

Reflection-based activism: toward mutual recognition

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Abstract

Much activism involves confrontations with opponents or authorities, for example occupations, pickets and rallies in which protesters sometimes shout aggressively toward perceived opponents. An alternative to confrontational activism can be built around seeking to meet human needs, including those of opponents, drawing on research and traditions including mutual-recognition theory, Gandhian nonviolence and prefigurative politics. In this alternative approach, reflection is a tool for rethinking activist practice, with an accompanying goal of encouraging others to participate in a similar reflective practice. Though this approach has many potential strengths, it may not be possible with some opponents and requires skills that may be challenging for activists more familiar with confrontational approaches.

Keywords: activism; mutual recognition; reflective practice; Alternatives to Violence Project; nonviolence; prefiguration

Introduction

Activism covers a wide variety of issues, campaigns and methods, from letter-writing campaigns on local planning issues to nationwide strikes and mass rallies designed to bring down a government. Quite a lot of activism involves a level of confrontation, in which opponents are pressured to change their views or behaviour, or are subjected to verbal abuse or even physical attack. Political activism may include attempts to discredit or sabotage opposing candidates; environmental activism may include attempts to put companies out of business.

Our interest here is in alternatives to the common sort of activism that involves confrontation, with opponents seen as the enemy and effort put into demonising and pressuring them. In these sorts of engagements, polarisation of positions can be accentuated, with participants in the conflict hardening their negative attitudes towards their opponents and entrenching themselves in their positions.

More widely, our concern is with the role of reflection in activism, in particular reflection on methods of engagement and campaigning. In many actions and campaigns, activists proceed on the basis of what they have done previously, using a common set of presumptions about what is appropriate and effective. Often the same techniques are used over and over because they are familiar and because they are assumed to be responsible for previous

successes. While it is worthwhile to practise to improve, repetition of the same methods can become stale. Furthermore, when activism becomes predictable, opponents are better able to develop counter-strategies.

The key presumption in the alternative presented here is that confrontational activism, like violence, may present the illusion of utility towards social progress, but in the long term be both ineffective and unethical. Self-reflection and concomitant identity shifts can contribute to long-term social progress. Identity is established and sustained through mutual recognition, which is crucial to relationships built on attempting to understand the needs of others. So it is to mutual recognition we turn, to do what Michel Foucault characterised as taking control of the production of the self. Central to the approach outlined here is abandoning the idea of controlling how others are socially (re)produced, and instead facilitating the reflective process in others that they might similarly take control of the reformation of their identity. Armed with care for self and others, mutual recognition may flower into a compassionate politics where understanding and meeting the needs of all can operate in conjunction with contentious political action.

To understand the role of reflection in activism, it is useful to distinguish two facets of reflection that, as ideal types, can be called explicit and implicit. Explicit reflection is when activists discuss their goals, methods and actions, seeking to apply insights from past experience to rethink how they will proceed in the future. Explicit reflection can be about actions, for example whether to hold a rally and, if so, how to organise it. It can also be about relationships between group members, organisational structures, leadership, skill development, goals and approaches to social change.

Implicit reflection is when activists act on the basis of principles or unspoken agreements that resulted from reflection by themselves or others. Implicit reflection might be called built-in or embedded reflection: careful analysis was done in the past and has become codified or automatic in current thinking and behaviour.

An example of largely implicit reflection is the rejection of physical violence as a method of action by many activists and groups: in a choice between armed struggle and nonviolent action (rallies, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and other such methods), many activists reject violence. This rejection can be on the basis of morality (a principled refusal to use violence) or on the basis of research showing that nonviolent action is more effective than violent action (e.g., Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011), or possibly on personal experience. In any case, this choice can become taken for granted or, when it is discussed, the discussion proceeds primarily on the basis of principles (what is right) or pragmatism (what is more effective) rather than reflection about previous activism.

