

Human Rights and Psychology

by Laurie Phillips
Adjunct Professor
Orlando, FL campus

There is an implicit link or connection between psychology and human rights. Psychology and the social sciences study the human condition, with the goal of understanding and even predicting the singular and collective behaviors of human beings. Social psychology, in particular, examines how both external/social and internal/mental processes contribute to one's actions by studying the relationships, human connections, and processes that occur in group structures within social settings. Institutions, groups, and communities often have intentions, values, and desires which differ greatly from the individual members belonging to those groups and institutions.

One such group or collective behavior studied by social psychologists is social movements, such as the American civil rights movement, feminist, anti-war, free speech, environmental protectionism, and recently, human rights. Catalysts for the tipping point in galvanizing support for a developing movement can be social crisis, shared emotional experience, feelings of solidarity, perceptual shift in vision or values, impact on needs or identity, and motivation to take action. In the clinical arena, counseling and clinical psychologists directly impact the well-being of clients by helping them improve cognitive, social and emotional functioning, adjust to loss, and alleviate suffering caused by mental disorders. Understanding social behavior and contributing to the well-being of society all fall within the rubric of psychology and connect us, in a natural progression, to a concern about human rights.

Educators play a key role in influencing attitudes about human rights, as does the media. The media influences the thinking of Americans through news stories and photographic images, whether reporting on social and gender discrimination, torture, military use of children, violations of the laws of war, child labor, denial of education and healthcare, economic discrimination/poverty, genocide, or trafficking in women and girls. Advances in technology, availability of information, global commerce and travel, and email communication between world citizens via the internet have elevated global awareness of the struggle for human rights, and, as a consequence, have made our world a smaller place. The phenomenon of globalization has unearthed inequalities and injustices that heretofore went unnoticed and concurrently created new opportunities for human rights violations. The field of psychology appears as a powerful force for change, having the potentiality of influencing national legislation, foreign policy, news reporting practices, and congressional decisions to invoke war or peace. It also influences the interventions of international human rights organizations as psychological concepts became part of mainstream thought and psychologists act as consultants to political groups as part of the political process.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 states: “The inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family (are) the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,” declaring human rights for all. Yet abuses continue by countries, armed groups, corporations, and institutions violating human rights.

Psychology examines human motivation and learning, personality characteristics, human development and attachment, cognitive and sensory processes as well as perceptual biases, subjective distortions, disordered thinking, moral development,

emotional numbing and dissociation, irrational beliefs, fragmentation of reality, and affective tendencies as causes or contributions to human behavior and choice. Psychology asks about the nature of humans' attachment and commitment to the ideology of warfare and violence leading to death, destruction and suffering, which has occurred throughout history and continues to occur. Psychology inquires specifically as to whether inner psychological conflicts, conflicting internal strivings, and human emotions like anxieties, desires and fears in the real world reliably lead to and predict political disagreements and political quarrels involving armed conflict, oppressive practices, and abuses of power, including torture and rape. Additionally, psychologists employ interventions to respond to emotional disequilibrium stemming from trauma to treat post-traumatic stress, adjustment and coping problems, and provide counseling to victims of human rights violations for common disorders of depression and anxiety, empowering victims to foster systemic change.

The phenomenon of ethnocentrism in psychology is attributed to group identification based on shared emotional ties among its members who value a set of ideals, qualities and experiences, (e.g., shared language, culture or geography), but can also be understood as a viewpoint through which we interpret reality that is based on our own limited experience—necessarily excluding the experiences of others. Inherent in the limitations of acquired, experiential knowledge is the possibility of misinterpretation and conflict. The opportunity exists within psychology to use knowledge of psychological concepts to build in controls for such biases by observing our reactions and those of others, increasing our awareness of resistance to change, and creating standards of responsibility, thus creating a more valid, balanced understanding. Without adopting an objective, observer stance, we are vulnerable to remain in an emotional self-orientation,

which breeds the kind of selfishness that ignores the plight of people in other countries whose human rights are marginalized or completely denied. Through education, research and a deeper understanding of psychological processes, many psychologists and educators work for economic, social and political justice locally and internationally within the larger, global struggle for human rights, sharing a core value: protection for all members of the human family.

Donnel B. Stern, Ph.D., a prominent contemporary psychologist, aptly articulates the interrelatedness of the implicit ideals of psychoanalysis, (e.g., the promotion of freedom of expression and thought) and human rights: “(And so), because to be an analyst is to be involved in the struggle for inner freedom, and because inner constraints are related to outer ones, analysts often find themselves critics of the societies within which they live. To be an analyst is to be an activist, even if the activism is not very noisy, and even if the activist him/herself is less than fully aware of participating that way.” He concludes: “The most cherished psychoanalytic value, though—that one value we all share, pursuing it in our different ways—is the maintenance of curiosity and the tolerance of what we learn as a result.”

(Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 2002, 38, 1:7-12)

Psychology has contributed greatly to our understanding of what attracts us to certain outcomes and contingencies and compels us to respond reflexively rather than creatively. As we grow in our ability to interpret and anticipate how our internal, mental life or ‘inner world’ impacts upon and interacts with our cultural world, we become better prepared to prevent human rights violations in the United States and abroad.