

Bridges to *Somewhere*:

The Power of Unexpected Alliances in Social Movements

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Introduction

I'm probably one of only a few people in this room who is old enough to remember a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War. VVAW appeared at a time when the War in Vietnam still enjoyed a good deal of support back home in the United States, and it helped change the national conversation about Vietnam by exposing its grim realities in a way that was difficult for the war's supporters to argue with. It meant a great deal to hear people who had fought the war criticize it, rather than people like me – privileged white kids with student deferments. I remember very vividly attending my first antiwar rally at the age of 18 and seeing a young man with 1960s-style long hair and beard but wearing his green fatigue shirt and combat boots, and hearing him recount what he had seen and heard and done in Southeast Asia and how he now knew that it was all wrong and hopeless. VVAW members brought credibility to the antiwar struggle, credibility that came from direct experience. Their credibility also came from the way these veterans shattered all the stereotypes that were used to discredit most other opponents of the war – that we were unpatriotic, privileged, clueless, and so forth. Supporters of the war could get away with saying things like that about most antiwar protesters, but it was impossible to lay such charges against *these* young men. They had been there. They *knew*, just like the newer generation of military-based antiwar activists in groups like Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Gold Star Families for Peace (Coy and Woehrle 1996; Coy, Maney, and Woehrle 2003).

My personal encounters with Vietnam Veterans Against the War happened before

The New York Sociologist, Vol. 5, 2010

I became a sociologist and long before I began studying collective action in a systematic way. But once my interests took that particular turn, a funny thing happened: in research project after research project, I kept running into activist groups in other social movements that bore a striking resemblance to VVAW. The first of these was involved in the anti-death penalty movement, which I studied very closely during the early 1990s and more casually since then. I remember encountering little groups of people meeting informally in the lobbies during the national conferences of the National Coalition to Abolish Capital Punishment, the most prominent organization of the movement during that period. They called themselves Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation (<http://www.mvfr.org/>). One of the organizers of that group was a woman from Richmond, Virginia that I met and later interviewed, Marie Deans. Neither she nor her husband had ever discussed the death penalty with each other, but after Marie's mother-in-law was murdered, they realized that they both opposed the execution of the killer and were compelled to speak out against it. She later organized a loose network of people like herself – people who had lost loved ones to murder but who opposed capital punishment – that morphed into MVFR and subsequently two other national level groups, Murder Victims Families for Human Rights (<http://www.murdervictimsfamilies.org/>) and the Journey of Hope (<http://www.journeyofhope.org/pages/index.htm>).

Journey of Hope is not so much a *group* as it is an annual *event*. Every year, Journey members travel around a particular death penalty state and speak to community groups and on local radio shows. Their message, like that of MVFR and MVFHR, is that capital punishment is not only racist, expensive and unjust, but that by reopening wounds and promising a "closure" that rarely comes, it does more harm than good for the people that murder leaves behind, the victims' loved ones (King 2003; Pelke 2003; Scheffer and Cushing 2006).

Several years later, when I was in the midst of a study of the Drug Policy Reform

Movement and attending conferences and rallies organized by groups like The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws and the Drug Policy Alliance, I again started running into another unexpected group of participants: law enforcement officers. Mixed into the diverse array of drug reformers was a contingent of disillusioned drug warriors who had reached the conclusion that there need to be major changes in the nation's drug laws. Indeed, many of them called for outright legalization of *all* drugs. Several years ago, these disillusioned cops, prosecutors, and judges coalesced into a group called Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (<http://www.leap.cc/cms/index.php>), which now claims 15,000 members (not all of whom are involved in the criminal justice and judicial systems) in 86 countries. LEAP operates a speakers' bureau which spreads the word to audiences at home and abroad about how the wisest course is to do for drugs what we did for alcoholic beverages in 1933: legalize them so we can more effectively regulate them.

The last of these VVAW-like groups that I have investigated systematically is active in the Pro-Life movement, but its members also often participate at anti-death penalty events. It is called Feminists for Life of America. Pro-life feminists maintain that the freedom to choose abortion is antithetical to true feminism – the feminism of the “founding mothers” like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton – and that it is in no way essential to women's rights (Kennedy 1997; Derr, Naranjo-Huebl and McNair 1995). Unlike most pro-life activists, many FFLA members subscribe to a “consistent life ethic” which leads them into anti-war and anti-death penalty activities as well as opposition to abortion. Meanwhile, they actively support feminist goals other than reproductive rights; e.g. equal employment opportunity and freedom from domestic violence.

