

# Gandhi: The Grandfather of Conflict Transformation

Gail M. Presbey

What is the relationship between Mohandas K. Gandhi's experiments with truth and nonviolence and the growing field of conflict resolution, with over 60 master's degree programs, several PhD programs, and textbooks like *The Sage Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Bercovitch et al., 2009)?<sup>1</sup> Certainly Gandhi is acknowledged as a precursor to the contemporary field, and key founders of the field such as Johan Galtung attribute their inspiration and key insights to him. But Gandhi scholars like Thomas Weber (2004) suggest that the contemporary field of conflict resolution has mostly forgotten Gandhi's contributions to conflict resolution. One of the goals of this essay is to remind students and practitioners of conflict resolution that key insights of the field originate from Gandhi's early experiments — that is, theory-laden activism and his reflections upon his movement's accomplishments and shortcomings.

Weber (2004) notes that American conflict resolution studies are more influenced by Kenneth Boulding and his *Journal of Conflict Resolution* — which focused on empirical studies and hard economic realities — rather than the normative emphases of sociologist Galtung. *The Sage Handbook* covers a wide range of social science methods used in the field, including quantitative studies, game theory, problem-solving approaches, and experimental research. It also includes an article by Jack S. Levy (2009) on the use of case studies, which looks at the history of political leaders who have played important roles in conflict resolution. Not mere historical exercises, Levy (2009) explains that “theory-guided/ideographic case studies” or “analytic history” can focus on a historical situation and its actors, but uses a specific conceptual framework to

focus attention on aspects of the situation that might otherwise be neglected (p. 73). Thus, a second and more humble goal of this chapter is to revisit some of the historical details of Gandhi's approach and evaluate them according to current accepted wisdom in the field of conflict resolution.

### Gandhi's Historical Role as Precursor

In *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Miall, Ramsbotham, and Woodhouse (1999) include Gandhi as a precursor to the contemporary institutionalized field of peace research and conflict resolution, which began in 1945 as a response to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the onset of the Cold War between the nuclear armed superpowers. They see Gandhi's contribution, along with early pacifist groups, as having "cross-fertilized with academic enterprise to enhance understanding of violent political conflict and alternatives to it" (Miall et al., 1999, p. 41). They credit Gandhi with creating a method — satyagraha—to bring to light the injustices inherent in accepted social structures of the day, so that these could be addressed in a way that did not result in a spiral of violence. The point of engaging with opponents upholding the status quo system is not to win but to build "a healthier relationship between antagonists" (p. 41). The authors suggest that these themes addressed by Gandhi were later championed in problem-solving workshops in the 1980s (alternatives to the problem-coercion-reward models), and also in the field's literature, such as the emphasis on the "win-win" situation in the popular *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981), and the emphasis on nurturing human relationships found in Adam Curle's 1971 book, *Making Peace*.

In Louis Kriesberg's essay on "The Evolution of Conflict Resolution" in the *Sage Handbook* (2009), Gandhi is first mentioned as having influence in the South African context of racial discrimination in the 1890s, before the preliminary developments of the field. He notes that Gandhi's practices in South Africa later influenced the African National Congress in their decades-long struggle against apartheid, and adds that Gandhi successfully "modeled methods of constructive escalation," which were used during the U.S. civil rights struggle. Academics studied these popular movements, noting their mixed record in bringing about positive social change and hoping that the interdisciplinary use of the social sciences could avoid or reduce war and injustice in the world (p. 19).

Weber (2004), a historian of Gandhi and his movement, identifies the places in Galtung's writings where he specifically mentions Gandhi's influence. Though Galtung published articles in the 1950s, wrote a book about Gandhi

in 1954, and visited India in 1969 to research Gandhi, he did not publish the bulk of his material on the Mahatma until 1992, in *The Way is the Goal: Gandhi Today*. Weber attributes to this late publication a reason that many scholars in the conflict resolution field did not realize how indebted Galtung is to Gandhi's ideas.

Galtung is well-known for his emphasis on structural violence, and notes in his 1969 writings that Gandhi saw the violence built into social structures like caste and colonialism. Gandhi's version of "hate the sin, not the sinner" was intended to point out that attacking their enemies violently was a misperception of both the cause and solution to their problems. For Galtung, Gandhi's emphasis on exonerating actors focused people's efforts on dismantling or transforming violent social structures — this being both a better solution and a way to avoid violence directed at individuals.

