



CHAPTER 1

The Practice Turn in Human Rights Research

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Over fifty years ago, international legal scholars reflected on the role of human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in advancing norms and shaping law, and longingly forecasted our current attempt to ground human rights ideals in practical action:

The focus of international efforts might be shifted from the preparation of complex and time-consuming declarations and conventions to practical grassroots measures designed to reach real problems of real people. A way must be found to establish a more effective and meaningful link between what is done by international organizations and the actual human rights issues of everyday concern. (Bilder 1964, 732)

AQ: Word change to avoid repetition. Okay?

That human rights are inherently tied to law is not in question, but law is fundamentally limited as a tool for human rights realization. Court systems are slow, expensive, and out of reach for too many. Too often, legal instruments become mere mechanisms that create openings for advocates to work: powerful levers for highlighting hypocrisy and failed obligations rather than literal processes for justice or accountability. The social practice of human rights takes place not in front of a judge, but in the streets and alleys, backrooms, and out-of-the-way places where significant change occurs. Appreciating the social context and focusing on the situated activities of advocates permits us to forge a “meaningful and effective link” between



the crucial work occupying those in international organizations and the efforts toward promotion, implementation, and protection unfolding on the ground, across the globe. Human rights practice in the twenty-first century happens in a multitude of spaces and scholars are paying close attention to this evolution.

As early as the 1960s, human rights advocacy efforts took shape as voluntary organizations composed of supporters committed to defending the dignity of silenced political prisoners. Fledgling NGOs like Amnesty International learned as they went along, rising from humble beginnings to prominence on the world stage. Recent research points in particular to the 1970s as a moment of “breakthrough” for human rights as an articulation of social justice and hope for egalitarian public policy (Eckel and Moyn 2013). The age of maturity for the advocacy sector struck following the end of the Cold War, as demands for their work expanded as did their latitude for operating. As the sheer quantity of organizations mushroomed, they began confronting one another in an increasingly competitive marketplace, struggling for media attention and donor funds. This environment motivated a transformation within the organizations themselves.

NGOs grew to include internal media divisions, enlarged development staffs, and human relations departments. Advocacy groups virtually mirror the internal flow chart of a multinational corporation or government agency. The professionalization of human rights, however, is critiqued for ushering in a period that has reshaped the incentive structures of advocacy campaigns. For instance, is it acceptable to sensationalize or stretch the truth of a case in exchange for greater media resonance? How is goal setting impacted by the necessity to produce demonstrable results to funders? Do issue agendas reflect greatest need or emergency, or does the prioritization of human rights work within an NGO depend on more instrumental concerns? The answers to these questions drive social practice scholars in human rights attuned to the context of advocacy today.

In its early years, survivors, their lawyers and family members, trade unionists, and faith groups galvanized the movement; by and large, communities constituted by individuals directly affected by political violence. For decades thereafter, the work of human rights practitioners was dismissed by politicians and ignored by scholars. I believe human rights work was characterized as a subcategory of pithy humanitarianism practiced by pot-smoking, hand-holding, Kumbaya-singing spiritualists dedicated to the cause out of faith and devotion alone. Today, human rights advocacy is a career pursued by serious people who may otherwise find themselves in an elite law practice or climbing the ladder in the public sector. Commensurate with the high-powered status of professionalized human rights advocacy

should be a sufficient degree of critique to investigate the consequences of this fundamental shift.

To expose the new world of human rights practice to proper inquiry, researchers have a role to play. And this is made even more apt by the erosion of traditional silos in the human rights world that once starkly separated scholars from practitioners. Instead, the convergence of epistemic communities with communities of practice marks a contemporary era in which advocacy professionals move freely from the operations staff of NGOs into government, then for a term at a lobbying firm, and through to prestigious appointments at major universities and think tanks. This is also true in reverse: scholars consult directly for NGOs and policymaking apparatuses, and have an ever-widening platform for broadcasting ideas and sharing information in social media networks. In a strong sense, this synchronicity is a product of pressures within each sector and demands for transformation.

