

Psychology and Human Rights: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This introduction serves to orient the reader to this special issue of *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* on the topic of psychology and human rights (HR). We provide a brief overview of the history of the concept of HR, the primary theoretical and empirical contributions to date within the field of psychology, and how various psychological organizations use the term today. We then summarize how HR fits into social psychological peace research, before explaining what kind of papers we sought and how they were selected. Finally, we provide an overview of the papers and their primary contributions, and point to some limitations of the research covered in this special issue as well as directions for future research.

Keywords: human rights, social psychological peace research, equality, violence

Human rights may be understood as basic rights protecting fundamental freedoms and human dignity to which we are all entitled, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, or other status (Amnesty International, 2012; United Nations, 1948). They encompass civil and political rights (similar to the U.S. Bill of Rights), as well as economic, social, and cultural rights (e.g., the rights to work, health, or education). They are indivisible, interdependent, universal, and inalienable, in that they cannot be removed, and may be thought of as entitlements of both individuals and groups. The primary responsibility for their enforce-

ment lies with governments, who must respect, protect, and fulfill human rights to the best of their ability (Keita, 2012). Human rights are guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), as well as two subsequent international treaties: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1976) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1976). There are also discussions about the legal establishment of additional environmental human rights (e.g., www.ehumanrights.org).

Of course, this cursory overview does not provide a critical reading of the development of these documents, or, perhaps as importantly, the United States' refusal to ratify many of the conventions (at the time of writing including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). These vital discussions go beyond the purview of this special issue, but for the interested reader, we suggest Donnelly (2013) for a general overview and Maynes and Williamson (1996) for a review of U.S. policy toward the United Nations.

Various psychological organizations have explicitly referred to human rights as a basis of their

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work. The American Psychological Association, according to its current vision statement, aspires to be “an effective champion of the application of psychology to promote human rights” (American Psychological Association, 2009). The International Society for Political Psychology recently amended Article II Section C of their constitution, and now aims “to increase the theoretical and practical significance of political psychology both inside and outside academia. Practical significance shall be guided by the principles of universal human rights” (International Society for Political Psychology, 2012). Psychologists for Social Responsibility have a program on “human rights and psychology,” and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues is a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Science and Human Rights Coalition.

The psychological research literature, although nascent, has made promising strides in the investigation of the links between psychology and human rights. Most notable are the seminal volumes “Human Rights as Social Representations” (Doise, 2004) and “The Psychology of Rights and Duties” (Finkel & Moghadam, 2005), which take stock of psychological research on human rights from different perspectives.¹ *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* has also occasionally published work on human rights (e.g., Dean, 2013; Elcheroth & Spini, 2009; Ibhawoh, 2013; Lykes, 2012; Stellmacher, Sommer, & Brähler, 2005). Despite all this, Ms. Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, recently argued in her keynote speech at the International Congress of Psychology that psychology and human rights have long been distinct fields, between which there should be more cooperation (Pillay, 2012). This interaction must be furthered by more human rights research within the discipline of psychology (Keita, 2012). We see this collection of articles as part of an effort to fill this important gap.

Peace Psychology and Human Rights

As is made clear by the articles in this special issue, human rights and peace are interconnected. Human rights represent a normative framework for how peaceful societies could—indeed must—look; that is, a full realization of human rights would form a solid base for a society characterized by both negative and positive peace (Galtung,

1969), where negative peace refers to the absence of direct (personal) violence, and positive peace to the absence of indirect (structural) violence which comprises peaceful beliefs and norms, harmonious relationships between groups, equitable political and economic systems and so forth (see also Anderson, 2004).

Moreover, human rights research, particularly the totality of the research published in this special issue, may be accurately characterized as social psychological peace research (SPPR):

The field of psychological theory and practice aimed at the prevention and mitigation of direct and structural violence between members of different sociopolitical groups, as well as the promotion of cooperation and a prosocial orientation that reduces the occurrence of intergroup and societal violence and further positive intergroup relations (Vollhardt & Bilali, 2008, p. 13).

