

Deconstructing *ahimsa* at the workplace: its relevance and significance

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ahimsa at the
workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to conceptualize *ahimsa* at the workplace as an alternate coping response to negative workplace behaviours. The response strategy aims to impede conflict escalation and transform a hostile situation into a collaborative one.

Design/methodology/approach – The conceptualization of the indigenous construct bases upon Bhawuk's methodological suggestion on building psychological models from the scriptures (Bhawuk, 2010, 2017, 2019). The construct *ahimsa* explicates by synthesizing the micro-world (Bhagawad Gita, BG and Patanjali Yoga Sutras, PYS) and through the lifeworld of Gandhiji.

Findings – The conceptual analysis illustrates the efficacy of *ahimsa* as an alternate response to negative workplace behaviours. The definition delineates its three core characteristics, i.e. conscious non-violent action, self-empowerment and rehumanizing the perpetrator. Besides, it proposes to enhance metacognition, creativity and individual learning at the workplace.

Originality/value – The conceptual paper gives a new direction to management researchers on coping and responding to stress.

Keywords *Ahimsa*, Non-violence, Coping, Response, Negative workplace behaviours

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the recent stream of articles in various popular and scholarly outlets, there is a growing interest in coping or responding to negative workplace behaviours (Cortina and Magley, 2009; Cortina *et al.*, 2021). Negative workplace behaviours have damaging effects on employees physical and psychological health. Besides, it increases organization costs due to loss in job performance (Chung and Kim, 2017), job satisfaction (Welbourne *et al.*, 2016) and job engagement (Xu *et al.*, 2020). The inclination among scholars and practitioners to imbibe a collaborative climate stimulates research on a rehumanizing response behaviour (Kay and Skarlicki, 2020; Holm, 1996) so that it does not lead to further conflict escalation (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Studies have shown that victims who forgive their perpetrators feel more rehumanized than those who seek revenge (Schumann and Walton, 2021). Forgiveness is also indirectly associated with job satisfaction and organization citizenship behaviours (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012). Therefore, the current study proposes an alternate rehumanizing response to negative workplace behaviour.

Although over the past two decades, there have been studies in management literature on coping responses with negative behaviours, the models and theories discussed primarily adapt western context (Cortina and Magley, 2009; Cortina *et al.*, 2021) or replicating western models on non-western populations (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Rai and Agarwal, 2018). For example, a well-established and systematic approach to study employee responses to adverse workplace

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situations is EVLN (Exit, Voice, Loyalty, Neglect) typology developed in the west. In this typology, an employee has only four ways to respond to negative behaviours, i.e. (exit) or leave the organization, decrease their additional job role and commitment, i.e. (voice and loyalty) or ignore the in-role activities, i.e. (neglect) (Farrell, 1983). Similarly, Agnew's general strain theory (1992) justifies criminal acts. The theory states that anger, frustration is apparent that arise out of external disliked strains. To escape the strain, the person may either resort to substance abuse or engage in criminal acts. These models and theories may not be relevant in a collectivist culture that is less confrontational than individualists (Cai and Fink, 2002). Collectivists prefer a compromising and integrating approach to individualists who prefer avoidance and domination (Cai and Fink, 2002; Lee et al., 2021). This model, therefore, fails to capture the nuances of the cultural dissimilarities in a non-western context.

From the ancient scriptures and spiritual discourses, consciousness level decides how much we allow ourselves to suffer from adversaries and that the resources to cope also lie within us. From Swami Sukhabodhananda, BK Sister Shivani, to many contemporary spiritual gurus, we learn that it is up to an individual to diffuse a negative behaviour encountered. Consciousness determines how much we allow the situation to overpower us (Sukhabodhananda, 2020, pp. 4-57; BKShivani, 2018, pp. 29-18). On the battlefield of *Kurukshetra*, Arjuna's cause of suffering from the adversaries also alluded to his unexpanded consciousness. Lord Krishna facilitates Arjuna to expand his *Chitta* (consciousness), to help him transform his *vishada* (unhappiness and despair) to *yoga* for higher-level understanding. In contemporary times, we learn Gandhian ways of transforming an "enemy to a friend that always initiated from the heart and the loving thoughts created inside the heart". Therefore, the differences between western and non-western approaches call for a different understanding of how we perceive *himsa* (violence) and a different cultural perspective to respond to it.