NGOs are thirsty for the analytical tools that academics can bring to bear on their work, simply for the fact that organizations are not equipped with the capacity for deliberative self-reflection—and, as is suggested later, the insular qualities of communities impede precisely the type of self-reflection that is necessary. Advocates and aid agencies bear the weight of their checkered histories and are currently undergoing a period of introspection, rethinking old assumptions and positioning themselves for future improvement. Scholars, on the other hand, regularly face the challenge of demonstrating the relevance of their research in the “real world.” Particularly in the field of human rights, studying the diffusion or promotion of norms can appear arcane, unless the proper framework helps to explain the pragmatic consequences of such research. Scholar–practitioner partnerships are increasingly common as centers and institutes conduct work with a normative slant geared toward making demonstrable change. The *social practice of human rights* captures the overlap of work at the intersection of research and advocacy.

This chapter rolls out the concept of the social practice of human rights and introduces the substantive chapters that make up the volume. With reference to other areas of study that have undergone a practice turn, I explain why a field might make this shift and what benefits a practice perspective lends. For human rights in particular, the question of social practice compels a deep investigation into the constitution of the “human rights community,” permits a glimpse behind the scenes at the inner-workings of the organizations, coalitions, and movements that drive the agenda, and compels a normative research program emphasizing constructive critique. Social practice is where the proverbial rubber hits the road, where the action happens. Exploring the social practice of human rights demands that scholars take a more active role in directing their resources in the service of advocacy

efforts. By problematizing and deconstructing the activities of practitioners, scholars of social practice extend beyond research-for-its-own sake into the realm of research-for-a-purpose.

What Does It Mean to Practice Human Rights?

We know what it means to practice juggling or dancing, but human rights is not a talent to rehearse or a skillset to perfect. As a political project, human rights attends to suffering, discrimination, and insecurity. Underwritten by global norms stipulated in international law, human rights aims to check the arbitrary exercise of state power and mitigate the ill effects of market excess. But, exactly how these lofty and worthwhile goals are pursued in the world remains subject to the strategic thinking of defenders and their efforts to manifest ideals through action. We use many verbs to describe human rights acts: to implement, enforce, comply, monitor, evaluate, assess, measure, protect, provide, defend, claim, uphold, struggle, advocate, exercise, enjoy, intervene, codify, institutionalize, and internalize, among others. Collectively these terms sketch out the universe of human rights work, cobbled together to patch the cracks in the edifice of social life through which human welfare often slips. The practice of human rights is the active process by which norms and ideas are brought to bear in the lives of those worse off, and as a concept captures crucial qualities of the work that goes into making human rights a reality.

In order to determine the meaning and significance of practice in the context of human rights, perhaps a better analogy, rather than juggling or dancing, is the practice of medicine. For this sector, to practice is to participate in a structured set of activities and patterned behaviors, governed by rules, relating to a specific professionalized environment. By building on lessons learned and guided by advancements in science and technology, the sector develops frameworks of practice to appropriately respond to a broad range of emergency situations. Through training and with repetition, the practical details are disseminated throughout the sector, as well as being reflexively shaped by those engaged in the practice itself.

Social practice is the performance of norms in lived experience. Not in the sense that norms are diffused or learned, which, while significant, only stands in for real practices, remaining abstract and ethereal. Whether or not states comply with norms remains important, but practice involves the activities by which compliance occurs, the local transformations compliance brings about, and the pressure to maintain compliance. For human rights, social practice is the grind of giving corporeal form to ideas and values, through the labor of actual people whose energies are directed at improving the lives of others.

To execute these functions, the human rights universe is constituted by a diverse array of personnel: states, international organizations, regional alliances, corporations, social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and philanthropic foundations. These agents concern themselves with human rights practice for a mix of odd reasons, sometimes taking action willfully and often kicking and screaming. But when we speak of *practitioners*, those people in the trenches, on the frontlines, in the field, and on the ground, only a sliver of this catalogue counts. In ordinary usage, “practitioners” does not imply diplomats, policymakers, or CEOs. It may even be the case that lawyers—fundamentally connected to human rights as legal instruments—should be excluded from the list of practitioners in the sense in which we normally use the word. This is not to say that law, diplomacy, and policy do not occupy important roles, but rather that focusing on social practice contributes additional layers to our traditional understanding of human rights. Indeed, there must be some identifiable relationship between practitioners and these other kinds of actors: antagonistic, symbiotic, parasitic, and other. A social practice lens helps tease out these dynamics.

