

# GETTING INTIMATE WITH THE OED

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun “intimacy” is adapted from the adjective “intimate,” which is borrowed from Latin. The first listed meaning of “intimate” suggests digging down to something fundamental: “Inmost, most inward, deep-seated.” Or to get a bit more detailed: “Pertaining to or connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing.” The OED notes, however, that this meaning survives “chiefly in scientific use.”

The next meaning of “intimate” focuses on its personal nature: “Pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal.” This moves intimacy into the realm of self-understanding. It suggests that before we can find intimacy with others, we first must know ourselves. Of course, this may very well be a reciprocal or “chicken and egg” phenomenon. Connections with others, one could argue, facilitate self-understanding.

The third meaning of “intimate” finally moves us into the familiar realm of interpersonal relationships: “Close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge.” If we describe someone as an intimate friend, this is what we mean. Indeed, the OED specifies that the word “deal[s] with such close personal relations.” When we use “intimate” to describe a sexual relationship, that’s a euphemistic extension of this sense of the word. Nonetheless, personal closeness doesn’t need to be sexual. The closeness itself is what makes the relationship intimate.

With this understanding in mind, we can see that intimacy is relevant to numerous aspects of peace and justice studies. When people explore the “interests” that lie behind their “positions” while mediating a conflict, this requires digging down to what is fundamental. They must understand their own underlying needs, as well as those of the other party. A similar understanding emerges from the field of restorative justice. As Howard Zehr explained in *The*

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Little Book of Restorative Justice, “Crime’ or wrongdoing is a violation of people and interpersonal relationships.” Thus, the primary emphasis of restorative justice is not on punishment, but on repairing harm. As in conflict mediation, this requires understanding the fundamental needs of all parties.

Turning to the field of nonviolent civil resistance, we see this impulse toward intimacy in the ever-controversial admonition to love one’s enemies, a maxim promoted by both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.—and before them, Jesus of Nazareth. King, a Christian minister, often joked that he was lucky that Jesus hadn’t asked him to *like* his enemies. That wasn’t within his power to choose. But he could choose to recognize his adversaries’ core humanity. That choice, I would argue, was an intimate act.

There’s an irony, I’ll admit, inherent in this brief glance at the links between intimacy and peace studies. Afterall, “intimacy” suggests digging down to fundamentals, and my overview has stayed closer to the surface. Still, I think there’s value in the abstraction of a map. A map can’t show you how things truly look beneath the surface, but it may indicate opportune places to dig.

As a closing gesture of intimacy, I’ll admit that this article is a product of how my brain works. I’m fascinated by connections that aren’t immediately obvious. Thus, linking the OED definition of “intimate” to certain peace and justice studies concepts is almost a form of play. Nonetheless, I hope that you also find my remarks interesting or useful. That is, I hope that something above proves an “X” that marks the spot.

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