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Debra L. DeLaet on Understanding Human Rights: An Exercise Book by Elisabeth Reichert. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006. 271pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, International human rights, Social work

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Understanding Human Rights: An Exercise Book by Elisabeth Reichert. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006. 271pp.

In Understanding Human Rights: An Exercise Book, Elisabeth Reichert has written a basic introduction to human rights specifically for social workers and faculty who teach in this field. The book is clearly written and has a very practical orientation towards the subject of human rights that will engage many readers. The book is based on two central premises: first, that the study of international human rights needs to be a core part of the education of social work students; second, that a social work approach provides a valuable framework for advancing and protecting basic human rights. In this regard, although the primary audience for this book is social work educators and professionals, the book contains practical insights about working with vulnerable populations that should be of interest to human rights scholars in other academic disciplines.

Understanding Human Rights covers the standard set of topics in most introductory texts on international human rights. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the definition and categorization of human rights. Chapter 2 describes the emergence and evolution of the international human rights regime. In Chapter 3, Reichert explores the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in greater detail, and then examines the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in Chapter 4. Drawing on a social work approach to the topic, Chapter 5 considers human rights concerns as they pertain to vulnerable groups, including women, children, persons with disabilities, and gays and lesbians. Reichert places these concerns in particular contexts as she discusses cultural relativism in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7, Reichert considers the connection between human rights and ethics with a particular focus on codes of ethics for the social work profession. The final chapters of the work are clearly aimed at social work educators and professionals, with Chapter 8 focusing on social work practice and human rights in a national context, while Chapter 9 emphasizes international aspects of social work and human rights.

The structure of each chapter follows the same format. Pertinent human rights concepts and theories are introduced in a very basic manner. Reichert then provides a series of exercises that require students to reflect on human rights concepts or dilemmas that practitioners might face when dealing with real situations in their work. In some cases, what Reichert calls “exercises” are simply discussion questions intended to provoke reflection or brainstorming on human rights issues. In other cases, Reichert provides exercises that can be used to involve students in genuine problem-solving or simulations of human rights dilemmas that social workers might face in the field. These discussion questions and exercises are the most valuable contribution of the book. Both provide students with extensive opportunities think analytically about the material in each chapter, and to consider the ways in which human rights concepts apply to situations social workers might face in their work.

A few examples of these discussion questions and exercises might be instructive. In Chapter 6 (Cultural Relativism), Reichert provides a hypothetical case study involving a Muslim student at a public high school in the United States. The school has banned her from wearing a head scarf to school, and she has approached a social worker at the school for advice because she wants to

wear a head scarf for religious reasons. The exercise asks students to write a report to school officials listing and analyzing the pertinent human rights that apply to this case and then to make recommendations. Chapter 8 (Social Work Practice and Human Rights) provides in-depth profiles of individuals facing various social problems and challenges. For example, one case study describes a family with an unemployed and alcoholic father and a mother with chronic depression living in poverty. The discussion questions urge students to consider the human rights challenges raised by the case, in particular the human rights issues relevant to the question of whether or not to remove the children from the home.

Although the basic introduction to human rights concepts and themes in each chapter will be helpful to new students of human rights, the substantive discussion of human rights throughout the book is not as comprehensive as that found in other introductory texts. Moreover, the substantive content on human rights will not add much to the understanding of advanced students. However, there are a number of interesting and provocative exercises that should be very effective in the classroom.

The audience that will most clearly benefit from this text is social work educators and practitioners. Instructors in this field might also benefit from pairing this text with another more general introduction to international human rights. Regardless of whether *Understanding Human Rights* is used alone or in combination with other works, the discussion questions and exercises are a unique contribution and, because so many of them focus on settings or conflicts that might realistically be faced by social workers, they will be particularly useful for social work educators and professionals. For that same reason, the book will be less beneficial for human rights scholars and practitioners in other fields. Nevertheless, many of the discussion questions and exercises are pertinent to the study and practice of human rights in general. Thus, human rights educators in other fields might find these exercises helpful for their introductory undergraduate courses.

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