

# Will H. Moore's enduring contribution to peace and conflict studies

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**Abstract**

This special issue is dedicated to Will H. Moore's enduring influence on peace science research and the community of peace science scholars. The five pieces in this special issue exemplify Will's dedication to the development of rigorous concepts and theories that generate testable hypotheses about political violence and are evaluated using novel, fine-grained data. Will's pioneering contributions to the study of peace science were both direct—through his scholarship—and indirect—through the mentorship of his students. All of the articles in this special issue were written by former students or scholars directly influenced by Will's research and mentorship.

**Keywords**

Dissent, human rights, repression, Will H. Moore

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In 2012, Christian Davenport launched MINDfields,<sup>1</sup> a project to record guided interviews of senior conflict, violence, and peace scholars, asking them to reflect on the “trajectory of their research agendas during the arc of their careers.” Will H. Moore conducted five MINDfields interviews, offering the peace science community a unique perspective on research from the viewpoints of Ted Robert Gurr, Barbara Harff, Harvey Starr, Dina Zinnes, and Peter Wallensteen.

Will was an exemplary MINDfields interviewer. The videos showcased his enthusiasm for learning at the feet of great scholars before him and hinted at his own desire to push the field forward—through both his own influential research and through the mentorship of the next generation of peace science scholars.

Will passed away in 2017. Sadly, he will never be the subject of his own MINDfields interview despite authoring more than 50 influential peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on the scientific study of political violence. As Will’s students—peace science scholars who would not be peace science scholars without his mentorship—we offer this special issue as a version of a high-level MINDfields interview of Will H. Moore. His pioneering contributions to the study of peace science were both direct—through his scholarship—and indirect—through the mentorship of his students. Our intention is to highlight these contributions, as we see them and as we believe he saw them as well.

Will’s investment in the mentorship of the next generation of peace science scholars was not accidental. He was deeply committed to the positivist study of political violence and believed that training an army of graduate students to “drink the water” was the best way to influence the field. As such, the manuscripts in this issue are part of Will’s legacy. All are written by scholars who were directly influenced by Will’s ideas and who benefited enormously from his mentorship. As (some of) Will’s students,<sup>2</sup> it is our pleasure to introduce this special issue—to reflect on the myriad ways in which Will shaped the peace science field directly as a scholar and indirectly (but purposefully!) as a mentor to the authors of the pieces herein.

## **A direct effect on peace and conflict studies**

Will received his PhD from the University of Colorado and held faculty positions at the University of California (UC), Riverside; Florida State University (FSU); and Arizona State University (ASU). He began his scholarly journey thinking of himself as a comparativist collecting observational data on the democratic attributes of countries for the Polity II project (Gurr et al., 1989). He ended it thinking of himself as a social scientist,<sup>3</sup> continuing to collect data (Conrad et al., 2013, 2014) and test hypotheses about democracy’s (in)ability to protect people from government abuse (Conrad and Moore, 2010; Conrad et al., 2018a, b). If we had had the opportunity to interview Will for MINDfields, we would have opened the video by describing him as a scientist; as an innovative scholar of political violence; as a tireless researcher whose numerous projects laid the groundwork for future scholars; as a generous mentor, armed with lofty expectations and forthright feedback, who always sought to help students improve their work.

As a young scholar, Will conducted research on rebellion and ethnic conflict in Africa, topics germane to his doctoral advisors, Ted Gurr and James Scarritt. He quickly challenged his scholarly upbringing—sometimes directly (e.g. Lindström and Moore, 1995)—and began to pursue a distinct line of research characterized by ideas that underpinned his work over

the course of his career. Like Gurr, Will sought to develop generalizable theories of political violence including but also *beyond* ethnic conflict in the African context. Despite Gurr's penchant for using psychological explanations to explain violent collective action, Will turned to rational actor models of social phenomena. As a scholar, his contributions to the field were foundational in understanding and explaining political violence as the outcome of a series of rational, strategic choices made by dissidents and state actors, rather than an effect of macro-level political or economic conditions. This departure from previous research—and from his own training—colored his body of work even as he moved from studying interactions themselves to examining the consequences of those interactions. For example, his work on forced migration, torture, and terror attacks explicitly invoked this kind of reasoning and explained all of these outcomes as the result of purposive choices made by political actors.

