

Towards a Human Rights Culture in Social Work Education

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Abstract

A human rights perspective must be embedded in the institutions, organisations or agencies where social work students find themselves. This paper will focus on one particular strategy that could be helpful to the process of solidifying a commitment to human rights for our students. Using a pedagogical tool from a school of social work in the USA originally developed to combat the social injustice of racism, the example transcends the academic institution and offers a solid link in connecting human rights, social justice and social work. Using the construct of critical realism, we argue that, for social work programmes to take steps towards an explicit commitment to human rights, not only must human rights be infused throughout the curriculum, but educators must provide opportunities for making more overt the links between human rights principles, social justice and social work. By addressing behaviours, tendencies and attitudes, students then acquire not only the skills and deeper understanding, but they internalise the motivation and commitment to broaden their human rights frame. In the process of developing a more firm commitment to human rights, we must not be limited to the walls of the academy, but rather extend beyond to our field agencies, organisations and communities.

Keywords: Human rights, social justice, anti-racism, pedagogy, critical realism

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Introduction

Many scholars have argued that social work is a profession whose values are largely aligned with human rights (NASW, 2008; IFSW, 2012). Defining how the concept of human rights is perceived by the profession of social work—a

profession that has identified itself with social justice since its inception—is complex.

This paper illustrates how the use of a pedagogical tool, originally created as a means to take action against racism, when partnered with an emphasis on particular human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 10 December 1948, 217 A (III), www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html) and the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 21 December 1965, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 660, p. 195, www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3940.html), could stimulate the creation of a human rights culture in schools of social work. The teaching tool, which is an anti-racism project and grounded in critical realism, goes beyond the tangible measurement of an individual's contribution to equity or inequity, a standard generally found in a social justice framework (Reichert, 2011), to include advocating against unseen elements created by structural forces. It offers an alternative perspective that we as social work educators could take in addressing the explicit and implicit curriculum necessary to teach human rights content and to create an understanding of social work's role in establishing and maintaining human rights. It allows for the potential to establish a national action plan to combat racial discrimination as recommended in the concluding observations on the USA report adopted at the 85th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in August 2014.

First, we discuss anti-racism and its relationship to human rights and social justice both having as one of their core tenets the elimination of racial discrimination, followed by an explanation of the anti-racism project, a pedagogical tool that can be used to develop a commitment to promoting human rights within the social work profession. Finally, we will review some of relevant aspects of critical realism that are embedded in the project.

This is a particularly relevant as the USA attempts to address structural dimensions of racism that have occurred with the use of excessive force by police. Also, Trayvon Martin's mother's August testimony in Geneva at the US review illustrates international attention to US police actions as a human rights concern. Having a commitment to human rights requires that everyone is provided the opportunity to learn about, explore and practise the core principles of human rights as outlined in the UDHR (Wronka, 2007). Human rights instil specific imperatives that advocate for the right of all individuals to have a 'minimally decent life' (Meckled-Garcia, 2011, p. 4). This is primarily achieved through the five core notions of human rights: human dignity; non-discrimination; civil and political rights; economic, social and cultural rights; and solidarity rights (Wronka, 2007). Similarly, a social justice framework implies working from a set of values and principles which have historically emphasised equity, accountability and responsibility. While the two used in tandem are complimentary and have some common principles that overlap, they are distinct.

Advocacy can occur within the context of any of the core principles of human rights. For example, anti-racism is a fundamental tenet of social justice and shares common principles with non-discrimination, one of the five core notions of human rights (Wronka, 2007). Therefore, emphasising social work's role in enabling and ensuring human rights can assist with the profession's obligations to enable equity and responsibility held within its social justice framework. This can be accomplished by providing a standard that extends beyond individual agency and responsibility through the inclusion of a universal standard of decency. In other words, when used together, social justice and human rights provide a robust moral compass that is inclusive of both the equity and equality of justice and overall belief that all persons have the right to that which can provide them at the very least with a minimal life standard (Meckled-Garcia, 2011).