As one might imagine, many of FFLA's alliances are uneasy ones. Because of their consistent life ethic and their advocacy of unorthodox combinations of claims, pro-life feminists seem never be completely welcome in any of the coalitions they

The New York Sociologist, Vol. 5, 2010

participate in or seek to participate in. Mainstream feminists, for instance, are quite uncomfortable with the anti-choice stance of Feminists for Life, and many pro-life conservatives don't like them because they are unabashedly feminist, anti-war, and anti-death penalty – and in favor of policies like universal health care. Many death penalty opponents get nervous whenever anyone links the death penalty to anything else that may threaten support on their single issue, especially something as contentious as abortion.

Bridge Activism

Initially, I started calling groups like these “wildcards.” Perhaps you see the idea behind this term. It was my notion that, just like a joker and a one-eyed jack may make a winner out of what was otherwise a mediocre poker hand, the presence of “wildcard” actors like the ones I have described can make the “host movement” – the larger social movement that the wildcards are part of – more competitive almost overnight. Host movements usually understand this perfectly, and do everything they can to assist the wildcard in organizing, as the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty did for the murder victim's groups.

But to quickly explain the title of this presentation, I eventually turned away from the label “wildcard” in favor of a term that is less colorful, but a bit more precise: movement bridge actors. I use the plural noun “actors” because, while they are usually groups or organizations, they can also be individual actors. Somebody like David Frum comes to mind, a former Bush speechwriter who has become so vocal a critic of the Tea Party and of Congressional Republicans that he got himself fired from the American Enterprise Institute. This in turn made him something of a darling of the left, and a frequent guest on MSNBC. Frum is a “bridge actor.”

The “bridging” that these actors do can be of two sorts. First, they can literally bridge two movements – or at least attempt to do so. This is what Feminists for Life

The New York Sociologist, Vol. 5, 2010

purport to do. FFLA says – if I might paraphrase – “we are feminists AND we are pro-life, and we are all about fighting abortion AND expanding rights and opportunities for women – *real* rights, not phony ones like abortion.” Indeed, Feminists for Life maintains that “reproductive rights” was a diversion that was used to throw the Women’s Movement off track in the 1960s and to keep it from pursuing what both women and their children really needed, like universal health care, family leave and equal pay for equal work. FFLA tries, at least rhetorically, to be part of two different movements which in their view ought to be natural allies, and to bring them back together like they once were.

The other sort of “bridging” – more common, I think – is where bridge actors attempt to bridge two identities. Death penalty opponents are supposed to be “disconnected liberals,” right? They’re assumed to be people who live in safe neighborhoods and work in academic ivory towers, untouched by violent crime, where they have the luxury of feeling sorry for vicious killers?! But MVFR says, “wait, not so fast! *We’re* not disconnected liberals with our heads in the clouds. We’ve been there. We *know* what it’s like to get that awful phone call at 2 o’clock in the morning! We *know* what it’s like to have to identify our own child’s body, to sit through a capital murder trial and hear the murder recounted in grisly detail and to see those horrible crime scene photos as they are introduced as evidence. But you know what? The tough-on-crime politicians and D.A.’s don’t speak for us!” MVFR and MVFHR link the identities of *victim* with that of death penalty opponent, redefining both in the process. LEAP does the same thing, linking the identities of the hard-nosed cop and the drug reformer, mixing a little more “blue” into the “tie-dye.” And of course, by linking the two identities – victim with abolitionist, law enforcer with drug legalizer – successful bridge actors radically transform the narrative of their movement, and confuse the narrative of their movement’s opponents.

There’s so much about these folks and their experiences that I could talk about.

In fact, I'd love to just spend the rest of my time at the podium relating some of their individual biographies, which are invariably dramatic and moving! If you are interested in learning more about them, you can get many of those stories by going to the various web sites for these groups. Instead, I want to use the remaining time to discuss a few of my observations about bridge actors in the three movements where I've studied them. The observations will be as follows:

- 1) Bridge actors matter. If skillfully deployed, bridge actors can be game changers, neutralizing some of their host movements' disadvantages.
- 2) "Skillful deployment" requires an often delicate sort of identity-management designed to fend off challenges to their legitimacy.
- 3) Bridge activism "ain't for sissies!" It's "high-risk activism" in that speaking out in unorthodox ways often alienates actors from people they care about, and exposes them to all sorts of social sanctions.
- 4) Despite the obvious benefits of bridge actors for their host movements, they also introduce built-in tensions and pitfalls that often arise and pose threats to most movements.

