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## **CHAPTER 25**

# **GANDHI AS PEACEBUILDER: THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF *SATYAGRAHA***

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On a cold night over a hundred years ago in Maritzburg, South Africa, Mohandas K. Gandhi was thrown off a train when he refused to move from his first-class seat. Gandhi's presence in that seat offended a white passenger because it was not appropriate for a "coloured person" to travel first class. This discrimination was a defining moment in Gandhi's life as it led him to develop the resolve needed to remove the injustice of color prejudice that was pervasive in South Africa at that time (Gandhi, 1957/1927).

Over the next five decades Gandhi became a peacebuilder. He developed and tested methods that produced political change and reduced social injustices. Gandhi's teachings and actions had a profound effect on those around him, his country, and, in many respects, the world. In this chapter, I will outline the philosophy of Gandhi and the actions he used and advocated to establish social justice. Following this, I will outline the psychological dynamics that contributed to making his peacebuilding efforts effective.

## THE GOAL AND PRINCIPLES GUIDING GANDHI'S ACTIONS

Gandhi's overarching goal throughout his life was *sarvodaya* which translates to "the welfare of all" (Bose, 1987, p. 23) or "uplift of all" (Bondurant, 1965, p. 6). To achieve this goal, three main principles guided his writings and actions. The Indian terms describing these principles are *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and *tapasya* (selfsuffering) (Bondurant, 1965; Gandhi, 1951; Pelton, 1974).

### ***Satya* or Truth**

*Satyagraha*, as discussed and used by Gandhi, can be understood on at least two levels. First, it refers to the process of developing an understanding of any situation and the points of view of all individuals who are involved with it. *Satyagraha*, which can be translated to mean "Soul Force," serves in this regard as a process to vindicate the truth. In trying to understand the validity of each viewpoint, Gandhi was well aware of his limitations and those of any human being trying to establish absolute truth. Given these limitations, he believed we can never be sure if we, as one side of a conflict, are correct in our position or if our adversaries, on the other side of a conflict, have truth on their side. Therefore, while Gandhi viewed the pursuit of truth as an ongoing aspect of life which was never fully achievable in a complete sense, *satyagraha* was an important orientation to maintain on an individual level.

The second interpretation for the term *satyagraha* is as a positive peacebuilding strategy on a larger societal level; here, *satyagraha* is a process of civil disobedience or nonviolent resistance. It is *satyagraha* in this second sense which helped India attain independence from Great Britain and which had a profound impact on other peacebuilders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Later in

this chapter, I will describe the characteristics of a *satyagraha* movement from this perspective, and then I will provide a concrete example, the Salt *Satya-graha* campaign of 1930 to 1931. However, to fully understand the *satyagraha* method, a close look at two other principles in Gandhi's philosophy is essential.

### ***Ahimsa* or Nonviolence**

An integral part of Gandhi's philosophy and life's work is the notion of *ahimsa*, which literally means "non-injury" or "nonviolence." For Gandhi, *ahimsa* was the belief in the sacredness of life and the refusal to do harm to living things (Bose, 1987; Nakhre, 1982), an interpretation that was based on the deep-rooted Hindu tradition of not doing harm.

*Ahimsa* was vital to Gandhi's peacebuilding efforts for several reasons. First, *ahimsa* means not harming others either in thought or deed. Second, Gandhi viewed *ahimsa* as also having a more dynamic and positive state which is love (Gandhi, 1951). Pelton (1974) describes this love as active goodwill and it also bears similarity to the Rogerian concept of unconditional positive regard. This love serves as the means to get to the ends of truth. Third, a means which uses non-violence to reveal truth has advantages to Gandhi because only relative truth can be attained for certain. Given this human limitation, the nonviolent means to realize one's goal guarantees that individuals will not hurt any adversary in a conflict who might be closer to the absolute truth than they themselves are. Excluding the use of violence is best, because humans are not capable of knowing the absolute truth and therefore are not competent to punish (Nakhre, 1982).

