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Working Across Contested Boundaries: Building Bridging Social Capital

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I. Recognitions

Thank you very much. We wish to thank the Canadian Political Science Association, the Conference Programme Committee Chair, William Cross, and the Plenary Session Organizer, Sylvia Bashevkin for the honor of delivering the plenary address this group. We are delighted to have been invited to speak on the subject “Working Across Contested Boundaries: Building Bridging Social Capital.”

II. The Problem of Creating Bridging Social Capital

This audience did not need the tragedy of September 11th and its aftermath to know that among the most urgent problems facing the world today are conflicts over religion, race, and ethnicity. These conflicts arise as much within countries as between them. Democracy, economic development, and peace hang in the balance if we cannot find ways to work effectively across these divides. Color and class divide Americans. Religion and national aspirations divide the Northern Irish. Color and economic development divide South Africans. Identity and statehood divide Israelis and Palestinians. The solutions to such conflicts are complex and long in coming. Each depends on thoughtful political arrangements and effective reduction of violence by the state and in civil society. But each also depends on working across contested boundaries in everyday life, on building bridging social capital, to use the phrase now as well known in popular commentary as in academic discussion.

Our research focuses on the third of these solutions—building bridging social capital in everyday life. Our work focuses on the theoretical and practical question of how people with profound differences agree to work together, especially how they form organizations that explicitly bring them together across deep divides of history and values. If we can determine the design principles for establishing and maintaining what we call “concord organizations,” we can know a great deal about the social process of creating durable bridging social capital. Such organizations are valuable because they are both a source of more general attitude change and, more particularly, a platform for structural changes beyond individual beliefs.

Some definitions are helpful here. *Social capital* is the organizational, personal, and relational resources available to facilitate collective life and solve social problems. Both *bonding* social capital, which amplifies shared identities, histories and view points, and *bridging* social capital, which spans different ones, are created and maintained by interactions with others, especially within formal organizations and informal groups. Social capital exists in many intrinsically linked forms, some more tangible than others. Psychological “frames” or approaches to problems are one component of social capital, but other components include individual and collective skills, relationships and their histories and expectations, and organizational structures that hold values, establish rules, and sustain work necessary for social problem solving.

This brings us to one of our fundamental assertions: Societies tend to have much less bridging than bonding social capital. This asymmetry is especially evident in divided communities. The main reason for this lopsided division of assets is the great difficulty establishing organizations and other settings that support activities across groups. This fundamental fact—the rarity of bridging social capital due to the difficulty in creating it—is seldom recognized in the research on social capital. In the first instance, this may be due to the relative newness of intellectual attention to social capital. But there are other intellectual reasons as well. A full understanding of bridging social capital lies at the intersection of research on social capital, social movements, and collective action.

A few examples of the absence of attention to the importance of bonding or bridging missions in organizations is useful. Putnam’s important work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, distinguishes between bridging and bonding social capital but does not talk about the institutional distinctiveness of bridging and bonding organizations, or even the different challenges of bridging and bonding organizational tasks. Similarly, the interesting research on multi-organizational fields in social movement research by Evans, Klandermans, Zald, and Useem focuses on social movement or counter movement organizations, only rarely looking for bridging organizations. So too, Olson’s classic text on *The Logic of Collective Action* asserts that an individual can never purchase collective goods cheaply enough to be individually rational in incurring that expense. In fact, the people who engage in collective action are described as “irrational”, having taken the “suckers pay off”, or in research by others, are thought to be “careerists” who meet personal needs through otherwise irrational collective action. The calculations that support this conclusion have been justly criticized for being based on the thin rationality of short-term price considerations. But even the new work on collective action—research that emphasizes the variability of group formation problems depending on group size, the different positions of leaders and followers, and the distinctiveness of organizations with economic versus social missions—does not investigate the challenges of establishing and maintaining bridging organizations.