Bridge Activism Matters

So let me begin with the observation that movement bridge actors matter. They matter because they are people who can make credibility claims that come either from personal experience or from allegiances that violate commonly accepted stereotypes – or both. My opening remarks about Vietnam Veterans Against the War illustrate this, and in the same sense, most people tend to defer to the views of police and victims (or co-victims) when it comes to crime. They've "been there," and we assume they see and understand things that we don't necessarily see. Thus, they strengthen the claims-making of their host movement by enhancing the narrative fidelity (Snow and Benford

1988) of their host movement's frames.

And when their assumed credibility is combined with unexpected opinions – when they're *against* something we expect them to be *for* – they become “attention magnets.” This is especially true of the press, which means that bridge actors seem to be inherently newsworthy. Here is another very important reason why bridge actors are so valuable to their host movements – they attract attention to the cause. We're seeing this right now in California, where voters will be deciding on November 2 whether or not to legalize the non-medical use of marijuana. The media in that state have been practically falling over themselves to put people from Law Enforcement Against Prohibition on camera, usually on a split screen with an opponent of Proposition 19, in hopes that an exciting verbal fireworks will ensue. You can't buy that kind of publicity! I don't know how things are going to go for Proposition 19 on election day¹, but from all appearances, LEAP will deserve a lot of the credit if it does well.

So bridge actors bring a lot of “street cred” to the table, and they attract a lot of attention. They also have the potential of providing space for broader mobilization. For example, pro-life feminists claim that there are plenty of women who are uncomfortable about abortion, but who won't come out and say so because it is “politically incorrect” – an apparent violation of their feminist loyalties. These women supposedly feel that they have to choose between the two, that they can't be both pro-woman and anti-choice. And when only pro-choice feminists speak out, we are left with the impression that abortion and feminism are inextricably linked. Feminists for Life claim that by speaking out against abortion, they can give these closeted pro-lifers the space to become actively involved on both fronts, which strengthens both movements. In the language of social movement theory, this is a perfect example of frame alignment (Snow, et al. 1986).

Similarly, I've been told by many of the bridge actors I've interviewed that they also think they provide “political cover” for policymakers who had previously been

reluctant to take the “right” stand on whatever issue it is. For instance, I’ve heard the same story over and over from Murder Victims’ relatives – about how they were testifying at a state legislative hearing somewhere or other, and they’ve had a legislator come up afterwards and say “you’ve given me a way to vote against the death penalty without being branded ‘anti-victim.’ By speaking out, you’ve made it possible for *me* to follow my conscience and vote the way I’ve always wanted to vote. Thank you.” So even when they don’t change somebody’s mind, bridge actors may nevertheless help a policymaker do something that she wanted to do in the first place, but couldn’t. For those of you familiar with social movement theory, you can think of this as a “radical flank effect-in-reverse.” Radical flank effects (Haines 1984, 1988; Conner and Epstein 2007; Downey and Rohlinger 2008) occur where the “extremists” in a movement make the “moderates” look even *more* moderate just by extending the movement’s horizon. What bridge actors do is almost like a “moderate flank effect.” They can help make fairly “radical” proposals seem more reasonable simply because *they’re* the ones who are speaking out. “How crazy can drug legalization be if all these cops are for it, right? Cop’s aren’t wild-eyed radicals! They’re . . . well, they’re COPS!”

It’s very difficult, of course, to precisely measure the impact that bridge actors have, to prove that “bridge activism matters.” This is all anecdotal. And even though I may have said that bridge actors can be “game changers,” I admit that I don’t have compelling empirical evidence to back up such a claim. But it is perfectly reasonable to hypothesize that skillful deployment of bridge actors can be an important variable in successful outcomes. For now, I’ll have to leave it at that. There are a handful of other people besides myself who are starting to look at bridge activism from different angles, and I’m hoping that we may be able to speak to this more conclusively in the future.

The Management of Bridge Identities

The second observation I said I want to make gets back to the idea of skillful

deployment. Neither a pro-life feminist nor an antiwar combat veteran, nor any other bridge activist is going to have much impact if

- people think their personal story is made up or exaggerated,
- people think they're the only one who feels this way,
- people think they're just some alienated nut-job seeking attention,
- or if people suspect they're being somehow bribed by the movement to say what they're saying.

Each of these are charges that are often leveled at bridge activists – especially the idea that *most* people in their shoes feel differently. MVFR/HR activists say that after their audiences get over the shock that they don't want the S.O.B. who killed their daughter or husband or whomever to die for it, the next step is often to say, "Well, there's no way that *I'd* feel that way if this happened to me, and it can't be true that other people in your situation agree with you!"

