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The Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists: Challenges in Finding a Language Together*

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ABSTRACT The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists is a welcome step toward identifying and professionally acting on internationally shared concerns and aims. However, challenges come with coordinating what it means in different cultures, particularly given that different conceptions of professional helping, psychology, and research are practised across cultures. This paper examines those challenges and proposes some process ethics for extending the dialogues of international psychologists as they keep the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles 'alive' as an aspirational language. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: ethics, globalization, psychology

Ethics is anarchic metapolitics. (Critchley, 2007, 130)

The recent adoption of the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles for Psychologists affords a unique and ongoing opportunity to engage psychologists, internationally, in dialogues about shared concerns and aspirations. What is particularly unique about this psychological initiative is that the principles involved translate differently to different cultural contexts. Despite its title, no universal claims or expectations are asserted in any absolute sense. Instead, the Universal Declaration of Ethical Principles (UDE) can be seen as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue on aims and concerns that matter to psychologists and to the public they serve. At worst they could be seen as moving international psychological practice toward a code of standards that constrains or overrides needed international variations of practice. At best, the UDE can help to keep psychologists dialogically focused on what they want and don't want for the profession and those it aims to help. This paper will focus on the challenges of talking globally while practising locally – in ways that reflect the diverse meanings and practices of psychologists and clients.

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BACKGROUND

Simon Critchley (2007) suggests that ethics are borne out of disappointments that are differently articulated in religious or political language, and as a result of cultural processes associated with either language. What moves Critchley's ethics of disappointment toward either form of language or conversational trajectory are two framing questions: a question of meaning (religious) or question of justice (political). In a sense, the UDE can be understood as a conversational project perhaps animated by both questions. But, staying with Critchley, what has disappointed psychologists enough to talk amongst themselves across the globe about their common ethical aspirations? Are aspirations necessarily the products of disappointments searching for religious or political answers?

The UDE's initial articulation sprung from the dialogues of Canadian psychologists (Pettifor, Sinclair and Strong, 2005), which found further articulations through feedback and input in international cross-cultural dialogues at psychological conferences and meetings (cf., Gauthier, 2006). The processes have been both responsive and inclusive and in some ways that parallel the kinds of big picture, critically responsive, discourse building one associates with thinkers like Habermas (e.g., 2005). For Habermas, conversationally moving toward a common discourse is a rational and inclusive process requiring assertions, justifications, and revisions as language is negotiated into accepted articulations embraced by those using it. But, associated with Habermas' prescription for ever improving discourses are 'discourse ethics', ways of openly discussing the rational merits of what is included and excluded by such discourses. The UDE, seen as a textual accomplishment, can be seen as a crystallization of the ethical discourse initiated by Pettifor and Sinclair, and furthered by Gauthier in international dialogue.

It can help to step back from these dialogues, and the present UDE, to reflect on what has been conceived to be under conversational construction. For the most part, psychologists have used language in ways that sometimes raise alarm for critical psychologists (for example, Rose, 1990; Prilleltensky, 1994; Gergen, 1999) who have embraced insights from linguistic and discourse theorists, like Foucault, Gadamer, or later Wittgenstein. Language, for these psychologists, is anything but a neutral way of articulating understandings or aspirations. Language mobilizes particular social actions, while obscuring other possible articulations and forms of collective action. For philosopher Ian Hacking (1999) psychologists have used language in ways that profoundly (and transiently) shape cultural and psychological realities. Conceptualizing problems as primarily occurring inside people, as characterological deficits, is but one example that almost goes unquestioned in lay and professional circles nowadays. Hermeneutic scholars of psychology, like Philip Cushman (1995), suggest an even broader consideration, pointing to how problems shift with their historical and cultural moments. It is this hermeneutic dimension that in my view most merits consideration, particularly since psychologists are used to using words like 'universal' in ahistoric and acultural ways.

