



Empathy in Theory and Practice: The Transformative Potential of Nonviolent Communication

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Abstract

This review is a critical examination of the tenets and suggestions of the book, Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg. The book offers a conceptualisation of both empathy and communication, not as mere skills, but as practices to internalise and embody in order to better improve relationships at the intrapersonal, interpersonal and even intergroup levels. Through actionable insights, examples, and exercises, the book lays out the common barriers to effective communication and the components of nonviolent communication. While its accessibility and comprehensibility in terms of explanations are its strength, it is limited by the lack of empirical evidence and questionable cross-cultural applicability due to the absence of engagement with power and resistance in different contexts. Through an analysis of contemporary research evidence testing the model as well as insights from humanistic and positive psychology, this review offers a comprehensive inquiry into the book and its relevance today for improving communication and resolving conflicts.

Keywords: Empathy · Listening · Relational Needs · Internal Dialogue

Effective communication is fundamental to human connection, yet it remains one of the most challenging aspects of interpersonal and societal interactions. Misunderstandings, conflicts, and emotional barriers often hinder meaningful dialogue, leading to strained relationships and unresolved issues. We currently live in the age of communication. Different levels of communication that result in dialogue in different walks of social life are the basis of a democratic polity.

In today's world, the major sources of communication, including means of mass media, right from the traditional to the new and emerging outlets, are being shaped not only by the lifestyle of the general public but also by the ways of interpersonal communication. Contents of mass media have been creating a vast range of impact over public life and communication patterns. According to Aryal (2020), the daily routine of a person involves myriad communication experiences which tend to fall into four relatively discrete categories, or levels of communication: intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group communication and mass communication. Evidently, each level is interlinked.

In this context, Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* emerges as a transformative guide, offering a structured approach to fostering empathy, accountability, and connection.

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By focusing on four key components, observation, feelings, needs, and requests, Rosenberg presents a model that simplifies complex communication dynamics while addressing the emotional and relational needs of individuals.

This review examines the strengths and limitations of Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC) framework, exploring its practical applicability, philosophical depth, and transformative potential. While the book's emphasis on empathy and individual responsibility provides valuable tools for personal growth and conflict resolution, it also raises critical questions about cross-cultural relevance, empirical support, and the nuanced role of individual accountability. By engaging with the strengths, limitations and current empirical evidence for Rosenberg's framework, this analysis seeks to offer a comprehensive evaluation of NVC as both a theoretical framework and a practical tool for enhancing communication across diverse contexts and shed light on its enduring relevance.

The Origin and Basis of Nonviolent Communication

Theorisation and modelling of language and communication that can facilitate peaceful relationships and by extension, a peaceful and nonviolent world have been a focal point in social and positive psychology, as well as in other fields like communication, sociology, journalism, etc. Very simply put, the language of peace is "any form of communication verbal or nonverbal — that describes, reflects, expresses, or actively expands peace" (Oxford, 2013). Such a language can not only foster interpersonal peace but expand intergroup, interstate and intercultural peace through a series of mutually reinforcing effects. This sentiment has been echoed in Eastern philosophy for centuries. For instance, Lao-Tzu's Book of

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Changes states that "No peace in the world without peace in the nation/No peace in the nation without peace in the town/ No peace in the town without peace in the home/ No peace in the home without peace in the heart." This acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of violence and thereby the mitigation of violence is of pivotal importance when addressing language changes, their scope and imagined effects.

Gregor (1996) introduced the term sociative peace, which refers to the values, emotions, attitudes, and institutions that link people in cooperative relationships through mutual interest and concern. These include empathy, warmth, cooperation, and legitimacy which is the mutually held perception that power in society is exercised morally or rightly. A commonly held and legitimate language of peace is imperative for international peace as we can observe today. The inception of institutions like the UN attempted to provide a framework for this language through treaties and agreements but an internalisation of this language remains a challenge precisely because various nation states and their constituent societies are unable to do it on smaller levels. Culturally and philosophically, Buddhist philosophy has been the source of a myriad of imaginations of peaceful communication and living and its contribution to the field as Buddhism made its way to the Western world in the 1960s, is well acknowledged (Little, 2008). The most famous verbalisation of a culturally rooted vet universally appealing language of peace was done by Mahatma Gandhi at a critical juncture in history. His philosophy of ahimsa or total nonviolence was applicable on intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup and global levels, and he was able to demonstrate that by making an example out of his life that was and is still emulated by peace activists.

