

GLOBAL NETWORK OF PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

JUNE, 2020

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN A PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULUM

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXPERIENCES
OF PSYCHOLOGY EDUCATORS



WRITTEN BY

ANDREA DE PALMA

FACULTY SUPERVISOR

FELISA TIBBITTS

CO-SUPERVISED BY

POLLI HAGENAARS, MARLENA PLAVŠIĆ

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following individuals for their active participation and generous availability at various stages of this project:

- DF
- Tonje Lossius Husum, Clinical Psychologist, Centre of Medical Ethics, University of Oslo
- Peter Kinderman, Professor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Liverpool
- Gert Sommer, Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology, Philipps-University Marburg
- Jost Stellmacher, Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Philipps-University Marburg
- Nora Sveaass, Professor Emerita, Department of Psychology, University of Oslo
- Ulrich Wagner, Professor Emeritus, Department of Social Psychology and of Conflict Studies, Philipps-University Marburg
- Tony Wainwright, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter

This work would have not been possible without your involvement.

The study was carried out for the Global Network of Psychologists for Human Rights as part of an Internship with the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights (SIM) of Utrecht University (The Netherlands).

INTRODUCTION



Following the horrific events of the Second World War, the creation of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has paved the way for ground breaking accomplishments in the field of Human Rights. Since 1948, more than 300 human rights treaties and declarations have been adopted by the United Nations; parts of the UDHR have been included in the constitutions of over ninety countries ("A brief history of human rights - Amnesty International", 2020). Since then, multiple global and regional human rights regimes have been created for the enforcement, implementation and promotional activities of Human Rights (Donnelly, 2013).

Moreover, a series of important conventions to protect individuals from specific human rights violations have been adopted, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). We have also witnessed the creation of multiple human rights non-governmental organizations. As of 2000, a total of 250 organizations were working worldwide for the monitoring, education and advocacy of human rights (Claude, 2002).



In the span of a century, we have thus seen the development of a human rights regime, including the engagement of governments and civil society. Despite these positive developments, human rights violations continue to take place. These can include discrimination against a minority group, the illegal use of torture in criminal investigations, the abuse of women and even the use of children as weapons of war in some countries (Hagenaars, 2016). A recent study identified a decline in global freedom over the past 14 years: as of 2019, 64 countries showed deterioration in the civil and political rights of its citizen compared to just the previous year (Repucci, 2020). Acting to avoid the establishment of this negative trend is an imperative for all of us, including those working in the field of psychology.

This was recognised by The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations in 2013 which called for psychologists and their professional associations to engage in protection, promotion and education of human rights (EFPA, 2013). Although the connection between human rights and psychology may not be readily apparent, psychologists have an important role to play. As an example, psychologists can play a vital role in the identification of abuses experienced by people living with dementia at the hands of caregivers and third parties (World Health Organization, 2015). Psychologists can help alleviate the suffering that someone feels as a result of a human rights violation and take action to ensure that such violations do not occur in the future (EFPA, 2015).

For these reasons, it is highly relevant to provide effective training and education of Human Rights in Psychology curricula at all higher education levels, from undergraduate and postgraduate education, to PhD candidates and practitioners in clinical trainings. It is necessary to teach students how to conduct research in Psychology so that, for instance, they do not involuntarily support a social order that maintains social inequalities (Patel, 2003). Human rights education can teach psychology students how to recognize human rights violations and how to act to defend the rights of human rights holders. Psychologists can be trained to meet the psychological needs of the people whose rights have been neglected or violated, as in the case of refugees, other vulnerable groups such as those suffering from mental illness, and individuals who have been subjected to torture (Hagenaars et al., 2020).

RESEARCH AIMS

This study was organized to obtain a better understanding of how Human Rights is being taught in Psychology in higher education. A series of individual interviews took place electronically and investigated several themes: the integration of human rights themes within the curriculum; the learning outcomes planned for the students; what educators have learned by teaching human rights and recommendations for other instructors in higher education based on their experiences.