Broadly stated, this paper aims to develop an alternate response model to negative workplace behaviour based on the ancient philosophy of *ahimsa*. It, therefore, addresses few significant gaps in the literature in the following ways. First, the management literature needs to develop an indigenous psycho-philosophical model addressing a pertinent workplace issue (Khattri et al., 2012; Bhawuk, 2008). Second, the need to develop a response strategy that is emic-embedded or culturally rich. As culture influence beliefs and values, there is a difference in how employees perceive and respond to stressors. Culture also determines the effectiveness of a response strategy (see Hofstede, 1993; Bhawuk, 2010, 2011). Other authors in the area have also delineated the lack of a coping response that is culturally attuned (Wu et al., 2012; Jung and Yoon, 2018; Rai and Agarwal, 2018). To address the following gaps, the current study leverages the philosophy of *ahimsa* to build an indigenous response model. Drawing from the methodological suggestions by Bhawuk (Bhawuk, 2010, 2011, 2019), this model synthesizes the micro-world through the scriptures of *BG* and *PYS* and the lifeworld of Gandhiji. In the following sections, the author first presents a literature review on *ahimsa*, drawing from philosophic traditions and the lifeworld of Gandhiji; then, it presents the synergy of both the worlds; finally, the author defines *ahimsa* as an alternate response strategy to negative workplace behaviours.

Hindu origin of ahimsa and himsa

The term *ahimsa* initially appears in the *Chandogya Upanishad* where it originates (Dwyer, 2016; Fitz, 2007). Later, the principles percolate through the teachings of *Manu* (Fitz, 2007). The teachings around *ahimsa* were primarily moral principles encompassing what an individual ought or ought not to do. Some of them are non-killing, non-harming animals (which were not a threat to humans), living in harmony with nature, rendering help to one another, fostering love and kindness. The teachings of both the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* further inspired Patanjali, the great Indian sage, and he delineates the significance of *ahimsa* as a necessary practice towards one's "Self"-realization journey. *Ahimsa* is one of the *Yamas* (abstinence), which lays the

foundation for higher levels of *yoga*. He further stated that all men, women and children must abide by the *Yamas*, irrespective of their nationalities or position (PYS, 2.31).

Further on this, Kapadia (2013) states that *Yama* as “an absolute truth” needs to be “cultivated” and rewired in the minds of modern men. However, if the vow of *ahimsa* is firmly grounded in someone, he gains the power to make all beings around him lose their hostility because the person releases harmonious vibrations, and in the presence of such a seer, even wild animals forget their nature of causing pain (PYS, 2.35). Therefore, in the Patanjali sutras, *ahimsa* is the foremost *Yama* or the means leading towards *yogas chitta vritti nirodhah*, i.e., expansion of *chitta* (mind stuff) by *nirodhah* (controlling or restraining) *vrittis* (that takes various forms or fluctuations) to ultimately stilling the mind, as described in the *Sadhana Pada* or the second sutra.

The virtue of *ahimsa* mentions in the *BG*. In Chapter 10, Verse 5, *ahimsa* is one of the seven states that arise from God. In Chapter 16, Verse 2, *ahimsa* is one of the 26 aspects of the “*daivee sampada*” (divine wealth). In Chapter 13, Verses 7 to 10, *ahimsa* is presented as one of the characteristics that a human being needs to cultivate to the knowledge of “the Self” or the *Brahman* that permeates all beings. Thus, the highest and most actual state of *ahimsa* epitomizes the *Brahman*, *Paramatma*, *Purusha*, Being, Truth, Self or the God or God-like behaviours deemed for liberation. Scholars in workplace spirituality describe the realization of this phenomenon through meaningful and meditative work (Pandey et al., 2015), oneness with the self and the environment (Pandey and Navare, 2018), self-awareness (Coner, 2009), authenticity (Garg, 2017).

Despite the knowledge established in the micro world, a sceptic may question the epistemological incongruencies of *PYS* and *BG*, as both texts propagate contradicting principles on *ahimsa*. On the one hand, *Patanjali* advocates the practice of *ahimsa* as non-killing, non-harming; on the other hand, in the *BG*, Lord Krishna instigates Arjuna to fight and kill ones’ opponents. For a cynic, this might be difficult to reconcile unless the subtleties are understood completely. The *svadharma* of Arjuna as a *Kshatriya* (warrior) is to fight evil for the greater good. Therefore, when he was backing out, Lord Krishna enlightened in him his *dharma* so that his fear, confusion, attachment and delusion ultimately transformed to *yoga* (union with the divine), leading to the expansion of his consciousness (*BG*, 2.31, 33). Therefore, there is a need to comprehend the meaning of *dharma* (doing one’s duty) in exhibiting *ahimsa*.

Ahimsa shapes a proper grounding in some of the decision-making situations in organizations through the lenses of *dharma*. For example, as a believer of *ahimsa*, one cannot sit idle if he/she sees any wrongdoings at the workplace; one needs to rise and speak up against the wrong deed for the organization’s benefit. A soldier who believes in the principles of *ahimsa*, cannot deter from his duty of fighting his enemies because he has a greater responsibility towards his country. Much later, Kohlberg’s cognitive moral development prioritizes what is morally right over other alternatives. It demonstrates strength and skills to follow through on behaving morally (Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977). Even His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the great contemporary proponent of non-anger, stated that force is essential to combat evil (Lama, n.d.). We learn from the *BG* the spiritual prerequisites for a man to use force against evil. Thus, in the *BG*, we see *ahimsa* as a divine quality and a knowledge form, distinguishing the “divine” from the “demonical” qualities of arrogance, hypocrite, harshness, anger and ignorance leading to delusion bondage (*BG*, 16.4). To sum up, *ahimsa* in the *Hindu* tradition is a vow, assimilation of divine qualities and moral practice that one must exhibit temporally and contextually.

