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Human Rights as a Lay Category of Thought: Content and Structure in the United States

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Abstract

What are human rights? Although legal scholars point to a growing list of international entitlements, social scientists have highlighted underlying ideological assumptions and the selective interpretation of human rights in practice. Lay conceptualizations of human rights, however, merit further examination. This study brings together human rights research and cognitive sociology, deploying a novel, online task-based study to explore the content and structure of human rights as a lay category of thought. To do so, the authors examine rights exemplars, perceived violations, goodness of fit, and response times in a sample of adults in the United States. The findings suggest that freedom of speech is a cognitive prototype. Civil and political rights were prominent in respondents' minds relative to economic, social, and cultural rights. There were substantive exceptions in both directions; certain political rights, such as asylum, were peripheral or dismissed from the human rights concept, while health care, food, and education were salient. Results indicate that respondents were disposed to include content within the human rights category when asked. This study garners insights on how ordinary people perceive and understand human rights in the United States, breaking ground for further comparative research.

Keywords

human rights, cognition, political culture, civil and political rights, prototypes

Human rights are fundamental to our contemporary political world. They define the human dignity to which we are universally entitled, and they provide an international lexicon for rights-claiming (Smith 2008; Tsutsui and Shin 2008). "An essential element in protecting human rights," affirmed former United Nations secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, is "widespread knowledge among the population of what their rights are." Yet groups have bemoaned a lack of human rights familiarity. The international nonprofit organization United for Human Rights declared, "many have a very limited understanding of human rights. Ask almost anyone 'What are human rights?' and most will be unable to . . . name more than a handful." Beyond the issue of naming and knowing, people may implicitly or explicitly see some human rights as more important than others. Common notions of human rights may differ from those inscribed by the United Nations, because of a lack of public familiarity with international doctrine and alternative circulating human rights discourses in the media and elsewhere (Blau 2016; Chilton 2014; David and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2023; Nash 2009; Stellmacher, Sommer, and Brähler 2005). Despite the recognized importance of human rights awareness and worries about its dearth or misalignment, how human rights are understood as a category in ordinary people's minds has received little scholarly attention.

Drawing on traditions in the cognitive social sciences, we examine human rights as a lay category of thought. Through a novel study comprised of cognitive psychological tasks, we assess how people think about human rights by evaluating the concept's internal content and structure among adults in the United States. Freedom of speech was the most common right associated with the human rights concept across

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demographic groups, signaling it as a privileged member and potential cognitive prototype for the construct in the United States. Civil and political rights were cognitively prominent relative to economic, social, and cultural rights. There were notable substantive exceptions in both directions, however, whereby certain civil and political rights such as asylum were peripheral or dismissed from the human rights concept, while rights such as health care, food, and education could figure more centrally at the concept's cognitive core than some civil and political rights. Finally, findings suggest human rights was an expansive category in respondents' minds, trending toward an inclusive rather than strict conceptualization. Respondents were cognitively disposed to include content in the human rights concept and open minded that stimuli were located within the category.

Altogether, this work offers an understanding of the internal conceptual structure of human rights in the United States. Bridging the sociology of human rights and cognitive social sciences, its analytical approach moves from human rights as global norms, or a discrete set of entitlements variably interpreted and manifested in particular contexts, to human rights as a lay sociocognitive construct. In doing so, it garners novel insights on how ordinary people perceive and understand human rights, breaking ground for further comparative research.

Existing Literature

Although legal understandings of human rights point to a growing list of internationally agreed-upon entitlements, sociologists have highlighted underlying ideological assumptions and the selective interpretation of rights in practice. Research in this critical tradition draws on textual and historical evidence, including media discourses, to diagnose how human rights is imbued with meanings in the context of broader intellectual phenomena, such as liberalism, eurocentrism, and gendered and racialized ideologies (Mutua 2001; Sjoberg, Gill, and Williams 2001). Empirical analyses of expert practices, for example, highlight the influence of donors (Clifford 2010), advocacy efforts (Clifford 2005; Velasco 2018), partner organizations (Hertel 2006), and units of distribution inside nongovernmental organizations (Krause 2020) in their disparate enactment. Journalists act as gatekeepers in their own right (McPherson 2012). Social scientists have also addressed human rights as norms: their diffusion and socialization (Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink 1999), as well as their impact on social movement claims-making and the efficacy of human rights as a framing vocabulary (Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Tsutsui and Shin 2008). Although normatively and legally held to be universal and indivisible, human rights is thus a construct tied to political contexts, cultural histories, and social processes (Waters 1996). Human rights are not a fixed set of entitlements and privileges, but "social constructs" whose weight and meaning stem from particular settings (Jung 2024).

A prominent strand of social scientific research has focused on professed human rights attitudes: who cares about human rights and whose rights they care about, and what factors and characteristics impact that support (Crowson 2004; McFarland and Mathews 2005; Scruggs 2018; Zhou 2013). Scholarship has addressed how citizens perceive the human rights situation in their countries (Anderson et al. 2005; Carlson and Listhaug 2007; Sutton and Norgaard 2013), as well as why people tolerate human rights violations and what influences public opinion in that regard (David and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2023; Drolet, Hafer, and Heuer 2016; Lupu and Wallace 2019; Valentino and Weinberg 2017). Empirically, studies often focus on a specific right or violation—such as the right to not be tortured or to undergo genital mutilation (Conrad et al. 2018; Gregg 2010; Hertel, Scruggs, and Heidkamp 2009)—or support for the rights of particular groups, such as women or sexual minorities (Anjum, Chilton, and Usman 2021; Smith and Hegarty 2021).

Research in sociology and related disciplines has pursued the considerable tensions between human rights as inalienable, universal principles and their sociopolitical manifestations. Scholarship has provided insights into human rights norms, opinions, and their selective interpretation and enactment in practice. Yet, we argue, its expression as a lay category of thought remains underexamined. In short, we know relatively little about what and how people think about human rights when they are asked to think about human rights. Bridging human rights research with cognitive social sciences, this study expands research on human rights by analyzing people's implicit understandings.