Implicit reflection is necessary for activism. It simplifies decision-making and indeed makes activism possible. If every decision about meeting times, forms of interaction and campaign goals were subjected to careful explicit reflection,

nothing would ever get done. There is a parallel here with the intuitive mind and the rational mind (Kahneman, 2011). The intuitive mind, which usually operates unconsciously, is fast, automatic and high capacity, whereas the rational mind is slow, laborious and low capacity. If you see an object moving in the corner of your eye, you don't use your rational mind to calculate its speed and trajectory, but rather duck to avoid the rock, using the intuitive mind. When developing a skill, such as playing the violin, a student uses the rational mind when tackling difficult passages until the notes become automatic and can be played without conscious attention, which can be directed elsewhere, for example to expression. Similarly, implicit reflection represents the accumulated experience of activists, coalesced into maxims, principles and habits. However, there are shortcomings in the intuitive mind that need to be studied and addressed, and likewise there are potential shortcomings in the habitual and taken-for-granted approaches used by activists.

In the following sections, several approaches to reflection-based activism are outlined: Gandhian nonviolence, prefigurative politics, mutual recognition and restorative practices. After this, an original approach to reflection-based activism is presented, with an example illustrating how it can be applied. Both the strengths and limitations of this approach are discussed.

Gandhian nonviolence and prefiguration

Mohandas Gandhi was the pioneering leader of using nonviolence as a strategic method for social change. Prior to Gandhi there had been various major struggles using methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and other forms of non-cooperation without using violence. Gandhi's contribution was to develop nonviolent action into a strategic mode of struggle, with principles and standard practices. Gandhi (1927) reflected on his efforts, subtitled his autobiography as "The story of my experiments with truth."

Gandhi always sought to be open and honest and to seek dialogue with his opponents. For example, prior to the launch of the famous 1930 salt march, Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, stating his requests and plans. When attempts at dialogue failed, Gandhi proceeded to nonviolent action (Weber, 1997). Gandhi's approach thus can be considered a type of reflection-based activism in which part of the reflection is implicit by being based on principles — notably the refusal to use physical violence against opponents — and part is explicit, as when campaigners seek dialogue with opponents and thus have to consider the opponent's circumstances.

A related approach to reflection-based activism is via the concept of prefiguration: the means to achieve a goal should reflect, embody or be compatible with the goal. Gandhian nonviolence is prefigurative because, to attain a peaceful society, only nonviolent means are used. Prefiguration is the message in the saying "Peace is the road, not the destination": in other words, the method embodies the goal.

Militaries are a striking contradiction with prefiguration: the methods (military preparedness and war) are contrary to the goal (peace). Some Leninists proclaim to have the goal of pure communism in which the state no longer exists, but their method, capturing state power, clashes with the goal. In contrast, anarchists reject the seizure of state power, arguing instead for pursuing a stateless society by using methods, such as people's assemblies and workers' councils, that in themselves build dual power and demonstrate people's capacities to organise life without domination.

Some feminists subscribe to prefiguration when they seek to foster egalitarian interpersonal relationships as part of their campaigns for gender equality. This is reflected in the saying "The personal is political," which encapsulates the idea that politics is not only about attaining institutional change but needs to be instantiated in relationships in the here and now, namely in the process of change.

Although Gandhian nonviolence remains influential, for much Western activism it has been superseded by the pragmatic approach promoted by Gene Sharp (1973, 2005). Sharp, initially a Gandhian, pioneered an approach to nonviolent action premised on its greater effectiveness than violence. Activists regularly refer to Sharp's classification of methods of nonviolent action — Sharp (1973) listed 198, and more have been articulated subsequently — and pragmatically oriented nonviolent action is sometimes referred to as methods-based. A Sharpian approach jettisons the requirement to adhere to a belief system, notably a moral commitment to nonviolence, as well as other Gandhian precepts such as bread labour and willingness to suffer. However, given the dysfunctional aspects of the confrontational style of many contemporary campaigns, it may be worth revisiting alternatives compatible with the Gandhian tradition.

Robert Burrowes (1996), in a sophisticated update to principle-based Gandhian nonviolence, conceptualised Gandhi's approach as seeking to meet human needs, including those of the opponent. Burrowes, like Gandhi, also extended concern to all sentient beings. Some contemporary activists, in the tradition of community organising, seek to build relationships first (Dixon, 2014: 170). Vinthagen (2015) offers a theory of nonviolent action that integrates Gandhian and Sharpian elements.

Critical perspectives

A number of writers and activists have criticised Gandhian nonviolence as a way to overcome domination. Shon Meckfessel (2016), an experienced activist who interviewed participants in the US Occupy movement, argues that rioting, involving damaging property and clashing with police, should be added to the activist repertoire. He supports destruction of corporate property as a way of challenging the capitalist assumption that equates commodities and bodies. However, Meckfessel emphasises that rioting should not harm humans.

