The Developmental Dialectic of International Human-Rights Advocacy

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This article describes the psychological processes leading to international human-rights advocacy. Based upon a series of focus group interviews with international human-rights advocates, the findings suggest that the developmental processes leading to human-rights advocacy can be described as a dialectic between one’s view of society and one’s self-concept. Self-concept vis-à-vis society then figures prominently as a rationale for taking action, as advocates act to maintain a sense of congruency between self-concept and behavior. The paper outlines the specific self-concept characteristics of advocates, their perspectives of their society, and how the interaction of the two can result in political advocacy for the rights of those outside one’s own group.

KEY WORDS: human rights; advocacy; prosocial behavior

INTRODUCTION

This paper will propose a descriptive framework for the psychological processes leading to human-rights advocacy. Based upon interviews with 39 middle class North American whites engaging in international human-rights advocacy, the description suggests that advocacy behavior is linked to a developmental dialectic between one’s view of society and one’s self-concept. Self-concept vis-à-vis society then figures prominently as a rationale for taking action as advocates work to maintain a sense of congruency between their self-concepts and their behaviors.

Constructing an understanding of one’s social contexts relative to one’s personal identity is a common theme within developmental theory. As individuals come to understand themselves, either tacitly or consciously, relative to their society and larger world, the way they give meaning to this relationship determines the nature of their participation in the world (Berman, 1990). The relationship that
emerges as a result of the self-society interaction can entail acceptance; critique; feeling centrally embedded within dominant societal groups or marginalized from societal privileges and resources.

Regardless of how consciously one reflects upon his or her relationship to society, individual efforts to develop theories about society and its structures are part of the developmental processes which determine political and social participation. Since most people do not actively engage in social change efforts, it would appear that the majority develop relationships to society whereby existing societal values and structures are accepted. This acceptance does not mean that unjust social structures are accepted as good. Social structures could also be perceived as unjust yet still be left unchallenged behaviorally. However, both cases are characterized by passive acceptance. Consequently, acceptance can result in extremes ranging from passive alienation to, in the case of those from a dominant group, the nonreflective assumption of privilege.

However, the advocates interviewed here fit neither of these extremes. They were neither accepting of fundamental societal values and structures nor alienated from the society as a whole. Although they showed themselves unreconciled to many of society’s defining structures and values, they demonstrated high levels of social engagement and involvement in a variety of organizations and institutions. Rather than embrace societal values and structures, advocates chose to confront behaviorally the tensions and contradictions they felt between self and society. Although not resolved to accept unjust social structures, they were resolved to work within the tensions to affect social change.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Assuming a life-course developmental perspective (Braungart & Braungart, 1990), this project sought to uncover evidence of developmental processes composed of relationships between interpsychic events and sociohistorical contexts. This perspective encourages researchers to look beyond static personality descriptors to explore how personality characteristics interact with perceived social contexts.

Although it considers the social context important, the life-course developmental perspective is distinct from a behavioristic orientation which views behavior as largely an artifact of external circumstances of reinforcement or punishment (Losco, 1986). From a life-course perspective, the researcher’s primary attention is not on the actual circumstances of the interviewee’s social context. Rather, the researcher’s interest lies with the interviewee’s subjective perception of the social context and the interaction of this societal perspective with personality, development, and behavior.
PARTICIPANTS

Since the behavior being investigated was so specific, participant selection was purposeful (Patton, 1990) and nonrandom. For this project, human-rights advocacy was operationalized as acting on behalf of those outside one’s own group (such as provided by nationality or ethnicity) who are suffering injustices.

The four groups of interviewees were all selected from the same international human-rights organization. This organization was chosen because the aim of its members is to act as advocates for the citizens of other nations who are being imprisoned and/or tortured for nonviolent acts of conscience. Examples of such “acts of conscience” are the expression of political or religious beliefs, acts of political protest, or community political organizing. The organization’s bylaws forbid its members from working on behalf of human-rights victims within members’ own countries. Consequently, in all cases the research subjects were working for the rights of those in other nations. In addition, virtually all the subjects were advocating for the rights of people in other ethnic and socioeconomic groups as well.

The organization from which the sample was taken is organized into hundreds of small local groups who meet weekly or monthly. The members’ activities consist largely of writing letters which urge governmental officials in other countries to investigate human-rights abuses committed within their jurisdictions. Typically, the member groups are also involved in fund-raising and educational activities which sensitize others to the state of human rights worldwide.