Social practice occurs where these areas converge. This is where work gets done. The social practice of human rights is the conduct of a community engaged in ordered, habituated action with the stated objective of safeguarding human dignity. Scholars are compelled to study behavior and phenomena in this area because of its impact in the lives of actual people, far removed from elite halls of power. For this very reason, however, social practice is often overlooked as being just outside the frame of relevance, a tendency that reproduces and reinforces biases that favor privilege and hierarchy. If the subject of inquiry becomes the practices themselves and the environments in which they happen, we can glean novel insight about actors and the consequences of their interventions. New research, such as that contained in this volume, investigates the social practice of human rights in an effort to unpack assumptions about strategies, motivations, and impact, and explore significant dilemmas raised in the process of translating global norms for varied audiences and contexts. The “practice turn” trains its sights on the space in which advocates and agencies strive to make actual changes in the world, forced to confront resource constraints, cultural barriers, and geopolitical hurdles. It is crucial, however, to understand this new research agenda as the most recent development in a lineage of human rights studies.

Generations of Scholarship on Human Rights Advocacy

The manner in which scholars approach the study of human rights advocacy has undergone a series of generational shifts over roughly the past fifty

years. Let us recall, it is not obvious or natural that this subject—the work of nongovernmental organizations and all that exists in their orbit—should fall within the purview of research in social science or the humanities. Initially, human rights belonged firmly to lawyers and legal scholarship. Therefore, observing and analyzing advocacy demanded particular focus on the relationship of NGOs to international law and institutions. Because human rights are most clearly enumerated in these instruments, the first generation of research on human rights advocacy framed the practice by reference to human rights organizations as valuable but ancillary *supporting actors* to broader global processes.

Considering advocacy NGOs as supporting actors prioritizes international organizations as the central building blocks of international society, which is not at all unreasonable. Therefore, this research emphasizes the role played by advocates in the context of global governance mechanisms largely tied to the United Nations (Cassese 1979). Two core functions of NGOs pertain to fact-finding and standard-setting, with clear corollaries between them. Reporting on human rights violations entails collecting evidence, interviewing witnesses and survivors, and constructing a narrative of events (Orentlicher 1990). Once all information has been corroborated, NGOs bring their findings to the attention of the international community, and to the violators directly. As the custodians of crucial information, NGOs positioned themselves as experts—professionals indispensable to the system of human rights promotion and protection. Bringing human stories to light makes everything possible.

With member states and organizations virtually dependent on NGO reporting, NGOs were situated to deploy their fact-finding in strategic ways, creating space to affect global norms on human rights as embodied in UN treaties, covenants, and declarations. NGOs set standards in human rights protection particularly by motivating the adoption of new issues and by participating in the drafting stages of emergent UN documents (Van Boven 1989). Effectively, from the Helsinki Accords on, human rights NGOs sought to establish themselves as global watchdogs and inject themselves in each step of the development of new law, including the post-stages of implementation and monitoring outcomes; mechanisms like UN consultative status made this increasingly possible. To disseminate their findings, NGOs utilized the chambers of the Economic and Social Council or Human Rights Committee. International organizations and institutions provided both the framework for analysis as well as served as the primary audience. The United Nations, its bodies, and regional organizations are opportune venues for calling out abusive states. Leveraging public humiliation as political pressure, NGOs skillfully asserted their perspective and

wielded soft power on the grandest of stages. However, even as legal journals chronicled their emergence and impact, advocacy NGOs were seen as supporting actors and outside agitators moving the conscience of the UN and finding their voices in the process.

By examining advocacy through the narrow lens of international law and institutions, our conceptualization of NGOs is limited by their impact on specific mechanisms of global governance. Second generation studies of advocacy made more overt reference to NGOs in their relationship to the state, as a subfield within International Relations (IR) began to focus attention on nonstate actors in the years following the fall of the Soviet Union. Even within the area of nonstate actors, human rights organizations were distinguished primarily due to their ethical and normative orientation. Contrasted with multinational corporations, global terror networks, and drug cartels, human rights embodied the liberal values of moral progress, hope, and cosmopolitanism and personified the promise of globalization. Human rights illustrated a world bent toward the common good, rather than *realpolitik*. While neoliberalism espoused a vision of freedom and prosperity through the spread of capitalism, human rights anchored an increasingly mainstream outlook committed to the realization of human dignity against the arbitrary exercise of state power and encroachment of markets.

