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Nonviolent Community Safety – building peace locally

For about eight years now, *Pt'chang*, a small activist organisation based in Melbourne in Australia has been experimenting and learning about how we can apply nonviolent principles and approaches to help create safety at the local community level.

Pt'chang is a Nonviolent Community Safety and Peacekeeping Group that assists communities and grassroots organisations create safety. *Pt'chang* provides training workshops, and trained Legal Observer Teams and Safety Teams upon invitation. Over the past eight years *Pt'chang* has initiated and organised a range of community safety and violence prevention projects, including fielding over thirty Safety Teams at large community events, actions, dance parties and festivals, trained over 600 people in nonviolence, protective behaviours, conflict resolution and peacekeeping skills.

Defining safety for ourselves

Many issues of violence and conflict at the community level in Australia are already widely described in terms of a 'community safety' issue and *Pt'chang* has chosen to use 'safety' as a term rather than 'peace' to describe it's work. Interpersonal violence such as family violence, sexual assault, hate or racially-motivated attacks, street crime and assaults, police violence and abuse, violence in the school yard, and 'youth crime' are generally not perceived as 'peace' issues. Safety seems to be a concept that relates to more people than peace when it comes to their own community.

But 'Community safety' is often defined for us by the media, police, security companies and by politically fuelled 'crime scares'. Companies sell security systems by emphasising house burglaries and politicians so commonly use particular serious incidents of violence to their own advantage. All this serves to generate fear and to severely distort people's own sense of safety and security. The ability of people and communities to 'define' safety for themselves is an important first step in that community's ability to create genuine safety. "*Where and when do I feel unsafe?*". "*What do I mean when I say Safety?*".

Pt'chang, has been asking people these questions for over eight years now. What we have consistently found is security doors, bars on our windows, surveillance cameras or even more police on the streets do not make most of us feel safe. What commonly *does* help us feel safe is knowing our friends are around, (familiar faces and places, smiles), having choices and feeling like we are in control over what's going on. It's a simple thing really and it helps us to recognise that 'violence' is actions or patterns that destroys our relationships with others and removes our choice and control. In other words, a good definition of safety according to the Protective Behaviours model is: 'Safety = having choice + control' (Flandreau-West, 1986).

So many so-called 'community safety and crime prevention' initiatives actually isolate people and remove control. Police blitzes, safe-city cameras and much of the environmental ('designing out crime') approaches (such as designing public seats that can't be slept on) do nothing to create real or genuine community safety. A high-tech security-surveillance system, for instance, might help residents of an inner-city apartment block feel safer, but remove even more 'choice and control' from the homeless people using a nearby alley for shelter. It is in this tension where so many mainstream community safety initiatives form nothing more than another mechanism for social control. Nonviolent community safety initiatives look at safety for the

whole community. Creating genuine and lasting safety is about restoring everyone's sense of choice and control. Building genuine and lasting peace is about creating just and equitable social structures that meet people's basic needs for safety.

Nonviolent Community Safety and Peacebuilding

Many skills and concepts in peacebuilding have been developed, tried and tested in the context of international armed conflict or war, either in post-conflict scenarios or in zones of actual armed conflict or severe political violence. Many of these same strategies can be and are being usefully applied within local, smaller scale conflicts present in Australian communities, cities and urban centres.

Nonviolent Community Safety is one such approach, essentially, bringing peacebuilding approaches together with community development and social activism to form empowering, nonviolent community building approaches to creating safety in local communities.

Nonviolent Community Safety describes approaches to safety that are community initiated and controlled. It is much more of an 'opening-up' and community building process than the common 'lock-up' and isolating 'power-over' responses to safety that tend to dominate in our society.

The annual 'Reclaim The Night' marches in cities throughout the world, which highlight and assert women's rights to walk free from the threat of violence is a classic example of a community-initiated, empowering and activist orientated approach to violence. Aboriginal Night Patrols, which operate in over fifty remote communities around Australia and the many Lesbian and Gay anti-violence street patrols in the United States and in Australia, are just some examples of nonviolent community safety initiatives which can assertively but nonviolently intervene in actual violence, but also serve to empower and open-up space in which people can live in safety.