Bridging social capital can be and certainly is formed in many places—in congregations, universities, work places, even bowling leagues that foster cross community exposure, personal readiness, and skills. But, as we know, many

organizations are close to homogenous in fact or function, regardless of social composition. That reality brought our attention to organizations that have the creation of bridging world views and skills as a main task. Once creating bridging social capital is articulated as an organizational mission, it is relatively easy to identify groups that fit this definition. In the US, the National Conference for Communities and Justice, formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews, immediately comes to mind. Called by different names in different national contexts, we have labeled such groups “concord organizations” because this identifies conceptually their central unifying characteristic. Specifically, concord organizations bring together people with fundamentally opposing views or values for the purpose of promoting civil society while recognizing group differences. Concord organizations are mostly found in civil society, but occasionally decentralized and somewhat autonomous public institutions, most notably schools, can be constituted as concord organizations, as they sometimes are in Northern Ireland and South Africa.

Concord organizations typically take on one or all of the following tasks: dialogue programs, witness activities (that is, demonstrating a new future by living together or sharing scarce space), education or training, community service, conflict resolution, and economic development. The most long-lasting concord organizations go beyond dialogue programs. Examples of concord organizations include the twenty-five local chapters of Common Ground for Life and Choice, dialogue organizations that bring together pro-choice and pro-life leaders in the United States; the 46 “integrated” schools in Northern Ireland that educate Catholic and Protestant children together; the Conflict Mediation Practice in South Africa, an organization that helps build skills in new, multiracial communities; Project Change Albuquerque, which founded the Project Change Fair Lending Center; and Neve Shalom/Wahat-al-Salam, a conscious community of Israeli Arabs and Jews living on a hilltop outside Jerusalem.. Big or small, individual or one of many linked institutions, concord organizations require an intentionality greater than the ordinary organization.

In many ways, concord organizations might top Olson’s list of organizations that should not, at least theoretically, form. They face much more serious formation problems than most other organizations. People with profound differences rarely have the impetus to work together. Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics who work in Corrymeela, a cross community training group, are not the proverbial workers who all want the union and its higher wage as described in Olson’s classic presentation of the dilemmas of collective action. In his model, if not in reality, all workers in a widget factory want a higher wage, and no other value is important. The workers have unity of collective economic interest, which is foiled by their individual cost calculations. Each worker wants to “buy” the union wage at the cheapest individual cost, and therefore each has the incentive to free ride. Hence, the classic collective action problem.

Olson’s union scenario with its individualistic and consumerist assumptions does not fit the members of 250 members of Corrymeela, split roughly equally among Protestants and Catholics. Corrymeela is both an inclusive Christian organization whose members examine questions of religion together and a training center that provides well

crafted short courses for about Catholics and Protestants. These courses introduce new understandings of the past and better skills for the present. It is true that some members of Corrymeela want a kind of union not envisioned by Olson. They want Northern Ireland's union with the Republic of Ireland. Other members want Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Members of Corrymeela, like most people in Northern Ireland, want these ends with an intensity that colors all other wants.

But the members of Corrymeela do have something important in common. They share a transcendental belief in the discipleship of Christ, and a fervent desire to reduce bloodshed. They work hard to keep these values present in their work, because little of what divides them politically or religiously goes away. Their conflicts are enduring, value-based, and non-divisible. Corrymeela is the quintessential concord organization. Through thoughtful organizational design and hard work its members keep the ties that bind more important than the disputes that divide. The organizational processes used by Corrymeela, and other concord organizations, are a very important source of durable bridging social capital in divided communities.

III. Research History and Design

Corrymeela is one of about 100 concord organizations we have researched in four regions: the United States, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and to a lesser extent because of recent violence, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. As mentioned, the general research question is "How is bridging social capital created in divided communities?" More specifically, our objective is to determine the design principles for overcoming the divisions that keep concord organizations from forming and succeeding. We hypothesize that bridging organizations must first manage their communal divisions in order to form. These divisions are rooted in deep religious, ethnic, or ideological differences. Very often people come to the consideration of creating these organizations with a sense that they are the guardians of the memory of ancient wrongs or the standard bearers of eternal truths. Identity is important to them. They see those who are different or who hold other beliefs as the "other." In the extreme, the "other" is demonized. Demons, by their nature, are outside the universe of obligation, that is, people to whom obligations are due and by whom they are held accountable.

