

Cultural Nonviolence: The Other Side of Galtung

Katerina Standish
University of Otago

Building a global culture of peace includes myriad components and a variety of platforms with which to engage and transform violence. The seminal article ‘Cultural Violence’ (Galtung, 1990) illuminated cultural variables responsible for legitimizing physical and structural violence in society. The following paper seeks to examine whether or not the theoretical construct of cultural violence (CV) may have a functional opposite—cultural nonviolence (CNV). In order to explore this, cultural violence will be defined and two cultural incarnations of non-harming—Gandhian *ahimsā* and pragmatic nonviolence—will be compared and contrasted. While pragmatic nonviolence can be considered instrumental in the reduction of physical violence, only Gandhian *ahimsā* can be considered a form of cultural nonviolence.

Key Words: cultural violence, Galtung, pragmatic nonviolence, ahimsa

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) avers that “in the new turbulent international globalized landscape...greater account must be taken of the close links between cultural diversity, dialogue, development, security and peace” (2013, p. 2). While this statement could motivate a person to optimistically encounter difference, engage with others, and work together toward a safe and sustainable existence (all activities that contribute to positive peace), it does not emerge from any specific cultural standpoint and perhaps suggests that by appreciating, for example, cultural diversity, positives outcomes will appear. These objectives are part of the conceptual backdrop of positive peace, “the presence of symbiosis and equity in human relations” (Galtung, 1996, p. 14); the perception that peace is not merely the absence of physical violence but the absence of structural (discrimination, marginalization, inequality) violence too.

Culture is a shared, socially transmitted, system of meaning that has both physical and symbolic forms (Ross, 2007). Culture can refer to the

language a person speaks, their religious practices, but also other, less obvious, forms of social life such as schooling, science, or art. In our “increasingly globalized landscape” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 2) we are in constant contact with *otherness*—ways of living, perceiving, and believing that differ from our own.

There are a variety of perspectives concerning cultural diversity and peace, and while some imagine a space of destructive intercultural encounter (Huntington, 1993), others imagine that appropriate exposure to others leads to a decrease in prejudice and an increase in positive regard (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). More recent scholars grapple with evidence that when we encounter people from other cultures and the experience is negative, we tend to ascribe negative characteristics to the whole group (Paolini, Harwood & Rubin, 2010).

In terms of violence, Galtung (1990) reminds us that all forms of violence, whether physical or structural in nature, have cultural roots. Physical violence includes acts or threats of aggression or harm that trespass on the integrity of the human instrument (the somatic and mental

body). Discrimination and prejudice are forms of structural violence, social structures that deny individuals and groups the ability to satisfy human needs such as survival, well-being, recognition, and freedom (Galtung, 1996, 1990).

Otherness is a concept that can be understood in terms of culture and communication style (Butler, 1997; Kearney and Rainwater, 2000). Levinas perceived *otherness* as a combination of both uniqueness and unknowableness (1969). To Levinas (1969), to encounter the *other* was to come face-to-face with the knowledge that our inability to subjectively connect with one another was based upon an absolute separation of our identities, which makes relationships difficult and true understanding impossible. Global encounters with *otherness* have led to some spectacularly destructive results such as female subordination, slavery, devastation of the natural world, and the subjugation of indigenous populations through colonization.

Cultural *encounters* can result in domination and assimilation (Dallmyr, 1996); but in the increasingly globalized world, the encounter of other cultures can also be seen as increasing the human potential for peace.

“Encounter may facilitate a pattern of mutual adjustment or reciprocal give-and-take which, in turn, can engender either an ambivalent form of syncretism or a precarious type of cultural juxtaposition or coexistence. In some instance...exposure to alien cultural strands may initiate a movement of genuine self-transformation, that is, a reassessment of prevailing patterns in the light of newly experienced insights or modes of life” (Dallmyr, 1996, p. 18).

Cultural *nonviolence*--sharing ways of seeing, being, and behaving--based on celebrating and manifesting peace-abilities for the betterment of all living things, is also a consequence of cultural encounter.

