Applications of Gandhian concepts in psychology and allied disciplines

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ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the significance of Gandhian concepts in research in psychology and its related fields. To illustrate the application of Gandhian ideology, a test of non-violence is described here with its psychometric properties. Further, two unexplored research issues having a bearing on clinical psychology and psychiatry have been delineated. Firstly, a call for addressing the mental health problems of non-violent protesters numbering over one billion spread all over the world has been made. And secondly, there is a need for understanding the neurological basis of non-violent form of behavior, for example, the role of oxytocin, to increase the legitimacy of non-violence as adaptive behavior.

Key words: Gandhian concepts, psychology, nonviolence

INTRODUCTION

Michael Nagler,[1] Professor of Classics at the University of California at Berkeley, stated that “non-violence is a science. It has precise rules and we have to learn them…” (see Kool, Perspectives on Non-violence, 1990, p. 138). Writing further in the same chapter of this book, he argued that the laws of non-violence are more robust than that of any other science. For example, he contended, “Gandhi tried to do for non-violence what astronomer Hubble is said to have done for the universe with his famous constant” and created “something to the basis of everything” (p. 138, ibid).

Non-violence is a form of behavior that should have been studied by psychologists long ago, but it has been neglected in the history of psychology. While the founding father of modern psychology, William James,[2] believed that we must study such behavior, the apathy toward this significant field of psychology continued for a long time, until the American Psychological Association established its Peace Division 48 at its annual meeting at Boston in 1990. I happened to chair a session of this Peace Division convention.

According to Daniel Mayton,[3] “non-violence, as an active behavior, falls clearly within the domain of psychology, however, till date only a handful of psychologists have written about non-violence (e.g., or researched or researched non-violence)”. Since Mayton made his comment, a few more publications have enriched this field, including the official Journal of Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, published by the Peace Division 48 of the American Psychological Association. For a more up-to-date list of publications, the reader is referred to Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology.[7]

While, there is considerable disagreement over defining what is (or is not) non-violence, there is consensus that non-violence in any form involves reduction and control of, or, active intervention to avoid, or refrain from, violence. Some critics argue that such a definition of non-violence is limited in nature, because it excludes the practice of empathizing with the adversary to broaden the base of non-violence. In the literature on non-violence the former is described as negative non-violence and the latter as positive non-violence.[8] Given the fact that science like psychology

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do not have objective and measureable concepts as we typically find in physical sciences, a few gutsy scholars like Nagler can challenge and evolve the scientific spirit of non-violence – should a science be understood as a source of enterprise based on experimentation – as envisaged by Gandhi in his “Experiments with Truth.” If the function of a theory of science is to objectively observe and predict the nature of events, Gandhi’s non-violence meets the criteria set by Nagler.[3]

**ON MEASURING NON-VIOLENCE: KOOL AND SEN’S TEST OF NON-VIOLENCE**

Gandhi believed that violence could never be eroded from the face of this earth, albeit he emphasized relentlessly the curbing of violence using both positive and negative modes of non-violence, that is, building and promoting non-violence versus simply retaining it. It is well known that he always preferred the former mode in his activism.[9] For him, violence and non-violence represented the ambivalence of human nature.

Given the impact of Gandhian concepts and our belief that non-violent behavior is measureable, I developed a test of non-violence (NVT) in collaboration with Manisha Sen (now deceased), of Mumbai University.[8] Our original purpose in developing this test was to investigate how subjects scoring high on Gandhian philosophy refrained from punishing their subjects with shocks. In doing so, we examined the applications of Milgram’s famous study at Yale University on how participants obeyed the instructions of an experimenter in administering shocks much the same way as Hitler’s henchmen, including soldiers, followed his instructions to conduct one of the worst genocide in human history. According to Milgram,[10] when extreme conditions were created, subjects in his laboratory administered lethal levels of electric shocks (actually shocks were never given but the subjects were made to believe its delivery through a sophisticated experimental procedure) that would otherwise not be delivered even by individuals with severe mental problems. Our results were exceptionally clear: Subjects with a preference of Gandhian ideology either kept their levels of shocks at a lower-level or declined to administer it at any level, in sharp contrast to those subscribing to a relatively higher-level of violent solutions. It is interesting to note that there were two per cent subjects in Milgram’s study who had also refused to deliver shocks to the victims. Summarizing this situation, I have written elsewhere.