While social workers embrace a commitment to both human rights and to social justice, frequently this connection is not made explicit. In the USA, the social work profession is deeply rooted in a tradition of charity and casework (Woods and Hollis, 2000), with an initial emphasis on 'doing for' and 'meeting needs' of individuals. As the tenets of the profession unfolded, the impact of structural and systemic forces and the interplay of these factors with individual development expanded our understanding of vulnerability and marginalisation, and contributed to some of the current discussions of micro and macro systems, oppression and power (Burghardt, 2011). Lundy (2011) notes, though, that we continue to lack critical analysis that brings together personal and interpersonal theory with themes related to 'oppression, power, and diversity' (p. xxvi). The profession has struggled to shed its paternalistic gaze on vulnerable populations and their place in the fight for human rights because of the ways that we have navigated our foundations in charity, volunteerism, empowerment and self-determination.

Occupying itself primarily with civil and political rights, social work has long considered constitutional and legal issues to be within the realm of social justice and therefore relevant to the profession. The understanding that certain economic, cultural and social rights can ensure certain fundamental freedoms and standards of living are concepts that exist within a human rights framework and are not as well known in social work (Reichert, 2007, 2011). Certainly, provision of social welfare (i.e. access to housing, supplemental aid), preservation of culture (i.e. advocating for non-discrimination based on cultural or religious practises) and mental health services, very familiar roles in social work, fall under the purview of economic, cultural and social rights. However, in the USA, these services are largely framed as entitlements rather than as human rights. What remains clear is that social work's long-standing commitment to social justice advocacy is indeed a vital part of a human rights focus, and one that must be enhanced in eyes of some scholars and academics (Reisch, 2011; Reichert, 2007; Wronka, 2007).

Social work education is becoming more and more aligned with multi-perspectivity (see Hartner, 2008). Holding myriad perspectives not only

implies having a variety of viewpoints; it means every point of view affects another. Through reflexive process, new perspectives are created and new consciousness is formed. In order for social work's commitment to human rights to become firmly established, though, pathways must be created between and among all levels of an institution and individuals' consciousness; a commitment to human rights exists when a group of individuals addresses human rights on all levels but most importantly on the structural level. With these ideas in mind, we move to a discussion of human rights and anti-racism in social work.

Human rights and anti-racism

Within the USA, anti-racism efforts began within a human rights framework. During the early phases of the civil rights movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lobbied the United Nations (UN) to take action on issues of past slavery, Jim Crow laws and other acts of racism in the USA. The movement itself was firmly grounded in the principles of human rights and even used human rights language. However, the US government at the time, being much more interested in symbolic equality, successfully blocked the efforts of the movement by inserting a clause in the Covenant on Human Rights (see [Anderson, 2003](#)), allowing federalised states to ignore the treaty. Later, as a result of Cold War tactics, by the mid-1950s, most human rights language was dropped in the efforts to successfully mobilise civil rights. There was a missed opportunity for racism and discrimination to be placed within the context of overall human rights—economic and cultural—not just within the confines of political or civil rights ([Anderson, 2003](#)).

The International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) demonstrates many important levels of the human right to be free from discrimination. Its main effort is the prevention of discrimination on the basis of racial/ethnic origin. Its significance lies in how it addresses the links between political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights and racial/ethnic discrimination. ICERD confronts discrimination that is perpetrated by the state as well as by individuals and institutions. Article 1 of ICERD very clearly defines racial discrimination and includes the various ways 'race' has been socially constructed. Although the USA ratified ICERD in 1994, it did so with some reservations. Not only does the treaty expect nation states to monitor judiciary equity, but also to monitor institutional policies and practises that may support or perpetuate racial discrimination. One of the most notable articles in ICERD is Article 7, in that it requires states to adopt 'immediate and effective measures' to address any form of racial discrimination, but particularly in 'the fields of teaching, education, culture, and information' (ICERD, Article 7). The two causes of racial discrimination that are outlined by ICERD are colonialism, which include segregation and

unequal treatment, and the doctrine of racial superiority, are expected to be remedied without delay (Banton, 1996). As advocates of social justice and human rights, this places social work educators squarely in the position of having to educate students and future social workers around anti-racist behaviours and advocacy. It also requires that we develop

through appropriate education programmes, training in respect for human rights, tolerance and friendship among racial or ethnic groups, as well as sensitisation to intercultural relations, for law enforcement officials: police personnel, persons working in the system of justice, prison institutions, psychiatric establishments, social and medical services, *etc.* (ICERD, Para. 5.b).

