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Universalism and cultural relativism in social work ethics

● **Lynne M. Healy**

Social work values and ethics have often been held out as unifying features of the profession. From a global or multicultural perspective, however, values and ethics may be more divisive than unifying. This article will address two related questions: should ethical principles in social work be universally applied, and, are the values held out as cornerstones of social work ethics universally relevant? The opposing philosophical perspectives of universalism and relativism will provide the framework for this brief exploration of the complexities of social work ethics. Following descriptions of the ethical philosophies, the article will relate them to major concepts in social work ethics, with emphasis on self-determination and equality and non-discrimination. Intersections of social work and human rights practice will be considered, using the human rights of women as an example. The article will then examine tools for ethical decision-making, including national codes of ethics and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) ethical document, concluding with recommendations for addressing the dilemma of universalism and relativism.

The relevance of the universalism–relativism debate to social work has grown with the increased globalization of the profession and its practice context; it is applicable not only to cross-national practice and cross-national efforts to define the profession, but increasingly to social work within countries, as more and more countries have become multicultural. Relevance is heightened by social work's growing involvement in the global human rights

struggle; universalism and relativism are hotly contested in the field of human rights, especially regarding the rights of oppressed and excluded groups.

Universalism and relativism defined

Competing schools of thought in ethics differ in the extent to which ethical rules are viewed as fixed or contextual. The deontological school of ethics 'stresses the overriding importance of fixed moral rules', arguing that 'an action is inherently right or wrong' and therefore that ethical rules are universal (Dolgoff et al., 2005: 43). The teleological school holds that ethical principles are contingent on context; ethical decisions may vary 'on the basis of the context in which they are made or on the basis of the consequences that result' (Dolgoff et al., 2005: 42).

These points of view are at the heart of debates in the arena of human rights, where they are often labeled the universalist and cultural relativist positions. The universalist view is that 'all members of the human family share the same inalienable rights' (Mayer, 1995: 176) and that 'culture is irrelevant to the validity of moral rights and rules' (Donnelly, 1984: 400). As explained by Donnelly, not himself a relativist, the extreme cultural relativist argument is that 'culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule' and that there are no common standards, only culturally specific ones (1984: 400). Between these extremes are mixed positions, ranging from moderately universalist to moderately relativist (Figure 1). Thus, belief that a set of universal rights or values exists can co-exist with varying degrees of consideration for the importance and relevance of culture and cultural traditions.
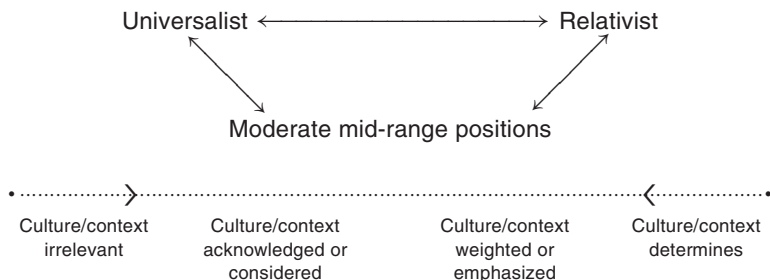

Figure 1 The universalist/cultural relativist continuum for ethical decision-making

The 1994 IFSW Code of Ethics identified with this middle ground when it recommended the adaptation of ethical principles, stating: the first purpose of the IFSW Declaration of Ethical Principles is 'to formulate a set of basic principles for social work, which can be adapted to cultural and social settings' (1994: 2.1). Are practitioners left to decide when and how to adapt ethical principles? On what basis should they make these decisions? Social workers in everyday practice encounter different cultures with values that conflict with their own and must struggle with the practical question: 'when is different just different and when is different wrong?' (Donaldson, 1996: 48). These dilemmas arise frequently in social work, especially in situations regarding equality claims for women; children; ethnic, religious and sexual minorities; or involving tensions over individualism against the claims of the group or community (also known as communalism). They also raise issues about the role of social workers in advocating for cultural change, although the 'Global Definition of Social Work' (IFSW/IASSW, 2000) begins: 'The social work profession promotes social change.'

