

Human Rights and Social Work Codes of Ethics: An International Analysis

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Abstract

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was designed to articulate values, guide behavior and protect the basic rights that are inherent to all human beings. The aim of this research is to identify ways that the international social work community explicitly reflects the ideals of human rights in its codes of ethics. The social work codes of ethics from 20 nations were examined for explicit reference to “human rights.” Fifteen (75%) codes explicitly referred to human rights. Five codes of ethics did not refer explicitly to “human rights” anywhere in the document. Language is a powerful tool in social activism. The authors discuss recommendations for future action.

Globalization, human rights, and value-based, decision-making are central tenets of the social work profession. The recent death of Nelson Mandela is a stark reminder that the social work profession has a deep commitment to human rights and the social work values that characterize the profession. In September 1948, the Commission on Human Rights drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly officially adopted the Declaration (<http://www.un.org>). The United Nations articulated a universal definition of human rights to be embraced by all nations. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) states:

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Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible (<http://www.ohchr.org>).

Professions such as medicine, law, nursing, and social work articulate the common values, principles, and standards of conduct of the profession in documents referred to as a code of ethics. As early as 1915, Abraham Flexner challenged the status of social work as a profession. One criticism noted by Flexner was social work's lack of a value base or "professional spirit." The social work community began conversations about guidelines for professional behavior shortly afterwards. Reamer (1987) credits Mary Richmond as having drafted an early social work code of ethics in the 1920s. Despite Flexner's early challenge, the first code of ethical behavior for social workers did not appear until 1960 when the American edition of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics was approved on October 13, 1960⁴. Based on "humanitarian and democratic ideals," the Code articulates the basic values of the profession of social work and defines standards of professional behaviors. In 1994 the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) introduced ethical standards for social workers (Congress & McAuliffe, 2006).

Given that both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and social work codes of ethics are designed to articulate values and guide behavior, the researchers were interested in exploring consistencies and inconsistencies between these documents. Thus, the purpose of this study is to review the IFSW's Statement of Ethical Principles and codes of ethics that are currently adopted by associations of social work across the world and examine their congruence with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The aim of the analysis is to identify ways that the international social work community explicitly reflects the ideals of human rights.

Literature Review

A brief review of the literature pertaining to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, social work values, and social work codes of ethics is provided below.

⁴Revisions were made in 1967 and 1979. Modifications to the Code were made in the 1990s and the current edition of the NASW Code of Ethics was approved in 2008.

Human Rights

Following atrocities uncovered during World War II, leaders from around the globe were motivated to prevent future crimes against humanity. The Charter of the United Nations was signed in 1945 and became the foundation for the international organization. The United Nations formed a Commission on Human Rights and a declaration of human rights was drafted. The final draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was presented to and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The UDHR addresses the fundamental rights of all humans in its preamble:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people, Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law, Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations, Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge

(<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Introduction.aspx>)

In addition to the preamble, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes 30 Articles that articulate three generations of human rights.

- i. First-generation rights consisting of civil and political rights;
- ii. Second-generation rights, including economic, social, and cultural rights; and
- iii. Third-generation rights are those rights that belong to and require the cooperation of people across the globe, including the right to peace, to a clean environment, to a system of fair trade, etc. (Standards in Social Work Practice Meeting Human Rights, 2010, 8-9)

These human rights include the right to freedom; dignity; life; liberty; recognition before the law; equal protection; presumption of innocence; privacy; asylum from persecution; nationality; marriage and family; freedom of thought, opinion, and expression; peaceful assembly; government participation; work; rest and leisure; adequate standard of living; education; and participation in cultural life (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/history.shtml>).