Meckfessel's position is close to that of pragmatic nonviolence in the Sharp tradition, with the addition of corporate property damage to the methods used. Meckfessel argues for disruption as necessary to activist effectiveness, with disruption including strikes, boycotts and other forms of noncooperation as well as riots. However, Meckfessel gives little evidence that riots, as an additional activist tool, make campaigns more effective.

A prominent critic of nonviolence is Peter Gelderloos, an anarchist who opposes the state, capitalism, racism and patriarchy. In his book *How Nonviolence Protects the State* (2007), he argues that nonviolence is inferior to violence in every way, and is itself racist and patriarchal. Gelderloos's conclusions derive from his view that the state cannot be overthrown by nonviolent means. He is opposed to the state and says violence is the only option.

Gelderloos's underlying assumption about the need for challenger violence to succeed against the violence of the state is undermined by the extensive evidence that nonviolent campaigns have often succeeded against repressive regimes (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Like Meckfessel, Gelderloos focuses on rallies and other methods of protest and persuasion, giving little or no attention to strikes, boycotts, occupations and alternative government. These means of nonviolent action can be highly potent. They enable widespread participation, win greater popular support and reduce the risk of reprisals.

The arguments by Meckfessel, Gelderloos and other critics deserve attention, and can be used to sharpen understandings of nonviolence (Martin, 2008; forthcoming). Although riots and armed struggle can sometimes be effective, this does not rule out using nonviolent means to achieve the same level of success. Rather than focusing on expanding the activist repertoire to include damaging property, clashing with police and using arms, we think there are better prospects by looking more deeply at relationships between activists and their opponents.

Reflection-based activism: mutual recognition

The approach presented here is to ground reflective activism in a concept called mutual recognition. Jessica Benjamin (1988, 1998), based on an analysis of relationships between mothers and their babies, argues that both the mother and her baby are intrinsically interested in the social connection they share. When the relationship between them is built using mutual recognition, this develops and exercises the capacity to understand the needs of the other. Applied to activism, this implies recognising and valuing the needs of the opponent, and acting accordingly, something seldom articulated in activist campaigning, in which the usual goal is to win, if necessary by overriding opponents' needs through strikes, boycotts and other coercive (yet nonviolent) methods. Mutual recognition practitioners would argue that like mothers and children, activists and their opponents are mutually self-defining and mutually reliant, and should, where this is possible, avoid damaging their

relationship by seeking 'solutions' that privilege the needs of one by denying those of the other.

Recognising the needs of opponents does not mean capitulating to them. Many of those in positions of power will take extreme measures to maintain their privilege. In such cases, mutual recognition can be used in conjunction with coercive methods of noncooperation and intervention.

A related point, which builds from Carol Gilligan's (1982) ethics of care, is a consequentialist morality that places the prevention of harm at the apex of the political endeavour. The rights-based approach, often the ethical basis for activists, aims to secure the unmet legitimate needs of those on whose behalf the activist is campaigning: the needs of the 'perpetrator' of the deemed injustice are often removed or devalued in the moral equation. Care ethics removes the predefined outcome and sense of entitlement often created by the divisive and seemingly fixed nature of rights. It seeks contingent and contextual solutions in which the needs of all are met, and no one is damaged. The approach to politics imagined here is one that values exchanges that promote mutual understanding in the embracing culture of care.

To add a reflective dimension to Benjamin-style mutual recognition, it is useful to turn to the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), which seeks to help prisoners learn new ways of relating to each other through group discussions that involve reflecting on behaviours. AVP has a well-developed philosophy that can be thought of as assisting individuals to think about themselves in relation to others, through asking questions and getting them to tell stories that highlight their own responsibility for the welfare of others — something many prisoners have difficulty taking on board, being caught up in their own needs and toxic emotions (Bischoff, 2003; Garver & Reitan, 1995).

The essence of AVP methodology is the rigorous use of communication to open up self-reflection for all participants. Based significantly on Marshall Rosenberg's (2005) nonviolent communication approach, AVP developed a communicative strategy called Restorative Practices. In a model developed in workshops in Sydney, Australia, Restorative Practices is based on four stages of questions for all participants in a managed confrontation between group members. The first question — 'What happened for you?' — invites the participants to give a factual recapitulation of the events in question, from their perspectives. The second question — 'What was the hardest part for you?' — invites each participant to locate what, in the group's interactions, has upset them. Ideally these reflections are shared with the group and 'opponents' in the in-group confrontation are involved in seeing reality from the other side, and have direct emotional exposure to the exploration of feelings and needs, and how these connect in both themselves and others.

