

Human Rights and Responsibility of Scientists

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Academics and Human Rights

Because university education should promote responsibility to the profession, the purpose of this talk is to describe how human rights and science are wound together.

Few physical or life science students in the US are involved in human rights activities.

The 1970s was a high point of the human rights movement, even among scientists there used to be a great deal of activism, but it this activism declined in recent years.

Lebowitz, J.; Birman, J. L. “Professional Responsibilities and Human Rights at StatPhys19” *Physics Today* **1996**.

Breslow, R. “Developing Breadth and Depth of Knowledge: The Doctorate in Chemistry” Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA, 2006; pp 167.

Why Do Human Rights Matter?

In the context of university science education? Education by itself cannot guarantee that graduating science students will make ethical decisions.

Second World War showed that education alone was not enough to prevent human rights violations.

Science and engineering were applied to exterminate humans, e.g. the engineers who designed the gas chambers.

Pseudo-science of physicians and their treatment of concentration camp prisoners.

My Own Personal Motivation

Has to do with atrocities committed during WWII period of history, and people who have influenced me:

Holocaust survivors Joel Lebowitz*
 Walter Reich*
 Sophie Cook*
 Micha Tomkiewicz
 Roald Hoffmann

Soviet dissident Eugene Chudnovsky*

Four of which are with the

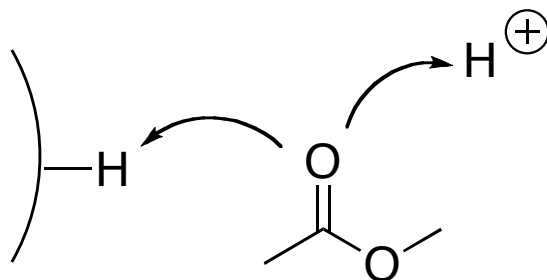


How are Human Rights Defined?

Specific definition: protection of academic freedom, helping the release of prisoners of conscience, freeing dissident scientists, preventing their executions

General concepts less tangibly connected to human rights: access to clean water, health care delivery, education opportunities, etc.

Resemblance to the organic chemistry concept of specific and general acid catalysis is intentional



The distinction of specific and general to human rights is elaborated, it does **not** mean individual vs collective as in self-determination

Specific vs General Distinction

Specific advocates directly on behalf of individuals who have suffered human rights abuses.

Response to late-breaking or immediate human rights violations. It is committed to protecting the rights of individuals.

General is different, defines the human rights landscape broadly by focusing on the rights of members of a society as a whole, and can be a worthy but often long range goal.

Specific vs general approaches to human rights, opinions as to which to adopt differ among scientific societies.

Committee of Concerned Scientists (CCS)

45-year old nonprofit organization of scientists, scholars, physicians who protect and advance **human rights and scientific freedom** of colleagues around the world

We write letters, circulate petitions, work with fellow human rights organizations

Past few years, CCS advocated on behalf of 200 individuals in ~30 countries including Bahrain, China, Egypt, Iran and others



- Origins come from restrictions of mobility and imprisonment of scientists in the Soviet Union

- Cases included in CCS jurisdiction – not only physicists or chemists

The Committee of Concerned Scientists and Scholars at Risk maintain websites with information on recent cases

Examples where CCS has protested

CCS has advocated on behalf of Prof. Ilham Tohti to reverse his sentence of life in prison for “separatism” based on non-violent opinions and teachings in China.

He still sits in jail for expressing his beliefs in a peaceful way; used Uighur teaching materials. A right guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

CCS protested the sentencing of seven of his students to prison terms of 3-8 years on charges of separatism.



Prof. Ilham Tohti
Photo: Voice of America

Engineer Abdul Jalil Al-Singace

CCS has advocated again on behalf of mechanical engineering professor and human rights activist Abdul Jalil Al-Singace in Bahrain.

He was arrested in 2011 and sentenced to life in prison solely on his expression of opinion.

Conditions in jail are inhumane.

He has held hunger strikes.



Prof. Abdul Jalil Al-Singace

Mathematician Boris Weisfeiler

CCS wrote to urge Chile to reopen the investigation to Boris Weisfeiler's disappearance.

He was a mathematics professor at Pennsylvania State University.

Evidence he was kidnapped, tortured and killed by the Chilean military in 1985 (during Augusto Pinochet's rule).

A judge of a Court of Appeals has recently closed this case.



Prof. Boris Weisfeiler
Photo: Leila Weisfeiler

Turkish Academics Who Signed a Petition

CCS wrote to request a US observer at court hearing for Turkish professors.