There is increasing interest in curating a dialogue between sociology and cognitive science (Brekhus 2015; Cerulo 2002; DiMaggio 1997; Hunzaker 2016; Lizardo 2014; Zerubavel 1999). Given concepts are basic units of cognition, examining conceptual knowledge and formation is an important arena in cognitive sciences. Cognitive and experimental research has shown that categories carry a certain baggage, and are shaped by schemas and a selective emphasis on privileged members rather than by explicit, logical rules of membership (Lakoff 1987; Murphy, Hampton, and Milovanovic 2012; Rosch 1973). Respondents associate "chair," for example, more quickly than "lamp" with the "furniture" category, and "robin" more quickly than "duck" with the "bird" category (Rosch et al. 1976). This essential

member, called a prototype, can be an average or quintessential member of the category depending on the cultural context (Hage and Miller 1976; Lakoff 1987:86–87). Such approaches are well-suited to uncover the conceptual features of human rights (Ilgit and Prakash 2019; Krause 2014). In cognitive science and psychology, however, the content of specific categories has mattered primarily as a stepping stone to general theories about categories and has tended to assess general features of concepts with a view to providing a universal understanding of the human mind (Taylor, Devereux, and Tyler 2011). It also largely focuses on concrete categories of everyday life, rather than abstract categories without clear physical referents (but see Harpaintner, Trumpp, and Kiefer 2018).

Sociologists demonstrate that how we think about particular categories matters in its own right. The content and associative elements of abstract categories and specific archetypes—from cultural genres (Hsu 2006), product categories (Hsu and Grodal 2015), racism (Valentino and Warren 2025), and nations (Cerulo 1995) to immigrants (Flores and Azar 2023), refugees (Jensen 2023), and ideal sexual harassment victims (Hart 2025)—are themselves of interest as they shape phenomena like public attitudes, policy support, and legal outcomes. As Valentino and Warren (2025) noted, lay and academic definitions of abstract concepts can loosely couple or diverge, and examining folk theories of categories is pertinent in the face of such polysemy.

Cognitive sociological approaches are useful for investigating human rights as a "intersubjective mental cluster" (Zerubavel 1996). Such perspectives highlight how the content, structure, and salience of mental categories are shaped by sociocultural dynamics and contexts (Cerulo 2002). Rather than general rule-based formations, sociologists of cognition pursue conceptual associative developments (Brekhus 2015) and mental processes of classification such as "lumping" and "splitting," which conform neither to universal logics nor personal idiosyncrasies (Zerubavel 1996), and which dynamically shape our social worlds. Examining human rights as a lay category of thought, we argue, contributes to the sociology of culture and cognition to further understandings of how political culture and lay constructs intertwine, and thus relationships between public and personal culture (Cerulo, Leschziner, and Shepherd 2021).

Political culture has been shown to influence how people perceive and value human rights (Carlson and Listhaug 2007; Stellmacher et al. 2005), with particular rights having greater legitimacy and normative strength than others (Tsutsui and Shin 2008:394; Vahabli 2024). Stellmacher et al. (2005), for example, found that East Germans deemed economic rights more important than West Germans, noting the formative role of different political ideological histories. It is widely assumed that, in the United States, civil and political rights—those that protect from government infringement, and ensure due process and political participation—are culturally hegemonic, coupled with a skepticism to recognize economic, social, and cultural human rights as such (Blau 2016; but see Hertel et al. 2009). Although the United States ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1992, it remains one of few United Nations member states that has not ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Across the U.S. political mainstream, "a lingering suspicion of economic and social rights persists," according to Donnelly (2013:32), whereby political discourse disparages them as conditional rather than fundamental obligations. Likewise, Curtis (2017:208) suggested "that the modern self-identity of the United States was to a great extent forged around the reflexive denial of socioeconomic rights . . . [and] centered on the ultimate, though narrowly construed, value of individual freedom." How this national political culture may manifest at the level of lay cognition, however, remains unclear. On the basis of data from a nationally representative stratified sample, we assess what and how ordinary people in the United States think about human rights.

Data and Methods

In this study we examine human rights in the "social mindscape" (Zerubavel 1999). We draw on research techniques in cognitive and experimental psychology that seek to access internal implicit baggage of concepts (Harpaintner et al. 2018; Rosch 1973). We leverage a novel, online study to investigate the content and structure of human rights as a lay mental category. We fielded this study among adults residing in the United States through a Qualtrics panel in February 2024, obtaining a nationally representative stratified sample across age, gender, and race and ethnicity (for sample demographics, see the supplementary materials). It returned 610 respondents, of whom 529 finished the study (87 percent). We included a speeding check for data quality, and the average completion time was 7:26 minutes. Research was approved by the University of Wisconsin's institutional review board.

To assess implicit cognitive features of the human rights concept, we evaluate three tasks and time data from a broader study (see supplementary materials). The first task was open ended to capture substantive associations. Psychology research has demonstrated the efficacy of free-listing experiments, whereby participants generate verbal associations with specific concepts to evaluate their semantic content

(Barsalou and Wiemer-Hastings 2005; Harpaintner et al. 2018; Rosch et al. 1976). We asked respondents to name a human right, while the following page asked for up to three additional examples. Forced response protocols were included for the first and second queries.

Two other tasks addressed human rights violations and goodness of fit. These presented respondents with examples that operationalized: rights inscribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; e.g., freedom from torture, paid holiday leave), rights affirmed by the United Nations but not codified in international treaties (e.g., healthy environment), and items outside international human rights (e.g., bear arms). We included two partisan topics, abortion and guns, as a relative benchmark for how political subcultures may shape the human rights construct. The second task randomized 10 potentially problematic scenarios, and asked if respondents felt it was a human rights violation (yes or no). Asking about violations is another way to capture thought regarding human rights, as what human rights are can be constructed through perceived violations of them. Moreover, human rights principles and violation examples do not always align (Staerkle and Clémence 2004). Scenarios began with "someone is" or "a person," given that social identities can inform rights violation perceptions (Drolet et al. 2016; Smith and Hegarty 2021). In the third task, respondents were presented with 14 randomized topics and asked whether they believed it was a human right. Following goodness-of-fit research designs (Rosch 1973), we asked respondents to evaluate the item on a seven-point scale, with 1 defined as "no," 4 as "maybe," and 7 as "definitely."

