

## Research Note: Integrative Ties as an Approach to Managing Organizational Conflict

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*This research note highlights the importance of integrative bonds as a means of managing organizational conflict. Drawing on Gamson and Modigliani's (1963) theory on integrative ties, the author argues for this approach to be considered in the future as an alternative but complementary approach to managing conflict in organizations.*

We must ask not only about forces of disintegration (disagreements or conflicts) but about integrative bonds ... A disagreement of given severity is less dangerous for a relationship in which there are strong integrative ties ... than it is for one in which there are weak ties.

*Gamson and Modigliani (1963)*

In 1963, reflecting on Cold War dynamics, Gamson and Modigliani argued that while “the severity of explicit disagreements between nations ... seems to be an essential element [for tension] ... it is not sufficient” (37–39). To illustrate, they argued that the United States and Great Britain had severe disagreements when it came to the invasion of the Suez Canal and the Skybolt missile—and France and Great Britain had critical disagreements over the latter’s entry into the European Common Market—and that objectively, these disagreements were comparable in terms of severity to disagreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. In all three cases, the fundamental goals of the parties were involved. Yet as they note, “in terms of distance to a breakdown in the relationship between

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the parties, less tension seems to have arisen than over ‘comparable’ disagreements between the United States and the Soviet Union” (38).

These observations led them to argue that these differences were due to the integrative ties (i.e., their social, political, and economic ties) that connected the United States and Great Britain, as well as France and Great Britain. Thus, they argued that tension is not simply due to the level of disagreements and/or disintegrative forces, but rather is “the ratio of disintegrative forces to integrative ties existing between two nations ... at any given point in time ( $T = D/I$ ).”

This conceptualization of tension provides a whole different lens for understanding conflict and conflict resolution. Most notably, it suggests that while it may be critical to manage or address the disagreements directly, it is just as important to consider the integrative ties, as stronger ties could allow the relationships to withstand greater conflict. While this theory has not yet been tested, there has been some supportive evidence for it. Most notably, Varshney (2002) found that what differentiated Indian cities engulfed in communal violence between Hindus and Muslims from relatively harmonious cities was the strong civic engagement and interaction of the Hindu and Muslim communities in the more peaceful cities. While Gamson and Modigliani’s (1963) theory focused on the international level and Varshney’s (2002) focused on the communal level, this theory is also of direct relevance for organizations, the focus of this research note.

As is clear from the literature, conflict within organizations is inevitable (Rahim 2010). Moreover, the ability of organizations to function effectively rests on their being able to manage organizational conflicts (Kolb and Putnam 1992; Rahim 2002). The literature highlights a plethora of strategies that can be used to manage or resolve conflicts constructively, including mediation, arbitration, bargaining, compromise, negotiation, and framing and treating problems as joint problems (Lewick, Weiss, and Lewin 1992; Kolb and Putnam 1992; Rahim 2010; Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011; Gawerc 2012). Yet all of these represent tools and strategies for managing or resolving conflict focused on the disagreement rather than a broader, more transformative, and more preventative focus on strengthening the relationships, which could allow withstanding more disagreements and minimizing their potential destructiveness.

In 1992, Lewick et al. similarly argued that the literature tends to emphasize responses to conflict after it becomes manifest rather than anticipating conflict and seeking to address it prior to its manifestation. More recently, Rahim (2002, 2010) argued that the conflict management literature on

organizations is deficient when it comes to identifying strategies for managing conflict at the macrolevel in organizations. More specifically, he argued that attention needs to be given to organizational cultures and organizational structures and the ways in which these could contribute to the constructive management of conflicts. Finally, Mayer and Louw (2012, 3) contended that the narrow focus on resolving disagreements does not allow for a more holistic focus on “continuous transformation.” While they themselves do not elaborate on what should be the center of focus for continuous transformation, Lederach (1997, 2004), who coined the term conflict *transformation*, asserts that relationships are central.

While attention to the different strategies for managing overt conflict in organizations is critical, this is not sufficient. Moreover, as Gamson and Modigliani’s (1963) theory makes explicit, focusing directly on the disagreements is only one approach to conflict management. A second approach, which may be just as important, focuses on the strength and the quality of the integrative bonds and the actions that can be taken to strengthen these bonds and the relationships on a whole. To help conceptualize this latter approach to conflict management, Gamson (1998) has used the metaphor of a rubber band to highlight that whether or not a rubber band breaks depends only in part on how far it is stretched. The other contributing factor is the strength of the band.

In a longitudinal study of twelve Israeli-Palestinian peacebuilding organizations, I (Gawerc 2012) provide evidence for Gamson and Modigliani’s (1963) theory. More specifically, I found that while severe disagreements can cause some organizations to break down or stop functioning effectively, other organizations with disagreements that are comparable or even greater may be able to continue to operate and function effectively. For example, my research highlighted how the organization Parents Circle–Families Forum, which consists of bereaved family members in both communities, managed to survive and come out stronger after a successful effort organized by the Palestinian side to transform the leadership and structure of the organization from an Israeli organization to a more equitable joint organization. According to Hannan and Freeman (1977), a change in organizational structure and forms of authority is one of the most challenging changes to make, as it can result in the loss of external legitimacy for the organization and cause organizational conflict (also see Freeman and Hannan 1984; Carroll and Hannan 2000).