Galtung's (1969) emphasis on structural injustice has sometimes been criticized as widening the definition of violence beyond its usefulness. If that is a fault, then blame is to be shared by Gandhi, as Galtung credits him with the definition of violence as "anything which would impede the individual from self-realization" (Galtung, in Weber, 2004, p. 38). The theme of Galtung's 1992 book is how Gandhi consistently rejects violence in all of its forms, including repression and exploitation. While Gandhi emphasized that conflicts are to be solved, he also saw them as golden opportunities for those involved to challenge themselves to become better persons through self-transformation (Weber, 2004, p. 38).

As Galtung (1996) said, "A satyagrahi tries to fight injustice, not to sweep it under the carpet" (p. 115). Of 12 possible responses to conflict, he notes that Gandhi rejects out-of-hand all but four, because the others involved some sort of violence or coercion. He writes, "Gandhi can be said to be a puritan in his choice of approaches to conflict resolution — a vegetarian here as in the choice of food, so to speak, and largely for the same reasons" (p. 115). Yet Gandhi's is no arbitrary or scrupulous narrowing; he chooses the only four approaches that attempt to transform the conflict, not escape from it. But is it really best to limit oneself and one's community only to the most ideal means to chosen ends? Galtung again: "In modern strategic terms Gandhi seems to be an adherent of the doctrine of graded and delayed response. The other party should be given time to reflect and come to see the total situation differently, just as one's own group also needs time to have a corresponding chance to learn and transcend, to improve A and B, together with the antagonist" (p. 116).

While Galtung was explicit in acknowledging Gandhi's role in the construction of his ideas on conflict resolution, a large part of the literature ignores Gandhi's contribution. Weber (2006) does an inventory of the two main

journals in the field, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* and *Journal of Peace Research*, and finds few overt references to Gandhi despite the many parallels between his methods and later developments in the field.

Arne Naess's 1974 book, *Gandhi and Group Conflict*, applied Gandhi's ideas to conflict resolution. Summarized by Weber (2006), the main themes of the book are that "all human beings have long-term interests in common; violence is invited from opponents if they are humiliated or provoked; opponents are less likely to resort to violence the better they understand your position; the essential interests which opponents have in common should be clearly formulated and cooperation established on that basis; personal contact with the opponent should be sought; opponents should not be judged harder than the self; opponents should be trusted; an unwillingness to compromise on non-essentials decreases the likelihood of true resolution; and that a position of weakness in an opponent should not be exploited" (p. 148). The remainder of the essay explores many of these themes.

### Gandhian Practice and the "Science" of Conflict Resolution

Contemporary conflict resolution models itself on the social sciences, and as such it often attempts to articulate a secular scientific view that does not rely upon spiritual principles. But other sciences have had founders who were steeped in a religious worldview and saw their scientific explorations as an outgrowth of their spiritual quest. By the time these insights are tried and tested and passed along to the next generation, the religious backdrop is often gone. This is the situation with Gandhi's "experiments with truth," as he called them in his autobiography. As his life spanned an age of pragmatism and inventions, he wanted to see if his moral convictions worked in the practical world. He believed spirituality was central to what he was trying to achieve. But those who came after him in the field of conflict resolution reduced his experiments to an applied method of nonviolence, jettisoning the spiritual convictions of the nonviolent actor.

While Gandhi insisted that he was engaged in experiments, he admitted he did not have the time to develop these into a strict science: "To write a treatise on the science of ahimsa is beyond my powers. I am not built for academic writings. Action is my domain.... Let anyone who can systematize ahimsa into a science do so, if indeed it lends itself to such treatment" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 90, p. 2). His experiments happened not in a lab but in the world. Most often his experiments were done either on himself or with his close followers and movement. For example, his writings are filled with his

experiments with his own diet; he scrutinized the effects of it on both his health and spiritual state (*Collected Works*, Vol. 44, pp. 16–17); to see if khadi spinning and sales can eliminate poverty (*Collected Works*, Vol. 70, p. 7); and to test his vow of celibacy (*Collected Works*, Vol. 86, pp. 9–10). Conflict resolution, however, typically does not rely on lab experiments (although they are part of the field), but uses events as they unfold in the world as their case studies.

