TRANSCEND: Person, Network, and Method

By Rebecca Joy Norlander

December 27, 2007
The TRANSCEND approach to conflict transformation - *peace by peaceful means* - has gained recent popularity as an alternative to traditional attempts at conflict resolution or negotiation. The TRANSCEND method addresses not only direct violence but also takes into consideration deeper societal structures and cultural attitudes that contribute to conflict.

Dominant Track I approaches (e.g., balance of power) have often been proven ineffective in solving conflict because they ignore the root of the problem. This essay is not a training manual, but instead a brief discussion of the person and philosophy behind TRANSCEND. Several main areas will be covered: Johan Galtung as the driving force behind TRANSCEND, the network or organization that has been constructed around his ideas, the methodology of the TRANSCEND approach (further divided into theory and praxis), and potential areas of concern.

Johan Galtung was born in Oslo, Norway in 1930. In addition to having earned degrees in mathematics and sociology, he is the distinguished recipient of various honorary doctorates recognizing his pioneering work in the area of Peace Studies. He founded the International Peace Research Institute (1959) as well as the Journal of Peace Research (1964) and has been instrumental in shaping the field as an independent academic discipline. He is also credited with developing widely-used terminology, including the concepts of *negative* and *positive* peace, and the delineation between direct, structural, and cultural violence.

Galtung’s philosophy has culminated in the creation of TRANSCEND, which refers to both a method and an organization. Galtung, a prolific writer, has published extensively – responsible for some 80 books and 1000 articles according to the 2000 United Nations Disaster Prevention Manual, *Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means: The TRANSCEND Approach*. Having met with parties involved in dozens of inter- and intra-national conflicts worldwide,
Galtung is currently still active as a conflict transformation worker and lecturer, and serves as Rector of TRANSCEND Peace University.

Galtung and his colleagues at TRANSCEND integrate theory and practice. “The aim is not just to introduce us to the academic study of peace and conflict but also to tell us how these ideas can be operationalized.” (Ryan, 2003, p. 81) The primary source of information about the TRANSCEND network is www.transcend.org, offering a wide range of educational materials (including a database of articles searchable by year, author, program, or country) and downloadable manuals for conflict resolution trainers and participants. TRANSCEND has held thousands of workshops for participants in countries across the globe, and developed a web-based university granting graduate degrees and certificates.

Since 2003, TRANSCEND Peace University (TPU) – “The world’s first online peace university” – has offered a variety of courses in subjects as varied as peace mathematics, peace literature, and peace business. The courses are taught by professors from 20 different countries, providing a range of experience and viewpoints. The online course format allows people in various places and professions to develop skills and increase knowledge while continuing to work in their chosen field.

Funding is a particularly sensitive issue for TRANSCEND as the parties receiving the benefit of mediation work often have a vested interest in the conflict process and desire a certain outcome. Positive gains can easily be undermined by poor financial decisions. According to the TRANSCEND website, it is believed that peace work is essential and should be publicly offered instead of limited to those parties who can afford it. Conflict workers associated with the network earn their own way; travel and accommodation charges are covered but typically the work itself is done free of charge. “TRANSCEND's capital is human: the skill, knowledge and
experience of our members; social: the capacity of the network to generate teams for specific
tasks even at very short warning, and political: no hidden agenda, independence.” Freedom to
mediate with neutrality is key. TRANSCEND will not receive any monetary compensation from
governments or other parties involved in conflicts where TRANSCEND is mediating or engaged
in dialogue. However, grants or other “untied funds” are willingly accepted and occasional fund
raising events do occur.