METHOD

DATA COLLECTION

The research was carried out as part of an internship project with Prof. Dr. Felisa Tibbitts and with the Global Network of Psychologists for Human Rights. Members of this network were emailed to inform them about the project and its purposes and to ask for their agreement to participate in it. If they agreed, the interviewer and interviewee decided on a time to conduct a web-based videocall interview.

A total of eight higher education faculty members teaching human rights in their psychology classes agreed to be interviewed. The educators were all Professors or Senior Lecturers teaching Psychology or Ethics at either Undergraduate or Graduate university level, collectively working in German, Norwegian, Serbian and UK universities.

The interviews were conducted in English and took approximately 50 minutes, investigating the background of the educators, their teaching and students' experiences and their overall remarks about their Human Rights course. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for the qualitative analysis. Three interviewees replied to the questions in writing.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis, defined by Braun & Clarke (2006) as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data." (p. 79), was used to interpret the data generated during the focus group. The general guidelines indicated by Miles & Huberman (1984) on qualitative data analysis were also followed. The transcript was read multiple times while identifying data extracts (i.e. coded chunks of data). These were later reviewed and categorised into themes and, finally, grouped into the larger, general themes that were identified within this qualitative analysis.

RESULTS

This qualitative research study aimed at exploring the experiences of Psychology and Ethics educators who have incorporated Human Rights in their teaching. Three main themes emerged from the review of the data:

- "The rationale for and the importance of integrating Human Rights within Psychology"
- "A prototypical Human Rights course"
- "Learner outcomes for a Human Rights in Psychology course".

THEME 1: THE RATIONALE FOR AND THE IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY

The first theme identified through this analysis was the common feeling among Psychology educators that it is highly relevant to teach Human Rights given psychology's ethical foundation; the necessity to empower clinical practitioners in their work conduct and decision-making; and the responsibility psychologists bear for protecting their clients' wellbeing, which can be better achieved with the incorporation of a Human Rights perspective.

These sub-themes are presented below.

Subtheme A. HRs as a foundation of Psychology.

Most of the interviewees shared the opinion that Human Rights are at the core of what constitutes Psychology and its ethical values. As Psychologist-practitioners, one cannot avoid noticing the importance of Human Rights as a basis of practice. There is a clear connection between Human Rights and Psychology, with these rights in the background of work and teaching.

"Human Rights as a basis or as a part of the basis of your Psychology work." (Nora Sveaass)

"For Social Psychology, Human rights are always a question in the background." (Ulrich Wagner)

For these reasons, since Human Rights constitute part of the foundation of Psychology and its ethical core, those interviewed strongly support human rights teaching to transmit this knowledge and appreciation to all Psychology students.

"They need knowledge about how Human Rights issues are relevant in their own work, in their own daily life." (Tonje Lossius Husum)

Subtheme B. Usefulness of HR in clinical practice.

According to most interviewees, it is very important to learn about Human Rights, as this perspective can further improve the work of Psychology, in particular for clinical practitioners. Adopting a human rights framework can further improve the decision making in clinical cases and expand the scope and effectiveness of practitioners' interventions.

"It helps clinical decision making to view things in a human rights perspective." (Peter Kinderman)

"We all have to have an ethical approach to our work, but I think a human rights approach expands it in a way." (Nora Sveaass)

Moreover, further knowledge of Human Rights and the incorporation of this perspective into one's work can empower practitioners to become better prepared to handle Human Rights violations when they occur, avoiding accepting things for the way they are and becoming able to make a change in their work and in their clients' lives.

"Knowledge about human rights enables them to recognize some of their duties, to protect their clients, themselves and psychology in general from abuse and misuse." (DF)

Subtheme C. HRs learning as a professional and ethical duty.

Finally, it was a common attitude among interviewees that psychologists should learn about Human Rights as part of their professional and ethical duty. Given the work conducted by psychologists with vulnerable groups of people and the shared ethical principles that the wellbeing and health of individuals should be protected and ensured, learning about Human Rights should be a professional duty for all Psychologists-practitioners.