Even though *ahimsa* is the scope of this paper, the path to *ahimsa* cultivates if we can comprehend what impedes our journey towards the path of *ahimsa*. Therefore, in this context, the seed of *himsa* in *Hindu* tradition is briefly touched. Sage Patanjali mentions the seven states in which *himsa* may arise, hindering the intellect of a person. These are:

- (1) Constant cravings to acquire things from outside (*prepsa*);
- (2) Aversions from things that are new (*jihasa*);

- (3) Not feeling satisfied even after fulfilling all desires (*atrupti*); and
 (4) Sorrow, fear and delusion (PYS as cited in [Kapadia, 2013](#))

Drawing from the *BG*, the author claims that the seed of *himsa* rests upon fear and *atrupti*, and unless one goes beyond these feelings, the path to *ahimsa* is difficult. The disharmony and imbalance in our mind occur when we are attached to the fruits of action, the bodily senses of pleasures and pain, and are not content with the “Self” (*BG*, 2.70,71). God adored a free person from envy, fear and anxiety (*BG*, 15.5). Thus, *himsa* arises in the unevolved *manas*, manifesting the dark aspects of pain, pleasure, fear and suffering. These dark aspects get controlled through yoga with the ultimate attainment of *samadhi* and *sthitaprajnata* – the highest state of peace, harmony and calmness.

Although we see traces of *ahimsa* in the ancient puranic texts, with the Jains, the concept of *ahimsa* attained a different stature altogether. Unlike Hindus, whose discretion of using force was based upon *dharmic* decisions (moralistic judgements), Jains condemned harming all animate and inanimate objects in their complete form. We will learn its philosophy in the next section.

Jain thoughts on ahimsa

In contrast to Vedanta philosophy, where killings were permitted, if one makes sacrifices to God or kills an animal if it is a threat to any human, or uses force to protect *dharma*, Jainism completely abhors killing of any intensity, nature or form ([Fitz, 2007](#)). Also, for Hindus, *Ahimsa* is understood in moral principles, practices and virtues, but for Jains, it forms the basis of their ultimate belief system. It is an “absolute truth” practised in thoughts, words or deeds, which all Jains adhere to, be it a layman or an ascetic. *Ahimsa* is the greatest, and the first vow Jains took to attain *moksha* (path of liberation) is the ultimate goal of their lives. They believe the only hindrance to attaining *moksha* is committing a *himsa* towards any life form or *jiva* (soul) of all elements. The *Tattvartha Sutra* (TS), a widely revered text in Jain tradition, explains that not only humans, but animals, plants, microorganisms such as bacteria, and even Earth, air, fire and water are considered living organisms with a soul (TS, 2.13, 14). Thus, harming any of these life forms burdens one’s *karma*, which impedes the attainment of liberation. Lord Mahavira also brings another dimension of *ahimsa*, i.e. *anekantvad*, in which truth is relative and has multiple perspectives ([Gandhi, 2013](#)); therefore, a person must be open to hear several perspectives and not commit a crime based on what he thinks is true. Also, unlike Hinduism, where *ahimsa* is the pathway to the higher forms of *yoga*, which ultimately lead to stilling our minds, in Jainism, only an equanimous state of mind sprouts *ahimsa* ([Fitz, 2007](#); [Chapple, 1993](#)). Despite the inconsequential differences of both traditions, the overarching goal of *ahimsa* remains the same. Therefore, at the workplace, one can resonate with this philosophy by directly not attacking someone or engaging in any kind of physical or verbal violence, either channelled at them directly or indirectly.

Buddhists thoughts on ahimsa

Contrary to Jainism, where the meaning of *ahimsa* has a negative connotation such as “non-harm, “non-killing” or “non-injury, the Buddhist meaning of *ahimsa* is more positive. One attains through an act of compassion ([Fitz, 2007](#)). Unlike Hinduism and Jainism, Buddhism refutes the existence of God or Soul. According to them, all life forms are interdependent and interrelated; therefore, if someone is suffering, it is a part of “me” suffering too; hence, I feel the pain of the other being (*sic*). Therefore, if we inflict violence on others indirectly, we are causing harm to ourselves. The Buddhist tradition’s loving-kindness meditation practices cultivate an unconditional kind attitude towards oneself and others. Research reveals that

loving-kindness meditation positively enhances affective learning and decreases the degree of associating negativity with neural stimuli (Hunsinger *et al.*, 2013). It also enhances positive emotions, intergroup interactions, complex understanding of the other and greater ability to recognize the “other” as self (Zeng *et al.*, 2015; He *et al.*, 2015; Trautwein *et al.*, 2016). At the workplace, this philosophy resonates well if leaders attentively listen to employee issues and act accordingly, or a junior feels the pain behind his manager’s reprimand for the work that needed to deliver on time. Thus, in all three traditions, the tenet of *himsa-ahimsa* sprouts from one’s mind, which later gets manifested in the physical body in the form of words or actions.