Conflicts around identity issues are different in nature from conflicts over economic interests. By and large economic interests are divisible, and in some instances, substitutable. Conflicts over economic interests are subject to resolution through basic problem solving techniques like changing the price, splitting the difference, finding a proportional solution, taking turns, or trading for something else that is also valued. Methods for solving economic problems also often have institutionalized rules, such as those that govern markets.

Getting people with identity-based conflicts to engage in collective action across groups is fundamentally different than trying to start a union where everyone makes the same low wage and wants it to be higher. Those with deep-based conflicts of religion, ethnicity, or ideology face a dilemma not faced by those with unity of interest. We call

this dilemma the “no-takers” problem, the fact that no one initially wants to create such organizations because there is not enough common interest to make it worthwhile to overcome group formation problems. The “no takers” problem temporally precedes the free rider problem. If people cannot overcome the issues that divide them in order to consider talking or working together, they will never get to the point where they face the free rider problem. In other words, they do not have enough in common to defect!

This project had two stages, and the research design reflects that history. The first stage was the identification of American concord organizations, the building of dossiers about them through the written record, and then the determination of which would be visited, which sometimes included participation in programs. Given the time and expense, not all organizations were visited. Elinor Ostrom has very imaginatively demonstrated in her work on common pool resources that historical cases could successfully be used to study fundamental questions of organizational design. In the first instance we chose organizations to interview on the basis of the kind of conflict they faced—racial and ethnic versus religious versus ideological. As our understanding of bridging capital grew, we also chose organizations on the basis of the kinds of work they undertook. Because we were interested in group formation, we made a specific decision to emphasize free-standing concord organizations rather than concord projects within other organizations. Thus we did not research such activities as Black-Jewish dialogues sponsored by local chapters of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) or religious congregations. In some instances, the organizations we studied did not endure beyond three or four years—in essence, they ended up being like independent concord projects. But at least at the outset there was some commitment to durable, if not permanent, independent organizations or activities by the groups we studied.

Once the first wave of U.S. institutions had been studied, we approached our major funder, the Kellogg Foundation, with a proposal to look at bridging organizations in countries with higher levels of communal conflict. The second stage was the extension of this research to Northern Ireland, and South Africa, where intensive interviewing was done, and the Palestinian Territories and Israel, where no on site interviews were done because of the escalation of the violence. While some concord work is still underway among Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, concord work between Israelis and Palestinians in the Territories, which had increased noticeably with the Oslo accords, has come to a standstill.

IV. Cases

One of the pleasures of fieldwork is the immersion in new settings and meeting new people. One of the demands is to maintain both a connection with the people who have let you into their lives and a distance that allows you to observe with the purpose of knowing a situation in a manner that extends generalizable knowledge. In many ways, field work on bridging social capital put us as researchers in touch with people whose own work make them acutely aware of the pleasures and perils of engaging people in new settings. In every instance, after preparing through immersion in the written records,

we interviewed as many people as possible about the origins of these groups as well as their organizational life histories. Our objective was to learn how both the micromobilization of small groups of people and the macromobilization of resources helped to create these organizations.

These cases show that concord organizations tend to form when two key qualities of the political and organizational opportunity structure make the landscape ready for their establishment. The first is dissatisfaction with the status quo, often defined as the inability to win *unequivocally* the cultural or policy conflicts over values and identities. This can be experienced either as an opportunity for investment, as in the integrated school movement in Northern Ireland, or the fear of a worsening situation, like the abortion dialogues, or both, as is the case in Corrymeela. The second quality of the opportunity structure is a sense not so much of “no exit” but of narrow doorways through which chances for new conversations and social arrangements are available. In situations defined by recursive loops of nonagreement, mistrust, or violence, narrow doorways are not to be ignored. After twenty years of intense public conflict, a quiet, non-public way to find a better way to talk about abortion made local Common Ground for Life and Choice groups and other, spontaneous abortion dialogues seem like an opportunity that tired opponents should not miss.