The universalist or deontologist position would argue that social work has a universally applicable set of values (which may or may not be those reflected in the current international ethics document). Those with a strong commitment to the relativist or teleologist point of view would be likely to discourage efforts to refine a single global code of ethics.

Human rights debates and conflicting philosophies

Human rights discourse is relevant to this debate, as social work has increasingly identified itself with human rights. In a 1994 publication, IFSW and IASSW declared that 'human rights are inseparable from social work theory, values and ethics, and practice' (UN, 1994: 5). In this training manual[1] social workers are told that they must advocate for human rights, even in authoritarian countries where it is dangerous to do so.

Actors in the international human rights arena struggle with the extent to which individual human rights supersede claims of cultural or national sovereignty. Human rights are delineated in a set of widely ratified United Nations documents. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 provides a foundation that has been further elaborated in the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted in 1966. Rights of racial groups, women and children were expanded and detailed successively in other new

Conventions.[2] The nature of rights is hotly contested; the official positions taken by the United States government, for example, suggest rejection of the notion of social rights and an extremely limited view of economic rights (as the USA has ratified only the Civil and Political Rights Covenant and the treaty on racial discrimination). These macro issues and policy positions shape the structure of social services and benefits in societies. However, the roles and status of women and children in families, communities and cultures are probably the most frequent sources of value clashes over social work ethics and human rights between individual rights and cultural traditions.

The example of Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Perhaps no issue has been more contentious than the rights of women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been ratified by 175 countries and signed by one more, the USA (UNDP, 2004). This does not indicate widespread agreement that women should have equal rights. CEDAW has had more reservations entered by ratifying countries than any other human rights treaty. Many of these contradict the core provisions and protections of the convention. For example, 24 nations have filed reservations indicating disagreement with Article 16, which guarantees equality between women and men in marriage and family life. As expressed in a UNICEF report, 'such reservations strike at the heart of CEDAW' and indicate 'widespread and deep-rooted resistance to the concept of full equality for women' (1997: 49). The UN has tolerated an uneasy situation in which countries are considered parties to a convention, normally meaning that they agree to be governed by its provisions, 'whose substantive provisions they had professed their unwillingness to abide by' (Mayer, 1995: 179).

Social work practice intersects with CEDAW in a number of ways. Practitioners encounter the clash between cultural tradition and women's rights in cases such as:

- providing counseling, support and alternatives to victims of domestic violence;
- introducing family planning practices or counseling women on reproductive options;
- poverty alleviation efforts that involve micro-enterprise projects for women to increase economic independence;

- efforts to introduce change in female circumcision practice (also labeled female genital mutilation).

In such cases, as social workers struggle to practice ethically, they need to contend with the tensions between individual rights and cultural sovereignty, between equality and non-discrimination and the continuation of cultural practices many would label harmful. When is it appropriate to advocate for cultural change and/or to promote change within the social work relationship? There is no ambiguity in CEDAW; the treaty specifically calls for cultural change in situations of discrimination or stereotypical treatment. Article 5 states that ratifying countries should take measures to 'modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women' (UN, 1979). The IFSW/IASSW *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* (2004) binds social workers to this and other provisions of CEDAW when it cites the 'Global Definition of Social Work' statement that 'principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' and lists CEDAW among the 'documents particularly relevant to social work practice and action' (2004: 3). Thus, it can be argued that social work is obligated to advocate for cultural change when equal rights are in jeopardy. This position is compatible with social work commitment to equality and non-discrimination, as will be discussed below.

The strongest voices of opposition to CEDAW have come from the Middle East and Africa. The Africentric scholar Josiah Cobbah objects to what he labels the individualistic bias of the human rights treaties. He states that the Universal Declaration is 'a product of Western liberal ideology', and points out that it was adopted during the late 1940s when most of Africa was still under colonial rule (Cobbah, 1987: 316). Fearing the type of cultural change that CEDAW so obviously promotes, Cobbah worries that human rights may be a Trojan horse sent in to change African civilizations. As Mutua (2000) says, the African Charter on Human Rights urges states to 'eliminate every discrimination against women' (p. 10) but also refers to duties to 'preserve the harmonious development of the family' and to uphold traditional values (p. 8). African scholars differ in their analysis of the extent

to which the charter supports or challenges the continued oppression of women (Mutua, 2000; Oloko-Onyango, 2000).