Among the four groups interviewed for this project, two met on college campuses and were composed of traditional-aged college students. The remaining two groups were community-based and composed predominantly of nonstudents aged 24 to 70 years. There were a total of 39 active participants during the first round of interviews, with some variation during follow-up interviews as some group members were absent or additional ones attended the group meetings on the nights the follow-up interviews were conducted. Among this initial group, the majority were in college or had attended or graduated from college. Virtually all were middle class or, in the case of the college students, had come from middle class backgrounds.

The majority (approximately 80%) were Caucasians, followed in frequency by Latino(a)s (approximately 12%). There was one African-American male, one East Indian male, and one Asian woman. The sex distribution favored females, with 64% of the sample being female.

Using a 6-point Likert-type scale to describe themselves politically (1 indicating “conservative” and 6 indicating “progressive”) the subjects identified themselves as fairly progressive (mean = 5.1, n = 36). In contrast, they described “those who had raised them” as more conservative (mean = 3.1, n = 34).

The initial interviews and follow-up interviews averaged 90 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Data collection and analysis employed phenomenological techniques to discover themes
and the relationships between themes within the data (see Appendix One for a more detailed description of methodologies employed).

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that the interviews contained two dominant themes: (a) intense social critique, that is, a dissatisfaction with the existing societal structures and values and (b) descriptions of self. The interviews constantly moved between observations of society, beliefs about self, and the tensions between the two. Consequently, the findings outline a dialectic between social critique (observations and critical evaluations of their societal/cultural context) and self-concept (observations and beliefs about self).

The dialectic between social critique and self-concept is believed to be constant and the transforming effects reciprocal. That is, although in tension and often antithetical, both self-concept and social perspective were simultaneously affecting each other as advocates attempted to live within the tensions and contradictions between the two. It is out of this dialectic that a felt moral obligation to address oppression emerges, followed by a need to preserve the self-concept by maintaining a sense of integrity between self-concept and personal behavior.

![Diagram](image.png)
The dynamic relationship between perceptions of self and society is constructed as a "dialectic" because the process is not merely the interaction of two immutable and autonomous psychological constructs (perspective of society and self-concept). Rather, the interaction between the individuals' perceptions of society and their perceptions of themselves entails conflict, influence, rejection, and adaptation, but not enduring reconciliation or resolve.

The relationship between self-concept and social perspective is portrayed as a dialectic because it represents two constructs in antithetical, and perhaps conflicting, relationships of tension. In the case of this sample, the tension exists between advocates' self-concepts and their perceptions of society. The data suggest that the resolution of this tension is impossible unless an advocate is willing to view the opposing elements superficially. This would require that the advocate deny the complexity of the psychological and structural conflicts which exist between the self and the complex web of social structures which shape the social context. The advocates interviewed here were unwilling to deny the complexity of their views of society or the tensions created by their perspectives of self, vis-à-vis society. Rather, advocates have chosen to work within this tension and attempt social change.

Advocacy work allowed the interviewees to live within the tension between self and society. Opposition to unjust social structures worked to preserve the self by preserving the distinctiveness between self and society. In other words, advocacy behavior results in the preservation of self-concept by behaviorally reinforcing its distinctiveness from a society perceived as unjust, oppressive, and apathetic.

Constructing the world as a dialectic between self and society revealed to advocates the possibility of social change. "Dialectical thought reveals the power of human activity... as both a product of and force in the shaping of social reality" (Darder, 1991, p. 82). Advocates referred to this revelation as "hope" and embraced a tension between self and society which made clear the possibilities and necessities for change.

In the interviews, feelings of hope were mentioned more often than success as a motivation for advocacy work. Rather than strive for the resolution of self/society tension, which if not successful could result in apathy and impotence, they constructed the world as a web of dialectic relationships.

Living in social contexts defined by process and relationships of tension, advocates recognized that when progress was made to resolve one situation of injustice, a return to a systemic view of society revealed other areas requiring change. The result was a critical social consciousness which compelled these advocates to participate in the dialectic of change rather than accept defeat because complete or permanent resolution of the dialectic tension is unlikely. Advocates were sustained because they focused on the process and possibility rather than resolution.