Human Rights and the Social Work Profession

After a 1928 world conference of social workers held in Paris, an international cooperation of national associations was formed that later became the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) (ifsw.org). The purpose of the International Federation of Social Work is to achieve a socially just world through professional social work. The IFSW is now the worldwide association for professional social workers. It is comprised of 90 member organizations and over 750 social workers (<http://ifsw.org/membership/our-members>). The IFSW has been the most articulate in embracing the principles of human rights as a core component of the social work profession. One of the first mentions of social work as a profession that embraces human rights as a core value came in 1968 during a presentation given by M.S. Gore, a former director of the Tata School of Social Sciences in India at the Conference on Social Welfare in Helsinki, Finland (as cited in Staub-Bernisconi, 2012). Gore argued that there was a need for a worldwide common denominator for all social workers that would provide common standards and direction. Gore believed that the UDHR could provide this focus.

In 1988, 40 years after the UDHR was adopted by the United Nations, the IFSW formally articulated the connection between social work and human rights in its definition of social work. In 2000, the IFSW stated that, "social workers respect the basic human rights of individuals and groups as expressed in the UDHR and other international conventions derived from the Declaration"

(<http://ifsw.org/policies/human-rights-policy/>). In 2004, the IFSW defined social work as a profession that “promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work” (IFSW, 2004, pp. 5-7).

In a more recent policy statement, the IFSW maintains: “The social work profession, through historical and empirical evidence, is convinced that the achievement of human rights for all people is a fundamental prerequisite for a caring world and the survival of the human race.... The social work profession accepts its share of responsibility for working to oppose and eliminate all violations of human rights” (IFSW, 2012).

Although the international community of social workers explicitly acknowledges the strong link between the UDHR and the core principles of social work, the authors wondered if social workers from around the world use the UDHR as a guideline to reflect their commitment to human rights. Healy (2007) states, “At the most basic level, human rights are those rights that belong to all just because we are human” (p.13). Social work codes of ethics are designed to provide the standards for ethical practice within a context of shared values. How is the commitment to human rights reflected in social work code of ethics?

Social Work Codes of Ethics

A code of ethics is a document that articulates the mission, values, and responsibilities of a community of professionals and posits ethical principles that guide decision-making and professional behavior. Codes of ethics guide the behavior of such professions as law, medicine, nursing, counseling, and social work. Codes of ethics are seen as the first tangible commitment to being ethical (Wood & Rimmer, 2003). Congress (2013) identifies four dimensions typically associated with a social work code of ethics: (1) offering advice or guidance in addressing ethical issues; (2) protecting consumers from incompetent practice; (3) providing opportunities for social workers to self-govern their professional behavior; and (4) delineating standards for ethical practice.

Social Work Code of Ethics in the United States

In the United States, the National Association of Social Workers approved the first edition of the Code of Ethics in 1960, to define the social work profession and responsibilities of the social worker. Since then, the Code “evolved from its 1960 format of 14 general statements to its current format that consumes twenty-seven pages of ethical prescriptions” (Morales, Sheafor, & Scott, 2012, p. 130). The last major revision came in 1996 when the NASW Delegate Assembly addressed a wider understanding of ethical issues that included media, publicity, and health care. In 2006, a Social Work Ethics Summit was hosted by the NASW, to examine the relevance of the current code; the group concluded that the Code did not need revision but recommended ethical education for social workers. The last revision to the Code came in 2008, which incorporated sexual orientation, gender identity, and immigration status into non-discrimination standards (<http://socialworkers.org/nasw/ethics/ethicshistory.asp>).

International Codes of Ethics in Social Work

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organization that strives to promote social work through efforts related to social justice, human rights, and social development through international collaboration (<http://ifsw.org/what-we-do/>). The Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and the United Nations Children’s Fund granted the IFSW Special Consultative Status.

