

# Human Rights and Psychology: From Pedagogy to Practice

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# Outline

- Why are human rights important for psychology?
- When, how and what should we teach human rights to psychologists?
- An example: context and experiences of training clinical psychologists in human rights from University of East London, UK
- Competencies
- Conceptual and practical challenges

# The question of why?

- Impact of inequalities and human rights violations on health....and in turn ability to access rights
- A socially responsible and relevant psychology has to address and help tackle these inequalities and human rights violations – or colludes and serves the interest of those privileged by the status quo
- Psychologists as perpetrators of human rights violations
- Role of psychologists in addressing human rights abuses and implementation within our services
- The role of psychologists in supporting the development of appropriate health policies and the implementation of human rights in services, rehabilitation and justice

# Why teach human rights to psychologists?

## An example

- **The importance of history:** British history of slavery, colonialism, human rights abuses, discrimination, history of immigration, various sociopolitical experiments from multiculturalism to anti-terrorism measures ....
- **The importance of current social context:** Austerity, poverty, racism and many other forms of discrimination ...
- **On our doorstep:** Human rights abuses happen not just ‘out there’ but ‘in here’, in our health and social care services
- **Psychologists as duty-bearers:** British clinical psychology training is government-funded, trains clinical psychologists for the National Health Service – a State body

# The question of when?

- Schools
- Undergraduate psychology degrees
- Professional/applied psychology postgraduate degrees
- Post-qualification: continuing professional development

# The question of how?

- Many approaches to pedagogy
- In applied psychology, focus on:
- Knowledge and critical appraisal
- Self-awareness
- Skills-building: in clinical practice, service design, service delivery, research, organisational consultancy, change processes
- Learning and development as a continual process....  
Towards personal and professional development, ethical and professional practice and accountability

# The question of how?

- Starting with context: Where, for whom, by who, why?
- ‘One-hit wonder’ approach e.g. stand-alone workshops
- Discrete modules/short courses/summer schools
- Shoe-horning human rights into a slot in the curriculum
- Integration at every level: re-designing the entire curriculum to take a social justice, human rights and critical ethics approach?

# The question of what?

- Many shared ethical principles between human rights and psychology – not least human dignity, security, personal and bodily integrity, notion of humanity, freedom, self-determination/agency/autonomy, empowerment, equality etc.
- But applied psychology and human rights have radically different ways of addressing the issues of social justice, equality and human rights abuses
- One focuses mainly on individual change, the other on structural change, prevention, accountability and reparation
- One draws on pseudo-scientific concepts and methods, the other on human rights machinery



# The question of what?

- Both human rights and psychology traditionally share significant limitations:
- Eurocentric .... an elitist ‘Western privilege’
- Individualistic
- Gendered
- Acontextual ... practical relevance to real life changes?
- Depoliticised ... yet deeply entrenched in power relations and vested interests
- But together, they have something to offer in addressing human suffering

# The question of what?

- Both strive for change but at different levels, with different tools – which could be complementary or contradictory
- Diverse and some radically opposing approaches to psychology and pedagogy
- Not many psychologists understand theory and practice of human rights *and* limitations ..... and few lawyers understand psychological theories, practice *and* limitations
- So can we ever have a shared view on human rights and psychology?
- Do we need to have a shared view – or can we agree on key components of a curriculum?

# An example

- **University of East London, UK: Professional Doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology (3 years)**
- **Since 1995: Compulsory 90 hours on ‘Social inequalities and Clinical Psychology’ and integrated in other lectures and skills-development training sessions**
- **Since 1997: Compulsory 21 hours on ‘Human Rights and Clinical Psychology’ (4 levels)**
- **Content: Critical theory, practice, clinical examples, experiential workshops, debates and assessed presentations and written examinations**

# An example

## Level 1:

- General human rights principles, theory, enforcement and domestic, regional and international courts, UN monitoring mechanisms etc.
- Origins of human rights and international treaties
- Relationship between international human rights law, regional and domestic laws
- Limitations and critique of human rights
- Psychological understanding of human rights principles and application in practice in different fields: psychological services for older adults, people with learning disabilities, mental health, children etc.

# An example

## Level 2

- Role of psychologists in perpetrating human rights violations and abuses
- Understanding of impact of human rights violations on individuals, families, communities and society
- Application of human rights principles and approach in clinical psychology practice: psychological assessment, interventions, clinical decision-making, service design and development and preventing abuses of human rights as psychologists, research
- Role of clinical psychologists in ensuring right to health, right to rehabilitation, right to justice and reparation and in prevention activities
- Limitations and pitfalls

# An example

## Level 3:

- Developing skills in critiquing and influencing policy using a human rights framework *and* a psychological lens
- Understanding the role of civil society and other actors in influencing human rights implementation
- Role of psychologists in primary prevention – using human rights framework and mechanisms, including engaging in expert witness reports, strategic litigation, treaty body monitoring mechanisms etc.
- Limitations and pitfalls

# An example

## Level 4:

- Optional field placements (6-12 months):
- Understanding what is a human rights-based approach to clinical practice and developing relevant skills e.g. with torture survivors, survivors of gender-based violence, war etc.
- Contributing to human rights and psychology research in the field – skills in human rights research
- Learning how to influence policy as psychologists and how to support the implementation of human rights
- Understanding the functions of human rights mechanisms and UN treaty bodies etc.

# Practical challenges

- Context: social context, educational context, institutional context...
- Creating a human rights culture in education and clinical practice
- Taking everyone along on the journey: professional bodies, colleagues and students
- Engaging trainees/students and clients/service users
- Formal assessment and examination
- In health services: training senior staff – training of trainers
- Ensuring CPD



# Conceptual challenges

- Understanding human rights in relation to other prevailing and related concepts of equality, social justice, ethics
- Not forgetting context, morality and culture....
- Understanding human rights and psychology - from a critical perspective
- Defining competencies

# Competencies

- Critical understanding the relationship between human rights and psychology
- Understanding of the limitations of human rights and critique dominant discourses of human rights
- Understanding of the international, regional and domestic legal framework for human rights and implementation
- Understanding of the role of international courts, tribunals and UN mechanisms and civil society
- Ability to critique the role of psychologists in perpetrating or supporting human rights violations
- Understanding and applying a human rights-based approach to evaluating and conducting research

# Competencies

- Skills in assessing and formulating the impact of human rights violations on psychological health
- Skills in a range of interventions working with survivors of human rights violations, using a human rights-based approach
- Skills in applying a human rights-based approach to psychological service design and delivery
- Understanding of how psychologists can support prevention activities (domestically and internationally) to promote human rights; to ensure the implementation of human rights; and to ensure access to redress and rehabilitation as a form of reparation

**The ultimate question ... and so what?!**

# Goals of human rights education for psychologists

To foster:

1. Psychologists as socially responsible human beings: get our own house in order as a discipline ...
2. Psychologists not as bystanders: but activists striving to address the root causes of suffering *and* the impact
3. Psychologists as human rights defenders: promoting and enabling access to justice, redress and rehabilitation
4. Human rights practice as routine in psychological practice, research, service design and delivery