Throughout his life, Gandhi insisted that the means to get to any goal must be carefully selected or the attainment of the goal might be short-lived or ultimately subverted. For instance, he

wanted to obtain India's independence using nonviolent means while others advocated violent rebellion. Gandhi believed the leaders who would emerge if India followed the violent path to independence would be just as tyrannical as the British leadership which they would replace. Therefore, the end result of independence would have very little impact on the common citizen of India and would not be as desirable as the leadership which would emerge if the principle of *ahimsa* was followed in the struggle for independence.

### ***Tapasya* or Self-Suffering**

*Tapasya* translates to "self-suffering" and is the third major principle in Gandhi's belief system. Gandhi viewed self-suffering as a viable maneuver to confront the violence that is often leveled at those who work to remove social injustices. The willingness to endure suffering instead of retaliating for a violent act with a violent act breaks the cycle of violence. While those fighting social injustices might suffer more than those who work to maintain the status quo, Gandhi believed that in the long run the world as a whole will witness less total violence.

The ability to engage in self-suffering requires considerable courage and self-control. In fact, Gandhi describes the self-discipline required of someone who follows his principles as being akin to those of a military soldier. Like soldiers, individuals who practice *tapasya* require extensive training to establish the needed discipline when violence is leveled at them.

### **Gandhi's Value System**

Human values are transsituational goals which vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Schwartz, 1992, 1994). An analysis of the value system of an individual can help explain the actions of an individual in a range of social and political situations (Ro-

keach, 1973, 1979). Schwartz (1994) has identified ten value types which have implications for understanding political orientation and political action. Closely examining the goals and principles which Gandhi considered important can shed some light on his actions.

Based on the goals and principles of Gandhi, outlined above, his values seem to fall into three of the value types identified by Schwartz (1994). The notion of the welfare of all (*sarvodaya*) and the concern about truth and wisdom (*satya*) directly corresponds to the two self-transcendent value types of universalism and benevolence. The emphasis placed on self-discipline corresponds to the value type of conformity as defined by Schwartz. This is consistent with the research of Mayton, Diessner, and Granby (1996), who found that individuals with predispositions to nonviolent behavior placed more emphasis on universalism, benevolence, and conformity values than individuals more predisposed to violence.

## **GANDHI'S USE OF *SATYAGRAHA* TO OBTAIN POLITICAL GOALS**

### ***Satyagraha* as a Peacebuilding Strategy**

*Satyagraha* is a method whereby grievances could successfully challenge an established political order. Bondurant (1965) has outlined the steps of a typical *satyagraha* movement, which is an activity of civil disobedience designed to confront unjust laws and policies. It would start with an effort to resolve the conflict through established channels and accepted protocol. Should these methods prove ineffective, systematic planning for the group to take direct action would begin. Following an active propaganda campaign involving demonstrations, parades, etc., a final strong appeal or ultimatum to one's opponent would be made which would explain the steps that will be undertaken if no agreement can be reached. Depending on the nature of the grievances and the

specific situation, the subsequent actions taken may involve boycotts, strikes, and other forms of noncooperation such as nonpayment of taxes. Those who take part in the movement are called *satyagrahi*.

### **The Salt *Satyagraha***

The Salt *Satyagraha* was a national movement throughout India that began early in 1930 and lasted for over a year (Bondurant, 1965). Its immediate goal was the removal of the salt tax which exploited the peasants and symbolized the unjust nature of British rule. The Salt Act made it a crime to possess salt not purchased by the British salt monopoly (Fischer, 1954).

