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# GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS

BY PHILLIP E. MYERS AND BETH SEWELL

THE ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS WAS NOT ALWAYS A PRIMARY FOCUS FOR PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSOR SAM MCFARLAND. DURING MOST OF HIS COLLEGE YEARS HE WAS NOT CONCERNED WITH THE MISFORTUNES OF OTHER NATIONS AND PEOPLES. IT WASN'T UNTIL HE WAS REQUIRED TO READ WILLIAM SHIRER'S *THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH* THAT HE OPENED HIS EYES TO A NEW WORLD. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY PRODUCED MORE THAN 20 GENOCIDES, ALONG WITH COUNTLESS WAR CRIMES AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY. AS DR. MCFARLAND BECAME INCREASINGLY AWARE OF THESE, HE BECAME MORE COMMITTED TO UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS. FOR THE PAST DOZEN YEARS, HE HAS TAUGHT AN HONORS SEMINAR ON HUMAN RIGHTS EACH FALL.

But it wasn't until recently that he focused on human rights as an issue for psychological research. He wanted to know what made some people care and some people look the other way. He wanted to know what factors control how much they care.

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His chance to find these answers began with his human rights research in order to publish a paper on his findings. With the help of Melissa Mathews, a senior honors student, McFarland found the answers to many of his questions. He said from the beginning it was evident that Mathews, who took his seminar, had the same level of

consciousness about human rights as he did. And with two people who cared that much about an issue, he knew they would find some answers.

"Melissa was great," McFarland said. "She put a tremendous amount of effort into the project and it was very clear that she was as concerned as I was."

Together they surveyed more than 200 people and reviewed the literature

on the psychology of human rights. The research and results led to the paper "Who Cares About Human Rights?" that indicated that human rights attitudes could be divided into three broad attitudes: human rights endorsement, human rights commitment, and human rights restriction. "These dimensions are relatively independent, so that a person



PHOTO BY SHERYL HAGAN-BOOTH

Dr. Sam McFarland

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can have strong human rights attitudes on one dimension but not on another," says McFarland.

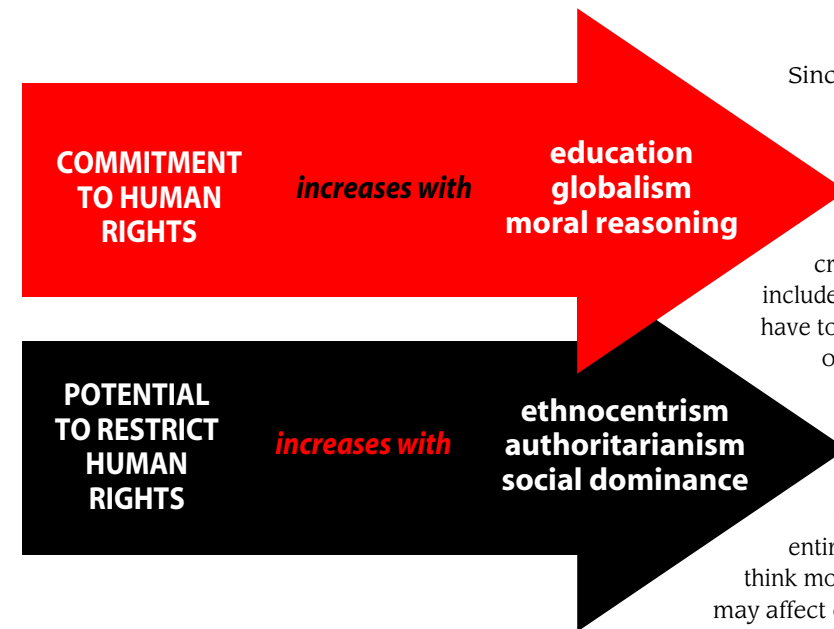
Human Rights Endorsement (HRE) is the simple agreement that human rights are important. A person who is high in the category of HRE would agree that freedom of speech and religion are important as abstract principles, but might not advocate cutting aid or trade to countries that abuse these rights.

Human Rights Commitment (HRC) refers to how much a person believes the nation should sacrifice to protect human rights around the world. A person high in this category would not only believe in freedom of speech for themselves and others, but they would support taking action when human rights are denied or abused. To measure HRC, McFarland described a number of historical scenarios such as the Rwandan genocide and asked participants what they think the US should have done: Send troops to prevent the genocide? Provide supplies for UN forces but not send troops ourselves?

Do nothing if the genocide does not affect US national interests? Other scenarios included: Should the US tie trade with China to improvements in its human rights record? Should the US support Central American dictatorships that are anti-communist but abuse their own people? Should the US risk its forces to prevent ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, or to arrest mass murderers there?

The third category, Human Rights Restriction (HRR), is measured by a subject's desire to take away rights from "evil" groups such as Al Qaeda. Individuals high in HRR would not be concerned, for example, about the legal or civil rights of Taliban prisoners held in Cuba.

McFarland developed a survey to measure each of the three categories of human rights attitudes. By asking questions, he was able to tell if the participant was committed to human rights. This method of surveying, combined with various other questions for rating the importance of things, provided McFarland with his results.



Thus, he found that education, globalism (a concern for global issues generally), and high levels of moral reasoning were key indicators that made people actively care about human rights. He also found that ethnocentrism (the idea that your race is above all others), the authoritarian personality, and social dominance reduced a person's commitment to human rights in other nations as well as increased their potential to restrict rights of others.

"In the abstract, most Americans care about human rights, but in action they don't always," McFarland said. "For a lot of people, human rights isn't really an issue until a human rights abuse happens that affects them."

Although he would very much wish to see more American commitment to protecting universal human rights around the world, McFarland still feels that he has served a purpose by turning the focus on education for himself and others. He said that by learning the patterns and ways in which people care and what makes them compassionate toward others, it will be possible to reduce human rights violations and crimes against humanity.

Two ways he plans on continuing his work are to write a college textbook on human rights and to conduct follow-up research. McFarland said he would also like to begin researching globalism and find out what it is that makes people care about all global issues.

Since it was one of the key determinates of caring about human rights, he is interested in seeing what else produces and comes of the global attitude.

McFarland's global research perspective has advanced his interests in genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. War crimes include the killing of prisoners; crimes against humanity have to do with persecuting civilian groups by starvation or other means. There are other things that militaries and political leaders do that fall under the rubric of any of these atrocities. Readers often ignore what we get in the newspapers as too far away to be of concern. Yet these genocides affect the entire world and the better we explore why we do not think more of them ourselves and how these genocides may affect our lives is a key part of McFarland's research.

There are international steps being taken to quell genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. For example, McFarland is watching the development of the International Criminal Court in The Hague. This Court was implemented to try crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression. Since the crime of aggression is not yet legally defined, there is still a lot of work to do in defining aggression. Is a pre-emptive strike aggression, for instance?

McFarland began his teaching career at Western in 1971 after attending David Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee, for his undergraduate education and Vanderbilt University for his graduate work. In 1989, he was a Fulbright Senior Lecturer in the Soviet Union, and in 1999 he was awarded the title of Distinguished University Professor.

This research is scheduled to appear in the journal *Political Psychology* in the near future.



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