From It to Us:
Language Analysis on Human Rights Discourse in Australia, UK and US

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Introduction

We all want to believe ourselves creatures of logic and reason, swayed chiefly by the facts before us. But much of the mechanism used to process information and formulate judgments lies beyond our conscious awareness and outside our deliberate control. We can know only what we *think* that we think; experimental evidence shows that a turn of phrase, the ordering of an argument, and the size or color of a graphic can radically alter what we deem "true," how much we elect to get involved, and what we desire in terms of public policy.[1]

So, how should advocates promoting the well-being of people around the world put forth arguments about human rights? How do we make the case that the ideals and legal protections codified in human rights documents are critical? How do we use human rights as an effective counter against a rising tide of white nationalism that endangers the people already most at risk?

To begin to answer these questions, this report explores existing advocacy for human rights. The findings here emerge from analysis of a wide range of discourse from Australia, the US and UK, revealing the underlying assumptions and unconscious triggers that can incite or increase desire for honoring human rights and bolster support for the many policies contained under this umbrella. The present data set has over 2,000 tokens –unique constructions attesting to reasoning. Beyond the words of advocates, attorneys, and politicians both for and against human rights issues, the sample includes discourse from social media as well as popular culture via film, television, and music. Findings are also informed by empirical research for messaging on asylum, equity and immigration as well as explorations on persuasion, habit formation, emotion, and cognition by the author and other scholars.

What follows is a thematic exploration of the opportunities and obstacles for making a compelling case for human rights. Remarkably, the challenges catalogued here are largely common to the three countries considered. Where practices diverge, I note as much.

This document is admittedly heavy on diagnosis and light on cure – an inescapable aspect of this phase of research. Happily, the subsequent piece of research moves from this detailed examination of what falls short today toward crafting new language.

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[1] The most comprehensive, among many sources, on this is Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)

Methodology

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, I've examined how people reason, formulate judgments and come to conclusions about social, racial and economic matters.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging the common non-literal phrases in discourse. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity. Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as "true" about a concept.[2] Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what "ought" to be done about a given topic. We judge a metaphor's efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what advocates wish the public would get about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford University showed that individuals primed with a metaphor of crime as disease (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the metaphor of crime as opponent (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) thought harsher punishments were the answer.[3] For those working for prevention, these results suggest it best to liken crime to a disease and avoid opponent evocations. A 3-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

An entry point to examine how language shapes understanding and gives rise to a set of unconscious and, at times, unintended meanings, is exploration of *frame semantics*. A *frame,* in linguistics, acknowledges that words exist within and thus evoke pre-set packages of meaning, determined by our existing knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs. In short, words occur in contexts. As such, usage of even a single word brings with it a whole host of associated meanings, actors, and objects that come into "view" whether or not the speaker desires.

Ambiguity in the elements of what I'll call the HUMAN RIGHTS[4] frame demonstrates just how complex and under-specified the storyline about problem origins, desired solutions and potential outcomes.

We'll look first at the prevailing frames for human rights, both metaphorical and not. As we'll see, there's a tendency to imply HUMAN RIGHTS are pre-existing entities in a frame that often absents human agents that wield power over each other.

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[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2ⁿᵈ ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[3] Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning", *PloS One*, February 23, 2011.

[4] Throughout this document, SMALL CAPS indicate the conceptual frame evoked, not the word in its more conventional usage and meaning.

What are human rights?

These definitions of human rights are representative of the genre:

> Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.[5]

> Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death.

What's notable here is the absence of power imbalances or conflicting priorities. In short, it suggests HUMAN RIGHTS exists in an apolitical space where everyone is currently equal. While this may be due to the dictionary-like purpose of these particular sentences, the tendency to skirt power relations and competing desires is the norm in advocacy. Consider this representative set of organizational objectives:

> **We seek democratic control** over how resources are preserved, used and distributed and do so while honoring and respecting the rights of our Indigenous family.

> The purpose of [organization] is to teach youth about human rights, specifically the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and inspire them to become advocates for **tolerance and peace**.

> We direct general grants to **support human rights** around the world.

> Using litigation, education, and other forms of advocacy, the [organization] **works toward the day when the ideals of equal justice and equal opportunity will be a reality**.

> [Organization] is an independent, international organization that works as part of a vibrant movement to **uphold human dignity and advance the cause of human rights** for all.

> [Organization] aims to **improve the lives of migrants** and receiving communities in the UK by **informing public debate on migration** and creating welcoming communities.

The absence of opposing entities brings us into a realm of circular reasoning: "Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that all humans should be guaranteed." This common formulation is, at best, impenetrable and certainly not an effective rallying cry to galvanize the base nor persuade skeptics.

In the real world, human rights concerns exist where perpetrators of abuse and marginalized populations interact. When we don't explicitly name the power dynamic inherent in the relationships between victims of human rights abuses, perpetrators and by-stander populations, HUMAN RIGHTS sounds bureaucratic

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[5] Citations are intentionally omitted here as the purpose is to signal broadly applicable patterns, not impugn any organization or author for messaging issues.

and emotionless. This undercuts the high stakes of real life: the sometimes-lethal crises that large groups of people endure.

When we move out of self-identified human rights advocacy and into efforts to fight for civil rights and racial justice in the US, naming or at least implying antagonists is the norm:

> Despite **constant exploitation and perpetual oppression**, Black people have bravely and brilliantly been the driving force pushing the U.S. towards the ideals it articulates but has never achieved.

> While this platform is focused on domestic policies, we know that **patriarchy, exploitative capitalism, militarism, and white supremacy** know no borders.

> We reject false solutions and believe we can achieve a complete **transformation of the current systems**, which place profit over people and make it impossible for many of us to breathe.

> In their communities, they're subjected to **racial profiling and harassment by law enforcement** – and frequently forced to prove themselves innocent of immigration violations, regardless of their legal status.

> We demand a world where those **most impacted in our communities** control the laws, institutions, and policies that are meant to serve us – from our schools to our local budgets, economies, police departments, and our land – while recognizing that the rights and histories of our Indigenous family must also be respected.

