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Practicing Human Rights in Social Work: Reflections and Rights-Based Approaches

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Abstract
In this article, I share my experiences from over 15 years as a social work practitioner, researcher, educator, and academic. Drawing upon these experiences, I reflect on the state of human rights in social work and present a model for practicing human rights in social work. This article was adapted from the inaugural lecture of the Human Rights Speaker Series at West Chester University in Philadelphia on November 9, 2017.

Keywords Human rights · Rights-based approaches · Social work practice

It is a great honor to share my experiences from over 15 years as a social work practitioner, researcher, educator, and academic. Drawing upon these experiences, I will reflect on the state of human rights in social work and present a model for practicing human rights in social work.

Reflections Upon Practicing Human Rights in Social Work

My graduate social work education at the University of California, Berkeley, prepared me to work in the field of community mental health. The School of Social Welfare was heavily influenced by the late Dean Harry Specht's *Unfaithful Angels* (Specht and Courtney 1995); I was taught that social workers should practice within public systems and serve the neediest of people. In the California state and Bay Area county mental health systems, I witnessed the criminalization of people with mental health symptoms. As a practitioner, I followed this population into jails, prisons, and death row. I worked in state and county public defender offices as a mitigation expert; I used social work research and evidence to make arguments in court for treatment over incarceration and to save the lives of people on death row. In these settings, I saw the trends of criminalization, hyperincarcertation, and racial disproportionalities in state systems. As rehabilitation was eliminated as a policy goal, criminal justice institutions became more explicit about their role in the punishment and management of people deemed to be a toxic underclass. Inspired by these injustices, I was drawn to restorative justice as a means to reform the criminal justice system. As I constructed social histories for the court, my clients would disclose that no one had ever asked them about their lives before. I was struck by how narrative interventions could have a healing benefit in their lives. I saw how the process of my clients sharing their life story with me had a profound impact upon them.

In many of these practice settings, I was the sole social worker, frequently asking: "Where are all the other social workers?" Social workers are missing in action in many human rights settings. Where have they gone? What are the structural forces that exclude them? The field of human rights is dominated by lawyers. Despite being allied professions, lawyers are distinct from social workers, in their education, professional ethics, and perspectives. Lawyers are important, yet hardly the only profession relevant to human rights. The overrepresentation of one profession skews the field and biases people's understandings of human rights.

However, I knew from my own experience that social workers can make valuable contributions to human rights, so I continued my graduate social work education to explore this. I entered my doctoral program to study restorative justice on a community and global scale. I was driven by questions of how people, communities, and nations rebuild themselves after trauma, violence, oppression, and other human rights violations.

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This was after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission emerged to rebuild the nation after the transition from Apartheid to democracy. Fascinated by this application of a restorative justice model with narrative components, I read everything I could on the South African case. Empirical evaluations and analyses from a social welfare perspective of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were scarce. Therefore, I focused my studies on human rights and transitional justice.

I had the opportunity to work for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Timor-Leste and participated in the struggle to rebuild a society following decades of mass human rights violations (Androff 2008). I saw tremendous potential for social workers to engage Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to foster community healing and recovery (Androff 2010). For my dissertation, I investigated the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission to be applied in North America. The Greensboro, North Carolina Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed to reconcile a community divided by a KKK shooting (Androff 2012). Lawyers in the field of transitional justice expressed surprise upon meeting me, asking: "Why are you a social worker?" This reaction made me realize that people in human rights settings are not always used to working with social workers and often fail to see social workers as integral to protecting and promoting human rights.

As a professor in Arizona, I have worked to strengthen the connection between social work and human rights. I studied human rights violations against immigrants on the border and in detention (Androff & Tavassoli 2012). I serve on the Board of Directors of the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project where we are developing a hybrid social-legal model of services for adults and children in immigrant detention (Androff 2016b). I built the capacity of local grassroots refugee organizations to empower refugees from Burma, Bhutan, Congo, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. Using participatory methods, I organized refugee leaders to promote their rights and the rights of their communities. Refugee leaders ultimately created a cooperative corporation called the New American Community, Inc. to generate economic activity and to humanize refugees resettled in the USA.