Even though, the current paper, “Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism”, mentions every religious tradition preaches peace and harmony. In the past, we have seen this in practice in the lives of Martin Luther King Jr and Badshah Khan. They both were proponents of non-violence, inspired by Gandhiji. Drawing inspiration from the above religious traditions, Gandhiji experimented with *ahimsa* throughout his life, propounding it to pursue the “Truth”.

Gandhiji’s thoughts on non-violence

Although *ahimsa* attained a new social and political status with a practical idealist like Gandhiji, the term faded to capture its nuances because of its transliteration to “non-violence”, which Gandhiji commonly used. Gandhiji’s practise of non-violence resonates mostly with the Jain tradition, i.e. total abstinence from violence (see non-violence defined by Gandhi, 1942). It loosely captures the role of *dharma* (as talked about in Gita) in making moralistic judgements if the situation calls for it (Malhotra, 2021). In this context, the principles of the BG are practical and realistic as they advocate to administer *himsa* when there is a need. As a believer of non-violence, a person cannot sit idle and adopt only peaceful means of seeing his family attacked by the goons. It becomes the moral duty of the man to protect his family, and if he does not, he is committing another act of *himsa*.

Beyond non-harm, non-injury and kindness, non-violence, as understood through the life of Gandhiji, is an act of valour and a weapon for the strong. Therefore, exhibiting fearlessness and courage were prerequisites for the practice of non-violence (Prabhu and Rao, 1967, pp. 69–71). Corroborating the statement, Gandhiji in his newspaper *Harijan* mentions “fearlessness does not mean arrogance or aggressiveness. That in itself is a sign of fear. Instead, it presupposes calmness and peace of mind. For that, it is necessary to have a living faith in God” (Prabhu and Rao, 1967, p. 70). This ideology resonates in the BG, where Lord Krishna urges Arjuna to completely surrender his actions to Him to free him from grief, fear, anxiety or other earthly attachments (BG, 3.31). In Chapter 16, fearlessness also tops the lists of divine characteristics. Thus, the pursuit of fearlessness is a consequence of one’s spiritual journey as the person transcends beyond the body consciousness and journeys towards the height of freedom from delusions of all kinds. Tannenbaum *et al.* (2015) in their meta-analysis of fear reveals that high depicted fear leads to worse outcomes at the workplace.

Since fear and love cannot cohabit, how can an employee fearful of the authority figure cultivate and nurture his creative side, which requires calmness of mind? What is the relevance of the “carrot and stick approach” if an employee exhibits fear? These questions call for further investigation in the context of power, authority and non-violence. In the next section, the author shall discuss some of Gandhiji’s practical non-violent principles laid down in *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* (Prabhu and Rao, 1967) regarding facing one’s perpetrator.

- (1) *Non-violence: a conscious suffering.* Gandhiji says, “ahimsa, in its dynamic condition, means conscious suffering, it does not mean meek submission to the will of the evil-doer, but it means the pitting of one’s soul against the will of the tyrant” (p. 45) Gandhiji refers to “conscious suffering” not to denote any feeling of helplessness or misery; instead, the victim consciously, with complete awareness, chooses to “step

back from the event". In this process, he pauses, contemplates and builds inner resources to respond appropriately rather than retaliate. [Pearlin and Schooler \(1978\)](#) refer to the inner resources as coping resources and is defined as "the social and personal characteristics people may draw when dealing with stressor". On the contrary, if the victim chooses to respond immediately or retaliate, he mirrors the perpetrator's act and submits to the evil. In the state of "being", the person can observe the event without forming any judgements; thus, he becomes capable of transcending beyond the evil and saving his honour.

- (2) *Non-violence: an active force.* With regards to potency of active force, Gandhiji says "non-violence is an active force that seeks entirely to blunt the edge of the tyrant's sword, not by putting up against it a sharper-edged weapon, but by disappointing his expectation that I would be offering physical resistance. The resistance that I should offer instead would elude him" (pp. 154). In this, the victim surprises the perpetrator by not giving a reaction he expects. No matter how much the perpetrator provokes to gain negative attention, the victim never responds likewise. Therefore, initially, the perpetrator feels dazzled but soon recognizes it is not serving his purpose, so he decides to step back. Thus, the victim feels empowered to break the negative spiral for further aggression to arise. Also, Gandhiji comments here that in the entire process, the victim's intent is never to humiliate the perpetrator; if that is so, the purpose of non-violence is not fully understood.
- (3) *Non-violence: an action towards the deed and not the doer.* On Page 127, Gandhiji states, "Man and his deeds are two distinct things. Whereas a good deed should call forth approbation and a wicked deed disapprobation, the doer of the deed, whether good or wicked, always deserves respect or pity as the case may be". It clearly distinguishes the doer and the deed; he still demands respect irrespective of the doer's evil deed. Keeping that in mind, the victim shall never retaliate similarly to the perpetrator or the doer. The justification of this argument streams from the fact that Gandhiji believes we all are children of the one and same Creator; therefore, to harm a single perpetrator is to show disrespect to the ultimate being or what he calls the truth.