The willingness to imply or even name conflicting forces is one element that sets US discourse apart. Granted, this may be due to the inclusion of what isn't classically regarded as *human rights* advocacy here. As you know, this framework is far more common abroad than domestically in the US. Thus, I've included discourse from the civil rights, racial justice, immigrant rights and women's rights movements that in Australia and the UK self-identify under the *human rights* banner.

Unsurprisingly, in popular culture across the countries included, we also find the need to oppose power structures instead of simply championing human rights in some uncontested space. Opposing forces, after all, are integral to moving a good story forward:

> Get Up, Stand Up
> Stand Up for Your Rights

> Don't you know, talking about a revolution sounds like a whisper
> Poor people gonna rise up and get their share
> Poor people gonna rise up and take what's theirs

> Gurindji were working for nothing but rations
> Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land
> And daily the pressure got tighter and tighter

Gurindji decided they **must make a stand**

And we all came America trying to get a lap dance from Lady Freedom
But now Lady Liberty is acting like Hilary Banks with a pre-nup
Man, I was brave, sailing on graves
Don't think I didn't notice those tombstones disguised as waves

Opponents to human rights aren't buying advocates' neutral tropes. Their objections are absolutely rooted in the struggle of opposing forces:

Rather, it is **SJWs** who style themselves as the **local Inquisition** and who have decided that everyone in Charlottesville must conform to their values and anyone who disagrees has no rights worthy of their respect.

Anti-White terrorists cannot handle the reality of losing power forever. Anti-fascist is a code word for anti-White.

Western Democratic institutions that are controlled via **a global corporatist and banking interest** are using the cultural Christian inheritance of the West and its teachings that have created the **modern human rights industry** and have wed these to institutions on the left like academia and media and are using witless pawns like antifa and Amnesty International to **help global finance import** a limitless number of new debt slaves into the West.

Because what **the little people** did, what **the ordinary people** did – what the **people who'd been oppressed** over the last few years who'd seen their living standards go down did – was they rejected **the multinationals**, they **rejected the merchant banks**, they rejected **big politics** and they said actually, we want our country back, we want our fishing waters back, we want our borders back.

I think you'll see a younger, more vibrant, energetic Ukip, campaigning not just to **get our country back** from Brussels, not just to control immigration sensibly with the Australian-style points system, but one that actually wants to see a fairer society that helps **those who are out there working hard** and trying their best to have a better life, and an electoral system that actually engages people and gets people thinking that when they vote, they might just get a Government and a Parliament that is representative of their views.

Theoretically founded on a principle of tolerance, the ideology of human rights thus reveals itself to be the bearer of the **most extreme intolerance**, of the most absolute rejection. The Declarations of Rights are not so much declarations of love as **declarations of war**.

The ADL, the SPLC, and other **hate groups** are doing their best to squash and/or criminalize dissent and are using censorship to **advance their sick leftist agenda**, much like they always have.

Human rights is also the only 'justification' for making the **most socially successful animals** 'serve' the **least socially successful animals**.

The reality of the intolerance of the **rainbow political movement** is starting to sink in as politicians use **brutal legislative force** to do the bidding of the rainbow political movement and **quash the possibility of dissent**.

Whether the enemies are named or merely implied, they are assuredly present. The opposition uses the language of *sides*, *battles* and *victory*. And, moreover, they employ direct address so the audience understands the threats as personal: "What are the extent of **your** rights going to be in this new order? Are **you** good enough to speak in the public square?"

The absence of power analysis in standard human rights discourse has helped bolster (or failed to curtail) a favored right-wing attack. Namely, that supporting and expanding human rights creates inequality. In this, human rights is in good company with feminism, anti-racism, LGBT rights and so on, as a purported means of bestowing unmerited goodies on select populations:

> Your natural right to freedom of speech or assembly is tangible and real. Government can protect it without infringing on someone else's rights. But trying to **guarantee a social group's right to something** inevitably puts them at odds with other groups, and both are reduced to petitioning political favors from government. A woman's right to freedom of speech is no less important than a man's, but that's because she's human, not because she's a woman.

> Had they been serious about defending humanism, liberalism and universalism, the rise of the alternative right might have been arrested. All they had to do was argue for common humanity in the face of **black and feminist identity politics**, for free speech in the face of the regressive **Left's censorship sprees**, and for universal values in the face of **left-wing moral relativism**.

> The regressive Left loudly insists that it stands for equality and racial justice while **praising acts of racial violence and forcing white people to sit at the back of the bus** (or, more accurately, the back of the campus — or in another campus altogether).

> They say they are **combating 'hate speech**,' but it is funny how no matter what **blacks, Jews and 3rd Worlders say about whites it is never 'hate speech,'** and no matter what whites say about non-whites, no matter how mild, no matter how measured, no matter how steeped in raw data or facts, it is always 'hate speech.'

> On a regular basis, the self-righteous press cries tragedy at the 'difficulties faced by illegal immigrants', **as if they were the victims** of racism and discrimination, and as if they had a spontaneous right to settle in our lands illegally and immediately benefit from employment and public relief.

> We are moving towards a system based on **different rights for different people**, based on their **membership of multicultural groups**.

To human rights advocates, it may seem unnecessary to note that the status quo is far from equitable. However, clearly this truism isn't universally recognized. And, in largely skipping past this, current discourse feeds beliefs that groups that are actually marginalized are seeking special status.

There are some examples demonstrating that advocates understand the need to articulate that human rights doesn't simply apply across the board, to everyone,

in the same way. Because HUMAN RIGHTS exists within a present-day deeply unequitable reality:

> Human rights for minorities simply ensure that minorities enjoy human rights **to the same level** as others in society
>
> **Vulnerable minorities are more likely to need** such protection because they are more likely to suffer from laws, policies or practices which adversely affect them.
>
> After all, majorities are more able to influence parliaments to protect and respect their rights, whereas **minorities can be neglected**.
>
> If human rights are left solely in the hands of Parliaments, **minorities may be required to wait patiently for majorities** to be motivated enough to prompt or tolerate change. That can take a long time, and leave many human rights abuses unaddressed along the way.