The following paper investigates whether or not the theoretical construct of cultural violence, the root of all other forms of violence, has a functional opposite; *cultural nonviolence*. In order to explore this, cultural violence will be defined and two incarnations of non-harming will be examined—Gandhian *ahimsā* and pragmatic nonviolence.

Cultural Violence (CV)

Johan Galtung developed a construct of cultural violence to explain how direct (physical) and structural (indirect) forms of violence are legitimized in society (1990). In his article *Violence, Peace and Peace Research*, published in 1969, Galtung explored perceptible and imperceptible forms of violence in society to make visible the reality that discrimination, inequality, and prejudice are just as harmful and destructive as physical violence but they are distinguished from acts of direct violence because they cannot be tied to a specific agent. In *Cultural Violence* (1990) Galtung built upon his prior theorizing with the inclusion of the symbolic spheres of life. He discovered that it is within such symbolic spheres that the roots of direct and indirect violence lie.

Cultural violence refers to “aspects of cultures”, not entire cultures... [because] entire cultures can hardly be classified as violent” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Cultural violence exists in the symbolic sphere of life “exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science...stars, crosses and crescents; flags, anthems

and military parades; the ubiquitous portrait of the Leader; inflammatory speeches and posters” and other symbolic forms that hold social meaning (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Cultural violence supports physical and structural violence, making them “look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Without cultural violence, other forms of violence would not be tolerated in society.

Gandhian *Ahimsā*

The Sanskrit word *ahimsā* can be translated as non-harming, or not-hurting. The word is attributed to the Indian Sage Patanjali who listed it first among his universal ethics of personal transformation in the eight-limbed (*Ashtanga*) path. The Yoga Sutras affirm that, “when [the *yogin*] is grounded in [the virtue of] nonharming (*ahimsā*), enmity ceases in his presence (2.35)” (Feuerstein, 2001, p. 224). The observance (*yama*) of *ahimsā*, or discipline of non-harming (nonviolence) appears in the Buddhist noble eightfold path, the Jain *Āgamas* and later teachings of monotheistic human spirituality.

Yoga, emerging over thousands of years of study and practice, is a Hindu psychotechnology for personal perfection (Feuerstein, 2001). As all life was considered sacred to ancient Indian sages, the act of destroying life was considered highly problematic. *Ahimsā* has classically been associated with renunciates, such as monks, people who leave daily living behind for a life of spiritual pursuit. However, even to the renunciate, *ahimsā* did not entail a total absence of violence as it was recognized that “to live was to kill...[as] every living being lived on some other living being” (Parekh, 1988, p.195). For Yogins, Buddhist monks or Jain monks, the total

avoidance of harming other life was considered impossible, so the observation of *ahimsā* entailed minimizing violence and, whenever possible, abstaining from acts of destruction.

Mohandas, K. Gandhi was a modern political and cultural thinker who was deeply influenced by Indian spirituality and world religion. While the scope of this work does not permit an exhaustive exploration of the life and pursuits of Gandhi (there are hundreds of volumes more suited to this purpose should the reader desire to do so) Gandhi’s perception (some would term, re-conception) of *ahimsā* is a valuable point from which to examine ‘living’ *ahimsā*, a form of *nonviolence* that begins with personal transformation.

Whereas *ahimsā* was originally a methodology toward personal spiritual perfection (renunciates practice monastic discipline in order to experience divinity—the interconnectivity of all existence), to Gandhi, the discipline of *ahimsā* required “broadening” to “suit the needs of the age” (Parekh, 1988, p. 200). Gandhi conceived of *ahimsā* as a custom that held the positive practice of non-harming intact. It also added a facet of love “both passive and active love, refraining from causing harm and destruction to living beings and positively promoting their well-being” (Parekh, 1988, p. 200). Gandhi included love within his conceptualization of *ahimsā* to not only identify with the importance of acting non-harmfully, but to include in the undertaking the provision of life affirming amenities to others. Gandhian *ahimsā* was both restraint and observation—doing minimal harm while giving love.