Second generation studies coalesced around NGOs as *principled actors*, driven by the work of constructivist IR scholars and a new set of analytical tools with respect to the role and power of norms. Human rights or environmental organizations, formed on the basis of shared values to pursue public goods, can confront material power and emerge victorious. As Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink describe in their important article on international norm dynamics, this body of scholarship focuses on the impact of ideas of justice and good on the behavior of humans. What distinguishes a norm is its “prescriptive (or evaluative) quality of ‘oughtness’” and a focus on “standards of ‘appropriate’ or ‘proper’ behavior” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891). Frequently cited campaigns promoting international norms include women’s suffrage, antislavery, antiapartheid, antilandmine, and the treatment of war wounded (Klotz 1995; Price 1998; Cameron et al. 1998). These campaigns offer empirical evidence of norm emergence and deepen our understanding of how norms work in the world.

To further enrich our comprehension of the operational elements of advocacy, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink built theory around the question of the composition of transnational advocacy networks (TANs). This important research agenda, in certain ways, stretches back to the early legalistic work that argued that NGOs offered critical connections between the international and domestic/local spheres. Keck and Sikkink proposed a

schematic for approaching this relationship that linked moral impetus with instrumental imperatives. As originally conceived, the “boomerang effect” within transnational advocacy networks is a set of connections sparked by domestic organizations that “bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12). In a campaign, the alliances between the domestic organization and international allies are, at a glance, mutually beneficial: “for less powerful third world actors, networks provide access, leverage, and information (and often money) they could not expect to have on their own; for northern groups, they make credible the assertion that they are struggling with, and not only for, their southern partners” (12–13). TANs are a useful device with which to study the manifestation of ethical activities shaped by rational decision-making.

Underwriting this period of scholarship on advocacy was the implicit belief that network actors were forces for moral good in a world of cold, material power; actors without “real” power banding together to overwhelm elites. Because David-versus-Goliath stories are compelling and rare, providing an explanation of how these battles are fought and won is both intellectually interesting and practically useful from an advocate’s standpoint. Over time, however, researchers built on this foundation and began to push in new directions to fill in gaps and add context. Clifford Bob, for instance, highlighted *which* victim groups gain attention (2002a) in the competitive global marketplace for moral movements (2002b). As well, Bob enlarged the scope of inquiry by focusing on illiberal global advocacy movements, countering the traditional stress on “feel good,” liberal NGOs (2012). Charli Carpenter has identified the role played by “gatekeeper” network organizations in providing recognition to peripheral movements (2007), and more recently has turned her attention to explore why certain movements fail to gain traction (2014).

Bob and Carpenter in particular evidence an attempt to augment the constructivist emphasis on NGOs as principled actors with an additional layer that problematizes the instrumental decisions of human rights advocates. Their research complements the principled actor perspective with one that focuses on NGOs also as *pragmatic actors*. While this does not suggest a deterministic or base rationalism, constructivists are certainly permitted to think about strategic calculation within a context whose parameters are outlined by ideas and values. Simply because interests are constituted by norms, it does not follow that actors act against their own interests. For advocacy, this overlap neatly and accurately describes the environment of NGO action: an organization formed for a moral purpose still operates in a material world. This third generation view of advocacy takes into account both the principled and pragmatic elements, and attempts to make sense of it all as one whole.

Therefore, NGOs must make decisions that have trade-offs. They do not always focus on the most severe or dire crisis, simply because it is so grave. NGOs must devote resources in a sensible way, even if that means that some issues go unattended, such is the practical world of human rights promotion.

Taking this hybrid approach to one logical extreme, Aseem Prakash and Mary Kay Gugerty have pushed scholars to regard NGOs without reference to their normative reason for being (2010, 13). These authors apply the “theory of the firm” to decision-making and propose that NGOs are just like corporations in that they exist to lower collective action costs and operate in an environment of resource scarcity. While certainly provocative, reducing the social practice of advocacy to its rationalist essentials dilutes what is interesting and unique about the role of NGOs in global politics: groups of individuals organically constituted to collectively articulate a set of norms and work to see their deeply held values realized, even and especially when antithetical to the material interests of powerful entities. As well, it is not clear that this perspective helps us understand this sector with any greater clarity.

Positing this generational typology of research into human rights advocacy is an exercise in gaining perspective on the arc of the field, rather than conducting an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. Sufficed to say, the evolution of thinking on the subject has followed developments in global politics, albeit at some distance. Conceiving of NGOs as actors permits scholars to attribute personality traits to them, just as we do with states, to help explain motivations, interests, and behaviors. Whether NGOs are situated in contradistinction to international organizations, states, markets, or coalitions, we hope to distill some fundamental qualities about their existence by virtue of how they act in context. A practice perspective simply takes as its subject a different level of analysis, as well as possesses the ability to link levels appropriately. It may be useful to characterize the difference as one between identity and function, although there are many overlaps.