Analytical Approach

We analyzed answers and response times to address the content, structure, and salience of human rights in respondents' minds. Across tasks, we considered general patterns and potential differences by demographic comparison groups. We evaluated the extent to which lay understandings conformed to or digressed from international human rights. To do so, we relied on the 1948 UDHR, the principal referent doctrine codifying international human rights. We also considered the relative prominence of two rights typologies: (1) the idea of different "generations" of human rights and (2) the distinction between negative and positive human rights. First generation refers to civil and political rights, while second generation indicates economic, social, and cultural rights. Our generational categorization followed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Negative rights are thought to be enjoyed through an absence of infringement (e.g., privacy), while positive rights entail provision for their enactment (e.g., education). Although certainly imperfect typologies (Donnelly 2013), they are useful heuristics of general lay cognitive tendencies and to evaluate the interplay of political culture and rights constructs. Although largely overlapping, examining both provided additional analytical nuance; right to family, for example, was categorized as a social, negative human right.

With the first task on exemplar associations, we assessed response frequency, order, and breadth. To analyze the 1,933 open-ended answers, we iteratively went through all material to generate categories that approximated content and combined substantively analogous responses. The coding scheme was based on deep familiarity with data, developed over multiple rounds of recursive coding across authors to establish intercoder validity and reliability. In its elaboration, we pursued granular proximity and patterned semantics to capture associational range and tendencies respectively. This led to 120 categories. For example, the safety category included responses such as "safety," "to feel safe," and "a safe life," while housing included "having a home," "shelter," "home," and "adequate housing/shelter." We combined housing and shelter, categorizing it as "housing" as the root word most responses used. Finding that some responses named multiple rights, we disaggregated those and delineated that responses included 2,073 total associations. We subsequently considered whether certain rights were lumped into shared mental clusters (Zerubavel 1996). Given partial forced response protocols and response attrition for this task, we checked if the demographic distribution shifted across the four queries. Changes were relatively slight, except for roughly four-point increases in women and college graduates, and altogether insufficient to explain findings below. Moreover, analysis of first- and second-generation rights mentioned across the four answers showed in every case substantive change within and across demographic groups.

With the second and third tasks, we also assessed response times and modeled effect estimates of demographic binary variables on likelihood of violation perception and goodness-of-fit scores. We analyzed timing data, operationalized as page submission time, to consider cognitive salience, as speed of response signals clarity of thought and strength of association. To focus on intrarespondent variation, and control for interrespondent differences, we totaled the time respondents spent on each of the second and third tasks respectively. With human rights violations, we assessed whether respondents spent significantly more or less than 10 percent of their time on each scenario. With goodness of fit, given there were 14 items, we analyzed whether respondents spent more or less than one fourteenth (7.14 percent) of

Table 1. Categorization Results of Human Rights Examples, First and Cumulative.

		First			Cumulative		
Type	Category	Rank	*n*	%	Rank	*n*	%
CP	Speech	1	120	16.6	1	262	12.6
CP	Freedom	2	63	8.7	2	134	6.5
ESC	Health care	3	43	6.0	5	99	4.8
ESC	Food	4	40	5.5	4	102	4.9
CP	Life	5	38	5.3	8	70	3.4
CP	Voting	6	37	5.1	3	107	5.2
Both	Abortion	7	27	3.7	15	43	2.1
CP	Self-determination	8	23	3.2	11	52	2.5
CP	Religion	9	22	3.0	10	58	2.8
None	Gun rights	10[a]	19	2.6	6	82	4.0
ESC	Housing	10[a]	19	2.6	7	79	3.8
ESC	Education	18[a]	10	1.4	9	59	2.8

Note: N (initial) = 721, *n* (cumulative) = 2,073. In descending order, first example raw totals. CP = civil and political right; ESC = economic, social, and cultural right.
a. Denotes tied ranking.

their time on each. Because scenarios and items did not have the same number of words or characters (see supplementary materials), we also assessed whether there were significant time differences between subjects who answered the same question affirmatively or negatively.

Results

We present study results regarding initial associations, perceived human rights violations, and goodness-of-fit assessments. To prelude, findings suggest freedom of speech is a privileged member and potential cognitive prototype among adults in the United States. Negative, civil and political rights were prominent in respondents' minds, while economic, social, and cultural rights were within the construct though peripheral. There were notable substantive exceptions in both directions, however, whereby certain civil and political rights were marginal or located outside the concept entirely, while rights such as health care, food, and education could figure more saliently than some civil and political rights. Although particular rights and types were prominent, the human rights construct was also capacious, and respondents were disposed to include content in the category.

Human Rights Exemplars

The right to speech was the strongest first and overall association, suggesting that it may serve as a cognitive prototype for the human rights concept among adults in the United States (see Table 1). It was the most common first response (16.6 percent), trailed by freedom (8.7 percent), and the most frequent overall, appearing in 12.6 percent of all answers (followed again by freedom, 6.5 percent). Put another way, 42 percent of respondents mentioned speech in one of their answers. Moreover, speech was the most common first response across all demographic groups examined—from men and women, white respondents and persons of color, younger and older than 55 years, with or without college degrees, and regardless of political preference—indicating it as a privileged member of the lay human rights concept in the United States.

Considering other common first and overall example associations, six categories appeared in at least 5 percent of first responses. These were, in descending order: speech, freedom, health care, food, life, and voting. Altogether, these six topics represented 47 percent of first responses. Cumulatively, 10 categories represented slightly over 50 percent of all answers, in descending order: speech, freedom, voting, food, health care, gun rights, housing, life, education, and religion. Some common answers saw significant divides by political preferences. Across all responses, although speech was the most frequent rights example from both conservatives and liberals, it represented a larger share of conservative answers (14 percent vs. 9 percent). Gun rights accounted for 7 percent of answers from conservatives, that group's second most common answer, but fewer than 1 percent of answers from liberals. Food and health care, on the other hand, each arose in 7 percent of liberal answers, while

appearing in 4 percent and 3 percent of conservative examples, respectively.

A substantial number of answers included more than one right, as noted above. In the first query, 74 respondents (12 percent) named or referenced multiple rights. Across all responses, this happened 102 times (5 percent). Certain rights tended to "lump" together (Zerubavel 1996). Food was the most common right to be cognitively associated with at least one other. Of those who listed more than one right in their first answer, 24 percent included food, followed by life at 12 percent. Across all multiple-right responses, 29 percent mentioned food, trailed again by life (14 percent). Food was principally cognitively linked with water (in two thirds of all appearances), followed by housing (one third). In a few responses, all three appeared together (e.g., "food, water, and shelter"). Life, on the other hand, overwhelmingly appeared with liberty (79 percent), and more than a third of life appearances lumped life, liberty, and happiness (e.g., "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness").

