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The Convergence of Social Work and Human Rights

Analysing the Historical and Ethical Foundations of Allied Disciplines

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Social work and human rights are related yet distinct disciplines. Recent scholarship has emphasised their mutual importance; however, the foundations of each discipline have as yet remained relatively unexplored. This paper investigates both social work and human rights for areas of overlap and convergence. Specific points of convergence identified include their shared historical context, congruence between their ethical and value positions, and their shared purpose and role in society. This paper concludes with implications for further integrating human rights into social work, the relevance of human rights to social work practice, and implications for social work education.

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INTRODUCTION

Human rights permeate the daily lives of people in every society. Its themes have been linked to political science, law, and social work. Since its establishment, social work has highlighted human rights issues through humanitarian activities with individuals, groups, and community activities in both institutional and voluntary work. Human rights issues are connected to the defence of disadvantaged groups such as the poor, the disabled, and those vulnerable to violence such as women, children and the elderly. Accordingly, social workers are likely to engage in human rights work in the fields of social and human services, health care, and law and justice jurisdictions.

Human rights pioneers agreed that the purpose of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was for protecting and safeguarding of human dignity, not to bring charges or convictions. This is a clear and fundamental point of convergence between the human rights discipline's humanitarian approach and the social work profession's contribution to the welfare of communities. Further, human rights are necessary to safe-guard and maintain a healthy human life, free from prejudice and persecution. Irrespective of the type of human rights, be they political or economic, the prevention of violations and protection of these essential basic rights needs to be taken seriously.

Indeed, there is growing attention to human rights within the social work profession. However, there remains a significant gap in the literature that leaves human rights disconnected from the consciousness and practice of many social workers. This paper seeks to strengthen the relationship of human rights and social work by examining several domains to assess the relationship between the disciplines, including the historical context, the ethical and value foundations and the purpose of both fields. Through a comparative analysis of the historical development, guiding principles, animating values, and key texts, common linkages between human rights and social work will be identified and presented. This paper concludes with implications for social work practice and education to take lead on human rights. This inquiry into the commonalities between social work and human rights will strengthen their relationship and provide a nuanced appreciation for the context of emerging rights-based approaches in social work.

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

Social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession (UN, 1994, p. 3).

Historical Context

The emergence of the social work profession from charitable and philanthropic activities to alleviate human suffering in the late 1880s was shaped by the industrial revolution and resulting urban concentration of poverty, social disruptions, injustice and oppression, and the failure of policies to address these problems. From this context social work emerged out of charity and service to humanity. These original concerns also contributed to the emergence of human rights. The roots of social work include the broad fields of 'social policy' and 'social welfare', which also gave rise to human rights, further establishing a historical convergence.

The advocacy of peace and its preservation has been a vital area supported by the social work profession since the 1930s. In one particular event, as many as 75 social work professionals met and signed a document to prevent war in the United States. Their document stipulates that social workers and lawyers are advocates of lasting peace. Additionally, the document expresses legitimate human rights concerns such as the right to freedom of expression and freedom of publication, among others (Social Work Today, 1940). During its delegate conference in 1947, the American Association of Social Workers (AASW) proposed a platform of civil rights in social work: “All social workers should have as a major concern, those broad human rights and civil liberties that are the birthright of every individual” (AASW, 1947: 53).

Professional associations also worked to prevent racial discrimination. The International Federation of Social Workers, (IFSW) formally supported anti-discrimination on the basis of race in South Africa. For this humanitarian purpose, the IFSW suspended the membership of South Africa in 1970, and then eliminated its membership conclusively in 1976. This was due to the dominant rise of racist political groups at the time. In addition, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) played an official role against racial discrimination in South Africa. The IASSW imposed conditions on the schools of social work in South Africa for violations of the rights of black South Africans (Healy, 2008a).