The following section examines parts of Gandhi's approach that depart from current conflict resolution practice and if they hold insights that should be revived and continued.

#### *An alternative to "tit-for-tat": Trust*

Contemporary conflict resolution depends in part on game theory. In a game like "Prisoner's Dilemma," studies suggest that the best way to respond to a situation if you are unsure if you can trust the other party is "tit-for-tat"—that is, be generous and cooperate at first, but if the other party does not reciprocate, then copy what the other did in the previous move. This solution was proposed by Anatol Rapoport and was verified by computer simulation by Axelrod in 1984 (Miall et al., 1999). Gandhi's approach, however—done years before computer simulation was possible—involved trusting opponents. As Gandhi said on several occasions: "Trust begets trust. Suspicion is feid and only stinks. He who trusts has never yet lost in the world.... It is true that I have often been let down. Many have deceived me and many have been found wanting. But I do not repent of my association with them.... The most practical, the most dignified way of going on in the world is to take people at their word" (as cited in Weber, 1991, p. 38).

Weber (2006), however, notes that studies show that exhibiting a trusting attitude is as likely to result in exploitation as in cooperation. Indeed, Gandhi knew that trusting others did not always yield the short-term results he hoped for. But he emphasized the larger goals and gains—the satisfaction of living with integrity and according to your own principles: "...satisfaction lies in the effort, not in the attainment. Full effort is full victory" (as cited in Weber, 1991, p. 139).

#### *Look inside: Spirituality*

Gandhi saw conflict as an opportunity to practice spiritual virtues. Practitioners of satyagraha should not hate their opponents, but love them, even while they refuse to cooperate with the unjust system they are a part of (Kumarappa, 1951). As mentioned previously, Galtung upholds Gandhi's

definition of violence as “anything which would impede the individual from self-realization” (as cited in Weber, 2006, p. 38). While this definition includes the violence — both daily and incremental — of unjust systems, for Gandhi it also involves the selfish actions we make almost reflexively when we regard ourselves as more important than others. Have I harbored hatred in my heart today? Did I speak harshly today? Did I save the best for myself? Did I shrink work? “All of these are forms of violence,” Gandhi claims (Yer, 1986). From this perspective, we are all perpetrators of violence, trying to wean ourselves as well as others from these continual habits stemming from our baser selves. Gandhi confessed that he often felt anger at the injustices suffered by the poor, and in this he fell short of the ideal of *ahimsa*, as the goal was to oppose injustice without any anger (Kumarappa, 1951). But he would implore today’s conflict resolvers as they enter a conflict situation to do so with the humility that we are all constantly prone to violence, and that we should strive as much to help others find alternatives to violence as to reject violence in ourselves.

*We could be wrong, and the charitable interpretation  
of the opponent's motives*

Gandhi explained his method in 1921, “Satyagraha is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force.... It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish” (Gandhi, 1921). Likewise, “What may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker. Where there is honest effort, it will be realized that what appear to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree. Does not God Himself appear to different individuals in different aspects? Yet we know that He is one.... Hence there is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights” (Gandhi, 1930, p. 39). Meeting the opponent with humility will shape the encounter. The goal is not to convince others of the rightness of our views through argumentation. It is better to approach the other with affinity. Chakravarti Ram-Prasad (2003) explains the Jain insights upon which Gandhi drew:

Now, in the contested encounter with the Other, disparation as well as narration of one’s position is epistemic violence, since both strategies seek to conquer the Other. Non-violence does not require the final repudiation of dialogue and discussion, as already noted; but it seeks to re-interpret discussion as the exchanging of views in a climate of “goodwill.” Affinity includes the exchange of views, and discussion, even debate for clarification, because, as it is directed to this end and not to triumph, it can proceed free of violence [p. 7].

Gandhi received insights on the importance of open-mindedness not only from religions like Jainism and Hinduism, the religions of his birthplace, but also from the West. In his negotiations for justice in the British colonies of South Africa and India, he encountered Lord John Morley, Secretary of State of India from 1905 to 1910. Morley had published his book, *On Commonwealth*, in 1886, the same year he became Secretary for Ireland and advocated Irish Home Rule. When he became Secretary of State for India in 1905, he supported increased self-government for Indians while still punishing what he considered acts of sedition. Gandhi looked for friends and allies of his movement everywhere, including among those potentially considered opponents, like Morley.