Regarding the relative prominence of rights types, analyses indicate negative rights were salient while positive rights were peripheral but within the category. Rights generally considered as "negative" were more common examples than positive rights. Given this, and the substantive prevalence of speech and freedom (the former often named as "freedom of speech"), we analyzed the frequency of "free-" mentions in responses. Across all responses, 55 percent of respondents wrote "free-" at least once. Demographic differences were not significant, with the exception that men were more likely to mention "free-" in the first answer than women (37 percent vs. 27 percent). Furthermore, the relative salience of negative rights subsequently lessened as respondents delved deeper into the construct. In first and second responses, roughly two thirds named negative rights, while a quarter named positive rights. In the third and fourth, negative rights decreased in prominence (60 percent), while positive rights increased to 35 percent. And although 43 percent of respondents named only negative rights and 9 percent only referenced positive rights, the preponderance of respondents (48 percent) included both negative and positive rights across their answers.

Generational rights followed similar patterns, whereby civil and political rights were salient while economic, social, and cultural rights were included but marginal in the construct. Most respondents (53 percent) included both sets of rights in their answers. Thirty-eight percent of respondents included only civil and political rights, while 10 percent named only economic, social, and cultural rights. In first and second answers, civil and political rights appeared in roughly two thirds (67 percent and 65 percent respectively), while economic, social, and cultural rights appeared in approximately a quarter (26 percent and 27 percent). In third and fourth questions, first-generation rights decreased to 55 percent, while second-generation rights increased to 40 percent. By the fourth association, for example, the top category shifted from speech to education.

Education and housing provide specific examples to demonstrate how second-generation rights were peripheral but included in the construct. Education only appeared in 10 responses for the first association (1.4 percent), ranking in 18th position. By the third association it became the third most common category, and by the fourth it was the top response. Housing followed a similar pattern. Although it ranked 11th in the first association, it became the second most common answer by the third, ahead of rights examples like religion, voting, and freedom. These findings suggest second-generation rights were cognitively marginal relative to first-generation rights, yet firmly within lay understandings.

We found some demographic differences in results regarding rights type prominence, but not with center-margin patterns. Negative and first-generation rights were more likely to be named by men, conservatives, and people older than 55 years. Men were more likely than women to name negative, civil and political rights for all answers. Liberals, respondents younger than 55 years, and women were more likely to list positive, economic, social, and cultural rights. On the other hand, we found substantive differences in the types of rights respondents thought about as they delved deeper into their conceptualizations across demographic comparison groups.

Although some examples appeared relatively frequently, the expanse and limits of content that respondents associated with the human rights concept was also striking. This task generated a total of 2,073 rights mentions, which we characterized into 120 unique categories. For perspective, the UDHR includes 30 articles, representing roughly 50 discrete rights. Common respondent examples included issues not enshrined in international doctrine, such as gun rights and happiness, while some UDHR rights such as asylum (article 14) and trade unions (article 23) received no mentions. The prevalence of the right to bear arms and pursuit of happiness, which appear in the U.S. Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence, respectively, but not the UDHR, suggests that national doctrine informs the lay human rights concept in the United States. In sum, results indicate freedom of speech is a privileged member and civil and political rights are salient in the lay human rights construct, but that it is also multidimensional and surpasses first-generation rights alone.

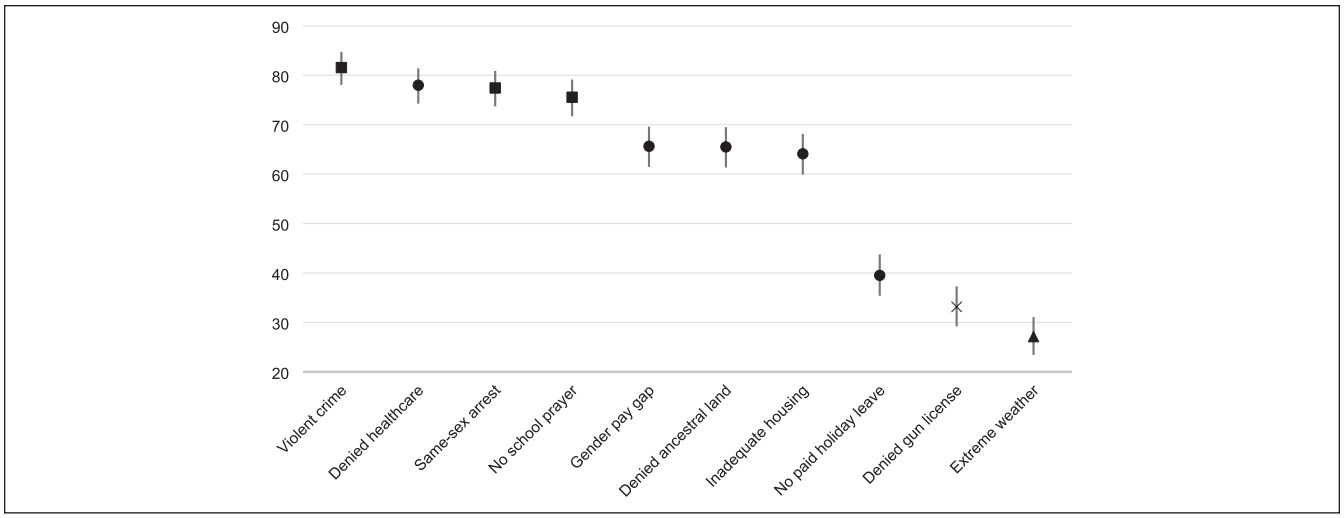

Figure 1. Perceived human rights violation.
Note: The *y*-axis shows the percentage yes, with 95 percent confidence intervals. Rights types: box = civil and political; circle = economic, social, and cultural; X = none; triangle = unclear.

Human Rights Violations

To consider the constitutive outside of the human rights concept, we assessed respondent evaluations of potential human rights violation scenarios (see Figure 1). The majority perceived 7 of the 10 scenarios as violations. There was broadest consensus around four issues, where more than 75 percent saw it as a violation. Statements most strongly thought to reflect human rights violations were as follows: victim of a violent crime (82 percent), does not have access to health care (78 percent), arrested for having a same-sex relationship (77 percent), and not allowed to pray in school (76 percent). A second cluster of three scenarios had a somewhat weaker consensus, while still seeing majority perception as violations. Approximately two thirds of respondents felt it was a human rights violation when someone makes less than someone of a different gender in the same job (66 percent), is denied a claim to ancestral land (65 percent), and does not have adequate housing (64 percent).