"I think it is part of our ethical obligations as psychologists to be aware of what it is Human Rights and how it applies to us." (Nora Sveaass)

"They have the responsibility to give part of that back and this includes their own professional responsibility." (Ulrich Wagner)

THEME 2: A PROTOTYPICAL HUMAN RIGHTS COURSE

The qualitative analysis conducted on the interview data led to the identification of a series of thoughts and suggestions on the desirable components of a Human Rights course.

Subtheme A. A practical focus

Firstly, given the time limitation of a university course, psychology educators recognised the importance of developing a Human Rights course with the intent of introducing the topic to make them enthusiastic enough to start thinking about Human Rights and applying the concepts outside class. Therefore, the aim of the course is not to make learners Human Rights' experts but to initiate a conversation of Human Rights among psychologists.

"Make them sufficiently enthusiastic about it and they will want to go off and learn more about it. I am not going to be able to teach them everything about HRs in a short session." (Tony Wainwright)

To this end, a common suggestion and practice among interviewees was to apply the teaching to the specific situations in which Human Rights can become a part of the work of a psychologist. Therefore, educators avoided a heavy focus on the legal aspects of Human Rights, (which may be less of interest to the students) but rather apply the theoretical aspects of Human Rights to the daily practice within Psychology, with real-world case scenarios and examples of possible violating situations.

"To think about this not in terms of the legal treaties and all of those things, but just in terms of what they need to be sensitive to." (Tony Wainwright)

"When you are talking about issues of human rights, clinical real-world human examples are right to the point of what you are talking about." (Peter Kinderman)

Subtheme B. Importance of discussion

Various teaching methods were mentioned by the educators in connection with the need for a practical focus to facilitate the learning of the materials among students. Most of the Psychology educators highlighted a key element that needs to be present within any Human Rights class: discussion. According to them, if students discuss the materials that are presented to them, their engagement with the material is better ensured. Moreover, the incorporation of Human Rights knowledge can be further facilitated, given the many perspectives and inputs that can arise.

"I think students learn much more through discussions and talks, they learn with being engaged and active and interested, they learn by talking to each other." (Tonje Lossius Husum)

"Try to involve people directly, use Human Rights to involve them in the cases they are working with. Have them exemplify their own cases." (Nora Sveaass)

Discussion is facilitated by the fact that Human Rights issues in Psychology do not always have a clear-cut answer; therefore, these discussions can be very lively and easy to conduct.

"That discussion, voluntary/involuntary treatment and care, it is something that activates a lot because there are so many strong arguments. [...] That is a very heated and engaged discussion." (Nora Sveaass)

Subtheme C. Effective presentation of the course and the need for unbiased communication.

A final remark appearing across interviewees was the shared opinion that some resistance towards the content may appear. This may limit the efficacy of a Human Rights course for some students.

"I have had the experience of starting to talk to people about HRs and their eyes would glaze over a bit, "Oh Human Rights, yeah well", bits like Health & Safety." (Tony Wainwright)

For this reason, two important suggestions were given by Psychology educators. First, the initial presentation of the course should motivate the students. Rather than presenting the course as a mandatory training, the ideal course should be presented as a powerful tool that can be used by students to improve their capability to act as good Psychology practitioners in the future.

"I would present human rights as tools that you can use to enhance clinical practice, rather than a mandatory training that someone says you must do, it will switch people off." (Peter Kinderman)

Moreover, once the course has started, instructors should aim to maintain an unbiased communication. Given the importance of discussions within a Human Rights course, as indicated earlier, interviewees felt that it is important for the educators to guide the discussion and teaching in a way that does not alienate any members of the audience. If this is achieved, a welcoming and enriching environment can be created in the classroom.

"Teaching Human Rights is also practicing Human Rights. If you come in teaching a Human Rights course and you are paternalistic, authoritarian, you do not want to listen to people's comments, you do not want to argue... You have to walk the talk, the way that you show that you deal with students, including students who may have a different opinion." (Nora Sveaass)

"I think something about the way we teach about this needs to make sure that it is not taught from a left-wing perspective, it is taught from a position where we talk about the psychology, the engagement with the community." (Tony Wainwright)

THEME 3: LEARNER OUTCOMES FOR A "HUMAN RIGHTS IN PSYCHOLOGY" COURSE

The final theme that emerged during the analysis was the generally positive results of a course of this type. Educators shared the idea that there has been a positive development among students in their attitudes towards Human Rights and their application in practice. Instructors have also observed the growing presence of human rights in disciplines other than legal ones.