Before moving to the third and fourth questions it is important to describe the process surrounding the first two. After each participant has shared their answers, they are invited to share how they felt after hearing responses from the others, and then again to respond to these responses, and so on. This

process is continued until no one has anything new to add. The aim of this process is not to intervene and try to establish either a shared consensus reality about the event, or to force an emotional response such as contrition from any participant, but simply to share feelings, so all may begin to perceive and hopefully value both the feelings themselves, and to understand the met or unmet needs to which these feelings may ultimately correspond.

When the process surrounding the first two questions has exhausted itself, the third question is 'What would you do differently?' Without seeking concessions or trying to force a 'win-win' scenario, this question involves the participants in problem solving based on trying to understand the feelings and needs of others. This again involves a sharing and counter-sharing process with participants invited to reformulate their responses after hearing the responses of others.

When this is exhausted, the final direct problem-solving question is to ask participants what they think needs to happen to restore or improve the relationships damaged in group confrontation. Again responses are shared and reformulated until no one has anything more to say. The final stage is to implement the suggestions developed by each participant.

An AVP workshop utilises these stages over and over to facilitate the learning of nonviolent communication skills, such as the use of 'I' statements (which encourage participants to acknowledge and work with the subjective nature of experience), and describing the actions of others in non-judgemental terms. The core processes at work here, that go beyond the formulaic process described above, involve taking the time and effort to skilfully open up the possibilities for people involved to examine their own behaviour, beliefs and identity, and providing the space for safely challenging themselves at all of these levels.

The skilled facilitator, which is what the activist in the system is working towards becoming, as well as setting up and 'holding the space' where this can occur, should be 'stalking the teachable moment' (Lakey 2010:10). In activist terms this means looking for the moments when those involved may be open to or moving towards identity transformation, and concentrating efforts to support them at these moments.

Reflection, towards mutual recognition

Ian Miles, with 20 years' experience in activism and increasing frustration with confrontational modes of campaigning, turned to mutual recognition theory and AVP's methods to propose a different approach to activism. It offers a perspective on activist engagements with others, including opponents, bystanders and supporters. The basic approach involves the following steps (Miles, 2011, 2014).

1. Analyse events, looking for shortcomings in mutual recognition.

2. Imagine what could have been done *before* the event to foster mutual recognition.
3. Imagine what could have been done *during* the event to foster mutual recognition.
4. Imagine what could have been done *after* the event to foster mutual recognition.
5. Use these reflections to guide practice in similar future events.

Instead of referring to mutual recognition, it might serve just as well to talk of building relationships, negotiating needs, encouraging dialogue or fostering reflection. The idea is that relationships between people need attention: others are autonomous subjects, with their own needs, who should be treated with care and respect. This is different from a common activist practice that in effect treats opponents as obstacles to be surmounted or overcome and treats supporters as potential tools in the struggle.

To illustrate the use of this approach, Ian tells of an experience during a years-long struggle over an area called Sandon Point, a suburb of Wollongong, a city south of Sydney on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. Developers had a plan to build dozens of houses on the site. Opponents, including both environmentalists and local Indigenous people, opposed the development, seeking to preserve the natural beauty of the site and its significant Indigenous cultural sites. Aboriginal activists set up a tent embassy. Ian tells of one incident in the saga.

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Two guards working for the developer were on the site, at a distance behind a fence. Two male youths, sympathetic to the protesters, started to throw stones at the guards. I assumed this was unwise, as it would alienate the guards and would not help the cause, so I walked over to the youths and told them not to throw stones, giving my reasons. This was the incident on which I later reflected. I thought, what would I have done differently from the perspective of seeking to enhance mutual recognition?