With the final three scenarios, most respondents rejected that they were human rights violations. In a third cluster, roughly only one third felt that the following represented violations: denied paid holiday leave (40 percent), gun license is denied (33 percent), and affected by extreme weather because of climate change (27 percent). Although the latter two scenarios do not reference rights inscribed in the UDHR, paid holiday leave is (article 24). The rejection of denied paid holiday leave as a human rights abuse was a rare instance in findings where most respondents had a more restrictive conceptualization than enshrined in international human rights doctrine.

Regarding rights typologies, respondents were more likely to recognize violations of civil and political rights than of economic, social, and cultural rights. All three scenarios that operationalized first-generation rights appeared in the first cluster and were strongly felt to entail human rights violations. Three of the five second-generation rights scenarios appeared in the second cluster, where a weaker majority perceived them as violations. However, this is not a uniform pattern. Health care was an outlier, as a broadly accepted second-generation right (78 percent) and the scenario with the greatest clarity of thought by response time. Respondents felt denied health care was a human rights violation significantly faster than expected, and faster than all other scenarios though it had median word and character lengths. Although there was a strong partisan difference, with liberals perceiving that scenario as a violation at a far higher rate than conservatives (88 percent vs. 68 percent), most liberals and conservatives alike perceived denied health care as a human rights violation.

Response and timing results suggest a relatively capacious lay conceptualization with inclusive cognitive tendencies. Although responses do not suggest human rights is a catch-all, boundless concept, for most scenarios—7 of 10—the majority felt it represented a human rights violation. Considering how long respondents took for each scenario, relative to their total section time, indicates cognitive predispositions to include content in the category (see Table 2).

Table 2. Time to Response Whether Human Rights Violation, in Fraction of Total Task Time.

Type	Scenario	Response			Significant Difference
		All	Yes	No	
ESC	Denied health care	*8.62***	*8.46***	9.22	No
CP	Victim violent crime	*9.24***	*9.07***	9.99	No
None	Denied gun license	*9.38***	9.82	*9.16***	No
ESC	Inadequate housing	*9.42***	*9.00***	10.18	Yes
CP	Cannot pray at school	9.55	*8.92***	**11.49****	Yes
ESC	Denied paid holiday	9.94	10.25	9.74	No
ESC	Denied ancestral land	10.38	10.21	10.70	No
CP	Same-sex arrest	**10.8****	10.50	**11.83****	No
Unclear	Extreme weather	**10.89****	11	**10.85****	No
ESC	Gender-pay gap	**11.78****	**11.77****	**11.79****	No

Note: Italic type denotes faster than expected, and boldface type denotes slower than expected. In ascending order, all responses. Average intrarespondent fraction time to page submission relative to total task section time. Significance tests compared against expected value, 10 (1/10th of total task time). The final column notes whether time difference between yes/no responses was significant at the 95 percent level. CP = civil and political right; ESC = economic, social, and cultural right.
**$p < .05$.

Respondents were quicker to decide a scenario was a violation than not. On average, it took respondents nearly a full second longer to declare something was not a violation, 7 vs. 6.1 seconds respectively. In almost every instance, people took more of their time to determine a scenario wasn't a violation. That difference is not usually significant, except with inadequate housing and no school prayer. The red herring of denied gun license, however, was a counterexample to this pattern of greater clarity about what was a violation; people who rejected this scenario as a human rights abuse did so quickly. Although the time difference between yes/no responses was not statistically significant, it was the fastest dismissal.

To consider demographic differences, we assessed response and time data between comparison groups, and estimated their effects on likelihood of human rights violation perceptions. Overall, liberals, persons younger than 55 years, people of color, those without college degrees, and women had more inclusive human rights conceptualizations relative to reference groups. The scenarios where there were significant effects, however, varied. Across scenarios, political ideology and age most consistently correlated with violation perceptions. Comparing liberal and conservative responses, there were roughly 20-point differences in six scenarios. Liberals were much more likely to see same-sex relationship arrest, denied health care, inadequate housing, and gender pay discrimination as violations; conservatives were much more likely to see no school prayer and denied gun license as violations. Net other factors, there was a significant difference between liberals and conservatives for eight scenarios. With most (six of eight), liberals were more likely to perceive a human rights abuse (see Table 3). With response times, there were significant partisan splits regarding clarity of thought with two scenarios. Liberals took longer to decide about school prayer, while conservatives took longer for same-sex arrest. Regarding age, those younger than 55 years were twice as likely relative to their reference group to see as violations: extreme weather, denied paid holiday leave, and denied gun license. Controlling for other variables, those younger than 55 years were significantly more likely to perceive six scenarios as violations.

Gender, education, and race had relatively less effect. Net other factors, women were more likely to see violent crime victim, gender pay discrimination, and no paid holiday leave as violations. Women spent more time than men on this task, but answered significantly faster about same-sex relationship arrest relative to men. Those without a college degree were more likely to perceive inadequate housing and denied ancestral land as violations. In half of scenarios, respondents of color were more likely to perceive a violation relative to white individuals. However, these were no longer significant net other factors, except with extreme weather.

Goodness of Fit

Finally, respondents rated whether 14 items were human rights on a seven-point scale, with seven defined as "definitely." Freedom of religion, of opinion, and from torture had the highest rankings, both in average scores and the percent that perceived them as definitely human rights (see Table 4).

Table 3. Estimated Effects on Likelihood Perceived as Human Rights Violation.

