



What Works? Evidence from Research on Nonviolent Social Movements

by Abigail A. Fuller

While much has been written on the philosophy and practice of nonviolence, there has been little systematic analysis of the effectiveness of different types of nonviolent action for social movements. This hinders nonviolent activists from learning from their collective experiences. For example, case studies of nonviolent action exist, but we have no way of knowing how representative a particular case is. These cases, therefore, are of limited use in guiding activists. Other writers on nonviolence generalize about the dynamics of nonviolence, but typically their conclusions have not been tested empirically against the evidence from real-world nonviolent campaigns. The work of Gene Sharp offers a preliminary empirical investigation of the types of nonviolent actions that are used, and how they operate to bring about social change. Sharp's analysis, however, is limited to nonviolent actions from a few campaigns such as resistance to Nazi occupation in European countries, and Gandhi's campaign against British rule. More recently, some activists have published "how to" works which, while valuable, could be made more so were their tips based on systematic research into a range of nonviolent social movements.

In sociology, a small but increasing number of scholars of social movements are investigating the effectiveness of different strategies and tactics. To give just one example, two sociologists compared social movement campaigns on behalf of the homeless in twelve cities in the United States to discern what the successful campaigns had in common (Cress and Snow 2000). The present article will summarize the available scholarly evidence of what works, i.e., the conditions under which various nonviolent strategies and tactics are most effective. The research cited here has limitations. For example, most studies draw on a small number of cases; and some social movements have hardly been studied at all. Nevertheless, this summary is a starting point for accumulating empirically-tested knowledge about what works for social movements. It concludes with suggestions for future research that can aid activists in nonviolent social movements.

What We Know

1. *Generally, strong, enduring organization contributes to success.* In his study of the success and failure of 53 social movement organizations in the United States between 1800 and 1945, Gamson (1975, 1990) found that a formalized structure increases a movement's chance of success. Cress and Snow (2000) found the same in their study of homeless movement organizations in 12 cities.

On the other hand, there is evidence that in the case of movements of the poor, organizations tend to suppress the disruptive tendencies of constituents which tend to be their only real source of power (Piven and Cloward 1979). First, building and maintaining organizations diverts time and energy from nonviolent direct action. Second, leaders of social movement organizations are induced to discourage

disruption in their attempts to procure resources from elites, and elites in turn offer resources to such organizations in attempts to buy off leaders, hence quell disruption.

2. *“Leadership teams” of people from diverse backgrounds/experiences produce better strategic choices, optimizing the chances for success* (Ganz 2000; Morris and Staggenborg 2002). By definition, because a team provides differing perspectives, the best thinking of a number of people can be combined. Both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez surrounded themselves with leadership teams, even though in the popular imagination their successes are attributed to individual genius and charisma. An observer noted:

“King had...an unexcelled ability to pull men and women of diverse viewpoints together and to keep their eyes focused on the goal...King demonstrated...a rare talent for attracting and using the skills and ideas of brilliant aides and administrators” (Bennett 1970:32-33, cited in Morris and Staggenborg 2002).

A leadership team that is diverse is comprised of both “insiders” or indigenous leaders, and “outsiders,” i.e., those who do not come from within the movement’s constituency (Ganz 2000). Insiders understand the history and culture of the constituency group and can use this knowledge to mobilize support and choose appropriate tactics. Outsiders bring new information and alternative viewpoints to the decision making mix. They are important in linking the movement with outside resources, ideas, and participants. They can be especially effective at building alliances that further the movement’s goals.

3. *A movement is more likely to succeed when its goals are narrowly defined and consistent with the broader values of the society and when it does not seek to displace the opponent* (Gamson 1975, 1990). Logically, narrower goals are easier to achieve. For example, stopping a particular war is generally considered more achievable than ending war forever. Yet achieving goals that are too narrow may fail to address the sources of the problem. The movement against the war in Vietnam contributed to stopping that war, but it failed to address the root sources of militarism in society. Similarly, a movement faces greater obstacles when its demands include the ouster of opponents, as compared with seeking changes in policies and practices.

Second, most movements frame their arguments to appeal to deeply held values in their society. For example, the gay and lesbian movement in the United States has consistently framed its demands in terms of civil rights. The American labor movement has often emphasized its patriotism. Finally, when responsibility for a problem is not clearly fixed, opponents can shirk responsibility for fixing it. Calling for “an end to hunger” without specifying who has the power, and therefore the responsibility to do so, lets everyone off the hook.

4. *The effective framing of the issues, that is, shaping one’s message to capture attention and appeal to an audience, contributes to success.* Cress and Snow (2000) found that all of the successful homeless organizations that they studied used clear and well-articulated diagnostic frames (which identify a problem and its cause) and prognostic frames (which specify what needs to be done to fix the problem).