What, then, would Cobbah and others skeptical or hostile to universalism recommend to deal with the oppression of women? The answer would likely be formulated from a communalist perspective, and would interweave the values of communalism: hierarchy, respect, restraint, responsibility and reciprocity, and 'groupness, sameness and commonality' rather than individual freedoms (1987: 320). Some of these would be readily accepted by social work – responsibility and reciprocity, for example. Others, such as hierarchy and restraint in pursuing one's rights, are more problematic and complex. This discussion will continue in the context of several hallmark social work values.

Social work values and the universal–relativist debate

Without debating universality at this point, there are some social work values that are common to the international ethical document, *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles*, and to codes of ethics from individual countries. These are loosely identified as cornerstone values of the profession. They include belief in the worth and dignity of each person; commitment to non-discrimination and equality; acceptance of the rights of persons to self-determination and to confidentiality in their dealings with social workers; and recognition that social workers have multiple ethical responsibilities to those served, to the profession, to employing institutions, to fellow professionals and to society at large. An additional ethical principle, not universally stated but generally viewed as important, is the avoidance of doing harm through professional actions. These will be briefly examined in the context of universalism and relativism, with emphasis on equality or non-discrimination and self-determination.

Equality and non-discrimination

Equality and non-discrimination are values most related to the discussion of CEDAW and other guarantees of human rights for special populations. Social work codes of ethics support the principle of equality and non-discrimination, perhaps underestimating the complexities of the concepts.[3] The US National Association of Social Workers Code contains very strong standards in this area, stating clearly that: 'Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the

basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion or mental or physical disability' (1996: 4.02). In addition, there are at least two relevant statements of social workers' societal-level responsibilities for equality. First, 'Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion or mental or physical disability' (1996: 6.04d). The second statement is a more complex statement on cultural diversity that requires social workers to respect culture while safeguarding social justice:

> Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people. (1996: 6.04c)

These principles are also reflected in the IFSW/IASSW document when it requires social workers to 'challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin colour or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation, or spiritual beliefs' (2004: 4.2.1). The Indian Declaration of Ethics also seems to emphasize the profession's special obligations to serve and advocate for oppressed groups, declaring that social work is 'committed to solidarity with the marginalised peoples' (Declaration of Ethics, 1997: 336). Thus, the recognition of obligations to promote equality and oppose discrimination is widespread in social work ethical codes.

These principles bring social work into conflict within and between societies, as many cultures promote discrimination on one or more of the named grounds. The reservations entered by CEDAW ratifiers demonstrate this conflict on the basis of gender. Extending equal rights on the basis of sexual orientation may be even more conflictual, but is less frequently discussed. Members of the government of Zimbabwe have openly encouraged harsh discrimination against homosexuals; a politician from the Caribbean blasted the Council of Europe for its pressure on Caribbean countries to liberalize laws on homosexuality, charging the European

nations with 'human-rights imperialism' (Jessop, 1998); studies conducted in Jamaica show 'very strong and deep-rooted local, religious and other socio-cultural prejudices' against homosexuals (Carr, 2003: 76); and the US Supreme Court has upheld the right of the Boy Scouts organization to exclude gay men from scouting. All codes of ethics reviewed put the profession at odds with these national policies and sentiments. The Canadian Code of Ethics specifically informs social workers that their ethical responsibilities exceed their Canadian legal responsibilities in promoting non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994). These principles reflect a universalism in formal ethical statements in respect to equality and non-discrimination.

Self-determination

In social work practice, self-determination means respecting and facilitating the ability of the client to make his or her own life choices and decisions. In many ways, this is the practice extension of the basic value of respect for the worth and dignity of each person. The ethic of self-determination is widely accepted in social work at the most fundamental level as preventing social workers from dictating life choices for those they serve. However, self-determination can also be seen as based in individualistic societies' valuation of self-determination as essential for adult functioning and the encouragement of independence rather than group interdependence. This value is particularly strong in the USA, the most individualistic culture in the world, according to Hofstede's (1980) study of world cultures.