Finally, if there is any added value to the practice turn it lies in the opening of intellectual space for new disciplines to contribute. No longer strictly for legalists, philosophers, political scientists, or international relations experts, now sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and scholars of literature, texts, media, culture, and communications have softer entry points to the material. This creates a richer and more robust exchange that was not able to take place previously, despite the disciplinary siloes and boundaries that persist. Although this volume remains weighted in favor of Political Science and International Relations, future research hopefully will be more inclusive and expansive. To demonstrate what that may look like and how the work has taken shape so far, the next section spells out the practice turn in more detail.

The Practice Turn in Context

Drawing inspiration and experience from diverse academic disciplines will help ground our understanding of human rights as a social practice and inform future research. Accounting, education and pedagogy, organizational theory, art, sociology, communications, cultural theory, sports science, and technology have each contributed to a generalizable concept of social practice that I will attempt to distill (Gee and Green 1998; Brown and Duguid 2001; Nabulime and McEwan 2011; Bourdieu 1986; Herndl and Nahrwold 2000; Reckwitz 2002; Brown and Johnson 2000; Suchman et al. 1999). The literature generates at least two important threads worth pursuing here: identifying the social context of activity, and presenting practices as learned, habituated actions. This enables us to highlight spheres of the social world previously considered to be uninteresting or irrelevant, but which in fact can effectively enhance comprehension of macro-trends. Social practice research concretizes the abstract and constructs conceptual bridges linking seemingly banal details with more compelling, more visible phenomena. For human rights, this perspective demands an inquiry into the social composition of the “human rights community” and provides an entry point to think about the actual work of advocacy in all its complexity.

The notion of a “human rights community” is a well-worn expression that captures a sentiment about the self-perception of actors within this sphere. But what do we mean when we talk about a human rights community and what are the consequences of talking about human rights in this way? Foremost, a community of this sort revolves around a central set of guiding principles or norms that reside in the Universal Declaration and elsewhere. The primacy of moral values in the constitution of this community is crucial as it serves as a key identity marker for all communards. These ideas are not fixed but do remain firm, and change ever slightly through interpretive practice. We know, however, that these ideas as often lead to friction as they do to harmony. Questions of origin and implementation plague human rights advocacy and evidence deep divides within this “community.” Yet, the magnetism and centripetal force of human rights discourse draw marginal movements and organizations into the fray. Despite whatever disagreements exist over definitions of rights, the power to articulate rights-claims persists in uniting its adherents.

In addition to the guidance that these norms provide in bounding the community, actors must experience some sense of solidarity or collectivity with one another. There must be something holding the community together that goes beyond shared ideas. Signaling shared purpose, cooperation, and mutual advantage, communities must be a whole greater than the sum of its

parts. This is not always obvious in the human rights arena. As mentioned earlier, the NGO sector is often a competitive one in which organizations work at cross-purposes with significant redundancy. Furthermore, the suggestion that there is one community proves tenuous as well. More accurately, there are multiple and overlapping communities that may be subdivided by geographic or thematic focus, for instance. Similar debates occur around the nomenclature of a “human rights movement”: is it really fair, accurate, or useful to talk about a singular entity driven toward a unified overarching goal, given the diversity of identities and missions subsumed under the flag of Human Rights? While these are appropriate disputes to be having, that we speak so frequently about a human rights community must carry weight and have some meaning.

What makes the landscape of human rights hang together as a community is the convergence around practices engaged in by its constituents who believe themselves to be a part of a community. “Communities of practice” (Wenger 2000) or “collectivities of practice” (Roberts 2006) are bound by joint enterprise, mutuality, and shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger 2000, 229). While not necessarily standing shoulder to shoulder at every moment, members of communities of practice remain bound by a common cause, a set of overlapping interests, and a base of tactical wisdom developed through generations of trial-and-error iteration. “Joining such a community . . . gives access to that community’s identity and through that its collective knowledge” (Brown and Duguid 2001, 203). Application and self-application of the human rights moniker to one’s organization carries cachet beyond mere discursive force. In a real sense, this could open doors for fledgling groups as they get invited to conferences with gatekeeper NGOs, increasingly exposed to the inner sanctum of transnational human rights circles. Practice and identity centrally inform community affiliation.

