On 1 September 1967, six months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King addressed the American Psychological Association in Washington. He spoke of the role of the behavioural scientist, and implored his audience to show ‘creative maladjustment’. What if Mahatma Gandhi – someone who inspired Martin Luther King – were alive today, and if he were to address an annual meeting of the British Psychological Society? Gandhian themes and ideals are as relevant today as they were in his lifetime, and psychology has much to offer in terms of progressing the roles and challenges that were close to his heart.

Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the independence movement in British-ruled India, respected the work of scientists, who in turn respected him. He would have gladly embraced the idea of discussing the findings of psychological science, especially as he himself featured in an experimental study of spelling errors for his name (Campbell & Coltheart, 1984), in the work of psychologists who have studied creative leadership (Gardner, 1993) and in attempts to apply Gandhian principles to science and healthcare (Kapur, 2010, 2013). I like to imagine that Gandhi would have become an avid follower of our discipline as it exploded in the second half of the 20th century.

In fact, Gandhi’s 1927 autobiography was subtitled ‘The Story of my Experiments with Truth’. In the first few pages he wrote: ‘Far be it for me to claim any degree of perfection for these experiments. I claim for them nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them.’ Gandhi also once commented, ‘Truth and nonviolence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could.’

Gandhi has inspired my own work (see box), so as I prepare to attend the Society’s Annual Conference this May I would like to take you on an intellectual journey to his imaginary address to the meeting. (Imaginary interactions with Gandhi are not new: one of the world’s leading experts on Gandhi, Lord Bhikhu Parekh, has published an imaginary conversation between Gandhi and Osama Bin Laden). Picture him in his customary dhoti and sandals… to any concerns about his attire, he may have given the same reply that he gave to King George V at Buckingham Palace in September 1931: ‘I think you have ample clothes for the both of us!’ Over to you, Mahatma…
Nonviolence

There are only two burning principles that should govern the life of human beings in this world: ‘God is Love’ and ‘God is Truth’. I stand by the words I once uttered, ‘When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of Truth and Love have always won’. So I will firstly talk about Nonviolence and Truth.

I welcome the contribution that psychology has made to understanding modern forms of violence, such as terrorism, and issues such as how minds may become prejudiced to regard other human beings as having a wholly negative, amorphous identity against whom violence may be perpetrated as a means to justify some misconceived end. I'm thinking of the work of psychologists such as Steven Hayes and Samuel Leistedt. But rather than focus on the negative components of such behaviour, I will briefly explore more positive dimensions, and in particular the domains of compassion, moral conduct and altruism.

The origins of the word ‘compassion’ mean ‘to suffer with’. The object in question is usually another human being, but animals, plants and organisations could in some situations be the focus of a degree of compassion. As a life-long vegetarian, I have always felt some compassion for animals. As I see it, there are two components to compassion. Being able to experience

How Gandhi influenced my work

Gandhi meant very little to me until I walked into the outpatient department at the All India Medical Institute in New Delhi in the late 1970s, while I was on a visiting scholarship. Inscribed in huge writing on the wall of the department were the words of Gandhi, ‘It is not our patient who is dependent on us, but we who are dependent on him. By serving him, we are not obliging him; rather, by giving us the privilege to serve him, he is obliging us.’ Those words moved me.

My next encounter with Gandhi was in the mid-1990s when I was doing research for my book, The Irish Raj. Gandhi took inspiration from Irish freedom fighters, and I got to learn about his work in more detail then. Around that time, I joined the Gandhi Foundation, which was set up in the 1980s following the Oscar-winning film by Sir Richard Attenborough, and I was further inspired by Gandhi’s teachings through the work of that Foundation. When I was working in Cambridge, around 2009 I attended a talk given by an eminent Indian scientist Dr Raghunath Mashelkar, who invited me to write a chapter on Gandhi for his book, Timeless Inspirator, which was published in 2010.