In work with individuals, social workers in various cultures modify or reject aspects of self-determination through actions ranging from the acceptance of more directive forms of counseling, the assumption of responsibility to act for the client, to avoiding offering options for individual choice. Lane reported that in Denmark, social workers' adherence to 'the ideals of the individual's rights to self-determination, self-empowerment and self-actualization are not as strong' as in the USA (Lane, 1998: 10). For example, it is fairly common for public welfare benefits to be directly paid to vendors, such as landlords and utility companies, on behalf of clients who have difficulty managing their money, a practice frowned upon by civil liberties advocates in the USA. A social worker from Jamaica reported that while self-determination is

held out as an ideal, most social workers engage in considerable amounts of advice-giving in practice and tend to be directive (Maxwell, personal communication, April, 1997). This is attributed to culturally based expectations based on social stratification and traditional authority relationships. Similarly, in her study of case-work in India, Ejaz (1989) found that while voicing support for an ideal of self-determination, social workers tended to be directive and prescriptive in response to clients' expectations that the experts would tell them how to resolve their problems.

Social workers in societies that are more strongly collectivist contest the very concept of self-determination. Silvawe stated that self-determination is an inappropriate concept for use in addressing individual problems in Africa 'because it assumes concepts of indivi-duality which are not applicable in an African culture or society' (1995: 71). He recommends a value of group determination rather than self-determination.

> African society is characterized by the prevalence of the idea of communalism or community. The individual recedes before the group. The whole of existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations, and life appears to have its full value only in these close ties. Individual initiative is discouraged . . . Self initiative or self-determination in resolving personal problems is collectively sanctioned by the community. (Silvawe, 1995: 72–3)

The 1994 IFSW Code of Ethics/Statement of Principles assumed a moderately relativist stance on self-determination and indeed, the term was not used in the document. The Statement of Principles established the right to self-fulfillment of individuals 'to the extent that it does not encroach upon the same right of others', while also assigning to individuals the 'obligation to contribute to the well-being of society' (2.2.2), suggesting duties. The 1994 document continued: 'social workers help the client – individual, group, com-munity or society – to achieve self-fulfillment and maximum poten-tial within the limits of the respective rights of others' (3.3.4). Thus, the right to self-fulfillment was recognized, but tempered by concerns about the well-being of society. It is interesting that the replacement global ethical document adopted in 2004 does include the word self-determination as a social work value. How are the interests of individual and society to be balanced in practice? This and the application of the other key principles will be examined through presentation of a case.

Illustrative case: domestic violence and culture conflict
A Vietnamese woman, a refugee, came to the local welfare agency in the North American community in which she had settled. She was originally referred to the agency for being in non-compliance with welfare work requirements; Mrs Nguyen had not responded to notices from the welfare office nor had she attended training sessions required to maintain her benefits. In an interview with the welfare office family caseworker, Mrs Nguyen revealed that her husband had been keeping her a virtual prisoner in their apartment. In addition, she had been frequently beaten and verbally abused. She told the worker she could not comply with the welfare department orders, as she was not allowed to leave home. The intake worker referred Mrs Nguyen to the local shelter for battered women and warned her that staying with her husband under these conditions was likely to mean the cut-off of all welfare support to her and her children. It could even result in the children being removed from the home, if they were left without sufficient support. As events unfolded, Mrs Nguyen decided to go to the shelter and made arrangements for her two children to be collected from school and taken to the shelter with her. Upon learning what had happened, Mrs Nguyen's husband was furious. He engaged the help of the local Vietnamese Mutual Assistance Association and together they accused the welfare agency and the shelter of destroying Vietnamese families in violation of cultural principles (adapted from a case provided by V. Shelto, personal interview, 2000).

Were the actions of the welfare office caseworker ethical? Were they in the best interests of the client? Did they give due consideration to culture and the preservation of cultural integrity?