When it comes to interpersonal communication, the Humanistic tradition and specifically, Carl Rogers, provided components and processes that can facilitate a type of communication that is both empathetic and effective. Rogers' emphasis on unconditional positive regard, empathy and individual autonomy have proved to be cornerstones in developing almost any intervention or theory addressing interpersonal violence and conflict (Bode, 1996).

In its present form, nonviolent communication serves as an innovative guide for improving human relationships through empathic communication. Putting an emphasis on empathy and understanding, this work forms a strong practical basis for resolving conflicts, articulating needs, and strengthening relationships. The basic premise of nonviolent communication states that all human action is an attempt to fulfill universal needs.

Observation without Evaluation

The practice of observation without forming any judgments has its roots in meditative and mindfulness practices like Vipassana of Eastern traditions, and has found space in modern psychotherapy literature as well. Piecq and Lambert (2020) bring light to the inherent tension that marks the shift from observation to evaluation of phenomena, and our tendency to think of behaviour using pairs of opposing adjectives like good/bad. The concept of observation without evaluation is a foundation of nonviolent communication (NVC). On the surface this can be helpful, but oftentimes the very purpose of observation is to make evaluation. Therefore, the question arises whether a change in language without addressing the underlying objective would create a sustaining change in communication. He argues that evaluations, whether verbal or nonverbal, are often perceived as criticism and can lead to defensiveness and conflict. For instance, instead of saying, "She won't get her work in," which presumes an evaluative judgment, one might say, "She said, 'I won't get my work in.'" This approach has many merits as it aims to foster honesty and clarity, allowing others to receive information without perceiving it as criticism.

Rosenberg acknowledges that our habitual use of evaluative language makes it challenging to implement. Similarly, while he highlights that cultural and linguistic variations can influence how observations are expressed and received, this topic is not deeply explored in the book. Still, the importance of observation for the establishment of rapport and confidence is established through research which speaks to the need of individuals to be observed without judgement, or feel *seen* (Schopper, 2016).

Feelings and Needs

Research on both feelings and needs has been at the centre of almost all traditions in psychology, from psychoanalytic focus on expression of repressed and suppressed emotions and needs, Skinner's paper on "Outlining a Science of Feeling" (1990), to a more expansive and empowering perspective in existential and humanistic schools which allowed and encouraged clients to get in touch with their feelings to understand their needs and consequently work towards them. While discussing feelings, the book draws from the Rogerian tradition and emphasizes the importance of expressing emotions authentically while distinguishing them from thoughts or judgments.

Once again, Rosenberg critiques how language often conflates feelings with evaluations, such as saying, "I feel ignored," which implies judgement, rather than expressing a genuine emotion like, "I feel lonely." By this point, he has addressed "making judgements" as essentially being violent and needing to be corrected and/or avoided. However, there may be ways to differentiate judgements and evaluations from attacking another person. This could be another way of taking personal accountability for our feelings and being more honest rather than siloing our opinions from what we deem as facts about our feelings and those of others. He provides a glossary of feeling words to help readers articulate their emotions, encouraging the development of a richer emotional vocabulary. This, he argues, is essential for connecting with others and addressing unmet needs. As in this case, the strength of the book lies in providing small actionable points that can be incorporated by almost everyone. Even though he does not use empirical research to back up the exercises he suggests, the use of feeling words is corroborated by literature. For instance, in their research, Meier et al. (2024) demonstrated how the use of positive and negative feelings words respectively has a corroborating impact on cardiovascular health.

