Ahimsa Center K-12 Lesson Plan

Examining Social Interaction through the Life of Mohandas Gandhi

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 11th grade / Psychology

Duration of Lesson: 3 days

Content Standards (National standards from National Psychological Association):
VC-2.2 Students will discuss how social and cultural categories affect behavior.
VC-3.2 Students will describe how social structure can affect intergroup relations.
VC-3.5 Students will discuss the nature of altruism in society.

Lesson Context:
Students will have just finished studying Social Cognition (chapter 20 in textbook Psychology: Principles in Practice by Spencer Rathus, 2010) and the life of Cesar Chavez. Thus, it is assumed that prior to this lesson students will have a basic understanding of Chavez’s non-violent tactics to create more humane working conditions for California farm workers.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will examine the basic tenets of social interaction (psychology) through the life of Mohandas Gandhi. Via a class discussion, students will then compare and contrast the non-violent tactics used by Cesar Chavez and Mohandas Gandhi. Finally, students will have an opportunity to examine a non-violent social movement of their choosing and relate this the terms and definitions presented in the textbook Psychology: Principles in Practice by Spencer Rathus.

Guiding Questions:
1. In what ways did the life of Gandhi and the non-violent movement that he led exemplify altruism?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the tactics of Gandhi and Chavez?
3. What are other examples of non-violent social movements and how do these movements relate to social psychology?

Content Essay:
Mohandas Gandhi and his non-violent movement for Indian independence can be analyzed through the lens of social psychology. Social psychology is the study of human interactions—this essay will follow the ideas and themes presented in chapter 21 (Social Interaction) of the textbook Psychology: Principles in Practice by Spencer Rathus.

Although Mohandas Gandhi was born (1869) and raised in India, he also spent decades living in South Africa. While living there, South Africa was under the political control of Britain—Britain enforced a form of legal segregation in South Africa known as apartheid. Under the system of apartheid, Gandhi experienced serious discrimination, including physical assault, from white Brits. Meanwhile, India was also under the political control of Britain. Gandhi came...
to see British colonization, and subsequent western industrialization, as a major source of the devastating dehumanization, subjugation, racism, exploitation, and cultural violence that was taking place in both South Africa and India. Thus, Gandhi made a conscious choice to lead a non-violent social movement for a more civil society and Indian liberation in South Africa, and later, in India (Sethia, 2012).

Gandhi was an incredibly successful leader for several reasons that can be explained through the lens of social psychology. Nearly all social movements have a leader who serves three main functions in the group: identifying goals, providing support (mental/spiritual) to people within the group, and establishing and implementing plans (Rathus, 2010).

Gandhi made it clear that the goal of the movement was not only Indian independence (i.e. Hind Swaraj), but also a moral transformation of the people, which would lead to the creation of an Indian civilization that promotes the “disinterested service of [all] citizens without regard to their to their gender, religion, caste, or class” (Parel, 2010). Likewise, Gandhi provided mental and spiritual support to the people of India in a variety of ways. One way he did this was by “cultivating a mutually felt sense if identity with the poor…Gandhi’s life engendered trust among the masses who convinced that Gandhi represented their interests” (Sethia, 2012). Gandhi did this by leading a minimalist lifestyle and traveling third class on trains. In addition, Gandhi provided spiritual support to followers by establishing *ashrams*, or spiritual communities. Gandhi opened the Sabarmati Ashram in 1915 and the Sevagram Ashram in 1936. Finally, Gandhi was able to establish and implement his plans, through non-violent demonstrations, boycotts, and protests. One such example is the famous Salt March of the 1930s wherein Gandhi led thousands of Indians in an act of civil disobedience by disobeying the British Salt laws.

Gandhi’s Salt March can also be analyzed through the lens of social psychology. According to social psychologists, people behave differently in groups than they do as individuals. Specifically, people tend to take greater risks as a group than they would if they were acting alone (Rathus, 2010). This phenomenon is called the *risky shift*—the tendency for people to take greater risks when they are part of a group than they would as individuals acting on their own. When Gandhi proposed the idea of the Salt March in 1930, some of his followers were initially skeptical. However, as Gandhi began to explain that salt tax was unjust, he was able to gain support of thousands of his followers. Gandhi was able to make his followers feel less vulnerable as part of a group, and he did so by “evoking in them a cooperative spirit” (Sethia, 2012). Gandhi said, “I wish that there should be no suspension or abandonment of the war that commences tomorrow morning... I shall eagerly await the news that ten batches are ready as soon as my batch is arrested” (Sethia, 2012).