In the following pages, a discussion of the findings will be presented. Each element of the schematic will be described and supporting data from the interviews
SOCIETAL CRITIQUE

As mentioned above, discontent with the surrounding society figured prominently in advocates’ discussions of their work and themselves relative to both their society and those outside it. The themes of social critique focused on the society’s global ignorance and lack of values appropriate within a world the advocates saw as interdependent.

Critique of Parochialism: Embracing a Global Perspective

Not surprisingly, an awareness of events outside their own country was fundamental to international advocacy behavior. For advocates, global ignorance was a point of contention between themselves and their society. The events which compelled advocates to respond to needs in other countries were the same as those ignored by individuals and the media in their society. One advocate observed that “unfortunately most of this country doesn’t have a world view” while another explained:

I always thought it was really ironic that technology has made it possible for us to literally have simulcast from around the world, but it’s also so easy to change the channel and have thirty minutes of a sitcom which tells you that in the end of the day everything is going to be all right and you can just go on with looking for your great car and choosing your great clothes.

Critique of Isolationism: Embracing a Systems Perspective

Going beyond the awareness of events in other countries, advocates constructed the world as a system, that is, an interdependent whole. As one woman explained, “[I experienced] a dawning awareness that what the United States government does or what we people do here, does have an impact on other countries and that there is an interconnectedness . . . .” In suggesting why people don’t respond to human rights violations, another advocate concluded that “even if they [non-advocates] know something bad is happening in another country, the way that they view it is that it is not happening to them so it’s not as important or maybe there is nothing they can do.” Therefore, they do nothing.

The advocates pointed out that there is a distinction between being aware of events in other countries (simple global awareness) and viewing the world as an interdependent system. The advocates had moved beyond simply being aware of international events; they constructed the world as a system and not as isolated nation-states and cultures.
Critique of Societal Values: Embracing the Primacy of Care for Others and Valued Inclusion

Advocates perceived a disparity between the prosocial values they felt were demanded by an awareness of worldwide human rights conditions and the values they believed were characteristic of their surrounding society. There were two particular value orientations which were flashpoints of societal critique. The first was American society’s disregard for caring as a dominant value. The second was the devaluation of those outside the society.

Primacy of Care for Others: Advocates were concerned that their society did not promote, as one college student put it, “a concern for other people’s welfare and a belief that you can’t go around just trying to serve your own needs without observing the fact that there are a lot of other people who could benefit from your time.” This concern for humanity was manifest in references to selflessness for the sake of others, compassion, and the paramount value of human beings.

Although embracing such values was a self-evident necessity to the advocates, they recognized that such values were not a priority in society as a whole. “A lot of people are very self-involved and I think a lot of that is cultural,” observed one of the college group leaders.

Negative Differentiation: Another criticism focused on the propensity of society to draw lines of demarcation between groups and then place a diminutive value upon other “out” groups. For example, one advocate explained her contention that “... our culture has bred for the last couple of generations, maybe even longer than that, ‘us versus them.’ Us, we’re the good, the Russians are bad, ‘us,’ we’re the strong ones, third-world countries are bad—and that kind of attitude.” Another participant suggested:

If you’ve got an “us” and “them” view then [those in other countries] are somehow dehumanized and made to be somewhat subhuman. . . . Whenever you can do that to another person, no matter who they are or where they are, the potential for abuse exists and will usually kick in at that point.

Advocates believed that values were defining of both a given society and a given person. Out of this belief arose the conflict between the advocates and their society.

And a lot of people say that money is not that important to them and yet they spend all their time doing it. . . . But once you say you’re not somebody who finds it the greatest value, that value that our country stands for, [then you must ask:] “What is your basic value?” “What do you really care about?” . . . And I had to make that decision that I cared about people, and that once I cared about people, I had to decide what’s wrong and what can I do to help that.

This advocate, one of the college group leaders, struggled over the irreconcilable division between the surrounding society’s values and the values which were, for him, self-defining. Rejecting the materialism of his society, he was not only aware
of a discrepancy between societal values and his personal identity, but he was making choices to preserve, and even promote, his distinctiveness.