However, these are far from the norm. And, as they rely upon divisive and not necessarily accurate language (people of color are an oppressed <u>majority</u> in many places, as are women), it's unlikely these particular formulations are best. Nevertheless, we must offer our audiences a clear origin story for why human rights initiatives are required and must be targeted toward key groups and sanction specific actors.

In previous and ongoing research projects on talking about race, immigrant rights and equity in the US as well as about migrant rights in Australia, we explored how to best highlight targeted harms against specific groups. The most effective formulations begin in a shared value and move to highlighting inequities with clear causal agents.[6]

Human rights as elitism

The absence of power analysis in human rights advocacy leaves it open to another favored line of attack from opponents. Here, the charge is that the human rights community is part of a global elite oppressing an increasingly beleaguered white working class of "ordinary people":

> Think about those places of power. The US military, public education (academia), major corporations whether they're financial on the east coast, Silicon Valley, what have you. What do they all agree on? 'Diversity is good.' 'We're all the same.' 'We're one world.' 'C'mon man, we all bleed red.' You might think that that kind of limp liberalism is some kind of underdog perspective, that you're speaking truth to power by saying that nonsense. You are not speaking truth to power. The military-industrial complex agrees with you, so does every major corporation, so does the US government. **You are not speaking truth to power, you are power speaking**.
>
> The sad fact is that after the Civil War (or Caesarean takeover of America, whichever you prefer) the house slaves and their slave masters made a pact against the field negroes and the non-slave owning whites to work together to

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[6] See Shenker-Osorio, A., Messaging This Moment, Center for Community Change, 2017 for summary of effective tested messages from US and Words that Work for People Seeking Asylum, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2015 for messages from Australian testing.

> stay wealthy and in control of their self-perceived 'lessers.' It's basically elitism, in a nutshell.

> High immigration is only beneficial to **multinationals, banks and big business**, seeking a larger market while **everyday Australians suffer** from this massive intake. They are waiting longer for their life-saving operation. The unemployment queues grow longer—and even longer when government jobs are given priority to migrants.

Opponents to human rights are increasingly recasting themselves in the underdog position. And, as noted above, they're perfectly comfortable with the language of power struggle, competing forces, right and wrong.

And, in order to convince others that they're the oppressed group, they've turned a massive effort to enshrine and protect the rights of the most vulnerable into an all-powerful globalist effort to promote elite interests. To be sure, it's not HUMAN RIGHTS alone pilloried in this fashion. It's a larger ethos of openness to difference, willingness to change and adapt, recognition of inequity and so on.

Nevertheless, the increasing traction of the right-wing nationalism built, at least partially, on claims to fight for the little guy indicates there is hunger for this storyline. So why isn't HUMAN RIGHTS playing the hero in this tale?

HUMAN RIGHTS AS OBJECT vs. HUMAN RIGHTS AS ACTION

In addition to the lack of antagonist, there's a troubling tendency to reference HUMAN RIGHTS as a static OBJECT. This is true across the countries examined. This implies that HUMAN RIGHTS exist without need for human activities, when, of course, their realization requires continuous action:

> It's clear that President Trump and his administration is attempting to **roll back** civil and human rights across the board.

> When people have the power to **claim** their basic human rights, they can escape poverty – permanently.

> Human rights are **owed** by the State to the people - this means public bodies must respect your human rights and the Government must ensure there are laws in place so that other people respect your human rights too.

> They can never be **taken away**, although they can sometimes be restricted – for example if a person breaks the law, or in the interests of national security.

> Human rights are basic entitlements that **belong** to every one of us, regardless of our background, where we live, what we look like, what we think or what we believe.

Indeed, these formulations are so common it may seem impossible to imagine alternatives. However, instead of construing HUMAN RIGHTS as pre-fabricated THINGS, we could speak about them as ACTIONS.

In fact, we have examples of HUMAN RIGHTS AS ACTIONS already from advocates in all three countries:

> [Human rights] are **the choices we make** every day as human beings.

> We envision a world where all people **enjoy** their human rights **and live** with dignity, equality, and justice.

> Leading the promotion and protection of human rights in Australia by: **empowering all people** to understand and **exercise** their human rights.

> Young, old and everyone in between – Australians of all ages have the right **to be treated** fairly and to enjoy the same opportunities as others.

> [Organization's] vision is: **Achieving** rights, fairness and equality for our communities.

> A host of other rights can also **go unrealised** when the right to housing is threatened, including the rights to health, security, privacy, nutrition and education for their children.

> To make sure that human rights **mechanisms** are accessible and meaningful for both tenants and social landlords…

> [Human rights] **provide a means** for those who have been mistreated or failed by the system **to challenge** their treatment and **hold** authorities **to account**.

> People have the right **to be treated** with humanity if they are accused of breaking the law and are detained.

Fully embracing HUMAN RIGHTS AS DOING not being may require formulations that feel awkward. This is a less common way to speak about this topic. However, reanimating the conversation will require shifting our discourse from the familiar.

What seems problematic about likening HUMAN RIGHTS to OBJECTS is the suggestion of a static bundle of rights that one can "have." These remove HUMAN RIGHTS, once again, from the realm of interaction and decision-making by people in power.

Further, if someone can "take away" your human rights, it's challenging to construe them as internal to you. Yet advocates are often keen to underscore that HUMAN RIGHTS come from within each person. Consider, for example, this criticism of the recent Australian postal survey on marriage equality: "Deciding human rights issues on the basis of a voluntary postal response from some Australian voters is no way to respect those rights and ignores the fundamental principle that **human rights derive from our human dignity** and cannot be voted in or out of existence."

And, indeed, opponents are happy to contest the idea that HUMAN RIGHTS come from within:

Although both are universal, **natural rights** most emphatically **do not come from government**. Government only secures these rights, that is, creates the political conditions that allow one to exercise them. **Human rights**, as popularly understood, **are bestowed** by the state or governing body.

