role of International Human Rights in the Psychology Curriculum

MICHAEL R. HULSIZER & LINDA M. WOOLF

Webster University, Saint Louis, USA

ABSTRACT International human rights are an important concern among psychologists. Consequently, many psychological professional organizations across the globe have begun to incorporate fundamental tenets of human rights into policy statements and ethics codes. As a result of these changes, psychology educators need to expand the curriculum to include human rights. This article provides examples aimed at the integration of human rights content into existing courses (e.g., lecture topics, activities, and service learning opportunities) as well as suggestions for creating courses which are focused solely on human rights. Given the fact that psychological and physical health has been tied to respect for international human rights, it is imperative that our students, as global citizens and future psychologists, understand and value these rights.

Psychology has a long history of involvement in international human rights, beginning with William James's speech about war (James, 1906), the use of psychological research to support the US civil rights movement (e.g., Clark & Clark, 1940), and, more currently, the work of psychologists concerning myriad contemporary human rights issues (e.g., human trafficking). Human rights issues have also been an important topic of concern within many professional psychology organizations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA), the British Psychological Society (BPS), and the Australian Psychological Society (APS). Indeed, psychologist Carolyn Payton (1984), the first female, as well as the first African-American, Director of the United States Peace Corps, in an address to the APA, asked, 'Who must do the hard things?' (p. 391). She argued that psychology has a fundamental role to play in understanding and confronting social issues, social inequalities, and human rights.

The APA has passed numerous policy resolutions concerning international human rights, such as resolutions supporting political dissent (APA, 1972), the Equal Rights Amendment (APA, 1975a), and the humane treatment of prisoners (APA, 1975b). The APA has also called for the end of corporal punishment (APA, 1975c), an end to discrimination against homosexuals (APA, 1975d), and an end to torture (1986). APA's (1987) resolution on human rights asserted that 'the discipline of psychology, and the academic and professional activities of psychologists, are relevant for securing and maintaining human rights.' The APA also provided support for several United Nations-sponsored human rights initiatives, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (APA, 1989, 2001) and the UN Declaration and Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (APA, 2006, 2008).

In addition to policy statements, professional psychological associations across the world have incorporated human rights into their ethics code. For example, the APA has revised the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2010a) to include international human rights. The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) references the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The APS Code of Ethics (2007) General Principle A states, 'Psychologists engage in conduct which promotes equity and the protection of people's human

rights, legal rights, and moral rights' (p. 11). Consequently, human rights education is no longer a luxury aimed at fostering global citizenship, but rather a fundamental feature of ethics training.

Unfortunately, many psychology students at the undergraduate and graduate level are not getting adequate education in fundamental international human rights and are not familiar with the various United Nations conventions, declarations, and resolutions concerning human rights. The lack of international human rights education is true not only in psychology programs but also in medical and public health schools throughout the United States (Cotter et al., 2009). The latter is particularly ironic considering the strongly worded human rights education resolution passed by the World Medical Assembly (World Medical Association, 1999). Regardless of this, given the fact that psychological and physical health has been tied to respect for international human rights, it is imperative that our students, as global citizens and future psychologists, understand and value these rights. Because the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2010a) now includes principles directly related to international human rights, it is increasingly incumbent on teachers to integrate the concepts of human rights into their psychology courses, particularly in relation to ethics.

International Human Rights

In 1948, the UN adopted the UDHR. Following the legacy of the Holocaust, the UDHR, as well as the Nuremberg Code and the Convention on Genocide, raised the visibility of human rights for all. An individual is endowed with these rights at birth simply because he or she is a human being. The UDHR states that these rights are universal (without distinction, all individuals inherently possess these rights), inalienable (they are unable to be lost or taken away), and indivisible (all rights are equally important).

In addition to the UDHR, it is imperative that our students, particularly at the graduate level, have familiarity with relevant UN human rights conventions and declarations because these documents have the greatest potential for integration into the psychology curriculum. Examples most relevant to psychology include the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the United Nations Principles for Older Persons; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. A more substantive list can be found at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law>.

