

2-25-2000

Psychological Pathways to Minimizing Human Rights Violations Against Children

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2000) "Psychological Pathways to Minimizing Human Rights Violations Against Children," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 8 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol8/iss8/4>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Psychological Pathways to Minimizing Human Rights Violations Against Children

Author: Editor

Volume: 8

Issue: 8

Date: 2000-02-25

Keywords: Children, Human Rights, United

Abstract. This article identifies several psychological pathways that governments and human rights organizations can employ to minimize human rights violations against children.

According to The New York Times, the United Nations (UN) is beginning to assign full-time advocates of children to UN operations centers (peacekeeping and the like) throughout the world. One has been assigned to Sierra Leone and one or two others are to be assigned to Congo. The population from which advocates are to be drawn include individuals from within the UN and outside it--e.g., private relief organizations. The goal of this initiative is to minimize human rights violations against children--viz., children as slaves, soldiers, targets of political and military violence, and as individuals bereft of basic assets such as food, shelter, clothing, education, and at least rudimentary physical and mental health support.

Although the intent of the initiative is admirable, one must ponder how effective the initiative might be and the psychological routes through which it can be effective. Advocates can attempt to influence the cognitions, emotions, motives, and behaviors of many political groupings. Many of these groupings have at least one direct route to impeding human rights violations of children--e.g., engaging in a behavior (providing personnel, money, materiel, and/or information) with a direct impact on impeding violations. And all of these groupings have at least one indirect route to impeding these violations--e.g., influencing attitudes about violations leading to behaviors that impede violations. The most significant political groupings include authorities of (1) local, regional, and national governments; (2) bilateral and multilateral governmental organizations comprising representatives from the governments in (1); (3) nongovernmental humanitarian organizations; (4) other nonstate actors including military, paramilitary, and civilian organizations that actually perpetrate or can impede human rights violations of children.

The core of the effectiveness of the UN initiative will reside in its applied political psychology. Advocates of UN advocates of children should now focus their efforts on developing psychological techniques that will truly work on hearts and minds throughout the globe--i.e., to effect a taboo that does not concurrently harbor the temptation to violate it. (See Cohn, J. (1998). Violations of human rights in children and adolescents. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 10, 185-192; Crossette, B. (February 18, 2000). Advocates for children joining U.N. peacekeeping missions. *The New York Times*, p. A 8; Davenport, C. (1999). Human rights and the democratic proposition. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 43, 92-116; Staerkle, C., Clemence, A., & Doise, W. (1998). Representation of human rights across different national contexts: The role of democratic and non-democratic populations and governments. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 207-226.)(Keywords: Children, Human Rights, United Nations.)