THE SELF

The Internationalization of Identity

The presence of an internationalization of identity became evident as the advocates spoke of the effect their global awareness had on their understandings of themselves and their life decisions. The advocates were beyond a superficial recognition of the events in other countries. They now engaged in a process whereby life decisions and beliefs were constructed upon a stage of global awareness rather than simply out of parochial interests (Keniston, 1968). Advocates’ attention to the events of other countries expanded the number of persons/groups relevant to their actions and the decision-making concerning their identity. The awareness of injustice in other countries left advocates with the responsibility to consider their life decisions in light of what they knew about the world beyond their immediate social context, in particular the human rights abuses that are committed in other countries. A college student explained:

I could talk to certain people about what’s going on in another country, and torture, and imprisonment, and things like that, and while intellectually they may be swayed to a certain extent . . . unless you feel like you’re really not free [you won’t act]. . . . And I don’t feel completely free when I find out about why people are imprisoned. . . . I also don’t feel like you can really ever talk about justice unless everyone is being served with the same amount of justice. . . . I think justice really is an equal playing field that everyone should be able to live their lives from. A bottom that you can’t sink below as far as what your rights are. When there are people that have sunk below that, for me to make certain decisions about my life and my career without observing that seems ridiculous to me. It’s ignoring the realities of what is going on and you’re not really living in the real world.

It became clear that advocates’ identity processes, and the resultant self-concepts, were shaped by their awareness of human rights abuses among groups other than their own. Their awareness of global events, particularly inequities and injustices, required that they reconcile themselves to a global context and not simply a parochial one.

The internationalization of identity affected the breadth of advocates’ moral communities. Advocacy is a manifestation of a concern for people outside one’s own ethnic or national group. One’s moral community is defined as the group of people to whom one extends justice and concern over well-being. The extent to which someone is willing to act on another person’s behalf indicates the other’s centrality to the agent’s moral community.

It would seem reasonable to conclude that advocates have a particularly broad and inclusive moral community which routinely includes those in other countries, those whom they do not know personally and who are not members of their own
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groups as defined by racial, political, national, or geographical criteria. What’s more, victims of oppression in other countries proved central enough to advocates’ moral communities that advocates have moved beyond superficial concern to committed action. Oliner and Oliner’s research with non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Nazi occupation of Europe revealed that rescuers had higher capacities for empathy, responsibility, and greater capacities for “extensive relationships” than their nonrescuer peers (Oliner & Oliner, 1988, p. 249). They “did not merely restrict . . . [the] sense of responsibility to their families but also extended it to include the larger community” (p. 173).

In exploring the antecedents to moral inclusion, Opotow (1987, 1990) concludes that the utility of one’s relationship with the other and the degree of conflict with the other were significantly related to the scope of one’s moral community. However, Opotow’s findings were not echoed in the interviews analyzed here. In fact, participants would often discount conflict as a valid criterion for treating people differentially. Also, as a criterion for helping, the utility of one’s relationship with victims of oppression was antithetical to the participants’ beliefs that people should never be treated as means toward some end. They frequently asserted that to treat people as means is tantamount to dehumanization.

**Self as Interdependent and Connected**

In addition to seeing themselves in a global context, the advocates described themselves as interdependent and connected with those outside their own group, particularly the oppressed. Interdependence is defined as seeing one’s actions and existence potentially affecting, and being affected by, the lives of others, particularly those in other countries, and involves a way of defining oneself which embraces an interdependent social context, rejecting the notion that one is an exclusively independent, autonomous being.

Closely related, although distinct and more varied in its presentation, was defining oneself as connected to others. This theme included feeling an emotional bond with victims of oppression and/or incorporating others into one’s self-definition.

**Self as Interdependent:** The interviews suggested that the sense of interdependence was not simply a recognition of global systems. Rather, advocates’ awareness of their interdependence was a foundation to self-understanding and, hence, very personal. The advocates moved beyond a superficial, dispassionate recognition that interdependent systems exist. Rather, interdependence was a part of self, not a condition which existed apart from self. This distinction is important because presumably an individual could acknowledge the existence of interdependent economic and political systems without allowing such acknowledgment to affect his or her understanding of self. However, among advocates, the awareness of
interdependent systems is understood at the self-concept level, as one woman illustrated:

Part of [my] identity is definitely being aware that our being does impact others and theirs does ours, ... we [advocates] all realize that our being impacts other people as their's does ours, our existence. ... This type of work creates [an awareness of interdependency] ... but it also comes from [an] original awareness that we are interconnected.