The dialogues that come to shape professional and cultural realities have a temporal quality about them that Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) described as centripetal and centrifugal. He equated centripetal dialogue with tendencies toward converging on singular prescriptive meanings and ways of relating whereas centrifugal dialogues enable differences to be discussed without such a convergence. It was in this sense that the

postmodern provocateur, Jean Baudrillard (2001), warned of the dangers of 'la singularité' in speaking about trends toward converging on globalization as a discourse after September 11, 2001. In Bakhtin's era, dialogues in his home country went from socialist utopian to Stalinist monologue overnight, with Bakhtin himself sent to the Russian Gulag for daring to write in centrifugal ways. My point is that the convergence of international ethical discourse into the present UDE needs to be seen through historical and temporal lenses as a discursive project that might similarly wax and wane.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS AS A 'HOMING DEVICE'

Consistent with some of psychology's other constructions, the UDE has been centripetal in its articulation but will likely be centrifugal in its international influence. Efforts to conceptualize psychology's subject matter — the behaviours, thoughts and feelings of individuals — can hardly be seen as taken up uniformly around the globe (Kirmayer, 2007). Robust and highly varied discussions occur internationally about how to regard people and be helpful to them despite strong centripetal efforts to anchor psychological understandings and practices in a discourse of psychopathology and evidence based scripts of intervention. Following Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic views, such articulations or utterances matter; however, what are at least as important are the responses to them and how those responses are in turn responded to. Gadamer (1988) might say that this is how hermeneutic circles of dialogue can avoid becoming vicious circles. The UDE, in my view, should not aim for final words; instead, it could beneficially serve as a discursive 'homing device' for psychologists' ongoing dialogues about ethical practice. By 'homing device' I refer to the notion that our UDE or ethical home, as we articulate it, should be considered a transitory product of our historic-cultural circumstances, being oriented and responded to as such.

As a 'homing device', the UDE provides a catalyst for further dialogue. The process leading to its present articulation and adoption has already brought together psychologists from diverse cultural backgrounds who have given shape and animating force to the words of the UDE. While I shall not address the specific wording of the UDE, its ethical language raises inescapable tensions that can keep people in unfinalizable dialogues that, in Judith Butler's sense: 'Language remains alive when it refuses to "encapsulate" or "capture" the events and lives it describes' (1997, 9). For example, notions of competent caring change in light of developments in research and clinical practice. While the UDE leaves open what constitutes competent caring to determination at national or other levels of professional regulation, its present articulation also invites the kind of further dialogue that might still lead to further refinements of the UDE. This should not be seen as a case of getting things right in ways that are intended to arrive at 'final' articulation of the UDE but leaves open the notion that new concerns and aspirations can result from its present articulation.

Criticism or deconstruction is one half of the creative process of putting our best language to what amounts to a moving discursive target. That target can be seen as moving in the hermeneutic sense described earlier, and the responses to the UDE change the discursive target itself. The articulation of homosexuality as a mental disorder in earlier editions of

the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders serves as an example of what I am describing. The resulting determinations that led to its exclusion in later editions of the DSM were, as its principal author, Spitzer (1981) indicated, questions of value decided in political ways. But, there can be a productive tension that can keep psychologists engaged in arguing both sides of a common ethical debate: arguing for a universal ethics while responding from local considerations of ethics. This kind of productive polarity is what Kelso and Engstrom (2006) referred to as having a 'complementary nature' requiring 'coordination dynamics' - through interactions that engage with and build from the differences. In this regard, the UDE should be seen as international psychology's best effort to articulate ethical principles as it engages its critics in making it more reflective of the discipline and the people it serves. Seeing the UDE as a 'homing device' promotes its consideration and revision as a moving discursive target that is transformed by how it is responded to. However, when one side of the centripetal/centrifugal dialogue turns legislative, the aliveness of people and language Butler described earlier can become ossified. In a sense, the UDE aims for a new internationally shared tradition. So, psychologists should be mindful of Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) notion of 'vital traditions' - that, they are kept that way through argument and negotiation.