In addition, natural rights, being natural, do not change over time. All men, at all times, have had the same right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. **Human rights**, on the other hand, **constantly change**. A whole cottage industry has sprung up to advance a bevy of new 'economic and social rights' conceived of, defined by, and promoted by activists, governments, and international bureaucrats.

It's an empirical question whether claims that HUMAN RIGHTS are inherent versus bestowed better serve the advocacy cause. What's clear, however, from analysis and previous research are two things: First, it's critical to avoid mixed messages with direct assertions of rights as inherent undermined by sentence structures suggesting external fabrication. Second, if we're promoting a model of HUMAN RIGHTS as coming from external forces, it's all the more critical we bring relationships, power hierarchies and human decisions into our frame.

Human rights as individual

As you know, human rights fall into different sub-groupings some of which represent positive obligations governments have toward citizens and residents. Others are so-called negative rights that require governments to curtail action rather than provide benefits. The former rights are often designated as "social" and "cultural" whereas the latter are generally corporeal.

Yet, while we have a category of *social rights*, the discourse in the field reveals a decidedly individualistic tendency to descriptions of HUMAN RIGHTS across the board. Consider, for example, this statement: "If we strip away the complexity of modern society, beneath these layers we are all the same. We all have fundamental human rights. **We all have basic needs**." Instead of suggesting each person exists as a set of individual needs, we could recast this assertion as follows: *We all exist within society, live in relationship to one another and need rules to govern how we interact with each other.*

Right now, the HUMAN RIGHTS scene profiles atomistic man divorced of context:

Our work is guided by international human rights and humanitarian law and respect for the **dignity of each human being**.

From start to finish, our work **focuses on the individual – people whose human rights are abused**, and people who have the power to change the world.

In less than a minute, youth can learn **one of their human rights**—and all of them in less than half an hour.

[Children] need to **know their human rights** and know that they must take responsibility to **protect themselves and their peers.**

They apply regardless of where you are from, what you believe or **how you choose to live your life**.

The Human Rights Act **protects all of us** - young and old, rich and poor.

We are called to serve the people in greatest need around the world, to **relieve their suffering** and to promote the **transformation of their condition** of life.

Our starting point is our belief in (sic): Building a modern British identity which helps us to build an inclusive citizenship, where **we can all be confident about who we are**, and which recognises the national and local **identities we hold** in Britain today too.

These representative examples could, instead, speak about HUMAN RIGHTS as the rules that structure how we interact with each other. But, instead, they unwittingly reify a fundamentally conservative worldview. Namely, that each person exists as an individual and that, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, "there's no such thing as society."

And, indeed, the focus on unconnected humans leads to an old but still common critique: "The human rights movement…is supposed to promote basic human rights, so that people are not mistreated or tortured, and so that they are given basic needs to sustain life. Now, people use it to abuse what it was originally needed for, to justify things that aren't human rights. These include privileges that aren't basic needs, when in prisons or in third world countries. Human rights **should extend to meeting our basic needs to sustain life**, without torture or degradation only."

There's nothing particularly novel in this opponent's assertion. However, it's worth asking whether the likely unintentional promotion of humans as discrete entities that runs through human rights advocacy paves way for these attacks. If the narrative of human rights focuses on what individuals need, then issues rooted in inter-group dynamics like relative deprivation, discrimination, and disrespect, integral to a human rights agenda, don't really belong.

A key leader in the opposition to human rights, Alain de Benoist, pithily sums up the danger of describing rights as applying to individuals outside of any social context: "The ideology of human rights is universalist insofar as it wishes to impose itself everywhere without consideration for relationships, traditions and contexts. It is subjectivist insofar as it defines rights as the subjective attributes of a single individual."

HUMAN RIGHTS must exist not merely because humans have needs but because we fulfill or are denied these needs in relation to others, in our communities, nations and world.

Human rights as social

Advocacy discourse also offers us a model of HUMAN RIGHTS AS SOCIAL. While less common, we still find an array of examples from all three countries, placing HUMAN RIGHTS within a frame of interaction among people and groups:

> [Human rights] are **the responsibility we all share** to **respect each other**, **help each other** and to protect those in need.

> We are working jointly with youth to challenge barriers that prevent them from enjoying their rights, **participating fully in society** and being an effective voice in decision-making processes

> We seek to facilitate an **engagement between the poor and the affluent** that opens both to transformation.

> [Organization's] approach to defending all people's humanity is to **build a culture** in which women, men, and all genders and gender expressions are regarded as fully equal, fully human, and equally deserving of human rights.

> In order to **craft a new world order** – one in which **all people are valued** equally, free to enjoy their rights, and able to live with dignity – we need profound cultural and social norm change.

> [Human rights] are about **being treated fairly, treating others fairly** and having the ability to make genuine choices in our daily lives.

> Respect for human rights is the cornerstone of **strong communities in which everyone can make a contribution and feel included**.

> People of faith can and must stand together against global terror and against all acts which **diminish our shared humanity**.

> Abortion is the defining women's rights issue for many women because the ability or inability to control pregnancy means the difference between **full participation in society** or not.

> [The Racial Discrimination Act] is about something more fundamental; it is about **how we live together**. It is the test of pluralism in a globalised world.

Unsurprisingly, these expressions tend to steer clear of HUMAN RIGHTS AS OBJECT and instead speak to us of processes. Moving away from HUMAN RIGHTS AS THINGS within or for individuals and toward HUMAN RIGHTS AS RULES GOVERNING INTERACTION among people necessitates describing actions not objects.

It's an empirical question which of these approaches best aids our cause. However, at a minimum it's useful to parse them apart and be deliberate about which frame we mean to employ. Otherwise, we risk muddling the potency of our arguments and the clarity of our narrative.

Right-wing nationalism as (exclusionary) inclusion

The need to examine whether HUMAN RIGHT'S framing that foregrounds individual needs is working is all the more urgent given that cementing group identity is an effective lure for right-wing nationalism:

> What I do know is that for my people to survive we have to have **a sense of who we are**. We have to have, we have to have identity. And we don't always have it. We don't have **an ethnic racial consciousness**.