For some, this sense of interdependence is literal and requires that they, as one advocate explained, “always try and live well, and encourage others to live well so that their living causes the least amount of dislodging and harm around them. Because everything makes an impact, everything one person does makes an impact on someone else.” Regardless of whether interdependence is present in every action or just those actions deliberately taken on behalf of others, the sense of interdependence appeared to be a self-defining construct in the lives of advocates. As one described:

If I did nothing? Oh, gosh, I’d probably lose part of myself. I identify very strongly with social action and if I didn’t do it I might as well shrivel up. What is the point of existing for yourself, I don’t think that is why we are here—just for me personally and to forget everybody else—because we are interconnected, I wouldn’t feel very whole.

Self as Connected: Subtly different from the construction of self as interdependent is the notion of self as connected to others. Interdependence is a recognition that one’s actions can potentially affect nonparochials. However, the connected self is different in that it experiences a bond to those outside its own group and/or actually uses affiliations with others to define and understand itself. Sutton (1992) concluded that human rights advocacy was “related to the degree to which volunteers felt they were emotionally close” to the people they were helping, even though they had no personal contact with them (Sutton, 1992, p. 2). Oliner and Oliner’s (1988) research concurred, suggesting that the rescuers of Jews had a greater “capacity for extensive relationships” (p. 248) than their nonrescuer peers. Rescuers felt a sense of attachment and responsibility which extended beyond familial, community, or ethnic group boundaries. The advocates interviewed here gave indication of an extensivity which is self-defining. As one advocate explained:

I can look at my own experience as a middle child of a big family. My sense-of-self has always been in larger community. ... just the sense that there’s always been an extension of me through other people. And I think maybe that as I started to become more educated and learn more about the world, the human rights element was brought into that, it was “How do I relate to the world? Well, as one of a community.”

Aligning with Sutton’s (1992) findings, connection was described by some advocates as a sense of emotional attachment.

At the risk of sounding like a cliche, I think that since we grew up in a really multicultural area like Southern California, ... my best friends when I was growing up were Mexican and Japanese. ... And my parents never fostered in me a sense that they should be treated differently or that we should think of them differently. And so since my friend’s parents came from Mexico and my other friend’s grandparents came from Japan, or Okinawa, and that makes it seem like you are connected to them and their people. And you just sort of extend that to anyone else.
Others articulated connection through its antithesis, isolation.

Maybe I am just a totally isolated organism from everybody else and my life is totally meaningless, [however,] I don’t think so. I have faith that I am not. But it's a faith thing not a really rational thing.

When asked to describe what he meant by the term “faith,” he continues.

It’s something that I want to believe and I do believe because it helps me to function in a way that I should function, the way I would like to function. It’s a fulfilling thing and I sort of go on that assumption because it will fulfill my life, it leads me to what I want to do and what I would like to believe.

Connection was equated with personal meaning, thus highlighting the importance of connection to the life of this advocate.

Yet despite the tremendous importance that connection played in the lives of many advocates, they explained that it was a difficult thing for them to discuss in concrete ways or encourage in others.

I think the connection is the most difficult thing to educate people about because it occurs on an emotional level, and it’s not a matter of teaching people the facts about a situation in Kenya or the U.S. or wherever it happens to be. You can offer people information that increases their awareness but you can’t offer them [something] that increases their sense of connection; that’s more an experiential kind of thing.

These interviews suggested that defining oneself as interdependent and connected provided the rationale for advocates' critique of what they perceived as society’s separatist mentality and disregard for the importance of caring and responding to the needs of others (Bellah et al., 1985). Defining themselves as connected compelled advocates to respond. Once again, this suggests the importance of particular self-concept characteristics, over environmental rewards, to advocacy behavior.

The findings, which suggest a relationship between advocacy and sense-of-self, emerge at a time when Western psychology is reexamining previous assumptions about the nature of the self. In the past, psychology has been dominated by the belief that the process of developing a healthy sense-of-self, and/or identity, was primarily a process of individuation and autonomy.

However, over the last 20 years a number of personality theorists have challenged traditional predilections valuing strict individuation (Miller, 1976; Sampson, 1985, 1988; Gilligan, 1982, 1988) and have developed theories describing the self as embedded in social relationships and affiliations. For example, Noddings (1984), Sampson (1985, 1988), and Jennings (1991) all link a relationally defined self to prosocial behavior. Action emerges “not from separate actors seeking somehow to mesh their behavior together, but rather from thoroughly interdependent actors whose very design for being includes working on behalf of larger interests” (Sampson, 1988, pp. 20–21).

