

EDITORIAL: THE SCIENCE OF NONVIOLENCE

The science of behavior analysis, often with minimal confirming data, claims wide-ranging applicability, but has generally focused only in quite limited domains. At a time when violence is a world-wide concern, there are, for example, a small number of behavior analysts working in violence prevention (e.g., Embry, in press; Mattaini, 2001; Mayer, 2001; Metzler, Biglan, Rusby, & Sprague, 2001), but almost none examining terrorism, or the alternative mechanisms of nonviolent action for social change. Can behavior analysis help to understand the mechanisms of such action, and perhaps in that way contribute to improving the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns for social justice and human rights? Is this a meaningful and viable area for behavior analytic scholarship and action? (*BSI* plans to publish a special collection of papers related to contributions of behavior analysis to understanding and preventing terrorists acts in a future issue.)

Campaigns of nonviolent action for producing cultural change (as opposed to passive acceptance, an entirely different repertoire) and nonviolent approaches to maintaining working relations among groups have a long, but not extensively known, history (e.g., Aspey & Eppler, 2001; Bacon, 1999; Easwaran, 1999). The early Christians, who refused both military service and violent responses to some of the most brutal repressive measures in all of human history, ultimately won over even the Roman Emperor. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) League, torn by violence, adopted and maintained a set of personal and tribal practices for resolving issues without violence after a nonviolent campaign under the leadership of Skennenrahowi (called the “Peacemaker”) long before the coming of the Europeans. Unlike other European groups, the Quakers almost universally adopted nonviolent (and fair) practices in their relations with indigenous peoples, and almost no violence occurred between them. Relatively better known figures in the history of nonviolence include radical abolitionists like John Woolman and William Lloyd Garrison; Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi; Martin Luther King—and, yes, Malcolm X; Cesar Chavez; and Corizon Aquino, but there are other important examples whose names few may recognize. For example, Badshah Kahn, a close ally of Gandhi and a Pashtun from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, organized and led a nonviolent army 100,000 strong, the world’s first professional nonviolent army, as part of the successful effort to end British colonial rule in South Asia. This despite the fact that the two “supreme arts of Pathan [Pashtun] life,” according to one cultural insider, are said to be “how to kill and how to die” (Easwaran, 1999, p. 100). There are also many examples of at least partially effective nonviolent action in World War II, including the organization of Norwegian teachers against Quisling and Hitler, as well as efforts among the Dutch, Czechs, French, and others.

This very partial history suggests that under at least some circumstances, nonviolent action can be effective within and among cultural groups. Important questions include under what circumstances this is true, what repertoires may be

associated with instances of meaningful change, how programs of nonviolent action are most effectively initiated and designed under what circumstances, and, ultimately, how widely applicable are nonviolent strategies? Historically, nonviolence has been the strategy of the oppressed. I have identified no complete examples of organized nonviolent action by cultural groups with greater relative coercive and financial power toward groups with relatively less. (I would appreciate hearing about any such examples from readers.) For example, if nonviolent action has a place in resolving the crisis in the Mideast, history would suggest it is more likely that the Palestinians would adopt this strategy than that the Israelis would. Perhaps the relative short-term response costs involved are part of the reason for this pattern. Nonviolent action often requires a willingness to suffer significant personal physical and economic pain, at least in the short term. Those with greater coercive and financial resources can often avoid such pain, at least for a time, by relying on escalations of punishment and threat. Members of the group experiencing greater deprivation may not have such alternatives available, but rather find themselves in a choice situation between two (or more) aversive options. Under what circumstances, if any, nonviolence can be effectively practiced by groups with greater relative power remains an open question, although some suggestions of this kind have been made (e.g., Lampen, 2000).

Based on a preliminary analysis of the non-violence literature, cultural practices that appear to commonly characterize examples of effective nonviolent action found in the literature include the following:

- *An emphasis on non-reinforcement (extinction).* Participants in nonviolent actions of this type simply stop cooperating. Economic boycotts of public transportation systems, particular commodities, or majority-owned businesses are examples, in which economic reinforcers previously provided no longer are. The civil rights struggle in Savannah, Georgia, is one excellent example.
- *Extinction of contingencies involving negative reinforcement and punishment.* Members of oppressed groups often experience high rates of threat and punishment for participating in behaviors undesirable to those with greater coercive power. Extinction in this case requires taking the action anyway. Much of the suffering that is often characteristic of non-violent action is the result of such efforts; the expected extinction bursts are commonly found, with escalating threat and punishment for a period. The British, for example, became increasingly violent when Gandhi's followers refused to pull back despite threats, as in the Salt March of 1930.
- *Explicit abandonment of some forms of coercive power* (e.g., physical violence and verbal disrespect) regardless of the actions of other side. Effective nonviolent action is often described as requiring a commitment not to reciprocate aversives, to treat opponents with respect and love no matter how one is treated oneself. This strategy in some cases may reduce countercontrol. Insulting or disrespectful words and actions may also be establishing

operations evoking aggressive actions, and eliminating such establishing operations may reduce such responses from the other side. (Nonviolence training often involves explicit rehearsal for not reciprocating aversives.)