The transfer of practical intelligence throughout the community or network perpetuates established “truths” about human rights advocacy, but also circumscribes transformational thinking. As the community grows and evolves over time, it can “become hostage to their own history, insular, defensive, closed in” (Wenger 2000, 233). Fostering internal critique requires a degree of introspection to which communities are not naturally predisposed. This certainly holds true for human rights. Understanding the conservative and myopic elements of communities is crucial to motivating positive change. Scholars working within the social practice paradigm may play a role by exposing the community to greater scrutiny through self-awareness. Absent a penetrating critique, “social practice is characterized by recursiveness that . . . equates with learned efficiencies, suggesting that ‘practice makes perfect’” (Jarzabkowski 2004, 534). However, practice does

not make perfect—practice makes permanent.¹ Presuming perfection is a symptom of the insular nature of communities of practices. Breaking free of routine and thinking creatively about advocacy strategies, for instance, are testaments to a healthy, self-conscious human rights community.

A practice perspective on human rights compels an appreciation toward the social context as a key venue for learning and cultivating practical insight, and also focuses on “situated, concrete activity” (Whittington 2002, 119). If we can agree that the social is at least an appropriate site of analysis, and even permits certain advantages, then we must dig deeper and explore what goes on in this context and what impact these events have on broader processes. “Practice occurs in macro-contexts that provide broad commonalities of action, but also in micro-contexts in which action is highly localized. The interaction between contexts provides an opportunity for adaptive practice” (Jarzabkowski 2004, 530). By identifying the usefulness of practice, researchers are given the tools to work across levels of analysis and assert linkages that were previously obscured. “Moreover, they recognize that the seeming minutiae of this human activity...are linked to and may reinforce wider social phenomena that lie far outside the organizational domain” (Whittington 2006, 616). The practice turn directs our attention at the intersection of theory and practice through a dialectical approach to human rights research.

The human rights practice turn bridges the gap between the social context of community, the practical activities of advocates, and the subjective characteristics of actors and their work (Whittington 2006, 615–616). Researchers working from a practice perspective emphasize the importance of the interventions of human rights advocates for our general understanding of human rights law and norms. The efforts of advocates and activists in securing human rights victories through public pressure and ultimately institutional reform are the practical expressions of moral ideals. Interpreting and translating norms into action requires real people to make sensible decisions on the grassroots level, keeping in mind resource constraints and opportunity costs. Struggling for recognition demands groups vocalize their plight to unfamiliar and unsympathetic audiences. Framing matters. Strategy matters. Politics matter. Transnational NGOs serve as interlocutors between the international and local, embedding their practices with particular value. Through these various processes, human rights ideas take shape in the material world and come to make a difference in the lives of the marginalized.

In a general sense, social practice constitutes a set of issues that practitioners have long understood and continue to deal with regularly; that scholars are late to the party should come as no surprise. Increasingly paying attention to the practice of human rights enables scholars to participate in

the work itself by critically analyzing strategies and tactics, and proposing better ways forward. This engagement should produce future partnerships between universities, NGOs, and philanthropic foundations as a natural outgrowth of the practice approach. Conducting research in this area permits academics to descend from their ivory towers and get their hands dirty in the practical world. That scholarship should focus on the point of contact, where the work is done in all its glorious and mundane detail, is a lesson that human rights can continue to learn from other fields that have pioneered a practice turn.

Human Rights as Social Practice

Over the course of the evolution of scholarship on human rights advocacy—from supporting to principled to pragmatic actor—there is a clear trend toward increased depth of analysis into the functioning of NGOs and coalitions (see table 1.1). What I call here “the practice turn” in human rights attempts to capture this trajectory: a great distance from the early, narrow focus on international institutions and nation-states, a strand in human rights research today is geared towards exploring human rights practice where it happens, in new spaces and across new terrains. This requires ethnographic studies of organizations themselves (Hopgood 2006; Stroup 2012; Wong 2012) and case studies that examine the way that human rights ideas are translated for diverse audiences and vocabularies.