Everything rides on how the bridge actor responds to such challenges to their legitimacy. And the way bridge actors respond is a key element in their unique way of framing their issues. The MVFR response usually boils down to something like, "I know that not all survivors feel this way. Many are trapped by their rage and their grief, and I know how that feels. But there are more of us than you think." Members of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition respond to similar challenges in two ways. First, they point to LEAP's rather large membership to show that they're not the isolated exception. Second, they claim that there are even *more* drug war skeptics in law enforcement positions who are prevented from speaking out by occupational pressures. And on that point, they're probably right. I'll come back to this.

In the interest of time, I won't go into more of the ways in which opponents attempt to discredit bridge actors and the strategies those actors use to legitimate

themselves. I'll only repeat the main point, which is that bridge actors have to be able to deflect these challenges if they're to exploit what they bring to the debate. This is something that they talk about among themselves, and share stories about, and strategize about.

Bridge Activism "Ain't for Sissies"

My point in saying that "bridge activism ain't for sissies" is to emphasize that bridge activists – whether they're pro-life feminists or anti-death penalty homicide survivors or legalizer-cops – often face some substantial costs when they speak out. The two founding members of FFLA, for instance, were allegedly thrown out of the Columbus, Ohio chapter of N.O.W. for their pro-life heresy. They maintain, of course, that the mainstream women's movement was no longer worth being part of! The disaffection was quite mutual. But this is not always the case. Many of the murder victims' families that I've gotten to know have paid the most heart-wrenching costs. Many of them are no longer on speaking terms with at least some of their relatives, who see them as traitors and turncoats, as having betrayed their fallen loved one. As "not loving _____ enough to do what is right." This is a huge price to pay, because the alienation of other family members is now heaped on the loss they have already experienced as the result of the murder.

Co-victims who don't want the death penalty sometimes also get the cold shoulder from the justice system. Renny Cushing, whose father was murdered and who now serves as executive director of Murder Victims Families for Human Rights, talks about how the police and prosecutors distinguish between "good victims" and "bad victims," and treat the former with more respect than the latter. Among other things, "good victims" are victims who help the state pursue the harshest possible punishment for criminals. "Bad victims" are the ones who don't. There have been cases in which prosecutors have prevented "bad" (i.e., anti-death penalty) family

members from testifying at clemency hearings, and on occasion they have faced greater difficulties in receiving victim compensation under state programs after having run afoul of the prosecutor's office.

In the case of LEAP, the price for speaking out against the War on Drugs can be alienation from one's fellow cops, but it can also be disciplinary suspensions, being passed over for promotions, and the like. When it comes to the drug war, after all, law enforcement agencies have a lot at stake! Substantial portions of law enforcement budgets, for instance, are often earmarked for drug enforcement purposes, and drug-related civil asset forfeiture in particular became a major source of funding for local law enforcement agencies after the late 1980s (Williams 2002; Williams, Holcomb, Kovandzic and Bullock 2010; Worrall 2004). So even though drug enforcement may be a distraction from more important types of police work in the eyes of many police, preaching legalization is a bit like biting the hand that feeds you. This is why most of the truly active and outspoken members of LEAP are *retired* cops and prosecutors and judges who are less vulnerable to most pressures and sanctions. Incidentally, LEAP speakers bureau participants are always careful, when introducing themselves to audiences, to emphasize that they "retired" cops rather than "former" cops, so as to avoid the impression that they left law enforcement under mysterious or unfavorable circumstances. This relates back to the matter of identify management that I spoke to earlier.

These often painful sanctions against those who speak out undoubtedly have the effect of silencing many of those who might otherwise expand and strengthen the bridge components of social movements. But this becomes part of the bridge actors' narrative. It allows them to say, in effect, "there are lots of us who feel this way, but many more have been intimidated into silence." In this way, bridge actors can claim numbers that they can't actually produce at a protest event or on a membership roster. But they're probably right in most cases. It takes a lot of courage for people to burn

bridges and sever relationships in order to do what they feel is right, much more courage, I think, than when we throw ourselves into causes that all our friends and loved ones are also more or less supportive of. This makes me respect these folks enormously, even when I don't agree with them.

Bridge Activism and Intra-Movement Conflict

The fourth and final observation I'd like to share with you is that bridge activism can have both an upside and a downside for the larger movements they participate in. The upsides are obvious: the peace movement is strengthened and legitimized when returning vets and their families take part; the drug reform movement is strengthened and legitimized when retired detectives and D.A.'s become prominent members of their organization, and so forth. What downside could there possibly be?