Gandhi experienced both direct and indirect violence in South Africa and India in the first half of the 20th

century. Afterward, Gandhi became convinced that the use of violence to overcome violence would never result in peace, “violence...maximizes ontological separateness and divisiveness and is based on the fundamental belief that the other...is essentially different from me or us” (Allen, 2007, p. 302). Gandhi believed that the primary struggle against violence happened ‘within’ an individual and that the illusion of separateness (our separateness from each other) led people to differentiate, judge, or condemn one another. Gandhi envisioned violence as more than the destruction of living beings; he saw it as an affront to unity (our inherent interconnectedness) and truth.

“The purpose of violence is to control others, to have them do what they would not otherwise have done, and it does this through physical force, meting out punishment and pain for noncompliance or resistance. As such, targets of violence are denied an independent will and remain targets until they desist in their opposition and comply with the demands of the violent agent” (Terchek, 2001, p. 225).

Along these lines, Gandhi envisioned *ahimsā* as both an *avoidance* of causing harm and an *active* form of love that promoted well-being. Gandhi saw love as the “identification with and service of all living beings” (Parekh, 1988, p. 200). Not an argument for the fundamental difference between existing creatures (physical or cultural diversity) but a universal conceptualization of sameness that included all life. “Gandhian love builds on an openness that enables a person to find a unity and mutuality with others...Gandhian love is expected to be totalizing” (Terchek, 2001, p. 227). Gandhian *ahimsā* is an ethical practice that perceives of a *unity* or interconnectedness of life. It results in

a decrease in interpersonal hostility because it forms a projection outward inclusive of positive regard that disarms adversaries. Gandhi was implying “that the power of love brings patience (as a mother has for a recalcitrant child). This patience is required to move the other to see that violence does not necessarily bring about peace,” the act of patience is an act of love (Coates, 2008, p. 139-140).

While all violence cannot be eradicated, Gandhian *ahimsā* is committed to loving nonviolent discipline because it not only transformed the politics of the day, but also transformed the people who struggled against violence. For Gandhi “an unshakable faith in the power of truth, love, and suffering, leading to one’s own self-transformation, is a prerequisite to sustained nonviolent action in the service of the common good” (Bharadwaj, 1998, p. 80). As we will see, pragmatic nonviolence holds no such assertion.

Pragmatic Nonviolence

There are two general orientations of nonviolence: principled and pragmatic. Pragmatic (or strategic) nonviolence is distinct from what is called principled nonviolence because of its internal or moral dimension. While pragmatic nonviolence aims to socially transform conflict, principled nonviolence (including Gandhian *ahimsā*) results in a transformation of self. Principled nonviolence is associated with pacifism and ethical constraints against the usage of violence, whereas pragmatic nonviolence “refers to a distinctive set of political practices that do not require actors to adopt pacifism” (Howes, 2013, p. 428). Simply put, pacifism and principled nonviolence eschew acts of violence, whereas pragmatic nonviolence uses

nonviolent acts of protest and resistance to achieve social change.

The major proponent of pragmatic nonviolence is Dr. Gene Sharp (1973). Sharp was influenced by the work of Gandhi and acknowledges the important nonviolent struggles of Gandhi and of Dr. Martin Luther King. However, he sees the principled nonviolence of Gandhi and King as both atypical historically and unnecessary models when seeking to achieve social transformation. Sharp sees nonviolent action as a political tool that requires neither ethical nor spiritual moralities; and indeed, Sharps' nonviolence may be considered superior at recruiting nonviolent activists as a result of the ideological lacunae (Sharp, 2005; Weber, 2003).

The theory of pragmatic nonviolence (Sharp, 1973) focuses on social/political power and using nonviolent action as a tactic to destabilize and co-opt power. Sharp's theory does not seek to recruit or convert political opponents so much as to defeat them. Pragmatic nonviolent activists need not hold personal beliefs that violence is wrong as long as they do not engage in violence to secure power.