Throughout his career, Will was committed to applying the highest standards of scientific inquiry to the study of politics. He was zealous about the need for precisely defined theoretical concepts (and occasionally demanded a similar level of precision in casual conversation). He also strongly favored the development of general theories that lead to testable hypotheses, and the evaluation of theories using explicit criteria (See, e.g. Moore, 1995). Influenced by another of his advisors, Mike Ward, Will was also passionate about the careful collection of observational data to test hypotheses, and the matching of research design to theory using the most appropriate modeling strategies. Early in his career he studied sub-national conflict using sophisticated time-series models with finely grained events data, an approach that is familiar today but at the time was well ahead of typical conflict studies. Between the Polity II and III-Treatment and Torture (ITT) data collection projects, Will would collect at least three other datasets and convene two conferences of over 30 scholars to distill standards and best practices for creating conflict data (Davenport and Moore, 2015). He considered collecting quality data and using it appropriately to be of great import, but only in service of accumulating scientific knowledge about topics he deemed important—conflict, repression, and human rights.

Will's passion and intensity for research stemmed from a desire to give more attention to issues that he believed received too little. This is apparent from the topics he studied. Early in his career, he was drawn to intrastate conflict, dissent, and repression when the vast majority of peace science scholars were interested in international conflict. As Will would often remind his students, these topics are central to the study of politics but until recently were not treated as part of mainstream political science. His work was instrumental in pushing these topics in (or at least closer) to the mainstream. Will's desire to serve the underserved is also reflected in the individuals and groups his research tended to focus on, which included ethnic groups with little political power, people displaced by violent conflict, and victims of state violence.

### **An indirect (but purposeful!) effect on peace and conflict studies**

Along with scholarship, Will devoted an extravagant amount of time to mentoring the next generation of peace scientists, including graduate students at UC Riverside, FSU, and ASU, as well as students of political violence across the discipline. In addition to having conversations about ontology and epistemology with students, for example, he wrote meticulous essays describing different approaches and how they might apply to graduate students

studying political science.<sup>4</sup> Will also invested considerable effort into personalized, individual mentorship in several ways: he helped each of his students identify research areas, theoretical frameworks, and career paths that best suited them, rather trying to create exact likenesses of himself. Those who found rational actor models appealing were encouraged to pursue them, while others were equally supported in their pursuit of criminological or psychological approaches to understanding human behavior. Students interested in careers at teaching institutions were advised about how to build a record conducive to that path rather than being pressured to pursue more research intensive jobs. He invested in his students as people as well as scholars-in-training, the result being a generation of researchers for whom this work is an integral part of a larger, fuller life.

Why did he sink so much time and energy into an endeavor with an uncertain outcome? We don't have to guess; Will was nothing if not forthright. He was passionate about mentorship for two reasons. First, Will saw himself as the recipient of generous mentorship, saying with regularity that he wanted to "pay forward" the investment in his own development made by, among others, Ted Gurr, Jim Scarritt, Mike Ward, John McIver, and Walt Stone. More generally, Will explicitly recognized his many privileges in life and decided to use them to position others who may not possess those same advantages. Second, while Will's mentorship required a certain amount of selflessness, he would often remind us (and he would want us to remind you) that it also benefited him. Will and his contemporaries did much to push the frontiers of positivist peace science. From early in his career, he recognized the opportunity that mentoring offered for advancing and making his mark on the field of conflict studies.

Our collective research to date—and any research the five of us will do in the future—is indelibly marked with Will Moore's fingerprints. In this special issue, we present five new articles written by scholars similarly influenced by Will's scholarship and his mentorship, many of them former students like us. Each of the articles shows the wisdom of Will's mentorship, building on and pushing forward the research philosophy and agenda he considered to be so important.

First, in "#rebel: Rebel communication strategies in the age of social media," Cyanne E. Loyle and Samuel E. Bestvater explore the extent to which rebel groups use social media and to what end, collecting information from 55 official rebel group Twitter accounts. In his early research, Will investigated why individuals mobilize collectively to take violent action against the state, contending that the decision is contingent on communication from groups to potential recruits (Moore, 1991).<sup>5</sup> Loyle and Bestvater update these arguments to account for a digitally connected world, exploring the social media messages of rebel groups and to whom they are addressed. Their findings—that group capacity seems to influence social media use rather than the other way around, that messages tend to focus on broad claims about legitimacy rather than immediate mobilization, and that target audiences are more international than local—add to the debate about whether and how communication influences mobilization.