	Violent Crime	No Health Care	Same-Sex Arrest	No School Prayer	Gender-Pay Gap	Denied Ancestral Land	Inadequate Housing	No Paid Leave	Denied Gun License	Extreme Weather
Liberal (reference: conservative)	.08	.96***	1.06***	−1.19***	.54*	.29	.88***	.42*	−1.06***	.55*
	(.25)	(.26)	(.27)	(.21)	(.21)	(.20)	(.21)	(.20)	(.23)	(.21)
<55 years (reference: >55 years)	.11	.18	.18	.46*	.62**	.41*	.20	1.09***	1.04***	1.03***
	(.25)	(.23)	(.23)	(.23)	(.20)	(.20)	(.20)	(.21)	(.22)	(.24)
POC (reference: white)	−.18	.11	−.01	.09	.37	.25	.03	.26	.10	.47*
	(.26)	(.25)	(.25)	(.25)	(.22)	(.22)	(.22)	(.21)	(.22)	(.22)
No college (reference: college)	.06	.35	.08	.29	.31	.42*	.43*	.03	.22	.04
	(.23)	(.22)	(.22)	(.22)	(.19)	(.19)	(.19)	(.19)	(.21)	(.21)
Female (reference: male)	.50*	.24	−.05	.18	.49*	.35	.16	.43*	−.26	.21
	(.23)	(.22)	(.22)	(.21)	(.19)	(.19)	(.19)	(.19)	(.20)	(.21)
n	537	540	540	535	539	537	541	539	535	537

Note: Log odds coefficient (*SE*). POC = person of color.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. Perception as Human Right, Seven-Point Scale.

Type	Topic	Average	7 (%)	1 (%)
CP	Freedom of religion	*5.91***	62.19	7.37
CP	Freedom of opinion	*5.90***	59.70	6.78
CP	Freedom from torture	*5.77***	59.96	10.34
CP	Voting	*5.56***	53.77	10.00
ESC	Education	*5.43***	47.37	10.15
CP	Access to a lawyer	5.22	38.68	8.30
ESC	Access to cultural heritage	5.02	36.60	9.43
ESC	Adequate living standard	**4.97****	33.52	10.17
CP	Asylum from persecution	**4.96****	32.20	9.79
ESC	Work	**4.83****	28.63	11.68
Both	Access to abortion	**4.80****	34.09	14.69
None	Bearing arms	**4.71****	32.27	14.82
ESC	Rest and leisure	**4.53****	25.80	11.30
ESC	Owning property	**4.44****	25.99	16.01

Note: Italic type denotes higher than expected, and boldface type denotes lower than expected. Average on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is "no" and 7 is "definitely a human right." In descending order, average score. Significance tests relative to overall average (5.15). CP = civil and political right; ESC = economic, social, and cultural right.
**$p < .05$.

Table 5. Time to Response Whether Human Right, in Fraction of Total Task Time.

		Response			
Type	Item	All	Yes	Maybe	No
ESC	Education	*6.31***	*6.05***	6.73	6.77
CP	Opinion	*6.38***	*6.02***	7.41	7.35
CP	Religion	*6.39***	*6.03***	7.85	6.72
CP	Torture	*6.45***	*6.3***	6.85	6.75
CP	Voting	6.59	*6.12***	6.9	8.53
None	Bear arms	6.81	*5.81***	7.58	7.58
CP	Access to lawyer	6.86	6.97	6.69	6.82
ESC	Own property	7.19	7.21	7.06	7.42
Both	Abortion	7.56	6.73	**8.56****	7.87
ESC	Living standard	7.66	6.74	**8.58****	8.2
ESC	Work	**7.78****	7.14	7.84	**9.34****
ESC	Rest and leisure	**7.8****	6.86	**8.4****	8.26
ESC	Cultural heritage	**7.87****	7.58	8.28	7.82
CP	Asylum	**8.36****	7.56	**8.89****	**9.52****

Note: Italic type denotes faster than expected, and boldface type denotes slower than expected. In ascending order, all responses. Average intrarespondent fraction time to page submission relative to total task section time. Significance tests compared against expected value, 7.14 (1/14th of total task time). CP = civil and political right; ESC = economic, social, and cultural right.
**$p < .05$.

Sixty percent of respondents gave these three items a score of 7, the highest possible. Moreover, all had significantly faster answers than expected (see Table 5). Freedom of religion and of opinion also had the lowest rates of being perceived as not a human right. With a converted three-point scale of "no" = 1 and 2, "maybe" = 3 to 5, and "yes" = 6 and 7 (see Table 6), most respondents identified six items as yes human rights: religion (74 percent), opinion (73 percent), torture (71 percent), voting (66 percent), education (62 percent), and lawyer access (55 percent).

Table 6. Perception as Human Right, Three-Point Scale.

Type	Topic	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
CP	Freedom of religion	74.29 (70.39–77.84)	16.82 (13.87–20.26)	8.88 (6.74–11.63)
CP	Freedom of opinion	73.26 (69.32–76.85)	18.46 (15.37–21.99)	8.29 (6.22–10.96)
CP	Freedom from torture	71.05 (67.04–74.76)	17.67 (14.65–21.15)	11.28 (8.85–14.27)
CP	Voting	66.04 (61.89–69.96)	21.32 (18.03–25.02)	12.64 (10.07–15.76)
ESC	Education	62.41 (58.2–66.43)	24.62 (21.14–28.47)	12.97 (10.37–16.11)
CP	Access to a lawyer	55.09 (50.82–59.29)	31.89 (28.05–35.99)	13.02 (10.41–16.17)
ESC	Cultural heritage	49.25 (45–53.51)	35.66 (31.69–39.84)	15.09 (12.29–18.41)
Both	Abortion	47.65 (43.42–51.91)	32.96 (29.08–37.08)	19.4 (16.24–22.99)
ESC	Living standard	47.46 (43.23–51.72)	38.42 (34.36–42.64)	14.12 (11.41–17.36)
CP	Asylum	46.14 (41.93–50.41)	41.05 (36.94–45.3)	12.81 (10.21–15.93)
ESC	Work	44.44 (40.26–48.71)	38.79 (34.73–43.02)	16.76 (13.81–20.19)
None	Bearing arms	43.53 (39.37–47.78)	37.71 (33.68–41.91)	18.76 (15.66–22.31)
ESC	Owning property	37.66 (33.63–41.87)	40.49 (36.38–44.73)	21.85 (18.53–25.57)
ESC	Rest and leisure	36.91 (32.9–41.11)	43.13 (38.96–47.39)	19.96 (16.77–23.59)

Note: Values in parentheses are 95 percent confidence intervals. In descending order, yes-percent. Scale of 1 to 7 converted to human right: "yes" (6 and 7), "maybe" (3–5), and "no" (1 and 2). CP = civil and political right; ESC = economic, social, and cultural right.