The history of social work is well documented with regard to the rights of children from its first years of recognising the status and rights of children when professional efforts were undertaken to protect children from violence, abuse, neglect and labour exploitation. Such efforts had an evident impact with the emergence of organisations, government agencies, legislation and services in many nations around the world. The efforts of the social work profession had a particular impact in the development and signing of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its applications in many countries in the world (Healy, 2008a). In another example, social workers in Jamaica coordinated government and non-government activities, which strengthened the rights of the child through the documentation of policies, with campaigns, popular direction and guidance, as well as develop and provide care and assistance services to the needy children (Healy, 2008a).

The history field of social work scholarship also confirms the link between social work and human rights. The first social work article with ‘human rights’ in its title was published in 1948, in one of the oldest

social work periodicals. The article addressed the efforts of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to adopt a Convention on Human Rights (*The Survey*, 1948). The term ‘rights’ first emerged in a lecture delivered in 1948 in one of the schools of social work in Brazil. The lecturer highlighted that social workers should consider the rights and duties of individuals (Junqueira, 1948). After a year and a half of adopting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and also during the Paris conference, a key-speaker (Donald Howard) stated two articles (21 and 25) would have a major impact on people’s achieving stability and prosperity (Howard, 1950). At the same conference, another speaker also emphasised human relationships, and the importance of the UDHR as a guide to further serve humanity (Billimoria, 1950).

In 1988, the IFSW established a Commission for Human Rights to defend the oppressed, including social workers. The committee participated directly in East Timor, where they defended social workers who were subjected to violence and abuse in the delivery of humanitarian services. The committee also worked to protect professional social workers in the United States, South Africa, Malaysia, Guatemala, and Columbia. The presence of the IFSW in Switzerland has provided an opportunity for closer ties with the United Nations (UN) in Geneva. For example, Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol, IFSW secretary general during 1975–1992, remained an active representative to the UN in Geneva.

Since the start of the 21st century, there have been outspoken claims among social workers asserting that social work is a human rights profession (Solas, 2008; Healy, 2008a). This trend has continued as social workers apply the human rights lens to a variety of social issues affecting people’s welfare. Rights-based approaches have been articulated in social work literature, in response to problems such as violence and reconciliation (Androff, 2010), human trafficking (Androff, 2011) and immigration (Androff, 2012). Recent social work texts emphasise the relationship between human rights and social services (Healy and Link, 2012; Wronka, 1998, 2008; Ife, 2008; Mapp, 2008; Healy, 2008b; Reichert, 2003; 2006; 2007). The IFSW and NASW have issued statements such as *Human Rights and Social Work – A Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession* (IFSW, 1994), *Social Work and the Rights of the Child* (IFSW, 2002), *Standards in Social Work Practice Meeting Human Rights* (IFSW, 2010a), *Human Rights Manual* (IFSW, 2010b) and the *International Policy on Human Rights* (NASW, 2012).

Ethics and Values

The 2008 International Conference of Social Work marked the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the UN in 1948. Although all rights in the UDHR are indivisible and interdependent, Healy (2008a) noted that social work has been involved in all three generations of human rights. These are represented in the eight major international conventions which have elucidated and expanded upon the rights contained in the UDHR. These include the 1966 International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 1966 International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the 1969 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 1984 Convention Against Torture (CAT), the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW) and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Together, these international conventions provide the basis for the human rights principles of participation, accountability, non-discrimination, transparency, peace, freedom, and self-determination, all of which are social work values.

Specific articles in the UDHR relate to social work's ethical mandate. For example, articles 22 to 27 highlight social, economic and cultural rights. Moreover articles 22 and 25 discuss the importance of an individual's social and economic rights to meet their social welfare needs and access to social services. Article 22 emphasises the right of every member of the community to have access to social security, in addition to being able to maintain dignity and attain their full human development. Article 25 contains the right to an adequate standard of living so as to maintain health, social protection and social welfare.

The social work code of ethics issued by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) contains six basic values and principles, which are: (1) human service, (2) social justice, (3) dignity and worth of the person, (4) importance of human relationships, (5) integrity, and (6) competence. The social work code of ethics promotes anti-discrimination, self-determination, and human dignity. The final two values, integrity and competence, hold social workers accountable to high professional practice standards. The language of the ethical code aligns with the ideals and principles adopted by human rights agendas.