- *Immediate reinforcement for desired actions.* A standard practice among nonviolent activists and organizers is to be ready to respond immediately and positively to desired actions on the part of “the other side,” to change tack immediately when the actions of the other side change. Such attention to opportunities to reinforce is very familiar to most behavior analysts. Other repertoires probably need to be in place to make such a shift in behavior possible, since for most people, opponents become conditioned aversives who may be difficult to respond to in positive ways (Sidman, 2001).
- *Presentation of discriminative stimuli for coercive actions by others.* In some cases, it appears to be effective to offer occasions for oppressors to “do their worst”—perhaps producing revulsion toward the coercive actions of the oppressors among the larger population and persons with power. The coercive actions then function as establishing operations for those observers to act to end the coercive actions. Taking severe coercive action may also prove aversive to some of those participating in the acts themselves.
- *Presentation of discriminative stimuli for positive treatment.* An opposite strategy is also sometimes used, in which occasions for respectful action are paired with the nonviolent action. In the “People Power” campaign in the Philippines, for example, nuns were sometimes placed in the front lines of a march, since Filipino soldiers and police were seen as unlikely to take violent action against them. (Similar strategies were commonly used on college campuses during the Vietnam protests of the 1960s and early 70s).

Nonviolent campaigns generally must involve interlocking actions among members of a group (a cultural entity); maintaining nonviolence among Khan’s enormous army, for example, required a level of discipline at least as great as that needed in armies that practice violence. Nonviolent actions are often costly, at least in the short run. Certain cultural practices appear to be common in prompting, coordinating, shaping, and maintaining nonviolent practices like those listed above among the activist group, despite the response costs involved. Among these are:

- *Social reinforcement.* There can be little doubt that social reinforcers are a major variable in achieving group solidarity; those reinforcers may need to be very powerful to overcome the aversives associated with many of the behaviors listed above. Such reinforcers almost certainly support commitment in situations that would otherwise lead to escape or extinction.

- *Public pledges or oaths.* Such pledges are likely to increase the aversiveness of actions inconsistent with pledge, and may serve as establishing operations for actions consistent with the commitment made.
- *Socially-mediated changes in equivalence relations and rules.* Collective shaping of new values and interpretations of events, practice, and consequences are common in nonviolent movements, and often involve shifts that are described as spiritual in nature. For example, one of Martin Luther King's "Six Principles of Nonviolence" is "Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform" (<http://www.thekingcenter.org>). Accepting this statement involves both a shift in equivalence relations (from {suffering ~ undesirable} to {suffering ~ desirable}) and a statement of a contingent relation that participants often have not previously observed.
- *Celebration of successful instances of nonviolent countercontrol.* The organizational behavior management literature suggests that such celebrations can function as powerful collective reinforcers.

Each of the practices listed in both sections above may need to be studied in considerable detail to achieve an adequate understanding of the behavioral dynamics involved. As preliminary as these interpretive data are, however, they suggest several critical questions that the science of the analysis of cultural practices might help to answer. Among these are:

- Could detailed analysis of specific historical instances rooted in the science of behavior, particularly an examination based on function rather than topography, have significant applied utility in determining what strategies would be most likely to lead to what outcomes?
- Might careful scientific elaboration of the contingency matrices involved be practically useful to persons planning nonviolent campaigns for social justice, who currently often make strategic and tactical decisions based on ambiguous personal guesses and reliance on authority (since currently, "history does not yield us an answer to the best methods applicable to a new situation," Aspey & Eppler, 2001, p. 59)?
- Could analyses of cultural matrices that shape terrorist acts, defensive actions, nonviolent resistance, and escalations of countercontrol among groups contribute to collective security?
- What would be the impact of increased exposure to actual consequences of violent actions, as opposed to verbal mediation? Many individuals in positions to contribute to policy decisions have very little exposure to the realities of the impact of those decisions, and their actions therefore are often governed by rules supported by verbal communities, rather than by actual consequences—a

problem Skinner discussed in different contexts in several of his writings (e.g., 1987). For example, modern governments often try to insulate the population—who in democratic countries are ultimately responsible for decisions made—and even those fighting from the human outcomes of military action through control of the media and use of technology that insulates actions from results at a distance. (Military leaders with combat experience are often noticeably more hesitant to initiate military action than are political leaders who lack such experience, perhaps because of their familiarity with the realities of war.) As a result, those outcomes cannot participate in metacontingent relations. Exposure to the actual results of such actions might serve as an establishing operation for increased attention to nonviolent alternatives.

The development of a science of nonviolent social change has exciting potential. What more interesting, and more important area could there be for students, as well as established behavior and cultural analysts, to pursue?

Mark A. Mattaini

Jane Addams College of Social Work -UIC

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