It is posited that our feelings result from the way we choose to receive others' inputs whether they are words or actions, along with our needs and expectations in that particular moment. The narrative of 'taking one's power back' which is so prominently present in positive psychology features here as well albeit in a more nuanced manner with Rosenberg underlining the aspect of needs and expectations and the importance of taking accountability for them. Therefore, it is not an individualised positive psychology that underlies his framework, but a relational one.

Here, the previously unaddressed role of societal systems gets addressed when talking of the "sacrifice and denial" that the image of the loving woman gets associated with. However, Rosenberg's discussion of professional and gendered barriers to emotional expression is somewhat cursory. For example, he mentions that lawyers, engineers, and military personnel may struggle with expressing emotions due to professional norms but does not delve into how these norms develop or vary across contexts.

Requests versus Demands

In tandem with positive psychology interventions and training (Friedman, 2008), NVC method for this asserts that requests should be specific, actionable, and framed in positive terms to foster mutual understanding. As previously mentioned, specificity and actionability of exercises or suggestions offered by Rosenberg in each chapter are a fundamental aspect of the book. Thus, it often reads akin to a self-help book but without the high-handed preachiness that characterises them. Further, he implicitly bridges the epistemological divide between positive and humanistic psychologies by combining the rigorous, action based and empirical methodology of the former with the person-centered and empowering approach of the latter.

Importantly, he emphasises the need to accept noncompliance without resentment, as treating requests as demands undermines the principles of NVC. This could be crucial for rejection-sensitive people but with his framing, he demonstrates how accepting rejection or non-compliance can improve communication. The link between rejectionsensitivity, communication and relational satisfaction is backed by research, as in the case of Worley & Samp (2018) who demonstrated that "communicating complaints openly to one's partner, in concert with positive politeness (i.e., affirming the partner while voicing complaints), may help serve as a buffer against relational dissatisfaction associated with RS."

Perhaps drawing from the neopsychoanalytic thinkers of his time, there is a mention of the unconscious nature of many requests, such as the need for acknowledgment or understanding, which he argues are central to all communication. He also outlines strategies for ensuring that our words have been received as intended. Once again, we need to shift our focus to our own actions and needs rather than those of others. From the book, one can extrapolate that the goal of NVC is not to use language in a way that we "get what we want", rather it is to increase honesty so that our requests are being consciously communication, fully comprehended and thereby substantively responded to, no matter the actual outcome.

However, his discussion does not fully account for how systemic inequalities, such as power imbalances in relationships or workplaces, might constrain an individual's ability to make or refuse requests. This omission limits the framework's applicability in addressing broader social dynamics. In fact, the very framework of NVC training and dissemination have to be very carefully carried out, especially when done with marginalised groups, similar to the level of ethics and micro-ethics required in participatory research (Spiel et al., 2018).

Empathy and Receiving Empathically

Empathy, as described by Rosenberg, involves offering one's presence and understanding without judgement, advice, or reassurance. He draws from Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy (2012) to argue that empathy enables individuals to feel heard and validated. Practical techniques such as paraphrasing are suggested to ensure accurate understanding and to communicate attentiveness. For example, asking, "Are you feeling frustrated because you need more clarity?" allows the speaker to confirm or clarify their feelings and needs. He gives a passionate case for the transformative potential of empathy through an example of a severely distressed psychiatric patient who wrote him a letter in the end saying, *''I've learned in the past vear about how wonderful it can be* to share myself with other people. I think it was mostly just one part that I learned, about the thrill of my talking to other people and have them actually listen, even really understand at times."

Thus listening and understanding could allow for someone in severe distress to come out of it. The role of empathy is all too familiar to those with a clinical psychological background but the understanding and potential of empathy have been distorted magnanimously in popular discourse. Thus, a chapter like this brings back attention to the dimensions of empathy that matter. Furthermore, clinical techniques are adapted to be better comprehensible to people without that background and the possible mixed reactions they may elicit are also addressed and affirmed by Rosenberg. This way, people attempting to try these exercises may be fortified against a myriad of reactions they can receive from the people in their lives.