THE UDE AS CULTURAL RORSCHACH

What can keep documents and dialogues on the UDE alive is the diversity of interpretations brought to them. In my training as a discourse analyst (cf., Wooffitt, 2005) a recurring mantra was that the meaning of any message is what one's conversational partner does in response to it. This can be frustrating for people who hold that meanings inhere (or should inhere) in the words used to convey them. For Bakhtin (1981, 1984) meanings are negotiated in the sense that each word has claims of meaning from prior use (Bakhtin went so far as to say one 'rents' words from prior discourse), while one's conversational partners have claims on the meaning of such words as well. It is in negotiating differences over meaning — what discourse analysts have referred to as the 'stakes' of dialogue (Potter, 1996) — that words come alive.

The hermeneutic scholar, Hans-George Gadamer (1988) wrote of dialogue partners as bringing different cultural horizons of meaning to conversational exchanges, and that shared understandings amounted to a 'fusion of horizons'. Among literary theorists (reader-response theory; for example Fish, 1980), there similarly has developed a view of readers as taking away their own meanings from texts, such as the UDE. This kind of relativism over meaning has been a source of much cultural and interpersonal conflict, both within cultures and between them. As Gadamer (1988) went to great lengths to point out, meaning and understanding cannot be understood in some absolute or correct way. Theologians have more than historically proven that interpretation always owes something to one's locatedness (cf. Bhabha, 2004). Or, to use Gadamer's terminology, the horizon of understanding one brings to interpreting any utterance or text. Truth, in this regard, is found in contexts where different histories, languages and evaluative criteria are brought to bear (Lynch, 2001). At issue, of course, is how such differences in understanding can be reconciled in the document and dialogues pertaining to the UDE.

THE UDE AND ITS INSTITUTIONAL UPTAKE

In discourse and dialogue theory, one can see what is accomplished according to what the parties involved 'take up' (Wooffitt, 2005). This view is quite different than metaphorically seeing dialogues as exchanges of information involving accuracy of transmission and reception (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The discourse and hermeneutic view I bring to understanding the UDE and its uptake internationally is that interpretive work is required to align differences in meanings to adequately meet the intentions of all involved in the UDE's articulation and use.

For sociologist, Bruno Latour (2005), social organization is built from associations people collectively take up as they engage in dialogues and with documents. Latour sees messages, like that of the UDE, taken forward by 'intermediaries' – the means of communicating them – but then such messages are *translated* and applied by 'mediators' in ways that may be inconsistent with a message's articulators' meanings. If such messages come to inform practice, they tend to be administered in 'centres of calculation'. In the case of psychologists, this would be where regulatory bodies come into the picture, and these bodies are frequently charged with the dual responsibility of promoting appropriate application of the message, and countering inappropriate applications. Ultimately, Latour is referring to how language, such as that of the UDE, comes to be interwoven with the social practices, to become social reality.

Researchers have tried to make evident this link between languages, social practices, and institutional realities. Institutional ethnographer, Dorothy Smith's (2005) writing highlights in reverse how institutions come to be dominated and coordinated by particular social practices; practices organized by textual language (e.g., forms, policies, reporting procedures). In this sense, institutional ethnography offers a 'shopfloor' examination (Garfinkel, 2002) of how language is used in micro-social ways that shape social institutions. Because each institution emphasizes particular values, and interactions around them, in its own language, Smith refers to such institutional constructions of reality as 'blob ontologies'. 'Blob ontologies' denote how significance and significant interactions are coordinated by particular institutional articulations and uses of language. The DSM-IV for mental health practice would illustrate an institutional language and its potentially exclusive (i.e., lacking in viable alternatives) coordinating effects on understanding and practice.

