

# Investigating nonviolent action by experimental testing

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## Abstract

Strategic nonviolent action has developed enormously over the past century: there is a burgeoning body of research, widespread use in social movements, and regular training of activists. Even so, understanding of nonviolent action has been constrained by the methods used to investigate it, for example case studies and practical experience. The experimental method, as widely used in scientific research, has yet to be applied to the study of nonviolent action in systematic ways. In this article, two possible experiments with nonviolent action are presented to highlight some of the possibilities. Experiments with nonviolent action have the usual rationale of acquiring knowledge and two additional rationales: participant practical understanding and participant willingness to learn from experimentation. There are a number of obstacles to nonviolence experimentation, including lack of funding, ethical challenges, and opposition from various parties. Yet until experimental testing becomes routine, the full potential of nonviolent action will not be realized.

## Introduction

Nonviolent action can be a remarkably effective means of challenging social injustice, for example in opposing the exploitation of workers, racial discrimination, and repressive regimes. This is an important topic for the emerging field of resistance studies, and much that has been learned from the study of nonviolent action is also likely to be of interest for those studying other forms of resistance. Yet the potential power of nonviolent action is only gradually being recognized outside activist circles. Researchers have documented case studies of nonviolent struggles (Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Roberts and Garton Ash 2009; Stephan

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