Social workers have also challenged me for my work in human rights. The Chair of my Doctoral Program reacted with dismay upon learning about my coursework on human rights and my research interests in Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, exclaiming, "But that's not social work!" I could not have imagined a more direct challenge to my education and career aspirations. Nonetheless, I have come to be very grateful for that moment. This professor was being honest and genuine in their reaction; they taught me something important, something that I have carried with me and used to shape my career. I learned that the connection between social work and human rights is not self-evident to social workers. I learned that I needed to become fluent in making this connection explicit.

Is Social Work a Human Rights-Based Profession?

This challenge inspired me to investigate the connections and disconnections between human rights and social work. The first question I asked was "is social work a human rights-based profession?" On paper, the answer is a resounding yes. This is plain and clear from many sources and documents. The International Federation of Social Work's 2014 Global Definition of Social Work, the 2012 Global Agenda of Social Work and Social Development, and Codes of Ethics from professional social work organizations around the world refer to human rights as "fundamental" and "central" to social work. There is a rising trend of human rights scholarship in the social work literature and on display at social work academic conferences. This very journal is an example of the growing recognition of the increased social work scholarship on human rights.

Social work curricula increasingly addresses human rights; since 2008, the Education and Policy Standards of the Council on Social Work Education have mandated social work curriculum to address human rights, and more courses on human rights are being developed and offered. The Human Rights Speaker Series at West Chester University in Philadelphia is another example.

Furthermore, social work and human rights share a common history and many common founding mothers (Healy 2008). Jane Addams was a peer of Eleanor Roosevelt. The connection is not just historical; social work and human rights share many common priorities and ethics (Albrithen & Androff 2014). Both areas are concerned with people's welfare, protecting people from violence and abuse.

The Problem with Human Rights in Social Work

Do these myriad affirmations and confirmations resolve social work to be a human rights profession? Not quite. Despite social work's lofty rhetoric on human rights, human rights are rarely used, and where they are, it is often only superficially. Another problem is that historically, there are examples of how social workers have violated the rights of their clients, yet the profession rarely examines these episodes or strives to learn from its past.

As demonstrated by my professional experiences, social work and human rights fields display a lack of consciousness about each other. The field of human rights is not a profession or even a discipline in the same way as social work, but rather an interdisciplinary area focused on the law. Social workers in the USA are likely to view human rights as something exotic, relevant perhaps in the far corners of the globe but not at home.

Social work scholarship on human rights is still emerging. The first books addressed the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings between the human rights and social work (Ife 2001), oriented social workers to the core human rights documents (Reichert 2003), traced the historical evolution of rights (Wronka 2008), and highlighted the global human rights issues (Mapp 2008). More recent works show how human rights can be directly applied to social work (Androff 2016a), including clinical practice (Berthold 2015), community practice (Libal and Harding 2015), and social policy analysis (Gatenio Gabel 2016).

Another challenge for social work in the USA is that the mainstream discourse, as a remnant of the Cold War division, has prioritized civil and political rights over economic, social, cultural, and collective rights. Dichotomizing rights into such categories is harmful to holistic and interdependent conceptions of human rights. There are also international challenges to human rights, where many are suspicious of human rights as a vehicle for Western imperialism. China, ascendant in global institutions, labels human rights as Western propaganda.

Rights-Based Approaches in Social Work Practice

Can social workers put human rights to use? I argue that, not only yes, human rights can be used by social workers, but also that they must be implemented, integrated, and applied across all practice domains, modes of intervention, and modalities. Human rights can and should be present in social work policies, institutions, organizations, programs, projects, and interventions. Yet, how can this be achieved? To answer this question, I wrote a book on rights-based approaches to social work (Androff 2016a).

Rights-based approaches are one way that social workers can put human rights to use. A rights-based approach is a framework for applying rights; these have become common in public health, development, and at the United Nations. My book identifies a framework for applying human rights to social work practice based on the rights-based principles of human dignity, nondiscrimination, participation, transparency, and accountability. These five principles are drawn from human rights declarations, covenants, and conventions as well as social work ethics, values, and theory.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is the first principle of a rights-based approach to social work. Above all, social workers should respect everyone's fundamental dignity. The NASW and most other social work Codes of Ethics prioritize the dignity and worth of the person. Rights-based approaches to social work require that every aspect of social work practice respects the dignity of each client and community. This includes engaging with people not as passive objects of charity, recipients of aid, or needy vessels awaiting professional intervention but rather as fully realized subjects, full of capabilities, potential, and human rights. To respect people's human dignity, practitioners must respect their self-determination.