What matters most to institutional ethnographers are 'ruling relations' (Smith, 2005) and how these enable but also constrain particular uses of language and social interaction. Ruling relations refer to the potential binding power of language should it become used in exclusory ways. The shopfloor of psychological dialogues – with clients, between professors and students, at psychology conferences, etc – is where the cutting edge work of our discipline occurs. One concern of institutional ethnographers is the inherent conservative and prescriptive nature of institutional discourses, for abetting 'ruling relations' that constrain possibilities for dialogues. Instead, differences keep languages, such as that of the UDE, alive. Said another way, related to Baudrillard's concerns about *la singularité*, the UDE needn't become a closed monologue.

COORDINATION DYNAMICS: DIFFERENCES AND STABILITIES

The politics of becoming requires specific conditions of possibility. (Connolly, 1996, 263)

The words of postmodern political philosopher, William Connolly (1996), point to inherent tensions that could accompany global adoption and further articulation of the UDE, tensions Connolly referred to as a 'politics of becoming'. Janel Gauthier (2006) is to be commended for helping to bring to its present articulation and international acceptance. At the same time, such good work can problematically ossify into the kinds of concerns raised by Dorothy Smith: as professional dialogues are increasingly overtaken by overdetermined language that constrains future dialogue on ethical practice. There is a tendency among Western institutions to enshrine their aspirations in fetishized language that eventually fossilizes, to the detriment of all. American Supreme Court judges are now being held by a sizable constituency to how faithfully they interpret the US constitution in terms of the meanings that constitution had when it was developed over 200 years ago. Similar literalist arguments fuel fundamentalists wanting a particular interpretation of the Bible or Ouran to use other examples. Documents, like religious texts, constitutions, or declarations of ethical principles were not intended to be fossilized but the words that animate their articulation and use are, for hermeneutic scholars, contemporaneous with the values and concerns of their day. Such documents cannot articulate what is over the next cultural and historical horizon (Gadamer, 1988), much like the framers of the American constitution could scarcely have anticipated the Internet. A 'politics of becoming' requires lots of dialogue to keep aspirational documents like the UDE alive and sufficiently inclusive for those embracing its use.

For Zygmunt Bauman (1993), significant concerns arise when the moral impulses that prompt particular articulations of ethics get codified. At that point a number of themes raised in this paper can converge: ruling relations, regulated cultural monologues, and dialogues that lose the vital unfinalizable quest for optimal language. From such a standpoint, what are needed are dialogues that *engage* tensions over difference; the kinds of interactions Kelso and Engstrom refer to as requiring respect for 'coordination dynamics'. Here is what they mean:

In coordination dynamics, where apartness and togetherness coexist as a complementary pair – where a whole is a part and a part is a whole – there are no equilibria, *no fixed points at all*. Nor are the dynamics necessarily chaotic. Instead, the vast metastable world between extremes contains only *tendencies* – preferences and dispositions. In coordination dynamics, polar extremes represent ideal states of affairs while reality lies in the world between those poles. (Kelso and Engstrom, 2006, 10, original italics)

Translated to the dialogues that support the UDE and its continued articulation, coordination dynamics refers to how to keep the 'between' of dialogues over cultural differences about the UDE going. As Gauthier (2006) has indicated, there is no colonial aim with the UDE; its principles are intended to be seen as resources for cultural groups, not as invariant disciplinary prescriptions. But, some share a concern raised by Axel Honneth (1995): any effort to 'move forward' invariably encounters resistance that can either be seen as legitimate and recognizable; or it can be suppressed as a nuisance to discursive and professional progress. Recognized as legitimate, such resistance is grist for the dialogic mill – evidence that dialogue and its articulations have been insufficiently inclusive. Seen otherwise, one is back to 'ruling relations' and colonization. Dialogic relations in the way Vygotsky (1978) intended are both tools and results; it is difficult to separate process from product, unless

one freezes the dialogic process. In a tangentially related way, Ferdinand de Saussure (1966, originally published in 1915) wrote of differences between 'langue' (the words of language) and 'parole' (how such words are used and spoken in dialogic interaction). The key point here is that dialogues about the UDE – whether about its further articulations or applications of its present wording in differing cultural contexts – can continuously yield new language and new ways of relating as the UDE is spoken of and responded to. Without such an approach to the langue/parole of UDE it fossilizes, raising the perhaps overstated concerns of Lyotard, who wrote in a much different context: 'To arrest the meanings of words once and for all, that is what Terror wants' (1993, 87).