“Imagine how a dedicated Buddhist or Jain would behave when asked to deliver shocks to an erring learner. And it is not only devoutly religious people who kept their non-violent behavior intact. Even ordinary members of the community of New Haven, Connecticut (CT), USA were capable of defying the violent procedure set up by a very well respected professor of Yale University, Stanley Milgram. Did Milgram continue to study those 2% ordinary individuals who simply declined to punish the learners for their errors? No, Milgram never followed them in his research, because his interest was in exploring the etiology of violence and to draw a parallel between the subjects in his research and Hitler’s henchmen, who blindly followed violence”[11]

And indeed, the interest of many veteran psychologists like Milgram never shifted to the exploration of the other side of human nature, so firmly exhibited by 2% of the individuals in Milgram’s study. In the context of such significant results on the Indian samples, Manisha Sen and I concluded that it was time to explore non-violent attitudes and beliefs further by developing a NVT. The NVT consists of 36 forced-choice items that measure the non-violent orientation, for example, item #9 from this test is reproduced below:

“When someone is rude to me I want to
A. Be rude back to the person
B. Overcome the temptation to be rude.”

In the above item if a subject endorses B, she or he gets a score of 1 on this non-violent orientation, but 0 by selecting the choice A. Likewise, by endorsing all the 36 items positively oriented toward non-violence, a subject collects a maximum of 36 points on the NVT. Conversely, with the highest violent orientation his or her score would be zero. The NVT has 29 filler items and all the 65 items of this scale are reported in my book – Psychology of Non-violence and Aggression.[8]

The validity of the NVT has been tested in several ways. First, we expected this test to correlate negatively with a popular test of aggression, the Buss-Durkee scale (−0.43) and its subscales: physical aggression (−0.51), verbal aggression (−0.28) negativism (−0.34), and irritability (−0.30). All the correlations were statistically significant at.05 level or higher.[12] For a simple external validation test, we administered this test to a group of Buddhists and Quakers in Wisconsin, USA and a group of delinquent adolescents in a residential facility also in Wisconsin. Their NVT scores were 31.86 and 19.83, respectively. To test the validity of this test further, its relationship was investigated by Mayton[13] with his own Test of Teenage Non-violence. Mayton reported a highly significant correlation between Test of Teenage Non-violence and NVT. In Japan, Matsumoto[14] translated the NVT into Japanese and administered the NVT to a group of young and old people. He received support to his hypothesis, that with increase in age, the NVT scores tended to increase, attributing it to moral development.

At the California School of Professional Psychology, Los Angeles, Johnson et al.,[15] developed their own multidimensional scale of non-violence. The designers of this test conceived six different components of non-violence: Direct non-violence, system level of non-violence (for
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example, religious), compassion, opposition to oppression, respect for life and environment, and spirituality. While NVT correlated positively with the overall scores of this new test, the consistency of Johnson’s subscales has been considered inadequate in research.

A factor analysis of the NVT revealed that the following seven factors significantly loaded with non-violence:[16,17]

- Self-control including understanding and negotiation
- Anti-punitiveness including compassion and forgiving
- Forbearance including tolerance and judging intention of others
- Equity of justice including equality of adjudicating justice
- Self-defense
- Constructive reform
- Affective control including emotional control in the face of irritation.

The reliability of the NVT across all samples was found to be 0.80, with Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.78 to 0.85. These values demonstrate a high degree of inter-item reliability for the entire 36 item test and meets conventional standards for tests.[12] The NVT has been translated into several languages, including Polish, Arabic, and Japanese and data from samples across cultures have demonstrated its usefulness. Commenting on the status of the NVT, Mayton,[3] former President of the American Psychological Association’s Peace Division, remarked, “… the NVT (Kool and Sen, 1984) has the best-documented validity and has a record of effective use cross-culturally.” (p. 351)

**GANDHIAN CONCEPTS AND THE NVT AS A RESEARCH TOOL**

As stated above, the NVT has been used in many research studies, including several doctoral and master’s dissertations, covering many areas of psychology: Values and non-violence/ universal peace; attributions/self-blame; dogmatism and intentionality; rules of war/us-them dichotomy; self-control, cross-cultural research, integrative power and moral development (please see Kool[8] for details).