Unfortunately, an examination of psychology textbooks reveals a paucity of material directly related to international human rights. In the rare instance when international human rights are discussed in the classroom, the focus is typically on human rights violations occurring in countries other than the United States. Although the United States has achieved some degree of civil and political rights for most of its citizens (e.g., due process, freedom of speech, and the right to vote), it is woefully behind other nations in economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g., entitlements to socially provided goods, services, and opportunities such as food, education, healthcare, and social insurance). According to Donnelly (1998), 'Americans typically act as if human rights problems exist only in places that must be reached by crossing large bodies of salt water' (p. 88).

Ethics

In response to the debate surrounding the use of psychologists during terrorist interrogations and torture, the APA revised its Ethics Code (APA, 2010b). Now, when psychologists find themselves in compromising situations, they must use the fundamental tenets of international human rights as their moral compass. Specifically:

1.02 Conflicts Between Ethics and Law, Regulations, or Other Governing Legal Authority

If psychologists' ethical responsibilities conflict with law, regulations, or other governing legal authority, psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the Ethics Code, and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict consistent with the General

Principles and Ethical Standards of the Ethics Code. *Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights.*

1.03 Conflicts Between Ethics and Organizational Demands

If the demands of an organization with which psychologists are affiliated or for whom they are working are in conflict with this Ethics Code, psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the Ethics Code, and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict consistent with the General Principles and Ethical Standards of the Ethics Code. *Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights.* (APA, 2010b; italics added for emphasis)

Without proper human rights education, these two standards become difficult to understand, value, and put into practice. Unfortunately, a lack of understanding may unwittingly open the door to unethical decisions and behaviors.

Suggestions for Integration into the Psychology Curriculum

There are several means by which instructors can integrate international human rights into the curriculum. One of the simplest approaches is to integrate elements of international human rights into relevant courses (e.g., developmental, social). As a first step, educators should introduce students to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Students can explore the document, compare and contrast different categories of rights (e.g., civil, political, economic, social, cultural), and discuss whether these rights are in fact universal or whether culture should impact the universality of these rights. Many of the conventions and declarations (e.g., the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination) can be incorporated into topical classes such as child psychology or social psychology with little effort.

Teachers can introduce students to international human rights through role-playing exercises (e.g., Plous, 2000) designed to teach about prejudice as well as to enable participants to address prejudiced comments. Students can learn about and discuss how societal institutions and cultural practices perpetuate social inequality and stratification through documentary films such as *Waiting for 'Superman'* (Guggenheim et al., 2011) and *A Walk to Beautiful* (Smith et al., 2008). Interviews with survivors of human rights abuses also can be a powerful means to learn about human rights in a way that cannot be achieved through simply reading about events. Many communities either have organizations or museums to foster remembrance of past atrocities, maintain current international or refugee centers, or are home to non-governmental or advocacy organizations that can help arrange speakers who are prepared and able to speak about their experiences as human rights abuse survivors (e.g., genocide, torture, human trafficking). The United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum provides a wide range of free resources for human rights materials that teachers can use in the classroom and has contact information for governmental and non-governmental human rights organizations.[1]

When teaching about international human rights, it is important that instructors provide students with the tools for positive action. Positive action through service learning projects can take many forms, ranging from effective lobbying of political officials to writing printable 'Letters to the Editor' to direct action (e.g., volunteering at a battered women's shelter). Service learning projects can enable students to understand that human rights violations are not just problems that occur in far distant lands or only in developing nations. Rather, they can come to realize that human rights are just as important 'at home' and understand the importance of working for positive change in the United States or other nation of origin.

Human rights education can also be integrated into the psychology curriculum through the development of focused courses. For example, one of the authors developed an undergraduate course entitled Women and Global Human Rights.[2] Related courses on the Holocaust, genocide, or peace psychology can also be used as vehicles for introducing students to international human rights.[3]

Discussion

Psychology is uniquely qualified to address the causes and consequences of human rights violations both domestically and internationally. Unfortunately, although psychologists have researched these issues on a local to global scale (e.g., Melchiori, 2010; Staub, 2011), this research is much less likely to make its way into the classroom. Thus, psychology students are unprepared to meet the psychosocial needs of individuals within the broader global community experiencing the trauma associated with human rights violations or to work towards prevention of such abuses. Moreover, our future psychologists may not be qualified to meet the standards set forth in the APA Ethics Code in relation to international human rights.