Lykes (1984, 1985) proposed a model of self which, out of a sense of connection and affiliation, was embedded in social relationships and responsive to the needs of others. She asserted that the connected self arises out of interactions
in the socioeconomic (material) world and the need by some to embrace affiliation as a means to survive and transform oppressive social structures. Lykes concluded that those characterized as defining themselves through their connection and interdependence “were significantly more likely than the autonomous individuals to engage in collective activities for social change” (1984, p. 167).

Involvement in activities that focus on the transformation of oppressive structures, in which one acts on a belief in the interdependence of all people or through which one is reinforced in one’s sense of belonging through community, may serve both to concretize an abstract sense of oneself as an “ensemble of social relations” and to provide a place where consciousness and action converge (Lykes, 1989, p. 167).

Self as Similar to, and Identified With, Oppression Victims

Closely tied to a sense of connection, the advocates saw themselves as similar to oppression victims and those in other countries generally. For example, one of the college students explained that although people may be “intellectually” swayed to care about victims of oppression, “unless they feel some sort of contact with people in another part of the world” they will not act. He later described what he meant by “contact.”

Well, just a recognition that people are basically the same. A lot of times I hear from people: “We should look after ourselves.” And I really wonder what they mean by “we” and what they mean by “ourselves” and how America is all that different from any other place, when you’re talking about the people. And for people to live in San Diego and then look across the border twenty miles away and say that those people are different from us is kind of astounding to me. . . . Obviously they have certain blinders on, they are not looking at realities, not looking at people. And that’s what I mean by contact and connections. It’s just a similarity between everyone. You really can’t say that anyone living, no matter how far away in the world they live, that they are all that different from any of us except for their basic living situation and their culture and things like that. But if you look in their eyes you see the same things.

Akin to finding shared characteristics between themselves and oppression victims was identification with the circumstances of those whom advocates were trying to assist. For example, one college woman spoke of her own struggles with sexism. As she reflected upon her frustrations, she explained that her experience “brings me in union with other people with the same problems and stuff . . . sort of like that connection. Or at least you can understand. I think if you understand one problem you can understand another, at least a little bit.”

Another participant related his cultural identity to his identification with oppression victims. “There isn’t a Jew living that can’t feel for human rights because it’s a matter of survival, not a matter of conviction.” He continues by sharing his regret that his “children, who are third-generation American, don’t feel the way that I do. They don’t feel as strongly as I do.” He believed his children are apathetic because their generational distance from the Holocaust has left them unable to identify with the oppressed.
Oliner and Oliner (1988) agree that perceived similarity plays an important role in defining one's moral community. They concluded that non-Jewish rescuers of Jews characteristically emphasized the "likenesses that bind them to others [rather] than the distinctions that separate them" (Oliner & Oliner, 1989, p. 250).

A number of researchers concur that identification, perceived similarity, and empathy are important and may even supersede self-concern and benefit in motivating some to act as advocates (Horstein, 1976; Sutton, 1992; Batson, 1990; Krebs, 1970). In short, an awareness of another's oppression felt at the level of one's own self-definition, through perceived similarity, connection, and identification, may be a more powerful predictor of advocacy behavior than the promise of external reward. Once the work is begun then the social support provided by other advocates helps to maintain the commitment to act congruent with a connected sense of self.

Unique in society

Highlighting again their attempts to understand themselves relative to the surrounding society, the advocates concluded that they are unique in embodying characteristics antithetical to the society around them: "Since obviously most people choose not to do anything, we all must consider ourselves somehow out of step with the norm." Another cited a specific reason for her sense of uniqueness.

What makes us kind of individualistic is [that] the message of the larger society is: "You don't have to care about those things." Their version of individuality is me getting my neat car and my new clothes, but don't care about other people. In thinking that you should care about other people that's kind of an expression of individuality because it's a little bit different than what we're told is our responsibility.

The above is an example of how the critique of societal values, in this case egoistic values, can result in a sense of uniqueness vis-à-vis society. This theme was repeated on multiple occasions within the interviews as advocates demonstrated their inability and unwillingness to deny self. Rather than resign themselves to accept society's values, they embraced their uniqueness. As one woman replied to the suggestion by another advocate that she was out of step with society, "I wouldn't want to be in step."