Several of the chapters in this volume provide distinct and nuanced glimpses into that process: Barbara Frey examines the power differentials that exist among human rights advocates in Mexico (chapter 7); Kristi Kenyon focuses on language and the localization of human rights discourse in Botswana (chapter 6); and Paul Nelson surveys the coalitions of resistance against the privatization of water across three continents (chapter 5). These contributions exemplify how the practice turn compels empirical investigation that tests key concepts and assumptions within the human rights literature, including universalism and cultural relativism, framing and

Table 1.1 Generations of scholarship on human rights advocacy

	<i>NGOs as</i>	<i>With reference to</i>	<i>Level of analysis</i>
First generation	Supporting actors	International law	System
Second generation	Principled actors	State action	Nation-state
Third generation	Pragmatic actors	Opportunity costs	Sector
Fourth generation	Complex actors	Social context	Practice

agenda-setting, mobilization and outreach, and the ethics and efficacy of the human rights project. Emphasizing the social practice of human rights enables scholars to examine human rights from below, how the norms are literally diffused through societies, articulated in social movements, and manifested in workable policies that potentially make a difference in the lives of actual people.

Thus, issues related to media and communication have already occupied a major position in this emerging program. Research into the relationship between media and information politics has sought to describe how NGOs shape media coverage (Ramos et al. 2007) and how NGOs select their casework (Ron et al. 2005). Examining press releases and country reports, scholars test hypotheses that correspond to commonly held expectations about advocacy; for instance that media focuses on the “worst” crises. By primarily using quantitative methods and discourse analysis tools, this research is effective in penetrating certain myths about human rights advocacy, but remains limited by its own framework (for a critique, see Rodio and Schmitz 2010). Focus on the communicative features of human rights promotion is one central plane of this research agenda.

Addressing questions about how NGOs engage in storytelling and narrative construction requires delving into discursive practices and utilizing sociological and cultural lenses. Examining diverse texts—literary, visual, and others—permits scholars to think about how meaning is imparted through messaging. As well, this approach opens space for investigating the ethics of representation in the context of a transnational campaign: for instance, what are the obligations of an NGO that records and translates the story of a victim for a global audience? Furthermore, controversies emerge when the content of the narrative utilizes emotional pleas, or when its claims embellish or selectively deploy the facts. Recently, Invisible Children’s KONY 2012 campaign became the target of such accusations and the subject of contested debate among observers (Gregory 2012; Harding 2012; Taub 2012). In this volume, Alexandra C. Budabin explores the way spokespersons affect the message in her chapter on celebrities as advocates (chapter 4).

Increasingly, literature on human rights practice involves practitioners on both sides of the equation: as productive researchers (Becker 2012) and as a primary audience. After all, this is a central purpose of social practice literature—to inform and influence the sphere of action that is the subject of inquiry. In order to make a positive difference in the world, scholarship must seek to inform practice with reasoned arguments anchored in theory and ideas; a praxis orientation is key to social practice. To this end, core human rights strategies have been taken up by researchers and dissected. In particular, naming and shaming, as the preeminent advocacy tactic, has

received disproportionate but welcomed attention (Hafner-Burton 2008; Murdie and Davis 2012; Murdie and Peksen 2014). How and when this works should, hopefully, determine how and when it is used. The chapter from Kyla McEntire, Michele Leiby, and Matthew Krain broadens the spectrum by conducting experiments on framing that offers much needed empirical evidence on fundraising appeals and calls to action (chapter 3). Testing assumptions of human rights advocates will demonstrate that some fundamental notions turn out to be routinely unsuccessful or perhaps even harmful. At that point, social practice becomes a ripe venue for critique.

This is precisely where the practice turn in human rights may be able to have its greatest impact. Opening space for critique allows the community to transcend cognitive blinders that assume all efforts in human rights and humanitarianism are simply and obviously net positive—that doing something is always better than doing nothing, as if good intentions and moral imperatives protect practitioners from accountability. The torchbearers of this critique lean heavily on their predecessors, particularly David Rieff (2003) and David Kennedy (2005). More recently, important contributions from Samuel Moyn (2010) and Stephen Hopgood (2013) demand that central assumptions about human rights ideas be reconsidered. Indeed, there is and should be rigorous debate around these issues because in fact human dignity and action in its defense are very controversial. These debates continue with writing from Alex de Waal (chapter 2) following closely from earlier work (1997; 2008) and the chapter by Mark Lagon and Anthony Arend who call into question the concept of dignity and the work it does in human rights discourse (chapter 10). That advocacy produces unintended consequences at times, or that short-term trade-offs may be at the expense of long-term gains, must be among the topics that are fair game for social practice scholars. Insulating advocacy NGOs from critique serves no purpose while exposure can hope to improve outcomes dramatically.