Components of a local community peacebuilding project

The outline below is compiled simply to show a range of activities that might fit under each of the peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding categories on a community level. It is in no way intended to be descriptive.

Peacebuilding

Building relationships:

- Shared sporting, cultural or social activities
- Creating and maintaining channels for communication across difference
- Discovering and defining needs of the different parties
- Sharing information appropriately in ways that builds trust and humanises parties
- Living with or building relationship with marginalised or ostracised groups
- Getting to know people and building personal relationships
- Mentoring or peer-to-peer support programs
- Cross-community visiting programs
- Prisoner visiting programs
- Independent, community-run media: papers; radios; TV; internet

Peace education:

- Nonviolence training
- Prominent people speaking out for nonviolence

- Community education activities
- Distribution of nonviolence resources and tools
- Mentoring or peer-to-peer support programs
- Peace journalism and reporting

Anticipating safety issues and potential conflicts:

- Research into the conflict
- Conflict mapping and conflict analysis,
- Coordinating and planning peacekeeping or Safety Team responses

Setting a tone for a safe and peaceful space:

- Cleaning up or changing physical appearance of environment
- Community gardens or playgrounds
- Socialising a culture of safety and peace
- Communication via 'safe place' signs, rainbow stickers etc.,
- Creative elements, community art, music, performance, humour
- Cultural events and activities

Challenging and changing violent social structures:

- Awareness and consciousness raising activities
- Nonviolence training program
- Building of Nonviolent Action Groups and support structures
- Nonviolent direct action:
 - 1) *Acts of Protest and Persuasion*; vigils, marches, rallies, public meetings, etc.
 - 2) *Non-cooperation*; strikes, boycotts, rent withholding, refusal to obey, etc.
 - 3) *Nonviolent Interventions*; occupations, sit-ins, blockades, pickets, etc
- Building Counter-structures; constructing institutions that meet people's needs. Incl. Credit co-ops, food banks or co-ops, strike funds, independent media, papers, radios, TV, internet, alternative cultural events, peace education centres, community childcare co-ops

Psycho/social healing and trauma recovery:

- Group and individual debriefing
- Cultural activities assisting community heal from past violence
- Community theatre and re-enactments
- Social actions by victims/survivors of violence
- Community designed memorials and commemorations
- Work with children healing from trauma
- Counselling and ongoing support

Peacemaking

Conflict Transformation:

- Facilitated dialogue
- Ongoing negotiation pathways
- Joint workshops or conflict transformation training
- Conflict mapping
- Community Mediation programs

Restorative Justice:

- Community conferencing
- Family Conferencing
- Peace Circles
- Community Justice Panels

Peacekeeping

Containment or disassociation:

- Use of community Peacekeeping and Safety Teams
- Whistle Projects – providing whistles to people targeted by violence
- Contain and limit the immediate impacts of violence
- Isolate or separate the parties – barriers, human walls
- Creation of ‘peace zones’ – ‘Gun-free zones’
- ‘Time-out’ periods – community truce
- ‘Living with’ or building relationship with marginalised or ostracised groups in order to deter violence against them
- Use of Legal Observer Teams or ‘Police Watch’ networks to deter police violence

Crisis Intervention:

- Use of community Peacekeeping and Safety Teams
- Community monitoring, Peace Monitors or Observer teams
- Nonviolent interventions by community members
- Diversion activities, clowning, music, sports activities

Nonviolent Intervention and peacekeeping

Methods that seek to intervene in, interrupt or de-escalate actual physical violence also need to be considered and developed further when considering nonviolent community safety and peacebuilding. For this reason, *Pt'chang* has been developing and experimenting with safe, effective and nonviolent ways of intervening in community level violence as a core aspect of its work. Peacekeeping strategies that have been used since the early US Civil Rights movement can form important and powerful ways of creating safety, intervening in actual violence and controlling our own space. But there has also been lot's of development of nonviolent intervention skills in recent years.

The basic idea of nonviolent interventions into interpersonal violence is that a person, staying within their own boundaries for safety, can act to make a conflict visible and prevent or halt the violence without using violence or escalating the overall level of violence. In *Pt'chang* we train in and use, a huge spectrum of nonviolent interventions to break up violence, from simply being present and *noticing* the violence, to creative distractions, neutral interruptions, using whistles, humour, human chains and physical interventions.