Turkish academics have been arrested and fired from jobs for signing a “Peace Petition”.

Signing of a petition requesting more humane treatment by the military of the Kurdish citizens.

CCS requested that the court hearing is fair and principles and international and human rights laws are adhered to.



Chemist Mohammad Rafiee-Fanwood

CCS wrote to the EU and Iran in behalf of Mohammad Rafiee-Fanwood, a retired chemistry professor who was arrested for peacefully expressing his political views.

He was convicted and a 6-year prison sentence was upheld by an appeals court in Iran.

He is detained in Evin Prison that may amount to ill-treatment in violation of the UN Mandela Rules for adequate treatment of prisoners.



Prof. Mohammad Rafiee-Fanwood
Photo: Wikipedia Commons

Effort to Release Omid Kokabee from Prison

CCS wrote several letters to Iran's Ayatollah Khamene'i requesting release from jail of Omid Kokabee, Iranian graduate student in optics at the University of Texas, who had returned to Iran to visit family.

He has been at Evin Prison for over 5 years and has been diagnosed with kidney cancer.

Brooklyn College student Alvaro Castillo assisted with electronic petitions.

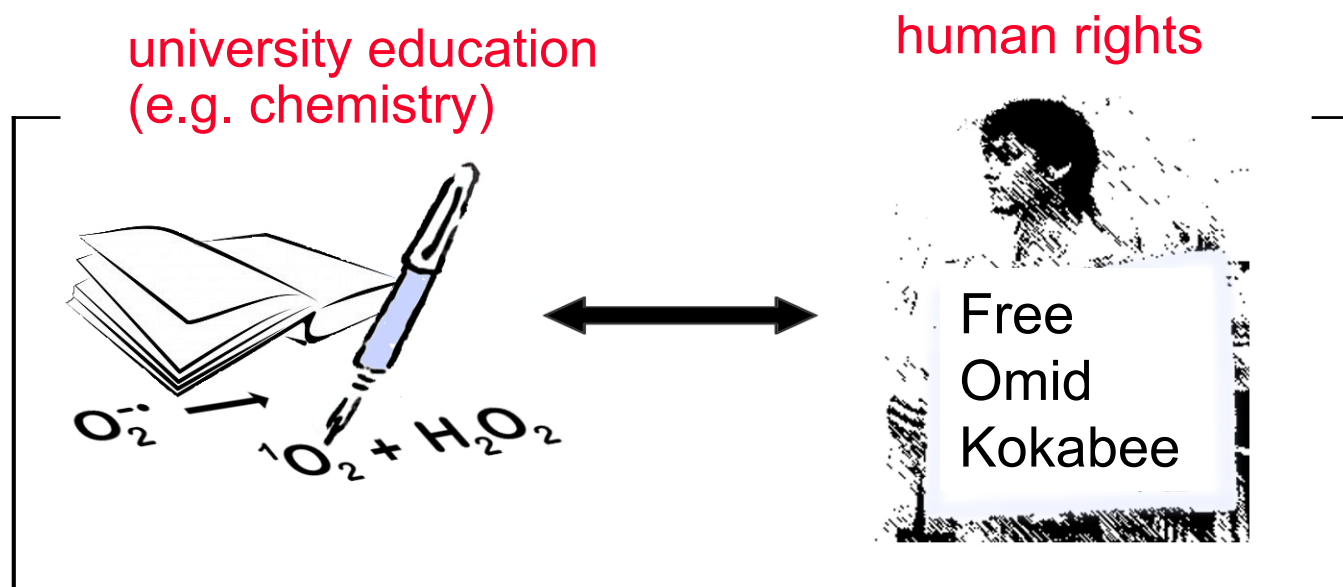


Omid Kokabee

Student Inna Abramova investigated human rights abuses of faculty in Colombia and Venezuela. Student bloggers have been recent targets.

Analogy of Human Rights Effort to the Organic Chemistry Concept of *Resonance*

- University education/human rights interface is unique
- Continuity and opportunities for those students graduating and seeking roles as life-long activists defending human rights



Conclusion

The incorporation of specific human rights problem solving can help diminish unchecked violations as a growing condition, which can advance to a larger scale end problem

Early intervention = enhanced security now

Instability, even war = later stage of human rights problems

Such specificity could fit scientists' research approach, which favors specialization and reductionism rather than Systems Thinking

Steinhardt, R. "The International Court of Justice" In *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008; pp 103.

Committee of Concerned Scientists (CCS)

Activism for scientists who are denied basic human rights.

Because concerns of human rights can be expressed at a professional and scientific level rather than a political level.



Acknowledgments

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