Social workers are present in all of these contexts.

As the field of social work continues to enhance its international perspective and works towards preparing students to work in a variety of countries, not just of origin, it is imperative that they learn a common language. This affords them the needed competencies to work in coalition with other social workers from different national and cultural backgrounds. UN treaties can be used as possible leverage that can be levied against governmental regimes that belie civil and political rights owed to its citizens. In the case of the USA, where few conventions have been ratified, social workers, although not legally bound to enact the articles under each convention, can still utilise them as guiding principles.

At the 85th session of the CERD, concluding observations on the US report were adopted (2014). One recommendation suggests that the state party adopt a national action plan to combat structural racial discrimination, and to ensure that school curricula, textbooks and teaching materials be informed by and address human rights themes and seek to promote understanding among racial and ethnic minority groups.

Recently, in the USA, there have been more concerted efforts to infuse human rights throughout social work curricula (Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2007, 2011) and, as a result, there is a call for ways to evaluate and/or measure student outcomes (McPherson and Abell, 2012). Similarly to measuring other constructs such as cultural competence (Ponterotto *et al.*, 2002), prejudice or discrimination (Correll *et al.*, 2010), some of the instruments that attempt to measure human rights engagement (Crowson, 2004; McPherson and Abell, 2012) and exposure in social work education focus on the individual as the unit of measurement. Frequently, schools of social work seek to instil in the classroom particular values inherent to the profession, such as human rights, social justice and anti-racism (Steen and Mathiesen, 2005), only to find an absence of adherence to these values in field placements. For instance, many students whose education is more focused on the micro level have difficulty truly comprehending the relevance of human rights in their work and, by default, cannot translate a human rights frame into practice. Similarly, macro students often have the dilemma of being placed in organisations or institutions which do not contextualise the important work

they do within a human rights framework. What follows is an example of a project that seeks to help social work students to bridge human rights and social justice, using anti-racism as the central tenet.

The anti-racism project

Recognising that most interventions geared towards anti-racism occurred on either the individual or micro levels, Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW), located in the north-eastern USA, developed an intervention for the macro systemic level (Donner and Miller, 2006). In 1994, the faculty voted to have an anti-racism focus centrally located in the curriculum and adopted an anti-racism mission statement (now known as an anti-racism commitment) to support this initiative. With this programmatic shift comes continued analysis of every facet of the programme: racial and ethnic representation of the staff, faculty and student body; diversity of field placements; support for students of colour on campus and in the field; and increased infusion of material on racial and ethnic minorities throughout the curriculum (Basham *et al.*, 1997). One notable addition to the curriculum was the implementation of a series of anti-racism field assignments (Basham *et al.*, 2001) that every student completes as a requirement for graduation.

In the students' first year, they learn and refine the art of assessment, using specific tools (see Minors, 1996) to gauge 'the ways in which an agency does or does not proactively account for race and racism in its policies and programs' (Basham *et al.*, 2001, p. 148). This type of assessment ensures the integration of an important systemic frame for both micro and macro elements of their clients and agency settings. Since the anti-racism project originally was not conceptualised within the context of human rights per se, direct discussion of ICERD and other human rights instruments has not played a large role in the formal required curriculum. Admittedly, addition of such material, though, would greatly augment the students' capacity to identify this important work with social work's commitment to human rights.

In the second year, students conceptualise, propose and implement anti-racism projects in their field agencies. With each phase of the project, students carry out the tenets of case and structural advocacy. After the implementation phase, students submit a report to their faculty adviser and to the school that details the entire scope of the project, the process of implementation, their reflections and reactions, and the reactions of participants.

Helping social work students understand how the self is situated is critical in the development of reflexivity (Miehls and Moffatt, 2000) and represents an important step in moving towards both a higher level of internalisation of social justice principles and a more explicit commitment to human rights. Throughout the curriculum, students examine their social identities and the accompanying relationships to power and privilege. Students generally interact with multiple players at the field agency during the planning phase

of the project. To this end, the anti-racism project seeks to 'have students focus an eye on themselves as they also focus an eye institutionally' (Donner *et al.*, 2004, p. 150).