Vollhardt and Bilali go on to describe SPPR as consisting of four methodological and conceptual criteria. (a) It is normative rather than value neutral, in that its ultimate goal is to reduce and prevent conflict, and to promote positive relations. (b) It must be contextualized in a real world setting, displaying sensitivity to cultural and historical realities, as well as the web of interrelated factors that comprise lived experiences. (This does not negate laboratory-based investigations, but rather insists that researchers always strive to consider how context-dependent variables may affect external validity.) (c) Relatedly, SPPR must consider multiple levels of analysis, particularly focusing on the effects of social and structural variables on individuals, and vice versa, leading to an incorporation of micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. (d) Finally, it has a practical in addition to epistemic orientation, in that it aims to prevent or mitigate conflict and violence, and promote cooperation and positive relations. Knowledge is pursued with a view to making practical changes.

What Were We Looking For?

Human rights, in and of themselves, are a huge topic. There have been volumes dedicated to their study, and it would be impossible to cover their breadth in a single issue. Accordingly, we specified our subtopic fairly narrowly, in order to limit

¹ For German speaking readers, we would add “Menschenrechte und Menschenrechtsbildung” [Human rights and human rights education] (Sommer & Stellmacher, 2009).

the scope of this issue to a more manageable area. First, we did not seek articles that investigate specific rights such as the right to a fair trial or freedom of movement (with the exception of Article One, with its more general stress on equality and freedom), or articles concerned with the human needs and material conditions related to specific rights. We were more interested in how the concept of human rights is used in psychological research and practice and so, accordingly, the focus remained on the concept rather than the specific contents of human rights. Second, we sought only psychological articles, especially those that fell under the rubric of SPPR. We did not accept articles that were solely legal or political science-based. Although these fields have made enormous contributions to the study of human rights—indeed, they comprise the predominance of the relevant literature—they were not the right fit for this issue.

Third, we sought articles that were international in scope, extending beyond the traditional “Western” investigators and research participants. Although research conducted in the West is valuable, there remain questions about how findings may (or may not) generalize to the rest of the world, and it seemed important to raise questions of cultural variability (although our contribution to answering these questions remains modest). Fourth, we aimed, partly successfully, to include articles that adopt different metatheoretical perspectives and methodologies, not just “mainstream” quantitative work with a broadly positivistic orientation. And finally, we were determined to interrogate broad injustice and inequality, not just basic and individual rights, as too narrow a focus can blind us to structural issues that affect entire populations.

Our Procedure

In order to discover the best, most relevant current research on psychology and human rights, we used a combination of an open and closed procedure to disseminate the call for submissions. We requested articles addressing the following topics:

1. Attitudes to human rights, how they may be affected, and how they materialize in behavioral intentions and behavior concerning human rights (e.g., volunteering, advocacy, donations).
2. Human rights in cultural and political contexts (e.g., cross-cultural differences in conceptions of human rights, the use of human rights for political agendas).
3. Human rights in the practice of psychology and professional work of psychologists (e.g., interrogation/national security, human trafficking, therapeutic work in conflict settings).

We sent targeted invitations to known researchers in the field, and also disseminated the call through numerous listservs, including internationally. We initially sought extended abstracts, and then requested that the most promising submissions be expanded into full articles. The six articles in this special issue are the result of this process of casting the net wide, and winnowing down submissions to only the strongest, most relevant articles, each of which highlight an arena in which psychologists can contribute to the study, and ideally promotion and protection, of human rights.

Overview of the Articles

One of the most vital areas in which psychological research can contribute, and indeed has contributed, to the study of human rights is through measuring relevant attitudes, and, preferably, behaviors. Accordingly, Sam McFarland (McFarland, 2015) launches the special issue with a thorough review of the existing literature investigating attitudes toward human rights. Interestingly, following earlier research by Doise (2004), his findings suggest a common international understanding of and support for human rights, although specific rights are supported to different degrees in different countries and cultures. He also identifies a number of strong positive and negative predictors of human rights support at the individual level, furthering our understanding of which people may be likely or unlikely to speak out in favor of human rights, and ideally, how we may encourage others to do so. An important distinction that McFarland makes is between (shallow) endorsement of human rights and (deeper) commitment to human rights and resistance to human rights violations.

