

A plan to fight injustices

Research

Brian Martin is Professor of Social Sciences in the School of Social Sciences, Media and Communication at the University of Wollongong. The central theme in his research is the dynamics of power, with special attention to strategies for challenging repression and exploitation.

You see a problem, such as bullying, a corrupt pay-off or abuse of refugees. What can you do about it? What's going to be effective?

For a long time I've been researching the use of nonviolent action, which means rallies, strikes, boycotts, fasts, sit-ins and a host of other methods of popular action that don't involve violence. A lot of people think that nonviolent methods can never succeed against a ruthless opponent, like the Nazis or Saddam Hussein, but actually there are plenty of examples where they have.

Gene Sharp, the world's leading nonviolence researcher, noticed that in some instances, violent attacks against peaceful protesters created more support for the protesters.

This happened in 1930 in India. To challenge the British rulers, Gandhi led civil disobedience against the salt laws. News that protesters were brutally beaten by police generated support for Indian independence around the world.

In 1991, Indonesian troops opened fire on protesters in a funeral march in Dili, East Timor, killing hundreds.

When photos and film of the massacre were smuggled out of East Timor and broadcast, there was a tremendous surge of support for the independence struggle.

The massacre, rather than being a victory of violence against peaceful protest, was counterproductive for the

Indonesian rulers.

In most cases, powerful attackers are able to get away with their abuses. Prior massacres in East Timor had caused barely a ripple of concern internationally.

So, I asked, what was happening when massacres and other abuses didn't lead to public outrage? I came up with a model consisting of five methods by which powerful perpetrators minimise popular concern about their actions:

- cover up the action;
- devalue the target;
- reinterpret what happened, by lying, minimising the consequences, blaming others or seeing the events through a convenient framework;
- use official channels to give an appearance of justice, without the substance; and,
- intimidate or bribe people involved to discourage expression of concern.

The Indonesian government and military used all of these methods to

dampen outrage over the Dili massacre. For example, to try to cover up, the government cut off communication out of East Timor and tried, unsuccessfully, to intercept the videotape taken by a British filmmaker.

In nearly every case I examined, perpetrators used one or more of these methods to minimise outrage - in many cases all five methods. This model can be applied to many sorts of injustice, including censorship, corruption, unfair dismissals and torture. Some of the cases I've studied in detail are the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

The really valuable insight from this research is about how to challenge injustice. You need to counter each of the five methods of inhibiting outrage. That means exposing the actions, validating the target, interpreting the events as unjust, avoiding official channels and instead mobilising support, and resisting intimidation and bribery.

I call this the backfire model: when the methods of inhibiting outrage fail, the action backfires on the perpetrator. You can apply the framework to big problems like war and genocide or to ones closer at hand like harassment at work.

Free lunchtime lecture

Professor Brian Martin will be delivering a lecture on "Making Injustice Backfire" on Thursday.

The lecture is part of the Centre

for Student Engagement's free lecture series.

All are welcome.

When: 12.20-1.30pm, Thursday

Where: Building 20, room 5



As part of his research Professor Brian Martin has devised a plan to challenge injustice, wherever it may occur.

Q & A

Are you getting anywhere? Yes, I keep adding articles to my website and people keep reading them - especially ones about defamation and whistleblowing.

Best part of your research?

Working with new ideas and new topics is always stimulating. So is collaborating with others.

Funniest moment: Telling jokes about academics. Why is a kilo of professors' brains worth more than a kilo of other people's? Because you need a lot more professors to make up a full kilo of brains.

Ugliest moment: In research, there

can be power plays. Opponents sometimes try to block your work and undermine your reputation.

Have you had a true "Eureka! I've found it!" experience? Not really.

Most of my insights develop gradually. When I first had the idea that led to the backfire framework, I wrote down a page of notes. A year later, I looked at the page and couldn't make head or tail of it - the concepts had moved on. So I have little moments of inspiration with lots of work in between.

Has it made you rich?

Intellectually rich, yes. As far as

money goes, research shows that having a lot of it doesn't make people much happier. Satisfaction in academic life comes from being able to immerse yourself in challenging issues and in helping others to learn.

What did you want to be when you were a kid? I never thought about it. Later, as a teenager, I thought about being an actuary or a mathematician.

Has your career followed a straight line? I did my PhD in theoretical physics and then worked in applied mathematics for

a decade. The big shift was coming to Wollongong and joining the Arts faculty.

What would you change? It's said that struggles in academia are especially bitter because the stakes are so small. I've been through my share of nasty academic disputes. It would be nice to imagine a career without them, though I don't know how that would be possible.

Advice for young researchers: Working consistently is essential. So is being able to persevere through failure. Keep sending articles to journals and don't worry when they

are rejected: just send them somewhere else while writing more. Have fun along the way.

Next adventure? I'm studying how to make good things better - things like happiness, honesty and helping people with disabilities. Social scientists seldom study questions of how and they seldom study good things, so I'm feeling my way.

Website for further information: www.bmartin.cc/

Final comment: Learning is endlessly stimulating. I'm privileged to have a job in which life-long learning is central.

TIGS



YOU ARE INVITED TO JOIN US IN THE CELEBRATIONS MARKING THE

The Illawarra Grammar School Golden Jubilee

EVENING RECEPTION

FRIDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2009

GOLDEN JUBILEE DINNER

SATURDAY, 19 SEPTEMBER 2009

THANKSGIVING SERVICE & REUNION BARBEQUE

SUNDAY, 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

For more information please visit our website www.tigs.nsw.edu.au or phone 4220 0200