He addresses the experience of a Chinese man who attended an NVC workshop in order to hear the feelings and needs behind his father's critical remarks. In that example, he states that understanding without reflecting back could be effective if moulded to the social norms one's relationship(s) is operating in. Therefore, none of the techniques mentioned in the book are iron-clad, and can and should be adapted to one's socio-cultural context. However, it is imperative to note that certain norms within cultures are inherently counterproductive to meaningful communication and challenging them rather than adapting to them may be better in the long term. For instance, the repression of expression of dissatisfaction or one's needs is a norm almost unilaterally imposed on women in many South Asian countries. Here, patriarchy is mediating the process of communication and by cloaking it under the diffuse garb of "cultural norms" would be harmful to the very people the model intends to serve. But, Rosenberg with a largely Western positionality and perspective is not equipped to speak to the same and perhaps avoids it for that reason. Cross-Cultural research on NVC may be able to shed more light on the same.

Self-Compassion and Internal Dialogue

Self-compassion is central to NVC, with Rosenberg advocating for a shift from self-judgement to selfunderstanding. Here, evaluation is not necessarily negative in and of itself but we need to be conscious of using it in "ways that engender growth rather than self-hatred." This is where the tangibility of the statements and exercises in the book gets clouded with self-help talk that encourages us to simply change perspective via emphasising on choice. Additionally, there is an assumption about the ability to differentiate positive and negative self-evaluations in terms of their outcomes as they cannot be predetermined or pre-assessed.

The book encourages readers to practice mourning and selfforgiveness in opposition to negative self-evaluation. Mourning refers to "connecting with the feelings and unmet needs stimulated by past actions which we now regret" and self-forgiveness refers to "connecting with the need we were trying to meet when we took the action which we now regret" (Rosenberg, 2003). These two together "free us in the direction of learning and growing." These can be important for those with a stream of negative self-talk dominating their consciousness as it would allow them to consciously face and resolve the factors contributing to that self-talk and ultimately providing closure for regrets one is experiencing.

In a concept analysis of self-compassion, Reyes (2011) attempted to identify the antecedents, attributes and consequences of self-compassion. The results indicated that suffering was the major antecedent, the attributes were mindfulness, commonality and wisdom, and the consequences were increased self-care capacity, compassion for others and increased relatedness and sense of self. Thus, one can put the NVC idea of self compassion in conjunction with the broader understanding of self compassion in psychological research. The concepts of mourning and forgiving can be understood as processes facilitating the suffering to actually become an antecedent for self-care and compassion for others.

Anger and Protective Use of Force

Here, Rosenberg more openly addresses the reservations underprivileged and marginalised communities may have with "non-violence" of any kind. The first step in expressing anger fully is to take full responsibility for our anger. The other may be a stimulus but they are not the cause of our anger. Thus, his model both agrees with and differs from the general understanding of anger, especially trait anger in that it does not treat it as a personality factor that needs to be "moderated" but rather a characteristic of people and groups in response to their context. He reframes anger as an indicator of unmet needs rather than a justification for blame. In a similar vein, Rosenberg posits that the protective use of force is not antithetical to non-violent communication, especially in situations with an immediate danger to the safety of self or others. It is similar to the justification given for self-defensive violence, force is permissible for protection but not punitive use intended to hurt the other.

This nuanced perspective acknowledges that force may sometimes be necessary to ensure safety without violating the principles of nonviolence. However, Rosenberg's discussion of anger and force is primarily focused on interpersonal dynamics and does not fully engage with the systemic violence and structural inequalities that marginalized communities face, which could add depth to his analysis.