Following the initial planning of the specific actions, Gandhi sent a letter to the Viceroy describing the grievances regarding the Salt Act and indicating the specific nature of the plan for civil disobedience. When this ultimatum was ignored, Gandhi and other *satyagrahis* began their historic march to the sea. Careful planning and the training of the *satyagrahis* in self-restraint and crowd control made this a peaceful event. The march took over three weeks and was widely covered in the press, making the injustice of British rule known throughout the world. Shortly after arriving at the beach, Gandhi purposely broke the law outlined in the Salt Act by making salt. With his act he opened the door for others to engage in the same type of civil disobedience. Estimates of the number of Indians jailed for breaking the Salt Act exceed sixty thousand (Fischer, 1954). As the salt tax was still in place, additional levels of civil disobedience were planned and executed.

In a second letter to the Viceroy, Gandhi explained how the *satyagrahis* would demand possession of the Dharsana salt works. While this letter led to Gandhi's arrest, the march on the salt

works still took place. Over two thousand *satyagrahis* took part in the nonviolent raid on the salt works. The leaders of the Salt *Satyagraha* admonished the *satyagrahis* to not resist nor raise a hand even to ward off the inevitable blows from the police. Webb Miller, a journalist for United Press, witnessed the raid and reported

In complete silence the Gandhi men drew up and halted a hundred yards from the stockade. A picked column advanced from the crowd, waded the ditches, and approached the barbed-wire stockade. Suddenly, at a word of command, scores of native policemen rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows upon their heads with their steel-shod lathis. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whack of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of marchers groaned and sucked in their breath in sympathetic pain at every blow. Those struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing with fractured pain or broken shoulders...Although everyone knew that within a few minutes he would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no sign of wavering or fear. They marched steadily, with heads up, without the encouragement of music or cheering or any possibility that they might escape injury or death...There was no fight, no struggle, the marchers simply walked forward until struck down (as quoted by Fischer, 1954, p. 101).

The raids and the carnage continued for days with stretcher bearers carrying bleeding men to the first aid station.

While the raids on the salt works ended with the approaching monsoons, civil disobedience

continued in the form of boycotts and intentional acts that broke unjust laws and ordinances (Bondurant, 1965). Eventually, the salt regulations were modified in ways which removed much of the injustice forced on the poor. The impact of the thousands of localized campaigns which were part of the Salt *Satyagraha* had been successful in following the guidelines for a *satyagraha* and were effective in reaching the immediate goal.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF *SATYA- GRAHA***

Gandhi implemented *satyagraha* successfully in many contexts (Gandhi, 1951, 1957/ 1927). In his “experiments with truth” Gandhi field-tested and applied numerous psychological constructs in very effective ways. How can we explain the success of this method Gandhi called a *satyagraha*? The next sections of this chapter will draw on research and theory in social psychology in an attempt to explain the positive outcomes of *satyagraha*.

### **Attribution Theory**

From Gandhi’s point of view the goal of *satyagraha* was to awaken the conscience of the opponent (Nakhre, 1982). Social psychologists have observed that people make attributions or try to determine the causes of their own and other people’s behavior all the time (e.g. Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 1999). According to attribution theory, when we try to understand why others are behaving the way they are, we often focus on the situation. However, when their behavior is vastly different from what we would expect of people in their situation, then our tendency is to attribute their behavior to their disposition. We learn a lot about people’s disposition when their behavior deviates markedly from our expectation (Jones & Davis, 1965). Ordinarily, we would expect the



*satyagrahis* to respond violently to the violence of the British. Because the *satyagrahis*' nonviolent behavior deviates from the norm or what we would expect of people in their situation, we are likely to attribute their nonviolence to the disposition of Gandhi and his fellow Indians.