Around this time, I fell victim to some of the horrors of NHS management, and my experiences inspired me to hold a conference in 2013 at the House of Commons on Gandhi and the NHS, and to write a couple of related articles that appeared in the BMJ and in the Health Service Journal. As I write this piece, I am in the midst of organising an international conference and exhibition to take place in April 2017 at UCL, ‘Mahatma Gandhi in the 21st Century: Gandhian Themes and Values’, which will cover a range of topics, from nonviolence to frugal innovations in healthcare.
the thoughts, the feelings, and in particular the pains and the hardships, of another human being; and having the motivation, resources and ability to bring about change for the good in that individual. I was thinking about compassion when I once remarked, ‘Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen, and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to him’.

Psychologists have been at the forefront of attempts to provide a number of novel perspectives on compassion and to improve our understanding of the processes underlying compassion and the lack of compassion – seek out the work of Tania Singer and Matthias Bolz. Researchers led by Clara Strauss have further dissected the concept, identifying five key components – recognising suffering, understanding its universality, feeling for the person, tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and a motivation to act to alleviate the suffering. As I see it, either consciously or unconsciously, before any act of compassion, individuals will generally have to appraise a situation, make judgements as to whether their knowledge, experience and resources may be of value, and then carry out a risk analysis of costs/benefits to themselves and to others. After the act of compassion, they will evaluate the consequences of their action.

Turning to moral conduct, as I wrote in my autobiography, ‘morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality’. Most definitions of morality bring in the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. It is natural that what is right and wrong in one culture may not be right and wrong in another culture, and the same could apply to some degree when comparing children with adults. It would appear to me that there are two broad strands of moral conduct. One strand deals with conflict of values, which includes what you in your profession have called Deontology versus Consequentialism, something that corresponds well to my views about whether ends ever justify means. It may also include other situations where two good actions or two evil actions have to be balanced against each other. The other strand deals with the issue of whether an action that resulted in harm was carried out intentionally, or occurred as a result of lack of care, lack of concern or lack of competence, or whether it occurred for reasons over which the individual had little or no control. Your field has carried out much research in these various domains of moral behaviour: just in the past few years there have been fascinating papers from Fiery Cushman and Joshua Greene, Jonathan Haidt, Guy Kahane, Molly Crockett.

Other than repeating my long-held view that Truth and Non-Violence must be the two key pillars of moral conduct in society, I do not offer ready solutions to some of these issues relating to moral conduct. Religious works may offer some guidance, but may be unable to address the complex situations that you have highlighted in your studies or that occasionally occur in everyday life. I still believe that means are more important than ends, but I accept the existence of moral dilemmas of the type that you have so exquisitely created in your experiments, which I have also commented on when dealing with the terminally ill who are in pain (see Gielen, 2012). My plea is that you continue to educate the public and those in positions of leadership and power on the thinking processes that surround moral issues and in particular moral dilemmas, so that they may at least think carefully before they rush to judgement or rush to action.

Turning to altruism, I welcome the contributions that those in your profession, such as Abigail Marsh, have made to understanding the nature of altruistic behaviour. There’s even research led by William Michael Brown at Rutgers that links altruism and wellbeing, and altruism and longevity. But more can be done, and to focus your minds on altruistic behaviour I say this: We are on this planet for a minuscule period of time, and we in this auditorium are the fortunate ones. There are millions of people for whom fate did not accord the beneficence which it has to those in your profession. You therefore have a duty, an obligation, to repay nature for your good luck. Do all in your power to do good work, to be more creative in exploring forms of altruistic activity, perhaps making more use of retired professionals and other sources of volunteering. I am reminded of the neuropsychologist Laird Cermak, who shortly before his passing advocated that each university department of psychology should engage in some activity that helps the local community. Such activity could range from the psychology of surplus (e.g. food banks) to the psychology of road-safety interventions.

What more would I like to see in this field of compassion, altruism and moral conduct? I would like to see the British Psychological Society support the formation of research centres for the study of compassion, such as the ones at Stanford and Berkley.