> [Trump's] starting point is **nationalism**. **Are we a nation**? **Are we a people** or are we not?

> These institutions do not want you to have **a sense of yourselves**. They do not want you to have **identity and rootedness**. They do not want you to have **duties to your people**.

> The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods. But fundamentally what it is lacking is the eternal problem, which is that there is **no underlying loyalty** to the idea of Europe.

> The alt-right do not hold a utopian view of the human condition: just as they are inclined to prioritise the **interests of their tribe**, they recognise that **other groups** – Mexicans, African-Americans or Muslims – are likely to **do the same**.

> Australia had a **national identity** before Federation, and it had nothing to do with diversity and **everything to do with belonging**.

> We have given ourselves to this movement as it is a form of **service to our Nationality**. It is a service which is today unique and wholly necessary: the service to ensure the continued **existence of our culture** which is an expression of **our people**.

There's no faster route to creating an "us" than constructing a "them." Thus, unsurprisingly, some of the discourse of nationalism claims a desire for "separatism." Other strains display their hatred more boldly. In both cases, of course, this "us" is constructed of white supremacy. Countless examples from the many factions of right-wing nationalists examined here attest to this. I will refrain from repeating these odious sentences here.

The appeal they employ, however, to grow beyond their core white supremacist base is for *connection and belonging*. The effectiveness of this positive promise is worth scrutinizing.

Mainstream conservative movements, with their fixation of self-reliance and dismantling social structures, laid the ground work for people's alienation from each other. Thus, it's no small irony that sub-strains of surging right-wing nationalism have wedged into the crevice of human longing for connection. In this, they're tapping into a legitimate critique, a real unmet need and twisting it for the ugliest outcomes:

We might not all be able to put it into those words, but we know that that is what America is becoming. It's becoming **an homogeneous consuming mass, and no one wants it**. Whether you're black or white or Asian or Hispanic or whatever, no one wants that. And that's what America has become.

'Collective humanity' as **a mass of people creates nothing**. It labours, multiplies and consumes but **does not create**.

That human rights are proclaimed forcefully in **an increasingly dehumanised society**, where **men themselves tend to become objects,** and where the **commercialisation of social relationships** creates everywhere new phenomena of **alienation**, is probably not an accident. There are many ways of demonstrating respect and solidarity to men. [But] the question of freedoms cannot be resolved in terms of law or of morality. It is above all a political question. It should be resolved politically.

They want an undifferentiated global population, raceless, genderless, identityless, **meaningless population, consuming sugar, consuming drugs, while watching porn on VR goggles while they max out their credit cards**. Don't deny that that is the kind of passive nihilism that so many in the elite class actually want. They want **a world without roots, they want a world without meaning**, they want a flat grey-on-grey world, one economic market for them to manipulate.

Havel said that if we 'live within the lie' we **collaborate with the system** – in his case the atheistic communist system – and we **compromise our full humanity**.

Further, they're eager to charge the human rights community and progressives more broadly with the promotion of what they consider to be extremist individualized demands. This is the impetus behind condemnation of "identity politics" wherein, according to opponents, individuals demand outlandish accommodations for particular needs. Take, for example, this claim: "Thirty years ago the left abandoned libertarian notions of human rights and embraced a new definition, which **elevated egalitarian rights**…Here then was the beginning of a recalibrated of a human rights movement **in favor of victimhood**, here **feelings became the measure** of human rights."

It seems worth at least asking whether HUMAN RIGHTS can actually meet the desire for belonging that right-wing nationalism now promises. Especially since they offer membership only to a select few.

Are human rights a means or end?

Do we support HUMAN RIGHTS because they're important in and of themselves or because of what they enable for people's lives? We see, across geographies, the tendency to focus on *the right* to something as opposed to the thing itself*:*

[Organization] defends **the rights of** people worldwide.

Taking a child's bodily fluids, whether blood or urine, without their consent, may violate the **right to bodily integrity** and constitute arbitrary interference with their privacy and dignity.

We want to **secure the rights** of people living in poverty to food and income security and decent work within the context of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing inequality, and ensuring the sustainable use of land and water.

In order to support the protection of **women and girls' rights**, increase its positive impact on gender equality, and help focus support on projects that increase the participation of women in the labour market and economy, the [organization] makes a number of commitments grouped under three categories: Protect, Impact and Invest.

In this, *the right to [X]* acts as a distancing mechanism. This is likely not helpful. In empirical research for education equity in the US, we found that "access to" some desirable thing was less effective than simply naming the objective itself. Thus, a statement about every child having "access to education" proved less popular and motivating than more boldly laying claim to every child having "education."

Bodily integrity, food and income security, and protection of women and girls matter to most people. Thus, we're likely better off having them as our outright objective rather than the *right to* said things.

A related pattern in the language assumes that audiences already care about HUMAN RIGHTS and thus reference to them is sufficient to promote our causes:

We call on European States to: invest additional resources to **ensure adequate scrutiny of human rights practices** by Libya and other Mediterranean states.

We want a world where **human rights are no longer under fire**.

The new attempt by President Trump and his administration to reinstate a new travel ban that discriminates against nationals, including refugees, from six Muslim-majority countries is callous, cruel and is **a threat to human rights**.

Resistance is a human right

LGBT rights are human rights

Australia has obligations to **protect the human rights** of all asylum seekers who arrive in Australia.

The mandatory testing of children for drug use **raises human rights concerns**.

The prohibition of extrajudicial killings is **central to human rights law**.

VAWG [violence against women and girls] is a many-headed hydra, far wider than domestic violence. It includes rape and sexual violence, so-called 'harmful traditional practices' **which are in fact human rights abuses**, like forced and child marriage and 'honour crimes'; and the ostensibly lesser forms like threats, bullying and anger.

These examples join the iconic "women's rights are human rights" in assuming that the case for the latter is already made. In order for these phrases to do their job, the listener would have to already care about HUMAN RIGHTS.