In contrast to other items, abortion and bearing arms were notably polarized, producing a bimodal distribution with relatively high numbers answering both "no" and "definitely" on the seven-point scale. As such, our two partisan items, abortion and guns, produced polarized results not seen otherwise. Each had lower than average overall scores, and the highest 1 ratings after property. Yet a higher percentage of respondents perceived them as definitely human rights than either work or asylum, which had higher averages. With timing, although the minority said bearing arms was a human right (43 percent), those who did, did so significantly faster than expected, and had the fastest of any affirmative item response.

Considering rights types, findings again suggest negative, civil and political rights are notably salient in the lay human rights construct. Several such rights were the most strongly identified, with freedom a potential trigger for conceptual association. With the three-point scale, five of the six items identified as "yes" human rights were civil and political. On the other end, economic rights represented the least common associations. Property and leisure had the lowest averages. A relatively high number said these were not human rights, at 22 percent and 20 percent, respectively, and only a quarter perceived them as definitely human rights. Except for education, respondents paused longer to address second-generation rights, significantly so with work, leisure, and cultural heritage. Although these results indicate relatively lower salience and clarity with economic, social, and cultural rights, a strong majority still perceived them as within, or potentially within, the human rights concept (see Table 6).

Results also suggest substantive caveats, in both directions, that trouble a categorical primacy of civil and political rights in respondents' minds. Education was a clear exception. On the three-point scale, education was the only second-generation right which the majority saw as a clear human right. Respondents also spent significantly less of their time on that item, indicating cognitive clarity. It was the only second-generation right to score above the overall item average, at 5.43, and it ranked significantly above two civil and political rights, lawyer access and asylum from persecution. As this suggests, not all civil and political rights figured prominently in the construct. Asylum is a notable outlier, with the lowest average score (4.96) among first-generation items and significantly below the overall average, ranking it lower than cultural heritage and adequate living standard. Respondents took the longest with asylum, though it was similar in word and character length to other topics and shorter than cultural heritage or adequate living standard. Liberals and those younger than 55 years decided about asylum significantly faster than their comparison groups, though they did not have significantly different perceptions.

Although the results signal key patterns in relative prominence and clarity of content and rights types, response and time data also show respondents were inclined to an inclusive conceptualization. The total average score was 5.15, between maybe and definitely human rights. Put another way, perceiving an item was not or likely not a human right was the least common average response for every item. This was even the case for "owning property," which had the lowest average (4.44), but still only 16 percent of respondents saw it as not a

human right. By another metric, on the three-point scale, respondents felt all 14 topics were at least maybe human rights (see Table 6). Most respondents believed six were yes human rights, while for five other items there was no significant difference between yes and maybe. People who identified the top five items as human rights, on average, did so faster than expected, and in no case was an item excluded significantly faster than expected. Respondents moved quicker to identify something as a human right than to reject it, potentially implying greater clarity of thought about what is a human right relative to what is not (see Table 5).

To consider demographic differences, we assessed response and time data between comparison groups, and estimated effects on goodness-of-fit perceptions (see Table 7). Liberals, respondents younger than 55 years, and persons of color were generally more likely to identify economic, social, and cultural topics as human rights. The items with significant differences, however, varied. Net other factors, age and political preference had the greatest number of significant effects across items. Respondents younger than 55 years ranked half the economic, social, and cultural rights significantly higher: adequate living standard, property, and leisure. They also rated half of first-generation rights—opinion, religion, and torture—significantly lower. Political preference correlated with six items, controlling for other variables. As suggested above, liberals scored abortion significantly higher and bearing arms significantly lower. Liberal political identification positively correlated with adequate living standard and education, but also with civil and political rights of asylum and freedom from torture. On the other hand, political preference did not significantly influence perceptions of opinion, voting, lawyer access, work, leisure, or property.

Discussion and Conclusion

By addressing what people imagine as human rights, this research advances knowledge regarding how human rights manifest as a concept in ordinary people's minds. Individuals' open-mindedness or myopias regarding human rights, and their receptiveness to seeing incidents as human rights violations, signal how people perceive the universal entitlements of their own and others' humanity. This study contributes to the sociology of human rights by empirically examining human rights as a lay category of thought. In doing so, it moves from human rights as norms (Risse et al. 1999), opinions and attitudes (Chilton 2014; Scruggs 2018), or framing vocabularies (Vahabli 2024) to its manifestation as a sociocognitive construct.

This study offers key findings regarding the content and structure of lay human rights conceptualizations in the United States. Freedom of speech was the primary exemplar association with the human rights concept across demographic groups, indicating that it is an essential member and potential cognitive prototype among U.S. adults. As this was unanticipated, we did not include speech in other study tasks. The item that comes closest was freedom of opinion, which saw the second highest average score in the goodness-of-fit task, with 60 percent perceiving it as a definite human right and 73 percent as a clear human right. That freedom of speech is a prospective prototype for the lay human rights construct in the United States matters because prototypes have been shown to relate to asymmetrical thinking and graded membership in a category, affecting whether other stimuli are marginalized in or excluded from a concept (Cerulo et al. 2021:66; Rosch 1973).

Regarding rights types, civil and political rights figured prominently. Across study tasks, respondents were generally more likely to identify civil and political rights as human rights, relative to economic, social, and cultural rights, and they often did so faster. We also found strong associations of human rights with notions of freedom. This suggests negative rights, when human rights are thought to be respected by absence of infringement, weigh prominently in the sociocognitive conceptualization of human rights in the United States, and that freedom may be a privileged member. Although second-generation rights were peripheral relative to first-generation rights, they were firmly within the ordinary human rights construct.

Findings revealed important substantive caveats. Certain civil and political rights were marginal in respondents' minds, while specific economic, social, and cultural rights figured significantly in the concept. Regarding the former, asylum from persecution was a suggestive outlier. Across the 2,073 open-answer associations, none referred to asylum or refugee rights. In the goodness-of-fit task, asylum preformed significantly worse than all other civil and political items, and was less likely perceived as a human right than education, cultural heritage, abortion, or adequate living standard. Tsutsui and Shin (2008) noted the weakness of "alien suffrage" as a global human right norm, and this may suggest a similar dynamic at the level of U.S. personal culture.

Regarding the latter, some economic, social, and cultural rights appeared notably across results. Health care, food, and education were noteworthy exceptions to the pattern of first-generation prominence. Health care and food were the third and fourth most common first associative exemplars respectively, appearing more frequently than the right to life, voting, or freedom of religion. Across all example responses, health care and food were more common than life or religion. Health care performed significantly better than most violations scenarios, while

Table 7. Ordinal Logistic Regression Model of Demographic Effects on Perceived Human Right.