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**Key sources**


Full list available in online/app versions.
I would like to see more research on displays of lack of compassion, such as the ‘bystander effect’. Fear and apathy may underlie absence of compassion in such settings, and then one is dealing with attributes such as courage and leadership. Other psychological variables, such as ambiguity of the situation and similarity of the victim, have also been found to be important, and other circumstances that allow people to ‘morally disengage’, in Albert Bandura’s term, are also worthy of investigation. Such behaviour occurs all too commonly in a range of organisations, including healthcare and political settings.

I would also welcome more research on interventions that hold promise in raising levels of compassion, for example Paul Crawford’s work on the design of compassionate care or James Kirby on compassionate interventions. There’s also promising work, led by Caroline Falconer, on the role of virtual-reality systems that allow someone to feel as if they are in the body of another person, but simpler interventions also need to be kept in mind: Narinder Kapur has advocated simply asking the question ‘How are you coping?’ and Carol Camfield has led research that attempts to integrate poverty into mainstream studies of brain and behaviour. But again more can be done, in particular focusing on those groups in society that are often ignored.

As for the Society itself, I note that the UK is well behind the US in the Charities Aid Foundation rankings for altruistic behaviour. I urge you to follow the example of your sister body, the American Psychological Association, to give more prominence and support to altruistic and philanthropic behaviour by your members. This may include overhauling your Welfare Fund, and more actively seeking out both those in need and those who can provide tangible support. I ask you to develop closer links with developing countries, and to do more to share the knowledge, skills and experience of your members with those in other parts of the world, perhaps having academic and applied departments and centres twinned with corresponding groups in developing countries. Such collaborations could be mutually beneficial, as in the recruitment of clinical populations that have a low incidence in the West or in the emerging field of ‘frugal innovation’. I ask you to urge greater recognition of those who show moral courage, such as aid workers like Dr Karen Woo, killed while carrying out their duties.

Truth

‘Truth’ shows its beautiful and ugly face in diverse ways. For many scientists, it’s about discovering the nature of the world and the universe in which we live; and for me too ‘truth’ includes something being scientifically sound and being reliable. Having been trained as a lawyer, I also consider justice as a marriage between Truth and Love, for it is for the court to decide if wrong has been done, if hurt has been caused, and to provide due retribution.

Your profession has shown that we mere mortals can unconsciously suffer distortions of the truth, that we are often unaware of such distortion, and in fact may be very confident in our erroneous statements, whether they be recollections or faulty forms of reasoning that result in our minds being so terribly biased. The writings of Elizabeth Loftus, Scott Lilienfeld, Aldert Vrij and many more have eloquently shown how the frailties of the human mind can lead to difficulties in discovering truth and in implementing justice. It is when truth is distorted or concealed, consciously or unconsciously, and when there is also lack of love, for whatever reason, that the ugly head of injustice shows itself. For too long, and in too many ways, I witnessed such injustice both in South Africa and in India, and also in England when I was a fledgling lawyer. But it seems that while civilisation has advanced, and some of the more obvious injustices such as imperialism and racial subjugation have largely disappeared, we are still left with burning injustices in society. We need mechanisms for recognising that injustices exist, for learning lessons, and to provide support and remedy for those who have suffered. Peer review and external scrutiny are important means for preventing or remedying injustices, and they should be used to the maximum.

Where there is distortion or concealment of truth, and where there is absence of compassion, be it in the workplace, in political settings, in legal settings, or wherever, you must highlight the processes that have gone wrong.”
down thinking at key times, having contact with groups for whom individuals may have stereotype bias, having role models who speak and act in ways that are counter to bias, and having regular tests of unconscious bias in respect of particular domains. In the case of unconscious racial bias, I would like to see more research into virtual-reality technologies, which appear to hold promise in reducing racial bias (see work led by Donna Banakou).