Not only is this suspect, it's possible that the addition of *human rights* actually undermines what would be effective descriptors of harms. Extra judicial killings merit upset not because they fall under the jurisdiction of human rights law but because they end lives. Similar can be said for violence against women and girls – repugnant in its own right, human rights violation or not.

It's worth interrogating whether the *human rights* label aids the cause. In work completed advocating for people seeking asylum in Australia, we found that references to human rights laws as well as treaties and conventions actually lowered support for more welcoming policies. Where universal values like the Golden Rule proved effective, citations to relevant human rights statues backfired.

We'd need to test to find out whether implying means or ends is more effective, but the data suggest some informed inferences. Language that focuses on HUMAN RIGHTS as the means seems significantly more powerful than messages that attempt to position this concept as the desired ends. Strong messages should present a clear theory of change – they should draw a direct line from competing interests to *human rights* to ensuring marginalized people prevail. And, this may mean not using the phrase *human rights* at all or it may mean varying our verbs.

We turn now to more thoroughly explore the theory of change implied in the advocacy discourse. Our first stop is unpacking how advocates articulate the problems they seek to address.

Who does what to whom?

Altering descriptions of events influence how audiences assess culpability and determine what they believe a fair outcome will be. In particular, varying verb forms between agentive (transitive) and non-agentive (intransitive) can create significant changes to audiences' judgments about real world events. In one experiment, using the infamous "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2004, researchers found that respondents who read that a named agent (Justin Timberlake) "tore" another's (Janet Jackson's) clothing attributed blame and sought to levy at least 30 percent more in indecency fines than those who read a description that said "the clothing was torn". This is especially telling because all the participants first watched the same video footage, which clearly showed Timberlake ripping Jackson's clothing.[7]
This research and its antecedents bring into focus a major challenge any social justice-seeking organization faces in communication: defining the problem it seeks to solve. The first step in this is, of course, to describe the problem itself.

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[7] Caitlin Fausey and Lera Boroditsky, "Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 2010, 17 (5), 644-650.

Here is an indicative sample of efforts trying to do just that:

Black youth are also **more likely to experience** higher rates of corporal punishment.

In much of the Islamic world, **women lack equality**, religious dissenters **are persecuted** and political freedoms **are curtailed**.

Political authoritarianism **has gained ground** in Russia, Turkey, Hungary and Venezuela. Backlashes against LGBT rights **have taken place** in countries as diverse as Russia and Nigeria. The traditional champions of human rights – Europe and the United States – **have floundered**.

Outside of schools, **young Black people are criminalized** in ways that limit their life chances at every point.

A UN high level panel recently highlighted **the failure to** recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid household work as a major systemic constrain hampering women's economic opportunities, something that human rights organisations have been saying for many years.

Access to justice for victims of business-related human rights violations **is a** widespread and **growing problem** around the world.

For months, [organization] has now been urging EU political elites to make sure the human rights and dignity of those on the move are not **put on the line by border policies**.

Unfortunately, human rights **abuse is rife** – thousands of people across the world **are denied** a fair trial, tortured and imprisoned because of what they think or believe.

Civilians **are targeted** at times of war. Children **are forced** to fight. Rape **is used** as a weapon.

Individuals **are confronted** with surveillance that interferes with private lives, and human rights.

Streets in the US **are getting** more dangerous for minorities.

Around the world **LGBTI persons face** discrimination, persecution, violence, and egregious human rights violations simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Religious minorities **are often targeted** for expressing their beliefs (or non-beliefs).

Civil and political rights **have suffered** a decade-long decline globally, and violations of human rights remain all too common, particularly in authoritarian countries.
Freedom of expression **is in retreat** around the world.

People exercising their human rights to assemble, pray and speak out **have been** brutally arrested, shot with rubber bullets, drenched in tear gas, and sprayed with water in freezing temperatures.

A growing body of evidence demonstrates how children living with or affected by HIV and AIDS are especially **vulnerable to issues** of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Over the past four decades, our country's incarceration rate – the number of prisoners per capita – **has more than quadrupled** and is now unprecedented in world history.

But while economic inequality **has become** a prominent issue on the international development agenda, as well as in national political debates in many countries, the human rights community **has barely begun** to address its implications for the full range of human rights.

The major obstacle in explaining why people face all the difficulties they do is **frequent use of non-agentive constructions.** In all of the examples above, and the many others I could add, there is never a single villain, or even actor, named.

We know through previous research that the seemingly simple shift from slavery (a state of being without cause) to enslavement (a state of being with an implied agent) alters people's perceptions of this horror. Yet, in advocacy we still find examples like this one: "Even age-old scourges such as **slavery continue to exist**."

Conveying causation is arguably a central communication objective here. Yet, we find advocates obfuscating sources of harms so thoroughly, they'll claim ignorance is to blame for actual malice: "When **human rights are not well known** by people, abuses such as discrimination, intolerance, injustice, oppression and slavery **can arise**." Discrimination, intolerance and so on aren't self-levitating. They do not "arise" on their own, much less emerge from lack of knowledge of HUMAN RIGHTS.

When we don't specify *why* something is, people will automatically and unconsciously fill in the details for themselves. We've seen this problem during the global financial crisis when it was common to talk about "people **losing** their homes." People may lose their house keys but misplacing an entire dwelling is arguably impossible. The efficacy of the right-wing storyline that blamed reckless borrowing and policies to expand homeownership for the financial crisis underscores the dangers of suggesting bad things just come out of the ether. Advocates left the origin story untold and people filled it in for themselves, with the characters the opposition supplied them.

And the same is true when it comes to other issues, including HUMAN RIGHTS. Yet, again, the talk of "loss" pervades:

Leo explains he could **lose** his job, his ability to finish college, his driver's license and be under threat of deportation.

[Organization] seeks to ensure that: no one **loses** their constitutional and human rights as a result of pregnancy.

No one "loses" a job or ability to finish college. These things, like "constitutional and human rights," can only be forcibly taken.

At times, advocates are able to suggest an agent is behind the action. But, even then, they're loathe to name names:

In the United States, we've been on the ground in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other communities affected by **police-related violence**.