Moral Obligation/Responsibility and Integrity

As a result of the dialectic between self-concept and their perceptions of society, the advocates experienced a deep sense of moral obligation and responsibility to address the needs of oppression victims. This sense of obligation and responsibility was rooted in self-concept: "By not doing anything like this I would feel empty. . . . this is the person who I am, it's an obligation in a way toward the world." Another advocate explained that "for me it's the right thing. It's what I need to do. . . . This is me."
References to personal identity were common among the interviews. What were missing were indications that moral obligation and responsibility were based on external norms or constraints. In fact, many felt that external forces, particularly other people, negatively judged them for their advocacy work. If they stopped the work it would be self-betrayal which met them, not external sanctions or judgments.

The sense of moral responsibility and obligation was a result of advocates’ critical analysis of who they were relative to societal structures and those in other parts of the world. As one of the college students explained:

I have all these rights and privileges as being a U.S. citizen and being a white middle-class male, yet I believe that everyone should be treated the same way and that I need to do something on behalf of that.

Reflecting upon the privileges given him by virtue of his citizenry, gender, and socioeconomic status (all components of self-concept), he embraces his felt obligation. The interviews demonstrated that advocacy emerged out of the sense of self: “I’d say my concern is pretty much fundamental to my being. My activism is a manifestation of that [my being].” More precisely, advocacy efforts worked to preserve the participants’ sense of self by maintaining a degree of integrity, or congruency, between their behavior and their self-concepts. “I just feel I wouldn’t be the same person if this [work] were taken away from me. . . . I would be an incomplete person.” It appeared that the advocates did not seek external rewards. Rather, they sought to maintain a sense of congruence between action and the notions of self they developed relative to the societal values, structures, and groups which surrounded them.

In fact, even the reward of success was less important than the pursuit of integrity. One of the advocates explained that the ability to affect actual change was not as important as the obligation to respond, to maintain a congruency between self and action. “I just can’t not do it. I can’t sit by the sidelines and think: ‘Well it wouldn’t have done any good anyway.’ I’ve got to at least make the attempt; if it does no good, O.K. fine, but I’ve got to feel that at least I’ve made the attempt.” She demonstrated that advocacy efforts were not predicated on guarantees of efficacy. Rather, the assurance of efficacy was less compelling than the obligation to respond. The interviews revealed that the primary motivation to respond came out of a need to preserve self-concept. This was done by working with other advocates to achieve a level of integrity between behavior and an identity formed out of a conflict with what they perceived as a dehumanizing, parochial society.

**CONCLUSION**

Advocacy behavior emerges out of a sense of disparity, a tension, between self-concept and existing societal values and structures. This sense of tension and disparity developed as advocates attempted to understand themselves relative to their society, the groups who compose it, and the values embodied by it. Growing
tension from attempts at reconciliation resulted in a felt moral obligation to actively oppose oppressive social structures or risk betraying self. The need for this integrity between sense of self and behavior compelled advocates to act and the achievement of integrity sustained both their self-concepts and their commitments.

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APPENDIX ONE

METHODS

Participant Selection

Group selection was done in consultation with the organization’s regional administrator responsible for coordinating volunteer groups within Southern California. The coordinator was asked to identify those groups which were active and consisted of at least five members. After identifying four possible groups for participation, the leaders from each of these groups were contacted and asked to invite their groups to participate in the study. All groups contacted agreed to participate.

Procedures

There were several important criteria for the selection of methods for this project. Since the psychological foundations of human rights advocacy are relatively unexplored, the project was designed to be both exploratory and descriptive. Rather than test for the influence of any number of independent personality measures, the goal was to describe the themes which emerge when human rights advocates describe their work and its role in their lives. It was hoped that these descriptions would offer insights into some of the psychosocial processes leading to human rights advocacy.
The research employed phenomenological research methods. Phenomenological research attempts to “gain entry into the conceptual lives of . . . subjects [Geertz, 1973] in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 34) (emphasis mine). The aim is to discover how these meanings, as related by the subjects themselves, are related to the behaviors under investigation. Phenomenological research is a departure from forms of psychological research which attempt to uncover subjects’ unconscious motivations for behavior. Rather, phenomenological research is primarily interested in subjects’ conscious understandings and rationale for their own actions.