Those staff involved in recruitment and disciplinary procedures should undergo an enhanced form of training and assessment in unconscious bias, with six-monthly refreshers, and a refresher within two months of a recruitment or disciplinary hearing. This is all the more important for disciplinary procedures, since they are particularly susceptible to bias and to miscarriages of justice that can result in great suffering. In general, the more senior the position that someone holds, the more rigorous and more frequent should be the training in relation to unconscious bias.

**Political behaviour**

I turn now to my final passion, the means to bring about mass changes in how Nonviolence and Truth are manifest in the societies in which we live. In most societies, it is political behaviour that is the most common mechanism for bringing about changes for the good, and when it fails it is often the most common reason for the harm that sometimes ensues.

I admire the work that your profession and others have undertaken in examining some of the issues surrounding political behaviour and nonviolence – Bernhard Leidner and colleagues’ ‘Bringing science to bear – on peace, not war’ is a good example. I have marvelled at the range of topics that have been the subject of scientific scrutiny, including ideological beliefs, political persuasion, hubris, voting behaviour, reconciliation, protest behaviours, the psychological nature of terrorism, and much more. You have produced commendable insights into the cognitive, psychological and neural mechanisms that lie behind such behaviours. What more can you do? You need to educate both the public and politicians about the findings of these studies and their implications for the principles of Truth and Nonviolence.

In particular, irrational behaviour by leaders is often the cause of hardship, injustice and even wars. You need to study this in greater detail. For political leaders, the end is often held to justify the means, whether this be in the use of torture or the reduction of freedoms or the initiation of wars. Leaders may also show ‘emotional generalisation’ from a traumatic event such as a terrorist act or from an emotionally laden goal, which then feeds into justification of questionable actions. Such behaviour is worthy of study. You should question and analyse the language used by politicians, especially where it may be misleading (see an interesting 2016 study from Stefan Pfattheichner and Simon Schindler on misperceiving bullshit as profound). I see that many politicians and media outlets abuse the word ‘people’, proclaiming that ‘the people have spoken’ or ‘we are following the wishes of the people’. I recall that the British Medical Journal once called for the word ‘accidents’ to be banned from use, and I personally would like to see a ban on politicians using the word ‘people’! You also need to question the mechanisms of selection and training of those who hold high office, whether it be prime ministers or government ministers, and the work of psychologists such as Jo Silvester and Helena Cooper-Thomas is important here. I also return to unconscious bias; those in positions of power and responsibility should undergo formal, systematic training in respect of unconscious bias, with annual refreshers. I would hope that your profession can take a lead in bringing this about.

I would ask you as an organisation to examine your own political behaviour. Following on from the proclamation of Martin Luther King, endorsed by your own president Tommy MacKay, I would like you to show more in the way of ‘creative maladjustment’ when you see injustice, moral misconduct or the absence of compassion. Fifty years ago, Noam Chomsky spoke about the ‘responsibility of intellectuals’, and his call is still valid today. Do not stand by, or become perturbed if a goal cannot be achieved in its entirety. As I once noted, ‘Men often hesitate to make a beginning because they feel that the objective cannot be achieved in its entirety. This attitude of mind is precisely our greatest obstacle to progress, an obstacle that each man, if he only wills it, can clear’. The icon of your discipline, William James, once called for a ‘moral equivalent to war’, and I would propose that principled nonviolent but forceful actions are the moral equivalent that James favoured, be they peaceful symbolic marches, as in my own Salt March in 1930, or my hunger-strikes. These actions require courage, determination and self-sacrifice, no less than that which is required of a soldier in war. It requires true leaders who will exemplify my words: Be the change you want to see in the world.

The British climate is not consonant with my dhoti attire, and so I must take my leave and thank you again for the opportunity to address you. The advances of mankind over the ages, ranging from technology to medicine to freedoms, have resulted from the behaviours of great individuals and great peoples. Most of the causes and the solutions to our current and future challenges lie in human behaviour: as your then President Tommy MacKay noted in 2008, psychology can truly change the world. You occupy a privileged position in society, and I ask you to rise to the occasion.