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Lisa Schechtman on Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for Policy and Practice by Elisabeth Reichert. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 295pp.

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Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for Policy and Practice by Elisabeth Reichert. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 295 pp.

To the general public, the differences between social work and related mental health professions may be ambiguous, relying only on the examples of case workers for federal and state organizations, such as divisions of child welfare. However, many social workers chose their profession because of its mandate to treat clients in context; that is, to incorporate cultural and societal understanding into all social work activities, and then to apply private concerns to national and international issues. This distinction is the basis for Elisabeth Reichert's exploration of the relationship between the social work profession and human rights. Reichert argues that connections between the social work mandate and the one set by international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are indelible, and that it is necessary for social workers to understand and employ this connection.

The first major section of this work examines the development of and provisions contained in major human rights documents, briefly placing these in the context of a social worker's primary focus, a concept to which she returns in greater detail in the second section of the book. Reichert begins her discussion with a valuable examination of what exactly constitute human rights, using examples such as the Dred Scott case to highlight the role of human rights in American society. She then considers theories of social justice, an operative term for many social workers, asserting that human rights can and should complement the ambiguous and outdated concept of social justice as a social worker's dogma. Social justice, she argues—with ample evidence from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW)—focuses on fairness in concentrating on a client's needs; human rights, on the other hand, incorporate social justice doctrines while expanding a social work practitioner's perspective to include specific universal rights and the policy and practice of governments around the world. Reichert continues with a history of the development of human rights. She covers nearly a century, beginning with a discussion of the *Magna Carta* and Saint Thomas Aquinas and continuing to the post-World-War-II modern human rights regime, touching briefly on the historical role of social workers in human rights. Her brief review provides the basic facts for those who have never studied the subject, and gives a modest survey of the historical preconditions that led to human rights.

In the second major part of Social Work and Human Rights, Reichert narrows her previously broad examination by delving into the major international human rights documents. She explores the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, outlining the major goals of each and then focusing on their substantive articles. While there are certainly many more relevant documents, Reichert emphasizes those that are viewed as most important and applicable to American social workers. Although the catalogue of individual articles from each of these lengthy documents could appear overwhelming, Reichert's application of specific articles to real-world examples adds vital relevance to what might otherwise be a doctrinaire field. Because she has chosen her cases wisely, they are cases with which social workers can easily identify. Finally, in effort to further focus her study, Reichert dedicates two chapters to the world's vulnerable groups. The first examines the rights of women with particular weight given to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the second explores rights specific to children (including a look at the Convention on the Rights of the Child), persons with disabilities including HIV-AIDS, gays and lesbians, older persons, and victims of racism. Because these categories

represent issues that might realistically be addressed in talk therapy or casework, they are quite germane to Reichert's audience and provide the opportunity to consider both social justice and human rights applications to familiar subjects.

In the second section of Social Work and Human Rights, Reichert highlights parallels between the human rights regime and the code of ethics provided by NASW. Beginning with an international perspective, Reichert then links the right to development with other human rights concerns, such as the effects of globalization, self-determination, and social exclusion. Most importantly, though, Reichert provides a brief discussion of cultural relativism, which complements an earlier exploration of universality and indivisibility to raise awareness of this highly controversial human rights debate. Because the social worker's mandate emphasizes both a client's context and advocacy for environmental change, the issue of relativism is vitally important for practitioners.

The last chapter specifically addresses applications of human rights to social work, departing from the background and dogma of the first 200 pages. Here Reichert deals directly with NASW's Policy Statement and Code of Ethics, instructing social workers in how to translate previously established concepts into social work practice. Reichert suggests interventions, such as challenging oppression, empowerment, strengths perspective, and cultural competence, that are included in a social worker's mandate and apply readily to human rights violations experienced by clients. Next, she focuses on a social worker's ethical principles, interpreting them from a human rights perspective. This discussion is perhaps the most valuable in the book and should become required reading for burgeoning social workers, for the Code of Ethics is strongly emphasized in social work education, and its wording directly relates to many of the human rights doctrines discussed earlier in Reichert's work.

As a social work educator, Reichert's work is somewhat narrowly applicable but highly powerful for its intended audience. Its strength lies particularly in case studies employed both in relation to specific articles and as more detailed sidebars. Specifically, Reichert emphasizes perceived human rights violations committed by the United States government, which is appropriate given that her readers are likely to be American practitioners. By challenging the American status quo perspective that human rights abusers are relegated to less-developed states, Reichert links what may seem to be standard policy issues—such as a living wage, universal health care, or capital punishment—both to the NASW Code of Ethics and to the human rights regime. In so doing, she provokes mental health practitioners to think about these important and controversial issues. Reichert's lengthy background discussions of the human rights regime are useful for those who have never before studied such material, or for those whose knowledge is merely cursory. The book itself is largely elementary for those in the human rights field, although the last chapter is highly insightful for advocates who work with social workers and wish to further engage the relationship. The distinction between the mandate of social workers and that of other mental health service providers is stark and important: it is what makes a social worker, and what provides him/her the opportunity to make changes in the wider world. Reichert's work provides practical and easily understood thought processes for social workers to use in emphasizing this connection, and in better fulfilling their mission to advocate for their clients' rights and opportunities.

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