Having the anti-racism project as a required assignment along with the required 'Racism in the United States' foundation course immerses the students in the anti-racism culture that SCSSW has developed. In attempting to make more explicit a commitment to human rights, having other course offerings and assignments aligned specifically with human rights, the UDHR and ICERD, and using human rights language would be a great advantage to help students understand the overlaps in social work and human rights.

Through exploring their own social location, examining their biases, world-views, understanding of culture, privilege, power and oppression, students learn about racism on both individual and systemic levels (Miller and Garran, 2008) with this project. There are several other benefits to having students engage in this assignment:

- (1) Students learn to complete an agency assessment and how to conceptualise, arrange and implement a project at the organisational level, contributing to heightened awareness of both the seen and unseen.
- (2) Students go through a process of consciousness raising as they learn about things that are not tangible, not seen (Houston, 2001), thus reinforcing that the journey of learning about culture, values, power and privilege is not always a quantifiable endeavour (Boyle and Springer, 2001; Wahler, 2012).
- (3) This project prompts the field agency to think in terms of human agency as they examine service delivery and the way they educate students through the lens of anti-racism. Field instructors are trained with this project in mind, representing an important convergence of coursework and field education.

Every student's experience and evaluation of the project are different. It greatly depends on where the student is in the development of his/her critical consciousness and where the agency is in their progress towards becoming an anti-racism institution (Minors, 1996). Most students leave empowered and inspired to continue their anti-racism activism. The assistance and encouragement they receive through collaborating with agency staff, their supervisors, advisers and professors offer them a sense of camaraderie in working towards change. However, there are some students who encounter challenges and disappointments from any of the above-named collaborators. Students process these experiences with their field adviser as a part of the ongoing learning and ongoing identity development as an agent of social change.

The following brief examples illustrate how these skills are created and enhanced. A student was placed in a secondary school in a low-income section of an urban city centre that has a high percentage of people of colour living far below the national poverty line. She was struck by the high rates of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes she heard about through

interactions with students at this school. She observed children eating crisps and soda for breakfast and eating just as poorly at lunch, if at all. She learned from students and staff alike that the area was a food desert (Walker *et al.*, 2010). Developing this critical consciousness allowed her to be aware that the residents' lack of access to fresh, affordable and non-processed foods was the result, at least in part, of the unseen structural forces of systemic racism. With the support of her supervisor, the Parent Teacher Organisation and various local merchants, she worked to help create a large organic community garden near school grounds that was maintained by students and their families. Themes related to nutrition, discrimination, advocacy and supporting local economies were infused throughout the secondary school's curricular and co-curricular activities.

Another student was placed at a community mental health centre and established a bimonthly discussion group focused on issues of race, racism and discrimination in clinical practice. Every two months, he selected a journal article about clinical practise and race, distributed it to interested agency staff members and facilitated a discussion group. This intervention raised the critical consciousness of the entire staff and allowed them to share important reflections, experiences and dialogue around issues of race, racism, power and privilege, which in turn led to enhanced services for clients and more openness and vulnerability amongst staff with each other.

As illustrated by both projects presented here, it is important to help students become aware of the unseen mechanisms that promote inequity and oppression through existing social structures. Moreover, producing a viable plan to interrupt these mechanisms, and framing these inequities using human rights language, aids in his/her ongoing sense of competence and commitment to transformational social action and to human rights.

One could argue that there is an a priori commitment to human rights within the social work profession. Its values and principles are congruent with the rights framed by the UDHR. The influence of early social workers on human rights is indisputable (Healy, 2008), just as is contemporary social work's adherence to the standard principles of human rights. This being true, the issue becomes one of understanding what is needed and/or what is already present that helps to create an ethos around human rights in social work. It goes without saying that human rights principles and documents must be a part of the required curriculum just as anti-racism theories were a part of the course of study we referenced above.

Implementing human rights education and creating a commitment to human rights in social work come with some challenges. For instance, human rights principles are based largely on Western democratic ideals which carry their own set of values and assumptions. The tension between cultural relativism and universalism is perhaps one of the greatest ongoing challenges to understanding how human rights are to be conceptualised and implemented (Reichert, 2007). Reichert (2007) calls for us to analyse 'the historical background, relevant democratic factors, and contemporary human rights standards of a

particular policy or practice' (p. 11) in order to find some balance between universalism and cultural relativism. This can be a complex task considering the myriad types of historical oppression that has influenced how nation states have conceptualised their own understanding of human rights.