Broader Applications of NVC

Rosenberg broadens the scope of NVC to include its applications in therapy, professional relationships, and societal peace-building. He critiques conventional compliments for being manipulative or judgmental and advocates for authentic appreciation that explicitly connects actions to fulfilled needs and resulting feelings. This chapter, however, is non-specific and tries to cover disparate dimensions and applications of NVC. The book could have benefited from a more detailed and systematic account of the various areas other than interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships where NVC can play an important role, especially considering the vast reservoir of anecdotes and testimonies from workshops Rosenberg had accumulated over the decades he trained people in the use of NVC and used it himself to mediate even extreme war-like situations. Lastly, his discussion of the applications to systemic issues remains underdeveloped. A more robust exploration of how NVC can address societal inequalities and structural violence would enhance its relevance and impact.

Strengths and Limitations of the Book

Strengths

Clear and Practical Framework

One of the most appreciable strengths of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is its clear and actionable framework. The complexities of human interaction have been reduced by Rosenberg to four components: observation, feelings, needs, and request. This model is that easy to understand, but it fits extremely well not only in personal relationships or professional settings but also in major conflict mediation.

Step by step, it gives an empowered reader the tools with which to use NVC right away. For instance, distinguishing observation from evaluation helps one to not trigger defensiveness in the other. The same applies to requests instead of demands, protecting and informing action to share understanding and cooperation. In this sense, the framework is clear, and therefore, it is theoretical and, at the same time, immensely practical.

Emphasis on Empathy and Connection

At its very heart, Nonviolent Communication relies on empathy as the corner-stone of meaningful relations. Most profound are Rosenberg's insights into how empathy transforms interaction, arguing that to identify and act on the feelings and needs within self and others we can bridge this divide with deeper bonds. Empathy in a polarized world is salient as misunderstandings and conflicts arise from lack of true communication. Rosenberg bolts open how empathy could help solve his key assignment: the people's conflict.

Accessibility and Relatability

Another strong suit regarding the book is Rosenberg's writing style. He keeps away from bends and turns of complex academic jargon, opting for simple everyday language in communicating concepts to wider audiences. The inclusion of real-life anecdotes and examples thus adds to the relatability of this material. For example, how Rosenberg personally mediates in difficult situations such as between warring groups or families strained by emotions. Such interesting anecdotes can easily explain NVC in practical application and give room for faith in its effectiveness.

Focus on Individual Responsibility

The greatest strength of the book is the emphasis on individual responsibility. In fact, it is encouraging readers to take responsibility for the feelings and say that feelings come from the needs that for some reason remain unfulfilled, not because of anything or anyone outside the interior individual. This change of perspective is one that finds important empowerment because control is actually placed where it belongs-in the person. This is in opposition to the determinism that characterised many psychological traditions prior to this.

Relevance in Different Contexts

The application of relating Nonviolent Communication principles in personal relationships, interactions within an organizational setup, and even society is probably one of the best things the book offers. Enormously adaptable, the framework proves to be working everywhere. From encouraging couples to improve their communication to mediation of seething controversies in war-torn regions, the examples range well within the all-embracing versatility of the approach. Defined in relation to individuals, the book is also concerned with wider systemic issues as Rosenberg discusses how worldly norms (such as that of women as socialized to be caregivers) penetrate communication style. By pointing out these larger dynamics, empathy is encouraged to provoke critical thought concerning the role culture and systems play in shaping relationships.

Practical Exercises and Tools

One of the other strengths of the book emanates from the inclusion of practical exercises and tools which really help a reader to internalize and practice the principles of NVC. Indeed, these exercises afford opportunities for self-reflection and for taking the theoretical self-regulation communication into actual experience under real-life conditions. For example, one might find prompts for identifying feelings and needs, formulating requests, and handling difficult conversations. This makes the book another source not only of inspiration but hands-on for personal growth as well as relationships.

Transformative Ability

Essentially, the greatness of Nonviolent Communication lies in its great potential for transformation. It's capable of changing the very nature of people bonding with themselves and others because it teaches its readers a different way of approaching communication — that is, with empathy, honesty, and accountability. The principles make it obligatory to turn from adversarial to collaborative and compassionate exchanges. This, in turn, corresponds with building healthier relationships and communities.