Not confined to the universe of NGOs, however, the practice turn in human rights engages with ongoing debates in international affairs. Natalie Hudson's chapter pushes back on the human security agenda by questioning whether or not there is actually value added in framing women's human rights under the banner of security (chapter 9), while Carrie Booth Walling investigates the evolving role for international organizations in her research on the UN Security Council as a venue for human rights advocacy (chapter 8). In important ways, the volume reminds readers that NGOs continue to challenge dominant thinking and influence power brokers to live up to their obligations. The practice turn does not replace that which came before it, but rather supplements research programs in human rights. Institutions certainly continue to be relevant, but this volume simply testifies to the

necessity to expand the scope of investigation. Studying advocacy through a social practice lens recommends we diligently produce work that has something to say about the lived experiences of people in the world, particularly those confronting cruelty and repression.

Conclusion

Despite the thin analogy at the outset, practicing human rights is not like practicing medicine, but perhaps certain parallels bear reiterating. Transnational human rights advocacy in the twenty-first century is the work of a professionalized sector, housed within hierarchical institutions, whose workers are trained at major graduate schools. The human rights community employs standardized responses to crisis that ostensibly improve with technological advancements. Skills and tactics are disseminated throughout the community and shared through professional networks. NGOs conduct triage on human suffering, hoping to do no harm, guided by a specific value system. Yet, grassroots coalitions and indigenous movements continue to operate from the flanks, occupying crucial space in the human rights universe. At the risk of overplaying the medical metaphor, traditional human rights practitioners of this variety retain their reliance on homegrown homeopathic remedies that are tried and true and effective in many circumstances.

Unlike medical practice, however, there is only a veneer of central oversight governing human rights advocacy. No boards of certification, no insurance, no developed fields of ethical inquiry. Indeed, it often appears that human rights advocacy is more like juggling than brain surgery. Although recently, NGOs, bar associations, and universities have begun working out stricter methodological guidelines for human rights fact-finding and investigation (NYU School of Law 2014). The practice perspective proposed here and instantiated in the chapters describes an approach to scholarship that attends to the space where human rights norms take form in the lived experiences of ordinary people and the processes by which they are pursued. Social practice research places the activities of the human rights movement under a microscope and permits scholars to participate in advocacy by serving as engaged observers. Constructive critique will be an indispensable tool for improving outcomes by contributing to a self-reflective and engaged community of human rights defenders.

Indeed, social practice scholarship can serve as a source of immanent critique and hold up a mirror to the human rights community. Thirty-five years ago, resonant calls were issued for researchers to tread precisely this path: “While academic study frequently appears several steps removed from actual political struggle, the hope is that social scientists can play at least

some small part in that struggle by helping to elucidate the politics of human rights protection” (Forsythe and Wiseberg 1979, 24). But this is a two-step process. First, focus attention on spaces of human rights practice, and then transmit findings to practitioners. Social practice research demands that scholars place themselves in dialogue with human rights professionals and position their work for maximal absorption in nontraditional venues (which may carry implications for academic publishing norms). If we are serious about overseeing the erosion of boundaries within the human rights community, then we must think deeply about how to improve communication across areas. If academics expect to influence the work of practitioners and serve as legitimate partners in constructive critique, then there must be a more sustained attempt at effective transmission of research findings and analysis.

Whether scholarship succeeds in cutting through conventional divisions within the human rights universe remains to be seen. What is clear is that the advocacy community broadly construed stands at a tipping point: having challenged mainstream geopolitical positions during the Cold War and risen to prominence in the era of globalization, what will its future role be? In the context of new emerging world powers, how will human rights norms translate? If America continues its decline, will Western NGOs falter without a hegemon to support its operations? Will the professionalization of advocacy lead to a further dilution of the subversive claims at the core of human rights? As popular culture and social media saturate our lives, will human rights demands be folded in as just another charitable cause to follow and retweet? The answers to these questions are contained within future research conducted from a social practice perspective. This volume sets the stage for a program of inquiry well situated to produce meaningful intellectual investigations that directly bear on the protection of human dignity.

Notes

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1. This quip “practice makes permanent” was imparted to me by a high school wrestling coach and math teacher, Glenn Pazinko. Mr. Pazinko always cautioned us that in order to be effective, practicing itself was insufficient because one could be reinforcing bad habits. *How* one practiced was at least as important as *whether* one practiced.