To sum up, Gandhiji's practical non-violent principles set forth a powerful force and rehumanization of the response strategy towards the perpetrator.

Convergence of the micro and the lifeworld in deconstructing *ahimsa* at the social context of work

Explaining an indigenous construct necessitates synthesizing the micro and the lifeworld as initially proposed by Hwang (as cited in [Bhawuk, 2010](#)). Further, drawing from the works of Bhawuk on methodological direction, microworld is deciphered through the scriptures of the *BG* and *PYS*, and the lifeworld through Gandhiji, who held the highest values of non-violence throughout his lifetime.

Adopting synthesizing principles, the author could unify the scriptural essence of *ahimsa*, and practical wisdom of Gandhiji's non-violence, making it a holistic construct. The effects of the holistic construct are manifold. This holistic construct not only cultivates one's spiritual attributes ([Sarkar and Garg, 2020, 2021](#)); altogether, it affects ethical decision-making ([Corner, 2009](#)), moral reasoning ([Mayton, 1992](#)), mindful utilization of organization resources ([Gandhi, 2013](#)), social responsibilities ([Narayan, 2000](#)) and many more. However, the scope of the current paper is an attempt to conceptualize the construct as a rehumanizing response on the face of *himsa*/violence.

In scriptures of the BG and PYS, we see that *ahimsa* is the highest order of mind evolved out of lower states that cause violence in both worlds. Therefore, with dedicated *yoga* and *sadhana* (spiritual practices), transformation can be possible in which a person attains *samadhi*, and is firmly established in peace and not affected by hostilities. In the scriptures, accepting pain is considered to be an opportunity to purify one's mind. The purification process is through three forms of *kriya yoga*, i.e. *tapas* (self-discipline, controlling the bodily senses firmly so that it refrains from the mind getting swayed), *swadhaya* (study of spiritual textbooks), *isvara pranidhara* (constant remembrance of God and surrendering the fruits of action to God) (BG, 2.1). In the BG, *ahimsa* is mentioned four times, in all the places, its depiction is of divine quality superior to demonic qualities, which led to bondage and miseries.

Gandhiji's gospel of non-violence is set in the context of his fight towards atrocities, be it his fight for anti-apartheid in South Africa or freedom in India. Through these examples, he demonstrates to conquer the evil and not the "evil doer". Drawing from both worlds, the author conceptualizes what *ahimsa* at the workplace is in the subsequent sections. Although both worlds use different terminology, the current paper adopts the word *ahimsa* for its conceptualization. It is because the psychology of non-violence bases upon the philosophy of *ahimsa*.

***Ahimsa* at the social context of work is a conscious action**

Although *ahimsa* is a *priori* assumption about human nature, as mentioned in the PYS, it needs conscious cultivation in modern times. At the workplace, *ahimsa* manifests as non-violent actions. According to the Oxford dictionary, "an action is what somebody does or the process of doing something to make something happen or deal with the situation" (Oxford, n.d.). Similarly, at the workplace, *ahimsa* is an action that people take to deal with a situation, respond to a situation or make something happen; it is not mere symbolism. An action established in the philosophy of *ahimsa* will sprout non-violent behaviours, but the same cannot motivate the prior, e.g. an action based on the principles of *ahimsa* will not only "non-harm the person but also feel the pain of the person who exhibited violence". He will use the action as a positive force; whereas, a person who is "non-violent tactically" may refrain from causing harm due to some ulterior motive, therefore, may resort back to violence if things do not fall in place according to his will (see strategic vs principled non-violence: Clements, 2015; Mayton and Mayton II, 2009). Therefore, *ahimsa* is conceptualized as a principled non-violent action that responds differently in a humanizing way to adversaries. In the next section, we shall see how *ahimsa* sprouts non-violent action. Following the lifeworld tradition through Gandhiji, the author will henceforth use the word "non-violent action" to denote the practical aspects of *ahimsa* or its verb form.

Ahimsa, samadhiprajnata and sthitaprajnata (the higher mind states) leading to principled non-violent action

In PYS, the initial spiritual vow of *ahimsa* (*Yama*) is to strengthen the advanced limbs of *yoga*, i.e. *dharana* and *dhyana*, and finally, *samadhi*. *Samadhiprajnata* calls for a certain amount of patience, intense hard work and self-discipline. Here, *prajna* means special knowledge (Bhawuk, 2011 p. 78) and *ata* is the "state of mind". A man becomes much controlled and can calm his senses even if he effortlessly practices *dhyana* (meditation). Even at this primary stage, a man can feel light and move beyond body consciousness, time and space (PYS, 3.2). A few minutes of deep breathing or mindfulness exercise could help a person at work when faced with deadlines and hostilities. *Sthitaprajnata*, i.e. roughly similar to the *samadhiprajnata* mention in BG, also calls for *sadhana*, else one's *manas* will be overpowered by the five senses, impede the spiritual journey. The context of *sthitaprajna* and *sadhana* further elaborates on the importance of controlling the *manas* or the mind (Bhawuk, 2011) or

else the lower intellect overtakes the higher ones. It is only with constant and intense sadhana that can one conquer the senses.

