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EDITORIAL: HUMAN RIGHTS, PRAGMATIC SOLIDARITY, AND BEHAVIOR SCIENCE

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) declares that:

“[D]isregard 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 ...”

Behavior and Social Issues is committed to expanding the possible contributions of behavior science to social justice and human rights, recognizing that justice and rights and their contraries are grounded in human action.

In an increasingly globalized world, human rights abuses remain ubiquitous. The Universal Declaration states, for example, that everyone has a right to “life, liberty, and security of person,” yet battering, child abuse, bullying, human trafficking, detention in contravention of international law and standards, torture and life-threatening poverty among other violations are common—and not only in poorer countries. Collective violence depends on access to weapons (an expanding global industry), and is exacerbated by a rapidly globalizing media industry (Mattaini, 2003). As is becoming increasingly apparent, the governments of the most prosperous nations—all of whom have committed to the Declaration—and corporations based in those societies are deeply involved in some of these violations, and tolerate the others.

Critically, every violation of human rights is a matter of individual or collective behavior, and most are embedded in interlocking cultural practices constituting structural violence (Farmer, 2003). The “five faces of oppression” identified by Iris Marion Young (1990)—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness (actively structured by the powerful), cultural imperialism, and violence are all behavioral phenomena. Behavior and cultural analytic scientists ought to have a great deal to say about how these occur, but none is simple, and depth of critical and contextual analysis is required to understand where the actions that violate human rights originate and how they are maintained. Paul Farmer, Harvard anthropologist, physician, and human rights activist, indicates that, “merely telling the truth, of course, often calls for exhaustive research” (Farmer). Once the facts are known, however, more is needed, for “[t]o subject to

scrutiny the mechanisms which render life painful, even untenable, is not to neutralize them; to bring to light contradictions is not to resolve them” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 944, cited and translated in Farmer, 2003).

As Farmer subsequently asks: “What, then, should be the role of the First World University, of researchers and health care professionals?” (p. 226). From his consideration of this question, the concept of “pragmatic solidarity” emerges:

If solidarity is among the most noble of human sentiments, then surely its more tangible forms are better still. Adding the material dimension to the equation—pragmatic solidarity—responds to the needs expressed by the people and communities who are living, and often dying, on the edge. (Farmer, p. 230).

Solidarity is a willingness to make respectful common cause with the vulnerable, but for Farmer, pragmatic solidarity goes beyond this by contributing through the active exercise of one’s power and privileged status as scientist, scholar and/or practitioner toward ensuring that the rights of the vulnerable are honored, actively *focusing one’s work on relief of suffering* in ways that are consonant with the vision of the vulnerable themselves. Such action goes well beyond either simple service provision or “scholarship about,” either of which can be undertaken from a stance of false generosity to relieve one’s own discomfort, to enhance one’s stature, or for personal advancement. Farmer also calls for exercising a “preferential option for the poor,” focusing primary efforts on those with the most serious needs.

The core question for a behavior scientist from this perspective, paraphrasing Farmer, becomes “How is my work relevant to the suffering of most vulnerable and to the relief of that suffering?” Behavior analytic research and practice has some solid precedents here, but much current work in the field may fail the test of pragmatic solidarity, whether because of area of focus, primary motivation, or lack of genuine attention to the voices of the vulnerable.

Farmer goes on to suggest a “new agenda for health and human rights” (p. 237). The following strategic priorities are adapted from Farmer’s agenda; each suggests critical queries for behavior scientists, whether they are engaged in basic or applied research, or are in professional practice.

1. Make construction of behavior that supports human rights the core of the scientific agenda for behavior and cultural analysis. Human rights include both civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights (primarily affirmative, including food, education, and health care). Important queries related to this priority include:

- What action, by whom, is necessary to construct an environment consistent with any one of these rights? What variables need to be addressed to increase such action, and how are those embedded in larger interlocking matrices of contingencies? (These questions alone establish an enormous research agenda.)
- How can behavior science assist in understanding and confronting those actions and cultural practices that structure oppression?

2. *Make pragmatic solidarity central to the agenda.* Students often come to behavior and cultural analysis with a passion for learning how to “change the world”—and instead are often taught how to “make it” in academic, professional, and scientific circles. Behavior scientists (all once students) find themselves immersed in a matrix of professional contingencies that can be difficult to escape. Critical questions related to this priority include:

- How can the field shift further toward work that actually helps?
- The applied emphasis of behavior analytic (and potentially cultural analytic) science offers power; how can this power be harnessed to make human rights more central to our work?

3. *Assume a broader educational mandate.* It is common in contemporary academic circles to emphasize that scholarship should be disseminated more broadly, and in more accessible ways. Doing so well is still rather rare, and it is not clear that much is known about how to do so. These points suggest the following queries:

- Does behavior and cultural analytic science already have anything that might be more broadly disseminated in ways that may immediately or ultimately address the needs of the most vulnerable?
- What additional mechanisms of dissemination could we develop that might have a reasonable chance of widely affecting behavior in ways that would support human rights?

4. *Achieve independence from governments and bureaucracies.* Those employed in academic and scientific institutions and nongovernmental organizations occupy places of high privilege, and often have more flexibility than others in society to take risks and shape their own agendas.

- To what extent are behavior scientists taking advantage of their privileged status to select areas of work that are most likely to contribute to social justice?
- What supports could be established that could maximize such work?

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- What are the obstacles (cultural and structural) that stand in the way of such work, and how could they be addressed?

5. *Secure more resources for human rights action.* Neoliberal economic policies privilege the maximization of profits and to some extent expansion of civil and political rights over economic, social and cultural rights, and scholarship supporting that agenda is often therefore easier to fund. Nonetheless, enormous resources are present in prosperous countries, and with effort increased amounts might be directed to justice and rights work, particularly if it that work involves scientific praxis grounded in action. Important questions remain, however:

- What are the likely sources of financial support for behavior and cultural analytic science directed toward contributing to human rights and social justice, and what approaches are most likely to evoke contributions to this work?
- Very critically, since human resources are perhaps the most valuable of all, what action could be taken to recruit students and behavior scientists to this work?

One final and humbling query emerges from all of this for each of us: is there more that I could and ought to be doing in my own work to act in pragmatic solidarity with those most in need? Giving Paul Farmer the last word, “Intellectual recognition is only a necessary first step toward pragmatic solidarity, that is, toward taking a stand by the side of those who suffer most from an increasingly hard ‘new world order’” (p. 246).

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