First consider the incident itself, namely my interaction with the two youths. I am a large, older man, and despite my use of rational arguments, what I had done was assert my authority — and I had done this prior to establishing any personal connection with the youths. Instead of initially telling them what not to do, I could have opened the interaction with a neutral question such as ‘What’s happening here?’ Then I could have carefully listened to their response. In this way I would have respected their point of view. By continuing the conversation we could have better seen each other as partners in a common quest, namely defence of Sandon Point. A side benefit of

establishing a conversation is that they probably would have suspended their rock-throwing for the duration. My hope is that by discussing what was happening in a neutral way, they would have become more open to learning a different way of thinking about action, in which rock-throwing can have negative consequences.

Next consider the time after the incident. It turned out that my initiative was not appreciated by a key figure at the embassy. Initially I set out to argue with him about the importance of maintaining nonviolent discipline. Reflecting on this much later, a relationship-restoring approach would have been to talk with him at a suitable moment, beginning with something like 'I feel our relationship has been damaged by what has happened, and I'd like to repair it'. Then, if he seemed willing to proceed, I would follow with other non-judgemental statements aimed at rebuilding our personal connection.

Finally, consider the time before the incident. I had not anticipated this particular engagement, but I knew that such confrontations were possible. I could have established a connection with the guards, who were only doing their job: they were not necessarily supportive of the development they were guarding. By approaching them, making conversation and exchanging views, I could have explained our aims and my own commitment to nonviolence. Just as important was making connections with others at the tent embassy, especially to talk about methods and goals. However, I had not pursued this: there were some implicit understandings, but no serious conversations. It would have been uncomfortable for me to disagree with others about methods of resistance, and especially to disagree with Indigenous leaders at the site, to whom many of us whites deferred. However, this also represented a shortcoming in fully recognising others, in giving them agency. When activists unduly defer to others because they are older, more experienced or have higher status — going along with their views or being reluctant to discuss touchy issues — we are failing to make a full connection with them. I had unconsciously chosen not to raise potentially divisive issues and thus, when I engaged with the young rock-throwers, I had not laid the ground for dealing with it effectively.

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This is a highly abbreviated version of the reflections Ian undertook over this particular incident (Miles, 2014). It is possible to go into far more detail, including considering a range of possible alternative actions before, during and after the incident. The brief account nevertheless highlights several key features of a reflection on activist practice.

The reconstruction, at least in this case, is a personal engagement with one's own behaviour, relying on memory. It does not attempt to verify facts or feelings, for example by checking dates and times or interviewing participants. It is a reconstruction based on the meaning of the events, in this instance for

Ian, because the purpose is to rethink actions.

The construction is hypothetical: it does not necessarily involve revisiting the scene or the participants. The purpose of systematic reflection on actions is to provide guidance for the future. Therefore, strict accuracy is not the point: what is important is gaining lessons on how to act on future occasions. Reflection can point to ways of proceeding that may be quite different, but how they apply to different sorts of engagements requires additional thought.

The central theme in the reflections is mutual recognition. In thinking about what might have been done differently before, during and after the event, the alternatives all involve building personal connections between people involved, connections in which people think about each other's needs. This is more than Ian thinking about how he can meet others' needs, though this is part of it; it also involves Ian thinking about how his actions can encourage others to think in terms of people's needs and in terms of mutual recognition.

Strengths and limitations

Mutual recognition offers an alternative to the common confrontational approach in which opponents are seen as obstacles to be overcome and allies are seen as tools in a struggle. Making mutual recognition a priority has the potential to change practices to become more engaging, satisfying and potentially more effective. Although short-term gains may be sacrificed, in the long term this approach is more promising, in the same way that prefiguration is a more solid basis for sustainable social change than expediency. For evidence of effectiveness, it is useful to point to the results obtained by the Alternatives to Violence Project with prisoners, at the individual level, and at nonviolent campaigns with a Gandhian dimension, at a larger level (Sharp, 1979).

Even the more instrumental nonviolent campaigns, using a Sharpian methods-based approach, contain an implicit level of reflection that has led to the choice not to use physical violence. Reflection around mutual recognition offers a way to refine the approach by bringing a greater self and group awareness of how recognising the needs of others can enhance the satisfaction experienced by campaigners, reduce the fierceness of opposition, and recruit new participants.

Some of the most dramatic successes of nonviolent action involve overthrowing repressive regimes, for example in the Philippines in 1986 and Serbia in 2000. For so-called nonviolent revolutions, one of the key conditions for success is defections by troops and security forces (Nepstad, 2011), yet there is little guidance about how to encourage defections aside from not using violence and talking to soldiers (MacNair, 2018). Mutual recognition theory offers an approach to this challenging task.

