

**Reichert, E. (2006). Understanding human rights: An exercise book. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. <http://www.sagepublications.com>** Reviewed by Laura Gibson, PhD, MSW, LCSW

Dr. Reichert is a professor of social work at the University of Illinois at Carbondale. Reichert first received her social work degree, the equivalent of an MSW, from the Fachhochschule fuer Sozialwesen in Mannheim, Germany. She received an MSSW and a PhD in Health Education from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. She has authored two previous books: Challenges in human rights: A social work perspective, Social work and human rights: A foundation for policy and practice, and numerous journal articles on the topic of human rights.

The stated purpose of this book is to help social workers identify human rights, recognize the value of human rights, analyze human rights, and take action to protect human rights, so that they might apply these principles to the social work profession. It is intended as a supplemental text for advanced undergraduate and graduate social work students.

Reichert begins by acknowledging that human rights can be difficult to define. She offers different ways of viewing human rights, and then explains the strengths and weaknesses of each view. She also offers the definition of human rights given by the United Nations. She further conceptualizes human rights in terms of three sets: 1) political rights, 2) rights necessary for the well-being of individuals and families, and 3) national rights. She acknowledges that it may seem logical to favor one set of rights over another, but strongly asserts that “every individual is entitled to the same human rights” (p. 2).

Reichert quickly connects the concepts of human rights to the social work profession and states that social workers have an obligation to advocate for human rights. She comments that the social work profession is concerned with helping people and that human rights relate to a range of political, economic, and cultural needs. Although the field of human rights is clearly a good fit for social work, not all may agree that needs equal rights.

Each chapter concludes with exercises to help readers better understand the ideas discussed, analyze them, discuss their application and to think critically about them. A total of 52 exercises are presented throughout the book. Chapters include a discussion of a) concepts, b) historical influences, c) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, d) the link between political and civil rights to economic, social, and cultural human rights, e) vulnerable groups, f) cultural relativism, g) ethics, and h) the relationship to social work practice.

Reichert traces the concept of inalienable rights to the writings of Plato and Socrates more than 2000 years ago. She identifies some of the historical events surrounding WW II as the catalyst for the development of a human rights framework. The contributions of significant individuals and documents are discussed as they relate to our present understanding of a human rights framework.

The strength of this book is its ability to help students analyze complex concepts in theory and in practice. Although Reichert's own beliefs about human rights are clearly present in the book, it is her passion about this subject that makes it engaging, thought provoking, and cutting-edge for social work practice. Although I did not agree with some of her ideas, I found myself questioning whether this disagreement was truly the result of a different opinion or of my own cultural relativism. Perhaps by having spent time in Germany, she is able to view American culture in a more objective fashion than I.

I must say, however, that I was somewhat distracted by Reichert's repeated criticisms of the United States' position on the human rights of its own citizens. She states that the protection of social, economic, and cultural rights is sorely lacking, and she gives some valid examples. However, she does not offer positive examples when they might be appropriate. For instance, she states that the United Nations does not recognize people who are gay and lesbian as a vulnerable group, but there is no specific comment about the US in relation to this topic. She fails to mention that some states have individually made strides in protecting the rights of people who are gay or lesbian. For instance, Massachusetts has protected against sexual orientation discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, and credit since 1989 (MGL 151B), and other states have implemented similar protections.

Overall, the book is full of interesting, thought-provoking exercises to help social workers understand human rights, analyze the complexities of them, and apply these concepts to social work practice. The book advances social work values and ethics and guides readers to view them in a human rights context.

### **Reference**

Massachusetts General Law 151B. Retrieved December 16, 2008 at <http://www.mass.gov/legis/laws/mgl/151b-3.htm>