IV. The Connection of Theory and Practice: Design Principles for Creating Concord Organizations

The history of organizational formation and successes and failures of these and other groups provide eight design principles for establishing concord organizations, and thus for ways to build bridging social capital. We use the term “design principles” in much the same way Elinor Ostrom did in discussing both self-governing irrigation systems and the governance of common pool resources in general. We share with Ostrom the belief that organizations are crafted, not bought, and that the nature of the good helps to determine what the rules for organizational creation are likely to be. But we depart from her economistic approach.

In our usage, a design principle is an element or condition that helps people craft a successful concord organization and keep it running. Given the nature of the conflicts of people who come together in concord groups, it is unlikely that people will be “converted” the other side. Because of this, concord organizations face the dilemma of always being in creation mode, even after they have been established.

Here are the eight design principles for creating concord organizations:

Design Principle 1: Promote Overarching Values. *Successful concord organizations find and continually enhance overarching shared values.* In fact, this is the first task of concord organizations. Concord organizations do not form unless their founders can overcome the “no takers” problem, that is, the problem that people separated by antagonistic values or identities rarely want to form a joint organization. The

founders of such organizations, through a series of small, transformational encounters (“micromobilization” in social movement theory) often “discover” these shared values by getting to know and trust individuals from other communities. They find they share generalized bridging beliefs, such as the belief that all people are children of God or disgust for violence. These can be expressed in very concrete objectives, like a shared desire for children to be able to walk to school safely.

The creation of the first integrated school in Northern Ireland is a good example of finding an overarching value—educating children together for a better life together. The founders of Lagon College, as it was ultimately called, were drawn in part from a group of Catholic families who sent their children to Protestant schools, because the Protestant schools were closer to home or better for their children for one reason or another. But there were significant problems, not the least of which was that Catholic children were “passing” in these Protestant schools and they were required to take a Protestant oriented religious curriculum. Catholic parents first identified each other by, very bravely, allowing Mass cards to peak out of pockets or purses or bags so that other Catholic parents could identify them. One or two Catholics had Protestant friends who had worked outside of Northern Ireland and were conversant with religiously integrated education and who were willing to discuss integrated education in Northern Ireland. Bit by bit they explored and reinforced their belief that educating their children together was immensely valuable. They did so even in the face of significant religious and political conflicts. And they did so at a time when there were tens of thousands of British troops in Northern Ireland and no direct rule.

Analytically, the Lagon College example shows that the process of creating concord organizations requires frame substitution, that is the creation of a new frame of reference that encompasses the bridging values, and its extension to meet the boundaries of existing frames, frames that are in contention. Those who want to establish or maintain concord organizations develop techniques through which participants can describe the best world they can imagine, or share the worst consequences they wish to avoid. Once articulated, these shared values are named and embraced, even as other, more exclusive communal beliefs are retained. The “other” is rehumanized and the shared overarching value changes the framework by which conflicts are understood, creating the opportunity for individuals to know about a problem from three perspectives—one’s own, the views of other groups, and the viewpoint of the shared values.

Design Principle 2: Balance bridging and bonding values. *Concord organizations have two enduring sets of values, bridging and bonding, and these values are always in contest with the members of organizations. Therefore, successful concord organizations deal with issues that divide them as well as issues that bind them. Said another way, concord organizations do not avoid conflicts; they contextualize them. They do so by what we call frame balancing, managing to hold several competing views of the same problem in one’s mind and keeping the bridging frame in the ascendancy.*

John Wallach, the founder of Seeds of Peace, a summer camp for children from divided communities including the Middle East, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, describes

the demands of this balancing act. The three-week program recognizes the stages its campers go through. In the first week, the youngsters are either idealistic or completely certain their “side” is right. In the second week, they begin to see that there might be other views and why people might hold them. In the third week, Wallach reports that the campers “realize that have to deal with the hatred and still need to accept each other anyway.” Seeds of Peace would fail if it had a jolly “we are all one under the skin” approach. In this way, Seeds of Peace recognizes that it cannot succeed in its mission if it does not acknowledge what divides campers as well as what unites them.