In his work, Morley (1908) notes that while a free-thinker should find satisfaction in beliefs that meet the test of truthfulness according to his or her own criteria, regardless of what others think,

when he proceeds to apply his beliefs in the practical conduct of life, the position is different. There are now good reasons why his attitude should be in some ways less inflexible. The society in which he is placed is a very ancient and composite growth. The people from whom he dissents have not come by their opinions, customs, and institutions by a process of mere hazard. These opinions and customs all had their origin in a certain real or supposed fitness. They have a certain depth of root in the lives of a proportion of the existing generation [p. 114].

Morley (1908) goes on to explain that each person should realize his or her own fallibility, which will increase tolerance: “Earnestness of conviction is perfectly compatible with a sense of liability to error” (p. 137). Gandhi saw a direct connection between this humility and dedication to nonviolent means in conflict, and adds the stipulation that action as an expression of our commitment to truth must be such that if we are wrong, the ill effects of our error will fall on ourselves rather than others.

What does this nonviolent exchange of views in a climate of goodwill, seeking affinity, look like in concrete terms? First, it is time-consuming and requires patience. In the Ahmedabad Labor dispute of 1918, Gandhi met with striking workers every day. As Erik Erikson (1969) explained, “Rarely, if ever, had any man reached out to them more directly and without any trace of talking down to them” (p. 331). Gandhi also met daily with the opposition — the mill owner, Ambalal. The mill owner’s sister, Anasuya, who served them tea every day, was on the side of the workers. At tea, Ambalal reported on what the mill owners’ committee had discussed, and the men briefed each other on current developments. Erikson (1969) adds, “Gandhi, not without a chuckle, would insist that Anasuya serve her brother” (p. 333). Here the emphasis is on reinforcing friendship and amiability among all the parties

despite their differences on workers' wages. Relationship building was one element that eventually led to a compromise that ended the strike and raised wages.

Gandhi's emphasis on respectful regard for opponents and a charitable interpretation of their motivations helped to de-escalate conflict. As V.K. Kool (2008) explains in his work on the psychology of nonviolence, we generally have a self-serving bias—a theory known as attribution. We interpret others' negative actions as part of their personal traits (and failings), while attributing our own negative actions to circumstances beyond our control. Likewise, we think our own good actions are due to our positive personal traits. Furthermore, some individuals caught in conflict have "hostile attribution bias"—they assume the actions of others are intentionally meant to thwart them. Such attitudes can lead to the entrenchment of conflict. A productive approach to resolving conflict therefore involves, like Gandhi's teachings and experiences, the appreciation of multiple motivations for people's actions; the acknowledgment of a partial overlap in the goals of all parties to a conflict; and the understanding that neither side has a monopoly on the "rightness" of an action (Kool, 2008).

An example of Gandhi's openness and charitable interpretation of an opponent was the 1924–1925 Vykom Temple Road satyagraha and his controversial dealings with the Brahmins of Vykom Temple, who would not allow untouchables to use the road that passed by the temple. The local satyagraha community had begun a vigil along the road in September 1924, and the police in turn put up barricades. Gandhi first arrived in Vykom in the spring of 1925 and negotiated with the state authorities, convincing them to remove the barricade. But the satyagrahis announced they would not take advantage of the removal of the barricade; they would not proceed down the road until the Brahmins were fully persuaded that the untouchables had a right to use the road despite their caste (Bondurant, 1971).

But the Brahmins had their own truth, which Gandhi respected, noting, "They believe their religion is in danger" (p. 51). Gandhi repeatedly met with them to discuss theological issues and interpretations of Hindu scripture, which they differed greatly on. When Gandhi, out of frustration, offered the Brahmins several compromises regarding the road controversy, they rejected them (Parekh, 1999). Gandhi then made a public speech, expressing his gratitude for their discussions, saying, "I appealed to their reason. I appealed to their humanity.... I was not able to produce the impression that I had expected that I would be able to. But despair is a term which does not occur in my dictionary" (as cited in Parekh, 1999, p. 246). Gandhi and his followers continued to apply "persistent reasoning supported by prayer" (Bondurant, 1971, p. 49). In autumn of 1925, the Brahmins declared, "We cannot any longer resist the prayers that have been made to us, and we are ready to receive the

untouchables" (p. 50). The conversion of this group led to a larger reform movement that spread to many Hindu temples in India. It was another example of Gandhi's insistence on respecting others' truths while encouraging and patiently anticipating transformation in his opponents.