One of the limitations of this approach is that with some opponents, seeking to foster mutual recognition simply will not work. Mutual recognition relies

on the opponent having some level of empathy. Alternatively, the opponent may be able to understand the dynamics of the situation and realise it is rational to enable or build a personal connection. However, some opponents are set in their plans and will not stop to reconsider the ways they are thinking and acting.

A rigid adherence to mutual recognition contains a risk of proceeding on the basis of negotiation from a position of weakness, and of compromising with powerholders. To counter this, nonviolent action is needed as a mechanism to facilitate dialogue on a basis of equality (Vinthagen, 2015). Contrary to the idea that nonviolent action means acquiescing and meekly accepting any punishment meted out by opponents, many of the methods of nonviolent action are coercive (e.g., Deming, 1984; Sharp, 1973). This includes the bulk of the methods classified by Sharp as noncooperation, which include numerous types of strikes and boycotts, or as nonviolent intervention, ranging from sit-ins to parallel government. These methods can be used against unresponsive opponents, applying pressure that can lead them to enter into dialogue. An example is the anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa, in which nonviolent campaigning enabled the dialogue that led to a peaceful transition to a post-apartheid society.

Gandhi could have assumed that the Viceroy would not heed his letters and hence not bothered to write them, instead proceeding immediately to nonviolent action. Actually, though, unknown to Gandhi at the time, the Viceroy was conflicted about what to do in response to the salt march (Dalton, 1993: 112). Arresting Gandhi before he had broken the law would inflame the population, whereas waiting until later meant the campaign built much more support. Gandhi's letters were part of the overall package that showed Gandhi's sincerity. The lesson here is that even though the opponent may not respond overtly, attempts at mutual recognition may still have an influence.

Strikes, boycotts, sit-ins and other coercive methods of nonviolent action might be considered confrontational in sense of being forceful measures, but they need not be confrontational in the sense of treating opponents as enemies who are stigmatised and condemned. Thinking from the perspective of mutual recognition can help activists make these methods powerful without being aggressive towards opponents.

Even when the opponent is totally unresponsive, efforts towards mutual recognition can send a message to supporters and bystanders of one's good will. It is useful to remember that actions have several audiences: other activists, people who are sympathetic but uninvolved (and who might join the campaign), people without an opinion (and who might become sympathetic), people who are unsympathetic but uninvolved (and who might shift their views), and active opponents. Attempts at mutual recognition often are directly aimed at opponents, but others may be influenced too. The possibility of influencing multiple audiences shows how a mutual-recognition approach can operate at two levels, that of individuals as in AVP and that of movements such as in India and South Africa.

Mutual recognition normally depends on the existence of a direct connection between people. Sometimes, though, interactions are only possible in less direct ways, for example through letters or phone conversations. Communicative distance caused by language or cultural differences as well as by lack of a way to speak to the others can severely limit prospects for building mutual recognition. To take an extreme example, imagine activists in Afghanistan targeted by drones: it would be impossible for them to communicate with drone pilots in Nevada. The rise of automated warfare undermines opportunities for building relationships. The retrospective process, by revisiting violence with a view towards those involved in healing and/or renouncing it, may serve as a guide for what is and is not possible.

To be effective at fostering mutual recognition requires skills, especially skills in speaking and listening as well as in analysing and pursuing options. Reflection on practice is itself a skill that seems simple on the surface but actually requires considerable effort. Furthermore, reflection alone is insufficient. It needs to lead to changed practice that in turn leads to further opportunities for reflection. Like any other skill, practice is crucial to improvement (Ericsson & Pool, 2016); this applies also to activism (Martin & Coy, 2017). In the Alternatives to Violence Project, prisoners are encouraged to practise connecting with others as well as understanding their own personalities. The goal is to change entrenched ways of thinking and behaving that lead to violence. AVP practitioners learn that progress occurs through practising the alternative ways. While there can be moments of personal illumination, they are still only steps along a journey.

Perhaps the most serious obstacle to a greater uptake of a mutual recognition approach is that so many activists and groups are locked into confrontational forms of politics. This lock-in has several facets. One is habit, an incredibly powerful force (Duhigg, 2012). Some groups are used to organising rallies; others are involved in election campaigns; yet others routinely engage in civil disobedience. These can all be worthwhile, and in some cases involve careful and extensive discussions about methods and goals. However, habitual ways of campaigning make it difficult to reconsider the approaches used and, in particular, to change the ways activists think about the needs of opponents.