The downside comes from the fact that bridge actors may bring different perspectives and priorities which can sometimes clash with those of the existing host movement. This is obviously the case with pro-life feminists, whose heretical interpretations of first-generation icons and so forth lead to their being shunned by most mainstream feminists. But in my experience, the clearest example of a downside – and mind you, this is a downside that hasn't yet become problematic and may never become truly problematic – is found in the cases of the murder victims' families groups. If you're familiar at all with the struggle against capital punishment, you know that "humanizing" death-row convicts and empathizing with their plight – and yes, even seeing them as "victims" in a sense – is part of the traditional "culture" of the movement. Why? Because capital punishment looks very different when you start thinking of the people we execute as more than just a mugshot in the newspaper. But murder victims families come to the capital punishment issue through a very different doorway than do other abolitionists. For many of them – some, not all – this isn't about "forgiveness" or pity for death-sentenced inmates. And it's not necessarily about the

needs of the people on death row. It's about *their* needs, the needs of the victims and ones left behind – the real needs, not just the phony needs as framed by prosecutors who may want to use victims for their own cynical purposes.

So there are family members of murder victims who feel very strongly that it is *their* experiences that ought to be the primary elements of the anti-death penalty struggle. As one informant put it to me in an interview, “[r]acism and cost and miscarriages of justice are important, sure, but the main thing ought to be about how the death penalty marginalizes and betrays victims.” This is a common feeling. Another victim-activist, who was responding to my question about how much higher the profile of victims had become in the annual meetings of one of the main movement organizations, said “yeah, that’s true, and it’s nice and all. But the [victim’s families] profile isn’t nearly as high as it *ought* to be! The next conference ought to be organized completely around victims and their needs.” As we talked about this more, she revealed that victims’ families sometimes feel as if they’re “used” by the anti-death penalty organizations, “trotted out” in front of the cameras when they’re needed, but then put back on the shelf.

In addition to frame-priority disputes such as this one, the co-existence of bridge- and nonbridge-segments in a movement can sometimes lead to very bitter internal conflicts over specific strategic or ideological matters. Many traditional abolitionists are nearly as opposed to life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences as they are to the death penalty itself. “I refuse to trade quick executions for slow ones,” one informant told me. “Because that’s all LWOP is – a slow death sentence.”

Well, many victims’ families don’t see it this way. A member of the MVFHR board, a Chicago woman that I’ll call “Jill,” had lost her sister, brother-in-law, and unborn nephew in a thrill killing by a wealthy suburban high-school kid. When the prosecutor attempted to exploit the case to push for the extension of the death penalty to 17 year-old murder defendants (which had not yet been ruled unconstitutional by the

The New York Sociologist, Vol. 5, 2010

Supreme Court but was not available in Illinois), she threatened to oppose him in public. The killer was sentenced to life without parole. But later, many of the people with whom Jill had worked for a death penalty moratorium in Illinois began agitating for a retroactive abolition of life-without-parole. If successful, this might have allowed the murderer of her sister and her family to have been re-sentenced. Jill felt betrayed, not only because she believed LWOP to be the appropriate sentence in some cases, but also because she felt that this would damage the anti-death penalty cause by allowing opponents to portray LWOP as an abolitionist ploy, a "Trojan horse."

These kinds of tensions, of course, are inherent in movement coalitions of all sorts. Nevertheless, I think we need to look at them very closely as we explore the important role of bridge actors in collective action, and to the ways in which the competing perspectives of bridge actors and host movements negotiate their differences and avoid schisms.

So, to wrap up, I think that what I've chosen to call "bridge activism" is a very important part of many social movements, but a part that hasn't yet been adequately theorized or researched. For a while, it seemed like I was the only person looking at "wildcards" or "bridges" in any systematic way, but that's no longer true. A small group of researchers (Coy and Woehrle 1996; Coy, Maney, and Woehrle 2003; Hipsher 2007) have now addressed the issue from other angles. And I am also aware of some as-yet unpublished work by others which will cast further light on the dynamics of bridge activism when it becomes available. So hopefully, we'll soon be able to piece together a more complete picture of how movement bridges work and the impacts they have in a wider range of movements in the future. Thanks very much for listening.

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The New York Sociologist, Vol. 5, 2010

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Notes

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1. These remarks were made several weeks before the 2010 elections. On November 2, Proposition 9 went down to defeat in California by a margin of 56% to 44% (McKinley 2010).