

APA RESOLUTION on APA, Psychology, and Human Rights

FEBRUARY 2021

The report of the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force on Human Rights proposes a definition of human rights in relation to psychology; reviews the relationship between human rights and the concepts that have historically guided APA (e.g., human welfare, public interest, and social justice); proposes an analytical Five Connections framework to assess the connections between psychology and human rights and uses that framework to review APA's recent and ongoing human rights activities; and makes recommendations for organizational mechanisms that can ensure APA's ongoing and visible commitment to human rights. The Five Connection framework is as follows:

- Psychologists possess human rights by virtue of being human as well as specific rights essential to their profession and discipline;
- Psychologists apply their knowledge and methods to the greater realization of human rights;
- Psychologists respect human rights and oppose the misuse of psychological science, practice, and applications and their negative impact on human rights;
- Psychologists advance equal access to the benefits of psychological science and practice; and,
- Psychologists advocate for human rights.

The report concludes that APA has demonstrated an implicit recognition of its human rights obligations throughout its history, but has often acted in piecemeal fashion. Without the clarity or commitment that a fully operationalized theoretical framework would provide, APA has been hampered in its ability to consistently and effectively promote and protect human rights. If APA were to adopt a human rights framework, international human rights instruments and principles such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* would become foundational to strategic planning and would inform all organizational programs and operations. This would enable APA to better support people's ability to participate in civil and political life; protect their freedom from discrimination, repression, and environmental injustice; promote their economic, social, and cultural wellbeing; and work to reduce the suffering caused by individual and systemic violations of human rights. APA would prioritize education, research, and the application of practices to help to achieve these objectives.

WHEREAS APA has for nearly 50 years expressed its strong commitment to human rights, most recently through its 2019 Strategic Plan, which includes the Guiding Principle that APA will "respect and promote human rights" and the Strategic Objective that APA will "foster the advancement of human rights, fairness, diversity, and inclusion" (APA, 2019a);

WHEREAS the 1977 Council of Representatives' Resolution on Human Rights expressed "APA's concern for and dedication to protecting human rights and human dignity in the United States and abroad" (APA, 1977a);

WHEREAS the 1987 Council Resolution on Human Rights declared that "the discipline of psychology, and the academic and professional activities of psychologists, are relevant for securing and maintaining human rights" and that "APA applauds the ongoing efforts of the United Nations (UN) to defend and protect human rights and undertakes to recommend the main UN human rights instruments and documents to the attention of its boards, committees, and membership at large" (APA, 1987);

WHEREAS the Preamble of the 1977 *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (Ethics Code) asserts that "Psychologists respect the dignity and worth of the individual and honor the preservation and protection of fundamental human rights" (APA, 1977b);

WHEREAS the revised Preamble of the 2016 Ethics Code states that "Psychologists respect and protect civil and human rights" (APA, 2016a) and since 2010, the Ethics Code has stated (with emphasis added in *italics*): "If the demands of an organization with which psychologists are affiliated or for whom they are working are in conflict with this Ethics Code, psychologists clarify the nature of the conflict, make known their commitment to the Ethics Code, and take reasonable steps to resolve the conflict consistent with the General Principles and Ethical Standards of the Ethics Code. *Under no circumstances may this standard be used to justify or defend violating human rights*" (APA, 2010a);

WHEREAS APA is an accredited Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) at the UN, affiliated with the Department of Global Communications since 1999 and accorded Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council since 2000 (APA, n.d.a.), where it undertakes many human rights initiatives (APA, 2018);

WHEREAS APA has adopted Council resolutions and conducted related federal advocacy to urge the US government to meet its obligations under international law to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights by ratifying the following UN treaties: the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (APA, 2001a), the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (APA, 2014a), and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (APA, 2015). APA has also engaged in international advocacy supporting the rights of sexual minorities (APA, 2014b), ethnic minority populations (APA, 2017a), and others whose rights are at risk;

WHEREAS APA has further expressed its respect for, and defense of, human rights on many occasions by issuing resolutions relating to the human rights of persons or groups, including those focused on:

