Working with a Truly Interdisciplinary Team

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In the Prologue, we referred to our decades of collaboration as the backdrop for this project. Yet most collaborating teams never reach the kind of conceptual breadth you see here. And that’s for good reason: Regardless of the degree of social benefit that might result, truly interdisciplinary work is far from easy to do. There have to be individual reasons — even if not exactly the same reasons — for all members of such a team to enter into (and stay with!) the collaboration.

Helping prospective team members identify and develop those motivations within themselves, however, is part of the work of our own field of negotiation (along with its allied fields). This particular collaboration was an outlier, at the high end of diversity among all of our joint and individual projects over the years; we think an account of “the mechanics” might be useful to record, particularly for any reader who might contemplate a similar effort in and around his or her own field in the future. So we’ll describe the history here.

One of our earlier collaborations in particular became pivotal to all the other collaborative undertakings here. Because the unique team we assembled could be considered counterintuitive in makeup, we will briefly explain how that progenitor came about. In 2001, along with Professor Sandra Cheldelin of George Mason University, Chris and Maria submitted a proposal to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, at that time the field’s main funder of new research and
idea-building. We suggested that its next convening of the 19 so-called Hewlett Theory Centers in Conflict Resolution focus on a problem Chris had identified in his then current (and Hewlett-funded) project, known as Theory to Practice: the lack of effective feedback from practice experience into research and theory-building.

Maria and Sandra were the directors of two of the Hewlett-funded Theory Centers (Maria, of the CUNY Dispute Resolution Center at John Jay College; Sandra, of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University — since upgraded to a full-blown School, and now therefore known as S-CAR). The three, with copious help from Hewlett’s then program officer Melanie Greenberg, spearheaded and organized the 2002 Theory Centers conference, held at John Jay College. This meeting had a radically different design from any of its predecessors. This became pivotal to what followed.

The two-day-plus meeting of Hewlett-funded scholars and invited conflict resolution colleagues was envisioned to center around three plenary discussions. By the time the planning was well under way, life in New York City was deeply affected by the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. The subsequent discussions and eventual design of the conference reflected this. Accordingly, one of the three plenary sessions featured the best part of a dozen religious leaders, from an equal variety of walks of faith, discussing with a spirited “working audience” of 100 academics their shared and different views of conflict — and its management within their separate faiths and congregations. Another equally noteworthy session, held courtesy of the United Nations at its headquarters in New York City, featured academic interrogation of a UN assistant secretary-general, ambassadors and other high-level diplomats, by scholars selected from among the attendees.

Yet, remarkable as these discussions were, the hands-down most powerful of the three sessions to the group overall was neither of these two. Instead, what really “grabbed”
the scholars was a session in which, at our request, four hostage negotiators agreed to be questioned in detail regarding their work on the front lines of conflict intervention — first by two scholars we had selected, and then by the whole group.

The willingness of two successive retired commanders of the already-famous Hostage Negotiation Team of the New York City Police Department, then as now considered the worldwide model for its type of unit, was the direct result of Maria’s many years of work with the team, as a colleague at the College and particularly as one of the team’s trainers.

Because of that background as well as through Chris’s many cases serving as a mediator or arbitrator between police forces and police unions, we were well aware of the “closed shop” world of the police. So we were delighted when Bob Louden and Hugh McGowan, as retirees, were willing to talk about the nuts and bolts of their work, as well as the team’s values, its preconceptions, and some of its administrative challenges.

Because the team — which as noted above prides itself on being the only named team, in a department of approximately 35,000 uniformed officers that is replete with offices, bureaus, divisions and every other type of administrative unit — must operate within a large bureaucratic context, we were pleasantly surprised to hear that the team’s then newly-appointed commander, Jack Cambria, was also willing to join the discussion. The enthusiasm and openness for this plenary session spilled over to another law enforcement agency entirely, so we were able to include a fourth panelist, a hostage negotiator at the FBI, Richard DeFilippo.