Design Principle 3: Prevent Proselytizing. *Successful, concord organizations develop techniques where members can hold their views, but not seek to impose them on others.* Preventing proselytizing is crucial, and most participants in concord organizations say it is one of the hardest values to internalize. Six American abortion activists—three leaders in favor of legal abortion and three opposed—engaged in a five year mediated dialogue that began after a murderous attack on abortion clinic personnel in Boston. When describing the procedures of their dialogue they said “We also made a commitment that some of us still find agonizingly difficult: to shift our focus away from arguing for our cause. This agreement was designed to prevent rancorous debates.”

Strong norms against proselytizing are important both organizationally and personally. Organizationally, strong norms against proselytizing keep the values that bridge viewpoints in the ascendancy, thus preventing organizations from drowning in the whirlpool of contested views. Personally, an individual’s commitment not to proselytize demonstrates a profound and concrete recognition of the legitimacy of the people who hold views fundamentally different, and often in opposition, to one’s own. The self-restraint involved in not proselytizing becomes a basis for a larger social practice of restraint, listening, and efforts at mutual problem solving.

Design Principle 4: Acknowledge and Receive Legitimacy. *Successful concord organizations provide mechanisms of legitimization and respect on a personal level.* Social techniques for legitimization are well known. They include such devices as using the language of the other when referencing them, refraining from using words that incite those from other communities, paying attention to the balance of viewpoints presented, developing vehicles for the expression of community viewpoints within the context of concord activities, and having an organizational culture that allows people to change their minds.

Legitimization is not easy or unproblematic. In the abortion dialogue “pro-choice” and “pro-life” were the legitimated labels for participants positions, rather than “pro-abortion” and “anti-choice,” the labels of political discourse. Legitimization also involves having one’s own narrative of the conflict heard and hearing the narratives of others. The intended purpose is not to argue for the superiority of one’s own narrative or to win the “oppression olympics” but instead to learn the sources of deeply felt values and the effects of the conflict on one’s self and others. In Northern Ireland Catholic and Protestant released prisoners discussed with each other the effects of their actions and internment on their families and communities, recognizing the costs they shared. On the

West Bank, the Bereaved Families Forum brings Jewish and Muslim families together to discuss their shared experience of losing a child to violence.

Every successful program we studied had mechanisms of legitimization. They were most evident in school and camp programs, but were universal. There has been great flight from public schools in South Africa, and neighborhood segregation makes fully integrated public schools in South Africa rare (as they are in the United States, we might add). But the South African Human Rights Commission training program has developed national programs that try to bridge historical differences, and the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, an NGO working in Johannesburg, has made similar efforts in for youth not in school.

Design Principle 5: Establish Rules of Engagement. *The most successful concord organizations do not rush to action without attention to rule making in organizational life.* They begin with well-stated democratic decision making mechanisms, with specific attention to leadership transition and to mechanisms of solving future conflicts. Genesis, the shared religious space of St. Claire's Episcopal congregation and Beth Emeth Jewish congregation has successfully experienced the leadership change of both congregations, and a capital campaign for and the building of an extension for educational and community activities. The council established in the by-laws when the congregations decided to share space, the deliberative and consultative processes, the fact that leaders and ordinary members share the commitment to the larger value of Genesis, all are made possible by transparent and accepted rules of engagement. In contrast, the four shared religious buildings of Columbia Maryland increasingly work like religious condominiums with multiple tenants, in part because the original founders thought that their good intentions would be sufficient to deal with any conflicts in the future.