The IFSW developed and adopted a set of ethical standards for social workers in 1994. The IFSW posts a number of policies to guide social work practice around the world. These policies address such issues as globalization and the environment, displaced persons, youth, women, refugees, privacy, the eradication of poverty, people with disabilities, peace and social justice, migration, indigenous people, HIV and AIDS, health, rural communities, aging and older adults, genocide, and cross-border reproductive services. An additional IFSW policy statement is the “Statement of Ethical Principles.” The Statement of Ethical Principles includes a preface, a definition of social work, a list of International Conventions, and describes two broad ethical principles. The principles include human rights and human dignity, and social justice. The Statement also addresses professional conduct (IFSW, 2012).

The IFSW website (ifsw.org) lists 22 countries that submitted national codes of ethics to the IFSW.⁵ The IFSW recognizes those nations whose professional ethics and standards of social work practice align with those of the international organization. It is important to note that valuing human rights is a critical component of the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles. According to Congress (2013), "Including a human rights perspective in a Code of Ethics often serves to provide a universal foundation for ethical social work practice around the world" (p.5).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was affirmed in 1948 by the international community as an articulation of global values and standards of behavior. The International Federation of Social Work embraces the principles of the UDHR as does the National Association of Social Work in the United States. Given these endorsements, do social work codes of ethics explicitly reflect the principles of the UDHR?

Methods

A descriptive research design was used to answer the research question: Do the current international social work codes of ethics on the International Federation of Social Work website explicitly reflect adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

Sample

As an international voice for the profession of social work, the IFSW strives "for social justice, human rights, and social development through the promotion of social work, best practice models and the facilitation of international cooperation" (<http://ifsw.org>). As of September 2013, the IFSW had 90 full members. Though members of the IFSW may have statements of ethical practice, only 22 have formalized country-specific codes of ethics of social work accepted by IFSW member organizations and posted on its website.

⁵Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, USA, and United Kingdom

Data were collected over a four-month period (September to December 2013) from member nations of the International Federation of Social Workers who submitted a social work code of ethics to the Federation of International Social Work (<http://ifsw.org>). There were 22 codes of ethics available on-line on the IFSW website. Researchers were unable to locate the Code of Ethics for Luxembourg. A copy of Turkey's Code of Ethics was acquired through IFSW; however, an English translation was not available.

Due to being unable to retrieve Code of Ethics for Luxembourg and Turkey, 20 of the 22 code of ethics available on the IFSW website were used for analysis. Of the 20 codes of ethics, thirteen were available on-line in English (Australia, Canada, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, United States of America, United Kingdom). The IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles was also available in English. The codes of ethics of seven nations were available on-line but required a translation (Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain). Google Translate (<https://translate.google.com>) was used to translate the seven codes of ethics that were unavailable in English. The latest revisions of each country's social work codes of ethics were used. The dates of the latest revisions are located in Table 2 with dates ranging from 1994 to 2012. Three codes of ethics were undated (Japan, South Korea and Ireland). Fourteen of the 20 codes were revised between 2000 and 2012.

All but one nation whose social work code of ethics was reviewed, South Korea, are members of the United Nations (<http://www.un.org/en/members/index.shtml>).

Instrument

A simple data collection instrument (See Table 1) was developed to document information about each code of ethics: title of the code of ethics; date the code was last revised; a yes/no indication of whether the term "human rights" was used in the document; a summary of where and how the term "human rights" was used in the document, if relevant; a yes/no indication whether the code of ethics explicitly refers to the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles; a yes/no indication whether the code of ethics explicitly refers to the UDHR; and reviewer comments. The researchers determined that the words "human" and "rights" must be juxtaposed (side by side) to be interpreted as referring to the concept of "human rights."

The phrase “right of humans” was also considered equivalent to human rights. The words “human needs” were not considered the same as “human rights”; “needs” imply a duty or obligation, where “rights” imply a just claim or title.