The following table presents the results of an analysis of both human rights and social work core texts: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the NASW Code of Ethics (2008). This analysis links specific social work ethical principles to the UDHR's individual articles (UN, 2013). Each of the 30 articles that comprise the UDHR was analysed for its association with social work ethical principles, and is listed below in Table 1. This table makes explicit the connections in the ethical foundations between the fields of human rights and social work, and identifies points of convergence between the fields' ethics and values.

Table 1: Ethical Connections between Human Rights and Social Work

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person Principle 4: Importance of human relationships	Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruelty, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 6: Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 8: Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 11: (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence. (2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 12: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 13: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state. (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 14: (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. (2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the UN.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 15: (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.
Principle 4: Importance of human relationships	Article 16: (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. (3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 17: (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others. (2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.
Principle 3: Dignity and worth of the person	Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 19: Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.
Principle 1: Human service	Article 20: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Principle 1: Human service	Article 21: (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country. (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.
Principle 1: Human service Principle 2: Social justice	Article 22: Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realisation, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 23: (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.
Principle 2: Social justice	Article 24: Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<p>Principle 1: Human service</p> <p>Principle 2: Social justice</p>	<p>Article 25: (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.</p>
<p>Principle 1: Human service</p> <p>Principle 2: Social justice</p>	<p>Article 26: (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the UN for the maintenance of peace. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.</p>
<p>Principle 4: Importance of human relationships</p>	<p>Article 27: (1) Everyone has the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. (2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.</p>
<p>Principle 2: Social justice</p>	<p>Article 28: Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised.</p>

Social Work Code of Ethics	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<p>Principle 4: Importance of human relationships</p>	<p>Article 29: (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible. (2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society. (3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the UN.</p>
<p>Principle 5: Integrity</p>	<p>Article 30: Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.</p>

This analysis, encapsulated in the above table, reveals that the second social work ethical principle, social justice, is the most relevant ethical value to the UDHR as it is related to as many as 14 articles. While 10 articles pertain to the value of dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships can fit with four articles, and five articles dealing with human service. This analysis finds that all thirty articles are compatible and in alignment with the fundamental values and principles promoted by the social work profession. Also, human rights at all levels and in all declarations do not conflict with social work ethics. The profession exists within premises of the declarations of human rights.

Purpose and Role in Society

The disciplines of social work and human rights share similar purposes and goals. The Preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics states “the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 1996: 1). Social work is committed to: a) working toward a more just society, b) addressing people’s needs, and c) protecting vulnerable groups. On the other side, the official human

rights movement is concerned with developing policies, legislations, and procedures to protect human rights. Human rights purpose and roles in society can be found in the framework of human rights declarations and conventions. The common role and function of social work and human rights are clearly visible. Social work is the only profession imbued with social justice as a core value and concern. Human rights also encompass social justice in the protection of basic life-sustaining human needs (NASW, 2012).

Social work has formally acknowledged human rights as a professional priority. In 2008 the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) announced the special significance of human rights to social work and introduced advancing human rights to social work curriculum as a core competency (CSWE, 2008). In their ethical documents, both the IFSW and IASSW list the seven international conventions of human rights as especially pertaining to social work and its practices (IFSW and IASSW, 2012). NASW declared the natural alliance between social work and human rights (NASW, 2012). The UN has defined social work as an essential profession for promoting and advocating human rights issues. Furthermore, the UN Centre for Human Rights published a manual on human rights and social work.

The human rights goals of overcoming oppression and promoting the fulfilment of human needs and human development is akin to the goal of social work (NASW, 2012). The UN Centre for Human Rights states that “more than many professions, social work educators and practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for human rights” (UN, 1994: 5). Human rights priorities such as preventing and combatting gender inequality and violence; discrimination and social exclusion; protecting the rights of women, children, ethnic and cultural minority groups, immigrants and refugees, older people, disabled individuals; and preventing war and genocide are social justice concerns of social workers.