Interviews were used to collect data because interviews allow subjects to describe their perspectives in their own words and offer their own interpretations of their actions. Hence, interviews offer opportunities for exploration which structured surveys may not because most surveys only provide limited response options. Interviews are often used in phenomenological research because they provide subjects with greater influence over the direction and content of the data collection process. As a result, interviews help to focus researcher attention on the topics which subjects think are important and assist the researcher to understand how subjects have interpreted their own actions. In addition, research projects which include follow-up interviews allow subjects to correct erroneous researcher conclusions or misconceptions based upon early statements or interviews.

For all of the above reasons, interviews are useful in phenomenological research because they provide researchers with access to subjects’ perspectives, perspectives which could go beyond the interpretations offered by existing psychological theory. At the same time, it is important to note that phenomenological research methods do not preclude interpreting data from a variety of theoretical perspectives offered by a discipline such as psychology. Phenomenology only requires that a researcher’s interpretations be grounded in, and consistent with, the interpretations of actions made by the subjects themselves.

Focus group interviews were chosen over individual interviews because group interviews provide opportunities to observe group interaction (Morgan, 1988) and enable participants to develop consensual, rather than idiosyncratic, conclusions. During group interviews subjects have time to reflect upon a topic while waiting for others to speak. This may enhance the detail, clarity, and even depth, with which subjects communicate their perspectives, opinions, and insights. Another benefit of group interviews is that subjects can clarify the similarities and dissimilarities between their experiences and the experiences of others in the group, adding to the likelihood of reaching consensual and more readily generalizable conclusions.

The initial interviews began with the question: “What is it about you that leads you to do human rights work?” and then proceeded with the interviewees’ largely directing the content and direction of the interviews. Interviewer questions were limited primarily to questions of clarification and summary/interpretive statements. Subjects were frequently prompted to respond to the input of others and to critique the interpretive summaries made by the interviewer.
Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a “grounded theory” approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 24). In other words, data analysis attempts to identify various themes, and their relationships to one another, which can be derived from interview data.

Following the transcription of the taped interviews, the interview data were coded for thematic content. These thematic codes then became categories and subcategories for analysis. In cases where an interview segment could be coded as appropriate for more than one thematic category, the segment was coded for each category and then cross-referenced. This process was facilitated by the software program entitled The Ethnograph (Seidel et al., 1988) which enabled coding in multiple layers (i.e., embedded codes within codes), cross-reference coding, and searches on codes singularly and in combination with others.

After the initial coding was complete, the data analysis explored the relationships between the various themes as represented by the codes. This process proceeded as follows. The interviews were read and tentative relationships between codes were developed. The existence of these relationships was tested by comparing them against the entire set of data (all four groups). The goal was to look for cases where the existence of a tentative relationship between two or more codes were supported or refuted. If there was support for the existence of the relationship and no contradicting evidence within the data, then the relationship between the codes was tentatively accepted, pending evaluation at future interviews by the research subjects themselves.

The procedure of returning to the subjects as a check of the finding’s accuracy is a uniquely phenomenological technique. Given the goal of phenomenological research to describe how subjects interpret and account for their behaviors, it was imperative that the researcher return to the subjects and ask how accurately the emerging findings reflected their understanding of their own experiences. This technique, called “member checking” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), is perhaps the most straightforward technique for comparing researcher conclusions against interviewees’ subjective understanding of their own psychosocial processes. This procedure allows the researcher to note and correct any discrepancies between his or her interpretive conclusions and the subjects’ perspectives and insights into their behavior.

Over the course of the project, one of the original college groups saw a marked loss of its original members through graduation. It was determined that the group was altered to such a degree that it endangered continuity with the group’s initial interview.

Consequently, follow-up data were gathered from only three of the four original groups. However, to both compensate for a loss of participants and provide some indication of external validity, a fifth group of advocates from the same
organization was approached and asked to review the findings. This fifth group was another community-based group composed of seven advocates ranging in age from approximately 22 to 85 years, 57% of the group were male. All group members were Caucasian. The group was evenly divided between middle-aged adults and retirees with the exception of one college student.

The findings were presented to this fifth group and subjected to their critique. The group confirmed that the findings accurately described their developmental experiences as well. These findings may suggest some degree of external validity of the findings by indicating that they accurately describe the experiences of advocates outside the original sample.

REFERENCES