Table 1: Code of Ethics Data Collection Instrument

Code of Ethics

1. Country name
 2. Document title
 3. Date of last revision
 4. Does the document include the words “human rights”?
 5. If yes, state where (e.g. preamble, principle or value, etc.)
 6. Does the document specifically refer to the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles?
 7. Does the document specifically refer to the UDHR?
 8. Reviewer comments
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Procedure and Analysis

The countries for analysis were divided among the researchers. Two researchers were assigned to review each country’s code of ethics separately to address inter-rater reliability. Opportunities for member checking were established on several occasions throughout the data collection time period. There was only one area of disagreement between two researchers regarding France’s Code of Ethics, which was resolved by discussion. Inter-rater reliability between the researchers was 95%.

A data matrix was constructed to record information obtained from social work codes of ethics. The level of analysis was the country and the units of analysis were the code of ethics.

Results

To address the research question, a univariate analysis was used to describe whether the code of ethics explicitly addressed “human rights,” referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and/or referred to the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles.

Fifteen (75%) countries whose social work codes of ethics were available on the IFSW website mention the words "human rights": Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, Norway, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles also mentions the term "human rights." The codes of ethics of five nations (25%) do not explicitly refer to "human rights": Ireland, Israel, Singapore, the United States of America, and Italy (See Table 2).

Ten (50%) of the codes of ethics reference the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles in their document: Australia, Canada, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is explicitly mentioned in nine of the codes of ethics (45%): Australia, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, and Spain.

The codes of ethics of seven countries (35%) do not reference either the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: France, Israel, Germany, Italy, Russia, Singapore and the United States of America.

As described, Israel, Ireland, Italy, Singapore, and the United States of America do not mention the words "human rights" in their code of ethics. Of those five, the codes of ethics of three countries, Singapore, Israel, and the United States of America do not mention the words "human rights", do not reference the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles, and do not refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Interestingly, Canada and Australia both reference the NASW Code of Ethics from the United States of America.

The codes of ethics from six countries (30%) mentioned "human rights;" the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles; and the UDHR: Australia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Norway, Portugal, and Spain.

Table 2: Data Matrix

Country	Document Title & Date of Last Revision	Human Rights Mentioned	IFSW Code of Ethics Referenced	UDHR Referenced
English Versions				
IFSW**	Statement of Ethical Principles (2012)	X		
Australia	Australian Association of Social Work (2010)	X	X	X
Canada	Canadian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2005)	X	X	
Finland	Work, Values, Life, Ethics: Ethical Guidelines for Social Welfare Professionals (2007)	X		X
Ireland	Irish Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (n.d)		X	
Israel	Code of Professional Ethics of the Social Workers In Israel (2007)			
Japan	Japanese Association of Social Workers (n.d)	X	X	
Russia	The Ethical Guideline of Social Educator and Social Worker (2003)	X		
Singapore	Singapore Association of Social Workers Code of Professional Ethics (2004)			
South Korea	Korean Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (n.d.)	X	X	
Sweden	Ethics in Social Work: An Ethical Code for Social Work Professionals (2006)	X	X	X
Switzerland	Professional Code of Ethics in Social Work Switzerland (2010)	X		X
USA	National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2006)			
United Kingdom	The Code of Ethics for Social Work: Statement of Principles (2012)	X	X	X
Google Translated				
Denmark	Danish Association of Social Workers' Ethics Manuel (2000)	X		X
France	Code de Déontologie (2002)	X		
Germany	German Professional Association for Social Work (1994)	X		
Italy	Codicedeontologicodell'AssistenteSociale (2002)			
Norway	Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers: Statement of Ethical Principles (1998)	X	X	X
Portugal	Association of Professional Social Work Ethics in Social Service (1994) CodigoDeontologico de La Profesion de Diplomado en Trabajo Social (1999)	X	X	X
Spain		X	X	X
Total		n=15 (75%)	n=10 (50%)	n=9 (45%)

**Not included in analysis

Discussion

The International Federation of Social Work Standards in Social Work Practice Meeting Human Rights clearly and explicitly embraces the principles of human rights and specifically adheres to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Of the 20 social work codes of ethics posted on the IFSW website and reviewed, 15 codes explicitly reflect its commitment of human rights through the use of the term “human rights;” five codes of ethics do not.

