



# Psychology and Human Rights moving from 'Doing No Harm' to 'Doing Good'

# Psychology and Human Rights

Human Rights are of crucial importance to everyone in the world, psychologists included. (EFPA, 2013)

By virtue of their knowledge and expertise, psychologists - individually and through their associations- have the responsibility to promote and protect human rights.

# Incorporate Human Rights into psychologists' associations

## A starting point

- Missions/ Bylaws/ Statutes, Codes of Conduct, Action programs (influencing politics), Advocacy, Public Statements
- Human rights apply to associations, groups and individual psychologists, to research, practice, assessment and epistemology



# Human Rights: Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

## Preamble:

- The inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family
- Human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want, the Four Freedoms
- The first 7 articles are about protection and promotion of Dignity, Freedom and Inclusion
- Amartya Sen calls human rights societal ethics. Sen argues that people should be enabled to exercise their rights, his 'capabilities approach'

## **Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, 2016 :**

‘The human dignity of every person should be upheld by his or her own agency, instead of being dependent on the goodwill of others, which is often doubtful or mixed with their own interests. This means that the focus of human rights implementation should be more ‘people-centred’ and less dependent on the ambiguities and contingencies of inter-governmental relations.’

The Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists (UDEPP, 2008):  
‘The first and most important principle of the UDEPP is: ‘Respect for the Dignity of Persons and Peoples’

# Psychology

No human being should fear of

- being excluded, not listened to, not seen (right to belong)
- being dehumanised, tortured (right to dignity and life)
- being forced (right to freedom)

Basic needs must be met for each person:

- Respect
- Belonging
- Autonomy



# Codes of Conduct

We need to distinguish between:

- Aspirational goals
- Enforceable Rules
  - 'Do Good' versus 'Do No Harm'



## Do No Harm

A study into sanctions based on medical ethics codes showed that the principle 'Do No Harm' was the most applied of the four principles used: Autonomy, Beneficence, Non-maleficence (Do no harm), and Justice. These all need to be weighed and balanced when determining an optimal course of action.

The principles can still be found in a lot of Ethical Codes.

*Biomedical Ethics, Beauchamp and Childress, 1994*



## Do Good

Protecting and promoting human rights is more than complying with (enforceable) rules.

- Sanctions exist only on transgressions of the (enforceable) rules in the codes of ethics
- Codes are meant for individual behaviour of psychologists, mostly only for members
- Human rights violations may be seen more often in the public space than in the practice rooms, although they may occur! This does not mean that they fall outside our concern and responsibility !
- Seldom found: Ban on cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment

## Shift needed in our professional ethics (1)

- Shift from codes, focused on enforceable rules ('Do no harm') to aspirational goals ('Do good'), in line with Sen, but **with commitment** to advocacy, action and evaluation.
- 'Do good' needs to be accompanied by accountability and education
- Human rights need to be translated -more systematically-, in psychological terms and practices
- Add knowledge about relevant human rights covenants to the Codes, like the CRC, CEDAW, CRPD, CERD



## Shift needed in our professional ethics (2)

- Every citizen should be able to challenge the misconduct or not-good-enough behaviour of psychologists. So far, only complaints from clients about violations by their psychologist have been processed
- ‘Ethics trump rules’: aspirational rules precede enforceable rules, but are not treated as such in the Ethical codes, and not made applicable
- Support and protection must be part of the ethical standards, for colleagues who are standing up for human rights, whistleblowing or being threatened
- Establish a group of wise senior colleagues to advise on complex ethical issues and dilemmas



## To be further discussed

- Research ethics (see the chapter by Bullock & Zakowski in Ruben and Flores book)
- Assessment
- Military involvement

## Last point

Are our Codes adequate standards on how to equally treat the marginalised, poor, undocumented, refugees, persons with physical disability, LGBTIQ+, and other minority groups?

Are they fit for a human rights-based psychology?

THANKS!