Limitations

An Oversimplification of Complex Emotional Dynamics

One of the most prominent criticisms against Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is that it is reductionist: it attempts to reduce human emotive and relational complexities into seemingly simple terms. A key tenet in Rosenberg's framework is the idea that all feelings are based on unmet needs. Yet it is a considerable distortion of the emotional experience. Some emotions stem from cultural, social, and biological factors that are unrelated to unfulfilled needs, such as grief, guilt, or shame.

The simplicity of the model is thus an effective weapon in making it accessible while it undermines the better part of the multifaceted complexity of human psychology. Their multifactorial origin is not fully addressed by the book; emotions happen to be borne out of a mix of past experience, cultural conditioning, and situational context. This reductionist trend would leave readers inadequately equipped to handle instances that do not fit very well into the NVC definition.

Absence of Empirical Evidence

Rosenberg's anecdotes and personal experiences provide the richest and most vivid illustrations of the non-violent communication model, but the book is devoid of empirical validation. It hardly cites scientific studies or research confirming the efficiency of NVC with various contexts. For instance, many successful conflict resolutions have been described by Rosenberg; however, they are simply anecdotal and hence not generalizable.

Cultural and Contextual Blind Spots

Rosenberg's universalist approach to communication misses out significant cultural and contextual variation in expression and interpretation of feelings by people. The book presupposes that people would simply articulate their needs and feelings, which may not be the case in every culture. For instance, in collectivist societies characterized by values that esteem indirect communication, the directness advocated by NVC would generally be seen as inappropriate or even confrontational.

Also, the book fails to capture much of the power dynamics in relationships. Most people cannot make requests or declare needs for fear of repercussions in settings like workspaces or families with strict authority lines. The egalitarian dynamic posited by Rosenberg does not exist in many of the real-world scenarios and hence limits applicability.

Practical Difficulties in Implementation

Although the NVC model is conceptually simple, in practice it might not be so. Accurately identifying and articulating feelings and needs comes with an emotional awareness and vocabulary particular to a level many may not possess. Often such examples show almost purely idealistic conditions in which those persons would be fully ready and able to enter the NVC dynamics, while their real-life condition speaks otherwise.

In contrast, it does not feel appropriate or may in fact be counterproductive to apply the NVC model to such intense emotional high-conflict situations. It could significantly restrict any access to effective communication and the book does not elaborate on how to deal with the resistance or hostility of the other.

Limited Engagement with Resistance and Power Contexts

The book implies that there is a certain level of goodwill and cooperation in conflict resolution that is not always found. In cases when at least one person withdraws empathy and is not responsive to any attempts by the other(s), the NVC model is not sufficient.

For example, NVC can be abused in a relationship or by those with high-stake negotiations by using the language of "needs" and "feelings" to prioritise their concerns. While mediators might help, those sufficiently trained in NVC are not enough in number or accessible to many.

Empirical Support for NVC

Nosek & Duran (2017) were able to use NVC to foster empathy and increase communication skills among Latino youth in order to better their conflict-resolution mechanisms. Empirical support for NVC has also come from workplace studies where both employers and employees were not only able to acquire new, useful skills but also change their perspective (Korlipara & Shah, 2024). This changed perspective at work also has trickle-down impact in their other interpersonal relationships (Adriani et al., 2024). Scholars have also argued for the use of NVC in crucial fields like Conservation Science that depend on public support to effect policy change (Williams et al., 2021).

Conclusion

Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life is a revolutionary book that offers a practical and gentle approach to enhancing relationships and conflicts. Its emphasis on empathy, accountability, and acknowledgment of universal needs makes it relevant for personal and professional contexts.

The book's appeal to the average reader comes at the cost of some theoretical depth and empirical rigour, which, rather ironically, may deter its reception in some academic circles. But to understand the sources of conflict and to see compassionate communication's transformative potential is to make this a book of the ages. Nonviolent Communication continues to be a road and an inspiration for scholars and practitioners to achieve connectivity in an increasingly fragmented world.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The author has no conflicts of interest.

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