Of particular interest are the five nations with codes of ethics that do not explicitly refer to “human rights” in their documents. How can this omission be explained given that the protection of human rights is considered to be fundamental to social work practice? One could argue that upholding human rights is implied in the social work codes of ethics of these five nations. NASW embraced the principles of human rights numerous times throughout its history including a challenge to unlawful imprisonment and torture of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. In a policy statement, NASW proclaims, “human rights and social work are natural allies” (NASW Delegate Assembly, 1999, p. 212). NASW also recognized the 60th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 2008.

The way language is used is critical to social activism, however, Rebecca Solnit (2012), a journalist for the Guardian Comment Network, insists: “Change the language and you’ve begun to change the reality or at least open the status quo to question.” She maintains that the importance of issues such as climate change, poverty, and misogyny have been reframed and relabeled resulting in an obfuscation of greed, lies, and violence. Solnit (2012) states: “Naming is only part of the work; but it a crucial first step... names matter; language matters; truth matters.” The explicit use of the term “human rights” matters to a profession whose commitment to human rights is a central principle.

The researchers are all social workers from the United States and we are especially disturbed by the failure of the NASW Code of Ethics to explicitly address human rights or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The need for the NASW Code of Ethics to highlight the importance of human rights is particularly relevant given the scrutiny that the United States has received over recent human rights violations.

Former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, stated, “the United States is abandoning its role as the global champion of human rights” (Carter, 2012, p.1).

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001, the United States federal and state governments have attempted to justify human right violations in the name of counterterrorism. As discussed, the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay housed more than 150 prisoners and practices such as waterboarding, threats, and intimidation were used to obtain “confessions” (Carter, 2012). These acts of violence are vindicated for the purpose of national security, yet they clearly violate principles set forth in the UDHR such as “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” (<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org>). Economic sanctions and extrajudicial assassinations (i.e. drone strikes) are other examples of how the United States is infringing on international human rights (Lindemann, 2012). With the support of the United States of America’s current political leaders, these international human rights violations are continuing despite challenges to the ways that the United States, a member of the United Nations, fails to uphold basic human rights articulated in the UDHR.

One way that the social work profession could play an important role in the advocacy of human rights is through its codes of ethics. The NASW Code of Ethics in particular, should challenge the current United States foreign policy practices by incorporating the words “human rights” and making explicit reference to the UDHR in the Code. Incorporating the language of human rights into the NASW Code of Ethics could be one response to former President Jimmy Carter’s stance on the United States’ moral authority. As Solnit (2012) shouts in the title of her article: *Words Are the Greatest Weapons for Political Activists.*”

Limitations of Current Study

Readers should consider several limitations to this study. First, seven codes of ethics (35%) were translated using Google Translate, which allows for potential mistranslation or misinterpretation of equivalent country specific terms that may, in fact, denote “human rights.” Such mistranslations can introduce false negatives into the data. Of these seven, however, only Italy’s social work code of ethics was judged to not contain the term “human rights.”

Second, all researchers are social workers from the United States whose primary language is English and who may introduce unintentional bias into the data collection, analysis and interpretation of data. In addition, there was no standardization of dates for codes of ethics written or revised before or after ethical guidelines were adopted by the IFSW in 1994.

Conclusion

Seventy-five percent of the 20 social work codes of ethics explicitly mention "human rights" in their documents. The codes of ethics of five nations do not. Almost one half of the analyzed codes of ethics explicitly reference the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The researchers argue that the social work profession should name its commitment to promoting human rights through the use of the term in formal documents such as a code of ethics. In this way, the profession of social work may fulfill Flexner's (1915) demand that social work have "professional spirit." Further examination of official social work documents, policy statements, and standards of practice are recommended with the purpose of explicitly incorporating the language of social justice and human rights.

If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done is undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything.

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