As well as the power of habit, activists can develop emotional attachments to particular ways of thinking and acting. Thinking of opponents as the enemy can give the satisfaction of solidarity with the cause and being associated with an in-group. Attachments to close-knit groups can be very strong. Rethinking attitudes towards opponents, perpetrators and bystanders, in particular thinking about how to connect with them and meet their needs, can threaten to undermine the familiarity and solidarity of activist core groups.

Changing thinking and behaviour can also threaten the organisational status quo within activist organisations. Even within egalitarian groups, there are differences in prestige and influence. Changes in methods and strategies can reduce the authority of those running things the usual way and increase the influence of others who know more or have different sorts of skills. A sudden

shift to a mutual-recognition approach risks alienating supporters who are insufficiently prepared for it.

The combination of habit, emotional attachment and organisational status serves to entrench usual ways of operating. After repeated confrontations with police have occurred, it may be more difficult to begin discussions with individual officers to build relationships, discover their needs and work out different ways to pursue goals, especially when some group members argue for an escalation of direct action.

Activism based on reflection about seeking mutual recognition is not a panacea. It will not work in every situation and it will not be easy because it requires commitment and development of skills, so sticking with what is familiar can seem safer and more effective in the short term. However, when repeating previous approaches has been less than successful, or where activists do not have a lot of power, there is a strong case for experimenting with alternative approaches.

Experimentation is, in essence, a process of systematic learning from experience by trying things out, seeing what happens, evaluating the outcomes, developing new hypotheses and planning the next action, itself seen as part of an ongoing experiment in testing activist methods. Activists hardly ever carry out careful experimental tests of their methods (Martin & Sørensen, 2017); systematically reflecting on actions is vitally important but not very common (Dixon, 2014: 103–4). Reflection-based activism can be considered a process in the experimental tradition, with mutual recognition being one framework for guiding the research programme.

Conclusion

Activists, in deciding how to proceed towards their goals, draw on a number of ideas, principles and habits, including personal experience, advice from figures in the field, examples from campaigns past and present, principles and rules of thumb. In many cases activists simply repeat what they have done previously, as a matter of habit or preference. When methods are effective, repeating them makes sense, but this has at least two shortcomings. First, opponents can learn too and develop more effective ways to counter the usual activist approaches (Dobson, 2012). Second, activists should be able to learn from their experiences. To do this, reflection is a powerful tool.

In much activism, opponents are seen as obstacles that need to be overcome. This is most obvious in armed struggles, but can sometimes be true when activists rely on methods such as rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins. A confrontational approach to activism, unreflectively pursued, potentially can lead to a dysfunctional engagement in which the positions of the contending parties are entrenched.

We have described a different approach to activism built around a search for mutual recognition or, in other words, building relationships that serve

people's needs. The basic idea is to design activist campaigning with a greater attention to how to strengthen personal connections with everyone involved, including opponents, campaigners and third parties. Figuring out how to proceed involves a systematic process of reflection. Starting with a single event or episode, reflection can be used to imagine alternative ways of acting beforehand, at the time, and afterwards. These alternatives then can be used as the basis for rethinking future actions.

The result of this sort of reflection grounded in the theory of mutual recognition and the practice of the Alternatives to Violence Project would be a practice that, in terms of nonviolence theory, is influenced more by the Gandhian tradition. However, this is not simply a move from pragmatic or Sharpian nonviolence to principled or Gandhian nonviolence, because the process of reflection is open-ended rather than premised on Gandhian precepts.

If activists have to rethink every single action they take, they would be doing lots of thinking and taking relatively little action. Reflection is a tool to be used sparingly, yet enough to shift dysfunctional habits. When campaigns become routinised and uninspiring, or when opponents always seem to have the upper hand, it is worthwhile subjecting practices to reflection. The approach of reflecting on circumstances before, during and after critical events with an eye to meeting the needs of participants is one that we think is worthwhile. The wider challenge is to reflect more frequently and more astutely, and to change practices in light of insights gained. Eventually, a new practice will become built into ways of thinking and acting; in other words, explicit reflection will become implicit, embodied in standard approaches. Then a new cycle of reflection and transformation can begin.

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