"Nonviolent struggle is identified by what people do, not what they believe. In many cases, the people using these nonviolent methods have believed violence to be perfectly justified in moral or religious terms. However, for the specific conflict that they currently faced, they chose, for pragmatic reasons, to use methods that did not include violence" (Sharp, 2005, p.19).

Pragmatic nonviolence, what Sharp terms nonviolent struggle or nonviolent action, uses nonviolence because it works, not because it is morally superior to the use of violence (Weber, 2003). Indeed, Sharp

conceives of the term nonviolence as problematic because it can be confused with the ethical, moral, or religious understandings of nonviolence.

"The use of the term 'nonviolence' is especially unfortunate, because it confuses these forms of mass action with beliefs in ethical or religious nonviolence ('Principled nonviolence'). Those beliefs, which have their merits, are different phenomena that usually are unrelated to mass struggles conducted by people who do not share such beliefs" (Sharp, 2005, pp. 20-21).

Pragmatic nonviolence, nonviolent struggle or action, is a method for social transformation based on actions that are either forms of nonviolent protest, persuasion, noncooperation, or nonviolent intervention (Sharp, 2005). The theory of nonviolent struggle trusts that true power resides in the hands of ordinary people, not elites; to take power away from political opponents it is necessary to isolate and remove social groups that uphold political power. Because by cooperating with a system of government you act to perpetuate it, by withdrawing your obedience you deteriorate social 'pillars' that sustain the regime. By systematically (and nonviolently) targeting social pillars (security forces, religious organizations, education, or the media for example) the consent of the people (the source of political power) is removed and social transformation (social revolution in most instances) results (Sharp, 1973).

Cultural Nonviolence (CNV)

If cultural violence makes physical and structural violence "look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong" then cultural *nonviolence* makes physical and structural violence look, even feel, wrong—or at least not right (Galtung,

1990, p. 291). When Galtung conceived of cultural violence he also suggested its negation.

“If the opposite of violence is peace, the subject matter of peace research/peace studies, then the opposite of cultural violence would be ‘cultural peace’, meaning aspects of a culture that serve to justify and legitimize direct peace and structural peace. If many and diverse aspects of that kind are found in a culture, we can refer to it as a ‘peace culture’” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291).

Although Galtung negates *cultural violence* with *cultural peace*, recent scholarship and inquiry into the utilization and incarnations of nonviolence (Stephan and Chenoweth, 2008; Clements, 2008) suggest that there may be something theoretical to gain in leaving the conceptual instability of the word ‘peace’ (defining peace is as problematic for some as defining health or happiness) and using the more commonly defined concept of nonviolence. The rationale also extends to the observation that the naming of something forms an act of praxis—reflection that leads to action.

“The word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible...within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire, 2003, p. 87).

Galtung (1990) averred that when aspects that contribute to positive peace exist within a culture they might be termed “peace culture[s]” (p. 291). However, earlier, in the same article, Galtung affirms that while there are violent ‘aspects’ within cultures “entire cultures can hardly be classified as violent” (p. 291). By this rationale

‘peace cultures’ are as unlikely as ‘violence cultures’ and therefore, when we are describing cultural (symbolic) practices that are ‘aspects’ of a culture we should be aware that although cultural ‘aspects’ are not held by ‘entire’ populations that they do contribute to the shared symbolic landscape.

When Paolo Freire spoke about the connectivity between reflection and action he perceived of an equation that recognized that in the social world humans did not exist in silence. Instead they gave symbolic meaning to authentic interaction (dialogue) through the act of naming the world (word=work=praxis). To Freire (2003), the reflection/action link is critical. Should *action* be sacrificed the result would be verbalism, or idle chatter; and, should *reflection* be sacrificed the result was activism, action without commitment. The act of separating action and reflection negates transformation. Transformation is an internal process that leads to full humanity, humility, trust and, hope (Freire, 2003). While the word peace can denote a positive reality, the word nonviolence implies an authentic interaction between reflection and action. If we say that cultural violence is an aspect of culture that legitimizes direct and structural forms of violence then, we should, equally be able to say that cultural *nonviolence* are ‘aspects’ of culture that delegitimize direct and structural forms of violence.