Not only were the peaceful *satyagrahis* viewed favorably according to world opinion, but there were additional psychological dynamics that could have influenced the British to focus on the unjust nature of the Salt Acts. Social psychologists have identified a set of biases and errors that people make in looking for causes of behavior. The *self-serving bias* involves the tendency of people to take less credit for failures than they do for their successes. When the *satyagrahis* provoked the British to enforce the unjust law and to engage in violent action, self-serving attributional biases would predict the British would continue to view themselves favorably by attributing their violent actions to external situational factors. Therefore, instead of denigrating themselves for inflicting pain on the Indians who had positive dispositional characteristics, they would attribute their violent behavior to the external situation and focus on the law that required them to commit acts which were unjust. With each additional aspect of the Salt *Satyagraha* as well as subsequent acts of civil disobedience, which were nonviolent, the self-attributions of being on the moral high ground gave way to the focus on the socially unjust policies created by the British. Fischer (1954) characterized the effects of the Salt *Satyagraha* in a manner consistent with this attributional interpretation when he said "it made the British aware that they were subjugating India" (p. 102).

### **Attitude Change Variables**

Gandhi succeeded in getting support for his efforts from the Indian people as well as the world community. Gandhi capitalized on many of the factors identified as efficacious by researchers of

persuasive communication. In particular, three factors that are found in models of persuasive communication are noteworthy.

First, Gandhi's *charismatic leadership* clearly worked in his favor. Gandhi spent considerable time traveling around India observing and listening to the concerns of the common citizen. Subsequently, he was able to address issues of significance in succinct ways that could be easily understood. Gandhi had a message of independence for India and the removal of social injustices, which were inspirational to nearly all Indians.

A second source characteristic of the communication model of persuasion which helped Gandhi was his *similarity* with the common people of India. He dressed and lived in the manner of an Indian peasant which made him a positive role model. He was very knowledgeable about diverse religious beliefs present in India and abroad and used this knowledge to express his non-violence in terms of Hindu, Moslem, and Christian doctrine. From the Bhagavad-Gita, to the Koran, to the "Sermon on the Mount" in the Bible, Gandhi was comfortable with many different audiences. His use of traditional terms to explain his procedures and concerns increased the support he received.

Third, Gandhi engaged people in his thoughtful analysis of social injustice. Petty & Cacioppo (1986) have developed the elaboration likelihood model. This model proposes that the central route to persuasion, which engages the person being persuaded in serious thought to the relevant points, results in more long term attitude change than the peripheral route, which appeals to emotion and results in lower cognitive engagement. Gandhi's efforts utilized the central route to persuasion in several ways. Because *satyagraha* was so different from what people expected, the focus on the content of the message was enhanced and thus more serious thought was given to

the message and a more enduring change was a result.

## **Negotiation Methods**

Gandhi's way of dealing with the British utilized behaviors which foreshadowed the method of principled negotiation discussed by Fisher, Ury, and Patton (1991). The notions of separating the people from the problem and focusing on interests and not positions, are mainstays of principled negotiation (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991). In separating the people from the problem, Gandhi was quick to remind his *satyagrahis* to distinguish the unjust laws from those who enforced them, and when harm did befall any of the British he was deeply troubled by it. Gandhi harbored no animosity toward any British individual and, on the contrary, his compassion for the hardship his actions had on the British were very genuine (Fischer, 1954). The outcome of the Salt *Satyagraha* serves as a good example of how Gandhi focused on interests of all parties instead of digging in and holding onto a position. While the initially stated objective was the repeal of the Salt Act, when the British agreed to modify the salt regulations so that much of the injustice forced on the poor ended, he modified his position and accepted their proposal as it satisfied the interests of this *satyagraha* (Bondurant, 1965).

## **Psychological Lessons from Gandhi**

From the time he was thrown off the train in South Africa until he fell from an assassin's bullet in India, Gandhi acted to rid his country of social injustice. His peacebuilding efforts were strongly based on self-transcendent values combined with a commitment to principle which reflected a conservative value emphasis. The search for truth combined with tolerance and self discipline made him an ethical model who many wanted to emulate. He utilized good communica-

tion with his allies and his opponents at the interpersonal level as well as via the written word.

Gandhi never lost sight of the fact that all were humans cut from the same cloth by God, and gave unconditional positive regard to all. He was an applied social scientist who used some very effective psychological principles to reach his goals.