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Measuring the Unconscionable

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Measuring the Unconscionable

Abstract

The combination of level-headed scientific approaches and passionate activism seems at first glance an incompatible relationship. For the passionate humanitarian, there is a hesitation in fear of "selling out" to the black and white world of science, that science would somehow take the "human" dimension away from human rights. However, the bigger issue-and opportunity-is the multitude of ways that the partnership between scientific method and human rights can yield possibilities and innovations. As described in Sonia Shah's piece in The Nation , scientists are coming together to lend their unique skills and perspective to the ever-changing global status of human rights. Through those scientific methods, a new and exciting dimension is being explored that will hopefully revolutionize how human rights research is carried out.

Keywords

Human rights, Science, Science and Human Rights Coalition, Advocacy, Conflict of interest

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The combination of level-headed scientific approaches and passionate activism seems at first glance an incompatible relationship. For the passionate humanitarian, there is a hesitation in fear of "selling out" to the black and white world of science, that science would somehow take the "human" dimension away from human rights. However, the bigger issue-and opportunity-is the multitude of ways that the partnership between scientific method and human rights can yield possibilities and innovations. As described in Sonia Shah's piece in *The Nation* , scientists are coming together to lend their unique skills and perspective to the ever-changing global status of human rights. Through those scientific methods, a new and exciting dimension is being explored that will hopefully revolutionize how human rights research is carried out.

As with last month's Roundtable discussion of proportionality, there are so many subjective details that arise in matters of human rights violations and protections. By using scientific method and theory to assess some of these issues, there is increased validity and legitimacy to the claims made by activists and officials. As EarthRights International activist Matthew Smith said in *The Nation* piece, both human rights practitioners and scientists are concerned with "the pursuit of truth." That truth is more accessible through the utilization of concrete measurements, analysis, and production to address when human needs are not being met, and evaluate when they are being violated. Geographers, anthropologists, engineers, and biologists can all lend their unique talents to different areas to collect evidence. That tangible evidence can be used to better help a population in danger, access those in the midst of a complex humanitarian emergency, or simply create structures to better meet the needs of an underserved people. Furthermore, the tangible signs of abuse can be presented to policymakers that will then have concrete basis to act.

One of the most useful tools has been GIS mapping and the utilization of geographers to chart changes in population dispersal. By having a visual of the remains of a village burned by militias, as in the case of Darfur , experts could then better understand the situation on the ground, including damages and movement of refugees. Furthermore, GIS mapping has been used to track down perpetrators of human rights abuses. UCLA geographers Thomas Gillespie and John Agnew recently published an article in the *MIT International Review* taking a cartographic approach to the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Through using satellites, the team managed to narrow possible hiding places down to three plausible locations in Pakistan . While these are sophisticated educated guesses, the lessons learned through this thought exercise could be translated to finding other, less-well funded and hidden human rights violators taking refuge around the globe.

Another powerful use of scientific know-how is forensic investigations of human rights abuses. In the case of Physicians for Human Rights , trained experts document, collect, and provide analysis on evidence that can play a large role in the prosecution of war criminals. Forensics and the work of medical anthropologists have been critical in assessing abuses from Saddam Hussein's reign of terror in Iraq to the Killing Fields in Cambodia and beyond. As the Khmer Rouge genocide trial of Kaing Guek Eav opens in Cambodia , forensic evidence of mass killings and torture is expected to play a large part in the case.

Circumstances around deaths, timelines, volume of traumatic injury, and bones unearthed are irrefutable evidence to the horrors that populations have experienced. Bolstering cases against war criminals with this evidence ultimately allows justice to be served for those who suffered.

The use of science in human rights is not limited to the analysis of the negative, but of the creation of the positive. For instance, Engineers Without Borders (EWB) is a collection of engineers that lend their skills to projects that drastically improve the living conditions of impoverished populations and those who are in a period of recovery from disaster. Addressing issues of clean water delivery, lack of shelter and heat, and educational initiatives are all encompassed in the mission of EWB. Projects have improved the living conditions of thousands, and as chapters spring up around the nation, this successful volunteer opportunity is likely to yield many more positive changes.

The newly formed AAAS Science and Human Rights Program is indicative of a larger movement to marry abstract thinking and concrete tools that can allow for promising advances in the field of human rights. One of the greatest challenges faced in the field of human rights is the "proof" needed to prosecute, negotiate, monitor, delegate, or resolve. In the proverbial toolbox of the human rights practitioner, most tools are of a qualitative, and ultimately, debatable nature. With so many questions to answer in the world of human rights, there needs to be fact-based analysis that leads to measured responses. By using scientific methodology, evidence is given to what is too often dismissed as baseless or subjective. There will still be those who dig their heels in and remain deniers. But the legitimacy that evidence can bring will revolutionize the way the human rights field operates, and give tangible hope to those who feel their cause is lost.

Sarah Stanlick is currently heading a health and human rights project working to alleviate health burdens on the underserved population of Lawrence, MA and as a teaching assistant at Harvard University. She formerly served as Research Associate to Samantha Power at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, and was also affiliated with the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at HKS. She graduated as a Trustee Scholar from Lafayette College and holds a Master's degree in Conflict and Coexistence from Brandeis University.