Further, *Yoga in Action* chapter of the *BG*, three types of *sadhana*s mention, “hearing the scriptures, reflecting upon them and meditating upon their significance” (*BG*, 3.43). However, mere hearing, reflecting and meditating is not enough until the teaching manifests in actions. Similarly, “going in silence”, *japa* (mantra repetition), prayer and fasting can also be a form of *sadhana*. Both prayer and fasting were necessary *sadhana* in Gandhiji’s life, searching for his “Truth”, i.e. God. In the context of fasting, Gandhiji enlightens us, saying that it holds an “inestimable value” in which a man starves his senses, the objects of those senses disappear from him, and the yearning to depart when he holds the Supreme ([Prabhu and Rao, 1967](#), p. 19). Therefore, some form of self-restraint is required to control the senses and redirect them to search for higher knowledge. Thus, the level of *sadhana* cultivated by the person will determine whether he can remain equanimous when facing adversaries. *Sadhana* also leads to the evolution of consciousness. Thus, in both the scriptures, *ahimsa* is a means to attain the ultimate goal of *samadhi* and *sthitaprajnata* and is considered the “highest state of mind” (*PYS*, 4.1, 6). Accordingly, the author proposes:

P1. Ahimsa (a spiritual vow and a divine quality) positively leads to the state of samadhi and sthitaprajnata through sadhana.

P1a. Ahimsa (a spiritual vow and a divine quality) positively leads to sadhana (dhyana, dharana and other spiritual practices).

P1b. The daily practice of sadhana positively leads to the higher state of samadhi and sthitaprajnata.

In the previous section, it is seen that *Samadhi* is a means to attain everything moral and spiritual, free from any desires. It is also the state where peace and calmness become the person’s very nature, and he is illuminated with the divine light of virtue (*dharma-megha*), as seen in the prophets of the past (*PYS*, 4.1.6, 28). Similarly, the *BG* mentions *sthitaprajnata* as the highest evolved state of the mind that is peaceful. In that state, a man is barely shaken or moved by adversaries. Drawing from the knowledge of the *BG*, 2.55, when a man is free from all desires, has realized “Self” and is content within, he has attained the state of *sthitaprajna*, and he is neither moved by pleasure, pain, anger or fear and is in complete control of his senses. Therefore, a man of *sthitaprajna* (a stable person), on facing any situation, is not overtaken by his *manas*, which is the seed of all earthy desires ([Bhawuk, 2011](#), p. 79). Nevertheless, both states of mind are ideal, and one needs to undergo a tremendous amount of mental exercise to attain it. *Patanjali Sutras* states that even after constant practise of *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), a man can only attain the lower state of *samadhi*, which still has some desires (*PYS*, 4.8,9).

Therefore, for a man who could moderately attain a state of *sthitaprajnata*, selfish desires are transformed into service for the greater good. For example, an employee wants to resolve conflict with his peer to get the work done only or have a good relationship or both. In the state of *sthitaprajnata*, to remain content does not mean that the person is selfish or indifferent; instead, anyone does not affect his pleasure or pain. For instance, an employee does not get disturbed by the politics around him; instead, he focuses on the present moment, i.e. the work at hand. It also implies moving from the body towards “the Self” or “Soul Consciousness”. Another essential trait of *sthitaprajna* is the “renunciation of fruit” mentioned by Lord Krishna (*BG* 3.4, 5.1.2). For example, in a conflict, on trying to reconcile, there is no guarantee that an opponent will respond in a similar frequency, but that does not discourage further action of non-violence. As a person, one can mourn and suffer (not in a negative sense), and at the same time, feel the pain of the other person for his rudeness. Therefore, *samadhi* and *sthitaprajnata* summarize it as a state of mind in which a person is

stable under any circumstances and adversaries and can transform his selfish desires for the service of the good. In the process, he remains content within himself without getting intoxicated with pleasure or pain. He can objectively face adversaries, maintain balance and harmony while coping or responding to negative workplace behaviours. Accordingly, the author proposes:

P2. Samadhi and sthitaprajnata positively lead to a principled non-violent action.

To summarize, *ahimsa* at the workplace is conceptualized as a *conscious non-violent action* to respond positively to adversaries, which otherwise would be a violent reaction; thus, in the process, an individual *empowers* thyself and *refrains from dehumanizing* the other. Thus, *ahimsa* at the workplace transforms a hostile situation into a collaborative one through *conscious action, self-empowerment and rehumanization*. Please refer to [Figure 1](#).