Dominic Abrams, Diane Houston, Julie Van de Vyver, and Milica Vasiljevic (Abrams, Houston, Van de Vyver, & Vasiljevic, 2015) make a different kind of contribution, using a represen-

tative sample of adults in the United Kingdom to investigate how people apply values of equality and freedom, as stressed in Article One of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Echoing McFarland's distinction between endorsement and commitment to human rights, their results show a clear gap between the degree to which people espouse abstract values of equality and the degree to which they apply specific measures of equality to a variety of status minority groups. Abrams et al. find such "equality inconsistency" across minority groups to be associated with individual differences related to prejudice. Even in a country where the population, ostensibly, is highly supportive of basic human rights, it seems that consistent application remains aspirational.

Picking up the idea that mere endorsement of human rights is not enough, Justin Hackett, Allen Omoto, and Miriam Matthews (Hackett, Omoto, & Matthews, 2015) examine a specific mechanism by which people become committed to human rights. In line with earlier research (reviewed by McFarland; e.g., Cohrs, Maes, Kielmann, & Moschner, 2007), their findings show that self-transcendence values (such as equality, social justice, helpfulness, and loyalty) predict attitudes and behaviors supportive of human rights. Importantly, this relationship is mediated by a "psychological sense of global community." This sense of a global community extends previous research on sense of community to incorporate a sense of connectedness to people outside of one's immediate geographical location, including those with whom one has no association or expectation of interpersonal contact. These intriguing findings have broad implications in terms of how to encourage human rights commitment, suggesting that, rather than focusing simply on equality, human rights campaigns should also aim to create or enhance a sense of global community as a kind of superordinate goal.

Kathie Malley-Morrison and her colleagues (Malley-Morrison, et al., 2015) are also interested in commitment and action in support of human rights and in response to human rights violations (rather than simply human rights attitudes), and complement the articles in this volume with an excellent sample of participants from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The researchers use a combined qualitative-quantitative methodology to investigate how these participants would want to respond if

exposed to specific human rights violations, and whether their level of moral engagement was correlated with agency and support for a number of individual- and state-level rights. This innovative study provides a fascinating extension to the psychological and human rights literature that is primarily conducted among participants in the Western world.

Shelly Grabe and Anjali Dutt (Grabe & Dutt, 2015) also take us outside of the Western world. They adopt a very different methodological approach, utilizing thematic narrative analysis to examine one particular case of human rights commitment: the *Movimiento Autonomo de Mujeres* in Nicaragua. The researchers convincingly show, in considerable depth, how this powerful social movement interacted with local and international counternarratives to create and popularize a far more expansive notion of human rights than had previously existed locally. Most notably, these women's efforts have had a concrete, tangible impact in the form of public policy, and the introduction of legislation that acknowledges their conception of women's human rights.

Bernhard Leidner and Mengyao Li (Leidner & Li, 2015), finally, take an interdisciplinary approach. They provide the special issue's second literature review as they appraise the state of the literature on approaches to intergroup violence in the aftermath of massive human rights violations and connect that body of research with psychological research on human rights. They leverage this review into the creation of a model explaining how approaches to intergroup violence might reestablish human rights consciousness and behavior in postconflict societies through a number of context-dependent mediators and moderators. The researchers convincingly argue that human rights consciousness is necessary, if not sufficient, to the creation of a more peaceful society, and begin to show us precisely how specific mechanisms (such as trials or truth commissions) might help us achieve this aim.

Each of these contributions may be considered representative of peace psychology individually, but this becomes even more apparent as a totality, as this compilation embodies Vollhardt and Bilali's (2008) components of social psychological peace research. Each of the authors would agree that the ultimate goal of their research is to reduce conflict and promote positive relations, and, from attitude gaps in the

United Kingdom, to legislative change in Nicaragua, to transitional justice mechanisms internationally, each provides examples of the practical, real-world implications of their work. Although lab-based contributions are not neglected, the research highlighted makes every effort to take cultural realities into account, including the effects of colonial legacies, and why some societies place more emphasis on economic rather than civil rights. And finally, the authors, especially Grabe and Dutt, show how individual- and structural-level variables can interact with and influence one another, as they explore how multiple levels of discourse are concurrently employed in women's promoting and taking ownership of their human rights.