Many theories used in social work have a postmodern constructivist bent (Payne, 1997; Smith and White, 1997), which extends a great deal of appreciation to subjectivity. Understanding the existence of subjectivity is important to social workers, as the profession's main *raison d'être* is to assist people in the development of their own empowerment and well-being as well as to promote social change. Critical realism advances the understanding of the interplay between human agency and 'the enabling and constraining effects of social structure' (Houston, 2010, p. 75). It is imperative that social work pay attention to both the well-being of an individual as well as to the social forces that exist which together create a person's reality. Part of the profession's role is to raise awareness to this two-pronged analysis of the social world.

Critical realism suggests that 'consciousness brings about change' (Bhaskar, 2013, p. 219) which makes consciousness raising a critical foundation for the profession's identity development. It enables individuals to make distinct choices informed by both 'seen' and 'unseen' forces, about what is or is not important to them. One way to accomplish all of this is by associating social work practice and human rights beyond the typical measurable advocacy of seen behaviours (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2009). When all of social work, both theory and practice, both micro and macro, begins to be more intentionally associated with human rights, what emerges is a strong, more explicit commitment to human rights.

Critical realism

Understanding systemic change and being able to impart that pedagogically is crucial. The theory of critical realism, which stems from philosophy and was further developed by sociology, can be a helpful tool in understanding the interface between person and environment, including the social forces that surround us (Houston, 2001). Critical realism posits that 'the world is composed not only of events, states of affairs, experiences, impressions and discourses, but also of underlying structures, powers, and tendencies that exist, whether or not detected or known through experience and/or discourse' (Patomaki and Wight, 2000, p. 44). This theory helps to understand the world by examining the interplay between a person's choices, meanings, understandings and motivations and enduring patterns, social rules and norms' (Houston, 2010). Using this theory, it is possible to understand how changes introduced to the social context have an effect on things such as programme effectiveness or an institution's overall vision.

Rather than relegating all experiences and interactions as a result of intersecting subjectivities, critical realism argues that 'structure' or social dimensions

themselves have a role in developing social meaning (Houston, 2001). It posits that there is a stratified world where several domains of the social life represent various levels of reality. Using this understanding of the social world is a notable asset to furthering human rights and social work practice. Critical realism enables social workers to recognise how individual agency within the context of a larger social structure can result in resilience or be the result of mediating social factors that are present for some but not for all. When determining how best to advocate for clients, this theory offers another level on which interventions can be implemented.

This theory is also appropriate for social work because there is an understanding that the science that deals with society is not, and should not be, value-free. As Houston (2001) purports, 'the role of critical realism is not only to uncover psychological and structural mechanisms, but to challenge their existence where they lead to human oppression' (p. 851).

Critical realism, which helps social work educators understand the importance of addressing both the seen and unseen elements of injustice that exist in various domains of reality, can help in the construction of social work students' commitment to human rights. According to Houston (2010), the domains of the person, situated activity, institution, culture and politics/economy, are supported by 'generative' mechanisms that maintain social order, social relations and social meaning (p. 79). Just as in the development of any congruent set of values, establishing a commitment to human rights requires mechanisms that promote certain practices, traditions, norms and guidelines on all levels of interaction: individual, systemic and cultural. Together, enhancing the role of human agency as well as recognising the underlying social structures that impact people's lives (Houston, 2001, p. 849), these two elements help social workers to understand and create interventions that are socially just. It helps social workers recognise the multiple levels that are complicit in the obstruction of human rights. Critical realism recognises these various stratified domains and underscores their importance in understanding the mechanisms that make something work. It is imperative to take into consideration the tangible and intangible, seen and unseen elements of social structures that exist that make this human rights framework necessary.