How can psychologists avoid becoming Lyotard's discursive terrorist? The simple answer is to remain in responsive dialogue with respect to emergent differences over the UDE and its application. Responsive dialogue is reciprocally influential on its participants and it requires engaging with and incorporating those differences over meaning and application. Psychologists, for having acquired expert knowledge or cultural status, are sometimes loath to engage in such open-ended dialogues, but surely the UDE is uncharted territory. Years ago, solution-focused therapy originator, Steve deShazer (1984) wrote that therapists would be better served if they saw the construct of 'resistance' die an ignoble death. This client-centred response aimed to counter a prominent view at that time that professional expertise was thwarted when clients wanted a say on their dialogues with therapists. In this paper, and borrowing from Butler, Honneth and Lyotard, resistance has been depicted as important to what keeps dialogues about developments like the UDE alive. But for such dialogues to occur, they need what Shotter (1993) referred to as a providential space, or what Heideggerian-inspired writers Spinosa, Flores and Dreyfus (1997) referred to as a disclosive space.

The kind of conversational space these writers are referring to is one where differences are welcomed and shaping of the dialogues taking place within them. For discussions of a cross-cultural nature, this requires a particular kind of dialogue that Spinosa et al. (1997) refer to as 'involving interpretive speaking'. Interpretive speaking involves conversational partners being: (1) true to their cultural groups, (2) acknowledging and respectful of differences with other cultural groups, and (3) open to cross-appropriating practices and ideas from other cultures (p. 99). If one's mind wanders to the seeming impotence of the United Nations at times, in reading this, it can help to think of the converse where differences are talked over, and where cultures stay conservative or chauvinist about their traditions and understandings. Returning to Lyotard (Lyotard and Thebaut, 1985), there can be no 'metalanguage' that puts such cultural differences to rest. Instead, he turns to the religiously provocative word 'pagan' to remind readers that it can be helpful to step back from one's beliefs and language at times, to see the kind of faith or commitment that resistance from others can highlight as a commitment to such beliefs and language. At the bottom of such concerns is how to 'go on', in Wittgenstein's (1953) sense, in productive dialogue, without cultural, professional, and other differences taking over the dialogue. Attempts to disengage from dialogue, impose meanings, or claim final say on the process and outcomes of dialogue are all concerns for a dialogic ethics (Strong and Sutherland, 2007) that aims to be inclusive and forward moving. The UDE, at best, invites dialogue, and coordination of differences in meaning in how it collectively is taken forward.

'FINAL' WORDS ON THE UDE AND ITS DISCURSIVE CHALLENGES

'Shall', 'will', and 'if', circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden centre or nucleus of potentiality, are the pass-words to hope. (Steiner, 2001, 7)

I want to conclude by reflecting on the aspirational intent of the UDE, having said perhaps too much about the dangers that might accompany its meanings and uses if fossilized. As Steiner indicated in the words above, great hope can accompany articulations of ethics. The UDE comes out of tireless efforts by Canadian psychologists like Jean Pettifor, Carole Sinclair and Janel Gauthier. It has not been the case that a particular legislative agenda is at work here, as can be seen by the openness of constructive dialogue that has led to the UDE's present articulation and international adoption. That said, the UDE can be seen as inviting ongoing dialogue on how psychologists can best serve the public and conduct themselves in the face of many countervailing forces and conversations that don't have the public's general good in mind. I share the view of many of the authors cited here that good dialogues are unfinalizable and, with that view comes a challenge of welcoming and coordinating differences over ethical meanings and practices. I hope psychologists welcome such discursive challenges as they keep their ethical dialogues, and the principles derived from them, alive.

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