5. *A social movement comprised of diverse organizations, with a range of ideologies and strategies, has an improved chance of success.* Research pertaining to the impact on policymakers of the movement against the Vietnam War found that different tactics were effective at different times (Small 1987). In the civil rights movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was the central organization for many nonviolent campaigns. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fought and won legal battles. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) brought young people into the movement who were especially willing to engage in dramatic, risky actions. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was a multiracial group that sponsored Freedom Rides to integrate interstate transportation in the South. It is unlikely that any one of these organizations alone would have achieved what the civil rights movement as a whole was able to achieve (Morris and Clawson 2002).

In particular, the presence of radical groups within a larger movement aids success. This is termed the "radical flank effect" (Haines 1984). There are several reasons such groups facilitate success. First, moderate groups within a movement are more attractive negotiating partners to the opponent when radical groups are also present. Second, the presence of radical groups tends to increase financial support for moderate groups from outsiders. Third, when radical groups emerge, moderate groups themselves tend to become more radical in their demands. During the 1950s the NAACP was driven underground in the Deep South; it was considered too radical for the white power structure to tolerate. When new, more radical civil rights groups such as SNCC and the revitalized SCLC (that used direct action, like sit-ins, to confront segregation) were created in the early 1960s, the NAACP suddenly looked moderate by comparison. As a result, over the next several years contributions to the NAACP increased tenfold. In addition, the goals of the NAACP became more radical during this time.

6. *Resources are less important than committed people and a good strategy.* The United Farm Workers compensated for their lack of material resources by developing an effective strategy, which they were able to achieve through access to a variety of relevant information, creative thinking, and the motivation of leaders (Ganz 2004). The successful homeless movements that Cress and Snow (1996) studied had in common not money, but leadership, outside support and advice, and office and meeting spaces. In fact, money often follows success: civil rights organizations received money from wealthy donors and attracted support from northern whites only after they had demonstrated their mass appeal and power (Morris and Clawson 2002).

7. *Disruption (but not violence) contributes to success, under certain conditions.* Piven and Cloward (1979) concluded that movements of the poor do not win by mobilizing material resources, but by using their power to disrupt the normal functioning of social, economic and political life. Disruptive tactics are most effective when used as a last resort—that is, when the target has been previously unresponsive to less disruptive tactics. In such cases, disruption is seen as justified (Gamson 1975; Piven and Cloward 1979). However, disruption is unnecessary, and may be counterproductive, when the target is already relatively responsive to constituents and when the social movement has allies in positions of power (Cress and Snow 2000).

8. *Tactical innovation, that is, the periodic introduction of new tactics, aids nonviolent social movements.* Over time, targets adapt to particular tactics,

becoming better able to control them in order to minimize disruption. For movements whose primary power is the ability to disrupt, then, tactical innovation is key to regaining the initiative (McAdam 1983). A good example is the invention of sit-ins by the American labor movement in the 1930s. It represented a new tactic that solved the problem of businesses hiring scabs to run factories.

9. *The greater the number of different tactics used, the more likely the chance of success.* Bronfenbrenner and Hickey (2003) investigated 412 union organizing campaigns and found that success depended on using as many of ten "comprehensive organizing tactics" as possible. These were:

- 1) adequate and appropriate staff and financial resources; 2) strategic targeting; 3) active and representative rank-and-file organizing committees; 4) active participation of member volunteer organizers; 5) person-to-person contact inside and outside the workplace; 6) benchmarks and assessments to monitor union support and set thresholds for moving ahead with the campaign; 7) an emphasis on issues which resonate in the workplace and in the community; 8) creative, escalating internal pressure tactics involving members in the workplace; 9) creative, escalating external pressure tactics involving members outside the workplace, locally, nationally and/or internationally; and 10) building for the first contract during the organizing campaign.

10. *Repression can either help or hinder social movements.* The effect of repression depends on several factors. It can encourage movements to develop in the first place (McAdam 1982). There is some evidence that in the short term repression inhibits protest, but in the long term it deligitimizes the opponent and thereby increases the level of protest (Rasler 1996; Olivier 1991).

What It Would Be Useful to Know

There are a number of questions that would be useful for social movement scholars to answer. As a movement activist, I can suggest a few.

1. How do more confrontational tactics (property damage, pie throwing) affect a social movement and its chances of success? Under what conditions do they attract potential participants or decrease public support for a movement? Do they encourage the target and third parties to take the movement more seriously?
2. What are the effects of various frames, that is, ways that movement activists articulate their message, on a movement's chance of success? Some empirical research on how audiences react to different frames would be useful. For example, if my local peace group puts up an antiwar billboard, should it carry a religious message? A humorous message?
3. When a nonviolent social movement succeeds, how does it do so? Do numbers matter? Does the support of influential third parties matter? Is media coverage a factor?

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