The seen and the unseen

Social work educators may recognise the 'seen' mechanisms as behaviours, skills, competencies that largely come into play when advocating an individual or case level. The 'unseen' mechanisms can be explained as attitudes, values and tendencies that tend to be encapsulated in the policies and practices of an institution. Critical realism recognises both the seen and unseen elements as important and influential in the creation of any set of values and norms, and offers a means by which they can be negotiated. The interplay between the seen and the unseen which exist in the various domains along

with human agency that shapes, reproduces and transforms structures (Houston, 2010) through the process of reflexive action is what comprises transformational social action or emancipatory realism. The examples offered through the anti-racism project models social action, which could constitute a basis for a national action plan against discrimination. When reflexive action occurs and underlying mechanisms are exposed, an authentic commitment to transformational social action that enhances human dignity by dismantling oppressive forces begins to emerge. This type of progress, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It is also understood, as Reichert (2011) states, that individuals by themselves are not always able to overcome systems that discriminate or create inequity, but a human rights framework can assist social workers in creating interventions that keep structural forces in mind. Critical realism also offers a perspective on human agency that is seldom presented in theories that attempt to describe the systemic causes of human suffering. In fact, Houston (2001) purports that 'Bhaskar does not conceive of the person as a mere automaton who is at the mercy of these mechanisms; rather, the person can actively transform his or her social world and is, in turn, transformed by it' (p. 851). Similarly, when an institutional commitment is added to the process, it strengthens the capacity of the individuals to perceive the multiple levels of power and privilege. The anti-racism project seeks to address these multiple levels.

Human rights and social work education

At the bachelor's and master's levels, social work education has as one of its goals to 'ensure and enhance the quality of social work education for a professional practise that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social and economic justice' (CSWE, 2008). Programmes across the country (USA) conceptualise and operationalise these goals in multiple ways. With the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008) as a frame, students are taught the core values and ethical principles of the profession, which emphasise human worth and dignity.

While few would argue that the Code does indeed offer a set of standards by which to operate, it is not entirely clear whether and how social work educators, both in the classroom and in the field, make connections for students between the Code and human rights. For instance, when exposing students to the ethical principles of the Code, the values of service as well as social justice are often operationalised within a case advocacy (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2009) framework, making the target of a social worker's advocacy the individual. This kind of advocacy exists largely in the seen world, since it deals primarily with people's individual social circumstances, needs and rights. Structural advocacy, however, is generally enacted through an agency's services or policies or national-level bodies (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2009) responsible for delivering justice, mostly operating on the level of the unseen world. A human rights perspective, though, advocates for holding the

nation state accountable and responsible for delivering the same justice and equality to all persons, utilising treaties as leverage for social change. These treaties become 'global scripts' (Goodman and Jinks, 2004, p. 652) which aid in the investment and implementation of a human rights framework. The more value a nation state places on their status within a global setting, the more likely they will seek to institutionalise a model formulated within a human rights framework (Goodman and Jinks, 2004). From a human rights perspective, dignity is aligned with individual rights, freedom and justice, which cover a broad range of entitlements.

While it is indisputable that individuals make up institutions and create policy, interventions made at the systemic level offer a different level of impact than those made on an individual level. Addressing policies, practices and/or cultural norms within an institution or system provides a wider reach of social justice and human rights, both in the realm of seen inequity as well as where the injustice is covert or unseen. Strategies that involve systemic-level change can be created and implemented by social work students, supervised by faculty as evidenced by the examples given.

Discussion

Enhancing social work's commitment to human rights requires that both students and instructors have an equal part in its content and process construction. Creating and implementing a project is a powerful form of learning for students. By using this method, social work can work to ensure that human rights and social justice are more fully addressed not only through strategies that exist outside of the introjected ethos, but at the individual, classroom, departmental/institutional levels, and in field education.

At the level of the individual, attention must be paid to how the basic tenets of human rights are implicitly and explicitly relayed and respected in the classroom. Applying some of the basic human rights principles to their experience in the classroom can bring forth greater understanding, particularly in the form of self-reflection, where students examine privilege, social identity, worldviews and biases. Furthermore, teaching the concepts of the UDHR, ICERD and other human rights documents in conjunction with content on social justice would encourage students to consider these entities in concert with one another rather than seeing them as distinctly different from one another.