Taking the universalist position, the social worker would argue that the woman herself decided to go to the shelter and that her right to self-determination would prevail. Drawing from CEDAW, Article 16, women have a right to equality in marriage and family life, a right that was certainly being violated in this case. Therefore, the social worker was also upholding the value of equality and non-discrimination by taking steps to remove the woman from a marital situation that was oppressive and by protecting her human right not to be abused.

The relativist would at least be less certain of the appropriateness of the action. Was the worker in fact guilty of subtle coercion in telling the woman that she would lose her benefits – even if it was a fact? Although fully informing clients is also an ethical principle,

information can be delivered in such a way as to be perceived as a threat. Did this diminish the free exercise of self-determination in the case? Was the social worker operating out of a Western bias of individualism that places a high value on adult independence rather than interdependence? How would intervention have differed if the worker believed that 'the individual recedes before the group', as expressed by Silvawe (1995)? The relativist might also have looked for ways to balance competing claims in this case. Rather than quickly refer to shelter services, the relativist social worker might have taken more time to examine alternatives with the woman, including efforts to modify the husband's behavior while maintaining the marital unit, perhaps through involving respected elders in the immigrant community. This strategy, however, might have necessitated a stretch of professional interpretations of confidentiality by sharing family information with others.

The concept of harm

In addition to values of self-determination and equality or non-discrimination, the concept of harm is relevant to this and many other cases of cultural conflict. It is widely agreed that professionals should take no action that causes harm to the client and should strive to reduce harm to as many parties to a situation as possible. Since all have a right to freedom from harm, an obvious interpretation is that the action was to protect the client and her children from harm – the physical and emotional harm of abuse. The pursuit of alternative strategies, such as efforts to modify the husband's behavior, might have resulted in increased violence and physical harm to the woman. Harm is not always simple to assess, however, especially in the context of social work's multiple responsibilities to client, relevant others, agency and society. Did the action of admitting the woman to the shelter protect her from harm, or merely substitute one form of harm for another? If, as Silvawe argued, 'The whole of existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations and life appears to have its full value only in these close ties' (1995: 72–3), will her estrangement from her husband and community create another significant harm? The social worker must also assess harm to the refugee community in circumventing its associations and problem-solving mechanisms. As the following discussion of tools for ethical decision-making will show, there are no easy answers to these complex dilemmas.

Applying tools for ethical decision-making

Codes of ethics delineate important principles for social work practice. In many cases, however, multiple principles are involved and in conflict. When only some values can be optimized, social workers face particularly difficult decisions.

Dolgoff et al. (2005) suggest using an 'ethical principles screen' in which ethical principles are arranged in a hierarchy. They include seven principles in their screen or ladder, with the protection of life at the top. Thus, social work action should protect life as a first consideration, even when this requires violating other ethical principles, such as self-determination and confidentiality. The other six principles, in order of priority consideration, are: equality and inequality; autonomy and freedom (including self-determination); least harm; quality of life; privacy and confidentiality; and truthfulness and full disclosure (2005: 65).

If the screen is applied to the case described above, many of the principles apply. If the woman's life is assessed to be in danger, the social worker would be obligated to take strong measures to encourage her to leave home. If this is not the case, the principle of equality/inequality specifies that the interests of the party with less power in the situation take precedence, especially if that party is being oppressed. Again, this would appear to justify giving priority to the interests of the woman, not her husband or wider community. However, a macro view would include an assessment that the Vietnamese refugee community is also in an unequal position and suffers oppression and racism from its minority status. The analysis could continue through the list of ethical principles, demonstrating that autonomy and freedom requires deference to the woman's wishes (unless her life is in danger); least harm, as discussed above, requires the assessment of many dimensions of physical, emotional and relationship harm; quality of life is involved and difficult to assess in its longer-term aspects. Confidentiality may be an element in the case, especially if the worker believed the client's life to be in danger and felt obligated to notify authorities without her consent. Finally, full disclosure, while desirable, could be problematic; disclosure of regulations about welfare payments so early in the relationship might have interfered with the autonomy rights of the client, making it impossible for her to truly exercise self-determination. Utilizing the ethical principles screen to balance the complexities of the example case, the social worker would probably feel reassured with the ethics of the decision to refer to the shelter.