Meanwhile, the Middle East Children’s Association, an organization of Israeli and Palestinian teachers, dissolved after a conflict over the curriculum

they were writing, which revolved around whether the Israeli narrative published should be a mainstream Israeli narrative (preferred by the Israelis) or more critical (preferred by the Palestinians). While this would be a significant challenge for any joint Israeli-Palestinian organization given the difficulties of publishing a mainstream Israeli narrative in the Palestinian community in the context of occupation, another organization, the Peace Research Institute of the Middle East, managed to do something similar without disbanding or erupting into severe conflict. My research (Gawerc 2012) suggested that what explained these differences, more than anything else, were the strength and the quality of the integrative bonds within the organizations.

While these organizations all required some of the conventional means to manage conflict (e.g., discussion, mediation, compromise, framing and treating problems as joint problems, and even setting disagreements aside occasionally), my study suggested that as the environment became more hostile, the gap between the identity groups in the larger environment widened, and the number of conflicts in the organization multiplied, it became just as critical—if not more critical—to pay attention to the integrative ties and actions which could strengthen these ties.

In the case of these initiatives, which worked across acute conflict lines in an asymmetric environment, strengthening the integrative bonds and the relationships at large involved active efforts to build trust and a sense of a shared mission in the organization. In the words of an Israeli engaged in one of these organizations, “I believe that projects must start with professional facilitation between the leaders of the project. Before they go out and before they try to recruit or to fundraise, they must feel the day together! This is a prerequisite! And then the dynamics, the game of power, everything is understandable. ... Respect and trust, these are [the] conditions that must be in any joint missions!” (Gawerc 2012).

It also required promoting respect for the other’s abilities and culture. In the words of one Palestinian peacebuilder:

The relations between the Israelis and Palestinians—also inside our organization—it’s like a twenty-four hour conflict! Always there is a conflict ... but, I will say again, and I still believe it, if you agree to work in an organization together with Israelis, you have to respect everything! And you have to do the things which respect the partnership and the relations. If there is a holiday for Jews, I have to respect there is a holiday. And again, if there is a holiday for the Muslims, they

have to respect [that] also. Three days ago it was a holiday for the Jews, and I called my [Israeli colleagues] to say happy holiday. It is ... our relationship that I respect. And they give it back to me on my holidays. Last April it was my birthday, and in the morning, [my Israeli counterpart] said good morning and happy birthday. You know, these things give you a good feeling, that we have a good relationship, well away from discord. (Gawerc 2012)

Furthermore, it required meeting expectations. The Palestinian peace-builder who lost his twelve-year-old daughter when she was shot by an Israeli border policeman noted:

Before my tragedy with my daughter ... I never said that that they [the Israelis] are like friends. ... But *after* my tragedy it is very easy for me to say that we are brothers. We are family. ... We created a kind of trust. For some [of them] I consider that my daughter was [also] their daughter. ... All of us [spent] three days in the hospital [together]. ... So we created really very strong relations at the personal level. (Gawerc 2012)

Finally, for these initiatives, most found it was critical to recognize the asymmetry and commit to working as equally as possible. One Israeli peacebuilder who worked with several joint organizations explained:

If the organization does not reflect the same values [you espouse] and if the team does not reflect the same values you cannot move on. ... [You will have] conflicts within the team, conflicts within the organization. ... If the organization is not symmetric, if the power relations in the organization are not symmetric according to what it says [i.e. that it is a joint organization] then there's a lack of trust, towards the organization, towards the staff, and towards the team. (Gawerc 2012)

It should be noted that while all of these organizations needed to actively engage in building trust and a sense of a shared mission in the organization, providing recognition and promoting respect of the other's culture and abilities, meeting the expectations of one's partners, recognizing the asymmetry and committing to work as equally as possible, there were multiple ways to accomplish this. Indeed, I studied twelve organizations, and the actions they took to strengthen these ties varied. The following actions were critical: communicating honestly and openly, discussing expectations,

showing a true commitment to change the situation, recognizing the needs of one's partners, being aware of the power relations between the groups, and making decisions jointly (see Gawerc 2012, 2013).

While what is necessary to strengthen the integrative bonds at the organizational level will inevitably differ depending on the type of organization, the environment in which the organization operates, and the characteristics of the staff, one thing that is likely to be universal across all organizations is the importance of the integrative bonds between staff members for managing conflict. Anderson and Polkinghorn (2008) similarly argued that successful projects and organizations rest on the creation and the maintenance of "healthy relationships" (p. 193). Indeed, as this research note highlights, actions taken to strengthen the integrative ties and the relationships within organizations can, among other things, allow organizations to withstand greater conflict.

## Conclusion

While there is a rich literature on the different strategies and methods that can be used to manage and resolve disagreements, too little attention is given to an alternative but complimentary approach to conflict management, which focuses on integrative bonds (including action processes that can further strengthen these bonds). Whether an organization becomes engulfed in conflict or fails rests not only on the quality of the strategies used to manage the conflicts but also on whether the integrative ties are strong enough to withstand disagreements. Gamson and Modigliani's (1963) theory on integrative ties was published fifty years ago and has received very little attention in the conflict management and resolution literature (except Gawerc 2006, 2012, 2013). Having highlighted studies that provide evidence for their theory, this research note urges consideration of this complementary approach to understanding conflict and conflict management for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the ways in which organizations can mitigate and manage conflict.

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