

Nonviolent Communication in Group Conflicts: An Intramural Note

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The following norms and hypotheses explicitly touch upon norms and hypotheses concerning verbal conflict behaviour:

H11a, H11b, H14, H16, H20
N7, N10, N11a, N12, N19

Survey of norms of nonviolence, see my *Gandhi and Group Conflict*¹, p. 60ff

Norm

N1c Take part in ethically significant group conflicts and communication in a nonviolent way, etc.

N2c Make a constructive program, part of which is dealing with nonviolent communication, part of your campaigns

H3c Short-time violent verbal communication counteracts

N3c Never resort to violent verbal communication

H4c As H4 adding: This implies never to use *argumentatum ad hominem*, never touch the dignity of the antagonist as a human being.

H9c “. . . by use of violent communication

H11ac Distorted description of your and your opponents' case reduces the chance etc.

N7 . . . which supporters and critics of the DEM and different shades of radical environmentalism have in common. Furthermore, which broader groups have in common.²

From this survey it is clear how important Gandhi considered nonviolent communication in conflicts.

Only very few in very few conflicts completely agree with Gandhi's hypotheses and norms. And even among those who do, only a minority can be expected to try to follow them strictly and persistently.

One aspect that is difficult for many to accept is the Gandhian radical optimism that at least seems to be implicitly implied. Example: H14. "There is a disposition in every opponent such that wholehearted, strong, and persistent appeal in favour of a good cause is able ultimately to convince him." (General convincibility)

Gandhi explicitly includes Hitler (p. 72). But he also imagines that the *force of satyagraha* in some persons may far exceed anything he has been capable of developing. He does not pretend that he could convince a Hitler of anything. And he presupposes a massive manifestation of *satyagraha* in wide groups of the population, "unarmed men, women and children" willing to face death without bitterness.

India got rid of its colonial status in the first half of this century, but only after great conflicts. Mahatma Gandhi's supreme efforts to maintain a high level of verbal nonviolence within those dramatic conflicts, and his insistence that his followers do the same, contributed significantly, perhaps decisively, to the political liberation.

The importance of nonviolence in communication during conflicts has been severely underrated. In what follows, I formulate a set of basic norms and hypotheses characteristic of this kind of behaviour as it manifested itself within Gandhi's *satyagraha*. The basic general norms and hypotheses of *satyagraha* I have tried to systematize in my book *Gandhi and Group Conflict* (now *SWAN V*). It is instructive to see how central the questions of communication are placed within the broad general question of how to behave in conflicts.

My book did not intend to furnish such a complete account, but it furnishes relevant material. In what follows, I make ample use of its general account of the basic norms of group conflict behaviour, and

especially the account on page 60ff. It turns out that as many as 10 of the hypotheses touch upon verbal behaviour in conflicts.

Slightly modified, the formulations of the 9 norms and hypotheses may be thus expressed:

H11a. Incompleteness and distortion in your description of your case and the plans for your struggle reduce the chance of a non-violent realization of the goal, and also that of future struggles.

11b. Secrecy reduces the chance of a non-violent realization of the goal of your campaign.

The intention to keep certain plans, moves, motives, and objectives secret influences our behaviour so that we cannot face our opponent openly. (Poker-face development) The intention, and its implementation, is also more easily revealed to the opponent than we are likely to believe. Our poker-face alerts the opponent. Furthermore, once a secret is revealed, the opponent cannot know how many other secrets are kept, and a general suspicion poisons the communication channels.

On the other hand, if the opponent is in power, he may arrest all the leaders of a planned direct action. This stresses the need of democratic leadership, making it possible for a large number to take over the leadership.

H11a. Incompleteness and distortion in your description of your case and the plans for your struggle reduce the chance of non-violent realization of the goal, and also that of future struggles.

Unfortunately, Gandhi uses Hitler as an example. He writes as late as in 1938:

Hitherto he [Hitler] and his likes have built upon their invariable experience that men yield to force. Unarmed men, women and children offering non-violent resistance without any bitterness in them will be a novel experience for them. Who can dare say that it is not in their nature to respond to the higher and finer forces? They have the same soul as I have . . .

Gandhi was not aware of the very, very special character of Adolf Hitler. Other examples are better . . .

H14. There is a disposition in every opponent such that whole-hearted, intelligent, strong, and persistent appeal in favour of a good cause is able ultimately to convince him. (General convincibility)

N7. Try to formulate interests which you and your opponents have in common and try to establish co-operation on that basis.

As a premise Gandhi uses the theory that in complex social conflicts the participants *always* have interests in common, for example, kinds of situations they both seriously wish that will not arise. Negative feelings toward the “enemy” tend to make us overlook such interests or at least not sincerely and repeatedly express them in well-chosen words.

N10. (Derived from N4 and H11a) Do your utmost in order to be in full accordance with the truth in your description of individuals, groups, institutions, and circumstances relevant to the struggle. (Unbiased description).

Early in his life Gandhi trained himself in unbiased description in labour conflicts. He was on the side of the labourers but used a lot of time to describe the difficulties of the leaders of Indian industry. Examples: Germany and other industrial societies started producing markets because of their chemistry, in India they lost markets because of their traditional ways. Gandhi made the resulting difficulties crystal clear. How could one find work for labourers who would have to give up their old jobs? Broad co-operation between “enemies” was necessary. Trust must be cultivated. Therefore: unbiased description of the *total* situation in spite of the greater in-group solidarity and willingness to fight based on distorted, one-sided descriptions.

N12. (Derived from N4 and H12 and H13) Announce the goal of your campaign explicitly and clearly, distinguishing essentials from non-essentials.

N19. (Derived from N10 or from N20) Do not formulate your case and the goal of your campaign and that of your opponent in a biased way.

Gandhi tried to split up the general movement in favour of political freedom in a succession of energetic campaigns. The opponent (Indian British Administration in most cases) was supposed to get clear inside information about the campaign, its strategy, and even its tactics (!!). No secrecy. Full communication all the time. And no overstepping of the goal of the campaign! No pictures of police brutality. Indignation,

yes, protests, yes, but no use of means to incite hatred. No malevolent caricatures. Iron will and strength to reach the goal of the campaign, but communication at a top level of fairness and equimindedness. No silly words among leaders of the campaign! As a pragmatist Gandhi only tried to clear up a misinterpretation when it was necessary:

I am used to misrepresentation all my life. It is the lot of every public worker. He has to have a tough hide. Life would be burdensome if every misrepresentation had to be answered and cleared. It is a rule of life with me never to explain misrepresentations except when the cause requires correction. This rule has saved much time and worry.

The worry he speaks about probably has to do with protracted, unfruitful discussion. The opponent may insist that they do *not* misinterpret you, “should I answer or not?”

N21. (Derived from N14 and H21) Keep in mind and admit your own factual and normative mistakes, and look for opportunities to correct your judgments.

This makes it more understandable that Gandhi often offered a compromise: “I am essentially a man of compromise, because I am never sure that I am right.”

Nevertheless the British often found him stubborn. Perhaps they found it peculiar that he always was ready to communicate in a most warm and friendly way, but rarely changed his practical decisions.

We may imagine meetings proceedings like this. Gandhi says “Yes, yes—I understand, yes of course, yes . . .” But when the British conclude with a “So we agree. You will postpone the planned campaign?” But Gandhi: “No, no, no! Sorry!”

So much about hypotheses and norms.

Endnotes

¹ Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1974.

² Gandhi goes *very far* in his harmony beliefs. How far depends on how he conceives the time factor. A thousand year struggle? A hundred years? Or even less?