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From Acceptable Loss to Unacceptable Harm: How Norm Entrepreneurs Co-opted the Human Rights Discourse (abstract)

Danielle K. Scherer
Temple University

Taylor Benjamin-Britton
Temple University

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Research Panel: Framing Human Rights

Presenters: Danielle K. Scherer and Taylor Benjamin-Britton

Title: From Acceptable Loss to Unacceptable Harm: How Norm Entrepreneurs Co-opted the Human Rights Discourse

Abstract: Contemporary human rights campaigns have created a shift in the discourse by reframing and co-opting the language surrounding high politics issues such as arms control and human security. The atrocities of the twentieth century led to increased interest in minimizing the costs of war, converging in an international norm privileging the protection of human life. While the dominant discourse in IHL has been geared towards rights of the human, a new approach framing human rights as duties of the state has gained traction resulting in victories for various human rights campaigns. This shift has placed the onus on states to follow particular rules of war to uphold human rights rather than focus on the *post hoc* consequences of their conduct. This paper explores the invocation of different types of ethical discourses and their impact on the outcomes of human rights campaigns, finding that a discourse with a deontological frame is the easiest to interpret with the lowest cost and is consequently most effective as a campaign tool. By serving as a heuristic for moral behavior this underutilized frame reverses the burden of making moral judgments back onto potential human rights violators and shifts the moral choice prior to any loss of life.

Keywords: norms, human rights, ethics, discourse

Biographies: Danielle K. Scherer and Taylor Benjamin-Britton are PhD candidates at Temple University looking at the role of recognition in international institutions and the role of civil society in humanitarian disarmament, respectively. They are in the final stages of their dissertations, and they are currently working on a shared research agenda concerning the role of ethical discourse in human rights campaigns.