People already have many personal safety strategies and techniques. Teachers, parents, social workers often practise techniques that minimise, reduce, or interrupt violence, resolve conflict and resist harassment everyday. To some extent we all do within our lives and relationships. Nonviolent intervention skills often draw from and are based on this everyday experience. (Biernbaum,1995).

Nonviolent interventions are about using power, but in a way that seeks to work with, rather than against, other people. Interventions are based on co-operative and open ‘power-with’ principles rather than the forceful, coercing, discriminating ‘power-over’ that is commonly seen in the actions of police and private security guards (Starhawk, 1987). This use of power-with is important and something that allows us to create safety in ways that do not exclude, alienate or repress the needs of others. Perhaps the greatest challenge for those who utilise nonviolent peacekeeping approaches is overcoming very deep socialised attitudes about conflict and it's relationship to violence and coercion.

Indeed, Peacekeeping is about meeting people's needs, not only people's very basic need to feel safe but many other needs that may lead to conflict, aggression or violence if they are not

met. Recognising and helping to meet people's needs for self-esteem, identity, control over their lives (and sometimes actual material needs) forms the basis for Nonviolent Peacekeeping strategies for creating safety (Burton, 1987).

In short, Peacekeeping is not about curtailing, suppressing, or coercing people or their behaviour (which tends to only contain violence - if not actually escalate it!). Peacekeeping is about creating space, often on a small scale, in which people can express themselves to the fullest. A very common example of this is the peacekeeping skill of active listening. Active listening aims to allow an aggressive, angry or upset person to calm down by meeting their immediate need to simply be heard. Active listening also allows peacekeepers to identify other needs that they can then, hopefully, help to meet (Manthei, 1981).

Safety Teams

Peacekeeping skills can best be used by trained and co-ordinated groups of people in situations that are particularly unsafe or when conflict, violence or repression is anticipated. According to Yeshua Moser Puangsuwan from Nonviolence International, organised, community responses to direct violence or unsafe situations are entirely possible;

“Teams based in nonviolent conflict management, even working with the handicap of minimal training, can effectively confront and diffuse violence in a society where people, are conditioned to expect violence and coercion instead...The peace community now has enough successful experience in nonviolent intervention to develop domestic peace brigades on a larger scale. Simply an observant presence is enough to deter many forms of common crime. An organised citizen peace brigades could be used in urban situations to decrease theft and fear of attack, without threat of force necessary” (1990).

Peace brigades have been defined as trained and well-organised groups whose function is to intervene in conflict using a wide range of nonviolent peacekeeping skills and strategies (Weber, 2000). Gandhi's vision of a nonviolent alternative to military force has manifested internationally as a huge range of cross-border, citizen-initiated nonviolent peace teams, including Peace Brigades International (PBI). In order to translate some of these ideas to local neighbourhood conflict or community level violence in Australia, *Pt'chang* has used the term 'Safety Teams'. The Safety Teams co-ordinated by *Pt'chang* at community events and festivals incorporate crisis-intervention, sexual assault, alcohol and other drug harm reduction skills and strategies as an addition to nonviolent intervention and peacekeeping skills.

Safety Teams can form viable and effective, community-initiated alternatives to police and private security presence. Safety Teams can include community elders, respected leaders or peers, people from within the community with particular skills, knowledge or experience. They can utilise existing youth work, social work, alcohol and other drug work experience from community members. Safety Teams can be the most effective when they are diverse, accountable and are able to draw upon the combined wisdom and authority of the community itself.

To be most effective, the training and use of Safety Teams or other peacekeeping strategies to intervene in or prevent actual violence, should be applied within a wider strategy of nonviolent community safety, peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Local activist groups such as *Pt'chang*, working for peace at a local level are a small but important part of the wider movement toward safe, peaceful and sustainable communities and toward social systems and structures that meet human needs.

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Pt'chang has a 70-page *Nonviolent Community Safety and Peacebuilding Handbook* available for \$10 plus postage.

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