A recent report estimates that nearly 30 million people **are forced against their will** to work.

[Organization] counteracts **the rising tide of government control** over the internet.

Poor people in America today are not only facing an economic gap – they're facing a justice gap. Too often, **they're exploited and abused** simply for being poor.

Or, where labels are provided, there's still a blurry line from culprit to crime:

We want a fair go and the same deal as everyone else. Yet what we've witnessed over the last twenty years is **the haves streaking ahead** in wealth and income and the have nots falling way behind.

We do find a handful of problem descriptions with perpetrators in full view. However, these examples are among the very few that fit this bill:

By locking away children and separating them from their families and communities, **our governments are** placing limits on children's potential and causing them life-long, psychological harm.

The **government of Vietnam** has a long record of limiting freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly for groups that criticize the government.

Tell the president of the World Bank to suspend its agriculture loans to the Uzbek government **until the government stops forcing people** to work in project funded areas.

We believe that most marginalized people have the capacity to contribute to decision making processes affecting their lives and **hold those in positions of power to account** to meet their obligations **to respect and protect** the rights of poor people.

Your voice can persuade **world leaders to change policies**.

Governments and people in power everywhere must respect everyone's basic freedoms, and allow their citizens to live safely, without fear.

Australians are coming together to **stop corporations profiting** from human suffering in Australia's detention centres.

Note that these effective examples of active constructions do not use the language of *human rights*, nor even reference *rights* at all. They use the language of emotion – suffering, fear, harm, the language of values – freedom, safety, respect, and the language of politics – policies, obligations, governments.

These last examples excepted, the failure to name names extends from describing problems to naming desired solutions:

> There is **a critical need for a coordinated strategy** in local communities that addresses rampant racial disparities in the application of zero-tolerance policies and criminalization practices that impact Black boys and girls.

> In considering these, our starting point is our belief in: Working for economic and social opportunity **to be shared across our society** – so that the chances in life of Britain's next generation are not determined by where their parents came from, and so that nobody is left behind.

> **It's vital that data protection laws are underpinned** by a respect for fundamental human rights.

> The Government **should ensure** that respect for press freedom and broader human rights **is at the core** of all practices and policies going forward.

> [Organization] made a submission covering **key areas for improvement**, such as political prisoners and detainees, ending harassment and violence against activists and dissidents, and respecting freedom of expression and religion.

> For the children of the world — the people that will grow into new generations with unique perspectives and life experiences — **more progress is needed** to equalize the basic opportunity for each child to live another day.

Lawmakers are, no doubt, very pleased with these "asks." They either leave out of sight who is tasked with implementation or frame the desired change in such opaque terms as to render cosmetic alteration sufficient.

Real appeals for power brokers to act in a specific and measurable way do exist, but they're remarkably infrequent. Here's one example:

> We are calling on **the Australian Government** to offer safety to more people fleeing devastation by **increasing our annual refugee intake to a minimum of 30,000 peopl**e, and for **an independent Mechanism** to assist in the **investigation** and prosecution of those responsible for the most serious **crimes under international law committed in Syria**.

And it's not merely in calling out perpetrators and holding change makers responsible for implementing real solutions that we see these inagentive sentences. It's there in descriptors advocates craft for their own work:

Human rights **have been used** to challenge decisions that place couples into different care homes when they have lived together for years.

Fortunately, a powerful grassroots movement, led primarily by youth and parents of color, **has taken shape** across the country to address these harmful policies — but much more work remains.

There's **a growing trend** of global apparel companies adopting supply chain transparency.

The campaigns to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay and end mass surveillance of the population **continue to be** major initiatives.

Advocacy **targets were expanded** to give greater attention to the United Nations and regional bodies such as the European Union.

The insecurity and fear driving policy in, and beyond Europe, **continues to exert a dramatic impact** on cross border funding, not just in the human rights field but also in the development, environmental and humanitarian sectors.

Alongside these changes in approach, **reflection** on internal organisation and structures **will be important**.

Over time, reliance on physical offices, layers of hierarchy and bureaucracy **should give way to** lighter, flatter and more open structures and working methods, with human rights experts empowered to make decisions and flexible working arrangements becoming the norm.

These examples attest to a pervasive pattern that's common to progressive discourse across geographies and issue areas. Indeed, previous messaging research indicates that the tendency to suggest that problems are unsourced, demands need not be strident, and the achievements of advocacy are uncreditable, hinders effective messaging. Unless we establish that a problem is wrought through deliberate human action, calls for different human action make little sense. At the same time, unless advocates declare that their efforts yielded results, potential supporters have little reason to want to fund or participate in continued advocacy.

Human rights personified

Indeed, the passive runs so commonly through this discourse, we come to the logical conclusion of sending actors off screen. HUMAN RIGHTS are frequently construed as acting independently:

We share stories of how **people have relied on human rights** in their everyday lives. We work with individuals and organisations to help them tell their own human rights stories.

We all need to start talking about human rights – spreading the word about **how they help us** and the people we care about.

Human rights mean we are protected in the workplace from discrimination, slavery, unfair treatment and unsafe practices.

Human rights have produced real results for individuals and forced authorities to make their policies and practices fairer.

Based on the values of freedom, equality, respect and dignity, **human rights acknowledge** the fundamental worth of each person.

When we have *human rights* acknowledging, producing and protecting, it's hard to understand how things go awry. It's also hard to fashion a strong call to join in advocacy efforts or provide resources to bolster them. Again, without noting the people making choices, our calls to alter these choices seem odd, at best.

Unnecessary hedging

Another common way progressive advocacy undermines its own efficacy is through unnecessary hedge phrases. These almost always take the form of an additional verb before an infinitive and most frequently appear in mission or values statements:

[Organization] **works to improve** health and nutrition of mothers, newborn babies and children, with special attention to poor and vulnerable communities.

[Organization] is **dedicated to fighting** hate and bigotry and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of our society.

We **seek to facilitate** an engagement between the poor and the affluent that opens both to transformation.