Being accepted by a group can be important because groups help people satisfy many needs, such as belonging, affection, attention, and support during difficult times. Moreover, groups also may help people accomplish things they could not accomplish on their own (Rathus, 2010). If we continue to analyze Gandhi’s Salt March through the lens of social psychology, it could even be argued that some of the individual who participated in the Salt March might have done so out of a (conscious or unconscious) pressure to conform to the group’s behavior. People who conform bring their behavior in line with that of a group—might have Gandhi presented such a compelling case for disobeying the Salt Laws that some followers felt pressure to conform to this cause? Belonging to a group usually means conforming to the group’s social norms: social norms are standards of behavior that people share (Rathus, 2010). The chances of conforming to a group’s norms increases as the group grows in size and conformity is more
likely when it is unanimous within a group. The Salt March had both size and unanimity on its side, therefore these factors might have led some (although certainly not all) of Gandhi’s followers to feel pressure to conform to the group’s decision to break the Salt Laws.

Another way to explain the group psychology behind the Salt March is through attitudes and group polarization. Members of a group usually share similar attitudes (Rathus, 2010). Shared attitudes are often what attract people to particular groups in the first place—for example, most of Gandhi’s followers shared the attitude that the British had imposed oppressive laws on Indians. The shared attitudes that group members hold are likely to grow stronger over time. This strengthening of a group’s shared attitudes is called group polarization (Rathus, 2010). Polarization occurs as group members discuss and act upon the attitudes they share. For example, the night before the Salt March, Gandhi announced to more than 10,000 followers that they would march to the Dandi sea where he would break the Salt Law and Gandhi asked his follower to violate the Salt Laws as well. The next morning, thousands of Gandhi’s followers joined him on the Salt March (Sethia, 2012).

Perhaps the most accurate and fair way to analyze Gandhi as an individual, however, is through the lens of altruism. Altruism is an unselfish concern for the welfare of other people (Rathus, 2010). While some argue that altruism is rooted solely in a genuine concern for others’ welfare, evolutionary psychologists believe that altruism in an adaptive behavior that helps humans survive and reproduce (Rathus, 2010). For example, by serving his fellow Indians, Gandhi was indirectly helping them to survive and pass their genes on to the next generation. Gandhi was not exclusively concerned about his own family’s survival; he wanted to see an end to racism, the caste system, gender inequality, and religious intolerance among all Indians (Parel, 2010). That said, while in South Africa, Gandhi demonstrate altruistic behavior toward his fellow Indians, but did not demonstrate the same altruistic behavior toward the oppressed native South Africans.

Over the course of his life, Gandhi placed great emphasis on serving others and creating more equality among Indians. Gandhi also emphasized the importance of fostering truthfulness, self-discipline, celibacy, and courage in order to create the mental conditions for serving others (Parel, 2010). Gandhi’s mental state might have contributed to his propensity to act altruistically—many studies have found that people are most likely to help others when they are in a positive emotional state (Rathus, 2010). The legacy of Gandhi demonstrates the importance of self-discipline and introspective practices in order to create mental and emotional conditions for altruism.

Bibliography:

Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:
1. Explain to students and Cesar Chavez and Mohandas Gandhi are but two of many people who have used non-violent means to combat oppression and social injustices.
2. Distribute the above content essay to students and have them read it individually (either
for homework or at the beginning of class. On a separate sheet of loose-leaf paper, students should take note of the following definitions, which are presented throughout the content essay: risky shift, social norms, conformity, group polarization, and altruism. If students have trouble identifying these definitions in the textbook, they can use the textbook Psychology: Principles in Practice (ch.21).

3. When all students have completed the reading and have identified the above definitions, engage students in a class discussion by posing the following questions:
   a. What similarities did you notice in the tactics used by Chavez and Gandhi?
   b. What differences did you notice in the tactics used by Chavez and Gandhi?
   c. How were the social and political climates they were struggling against similar?
   d. How were the social and political climates they were struggling against different?
   e. Whose tactics seemed more effective to you and why?
   f. How have the social climates that each one fought against changed?

4. Explain to student that there have been dozens of examples of non-violent social movements throughout history. Tell students that they will choose one such movement to study and write a 250-500 word summary of that movement or individual. Here are just a few options:
   a. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina
   b. Yo No Coopero Con La Dictadura
   c. The Ladies in White in Cuba
   d. Martin Luther King Jr.
   e. Anti-Apartheid Campaign in South Africa
   f. Campaigns for religious freedom, such as the one led by the Dalai Lama or monks in Burma/Myanmar
   g. Environmental movements, such as tree sitting

5. Students can use periodicals, the Internet, or reference materials to conduct their research. Students must cite evidence of at least three of the following terms in their summary: risky shift, social norms, conformity, group polarization, and altruism.

6. As an optional extension activity for advanced learners, students can create a visual representation of the movement or individual that they studied (collage, poster, diagram, or visual story) and present their finding to the class.