The word TRANSCEND was chosen to mark a distinction from traditional approaches. Previously,
only direct violence was addressed, while structural and cultural violence went
unacknowledged. While conflict is always present, it is not the same as violence, and does not
necessarily lead to violence. The goal is to transform a conflict so that the outcome is peaceful
and sustainable. TRANSCEND refers to not only the network or organization, but also the
method of achieving this outcome. The TRANSCEND method includes theory and practice, a
philosophy and praxis. A good place to start examining the theory behind TRANSCEND is their
mission statement, found on the website:

**Mission Statement: Peace by Peaceful Means**

*By peace we mean the capacity to transform conflicts constructively and without violence; a never-ending process. By transforming conflicts we mean helping bring about a situation so that the parties can proceed in a participatory, mutually acceptable, and sustainable manner. By constructively we mean channeling conflict energy toward new, innovative ways of satisfying basic human needs for all. By without violence we mean that this process should avoid*
- *any threat or use of direct violence that hurts and harms,*
- *any use of structural violence that demobilizes the parties.*

In a recent article in *A Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies* (2007), Galtung discusses
the model for violence-peace and proposes using a medical model. Conflict transformation work,
like medicine, is integrative. It requires both diagnosis and prognosis, description and prescription (p. 15). What is the root or cause of violence and how is it manifested in the “body” (individually or collectively)? What is needed to restore health? In Galtung’s assessment, violence arises from untransformed conflict, rooted in Nature, Culture, and Structure. “Nature is in us, and around us, Culture is in us as internalized values and norms; and Structure is around us as institutionalized, positive and negative sanctions” (Galtung, 2007, p. 16).

Psychologists writing about the TRANSCEND approach have found its epistemological roots in “the trilateral concept of science: empiricism, criticism and constructivism” (Graf, Kramer, & Nicolescu, 2007, p. 129). The integration of past, present, and future is again emphasized. Empiricism is a way of examining past events and data and then analyzing them according to a given theory. Criticism happens in the present, a current assessment of the empirical data based on stated values. Finally, constructivism is the future-oriented, prognostic tool that develops a way of achieving desired outcomes (Graf et al., 2007).

In the TRANSCEND method, the conflict worker meets involved parties separately, facilitating conversation and creating new ideological space, resulting in increased self-reflection. Ideally, the need for third party mediation decreases as parties learn how to sustain autonomous dialogue.

The source of conflict is usually incompatible goals, occurring either within an actor or actors, referred to as “dilemmas” and “disputes” respectively (Galtung & Tschudi, 2001). When goals are blocked and unobtainable, conflict occurs. This resulting frustration can include A) attitudes, B) behaviors, and C) contradiction. This A-B-C triangle is the root of incompatibility. (Galtung & Tschudi, 2001, p. 211) Traditional approaches have tended to focus on only one point of the triangle at a time and ignore the other two. For example, if an attempt is made to
address behavior and curb aggression, the blocked goal (i.e., root of the conflict) has not been treated and the “cure” will not last.

Often, the concepts of war and peace are closely intertwined with religious values or beliefs. TRANSCEND’s methodological roots do not come from a particular religious ideology. This has been a conscious choice, as religion can be highly polarizing. Neutrality results in greater efficacy in the mediation process.

The praxis element of TRANSCEND is based on a combination of approaches in specific focus areas where reform is needed. The website mentions 14 of these, including abolition of war, mandatory peace education at all levels of schooling, peace building, peacekeeping, and reconciliation work. The comprehensiveness of the TRANSCEND approach is its strength, however, it can also be overwhelming for participants as they realize how much work is required for true peace; nothing short of a complete restructuring of governments, societies, and systems.

Galtung articulates the link between philosophy and praxis, taking place within mediation. There is a practice linking the problem and the goal: dialogue with all actors, (1) to map the conflict formation (parties, goals and contradictions), (2) to assess legitimacy, or not, of all goals, and (3) to bridge legitimate goals by a creative jump, imagining a new reality, with contradictions transcended, and conflicts transformed. (Galtung, 2007, p. 28)

The goal of the TRANSCEND approach is a larger creative space in which to envision potential (and acceptable) outcomes. It is NOT based on “giving in” to the opposition or coming closer to the opposing party’s platform (i.e., compromise). Nor is it face-to-face negotiation, although eventually the two or more parties will meet in person. If direct contact is made too early or with the wrong goal in mind, it may be counter-productive and heighten the level of conflict.
The TRANSCEND approach is enacted in three distinct rounds or phases. While this description of the process may sound linear, actual conversations are much more fluid. Briefly, the goal of the first phase is to understand the desired outcomes and positions of each party involved. The goal is to understand the actors and the way they interpret events. In other words a current analysis is performed as accurately as possible, including understanding assumptions and attitudes that each party brings with them to the process (Graf et al., 2007).