Below are each of the dimensions:

- (1) In this context, a target demonstrates a *conscious non-violent action* on facing hostility and steps back from the situation to anchor to “the Self”. Anchoring to the “Self”.
- (2) Enables the target to make conscious observations, accumulate inner spiritual resources, finally stabilizes and calms the mind ([Yeganeh and Kolb, 2009](#)). In this state, the person can decide the next course of action.
- (3) While anchoring to the inner self, the target builds upon his psycho-spiritual resources. Although he may suffer, these resources enable him to remain unnerved, thus *empowering* him to take complete control of the situation. This phenomenon can

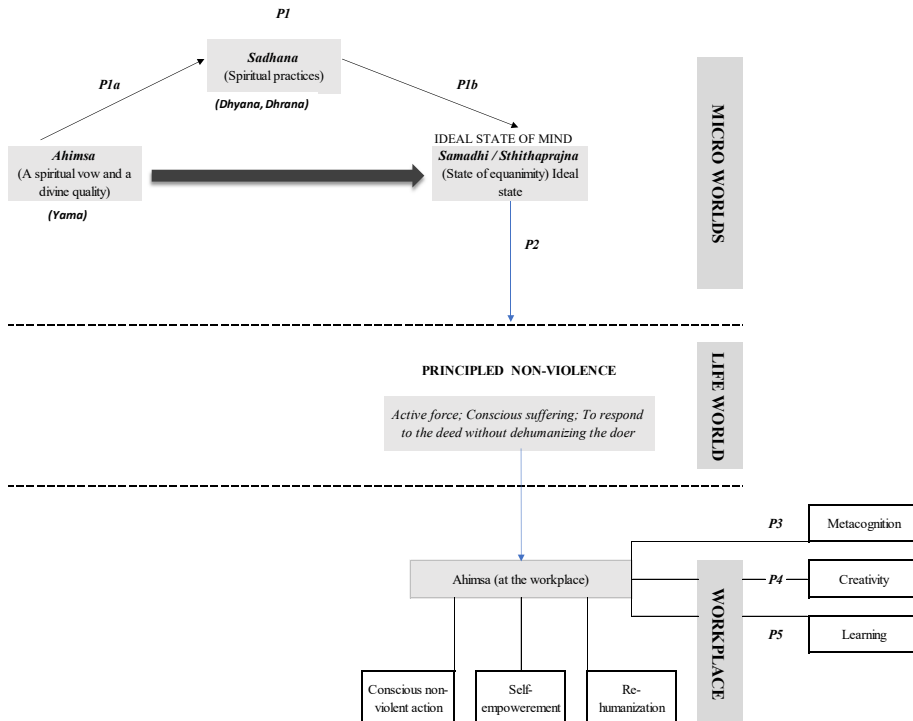


Figure 1.
Comprehensive
response model on
ahimsa at the
workplace

also be described as paying mindful attention to the “Self” to regulate attention to the life-serving resources (Kudesia, 2019).

- (4) *Rehumanization* occurs when the target holds no grudge against the perpetrator and is ready to forgive the perpetrator. Schumann and Walton (2021) found that targets who could forgive have unique humane qualities. Thus, victims sense of humaneness can be restored on account of the dehumanizing process by the perpetrator.

Consequences of ahimsa at the workplace

In the state of *sthita-prajnata*, a person remains vigilant, aware and operates from a higher level of cognition. Western scholars explain this phenomenon as “metacognition” coined by Flavell (1979). A metacognitive person is not affected by the external environment, maintains harmony and will not digress from established goals and objectives (Kudesia, 2019), just like a *sthita-prajnata* would exemplify. Ong *et al.* (2012) explain that metacognitive strategies are balanced appraisals, cognitive flexibility and equanimity. It also encompasses integral components of the human mind, such as self-regulation, self-monitoring (Kudesia and Lau, 2020), mindfulness (Kudesia, 2019), more excellent social functioning (Bo *et al.*, 2015), ability to distinguish one’s own internal states (emotions, cognitions, motivations) from the others (Semerari *et al.*, 2003). Researchers have also studied that poor metacognitive abilities may lead to violent and aggressive behaviour (Candidini *et al.*, 2020), higher levels of delusions and conceptual disorganization (Bo *et al.*, 2015), unable to decipher thoughts, actions and behaviour of the other (Ong *et al.*, 2012). High metacognition leads to enhanced job performance; thus, the author proposes:

P3. Ahimsa at the workplace positively leads to metacognition.