[Organization] **campaigns to protect** basic rights and freedoms through the courts, in Parliament and in the wider community.

We publish an annual community-created resource…which **aims to help** funders see the big picture and discover new trends, both in issues and grant-making practice, so that they can plan ahead.

Our mission is **to help to enhance** coverage of these issues from the viewpoint that Britain should remain an open and welcoming country for the benefit of all who live here.

[Organization] **aims to work to advocate** and empower the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in Australia.

It is **our hope that** by working together to create and amplify a shared agenda, we can continue **to move towards** a world in which the full humanity and dignity of all people **is recognized**.

We're **dedicated to reducing** prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children.

These extra phrases leave audiences questioning whether said organizations accomplish anything or merely try hard. While they're understandably borne of modesty and a desire not to claim victory in ongoing struggles, they diminish real achievements. This has proven to dampen the enthusiasm of the base and with it their willingness to evangelize the cause to potential converts. People want to be on the winning team, not the tries their best team.

Fortunately, of all messaging issues, this is the easiest to fix. Almost always, eliminating the first verb, so that "aims to work to advocate and empower" becomes *advocates and empowers* while "help to enhance" becomes *enhances*, does the trick.

What you fight you feed

In addition to passivizing and hedging, negation is another common misstep also present here. Happily, it's far less pervasive in this advocacy discourse than in some other progressive issues.

Nonetheless, what follows are some of the negating constructions in this data set wherein advocates "prove" their point by overtly denying their opponents' claims:

> Refugee children, like 4-year old Nada who fled her Syrian home with her family – have been terrorized. They are **not terrorists**.

> Repression and injustice, and the criminalisation of non-violent speech and protest, make us less safe - **not more**.

> Human rights, including **the right not to be subjected** to degrading treatment, to a private and family life, to free expression and protest etc. apply to all human beings. These rights **do not depend on citizenship**.

> **There is nothing** in the **Human Rights Act** that **stops the courts** from locking up convicted criminals and terrorists.

> Human rights **do not elevate** one group over another.

> When you support [organization] **you're not just funding political noise**.

These overt denials are unlikely to prove persuasive to folks who have heard the false claims they're trying to address. If people believed advocates, they'd already believe them. And, for folks who've not heard these claims or at least didn't have them top of mind, they've now made a neural connection between an organization and political noise, elevating one group over another, Syrians and terrorists, and so forth. Opponents get way too much airtime as it is; there's no reason to cede the precious little advocates are afforded to engage their lies.

In order, I've rewritten each of these statements in affirming language:

Refugee children, like 4-year old Nada who fled her Syrian home with her family – have been terrorized. *They, more than anyone, fear terrorists.*

Freedom and justice, and protection of non-violent speech and protest, make us safer.

Human rights, including *the right to humane treatment,* to a private and family life, to free expression and protest etc. apply to all human beings, *no matter where they are from or where they reside.*

T*he Human Rights Act permits courts to detain convicted criminals and terrorists.*

Human rights ensure equality among all groups.

When you support [organization] *you're funding effective political change.*

Note that this caution on negation applies to the whole construct of *myth busting.* The only myth worth busting in public discourse is the efficacy of that rhetorical device. Decades of study prove it's not useful, at best, and may in fact reinforce the information you seek to discredit.

Elimination of harm vs. creation of good

Finally, in most of the discourse, advocates offer their audiences an opportunity to ameliorate harms. In short, the pitch is a chance to make things less bad:

By welcoming refugees, governments and citizens **can help to prevent** widespread gender-based violence and protect those who are most vulnerable to the many human rights abuses faced by displaced persons.

The Human Rights Act also puts positive obligations on the State to **protect victims**.

Run, bake, tweet, give, shop, speak out, even sky dive – how will you be part of the generation to **end extreme poverty**?

No one should be **treated unfairly or subjected to harm and abuse** because of who they are or who they love.

[Organization] is a global movement of millions of people who share the belief that, in a world rich in resources, poverty isn't inevitable.

Our mandate is to **stop violence** before it happens.

Our purpose is to provide national leadership **to prevent all forms of violence** against women and their children.

We're an international organisation, working with over 15 million people in 45 countries for a world **free from poverty and injustice**.

These are just some of the many examples of overall mission statements, particular campaigns and frequent appeals to put forth effort to tackle problems.

And, while fear and anger are absolutely motivating, these are necessarily short-term *reactive* emotions.

Sustained participation is mass movements requires an opportunity to create something good, not merely diminish something harmful. Or, in pithier terms, there must be a *dream* not merely a series of (absolutely justified) complaints.

Marriage Equality campaign the world over offered us a great illustration of pivoting from fixing a problem orientation to implementing a solution framing. Where we could talk about this issue, and indeed still sometimes do, as "ending discrimination" or "fighting bigotry," effective campaigns including the most recent one in Australia embraced positive framing:

> Australians are coming together like never before to **say YES to equality** under the law.

> Everyone should be **treated equally under the law**. **Love is love**. Simple as that.

"Ending poverty" also means *creating shared prosperity* or *ensuring people's welfare*. "Prevent all forms of violence" can instead be called *ensure all children live in peace*. Even seemingly small tweaks from, for example "reform our broken immigration system" to "create a fair immigration process" have measurable impacts on public perception.

Concluding Thoughts

My aim in this report is to uncover stumbling blocks to and ask provocative questions about the way we talk about HUMAN RIGHTS. As mentioned at the outset, there's much devoted here to what to avoid and relatively little offered by way of remedies. Language analysis like this can be likened to the "you are here" dot on a map. It tells us how people currently reason. If we're not trying to move anywhere, that would be fine.

However, the work of advocacy is – of course – to change conditions, and a necessary precursor for this is changing perceptions. In this, we cannot meet people where they are. We must uncover where they're capable of going and lead them to that destination.

In order to make our way on this trajectory, understanding the pitfalls of common language, as I've hopefully made clear here, is critical. Equally important, however, is to have a sense of what it is we want to convey. This is the very question explored in the next piece of research analyzing elicitation interviews we conducted with advocates for human rights.