The discipline of human rights is not a profession per se, and does not have practice specialists. Therefore, the priority of practising human rights is an important social work role. Social workers, more than any other professionals, know the basic rules of work such as the indivisibility of rights, the definition of human rights standards, as well as the complicated issues of humanitarian needs. Moreover, social work has a mission to enact policies to protect the fundamental rights of individuals, groups, and the society as a whole. The person-in-environment perspective across practice levels, enable social workers to advocate for people’s human rights to

health care, education, adequate food, shelter, employment and well-being (NASW, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice. Rights corresponding to human needs have to be upheld and fostered and they embody the justification and motivation for social work action. Advocacy of such rights must therefore be an integral part of social work (UN, 1994 : 5).

This analysis confirms the strong involvement of social work with human rights, emerging over time. Indeed, social work has the precession of adopting human rights and principles even by the UDHR. The analysis of the history of social work and human rights finds a strong correlation during certain years (1970–1979), while a stronger link presented during specific periods imposed by private global events (1945–1980) (Healy, 2008a). The alignment of specific UDHR articles and social work ethical values further explicate the common foundation of shared goals across both disciplines.

Integrating the Disciplines

This analysis also reveals several arguments for better integration between the two disciplines. Social work's adoption of human rights issues and human rights' emphasis of social work practice may have positive implications. This would include contributing to the stability and welfare of individuals, families, and communities, the enhancement of allied theoretical and practical applications, increased legitimacy through the adoption of shared values and language, increased advocacy for social justice, and complementary institutions and communities of scholars, advocates, and defenders. Further analysis is required to ensure careful coordination between the two disciplines, and to identify potential limitations of this approach to be mitigated.

Relevance to Practice

This analysis of the allied disciplines finds that social work practice is relevant to human rights. Social work practice is generally classified as micro practice (individuals and families), or practice at the macro level (communities and societies). All levels of social work practice concern the human rights of individuals. Human rights issues of poverty, oppression, injustice, and violence, also fall within social work practice fields. As

stated by the IFSW, “human rights are at the heart of social work” (IFSW, 2003: 4). Healy (2008a) confirms that social workers are front-line human rights workers in securing individual and community rights.

Macro practice, especially community organising, has been linked to human rights (Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2003). Community organising focuses on community issues and needs, overcoming problems and promoting social justice among individuals, groups, families and communities. Community organisations go beyond these purposes in achieving therapeutic goals through professional approaches and interventions at the level of the entire society. Macro social work practice is also concerned with the way society is organised from a developmental perspective where the community, its members and institutions are stakeholders. Thus, macro practice and community organisation promotes and protects human rights.

Implications for Education

Social work educators realise the importance of the social worker’s role in the promotion of human rights and the development of its applications in real life human situations. Contemporary social work educators have placed human rights on the agenda of social work education (Healy, 2008a; Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2011; 2001; Witkin, 1998). However some have called for greater attention to human rights in social work curricula and syllabi to better prepare practitioners to promote and protect human rights (Dominelli, 2007: 21). Others have developed tools for measuring human rights engagement and exposure in social work (McPherson and Abell, 2012), based on a concern that “if social work students are not educated about our professional commitments to human rights, how will they learn to identify as human rights workers?” (McPherson and Abell, 2012: 2).

To prioritise human rights in global social work education, a recent initiative was undertaken by social work scholars from five countries to establish an ‘Institute for Human Rights Studies’ within the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The mission of the institute is to organise and deliver a short series of professional training and professional development opportunities for social work educators, administrators and researchers aiming to teach, discuss and exchange knowledge about the practical ways of adapting human rights principles into social work curriculum.

What needs to be reiterated with social work and human rights is that they are complementary and entwined approaches. Social work has

typically focused on ‘need’ while human rights deal more exclusively with ‘rights’. However, they do in fact share in the advocacy of the whole individual; the individual’s needs and rights are interrelated concepts. Both needs and rights support and seek decent living conditions for all individuals, to achieve justice for groups, and to disseminate peace within communities and across the globe.

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