Like metacognition, creativity sprouts from an individual when he channels negative energy into some life-serving goals and purposes. *Ahimsa* also means that the target consciously chooses to suffer on facing the perpetration. These sufferings must not equate to miseries nor meek submission to the perpetrator. Instead, facing adversaries objectively with a calm and stable mind will help him cultivate creative means to get the work done without being too affected by the perpetrator’s act – a creative means to transform the relationship into a collaborative one. Also, such a calm state of mind will enable him to think clearly and often equip him with creative ideas, which becomes a competitive advantage for the organization. Andriopoulos (2001) has researched significant determinants of organizational creativity. Some of the factors that emerged are closely related to *ahimsa* in action, such as an open and compassionate flow of communication, nurturing a fair and supportive environment and a humble and participative leadership style. Also, at the workplace, a person with high aggression is reported to have low achievement and low creativity (Bowler *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, *ahimsa* predicts to move the foci of an individual from external to internal, channelize the negative energy to a life-serving one, and thus enhance one’s creative abilities. Therefore, the author proposes:

P4. Ahimsa at the workplace positively leads to individual creativity.

Another impact of *ahimsa* is the individual learning process. The *BG* mentions that an angry person has delusional thoughts and vision (BG, 16.21). In a state of delusion, one cannot be open to learning or accepting knowledge. Individual learning at the workplace is crucial as it is a source of competitive advantage (Noe *et al.*, 2014), the core of innovation and strategy (Sung and Choi, 2014). An individual who demonstrates *ahimsa* is assumed to be in the state of *sthita-prajnata* where he is content with himself and free from external pursuits and meaningless desires. He, hence, becomes more receptive to gain new knowledge, meet new people and have more experience in life. Therefore, the author proposes:

P5. Ahimsa at the workplace positively leads to individual learning.

In the next section, we shall see the possible implications of *ahimsa* in a positive psychological theory.

Possible implications for broaden and build theory

The theory suggests that the positive outcomes experienced from a situation broaden the range of positive emotions, which further aids in building up prosocial resources (Fredrickson, 2001). *Ahimsa* allows meaning-making and perspective-taking of the situation that is not favourable. Although the target suffers at the perpetrator's hands, the suffering may lead to empathy and care instead of revenge or aggression. Staub and Vollhardt (2003) have further examined the phenomenon of "altruism born of suffering", in which he states that victimization and suffering experiences promote healing that results in altruistic behaviour. The suffering allows them to develop extreme tolerance and, in the process, builds positive emotions such as resilience, grit and perseverance, which empowers them to handle hostilities in future. Therefore, *ahimsa* broadens individuals positive emotions and builds prosocial resources such as resilience and grit that help them function at a meta-cognitive level and exhibit creativity and openness to learning.

Establishing *ahimsa* as a positive construct

Ahimsa has much to contribute to positive psychology, which nurtures happiness, well-being, flourishing. To attain a flourishing state, one needs to undergo self-discipline, suffering in self-control and *sadhana*. Gandhiji says that the "call" will not come to him who has not undergone "a long previous preparation" (Saxena, 1976). He believes continuous suffering and the cultivation of endless patience ultimately lead us to the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel (Prabhu and Rao, 1967, p. 37). *Ahimsa* entails goodness for oneself and all, just as self-suffering can be redemptive, e.g. Christ, who had sacrificed his life for others. Some of the 24 character strengths and virtues scientists discovered in positive psychology (Niemiec, 2013), such as forgiveness, courage, love for humanity, perseverance, resonate with Gandhiji's virtues demonstrated in many of his political and social struggles. Bhawuk (2011) portrays *ahimsa* as a positive psychological element necessary for a man to cultivate knowledge. Thus, the philosophy of *ahimsa* is committed to a good life through suffering and perseverance and not merely overemphasizing pollyanna (Diener, 2003; Lazarus, 2003; Freidlin et al., 2017).

Future research directions

Ahimsa at the workplace highlights ample opportunities for research in this domain. First, one may empirically test the model established in the paper between *ahimsa*, *sadhana*, *samadhi* and *sthitaprajna* (Figure 1). Second, *ahimsa*, an action observed with external stakeholders, is not necessarily always the internal ones. Therefore, studying how internal and external stakeholders work in tandem towards organizational efficiency through *ahimsa in action* can open up new collaboration approaches. Third, Gandhiji believed the means are as necessary as ends; in this context, we have seen how *sadhana* can help one's spiritual progress and help change how people would respond to a situation. Therefore, the aspect of *sadhana* needs further probing in conflict management and workplace spirituality literature. Fourth, empirical studies to understand if *ahimsa* influences the 24 character virtues in positive psychology literature. Fifth, *sadhana* is proposed as a mediating variable; future studies may consider other factors that strengthen the relationship between *ahimsa* and *sthitaprajnata*, such as *sila* or moral conduct, similarly moderating variables like personality characteristics demography may also be explored. Lastly, non-violent action based on the

principles of *ahimsa* may positively affect the target's well-being. Future researchers may test such implications.

Conclusion

Drawing from the knowledge of ancient texts, traditions and life works of great leaders, the current paper has proposed *ahimsa* as a humanistic response to violence. Besides consciously choosing a response, one empowers the self and heals relationships. It also established a model on the possible consequences, thereby contributing to indigenous psychology. It becomes essential to state that workplace violence and misconduct are inevitable, and *ahimsa* is not a panacea for its complete eradication. Instead, it is an alternate response tool that has peaceful means and ends.

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