The special issue also features two commentaries, one more academically oriented by Christian Staerklé, Alain Clémence, and Dario Spini (Staerklé, Clémence, & Spini, 2015), who identify three overarching themes that are discussed to varying degrees in each of the articles: (a) people support abstract human rights principles, but these principles do not apply to "bad" individuals; (b) social identity and intergroup processes play an enormously important role in shaping human rights attitudes and behaviors, leading to a strategic emphasis on duties versus rights in asymmetric intergroup relations between dominant and subordinate groups; and (c) we need new models, such as those that are preliminarily developed in this special issue, to further investigate human rights. Katya Migacheva, currently a researcher at the RAND Corporation and formerly the lead Democratic fellow on the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in the U.S. House of Representatives, contributes a second, more applied commentary, focusing on public policy (Migacheva, 2015). Migacheva analyzes how the concept of human rights influences U.S. foreign policy, and explores how the research in this issue, and psychological research more generally, could and should be used constructively by policy-makers.

Limitations

The research published in this volume give examples of the myriad ways that psychologists are contributing to the investigation, and indeed promotion, of human rights. These articles make a variety of theoretical, empirical, and methodolog-

ical contributions, but they are also illustrative in highlighting gaps. McFarland's review of the human rights attitudes literature underlines the scarcity of research outside of the "Western" world. Researchers in this volume begin to fill this gap, but this is just a drop in the bucket, and we must continue to seek out data from around the world, as well as theories that reflect a global perspective. It is also necessary for us to institute more behavioral measures. Asking participants what they would do when placed in specific situations or what they have done in the past to support human rights is a good beginning, but we must go further in order to state more confidently how attitudes translate into behaviors. An earlier study on human rights by Moghaddam and Vuksanovic (1990, Study 3) did include both attitudinal and behavioral measures, but more research is needed to clarify the links between expressed attitudes and actions in this arena.

It may also be useful for further focused compilations of research to investigate more specific subtopics within the larger realm of human rights research. For instance, the study of human rights opens the door to interesting psycho-legal questions about the meaning of particular rights, such as the right to privacy or the rights of particular populations, such as children. There are also huge areas for psychologists to contribute in the promotion and protection of human rights in the criminal justice and correctional systems, or more broadly speaking, human rights in the practice of psychology and professional work of psychologists. For example, there has been an enormously active group of psychologists steeped in human rights discourse who have engaged the American Psychological Association and its ethical guidelines, particularly in terms of psychologists' presence at sessions of "enhanced interrogation" (e.g., Arrigo, Eidelson, & Bennett, 2012; Soldz, 2011). In short, although the research published in this volume is valuable, it is only a beginning. There is plenty of work left to do.

Finally, concurring with Staerklé and colleagues' commentary, we are eager to see more psychological research that critically interrogates the concept of human rights itself. A discourse analysis of the articles assembled here might find one "hegemonic" discourse, in line with the definition of human rights we gave in the beginning of this introduction: that of human rights as a univer-

sally positive concept to protect freedoms and human dignity that deserves unconditional support. However, outside psychology, criticisms of being rooted in a male (Gilligan, 1980) or Western (Wong, 1984) moral perspectives have been leveled at the concept of human rights. There is also empirical evidence that alternative social representations exist even among people in a Western context (Stainton Rogers & Kitzinger, 1995; Stenner, 2011). Human rights have a widely shared positive meaning that makes the concept a powerful discursive device (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987); hence, it becomes important to investigate how the concept can be used strategically to pursue goals that are detrimental to peace. One could think of examples such as military (and nonmilitary) interventions conducted in the name of human rights, but with ulterior motives (see, e.g., Chandler, 2006; Chomsky, 1999), or international developmental aid that may worsen, rather than improve, the living conditions in the recipient society (e.g., Moyo, 2009). Moreover, human rights discourse may restrict and interfere with humanitarian relief that is needed in emergency situations (Chandler, 2001).

Conclusion

These limitations notwithstanding, the articles in this issue provide promising examples of psychology's contribution to human rights, and we hope that the compilation will help to generate research in an area of social importance that psychologists have seldom used as an organizing framework. Further, we believe that psychological research can have a real-world impact at interpersonal or societal levels. Migacheva, although appreciative of the contributions to date, is clear that psychological research can go further, and has the potential to effect public policy change. Findings such as the equality hypocrisy or the importance of a sense of global community have real-world implications for policymakers, the advocacy community, and human rights practitioners, and it is up to us to ensure that our work does not end with a publication, but that we do all that we can to extend our research beyond the ivory tower of academia.

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