Following the conference, Chris, Maria, Sandra and Melanie edited two special issues of Harvard’s Negotiation Journal. Among the articles was one devoted to the presentations made by the four hostage negotiators. (See Cambria et al 2002.) We have been working with Jack ever since that conference. Among the other collaborative efforts have been chapters co-authored by Jack in four different books edited by Chris, including Chris’s and Andrea Schneider’s The
Negotiator’s Fieldbook (American Bar Association 2006) and its replacement, The Negotiator’s Desk Reference (DRI Press 2017), and Negotiation Essentials for Lawyers (ABA 2019.) In short, this has been a rich and productive partnership over a number of years and specific subjects.

Along the way, we had often discussed a training-related topic that was of high interest to Jack. New York City’s police department, as noted above, was the originator of a specialized kind of police unit in 1973, now found across the world, of officers with the assignment, skills, experience and training to handle without violence some of the most difficult negotiations known to humankind, between the police and a hostage taker. Knowledge and skills aplenty have been developed for this purpose. The team has amassed a distinguished record.

Yet, a well-known fact is that a trained hostage negotiator is almost never the first responder to the scene of a hostage-taking, a barricaded situation, a threatened suicide, or another incident calling for serious negotiation skills to avert something worse. The City is simply too vast. Even with 100-plus members of the team, when they are spread over many shifts and five boroughs, the chance that one of them can be on the scene before someone else can do something inappropriate, perhaps even fatal, approaches the infinitesimal. A lot can happen before the hostage team members can assemble and respond. The recruits’ six month police academy curriculum limits the amount of training hours that can be dedicated to teaching hostage negotiation principles. This had defeated all of Jack’s (and his predecessors’) arguments to the effect that at least a minimal level of the skills used by experienced hostage negotiators should be taught to every new police officer. (To a certain extent, this situation may now be changing. See Kirschner and Cambria 2017, and Volpe et al 2017. In particular, in the wake of a nationwide string of tragedies best summarized by the placename of Ferguson, Missouri, one resulting course did draw on Jack’s experience, and is noted in the two aforementioned book chapters. It was in its design phase concurrently with the planning of the workshop dis-
cussed here, however, and followed a very different model. So it is too soon to assess its effects.)

Over years of repeated discussions, the need for more widespread training along the lines of hostage negotiators’ training came up many times. By itself, that shared observation counted for little; for a number of years, neither Jack nor Chris could see any practical way of doing anything about it. And by the time the pilot project described in these pages was finally mounted, in 2015, it might appear to the reader that the appalling series of stories from around the US represented by names such as Eric Garner (New York City); Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri); Trayvon Martin (Sanford, Florida) and Freddie Gray (Baltimore, Maryland) must have been at the heart of our effort. But while these developments increased our determination, they were not its origin.

The heart of our effort lies instead in the 2007 suicide of an active member of the Hostage Negotiation Team of the New York City Police Department. In a real sense, both our pilot project and this book are dedicated to Detective Lydia Martinez: Her death forced us to recognize both how difficult it was to really know another person’s emotional state, and how essential it was to at least try to do something constructive about that.

Chris describes Lydia — an accomplished NYPD hostage negotiator — as the most empathetic human being he has ever encountered. His reaction to her death, like Maria’s, was one of shock. But Jack knew her best, and his reaction went beyond shock into something very like denial. By the time Jack was able to write his best tribute to Lydia, several years had elapsed. That tribute became a chapter (see Cambria 2010) in a book Jack describes as “the Bible” of crisis negotiation training. But even with this impetus, it was years before any kind of opportunity, even on an experimental level, presented itself to us. That was a result of a quite different collaboration.

Over roughly the same period of time, scholarship and experiments on the apparently unrelated topic of the use of
the arts in conflict management had been growing. One of the earliest inquiries in this line of thinking, as it happened, was conducted by University of British Columbia law professor Michelle LeBaron, in partnership with Chris, in the mid-2000s. It investigated the local culture of Vancouver, which has long used the arts in assessing, understanding, and helping to resolve public conflicts. Their first publication (LeBaron and Honeyman 2006) served as impetus for a larger program by LeBaron, which has now produced distinguished works of multiple kinds. One focus has been on the relationship between willingness to rethink one’s stand in a conflict and physical movement, particularly dance. Investigating this proposition led to a workshop in Saas Fee, Switzerland in 2010, to which LeBaron invited, among others, Chris — and a theater artist with a deeply social practice named Rachel Parish. Rachel and Chris ended up writing a chapter jointly (Honeyman and Parish 2013) for the book about dance, movement, nonverbal communication and conflict management which LeBaron co-edited as a result of the workshop (LeBaron, MacLeod and Acland 2013). That book, in an illustration of increasing acceptance of an unorthodox subject in very orthodox quarters, was published in 2013 by the American Bar Association.