	Opinion	Voting	Asylum	Religion	Bear Arms	Torture	Lawyer	Cultural Heritage	Education	Living Standard	Leisure	Work	Property	Abortion
Liberal (reference: conservative)	.02 (.19)	.30 (.18)	.36* (.17)	.08 (.19)	−.97*** (.17)	.39* (.19)	.15 (.17)	.24 (.17)	.38* (.18)	.47** (.17)	.31 (.17)	.12 (.17)	−.04 (.17)	.91*** (.18)
< 55 years (reference: >55 years)	−.48* (.20)	−.36 (.19)	−.01 (.17)	−.64** (.21)	.05 (.17)	−.51* (.20)	.07 (.17)	.29 (.17)	.23 (.18)	.42* (.17)	.48** (.17)	.20 (.17)	.59** (.17)	.35* (.17)
POC (reference: white)	−.35 (.19)	−.06 (.19)	−.36* (.18)	−.31 (.20)	−.13 (.18)	−.70*** (.20)	.25 (.18)	.19 (.18)	.08 (.19)	−.09 (.18)	.00 (.18)	.35* (.18)	.17 (.18)	.04 (.18)
No college (reference: college)	−.04 (.18)	−.04 (.18)	−.05 (.16)	.01 (.19)	.33* (.16)	−.04 (.18)	.23 (.17)	.04 (.17)	−.03 (.17)	.13 (.17)	.19 (.16)	.18 (.16)	.26 (.16)	.28 (.17)
Female (reference: male)	.03 (.18)	.11 (.17)	−.14 (.16)	.07 (.18)	−.11 (.16)	−.09 (.18)	.20 (.16)	.07 (.16)	.38* (.17)	.29 (.16)	.24 (.16)	.02 (.16)	−.14 (.16)	.26 (.16)
n	526	525	526	524	528	527	525	525	527	526	526	526	526	526

Note: Values in parentheses are standard errors. Perception as human right is measured on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 is "no" and 7 is "definitely."
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

education was more likely to be perceived as definitely a human right than some civil and political items. Altogether, this suggests a multidimensional cognitive structure irreducible to the purported hegemony of civil and political rights, or skepticism about second-generation rights, in the U.S. political cultural milieu (e.g., Curtis 2017; Donnelly 2013). At the level of lay cognition, we did not find this to be the case.

Considering the interplay of national political culture and the lay human rights construct, results signal its content and structure to be more nuanced than political culture arguments indicate. Contrary to what critics of liberalism (Douzinas 2014) would suggest, freedom of speech, rather than property, featured centrally in respondents' answers. Although the findings offer some confirming evidence that civil and political rights are salient at the level of personal culture in the United States, such rights were not categorically central nor best exemplars in lay understandings. Relatively common associative exemplars like gun rights and happiness, which are not in the UDHR, suggest national doctrine could be referents for the construct among some publics. However, other rights such as lawyer access and property, affirmed in both the U.S. Bill of Rights and the UDHR, were not salient.

Alongside content and rights type trends, response and time data results indicate human rights was an expansive concept among respondents, who trended toward an inclusive conceptualization. With potential violation scenarios, the majority—7 of 10—were perceived as a human rights violation, including denied claim to ancestral land. All goodness-of-fit items were principally perceived as clear or possible human rights. With the most rejected item (property), still more than three quarters believed it to be at least maybe a human right. Although the nature of the research could have primed respondents toward conceptual inclusivity, we designed instructions, tasks and their sequence, and red herrings to mitigate acquiescence response (see Stellmacher et al. 2005). Notably, results suggest this inclusive tendency had parameters. Moreover, respondents were significantly faster to include content within the human rights concept, and more delayed in determining what was outside it. Altogether, results did not suggest a strict conceptualization or inclination to reject content. Respondents were generally broad and open minded that stimuli were members, or potential members, within the human rights category.

Further research in interdisciplinary studies of human rights and the sociology of culture and cognition can build on this research in different ways. The study garners novel empirical insights into sociocognitive dynamics of human rights, and the interplay between political culture and lay constructs. These findings may be informative for research on the efficacy of human rights frames for social movements, and why the framing of some issues as human rights garners better reception and more attention than others (Bloemraad et al. 2016; Tsutsui and Shin 2008; Vahabli 2024). On the basis of these results, framing health care as a human right may garner more immediate resonance, for example, than asylum in the United States. At the same time, respondents' cognitive dispositions to include content in the concept may bode well for advocacy campaigns to dynamically inform lay human rights conceptualizations, whether with general or particular publics.

Although we endeavored to map general patterns in the internal structure of human rights as a lay category, we considered potential sociodemographic differences in how respondents implicitly conceptualized human rights. Liberals, those younger than 55 years, persons of color, and those without college degrees tended to have stronger, more inclusive perceptions of second-generation human rights relative to their comparison groups. White, male, older, and conservative respondents tended to have more salient and certain perceptions of civil and political rights. Partisan topics of abortion and bearing arms correlated, as expected, with political preferences, and offered a benchmark to evaluate how political subcultures interplay with the human rights concept. Although political preferences had estimated effects on some implicit understandings, liberals and conservatives alike generally saw economic, social, and cultural rights as marginal but within the human rights category. Future research could use latent class analysis to evaluate if there are distinguishable human rights archetypes for particular groups within the cognitive trends detailed here (Flores and Azar 2023).

Given that political culture shapes what human rights groups value (Stellmacher et al. 2005), researchers could compare how the social mindscape of human rights varies in other countries or world regions. Existing scholarship and United Nations treaty ratifications suggest that the United States emphasizes civil and political rights, while second-generation rights are more prominent elsewhere (e.g., Blau 2016; Donnelly 2013). Although this study's findings empirically deepen and nuance our understandings of human rights at the level of personal culture in the United States, it remains uncertain how this compares with other political cultural environs. Whether first- and second-generation rights are acutely salient and peripheral in the lay U.S. construct, respectively, requires comparative research. Applying this study design in other country contexts would aid in that pursuit. In other words, it would garner global comparative insights into the personal culture of human rights, as well as into how lay constructs and national political cultures interplay. Such comparisons would generate fresh, evidence-based perspectives to long-standing debates about the relationship between culture and human rights.

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