- Children (Resolution on Violence Against Children by Governments (APA, 1989));
- Women (Resolution on the Equal Rights Amendment (APA, 1975));
- Ethnic minorities (Resolution on Racism and Racial Discrimination: A Policy Statement in Support of the Goals of the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (APA, 2001b));
- People with disabilities (Resolution on the Americans with Disabilities Act (APA, 2008a));
- Sexual and gender minorities (Resolution on Opposing Discriminatory Legislation and Initiatives Aimed at Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Persons (APA, 2004); Resolution on Transgender and Gender Identity and Gender Expression Non-discrimination (APA, 2008b); Resolution on Sexual Orientation & Marriage (APA, 2010b); Resolution on Marriage Equality for Same-Sex Couples (APA, 2011));
- Older adults (Resolution on Ageism (APA, 2020));
- Low-income people (Resolution on Poverty and Socioeconomic Status (APA, 2000));
- Other marginalized and at-risk groups (Resolution against Genocide (APA, 2008c); Resolution on Human Trafficking in the United States, Especially of Women and Girls (APA, 2017b); Immigration and Refugee Policy Statement (APA, 2019b); Principles for Healthcare Reform (APA, 2007));

WHEREAS APA has submitted over 150 amicus briefs, approximately one-third of which have been to the US Supreme Court, many of which focus on human rights-related issues, for example, the execution of child offenders and persons with intellectual disabilities, the rights of persons with disabilities, the right to refuse medication, and discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (APA, n.d.b.);

WHEREAS APA became a founding member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's Science and Human Rights Coalition in 2009 and launched a webpage on Psychology and Human Rights in 2012 containing basic overviews of human rights, a variety of materials for educators on integrating the teaching of human rights and psychology, and opportunities for psychologists' advocacy to advance human rights (APA, n.d.c.);

WHEREAS APA created a Task Force on Human Rights in 2016 instructed to make "recommendations for organizational mechanisms that can ensure APA's ongoing and visible commitment to human rights" (APA, 2016b);

WHEREAS the APA Task Force reviewed APA's history of engagement with human rights and issued the following conclusions in its 2020 report:

- APA's human rights efforts have often been informed by international standards as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related conventions, protocols, and treaties¹;
- Yet APA's failure to define human rights in relation to psychology has led to a lack of clarity about how to enact its commitment to human rights;
- Furthermore, the lack of foundational human rights knowledge within APA undermines its ability to effectively oppose the misuse of psychological science and practice and any harm done to marginalized populations made vulnerable by societal inequalities as a result of the misuse;
- While APA's research, applied initiatives, and federal advocacy efforts have often been resonant with human rights, they have rarely been informed by an explicit human rights framework;
- Likewise, APA's efforts to promote academic freedom, respond to the persecution of psychologists, or ensure that all people receive the benefits of psychological science and practice have generally been

¹ As shown in the Appendix, these include the core nine human rights treaties and nine optional protocols, the UN human rights declarations on sexual identity and the rights of indigenous peoples, the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, and the standards of international humanitarian law (the laws of war), which are regarded as "human rights law applicable to armed conflict" (Dosweld-Beck & Vit , 1993).

carried out without explicit reference to human rights instruments or principles;

WHEREAS the International Standard on Social Responsibility (International Organization for Standardization, 2010) guides organizations on how to operate in a socially responsible way and identifies human rights as one of the principles of social responsibility;

WHEREAS, while human rights are guaranteed to all in theory, the degree to which they are actualized is dependent upon power and privilege, often denied to those with marginalized identities, such as individuals of diverse age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, or socioeconomic status;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that, in keeping with its strategic plan, APA align its ethics, governance, and programmatic activities with human rights principles and practices as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related conventions, protocols, and treaties, comprising international law protecting civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA adopt the “Five Connections Between Psychology and Human Rights,” stipulated in the Task Force report, as a framework to make explicit connections between human rights and psychology when enacting the mission, goals, and objectives in its strategic plan;