Will's scholarship on dissident mobilization reflected a broader interest in how governments consider other actors and their likely responses when choosing to use political violence. In "Repressive agent defections: How powers, costs, and uncertainty influence military behavior and state repression," Kimberly R. Frugé argues that even when leaders wish to repress, we may not observe repression. Suspecting their military agents will not follow through with orders, leaders may back down to save face. They may also miscalculate the military's willingness to repress, order the repression, and then face a recalcitrant military

that sides with or protects protesters. The article illustrates Will's claim that repression and dissent can be viewed profitably through a strategic lens.

The next article in the issue reflects Will's move to explore the international human rights regime using the same perspective adopted in his work on repression. In "International institutional design and human rights: The case of the inter-American human rights system," Jillienne Haglund explores the effects of international human rights law on government respect for human rights. Whereas many quantitative studies of international human rights law focus exclusively on treaties, Haglund suggests we look to the Inter-American human rights regime to parse out the effects of varying levels of institutionally designed legalization. She couples the ITT data (Conrad, Haglund, and Moore, 2013, 2014) with original data on rulings by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to show that more legalized regimes result in less scarring torture.

In the penultimate article, "Examining repressive and oppressive state violence using the Ill-treatment and Torture data," Andreas Beger and Daniel W. Hill, Jr explore the specific rights abuse Will focused upon most during his career: torture. They also use the ITT data and challenge the notion that democratic institutions diminish *all types of state violence*, pushing scholars to consider violence with distinct motivations: repression used to quell political challenges and oppression, or state violence used for other purposes. Using regression and machine learning techniques, they elucidate the covariates associated with each outcome, directly extending Will's research that explored the nuances of democracy's relationship with abusive state behavior.

In his later work (Moore, 2015; Bakker et al., 2016), Will started making explicit a claim that informed his work for most of his career: groups that participate in contentious politics against the state should be viewed as dissident groups, generally, and not defined by the observable tactic employed (e.g. protest[ers], terror[ists]). In the final article in this issue, "Protestors, terrorists, or something else? How to think about dissident groups," Joseph K. Young and Steve Shellman empirically address this claim. They outline the debate between scholars that think dissident groups specialize in single tactics vs. scholars that believe, like Moore, that dissidents select a range of tactics from a menu. In a first attempt at addressing this debate, Young and Shellman show that some groups are generalist in nature, substituting tactics from a menu, while others exhibit more specialized behavior, suggesting that there is value to both approaches.

## Conclusion

Will H. Moore left the peace science community with an influential body of work on forced migration, ethnic conflict, torture, dissent, and repression. The current study of political violence is dominated by studies that either consciously or subconsciously are influenced by Will's scholarship. Beyond these impacts, his devotion to mentorship allows him to continue shaping the peace science field through the work of the next generation of peace science scholars. Not only have his students and other mentees continued his legacy, but many of them, too, train students. If they—and we as a community—continue to pay it forward in the manner exemplified by Will, the scientific study of political violence can (continue to) develop cohesively and become increasingly comprehensive. Positivist scholarship on peace and conflict will help us better understand and raise awareness about who perpetuates

violence against whom—and why. Such information can be invaluable if used to reduce suffering in the world around us. That is a truly powerful legacy, indeed.

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### Notes

1. The MINDfields website is located at <https://mindfields.weebly.com/>.
2. Will served as primary advisor for each of us in graduate school. His mentorship continued long after we were each conferred with a PhD.
3. Though Will began his career as a comparativist, he was generally seen as an international relations scholar by the end of his career. Will's work spanned multiple social science disciplines including political science, international affairs, sociology, law, criminology, economics, and psychology. He often argued that distinctions between subfields and disciplines were both arbitrary and counter-productive (Lindström and Moore, 1995; Staton and Moore, 2011).
4. Some of these essays were rooted in the philosophy of science; others were more mathematical/statistical. The latter eventually led to a highly useful book on mathematics for political science graduate students (Moore and Siegel, 2013).
5. See, also, Gurr (1993); Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013).

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