Subtheme A: Initial positive signs

Most of the interviewees shared the opinion that Psychology students are generally interested in the topic of Human Rights and interested to learn more about it. This is partly due to the fact that Psychology students typically have little or no previous knowledge of Human Rights.

*"What is their level of acquaintance of HR at the beginning of the course?
Mostly, limited." (DF)*

*"It is very much a demand from the students to have this overview and insight
into human rights." (Nora Sveaass)*

Moreover, Psychology educators who are active within the Human Rights field have also noticed a positive development through the years. as more students have expressed a greater interest in this topic..

*"When I started the Human Rights committee among Norwegian psychologists
in 1998, people said: "What? Human Rights what? Why should we deal with
this?" and it was difficult to have people understand. Now people are in line
to join the work." (Nora Sveaass)*

The interviews highlighted how the topic of Human Rights has become more visible in the eyes of the public and increasingly viewed as relevant for Psychology and its practical work.

Subtheme B: Positive real experiences

During the interviews, most of the educators shared their positive experiences while teaching Human Rights in Psychology. Firstly, students seem to be enjoying the course. In the end-of-course- evaluations, students stated they found the courses interesting and stimulating.

"I really have the impression that they really liked the course." (Ulrich Wagner)

*"Some will be very enthusiastic and really just feel like they want to read, they
want to study, they want to understand." (Nora Sveaass)*

Human Rights courses were also successful in involving students in activities outside of the class, with many volunteering in the field of Human Rights, enrolling in further studies on Human Rights or conducting their thesis research project on a topic involving Human Rights.

*"I see that my students afterwards choose to go to work on a community level,
they go into work with refugees, some of them do further studies on Human
Rights." (Nora Sveaass)*

Interviewees have observed that the Human Rights course has furthered the personal growth of the students as Psychology professionals and individuals; at the end of the course, many learners were more aware they were 'citizens of the world'.

"They say: "This made me more sure about myself, it made me feel like I am part of a network, it made me feel that there is meaning in what I do, as sometimes I just feel that I am working uphill, with heavy challenges." (Nora Sveaass)

Finally, the educators themselves shared their own experience in teaching Human Rights. This was overall a very positive teaching experiment for them, from which the educators came out enriched and inspired by the students and the discussions with them.

"It is very interesting, it has given me a lot, it is very meaningful to do this teaching and to meet the students." (Tonje Lossius Husum)

Table 1. A summary of the main themes identified in this qualitative analysis.

THEME	DESCRIPTION	SUB-THEMES
RATIONALE FOR AND IMPORTANCE OF INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS WITHIN PSYCHOLOGY	This theme describes the common feeling among Psychology educators that Human Rights are embedded within Psychology and their knowledge can improve the work and decision making of practitioners. Moreover, this theme highlights how HRs should be taught as it is a duty for all psychologists to be aware of these issues and to avoid overlooking any violation happening around them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HRS AS A FOUNDATION OF PSYCHOLOGY • USEFULNESS OF HR IN CLINICAL PRACTICE • HRS LEARNING AS A PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL DUTY
A PROTOTYPICAL HUMAN RIGHTS COURSE	This theme summarises the general thoughts that Psychology educators have shared about how a prototypical HR course would look like. This prototypical HR course should have a heavy focus on the application of Human Rights within Psychology and should make use of discussions in order to facilitate learning. Finally, the course should be presented as a tool to motivate students and should use an unbiased communication to avoid alienating certain students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A PRACTICAL FOCUS • IMPORTANCE OF DISCUSSION • EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION OF THE COURSE AND THE NEED FOR UNBIASED COMMUNICATION
LEARNER OUTCOMES FOR A "HUMAN RIGHTS IN PSYCHOLOGY" COURSE	This final theme describes the experiences of students and teachers in these initial HRs courses in Psychology. This starts with a positive historical trend which shows that the attention for human rights seems to be improving in this area and students become more willing to learn about this topic. Then, it presents real life experiences showing the effectiveness of these courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INITIAL POSITIVE SIGNS • POSITIVE REAL EXPERIENCES