## Evaluation

### *Gandhi's critics*

Gandhi has been criticized for not living up to his own prescriptions for handling conflict, including not being able to see the other's point of view (Jurgensmeyer, 1989). Also, a reader suggested to Gandhi that his decision to support the British against the Zulu in South Africa showed that he neglected to hear both sides of the issue (Gandhi, 1948). It is important to note that Gandhi often reflected on his life and admitted mistakes, and sometimes changed his views to rectify situations.

Some of Gandhi's contemporaries did not believe that his "soft" approach of respecting the opponent and seeing others' point of view could end up with sure and favorable results. Acharya Kripalani argued that "Gandhi could not turn the heart of even one capitalist" (as cited in Bourai, 2004, p. 118). Participants in satyagrahas interviewed by Nakhre (1982) also registered skepticism that Gandhi ever succeeded in converting the enemy. Jetha Lal Joshi from Rajkor said, "I believe conversion in a satyagraha is more an exception rather than a rule" (p. 102).

Gandhi noted in 1947 that in the eyes of his critics, 30 years was wasted—that Gandhi's nonviolent experiment delayed independence from the British, which could have been won more swiftly if the movement embraced violence against the British. One outspoken critic of Gandhi argued even more forcefully that his policy of compromise and redress made him a "half-way" leader. Himansu Roy (2001) argued that Gandhi was used as a buffer between the government and terrorists, the latter whom Roy thought could win Indian independence more quickly. But Gandhi argued that even without foreign domination, there would be no self-rule in India unless Indians stopped their mutual hatreds and learned to live with each other in harmony (Krishnadas, 1951). His way was a calculated attempt to change social structures—not just British imperialism, but Indian society as well.

### *Evaluation in light of contemporary conflict resolution*

Certainly Gandhi is not irrelevant to the field of conflict resolution. He was a major influence on Galtung, one of the founders of the field. He

popularized approaches to conflict that were instrumental in subsequent movements in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere. But more specifically, what are we to make of the aspects of his approach that do not fit comfortably into secular, more practical-oriented forms of conflict resolution?

Adherents of Gandhian nonviolence typically justify it either because it is morally coherent and spiritually based or because of its proven efficacy. At times, the approach in the conflict resolution field is so dominated by game theory which emphasizes strategic rationality, Gandhi's insights seem irrelevant or naive. While some studies have shown that cooperative bargainers can be exploited by others, Braver and Rohrer (1975) have challenged this in their own studies, noting that while exploiters will take advantage of "martyrs," it can "evoke a high degree of cooperation from a later opponent who observes the martyrdom" (as cited in Weber, 2006, p. 163). Other studies confirm Gandhi's emphasis on trusting opponents, noting that it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Weber, 2006).

Michael Sonleitner (1985) argues that there are three levels to Gandhi's idea of nonviolence: secular, religious, and mystical. On the latter, Gandhi claimed soul force is endless. This led to his great confidence: "Given a just cause, capacity for endless suffering and avoidance of violence, victory is a certainty" (as cited in Kumarappa, 1951, p. 56). He had "an implicit belief in the absolute efficacy of innocent suffering" (as cited in Kumarappa, 1951, p. 172). While Gandhi referenced the *Bhagavad-Gita* as the source of his insight, he also referred to Christian metaphors, saying to seek first the Kingdom of God, then everything will be added (as cited in Kumarappa, 1951). It is this lack of attachment to the results of actions, paired with vigorous commitment to eradicate injustice and love one's neighbor, that is one of his enduring contributions — one often overlooked by contemporary conflict resolution literature, which is largely concerned with results.

## NOTE

1. The author acknowledges the support of the J. William Fulbright Foundation and USEFI in India for making possible the research for this essay, carried out in 2005, and the host institution, World Peace Center, Maharashtra Institute of Technology, in Pune, India.

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