The second phase consists of reframing those goals in a way that meets basic human needs of the parties involved. A new cognitive space resulting from the first round is then given back to the parties to be reworked and checked for sustainability and weaknesses. Assumptions and attitudes must be probed further. The goal of this round is to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate goals (based on a needs analysis).

The final round brings the parties together in order to develop a plan of achieving a sustainable goal. A common goal should be identified and articulated, transcending each party’s original goal. A plan of action is developed based on the new ideological/cognitive space and respective goals that have been created. (Graf et al., 2007)

Crucial for successfully implementing TRANSCEND methodology are intrapersonal considerations and interpersonal considerations. First, the conflict worker must be motivated by a sincere desire to help and not for potential material gain, not operating according to any hidden agenda or acting in a manipulative way. Between the conflict worker and the parties involved, communication should be confidential, genuine, neutral, empathetic, and open. Finally, between the conflict worker and society at large, personal or organizational credit should not be sought and the experience should benefit others within a growing culture of conflict transformation.
The TRANSCEND method has been well received among peace practitioners, yet still poses a few concerns worth addressing. A peace worker using the TRANSCEND method must have a heightened awareness of their own cultural bias. Since certain views and beliefs are normative - conditioned to the point of feeling virtually innate - they are often difficult to recognize as culturally specific. A third-party mediator might subconsciously impose his/her own values on the process. Writing in the UNDP Manual (2000), Galtung states that in order to be a conflict worker, one must act with no hidden agendas (p. 2). These hidden agendas may indeed be “hidden” even to the conflict worker, subconscious and difficult to locate, requiring increased caution.

Another potential area of concern is present in the methodological assumptions of the TRANSCEND method. In order to have the types of discussions necessary for new and sustainable outcomes, the rationality of all parties is assumed. Galtung and Tschudi (2001) claim that the leaders involved are “usually intelligent, articulate, charming people, with a high capacity for leadership” (p. 212). This claim begs the question: will the approach still be effective with leaders who exhibit irrational or erratic behavior?

Finally, there is some concern among feminists concerning the TRANSCEND approach. Confortini (2006) argues for increased integration of peace work and feminist inquiry. She readily acknowledges Galtung’s view of violence as a helpful starting point - including the structural and cultural aspects in addition to the traditionally accepted understanding of direct violence - but admonishes him for contributing to the ongoing association of women with peace, which she calls “disempowering and harmful for both women and peace” as well as for male peacemakers (p. 356). While the constraints of this paper prevent an in depth treatment of Confortini’s critiques, I mention her briefly to indicate one area requiring further revision within
the TRANSCEND approach. The equating of gender with sex (instead of viewing gender as a social construct) is potentially harmful. Violence produces and defines gender identities and these constructs are then reinforced and contribute to ongoing violence. Violence is also present in language; verbal patterns have the capacity for producing and sustaining either peace or violence. Appropriately gendered language might open up new ways of envisioning the world. A gender-sensitive theory could empower both men and women involved in peace work.

Despite the potential complications when implementing the TRANSCEND approach, the potential for ameliorating violent conflict situations makes it a worthwhile pursuit. What is both unique and powerful about TRANSCEND is the way it addresses the harsh realities of deep structures and culture, requiring change at the most fundamental level.
References


archive/volume_II/issue_2/ryan.pdf

TRANSCEND: A peace and development network for conflict transformation by peaceful means.