In the following paragraphs I will explain the use of the NVT in two burgeoning areas of psychology and its allied sciences. First, in promoting his non-violent movement, Gandhi used satyagraha as a tool that required each participating activist to rehearse the script of non-violent action. Basically each individual, called Satyagrahi, who dedicated himself or herself as a follower of this movement, had to learn a set of action plans consisting of keeping a firm posture of fearlessness while being beaten by the police.[18] During the recent Arab non-violent movement and elsewhere, Gene Sharp[19] of Harvard University used strategies based on Gandhi’s techniques to script non-violence. At the Einstein Forum in Berlin (2012) I learned that there were 2000 non-violent centers in Russia that were rehearsing non-violent scripts through electronic media. In other words, in this age of electronics, scripting would not go away during the millennium because of its unique value, but it has and will take a different source with faster approaches to alternatives to violence. Thanks to the mass media of our time that well over one billion people in the world are directly or indirectly engaged in non-violent protest (Time Magazine[20]). Is clinical psychology and psychiatry prepared to deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other major problems of non-violent activists? It is doubtful if the activists engaged in non-violent struggle in 2000 centers in Russia will be without mental health problems after their participation in such activism.

The PTSD problems that the US soldiers are currently facing after participating in the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan are well known. However, mental health problems of soldiers after war are not going to provide us the answers we are searching for in our research of peace activists who receive humiliation and torture at the hands of their perpetrators because they engage themselves instrumentally by using non-violence as a strategy to achieve the end that others find expeditious through violence. According to MacNair,[21] because of their strong moral defense, an average peace activist does not go through the same bursts of anger such as that of soldiers engaging in war. Therefore the PTSD classification of panic and anxiety based on Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IVth Edition-Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) might not apply to the traumatized activist. For Gandhi, extreme expression of emotions in any situation – winning or losing, yielding to an aggressor’s demands, or imprisonment and torture – must be dealt with the same humility of love and respect even if one is dealing with an adversary; otherwise, an activist would not be fit to join his movement. Unfortunately, according to Kohlberg,[22] fewer than 10% people reach this stage of highest morality, called post-conventional stage. Hence our average protestor is likely to suffer from serious mental health problems in his/her moral defense. With over one billion people currently pursuing non-violent movements, psychology, psychiatry and allied disciplines need to take some proactive action to address this issue.

The next area of research on non-violence that needs further attention is its neurological basis. When non-violence is displayed it must be represented in some form of behavior that has a neurological connection, especially established through functional magnetic resonance imaging studies. Recent research conducted by Kerstin Uvas-Moberg[23] on oxytocin (OT), a hormone that is abundantly available during pregnancy, tends to enhance cooperative behavior and attachments. Taking a leaf from the writing of Lee et al.,[24] we wrote elsewhere: “The very fact that the substance, namely OT, has remained with mammals even after such a long evolutionary history suggests OT has adaptive value.
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It is often said that, “an eye for an eye will leave the world blind.” Maybe it is the effect of OT on various brain systems that prevents us from being so revengeful and killing others and helps us to continue to trust others even after persistent breaches of trust.”[23] This has also been validated by studies showing that OT can act as a stress reducer and appears to be a natural means of treating PTSD.[26] At the end of this paper, it is argued that Gandhi, as an engineer of the non-violent mind, gave us insights into discovering our own psychological capital: Seeking a non-violent solution over a violent one, winning the adversary with continued love and trust, be morally inclusive, mitigate the boundaries between us and them (attribute theory), developing a sense of self-efficacy, bridging the gap between one’s attitude and behavior, and managing self-control—are all such topics in modern psychology that are being studied by leading psychologists of our time. There is, however, a need for further enrichment of these areas from the perspective of non-violence so as to enrich the understanding of our own psychological capital. Unlike Freud, Gandhi looked at the brighter side of human nature for which modern psychotherapy and psychiatry do not seem to be prepared to deal with the problems of the followers of non-violence. Seligman’s positive psychology, with its present growth is too positive to focus on the “burn out” form of devastation that the activist face, much like Nelson Mandela, who at times, oscillated between non-violence and violence, as stated by Presbey.[27]

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