Supporting a human rights commitment at the departmental or institutional level can be more challenging. Instruments that measure an individual's competency stop short of being able to capture the culture of an institution. How then are we to understand the breadth to which an institution is conceptualising and operationalising a true commitment to human rights? As noted earlier, by adopting a strong position against racism, SCSSW offers a strong example of implementation and integration of institutional change. With the

addition of instruction around ICERD, the school would 're-contextualise' an important institutional commitment about a critical human rights concern.

At the level of field education, it is difficult to determine just how explicitly the links are made between practicum and human rights. Agencies vary from one another in terms of stated mission, configurations of power, training opportunities, services offered and populations served. Clearly, field agencies strive to uphold the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* in their training of bachelor's and master's of social work students. However, because field experiences differ so markedly on so many fronts, schools of social work often have little control over whether, and how, the tenets of the Code are translated into a human rights framework. An institution is better equipped to impart the 'seen' as well as 'unseen' elements of human rights to its students when it accomplishes the task of embedding a human rights commitment on all levels of an educational institution. For instance, in-depth content about ICERD could be located in both the field supervisor training and students' anti-racism courses to introduce both groups to the key human rights concepts that will help them to conceptualise their work within both a social justice and human rights frame. In so doing, students awareness of elements of the unseen (Houston, 2001) could be heightened, helping them to identify critical ways that structural inequities profoundly impact individual, community and organisational well-being.

Houston (2001) writes that 'surface competencies are of little assistance to social workers when they encounter trauma, loss, broken attachments, suicidal intent, adolescent pathos, impoverished social networks and atrophying communities' (p. 853). Examining how an individual can be measured to be human rights-oriented is a good step forward in understanding what makes a social worker more of a human rights activist. However, experience has taught us that human rights also needs to be examined and addressed on the systemic, unseen level. In this way, we move closer to exhibiting a commitment to human rights that is inclusive of both the systemic and the individual perspectives. Doing this allows for organisations or institutions to begin transitioning from their commitment to human rights to building a culture of human rights.

Conclusion

Human rights has long been a part of the social work profession and social work practice. Some educators propose that a difference be acknowledged between the social workers' task of helping clients to meet their various needs versus advocating for their various rights (Deweese and Roche, 2001). The clients' needs, with which social workers most often work, tend to be closely linked to and certainly affect the fulfilment of human rights. Certainly, the confluence of right and need are not always clearly aligned. For example, a social worker's function as the duty bearer of a state which prohibits

corporal punishment of children can easily come into direct conflict with what a rights-holders-client sees as a his/her cultural right to discipline their child.

Newdom and Sachs (2011) state that ‘true dialogue . . . implies a sharing of power’ (p. 18) or investing in the authenticity of subject-to-subject communication. In order for social work to be invested in the explicit commitment to human rights that is not object–subject constructed, each must be immersed in a culture that honours and at times may even privilege client knowledge and sovereignty over professional competence (Garran and Werkmeister Rozas, 2013). The right to self-determination is one of social work’s most cherished values. Not only does it serve as a faithful aide-memoire that helps to avoid the trap of paternalism, but self-determination also gives social workers an opportunity to enter into a more authentic dialogue with their clients (Werkmeister Rozas, 2004, 2012). Creating and maintaining a commitment to human rights involve a parallel process borne between social work instructors, field personnel and students.

This paper has identified an area of social work education that continues to need attention and creativity in order to make more manifest to students the importance of holding a human rights frame in conceptualising and implementing their practice. It is imperative that social work educators make links between the social justice mission of the profession and human rights. Using the lens of critical realism to illustrate the importance of identifying human agency within the context of the social structures, the anti-racism project was presented. The two examples offered illustrate how students have the opportunity to engage in a national action plan to combat structural racial discrimination.

In the continuing process of globalisation, social work students and their clients will be exposed increasingly more to different countries and cultures and their attempt at bestowing or restricting civil, political, economic and cultural rights and entitlements of people from various social groups. Schools of social work can embed into their curricula an understanding of what human dignity looks like and what it means to provide people with opportunities to obtain and maintain a quality of life that reflects such dignity. Embracing a firm, explicit commitment to human rights among social work students, educators and administrators means altering our curricula to include not only the language, principles and tenets of human rights, but also the applied practice of implementing such ideas into the field where students are practising with clients.

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