Although the empirical evidence is limited, there is research highlighting the benefits of exposure to human rights education. For example, Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, and Barber (2008) examined data from 27 countries surveyed in the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Civic Education Study. Their analysis demonstrated that integration of human rights and international issues into the educational arena has a positive impact on political efficacy (e.g., increasing self-confidence when discussing political issues) and value for social justice activities (e.g., advocacy work, membership in human rights related organizations). Most importantly, Stellmacher and Sommer (2008) demonstrated that even short-term exposure to human rights education not only has a positive impact on knowledge of human rights but also enhances positive attitudes and commitment towards human rights.

As teachers of psychology, we must make the first step towards integrating information relevant to human rights into the psychology curriculum at all levels of education. A list of helpful resources currently available is found in the Appendix. It is also imperative that curricular materials promoting the teaching of human rights within psychology be developed and disseminated. Only through such endeavors will we be able to meet the needs of our students as they prepare for life and their future careers in psychology.

Notes

- [1] See http://www.usmmm.org/genocide/take_action/action/resources
- [2] <http://www.webster.edu/~woolfm/wandghr.html>
- [3] See the Office of Teaching Resources Project [OTRP] syllabus for examples of these courses, at <http://teachpsych.org/otrp/syllabi>

References

- American Psychological Association (1972). *Political dissent*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1975a). *Equal Rights Amendment*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1975b). *Psychological treatment in prison settings*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1975c). *Corporal punishment*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1975d). *Discrimination against homosexuals*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1986). *Opposition to torture*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1987). *Human rights*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (1989). *United Nations convention on the rights of the child*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (2001). *APA resolution on UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the convention's optional protocols*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>

- American Psychological Association (2006). *Resolution against torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (2008). *Reaffirmation of the American Psychological Association position against torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment and its application to individuals defined in the United States Code as 'enemy combatants' (amended 2007 position)*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/>
- American Psychological Association (2010a). *Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>
- American Psychological Association (2010b). *American Psychological Association amends Ethics Code to address potential conflicts among professional ethics, legal authority and organizational demands*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/02/ethics-code.aspx>
- Australian Psychological Society (2007). *Code of ethics*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychology.org.au/about/ethics/>
- British Psychological Society (2009). *Code of ethics and conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.bps.org.uk/what-we-do/ethics-standards/ethics-standards>
- Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. K. (1940). Skin color as a factor in racial identification of Negro preschool children. *Journal of Social Psychology, 11*, 159-169. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080%2F00224545.1940.9918741>
- Cotter, E. L., Chevrier, J., El-Nachef, W. N., Radhakrishna, R., Rahangdale, L., Weiser, S., & Iocopino, V. (2009). Health and human rights education in US schools of medicine and public health: Current status and future challenges. *PLoS ONE 4*(3), e4916. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0004916>
- Donnelly, J. (1998). *International human rights* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Guggenheim, D., Kimball, B., Chilcott, L., Strickland, B., Canada, G., Rhee, M., Weingarten, R., & Paramount Home Entertainment (Film). (2011). *Waiting for 'Superman'*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Home Entertainment.
- James, W. (1906). *The moral equivalence of war*. Retrieved from <http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/moral.html>
- Melchiori, K. J. (2010). A locally grounded, feminist analysis of sex trafficking in Nepal. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP), 10*, 347-349. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1530-2415.2010.01216.x>
- Payton, C. R. (1984). Who must do the hard things? *American Psychologist, 39*, 391-397. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037%2F0003-066X.39.4.391>
- Plous, S. (2000). Responding to overt displays of prejudice: A role-playing exercise. *Teaching of Psychology, 27*, 198-200. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207%2FS15328023TOP2703_07
- Smith, M. O., Bucher, A., Engel, S., Engel Entertainment, WGBH Educational Foundation, & WGBH Video (Film). (2008). *A walk to beautiful*. Boston, MA: WGBH Video.
- Staub, E. (2011). *Overcoming evil: Genocide, violent conflict, and terrorism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stellmacher, J., & Sommer, G. (2008). Human rights education: An evaluation of university seminars. *Social Psychology, 39*, 70-80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1027%2F1864-9335.39.1.70>
- Torney-Purta, J., Wilkenfeld, B., & Barber, C. (2008). How adolescents in 27 countries understand, support, and practice human rights. *Journal of Social Issues, 64*, 857-880. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111%2Fj.1540-4560.2008.00592.x>
- World Medical Association (1999). *WMA Resolution on the Inclusion of Medical Ethics and Human Rights in the Curriculum of Medical Schools World-Wide*. Retrieved from www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/e8/index.html