Human dignity also means combatting dehumanization. History reveals that human rights violations are often preceded by dehumanization of the victims by the perpetrators. It is as if in order to violate someone's rights, one must first render them "less than" human, minimizing their humanity such as through stigma and scapegoating. Promoting human dignity means promoting the re-humanization of people who have been dehumanized. One effective means to do this is through storytelling and narrative.

Nondiscrimination

The second rights-based principle of nondiscrimination means that social workers should prevent discrimination on any basis. Human rights documents list the grounds upon which we should prevent discrimination, such as gender, age, sexual orientation, sexual identity, ability status, national origin, race or ethnicity, language, religion, and migrant status. However, our understanding of the basis for discrimination is continually evolving. Therefore, such lists should not be regarded as checklists to be satisfied, rather as the starting point of a larger conversation about inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusivity by itself does not go far enough. The rights-based principle of nondiscrimination also requires attending to people who have been historically excluded and marginalized. In addition, social work practice should be culturally appropriate. Finally, nondiscrimination means that social work practice should be non-hierarchal. Often social work practice is organized and implemented in such a way that creates power differentials between practitioners and those who social workers would help. Rights-based approaches aim to reduce these power differentials in relationships.

Participation

Participation, the third principle of a rights-based approach to social work, is both a goal and a process. It is a goal, because participation is a human right in and of itself. Human rights covenants and conventions hold that people have a human right to participate in the programs and policies that affect them. Participation is also a process, because having people participate is a rights-based approach and a recognized means to achieving other human rights. This is reflected in the Disability Rights Movement slogan "nothing about us, without us."

A rights-based approach to social work practice means that people have influence and input into decisions that affect their

social welfare. The type of participation matters; practitioners must prevent tokenism to ensure a more genuine and authentic participation. This type of participation is about altering the relations of power through empowering the disempowered. It requires capacity building to ensure people'sgenuine participation.

Transparency

Transparency in human rights usually refers to anti-corruption policies and regulations. Indeed, this is a highly important priority, not just in the Global South, but in the USA as well. Transparency about the budget and policies of agencies and organizations can build trust with communities, clients, and consumers of social work services.

However, transparency in a rights-based approach to social work practice also relates to assessment, research, program evaluation, and monitoring. Rights-based approaches require careful assessment. Rights-based assessment involves building evidence and documenting violations as well as analyzing and understanding which interventions are effective for whom. This means doing research from a rights-based perspective. Transparency also means publicizing results for an informed populace.

Yet transparency means something else. On a deeper, more personal level, it requires transparency within ourselves and with each other. Social workers should incorporate reflexivity in practice, in relationships, and in interactions. This recalls the Eleanor Roosevelt quote "human rights begin … in the small places, close to home… unless they have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere" (Roosevelt 1958).

Accountability

The rights-based principle of accountability requires social workers to engage in advocacy for people and for causes. This often means lobbying of those in power and those responsible for protecting human rights. Accountability also means promoting justice, strengthening the rule of law, and increasing access to the rule of law. This also relates to democracy, including democratic decision-making.

Accountability also entails something bigger than advocacy, justice, and democracy—it relates to building and promoting a human rights culture. This includes education for and on human rights. Awareness-raising and community education campaigns can emphasize everyone's responsibility to protect and promote each other's rights.

Transforming Social Work

These principles can be used for rights-based approaches in mainstream social work practice areas. Rights-based approaches can be used with people in poverty, children, older adults, and people with health and mental health issues. Rights-based approaches in social work practice have the potential to transform the profession. A stronger embrace of human rights by social workers will safeguard and advance our progress towards social justice in the current perilous political climate. As domestic and international challenges to human rights mount, social workers must protect human rights; a rights-based approach to practice shows us how to do so.

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