The screen, however, represents the value judgements of its authors. While the authors are well-informed scholars of ethics, the judgements are nonetheless just that and appear oriented towards individualistic values. The relativist would quickly see that cultural integrity is not included in the hierarchy of values and communalist perspectives are lacking. Thus, the screen is of little help in deciding when cultural change should be advocated or when a client should be supported or encouraged to 'recede before the group' (Silvawe, 1995: 72).

Analysis and conclusion

Hopefully, this beginning effort to explore ethics in the context of culture has demonstrated that the field of ethical decision-making is highly complex in multicultural contexts. Considerations of the extent to which social work values should be applied universally or relatively are particularly challenging. Current tools for analysis and decision-making are limited in helping social workers decide, to paraphrase Donaldson, when different is 'just different' and when different is wrong (1996: 48).

Universalist or relativist?
Social workers may find both the relativist and universalist positions attractive for different reasons. As noted above, codes of ethics from diverse countries show considerable agreement about fundamental social work values, suggesting some level of universalism. As underscored in the recent publication *Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*, social work also places considerable importance on valuing cultural diversity (NASW, 2001). Social workers are attracted to respect for culture as both a moral position and as an element of practice effectiveness. Some in the profession have therefore advocated non-interference with cultural practices such as female circumcision, corporal punishment of children, bride price and dowry. This degree of cultural relativism should be adopted only with considerable caution. The ethical dangers in viewing culture as sacrosanct are serious and include trampling on the rights of those who may wish their rights respected; according fewer rights for some than for others; and not paying attention to the concept of harm in all its complexities.

While the relativist position appears flexible, it is often applied with rigidity. Those who argue the extreme relativist perspective view values as fixed, and ignore the evolutionary nature of cultural

values. Mayer notes that the critique of feminism as a Western value, alien to other cultures, ignores the fact that until very recently, feminism was also alien to Western cultures and gained acceptance only after lengthy and contested efforts towards culture change (1995). Cultures are dynamic and can be defined as 'a series of constantly contested and negotiated social practices whose meanings are influenced by the power and status of their interpreters and participants' (Rao, 1995: 173).

Recommendations

Given social work's strong affiliation with human rights, a stance in the mid-range of the universalist–relativism continuum is recommended for the profession's ethics, with a preference towards moderate universalism. Such a stance would recognize that all humans have rights to equality and to the full range of protections, entitlements and responsibilities embodied in the UN human rights treaties. The importance of diverse cultures and of ties to cultural groups would be recognized as among the human rights. Thus, specific practice decisions would promote universal rights while supporting the preservation of culture whenever possible.

In stating this, it must be recognized that existing social work codes of ethics and ethical screens fail to explicate the communalist perspective and are fairly heavily biased towards the individualistic cultural perspective. Individualism, especially in its rugged and competitive forms, diminishes the importance of caring, reciprocity, community-building, generosity and cooperation. These are important values that need to be captured in social work ethics. Additional work is needed on international ethical principles to explore ways in which positive communalist values can be accommodated within a human rights framework. The cultural specificity of the ethical principles screen (Dolgoff et al., 2005) suggests that national social work associations may wish to consider developing particularized screens, prioritizing the universal values in a more culturally relevant hierarchy.

Individual social workers may find that their positions on the continuum are not static but move along the mid-ranges depending upon the particular situation. Finally, social workers who fear the Trojan horse of human rights and universal social work values might consider the words of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi of Iran. As she wrote in a brief essay, 'cultural relativity should never be used as a pretext to violate human rights' (UNDP, 2004: 23).

Notes

1. The training manual was the result of collaboration between IASSW, IFSW and the UN Centre for Human Rights.
2. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
3. Equality, equity and non-discrimination are complex concepts and a full discussion of them is not possible within the confines of this article. Some social work codes, such as the IFSW/IASSW statement, distinguish positive from negative discrimination, recognizing that positive discrimination may be necessary to achieve equity; others, such as the NASW/US code, refer more broadly to discrimination.

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