Design Principle 6: Avoid "Gotcha". *"Gotcha" is the practice of highlighting to others their failures to recognize group experience in a way that the group sees itself. Successful concord organizations avoid "gotcha" because it undermines the inquiring, learning culture of concord work.* Diana Dorn-Jones, the President of Project Change Albuquerque, whose objective was to reduce racial prejudice and improve race relations, said that "'Gotcha' is a bad game because it is designed to punish people for what are usually small mistakes of language or experience rather than reward them for trying to make big changes on race and color." She added that, "All of us can improve our understanding of other groups, and want to be given the benefit of the doubt."

In practice, avoiding "gotcha" means that people in concord groups are committed to engaging with those in opposing camps even when they cause some pain or frustration. It means being able to see oneself making the kinds of mistakes others have made about one's group. Such norms create a virtuous circle of both attentiveness to others and flexibility and generosity in the process of learning. Avoiding "gotcha" is a way of avoiding political correctness, which tends to emphasize monitoring behavior for failures.

Design Principle 7: Develop Leaders that can Maintain Legitimacy while Encouraging Engagement. *Concord organizations are inherently risky to leaders of advocacy organizations or identity communities. They challenge conventional definitions and demand complex thinking about the value of joint activity.* Concord organizations ultimately depend on leaders who have enough political capital to withstand accusations of disloyalty from detractors. In the earliest phases of the work, the concord organization may have to provide cover for leaders whose tentative steps toward the other party may be labeled as “traitorous”. In Belfast, the Interface Project manages rumors of violence for both sides of the conflict without exposing the leaders who work with them. Receiving confidential inquiries from leaders on one side of the Peace Line (the not very peaceful borders between sectarian neighborhoods), the Interface Project calls leaders on the other side equipped with cell phones to verify the information. Relaying correct information back to the inquiring parties allows them to demobilize retaliation gangs. While the Protestant nationalists may have had contacts with the police, who could have served the same function, the Catholic leadership would never have risked contacts with the police. Even today, with a more religiously integrated police force, when violence is not happening in North Belfast, it is often because the cell phone network operated by the Interface Project has been effective.

Leaders with a tenuous hold on their own positions of authority or who become weakened by failing to deliver value to their members will not be able to withstand attacks for participation in concord organizations. The leaders who can successfully engage in concord organizations and bring their own membership along are leaders who both understand and satisfy some of the traditional needs of their followers and who simultaneously encourage their learning and critical thinking.

Design Principle 7: Recognize and Reward Investment. *People involved in concord work see themselves first and foremost as investors, not consumers, and they recognize and reward investment.* They understand the long historical time frames of their conflicts and are realistic the kinds of efforts necessary to bring about change. They see the organizations they form as “banks” that hold and reinforce the often-fragile visions for a better, shared future. They cultivate a hardheaded hopefulness.

Moreover, all the other design principles of successful concord activities are amplified when participants recognize and affirm the investment nature of their work. The commitment to reaching youth in most concord organizations is one measure of the time horizons of the members of these groups. The care that many groups take to act as incubators for other projects is another measure of their investment approach. For instance, Corrymeela and Project Change Albuquerque have spun off numerous projects and organizations in order to give breadth and longevity to their work.

The investment approach to group formation and to creating bridging social capital is perhaps the most important theoretical finding of our work. And it is on this note that we wish to end our comments. An investment logic gives us a way to challenge the factual accuracy behind the language of “suckers”, “irrationality”, and even “career advancement of leaders” in understanding why individuals choose to participate in group

formation. An investment logic allows us to see that every time, say, the parents who started Lagon College, got together to talk about starting their own school, they were part of building a social network that would make their dream come true—an integrated education for Protestant and Catholic children together. The people who established Lagon College were not suckers, irrational, or careerists. They judged the value of their efforts, not against those who might benefit from the school but did not create it, but against the alternative of not having an integrated school at all and against the demands of everyday life. For them building the organization was as much a goal, and a definition of success, as was providing integrated education. They teach us a great deal about working across contested boundaries and building bridging social capital.

Thank you.