Assessing CNV

In Galtung’s article, *Cultural Violence* (1990), he observed the connectivity between forms of violence in a violence triangle; “violence can start at any corner in the direct-structural-cultural violence triangle and is easily transmitted to the other corners” (1990, p. 302). By this same reasoning, it

might be perceived that cultural *nonviolence* can also emerge from direct-structural-cultural vertices and be transmitted accordingly. For instance, structural *nonviolence* could result from punitive legal structures that make acts of physical aggression illegal. This would lead to increases in not only incidences of direct *nonviolence* but also provide symbolic backing for the legal prohibition through religious or scientific support (cultural *nonviolence*).

To determine cultural violence, Galtung (1990) posits that “the logic of the scheme is simple: identify the cultural element and show how it can, empirically or potentially, be used to legitimize direct or structural violence” (p. 296). Utilizing this same logic, cultural *nonviolence* should be identifiable by showing how it authentically or theoretically can be used to *delegitimize* direct or structural violence. In order to assess whether Gandhian *ahimsā* and pragmatic nonviolence comprise cultural *nonviolence* the following questions could be asked:

(i) Does this cultural ‘aspect’ delegitimize physical violence?

(ii) Does this cultural ‘aspect’ delegitimize structural violence?

After investigating both of these questions it should be relatively easy to discern whether an ‘aspect’ of culture can be a form of cultural *nonviolence*.

The practice of Gandhian *ahimsā* can be considered a form of cultural *nonviolence* because in addition to the ideological prohibition on doing harm to others the practice directly confronts structural, discriminatory aspects of violence through its unitary vision of life. Pragmatic nonviolence, while it proscribes the use of violence to achieve social transformation does not delegitimize structural violence. Pragmatic nonviolence is an

instrument of political transformation and does not ontologically entertain conditions of inequality. Pragmatic nonviolence is a strategy used to defeat ones opponents, not to connect with them. Gandhian *ahimsā*, while it, likewise, eschews the use of force (*himsa*) to achieve social transformation, also perceives of an essential unity of living things that delegitimizes direct and structural violence and therefore can be considered a form of cultural *nonviolence*.

From a Freirian perspective, when *action* is sacrificed *praxis* becomes idle chatter. And, when *reflection* is sacrificed the result is *activism* (action without commitment). Therefore, Gandhian *ahimsā* is not only a form of cultural nonviolence but a form of *praxis* as well (2003, p. 87). In order to be imagined as a form of *praxis*, nonviolence requires both an internal (reflection) and an external (action) dimension.

Limitations and Future Considerations

This exploratory paper has attempted to discern whether or not it is possible to highlight positive characteristics of society that contribute to peace. Are there aspects of culture that make direct and structural forms of violence wrong, or at least not right? In order to briefly explore the theoretical validity of cultural nonviolence this examination has been limited in scope and it solely compared and contrasted two practices of nonviolence. However, future nonviolence research would benefit from inter-cultural and intra-cultural explorations that encourage the field of peace and conflict studies to look for existing cultural constructs that inhibit and delegitimize violence.

Conclusions

All forms of violence, whether physical or structural in nature, have cultural roots. Likewise, many forms of nonviolence can be said to emerge from a shared sense of symbolic significance. This paper has suggested that in addition to looking at why culture makes certain forms of violence permissible, there is something to be gained by investigating the functional opposite of cultural violence. Put simply, in an inversion of Galtung's notion of cultural violence, how does culture make certain forms of violence impermissible, illegitimate, and wrong? The increasingly globalized world with the encounter of other cultures provides an opportunity for increasing the human potential for peace by sharing ways of seeing, being, and behaving that are based on celebrating and manifesting peace-abilities for the betterment of all life on earth. Surveying cultural *nonviolence* is a way of looking for peace in a sea of conflict.

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