2013 also represented the conclusion of a related line of inquiry, one that influenced this project in many ways, in which Chris, with James R. Coben and others, organized and ran the five-year Rethinking Negotiation Teaching project. Among other innovations, that project encouraged fresh thinking about how to redesign specific trainings so that each one would address more closely the kinds of people taking it (Lewicki and Schneider 2010); how to “teach” people who don’t normally see themselves as students at all (Blanchot et al 2013; cf. Kirschner and Cambria 2017); how to make the learning of hostage negotiators more broadly available (Volpe and Cambria 2009); and how ideas from theater might relate to uniformed officers who start out far from comfortable with them (Lira and Parish 2013). All of these concepts, as well as
broader assessments of the whole sweep of new thinking about negotiation teaching (Fox and Press 2013) and of the role of reputation in every kind of negotiation (Tinsley, Cambria and Schneider 2006, 2017) pervaded our group’s thinking throughout this venture.

But by the time the projects noted above were complete, the collaboration discussed in this volume was already off and running. When Chris learned that Rachel, for family reasons, was about to set up a branch of her London theater company in New York for a three-year period, he began to wonder whether Rachel’s theater skills and practices might provide a way to approach the obvious-but-unfulfilled need for more effective training of new police officers in the skills of negotiation. As noted above, the possibility also offered the first opening Chris had seen toward a meaningful response to the tragic death by her own hand of an extraordinary member of the Hostage Negotiation Team, Lydia Martinez.

As detailed by Rachel above, the discussion began without a clear idea of what a program might look like. But over two years of engagement and discussion, Jack, Rachel, Maria and Chris formed a perspective that promised to edge free from some of the real and perceived obstacles (institutional, law enforcement, and even scholarly) towards addressing these longstanding issues, and to use the tools that arts-led collaborative practice had to offer. We ultimately agreed that it was best to frame the program we would develop as an arts-based one. Rachel and Jack then proceeded to develop the specific experimental, multi-session workshop detailed in the core of this text.

We also realized that since we were working within an academic context — one where a generous grant was received from Dan and Joanna Rose, pillars of the New York philanthropic community, to support Rachel’s and Jack’s work — it would be beneficial to incorporate as solid a scholarly assessment of the initiative as the circumstances would permit. To this effect, yet another of our long-standing collaborations became invoked. Chris had first encountered Elizabeth Jeglic,
a John Jay colleague of Maria’s, in the mid-2000s, when her presentation to a Hostage Negotiation Team training that he was allowed to sit in on practically “knocked him out of his seat.” It concerned rates and types of mental illness in society. The heavily-researched numbers exceeded by an order of magnitude what he had imagined.

This encounter resulted, first, in a chapter on “Negotiating with Disordered People” by Elizabeth and Alexander Jeglic in the 2006 Negotiator’s Fieldbook (now updated as “Mental Health Challenges at the Table” for Honeyman and Schneider 2017.) It also provided the opening for a continuing collaboration. When the present project was ready for that, the resulting discussion, and a significant independent effort, provided the team with the psychological assessments discussed above by Georgia Winters and Elizabeth Jeglic.

As Rachel delicately notes at the head of this section of the book, getting a team of such talented but distinctly different individuals together, and even more, keeping it together till it “produces” is not easy. But it is essential to our shared view of what our field needs, and will continue to need if it is to remain vital. (The risks of not making this kind of effort are outlined in a special 19-article issue on “Capitulation to the Routine” in the Penn State Law Review, Vol. 108/1, 2003, including Chris’s introduction by that title.)

We don’t think our own field is alone in needing some new thinking that in turn demands new combinations of skills. And we are far from the only people whose encounters, over years, develop a truly rich array of possible collaborators for some future effort. We hope this sharing of the mechanics of our pilot project will help inspire readers who have been holding the seed of an apparently impossible idea, toward a new round of mulling: Who might be well-positioned, and motivated for their own reasons, to become part of a collaborative venture to help you first brainstorm, and then work on, the previously unimaginable?