APPENDIX

Suggested Resources

- Abdi, A. A., & Shultz, L. (Eds.). (2008). *Educating for human rights and global citizenship*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Andreopoulos, G. J., & Claude, R. P. (Eds.). (1997). *Human rights education for the twenty-first century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bajaj, M. (2011). Human rights education: Ideology, location, and approaches. *Human Rights Quarterly, 33*, 481-508. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353%2Fhrq.2011.0019>

- Fetherstonhaugh, D., Slovic, P., Johnson, S. M., & Friedrich, J. (1998). Insensitivity to the value of human life: A study of psychophysical numbing. In H. J. Langholtz (Ed.), *The psychology of peacekeeping* (pp. 75-88) Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gearon, L. (2003). *The human rights handbook: A global perspective for education*. Sterling, VA: Trentham Books.
- Graves, N. J., Dunlop, O. J., Torney-Purta, J. V. (Eds.). (1984). *Teaching for international understanding, peace, and human rights*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- Kingston, L. N. (2012). Creating a 'Human Rights Campus'. *Peace Review*, 24, 78-83.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2012.651028>
- Krain, M. (2004). Teaching human rights through service learning. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 26, 189-207.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353%2Fhrq.2004.0005>
- Lawson, T. J., McDonough, T. A., & Bodle, J. H. (2010). Confronting prejudiced comments: Effectiveness of a role-playing exercise. *Teaching of Psychology*, 37, 257-261.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080%2F00986283.2010.510968>
- Mertus, J. A., & Helsing, J. W. (Eds.). (2006). *Human rights and conflict: Exploring the links between rights, law, and peacebuilding*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
- Opotow, S. (2001). Social injustice. In D. J. Christie, R. V. Wagner, & D. D. Winter (Eds.), *Peace, conflict, and violence: Peace psychology for the 21st century*. Delhi: I. A. Books. Available free online at
<http://academic.marion.ohio-state.edu/dchristie/Peace%20Psychology%20Book.html>
- Osler, A., & Starkey, H. (2010). *Teachers and human rights education*. Sterling, VA: Trentham Books.
- Tibbitts, F. (2002). Understanding what we do: Emerging models for human rights education. *International Review of Education*, 48(3-4), 159-171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023%2FA%3A1020338300881>
- Totten, S. (Ed.). (2004). *Teaching about genocide: Issues, approaches, and resources*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2010). *Guidelines for arranging a survivor presentation*. Retrieved from <http://www.ushmm.org/remembrance/survivoraffairs/guideline.pdf>
- Woolf, L. M., & Hulsizer, M. R. (2004). Psychology of mass violence: Genocide, torture, and human rights: Informational resources. *Office of Teaching Resources in Psychology – Online, Society for the Teaching of Psychology, APA Division 2*. Retrieved from <http://teachpsych.org/otrp/resources/woolf04genocide.pdf>

MICHAEL R. HULSIZER* is professor of social psychology at Webster University, Saint Louis, USA, and is a Fellow in the Webster University Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies and the current newsletter editor for Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence (American Psychological Association Division 48). *Correspondence:* hulsizer@webster.edu

LINDA M. WOOLF is professor of peace psychology at Webster University Saint Louis, USA, and is a Fellow in the Webster University Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies and past president of the Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence. *Correspondence:* woolfm@webster.edu

*Contact author

Manuscript received: 12 March 2012

Revised manuscript accepted for publication 19 March 2012