DISCUSSION

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the subsequent recognition of the importance of the concept of universal human dignity, much has been elaborated within the human rights framework. However, these principles need to be applied in everyday life. As highlighted in the introduction, vulnerable groups close to the work of psychologists -- such as refugees, asylum-seekers, prisoners or patients suffering from dementia -- continue to suffer from basic human rights violations. This is why The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations called for psychologists and their associations to engage in the protection, promotion and education of human rights (EFPA, 2013). This qualitative research analysis therefore aimed at exploring the experiences of Psychology educators who embedded a Human Rights course within a Psychology curriculum.

As highlighted in the study, there is an underlying connection between Human Rights and Psychology, given their shared, ethical values based on the key

principle of respect of a person's human dignity.

Therefore, learning about Human Rights in Psychology is important. The interviewees and the sponsors of this study see that such an education is part of a professional duty to protect human dignity and has the potential to enhance the work of psychologists, improving their decision-making and self-efficacy. Moreover, the analysis suggested that teaching that has already taken place has shown promising results: many educators report their students being very motivated about human rights and many engage outside the class to act upon those environments in which the work of a psychologist can be life changing. These positive results are more likely to be achieved if certain indications are followed in the development of a Human Rights course, such as presenting it as a useful tool to psychologists, applying the course materials with real-life scenarios and organizing discussions that are unbiased and open to facilitate learning and include all students in the process.



These promising, initial experiences shared by the interviewees highlight the positive impact that Human Rights education can have on psychology students and practitioners. Nonetheless, a training of this type is still largely absent within all education levels of Psychology. The result is a cohort of students who are unaware and unprepared to apply the human rights framework to work scenarios with ethical ambiguity, or where advocacy for legal change might be required (Tibbitts & Hagenaars, 2020). Education is needed in order to spread this awareness and improve the efficacy of the future generations of psychologists, to be able to become vigilant observers and, most importantly, active individuals in their research, practice and social action.

CONCLUSION

Today, we are training the students who will become the future of Psychology and will represent it in their own practice, in their classrooms, in the counselling rooms. We cannot expect psychologists to fix all the injustices that they will come across in their professional and personal lives. Nonetheless, with a Human Rights education, we can help ensure they possess the tools necessary to perform their work at the best of their possibilities, ensuring the sanctity of human dignity.



REFERENCES

- Amnesty International (2020). *A brief history of human rights*. Retrieved 22 May 2020, from <https://www.amnesty.nl/a-brief-history-of-human-rights>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research In Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Claude, R. (2002). *Science in the service of human rights*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Donnelly, J. (2013). *Universal human rights in theory and practice*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- EFPA. (2013). *Tasks and recommendations of new TF Human Rights*. EFPA, General Assembly, Brussels. Retrieved from <http://www.efpa.eu/>
- EFPA. (2015) *Psychology matters in Human Rights – Human Rights matter in Psychology*. EFPA policy and action in the area of Human Rights and Psychology. Retrieved from <http://efpa.eu/>
- Hagenaars, P. (2016). Towards a Human Rights Based and Oriented Psychology. *Psychology And Developing Societies*, 28(2), 183-202. doi: 10.1177/0971333616657170
- Hagenaars, P., Plavšić, M., Sveaass, N., Wagner, U., & Wainwright, T. (2020). *Human rights education for psychologists* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Patel, N. (2003). Clinical Psychology: Reinforcing Inequalities or Facilitating Empowerment?. *The International Journal Of Human Rights*, 7(1), 16-39. doi: 10.1080/714003792
- Repucci, S. (2020). *A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*. Retrieved 22 May 2020, from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>
- Tibbitts, F. & Hagenaars, P. (2020). Chapter 32. Education of Psychologists for Human Rights Awareness, Accountability and Action. In N. S. Rubin (ed.) *Cambridge Handbook on Psychology and Human Rights*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- World Health Organization. (2015). *Ensuring a human-rights based approach for people living with dementia*. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/mental_health/neurology/dementia/en/