FURTHERMORE, based on the Five Connections framework, APA will:

- Protect psychologists’ human right to ethically and responsibly conduct their science and practice;
- Support the development, production, and dissemination of psychological knowledge and methods that can be applied to the greater realization of human rights;
- Oppose the misuse of psychological science, practice, and applications and their negative impact on human rights;
- Advance equal participation in and access to the benefits of psychological science and practice;
- Advocate for human rights and provide the resources and tools necessary for its members to do so as well;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that by adopting a human rights framework, APA will integrate its longstanding concerns for human welfare, public interest, and social justice within a broader international consensus-building process, which will provide clearer guidance and structure for organizational decision-making, including accountability, on issues related to societal good;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA supports the incorporation of foundational human rights knowledge into the education and training of psychologists at all levels, from high school through postdoctoral training, with particular attention to racism and bias against marginalized populations, as well as to global inequalities;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA encourages the growth and development of human rights research in psychology;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA encourages psychologists to support and advocate for populations at risk of human rights violations, including marginalized populations both domestically and globally;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA prioritizes human rights advocacy and the development of a consistent process to inform public policy and legal decision-making for the protection of human rights;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA demonstrates that respect for human rights is central to psychological ethics;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the APA central office and governance system will ensure centralized coordination to oversee and maintain engagement with human rights at the organizational level;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that APA will continually disseminate and publicize this 2021 Resolution on APA, Psychology, and Human Rights both within the Association (to boards, committees, and the membership at large) and to the wider public.

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APPENDIX

A. THE NINE CORE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS TREATIES AND THEIR OPTIONAL PROTOCOLS

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, 1976)*

First [Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (1966, 1976). This optional protocol establishes a “right of petition” that allows individuals or groups to petition the Human Rights Committee that a nation has violated their civil and political rights. [Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, aiming at the abolition of the death penalty](#) (1989, 1991).

International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966, 1976).

International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965, 1969).*

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979, 1981).

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1999, 2000), establishing a right of petition, and allowing investigation of possible “grave or systematic violations” of the Convention by a nation.

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).*

Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (2002, 2006), allowing independent investigation of a nation’s detention facilities to verify that torture is not occurring.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, 1990);

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000, 2002)*

Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000, 2002)*

[Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure](#) (2011, 2014), establishing a right of petition against a nation for violating the rights of the child.

International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990, 2003).

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006; 2008).

[Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (2006, 2008), allowing a right of petition against states for violating these rights.

International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006, 2010).

B. ADDITIONAL RELEVANT UN STATEMENTS

UN General Assembly:

The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (13 September 2007)*

Joint statement on human rights, sexual orientation, and gender identity (18 December 2008)*

Human Rights Council:

Resolution on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity (17 June, 2011)*

Human Rights, sexual orientation, and gender identity (2 February, 2014)*

Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (15 July, 2016).²

C. CONVENTION ON THE PREVENTION AND PUNISHMENT OF THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE*

D. INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW TREATIES

The four Geneva Conventions, dating in development from 1864 to 1977, these address the treatment of war wounded and prisoners of war, the protection of civilians during conflict and while under enemy occupation*

Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land (1899 and 1925). Also known as the *Hague Conventions*, they prohibit the bombardment of undefended cities and the use of particular weapons such as expanding bullets and poisonous gasses*

Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction (1972), also called the *Biological Weapons Convention*, banning all biological weapons*

Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May Be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects (1980)*

Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction (1993), also called the *Chemical Weapons Convention*, banning all chemical weapons*

Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (1997) also called the *Mine Ban Treaty*, banning all anti-personnel land mines

Convention on Cluster Munitions (2008), banning munitions with multiple warheads or “bomblets”

* Ratified or endorsed by the United States.

Note: The first date following each treaty refers to the date of its adoption by the UN General Assembly, the second to when the required number of nations had ratified it to make the treaty international law. Detailed information on each convention is available on the website of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CoreInstruments.aspx>).

2 The United States was not a member of the Human Rights Council when this resolution was adopted.